

PRESIDENT OF IRELAND

Statement by Speaker

THE SPEAKER (Mr P.B. Watson): It is my pleasure to welcome the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, onto the floor of the house.

I invite President Higgins to take a seat next to me and I ask the Sergeant-at-Arms to escort him onto the floor of the chamber.

I have also approved the presence of media and security in the chamber and the public gallery for this historic event. [His Excellency Michael D. Higgins was announced and escorted into the chamber.]

Standing Orders Suspension — Motion

On motion without notice by **Mr D.A. Templeman (Leader of the House)**, resolved with an absolute majority —

That so much of standing orders be suspended as is necessary to enable, by this motion, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, to address this house.

Address by President of Ireland

His Excellency MICHAEL D. HIGGINS (President of Ireland) [2.03 pm]: Mr Speaker, President of the Legislative Council, Premier, members of the Legislative Assembly, members of the Legislative Council, if you will allow me to begin in my own ancient language. A Chairde, Mar Uachtarán na hÉireann, ba mhór an onóir dom é bhur gcuireadh a fháil labhairt le Parlaimint Iarthair na hAstráile, agus mar Uachtarán na hÉireann tá fíorchaoín áthas orm a bheith anseo libh agus go raibh míle maith agaibh as an fíorchaoín fáilte a d'fhear sibh romham.

Continuing in my other language. Mr Speaker, I appreciate what a great honour it is for me to have received an invitation to address the Parliament of Western Australia and to have the opportunity of reaffirming the long and abiding bonds that are shared by the peoples of Ireland and the Commonwealth of Australia. Premier, I thank you for your kind hospitality and the very warm welcome that you have offered to me and to the Irish delegation.

In making this visit as President of Ireland, I am minded of all those earlier visits by others, including my own ancestors. My grandfather's siblings came to Australia in 1862. They did not come to a terra nullius, and may I begin here today by acknowledging the first occupants of this land, who for tens of thousands of years negotiated with its possibilities and its challenges, and developed one of the oldest cultures in the world; one that valued symmetry with nature, ancient wisdom and practical balances. I honour their elders present and past.

Mr Speaker, President of the Legislative Council, since the arrival of the First Fleet 230 years ago, Irish people have traversed the vast seas to this continent. They have come or been brought, some as prisoners and some as servants of empire, and later as migrants fleeing hunger, poverty, oppression, frustration and stagnation seeking maybe, perhaps, the economic security of land tenure, adventure, professional or economic opportunity. When we speak of the Irish diaspora, there has never been any one Irish migratory experience, and those who form the Australian component of the Irish diaspora are no exception. The different streams of Irish migration to Australia show us, for example, differences in religious affiliation, level of skill and loyalty. In the years before the Great Famine of the late nineteenth century—1845 to, say, as late as 1850—Irish migrants were in the category of skilled workers and most often self-financing as to their passage. Referred to frequently as Protestant and prudent. Although post-famine, it was the poor, the most broken and their dependants who often sought escape and the prospect of new beginnings.

All migrant journeys are impelled by individual, deeply personal decisions to leave a home. Also, the timing of these personal decisions is undoubtedly affected by great structural, economic, social, political and natural forces, which even today are shaping the modern world. We find in the journey of Irish and indeed all migrants to this country a complex interplay of impelling or attractive structural forces and at the same time personal decisions. The structural forces affect the rate; the personal decision—the incidence—is usually some last-straw effect.

In the early years of the penal colonies, to those imprisoned on criminal or political charges who were awaiting transportation in the gaols of Ireland—this is something that is reflected in the songs and literature of Ireland—the foreign yet threateningly familiar names of Botany Bay and Van Diemen's Land had a particular ring, as they signalled leaving one's home and one's loved ones for a life of imprisonment and exile. The term could be for seven or 14 years, and of course it had a particularly extra chilling effect if those awaiting transportation were aware that for some of them it could include or be followed by a forced removal to Norfolk Island—the gulag of its time.

As transportation gave way to assisted passage—including my ancestors—the new colonies of the southern oceans were offered often as an Arcadia of abundant land and in time, too, after the announcement of the discovery of mineral resources, as a location for a new life, or as some landlords in Ireland saw it, an opportunity for clearing estates of what they saw as unproductive and increasingly more desperate tenants. A third of a million Irish people emigrated to Australia between 1840 and 1914. Often travelling, particularly in the later period, with assistance

from the governments of the new colonies. Indeed, the high price of land in my grand uncle's time of the 1860s was something that was connected to the assisted passages; it was about 80 times the cost an acre of land in Nova Scotia at the time.

We Irish, for example, were the most prolific users of the nomination scheme, which allowed whole families to migrate over time. The migrants who came to Australia were diverse—Catholic, Anglican and dissenting, Quakers and Jews. They came for different purposes with different motivations from all social classes. They would, in time, include a diversity of experiences, from gentlemen and lawyers to farmers and cottiers. My grandfather's brother Patrick Higgins and his sister Mary Ann were emigrants from County Clare, and they arrived in Moreton Bay on the *Montmorency* on 8 April 1862. Five of my grandfather's family of seven would end up moving to Australia. Patrick, my granduncle, was a ploughman and, in his own words, he described himself as a tiller of the soil, brought up to plough from a young age. He used these skills to become a worker and manager of different farms in Queensland, and finally to establish himself with his own farm at Sandy Creek, seven miles from the town of Warwick. This is somewhat of a familiar story, because Patrick was from the same county as his namesake, Patrick Durack, whose life and times as an overlander driving cattle to the Kimberley were so memorably recounted in that great book of history, *Kings in Grass Castles*, by that great Western Australian author—his granddaughter Mary Durack.

Since the Second World War, the Irish have continued to travel to Australia and have been part of the new waves of migration that have made Australia the multicultural society it is today. The ebb and flow of migration since that time has been a result of the same conjunction of structural forces and personal agency, of the push and pull of economic and social circumstances, individual hopes and dreams, and, in the Irish case, as with others, of the pressures of a society and economy in Ireland that so often struggled or was not permitted to provide the necessary opportunities and economic security for all its citizens. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, times of economic hardship in Ireland, the great postwar reconstruction projects, particularly the Snowy Mountains scheme, attracted construction workers from Ireland. In recent years, they have been here in Western Australia, and Australia has again become both a site of travel and work, as many Irish people now come to participate in what is a prosperous, modern economy. Today, over 90 000 Irish-born people live in Australia, and of course two million Australians have recorded their ancestry as Irish in Australia's census. I am so happy—*Mar Uachtarán na hÉireann*—as President of Ireland, to have the opportunity of not only greeting them all, but also those who have welcomed them and with whom they have made their lives as Australians. Some lawyers came to seek professional recognition and opportunities for advancement from which they were excluded access to at home on religious grounds. Among them was John Hubert Plunkett, who should always be remembered as the prosecuting counsel at the trial of Myall Creek. Ever since Paddy Hannan struck gold in Kalgoorlie, Irish men and women have come to labour, with hand and brain, in the mines of this state; to work the soil in the vast wheatbelt; to contribute to commerce and industry, law, journalism—so many of them—and the academy; to be involved in the practice of their faith and to have it recognised. It was here that Charles Yelverton O'Connor designed goldfields pipelines and Fremantle Harbour. I always think as well that the purpose of his water scheme was to be beneficent—water not just for the use of extraction, but for the benefit of the workers. It was here that John Hackett became the founding chancellor of a great university; from here that John Curtin, the son of emigrants from County Cork, became Prime Minister of this commonwealth; and from here that the last of the Fenian captives escaped aboard a whaling ship called the *Catalpa*. I was so pleased to receive a gift of the story of the *Catalpa*. The Irish imprint in this state, surely, is captured in the lines of that great Western Australian poet of the goldfields, Edwin “Dryblower” Murphy, who wrote —

Our harps are hung in the towering trees
And the mulga low and grey

Mr Speaker and President of the Legislative Council, 122 years ago, in 1895, one of our nation's finest patriots, the land reformer and Labour leader, Michael Davitt, travelled for seven months through Australia and New Zealand. He wrote of his journey seeking, as he put it, to understand the story of the goldfields of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, the utopian settlements of the Murray River, and the rising cities of what he called the future Australia. Founder of the Land League and leader of the Land War in Ireland 1879 to 1882, he was disappointed that a leasehold rather than an absolute ownership system was not finding favour among the tenant holders whose cause he had so stoutly defended in Ireland. He remained deeply interested in his travels abroad in innovative forms of representation of interests. His independent mind had led him to be removed from the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Never a narrow nationalist, he saw the workers on the land and the workers in the factories and cities as having a common cause. Davitt was very aware too of what he saw as what could be the corrosive effect of absolute property ownership in terms of the emergence of an abuse of class position. He was concerned to recognise those who laboured on the land; hence his emphasis on the naming of his organisation as the Land and Labour League. He encouraged workers, as I would, to seek protection by joining trade unions and by having a collective spirit. In Perth, only five years after the proclamation of Western Australia's

Constitution and achievement of self-government, and in other states, he found a confident legislature and people who were, in his own words —

... teaching, by their examples, not alone the parent countries, but other lands as well, —

He found what he called —

the courageous wisdom of progressive legislation on most of the vexed social and economic problems of Europe ...

Members will be pleased to know that as a former parliamentarian, he concluded that Western Australian parliamentarians were proficient public speakers. As he put it, they were “full to overflowing with the subject— climatic, commercial, constitutional” that faced what he called this coming country.

He found in Australia what he saw as a new society in embryonic form that was profoundly shaped by the remembered thoughts and actions of Irish emigrants, who, whether of Irish ancestry or Irish born, comprised, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a quarter of the population of the new federation. Today it is 11 per cent. Here in Australia, thousands of miles from the ancient conflicts and the sometimes stifling orthodoxies of an old world, he felt Irish people could contribute to building what he wrote of as “a new world full of hope and promise”; one that at its best would vindicate the economic, social and political rights and liberties of the people, raise the dignity of labour, foster an active government dedicated to the public purpose and, above all, subordinated to the public good. He knew that achieving this would not be easy. It would not be without its challenges and contradictions. The shearers’ mobilisation and the Sydney lockout would polarise settlers and workers. The lockout of 1890 in Australia would echo later in the Dublin lockout of 1913. Both defeats for workers would, within a decade of such defeats of course, lead to a massive recruitment and birth of what would become a strong trade union movement. This new world, with its burgeoning democratic tradition, was formed and gave form, had an influence too on the struggle for democracy and independence in Ireland. Some of the defining characteristics of Australian democracy, established in often perilous and difficult conditions, carry a distinctive Irish influence. Indeed, conditions in Ireland may have given to some a perhaps singular determination not to carry and necessarily repeat all of the sins of the old world in the circumstances of the new. Among the first political prisoners to arrive in New South Wales, for example, were members of the revolutionary organisation the Society of United Irishmen, many of whom were Anglicans and dissenters, who had fomented a rebellion to create an independent Irish Republic inspired by the ideas and practices of the American and French Revolutions. They were imbued with the ideas of the *Rights of Man* by Tom Paine. They would often be castigated as being carriers of the French ideas and they would be moved by the case for religious and civil liberty for all, and many of those who stayed, upon completion of their sentence, would go on to become prominent emancipists.

Then the influence of Daniel O’Connell, the Irish liberator, extended to this country through the appointment of the remarkable John Hubert Plunkett as Attorney General of New South Wales in 1832, where he fought for and established the principles of civil and religious equality, and of equality before the law, thus helping break down the distinction between emancipist and exclusionist that had divided and marred the infant colony. His prosecution of the case of Myall Creek, with its vindication of the rights of Indigenous people, would of course come at a great personal cost.

As to political representation, on 11 November 1854 on Bakery Hill at the inauguration of the Ballarat Reform League, there stood alongside English, Scottish and Welsh chartists, German and Italian veterans of the Springtime of Peoples, and Victorians of all ancestries, a distinctive Irish presence influenced by the ideas of O’Connell and the Young Ireland movement in the person of not only Peter Lalor, later elected leader of the diggers by universal acclamation, but also Anastasia Hayes, who wove the southern cross that flew over the Eureka Stockade. The resolutions of that assembly were not narrowly national in any sense but, as I have been describing it in terms of their moral ideas, they were universal in origin and they still echo today in their demand for the inalienable right of every citizen to have a voice in making the laws they are called upon to obey.

The impulse to build here a new and better world, to bend the destiny of this land towards a more humane and egalitarian future, has been a recurring theme in Australian discourse. The Irish who contributed to this discourse perhaps saw reflected in this coming nation, as Davitt put it, the future form of a free Ireland. That is why I am so pleased to be here. We can see this in the views of the leaders of Young Ireland, successors of the United Irishman who were sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen’s Land in 1848. Remember 1848 is the first year after the worst year of the famine of 1847 when poor relief was suspended. While there, William Smith O’Brien drafted a constitution for what would become the self-governing colony of Tasmania, and he envisioned a federation of the colonies, willing to work towards a common good. Another leader of Young Ireland, Charles Gavan Duffy, who arrived in Australia as an emigrant, and as a politician and later Premier of Victoria, became an advocate for Federation as the vehicle for the creation of a new nation.

The distance from Europe and from Rome allowed for the development of a distinctive Australian Catholic Church, long seen as an extension of Ireland's spiritual empire, which was perhaps, at times, more willing to address the challenges of the new industrial society than its Irish counterpart. In the tumult of the 1890s, which witnessed the great battles of capital and labour to which I have referred and which gave birth to your great trade union movement, Cardinal Patrick Moran, the Archbishop of Sydney, supported the cause of labour, giving a distinctly Australian expression to the Papal encyclical *rerum novarum*—of things new—to the rights and duties of labour and to the legitimacy, and at times necessity, of collective action to secure those rights and fulfil those duties and obligations. This was a disposition not unique or limited to the Irish leadership in the Catholic Church and this is exemplified by Henry Bourne Higgins, a Methodist born in County Down and educated in Dublin, who declared, as presiding judge at the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration during the famous Harvester case, that what was considered a fair and reasonable wage should be that which is considered sufficient for, as he put it, “a human being in a civilised community” to support a family in “frugal comfort”. These words might ring in so many places today in our world.

I have highlighted these Irish contributions to the development of our shared values not only to celebrate the distinctive Irish influence on the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia and its states, but also to suggest that it was living and working in this young society that allowed for the expression and formulation of quite new modes of thought—modes that were equal to the challenges of the new as well as the old world. Indeed, one of our contemporary challenges is surely to be faithful to meeting the challenge of an inclusive history. This is a challenge we face in Ireland in our tasks of commemoration that we have been completing and the tasks of commemoration that we will commence. It is a challenge that we face in both Australia and in Ireland.

Although the Irish emigrant experience in Australia is, for the vast majority of our recent Irish emigrants, an overwhelmingly positive one, this was not always the case. The dominant ideas of the time of the emigrants leaving and their arrival defined that experience. It was surely not a positive experience for the thousands of young girls orphaned by the Irish famine and transported to Australia under Earl Grey's scheme developed to address a failing landlordism at home, and to meet the labour force needs and the gender balance as it was seen in the new colony. These girls were often exposed to humiliation based on the threefold prejudice of gender, religion and nationality. Neither was it the case for the thousands of convicted men and women who, on arrival, encountered a prison system that was little less than slavery by another name. Nor was it the case either for succeeding generations who, in Peter Carey's words, bore “the historic memory of unfairness in their blood ... the knowledge of unfairness deep in bone and marrow.”

Then too, if we are to be truly unblinking in our gaze, we must acknowledge that although most Irish emigrants experienced some measure—some a large measure—of prejudice and injustice, some among their number inflicted injustice too. For example, when former Prime Minister Paul Keating memorably acknowledged responsibility for crimes against Aboriginal communities, his “we” included not only the most powerful; it included all the elements of the society who had participated or acquiesced in. It had to include, we must recognise, some who were Irish in Australia too. His were powerful words —

We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice.

His speech in my belief was, and remains, an emancipatory act in the ethics of memory. Indeed, it stands as an example to those of us who must do something similar in our different circumstances, for surely we can take encouragement from Thomas Keneally, who has written that —

... if there are to be areas of history which are off bounds, then in principle we are reduced to fudging, to cosmetic narrative.

Dear friends, it is perhaps the vast distance from what were for many years considered mother countries that has allowed in Australia the exercise of an independence of thought, characterised by an unwillingness to become an unquestioning servant to old orthodoxies, and an Australian tendency to innovation and experimentation in institutional forms and structure.

Mr Speaker, President of the Council, your Parliament has, since its inception, and perhaps magnified by distance, displayed these characteristics, when as one of the first Parliaments in the world, it would recognise the basic demands of equality by embracing women's suffrage. This spirit of intellectual independence is required today and I wish you well with it more than ever, and it can so serve us well. The great issues of our time—the necessity for just and sustainable development; the challenges of climate change; the resolution of ancient and new conflicts; the reconciliation that is necessary with communities and sections of communities who have been, or whose ancestors have been, victims of great wrongs; the need to oppose, all of us together, by concerted voices of opposition and denunciation, all forms of the contemporary and, increasingly, the persistence of xenophobia and racism—demand a critical and inquiring engagement from all of us who have the privilege of serving in public life.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY — Tuesday, 10 October 2017]

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Speaker; Mr David Templeman; His Excellency Michael D. Higgins

As to matters economic and the need for a new international economic order becomes ever more clear, we have seen over the past 30 years the dangers of accepting, without examination, any reductionist, narrow economic philosophy that would separate our engagement and activity in economic life from our culture and society. The consequences of suggesting a singularity of economic models rather than a plurality of models are so obvious. This has led, where it has been uncritically accepted, to the adoption of unsustainable economic models that have widened the inequality of wealth, power, income and participation in our societies; created rather than mitigated instability; and contributed to the degradation of our environment. We are challenged to produce alternatives and advance them with, of course, the necessary courtesies of discourse, but being resolute in not accepting the failed paradigms of economy, society and life itself. There is now, surely, an imperative need and an urgency to challenge these still entrenched ideas, and to demand a space for a new, more pluralist discourse—one capable of an ethical remembrance of the past and adequate responsibility to find new solutions to our collective challenges, of participating in the resolution of the global challenges we face together on a shared vulnerable planet.

Mr Speaker and President of the Council, may I conclude what I have to say today by saying again that the warmth of the welcome I and all those travelling with me have received in Perth has touched me deeply and is an indication not only of the strength of the Irish community in this city and in this state, but also of the warmth between the peoples of Australia and Ireland, which I hope and know will deepen.

Allow me to finish again by saying: Go raibh míle maith agaibh agus guím rath agus beannacht ar bhur n-iarrachtaí ar son na ndaoine i gcoitinne san Astráil agus don daonnacht ar fad.

I thank you and I wish all your colleagues success and good health on your work for all Australian people and, in particular, the people of Western Australia, and for all of humanity. I thank you for listening to me.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir, agus go dté sibh slán.

[Applause.]