

No. 136 NAI DFA LN 1/7

*Facsimile reproduction of a letter from Michael MacWhite to Joseph P. Walshe (Dublin) enclosing
a memorandum on the Irish Free State and the League of Nations
(M.L. 04/0130)*

Geneva, 14 April 1928

THE SAORSTÁT AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

I

The Saorstát was admitted to Membership of the League of Nations at the Third Assembly in September 1923. The sympathy manifested towards her on that historic occasion by the other members of the League was such as Geneva has witnessed neither before nor since. In returning thanks for her admission, President Cosgrave, after paying a tribute to the ideals of the League, stated that 'with all the nations whose spokesmen form this Assembly Ireland joins in a solemn Covenant to exercise the powers of her sovereign status in promoting the peace, security and happiness, the economic and cultural well being of the human race'.¹

It was naturally thought by those who listened to the President's speech that the Saorstát would, thenceforward, play an important part in League activities, and that, having no axe of her own to grind, she would use her influence, free from the prejudices associated with the allied and entente States, to dissipate the jealousies and suspicions then rampant in League circles and thereby advance the humanitarian ideals embodied in the Covenant. For one reason or another, these hopes did not materialise. The promises made were not followed by any corresponding action with the result that the prestige of the Saorstát amongst the League Members is less to-day than it was five or six years ago.

II

Six Assemblies have come and gone since she became a Member of the League, nevertheless the voice of the Saorstát has been scarcely heard in the Reformation Hall. In 1923, Dr. MacNeill made some pertinent observations on the international situation created by Italy, owing to the bombardment of Corfu and in 1926 Mr. FitzGerald discussed the proposal for the composition of the Council.²

In the different Committees set up by the Assembly the Saorstát delegates have also been noted for their silence. From this, however, it must not be inferred that their action on matters under discussion has been insignificant. On the contrary, it has on many occasions been appreciable, for influence may be exercised in conversations with other delegates, in supporting

¹ See DIFP Volume II, No. 118.

² See above No. 33.

proposals corresponding to our ideas and by a discriminating use of the vote. For example, the role played by the Saorstát delegation in the election of Canada to a seat on the Council was considerable.

In the long run, however, it is only those States whose representatives participate actively and openly in the general work of the Assembly who count. Experienced diplomatists are well aware of this fact and act accordingly. They take advantage of any and every situation in order to support or obstruct the proposals of other States, as the case may be, for this is an excellent method of putting their own country on the map and a warning to all concerned that it must not be omitted from the calculations of Statesmen. A country possessing men capable of acting as I have outlined controls a powerful diplomatic currency and has a medium of exchange which immensely facilitates its own negotiations.

It is most important that a young State like the Saorstát should cultivate her international relations. Her geographical position, her economic situation and her constitutional status demand it. The Assemblies of the League provide the occasion. They facilitate international contact and experience and they afford a valuable framework for constitutional development. Advantage has not been taken, as it might have been, in the past, of this situation, but if the Saorstát is to stand for anything in international life in the future she must exploit it to the limit.

III

Outside the Assembly, the Saorstát has been represented at about a dozen Conferences that have been held under League auspices. The subject of many of these conferences was of no particular interest to Ireland, nevertheless they all afforded an occasion for asserting her new found status and for conserving some of the rights acquired by the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which were being menaced by British interference. It was due to the intervention of the Saorstát delegate at the second Conference on Communications and Transit in 1923 that the well known *inter se* clause, adopted two years previously at Barcelona, was modified and subordinated to the Covenant. At the Opium Conference in 1924, the Saorstát delegate took an active part which was appreciated by those who propose to limit the manufacture of dangerous drugs to medical and scientific requirements. At the Economic and other Conferences, the views of the Saorstát Government were put on record. It is, however, a difficult task, under the most favourable circumstances, for a delegate who resides at Geneva to intervene effectually in the debates of technical conferences, unless he receives very elaborate instructions, or, at least, has had an opportunity of discussing the items on the agenda with the different governmental Departments concerned. Generally speaking, this has not, hitherto, been the case.

IV

The question of Canada's successor on the Council must be of first class importance to the Saorstát. Canada's mandate will not expire before 1930 and if the Saorstát should aspire to it,

and her prestige both at home and abroad requires that she should, it is imperative that she should make her candidature known at an early date. Some people in England are already putting forward the name of Australia and it is perhaps in anticipation of such an eventuality that Sir George Harrison Moore, one of the Australian delegates to the last Assembly, has remained since last September in Geneva studying the activities of the League from close quarters.

The Saorstát's chances of success will depend to a high degree on her action in League matters during the next two years. She will, however, have two powerful competitors in Belgium and Czechoslovakia, both of whom will be again eligible at the time. It is, therefore, incumbent that she should adopt a firm attitude on the question of arbitration, which is the bed rock on which the Covenant is built. There can be no progress in the domain of international disarmament unless the Members of the League agree to submit their disputes to Arbitration. Canada has had some bitter experience of arbitration, nevertheless her delegation at the last Assembly pronounced in favour of it. They admitted in private conversation that, in the near future, they should consider what action they should take as regards the optional clause recognising the jurisdiction of the Permanent Court of International Justice. If this clause could be signed on behalf of the Saorstát before the 1930 Assembly³ her chances of election to a seat on the League Council would be considerably enhanced. The effect of such a signature would not have the same significance if Canada had already signed. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the steps, if any, that are being taken in this matter by the Canadian Government should be known in Dublin as, judging by their recent attitude on inter imperial matters, it is not at all sure that they would allow the recommendations of the Imperial Conference to stand in their way.

The question of the limitation of armaments is becoming day by day of greater importance to the League and its Members. It is one on which the Saorstát could take up a very strong attitude in view of the reductions that have been effectuated in this domain in the Saorstát Army since 1924.

Humanitarian questions, such as the traffic in drugs, traffic in Women and Children and Hygiene should also receive attention, as many States attach perhaps more importance to this side of the League activities, where practical work can be accomplished, than to those which they regard as more or less chimerical.

V

In relation to the League Assembly, it would perhaps also be well to consider the prejudice that may be caused to the Saorstát by the meetings of the delegates of the 'Empire' whilst at Geneva. It is because of these meetings that the British delegate has frequently pretended to speak to his Colleagues in the name of the Dominions as well. At the last Assembly this was the case and the

³ The Irish Free State signed the Optional Clause at the 1929 Assembly of the League of Nations: see below Nos 246, 254, 255, 257, 258, 259, 260 and 261.

point was well brought out in a book which was written some months ago by a gentleman who is evidently in close touch with Downing Street and who calls himself 'Augur'. In this book, he states 'This fiction of complete independence in League affairs of Great Britain and of the Dominions had been maintained until now, but Sir Austen's declaration of devotion to the Imperial idea would have no value if it were not endorsed by the dominion representatives. Evidently it was so endorsed. This means that the British Empire is being interposed between the League and the individual members. It now remains to take the last step to clinch the matter by giving an official sanction to the private meetings at which the British and the Dominion delegates establish a common point of view on League Affairs.'

I understand that Augur's book was distributed gratuitously to all the delegates who assisted at the last Assembly. The intention is evident enough. It is an insidious way of conveying to other Powers the idea that at those meetings agreement was reached affecting Commonwealth interests to which the British delegate was authorised to give expression and our silence goes a long way towards confirming this impression.