

A FATEFUL DIPLOMATIC DINNER

18 April 1949: Ireland declared a full republic and withdrawn from the British Commonwealth.

On 6 September the Taoiseach (Chief) of the former Irish Free State John A. Costello surprised both the British Commonwealth Office and the members of his own cabinet by announcing, during a state visit to Canada, that his government would repeal the External Relations Act of 1936 and unilaterally terminate the 26-county state's membership in the British Commonwealth.

English political observers had expected such a move only in the event the opposition Fianna Fail party won the upcoming 1948 elections. Instead they were perplexed to hear such an announcement coming from an Irish government headed by what they thought of as the more conservative Fine Gael party. Although in the ensuing debates in the Dail (the Irish parliament), Costello's administration made the case that the surprise move was really only the logical outcome of a long standing Fine Gael

party policy, observers then and since were left scratching their heads in wonder.

If some stories are to be believed, it is possible that the timing of the announcement was speeded up by a frosty diplomatic dinner in Ottawa, Canada, of all places. There on an official visit, Costello was apparently cold-shouldered by Canada's Governor-General Field Marshall Viscount Alexander. At a reception hosted by Alexander, despite a long standing though unspoken diplomatic understanding, Costello found himself in the embarrassing position of being present during a "loyal toast" to the Queen of England, without his host relieving him by proposing a corresponding toast to the President of Ireland.

Perhaps the gruff old soldier Alexander (the conqueror of Sicily during World War II) was just ill-briefed, or perhaps he was still feeling a warrior's annoyance at Ireland's neutrality during the war. But Costello's mood was further blackened when one of Alexander's personal trophies, a silver model of the fortifications of the city of Derry, was brought out and placed on the table directly in front of the Irish prime minister. Not only was it placed before him, but it was

oriented so that the silver model of the famous “Roaring Meg” cannon was pointed directly at him. It was as if it were 1689 all over again, and the walls of Derry (still a bastion of the partitioned North) were again defying an Irish ruler, with Costello this time cast in the role of the hapless King James, whose epic siege of Derry came to naught.

In the art and practice of diplomacy, little acts can carry a great meaning, and the events of that dinner seemed too much to be entirely a coincidence. Pressure had been building for some time to have the 26-county Irish state resolve its amorphous position in regard to membership in the British Commonwealth, and for whatever the reasons, Costello now decided to go for a clean break. Two days after the dinner, while still in Canada, he made his surprise declaration in the course of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation interview. The Irish government formally concluded the move the following April.