All of the signatories of the Easter proclamation had been executed and most of the surviving senior figures were, like Eamon De Valera, serving life terms in British gaols.

To continue the planning and execution of a revolutionary programme from behind prison bars was a tall order. Yet that is precisely what occurred.

The Irish Parliamentary Party realised that their support was ebbing away. They pressed Asquith’s government to adopt a softer approach, resulting in the release of the first batch of prisoners just before Christmas 1916. The tumultuous welcome they received throughout Ireland was a clear indication of how things had changed since the Rising.

**It was just the beginning.**

De Valera was the senior surviving Commandant of the rebellion. He had seen more action than most and the greatest casualties in the British forces were suffered at the hands of his Boland’s Mills unit. Whereas that undoubtedly placed him in a key position of respect and admiration among his fellow rebels, it would not alone have made him the focus of the independence movement that he was to become.
It is clear that even at this early stage in his public life De Valera was already manifesting the personality and leadership traits that attracted people to him throughout his career. He had an aura, a charisma about him.

Perhaps it was his exotic name and striking appearance, perhaps his physical stature and presence, that made men and women alike look up to him and follow him.

He was also possessed of an extraordinary political intelligence for a man whose main career ambition heretofore was to be a college professor.

De Valera first showed the uncommon astuteness that was to define him on a celebrated occasion in Dartmoor prison. He was the accepted leader of the prisoners and one morning he observed Prof. Eoin MacNeill arriving into the exercise area, having been imprisoned the evening before. MacNeill had been duped by the Executive Council and had attempted to call off the Rising as he could see no chance of success. Naturally, there was some resentment against him from the prisoners but De Valera immediately stepped forward and called the men to attention. He intuitively sensed the right thing to do. He had honoured a man who had worked with him in the Volunteers and the Gaelic League and whose spirits were probably at an all-time low. This episode further enhanced De Valera’s standing, both within and without the prison walls.

As leader of the prisoners in Dartmoor, De Valera was constantly in conflict with the prison authorities. Ever the mathematician, he calculated the calorific value of the prison food and successfully lobbied the Governor for a more nutritious diet. He and his friend and fellow inmate, Thomas Ashe, organised a general work strike of prisoners which commenced on Whit Sunday 1917. They were seeking political status. Interestingly, De Valera did not favour hunger strike as a weapon, telling his colleagues to remember how precious human life is. The prison authorities thought it prudent to split up the prisoner leaders and De Valera was moved from Dartmoor to Lewes and finally to Maidstone prison. His efforts and trials on behalf of the prisoners were well reported in the Irish media and De Valera’s name was now becoming well known.

Things were moving on apace in the outside world. On 3rd February, Count Plunkett won the North Roscommon By-Election on a loosely defined nationalist programme. On 9th May, prisoner Joe McGuinness narrowly won Longford after a recount, the famous slogan, “Put him in to get him out” helping to get him over the line.

De Valera had mixed views on the advisability of contesting elections. He wrote:

“It is a question whether it is good tactics to provoke a contest in which defeat may well mean ruin... As soldiers we should abstain officially from taking sides in these contests and no candidates should in future be officially recognised as standing in our interests or as representing our ideals. We can individually help all those who are striving for Ireland’s freedom by other means – there will never be any lack of these – but we should as a body keep to our own special sphere.”

(Eamon De Valera, Longford and O’Neill, Gill and Macmillan)

In fact, he and Thomas Ashe and Diarmuid Lynch had encouraged McGuinness to decline the Longford nomination, most likely realising how close that contest would be. They were rightly concerned that an electoral reverse would be seen as a post-hoc repudiation of the Rising.

On 15th June, Bonar Law, Leader of the House of Commons, announced the general release of prisoners. Their reception in Dún Laoghaire and Westland Row station in Dublin was phenomenal. The massive turnout, co-ordinated by the Volunteers but spontaneous in the main, underlined how things had, in Yeats words, ‘changed. changed utterly.’

As he was leaving prison, De Valera received a telegram that he had been chosen to contest a parliamentary seat in East Clare.
Following a meeting of the Irish Volunteers he agreed to stand, stating:

“Men of Clare whilst I was yet in gaol a large convention of your fellow countrymen unanimously selected me to stand as a Republican candidate in this election. Political platforms have little attraction for me, but in this case I considered that the principles for which my comrades died were at stake and that it was my duty, seeing I still adhered to these principles, to avail of every opportunity to vindicate and to advance them.”

(Speeches and Statements by Eamon De Valera 1917–1973, Edited by Maurice Moynihan, Gill & Macmillan St. Martin’s)

East Clare was to become one of the key events in the move towards a separatist state and an independent Irish republic. De Valera made it quite clear that he would not take his seat in Westminster if elected and that he was standing on the programme of the 1916 proclamation. To emphasise this, he campaigned throughout in his Volunteer uniform.

His Parliamentary Party opponent, Patrick Lynch, K.C., came from a highly respected family but the tide of opinion was against him and De Valera was elected by 5010 votes to 2035, a very significant margin. It signalled the beginning of the end of the old Irish Party. After decades of inner turmoil following the Parnellite split, they had finally united under John Redmond.

Their long-cherished dream of Home Rule was at last in sight, albeit in a much diluted format, but it was no longer good enough for the Irish people. East Clare foreshadowed their total eclipse in the General Election of 1918. With the exception of the death by forced feeding of Thomas Ashe on 25th September, it was the single most important event in the crucial year after the Rising.

Interestingly, Patrick Lynch subsequently became a great admirer of De Valera who, in later years made him his Attorney General.

Pearse and his comrades had not died in vain. Rather, they had been vindicated by the tireless and well-planned endeavours of those who had survived, De Valera chief among them.

Arthur Griffith’s Sinn Fein, a party on the margins prior to the Rising, had been erroneously credited by the British authorities and newspapers as being the voice of the rebellion. It now became a convenient umbrella for the various strands of nationalism that had evolved since 1916 but it was important that its leadership should devolve on someone who represented mainstream revolutionary thinking. As the recognised champion of the independence cause, De Valera was the obvious choice.

On 25th October, a Sinn Fein National Convention was held in the Mansion House. Approximately 1700 delegates attended and, nominated by Griffith, De Valera was unanimously elected President. Eoin MacNeill, with De Valera’s support, headed the poll for the 24 man party executive with the little known Michael Collins securing the final place.

In his acceptance speech De Valera stated:

“The only banner under which our freedom can be won at the present time is the Republican banner. It is as an Irish Republic that we have a chance of getting international recognition… Some might have faults to find with that.

Senator Ned O’Sullivan is a member of the Fianna Fáil 1917-1921 Commemoration Committee which is chaired by Eamon Ó Cuív TD, grandson of Eamon De Valera. Ned studied History at UCD and St. Patrick’s College of Education.
and prefer other forms of government. But we are all united on this – that we want complete and absolute independence. This is not the time for discussion on the best forms of government. This is the time to get freedom. Then we can settle by the most democratic means what particular form of government we may have.”

(Eamon De Valera, Longford and O’Neill, Gill and Macmillan)

Shortly afterwards De Valera was elected President of the Irish Volunteers. The political and military leadership of nationalist Ireland was now in his hands. Cathal Brugha, his close confidant, was appointed Chief of Staff with Collins becoming Director of Organisation.

Thus ended a very eventful year in the life of the man who was now known nationwide as ‘Dev’. It was a critical period in the onward march of the Irish nation and it set the scene for other stirring events in the years that followed.

What is remarkable is the spirit of discipline and unity that prevailed at this difficult juncture. Ireland’s cause was never better served than it was at this time by the courageous and patriotic men and women who charted its course. That spirit was to endure under De Valera’s sure guidance right through to the end of the War of Independence.

1917 – THE FIANNA FÁIL CONNECTION

It is interesting to note how many of those who came to the forefront in the 1916–1917 period went on to follow De Valera on his political journey towards the founding of the Fianna Fáil Party in 1926. Among the main drivers of the Fianna Fáil movement were -

Sean Lemass
Sean T. Ó Ceallaigh
Countess Markievicz
Dr. Jim Ryan
Seán MacEntee
Frank Aiken
Tom Derrig
P.J. Ruttledge
De Valera’s First Cabinet

Senator Ned O’Sullivan
Spokesperson on Transport, Tourism and Sport
Scanad Éireann, Leinster House, Kildare St, Dublin 2. ☎ +353 (0)61 618 3730
Constituency Office, Cahirdown, Listowel, Co.Kerry. ☎ +353 (0)68 21 831
✉ ned.osullivan@oireachtas.ie
🌐 www.senatordenosullivan.com