

Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations Second Phase Mission Statement 2017 - 2023

The reappointed Expert Advisory Group is, first and foremost, a collection of individual professional historians, record custodians and cultural practitioners, with individual research interests, interpretations and institutional affiliations. While continuing to serve on this Advisory Group, we will all be involved on an ongoing basis in the research and dissemination of history and making individual contributions to the commemoration debate. Any ideas or views that we express in that capacity should not be seen as representing the views of the Group as a whole.

It is not the function of this Group, as shown since its inception, to be prescriptive or directive in how to interpret the impact of this pivotal part of our history. It is our intention to set out some guiding principles to be referenced when navigating this important and formative historical period on the road to the foundation of the State and in its taking its place among the nations.

The decade of commemorations recalls some of the most significant events in the history of modern Ireland and the modern world: a decade of unprecedented violence, death, destruction and forced resettlement, but also the exercise of national self-determination resulting in major changes in government and political boundaries, the development of a modern Irish democracy and universal adult suffrage. The principles expressed in the Group's Initial Statement are still valid and relevant. This document re-affirms the Group's overall approach as we look forward to the second half of the Decade of Centenaries. These tenets include:

- The aim of commemoration should be to broaden sympathies without having to abandon loyalties and, in particular, to recognise the value of ideals and sacrifices, including their cost.
- Throughout the remainder of the decade, it is important not to forget the bloodshed and the deep antagonisms of these years. While few eyewitnesses survive, the memories remain vivid in some communities and families and commemorations may revive painful memories of loss or dispossession.
- We should also be conscious that on this island we have a common history but not a common memory of these shaping events.
- Commemoration should not ignore differences and divisions. The goal of inclusiveness is best achieved, not by trying for an enforced common interest or universal participation, but by encouraging multiple and plural commemorations which remember the past while ensuring, as far as possible, that the commemoration does not re-ignite old tensions.

What unites us is a desire to make a contribution to meaningful commemoration in the form of advice to the Government on official commemorative events. We do this in a spirit of public service and independently of any political views, agendas or influence. We do believe it is essential that the Government should maintain continuity in its commitment to commemoration and build on the widely acknowledged success of the centenary events during the decade of commemorations so far. In order to facilitate all-party discussion with the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht on potential areas of consideration and for the sake of continuity and political

inclusiveness, we endorse the Minister's decision to re-establish the All-Party Consultation Group on Commemorations and look forward to working with that group.

We also welcome continued positive engagement with local authorities, noting their key role in engaging local communities in commemorative events, particularly during 2016.

The Group recognises the considerable depth and range of expertise gained in the commemorative period to date, all of which will inform the Group as to the approach to be adopted in the next stages of the Decade of Centenaries. Commemorating the period 1917-1923 raises particular challenges, requiring imaginative, thoughtful, innovative and authentic interpretations to appeal to a discerning and expectant public and to stay true to the intricate and controversial sequence of events of that time.

Official events must, within reason, be inclusive and non-partisan, but the State should not be expected to be neutral about its own existence. The focus on commemorations should continue to be measured and reflective and informed by a full acknowledgement of the complexity of historical events and their legacy; of the multiple readings of history; and of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the Irish historical experience. There should be no attempt to contrive an ahistorical or retrospective consensus about the contemporary impact and legacy of divisive events.

We see our advice as being particularly relevant under the following headings:

Wider Context

The coming years see the centenaries of some of the most significant and also divisive events in the history of modern Ireland but equally importantly, reflect the history of the modern world. We should be conscious that events in Ireland, particularly the issues of military conflict, self-determination and state-building, form part of a much wider story and the focus of commemoration needs to be framed in that context.

Diversity

A key issue will be the avoidance of the promotion of any single reading of history. There must be full acknowledgement of the multiple identities, complexities and traditions which are part of the overall story.

Authenticity, Accuracy and Practicality

With regard to proposed official commemorations, it shall be within the brief of the Group to advise that events so selected are historically authentic and of significance, and that they are presented and framed in an accurate way. The use of primary source material will be promoted. We are also conscious of the danger of excessive official commemoration, which would not be practically or economically feasible. Not everything to do with this Decade can be commemorated at State level.

All-Island Events

The Group is conscious of the sensitivity surrounding commemoration in both jurisdictions on the island and will where possible liaise with appropriate groups in formulating its advice to Government on relevant events. We should continue to commemorate in partnership with relevant bodies and interest groups in Northern Ireland, but recognising and accepting that, ultimately, the decision to participate in individual acts of commemoration is voluntary and a matter of judgement in each jurisdiction.

Thematic Issues

The Group is conscious that any event-based approach may ignore major thematic issues. We will advise on appropriate themes and suggest ways in which they may best be approached. Major themes of the period to be commemorated in the coming years include the transformation of a revolution with violence into a functioning democracy and the foundation of the Irish State and Northern Ireland as well as the Civil War. This will provide an opportunity to highlight new and ongoing research and perspectives and to emphasise the huge broadening of the frameworks for interpreting the events of 1917 - 1923 in recent decades, with a focus no longer exclusively on political history but also on social, cultural, class and gender history.

Research and Scholarship

The Group is of the strong view that the opportunity to encourage scholarship at national and local level must be used as fully as possible, with particular emphasis on archival investment and development, the involvement of national cultural institutions, institutions of learning and the Department of Education and Skills.

The Group considers that the initiatives detailed below merit support by Government:

- Ensuring that Irish cultural institutions that house material most relevant to the period - principally the National Archives, the National Library, the Military Archives and the National Museum - continue to play a central role in exploring and explaining the history of this period;
- The release of all remaining military service pension files in the Military Archives files, with the aim that the entire collection is freely available online by January 2019;
- Ensuring that personal papers of key figures from the period in the National Library of Ireland, universities, local and regional repositories and elsewhere are progressively identified for digitisation and made freely available online. There are relevant materials retained in the British National Archives in Kew and efforts should be made to ensure that this material is made available;
- Ensuring that the range of commemorative events and media generated by this decade of reflection, including photographs, film, websites and digital archives, in addition to paper-based ephemera, continue to be captured for posterity and archived in the National Library of Ireland.

We are also conscious that we have a responsibility towards ensuring that a younger generation of students are familiar with the events of this decade and that history at all levels of education needs to be a core part of the curricula.

Capital Projects and Permanent Reminders

The development of the Decade of Centenaries commemorative capital projects to date has led to welcome and significant commemorative infrastructure, which will benefit all citizens for decades to come. It is essential that funding of such projects continues but also that the capital projects are not confined to Dublin, especially given the importance of the regional experiences during the war of independence and civil war.

Given that the start of the Irish Civil War brought the destruction of the Public Records Office, we recommend capital investment to fully refurbish the National Archives, and consideration for a *National Shared Store* to ensure permanent safekeeping and access for the national collections.

Consultation, Inclusiveness and Local Commemoration

Following from the very successful public consultations that took place as part of the *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, the Group will consult widely with scholars, universities, educational and cultural bodies, galleries, libraries, archives, museums, local historical associations and committees. We are happy to receive suggestions and ideas from these as well as from individuals. We welcome original research at local and national level, at all times acknowledging the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the historic story of the island of Ireland and Irish people worldwide.

We acknowledge the critical importance of local authorities in the commemorations to date and the need for them to continue their work and to be supported in their role. The State should continue to support local and county commemorative exercises to widen and deepen a historical understanding of the significance of the events being commemorated among the public at large, including, for example, by encouraging rounded exhibitions. The work of local authorities should also follow the principles as set out in this statement.

We also recognise the essential value of local initiative and the importance of supporting it by continued collaboration between cultural institutions and bodies, nationally and locally, including through joint exhibitions, the sharing of certain resources, guest lectures, and temporary loans. This would tangibly demonstrate the State's support for local and county commemorative exercises and would underpin the excellent work undertaken by local authorities developing inclusive, citizen-focused commemorations.

This sense of context may best be achieved by encouraging the study and exploration of the historical evidence for the social, cultural, political and military history of Irish people - in their families, communities and associational worlds – during the decisive decade. In effect, this would encourage individuals, schools, dedicated societies and organisations to investigate the historical evidence for what was actually happening in their own families, communities and localities during the period 1917- 1923. Thus,

the *leitmotiv* of widespread public engagement in this second phase of commemoration would be, as has been the case to date, exploring the lived experience of communities in Ireland during the revolutionary years 1917 – 1923.

Ends.