

The First Dáil Éireann (DOYL AIR-uhn)– Assembly of Ireland

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In 1914, the Government of Ireland Act was passed by the British parliament. This Act finally granted Home Rule, limiting self-government, to the people of Ireland. After a decades-long campaign for Home Rule, John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party had secured a major victory. However, despite being passed, the Act was never enacted.

The outbreak of World War 1 in July 1914 led to the postponement of the Act for twelve months. This postponement then became extended for the duration of the war. By the time the war ceased in 1918, the situation in Ireland had changed permanently. Members of the Sinn Féin party, which had been established in 1905 by Arthur Griffith, campaigned not for Home Rule but for full independence from Britain. In 1916, members of Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Brotherhood undertook the short-lived but pivotal Easter Rising, in which they declared Ireland a republic. The British government's execution of the rising's leaders in the aftermath resulted in a huge shift in support from the Irish public to the republican movement, away from the IPP and Home Rule.

Sinn Féin's first electoral breakthrough came in February 1917 when Count Joseph Plunkett (father of the late executed 1916 leader, Joseph Mary Plunkett) won the Roscommon North by-election (election not on the normal cycle) caused by the death of IPP Member of Parliament James O'Kelly. Five more Sinn Féin members, including Arthur Griffith, Éamon de Valera and William T. Cosgrave, contested and won further by-elections over the next year. By the time the new general election was called for December 1918 – the first British general election in eight years – Sinn Féin looked to make huge gains.

Sinn Féin's success in the election was phenomenal. The IPP was all but obliterated by Sinn Féin in the December 1918 election. They essentially wiped the predominant Irish Parliamentary Party off the map. The only viable challenge to the republicans was the Unionist Party, which was concentrated primarily in north and east Ulster and some small areas of Dublin. Sinn Féin won 73 seats; the IPP lost 61 seats, returning just six and the Unionist's 22. Only one of these seats was outside Ulster – party leader John Redmond's Waterford City. The Belfast Labour Party won three seats in what was soon to become the capital of a new political entity. The 1918 Election was the last all-Ireland election to be held; it was also the first to allow women to vote and the first to elect a woman, Countess Markievicz to the British Parliament.

The scale of the support for Sinn Féin was so great that they ran unopposed in 25 constituencies, concentrated primarily in western Munster and the midlands. Nationally, Sinn Féin's vote share was 46.9%, though it was higher than 80% in some contested areas.

The Sinn Féin Manifesto of 1918 promised to create an Irish Republic (1) by withdrawing the Irish representation from the British Parliament, (2) by the establishment of a constituent assembly. Although Sinn Féin intended for this Dáil to be open to the IPP and Unionist MPs as well, they refused to recognize the action and maintained their Westminster presence. It was to be the IPP's final election.

The newly elected Sinn Féin membership met 2 January 1919 to work out the details on the new assembly's format. A republican pledge had been signed at a meeting on 7 January by the elected members present: *I hereby pledge myself to work for the establishment of an independent Irish republic; that I will accept nothing less than complete separation from England in settlement of Ireland's claims; and that I will abstain from attending the English Parliament.* So, a century ago from January 2019, Sinn Féin MPs refused to take their seats in Westminster and instead the 28 MPs formed the first Dáil Éireann, an independent Irish parliament which would meet in Dublin's Mansion House on 21 January 1919. The remaining Sinn Féin MPs that did not attend were either in prison, on the run or could not attend for other reasons.

The main resolutions of the assembly were formulated: *The Constitution, The Declaration of Independence, The Address to the Free Nations of the World, and The Democratic Programme.* The Constitution was read in Irish alone; the other three were read in Irish, French and English. The first Dáil produced a handwritten document called the Declaration of Independence – where it asserted that the Irish people are by right a free people and asserting that this right had been taken away (by the English). The first paragraph of the address to the free nations of the world was this: *"The nation of Ireland having proclaimed her national independence, calls, through her elected representatives in Parliament assembled in the Irish Capital on 21 January 1919, upon every free nation to support the Irish Republic by recognising Ireland's national status and her right to its vindication of the peace conference."* (In reference to the Versailles Peace Conference in Paris).

Eight months later on 20 August 1919, Cathal Brugha, seconded by Terence MacSwiney, proposed a formal oath, which applied to Sinn Féin members and deputies alike, contained these words: *I will support and defend the Irish Republic and the Government of the Irish Republic, which is Dáil Éireann, against all enemies, foreign and domestic...* The Irish Republican Army was now subordinate to Dáil Éireann; the political and military struggle against British rule was thus unified and the scene was set for the War of Independence.