



ASPIRATION AND ACTUALITY: CHILDHOOD INEQUALITY AND THE LEGACY OF 1916

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As we enter 2016, the controversies about how best to commemorate the legacy of the Rising have already begun. Already, various groups have claimed to be the true inheritors of the spirit of Proclamation. However, a closer look at those who were involved in the Rising reveals a disparate group. United as they were in fighting for Ireland's freedom, the divisions of class, religion, gender and citizenship all contributed to shaping their differing experiences of the Rising and its aftermath. Perhaps it was because of these divisions that the 1916 revolutionaries so frequently characterised themselves and their fellow Irishmen and women as children – particularly in the proclamation which begins:

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: *In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.*

The practice of characterising themselves as Ireland's children may have been an effective way to mask their differences but children also featured more directly as we know in the proclamation which continued:

*The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts, **cherishing all of the children of the nation equally** and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.*

Revolutionaries tend to be strong on aspiration and, indeed, many historians have argued that the Rising was a more effective means of appealing to the nationalism of Irish people than as a military exercise per se. However, when we look at the lives of the leaders of 1916, I think there is a reasonable foundation for arguing that this aspiration to create a country of more equal childhoods was a serious one. Secondly, this idealism around childhood was not simply confined to those who wrote the proclamation. When the first Dáil was established in 1919, it was stated clearly that:

It shall be the duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing and shelter.

In some ways, this is an even more admirable aspiration, specifying as it does the material things that children might need to have a more equal childhood... but what about the actuality of childhood in Ireland at this time – its existing facts and conditions?

In the Ireland of 1916 (and indeed the Ireland of 2016), the experience of children was not largely shaped by these idealised visions but rather the economic circumstances into which the child was born. When Patrick Pearce referred to the 'differences' within the Irish population of 1916, he could have done worse than start with the differences in quality of life experienced by children themselves at that time. In 1916, a

baby born into the family of a labourer was seventeen times more likely to die within a year than the child of a professional. There were also significant differences in educational opportunities. Although primary school education was widely available, conditions in classrooms were often poor in terms of heating and sanitation. Second level education was not free although a number of religious orders had made significant inroads in providing education for the poor. Corporal punishment was a significant feature of the education system at all levels. Where families had farms or local businesses, children from the ages of seven or even younger were expected to actively contribute through their labour. Children were also frequently sent out to work as servants or messenger boys once early education had finished. In his memoir *Children of the Dead End* published in 1914, Patrick McGill describes his treatment at the hands of his employer. He said 'To him, I was not a human being, a boy with an appetite and a soul. I was merely a ware purchased in the market place, something of less value than a plough and of no more account than a barrow.' Childhood health inequalities were strongly exacerbated by the condition of housing and sanitation, particularly in the urban slums of Dublin, Cork and Limerick. An enquiry in 1914 reported that 28,000 Dubliners were living in houses considered 'unfit for human habitation'. Largely as a result of the unsettled nature of early twentieth-century political life, poor conditions prevailed until well into the 1940s. Indeed, in some cases they got worse.

Even before 1916, the close alliance which had been established between the British colonial state and the Catholic Church provided strong hints of what Irish society would be like during the 20th century regardless of who was in charge. For those who came from affluent backgrounds, church-run institutions could provide new opportunities for educational advancement and a wider view of the world. Kate O'Brien's book *The Land of Spices*, which was based largely on her own experiences of attending Laurel Hill School in Limerick, describes school as liberating her from her own troubled home life. Colm Luibheid who wrote about the experience of attending Jesuit-run Belvedere College describes the occasional use of the strap but nothing humiliating. He continues:

We noticed too that stupidity was never a crime and that, however much exasperation it might provoke in this or that teacher, the student in question was never made to believe that he was somehow an inferior being.

However, for those children unlucky enough to find themselves in church-run institutions at the other end of the social spectrum, it was an entirely different story. The Catholic Church's ideal vision of Irish society was one that focused less on children and much more on the married family as the key container of sexuality. Therefore, children born outside this unit were, by their very existence, a threat to the status quo. Secondly, a number of key church figures espoused what we would now call a Dionysian vision of childhood – they didn't view children as being inherently good, rather children needed to be trained to control their impulses which if uncontrolled could be dangerous for a society.

The combination of these factors led to the incarceration of children in orphanages, industrial schools and county homes on a grand scale. Between 1858 and 1969, 15,899 children were committed to reformatory schools and, between 1869 and 1969, 105,000 children were committed to industrial schools (nearly 6% of children in industrial schools died while in custody). Particularly damning for the revolutionary generation, given their aspirations to create more equal childhoods, is that while their British colonial masters began to recognise the deep flaws in the industrial school model and abolished them in 1933, the new Irish state took the opposite approach. By 1924, there were more children in industrial schools in the Irish Free State than there were in all of the industrial schools in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland put together. Many of these children were subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse which scarred their lives forever.

Given these statistics, it would appear that those who inherited the legacy of the revolutionaries of 1916 did little to live up to their aspirations, that they did little to create the actuality – the existing conditions and facts that would genuinely support the equality which they regarded as being so important. However, I think it is also important to highlight a few moments and a few people who have taken that aspiration seriously in the hundred years since Patrick Pearse stood on the steps of the GPO and made that proclamation: Those who introduced the 1947 Health Act, Noel Browne who proposed the Mother and Baby Scheme, Donogh O'Malley who introduced free secondary education in 1966 and the Kennedy Commission who began the process of ending the widespread incarceration of children with their report in 1970 all recognised the importance of that aspiration. Further positive changes occurred in 1982 when corporal punishment in Irish schools was abolished and in 1987 when the Status of Children Act abolished the status of illegitimacy. A number of important pieces of legislation

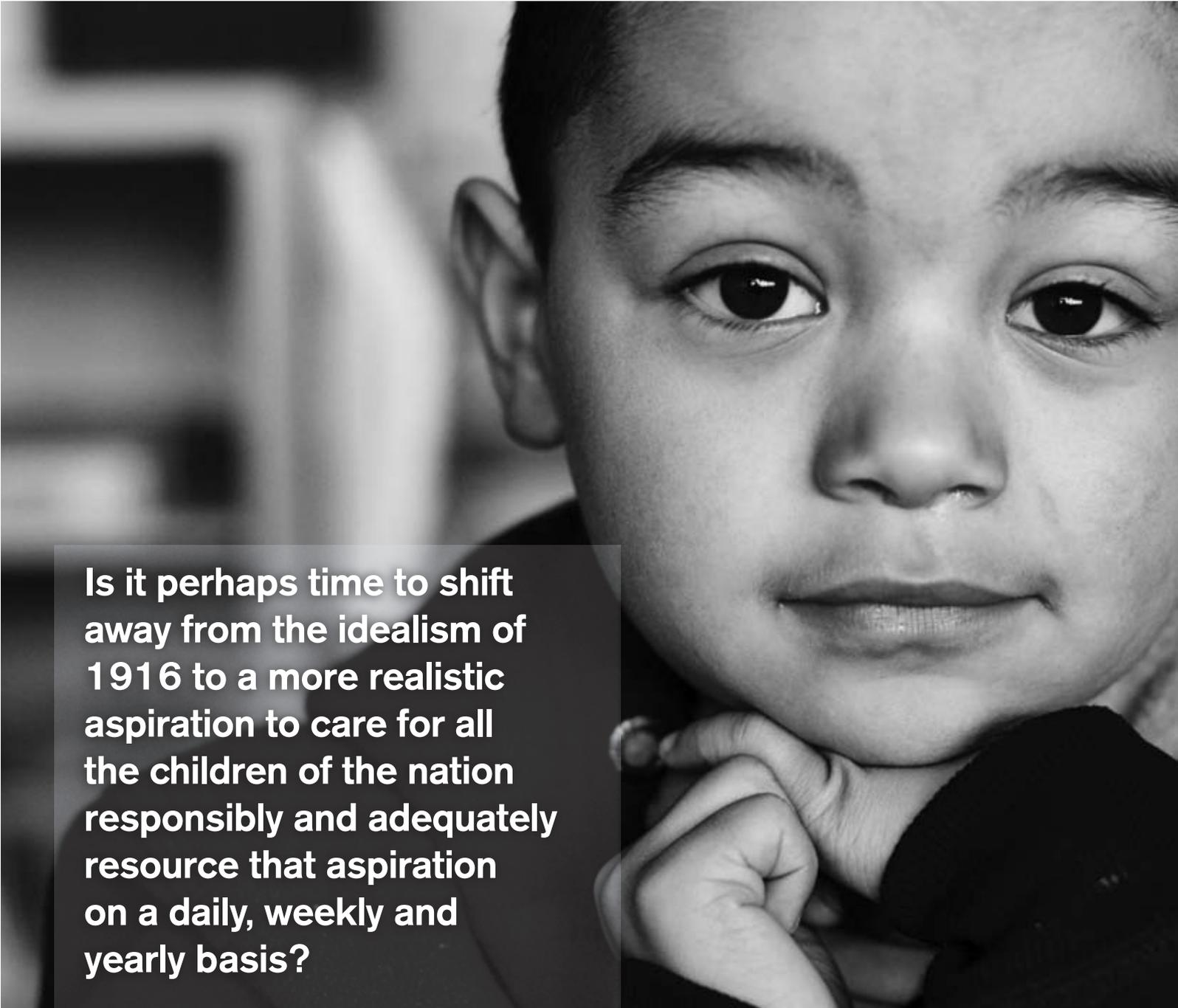
concerning children followed including Child Care Act (1991), Children's Act (1997), Children's Act (2001), Children's Right Referendum (2012) and the Children's First Bill (2014).

These changes have altered the legal status and material conditions of Irish children and need to be honoured and acknowledged. However, it is possible to argue that Irish governments have been more successful at including aspirations for greater childhood equality in policy documents and legislation than they have in actually achieving that equality through the effective resourcing and implementation of these aspirations. In 2007, the Director General of the Office of the Minister for Children acknowledged:

The Irish Public Service has been relatively strong historically in the area of policy formulation. I have come to the conclusion, however, that we are relatively weak when it comes to implementation and many good policies fail due to a lack of appropriate structures and processes to ensure their successful implementation from policy objectives to tangible outcomes.

The Barnardos **Rise Up for Children Manifesto** in its five key actions identifies five policy areas where the Irish state has yet to achieve in terms of the actuality of implementing greater child equality. They highlight the need for investment in TUSLA – the child and family protection agency, investment in early childhood education and care, investment in primary and secondary education which would make it genuinely free, guaranteed access to primary health care facilities and measures which would create a stable home for all children. How can we contextualise these aspirations in light of the ambitions of those who signed the 1916 Proclamation?

Is it perhaps time to shift away from the idealism of 1916 to a more realistic aspiration to care for all the children of the nation responsibly and adequately resource that aspiration on a daily, weekly and yearly basis? Some of the weaknesses in our current policy towards children have resulted from a very high level of aspiration which has not been adequately resourced. For instance, the requirement for mandatory reporting of child protection concerns was introduced as part



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of the Children's First Bill (2014). This reform is to be welcomed. However, a review of TUSLA in April 2015 found that 6,000 child protection and welfare cases were awaiting the allocation of a social worker. Therefore, the impact of this change may be minimal in terms of child protection. A second example can be drawn from the most recent budget where the introduction of a second free pre-school year seemed like one of the most admirable pro-child measures. For many children, this provision covers three hours a day for five days a week. Childcare experts have highlighted the considerable

variance in the sector in terms of training, standards and implementation of the curriculum from an early years education perspective. In terms of the needs of many working parents, the provision is inadequate to cover the working week. Once again, the gap between aspiration and actuality is significant.

In attempting to reconcile the gap between aspiration and actuality, it is clear that there are dangers in economic recovery. The main danger is the belief that 'the rising tide

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will lift all boats’, that more jobs and rising incomes will soften or even eliminate the inequalities that have been deepened and exacerbated during the austerity period. In his study which examined Ireland’s recovery from the recession of the 1980s and its impact on child poverty, the ESRI’s (Economic and Social Research Institute) Brian Nolan wrote:

The overall conclusion of this study is that falling unemployment and rising personal incomes are not on their own sufficient to end child poverty. The challenge for government is proactively to redistribute resources in favour of children on the lowest incomes (2000, xvi)

Just because things are getting better for some, we cannot assume that the major challenges that Irish society faces in terms of child poverty, child neglect, child protection, education and homelessness are going to go away. Indeed, it

is possible (as has happened in the case of homelessness) that the rising tide of recovery actually makes the problems worse. The leaders of the Rising aspired to create a nation to which everyone belonged. When we revisit the proclamation, we must realise that if the gap between aspiration and actuality becomes too great, our children will lose that sense that they are part of the Irish nation and that they share a common destiny with other citizens. Creating a fairer society where children can be assured that at least their most basic needs are met would be one of the most practical ways to live up to the aspirations of the Proclamation. Without this redistribution, social cohesion and social solidarity will be undermined, creating a fragmented and divided nation – and a bleaker future for all of us.

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