

Saklatvala Speech in Parliament, 17/11/1922:
–IRISH FREE STATE CONSTITUTION

I beg to move, to leave out the word "now," and at the end of the Question to add the words "upon this day three months."

I realise the unpopularity I am courting in taking this step, but it was distinctly understood between my electors and myself that they did not wish me to back up a Treaty which was based upon coercion, and was signed under duress. I do not now speak on behalf of the Labour party in the House. I wish that to be made perfectly clear. I maintain that, perhaps as a purist, I adhere in the Amendment to a principle that the Labour party has laid down, namely, the principle of self-determination. It is not to be understood that I do not share the wishes or the prayers of my chief, nor is it to be understood I have not the same desire as my colleagues, but I must frankly admit that I do not share their hopes. I believe that the only cure will come when either this Government or a future Labour Government tells our friends in Ireland that they have a right to a genuine and bonâ fide, self-determined voice of their own. Unless that is done, neither the Treaty nor the Constitution nor the Bill now before the House is likely to do what we all, against our convictions, hope that they may do. We talk of a Treaty. Hon. Members on all sides of the House have written and spoken in unmistakable terms in expressing their views that the unfortunate part of the Treaty was that the signatures were obtained under duress. I feel that that duress was undoubtedly there, and the unfortunate fact was that it need not have been there. If matters had been left to the free will and the good sense of the people, the result would have been quite- different from what it has been.

We have heard to-day quotations and illustrations of similar enactments for colonies and dominions of the Empire. Is there any real parallel between those Constitutions and the hopes and desires of the people of the countries concerned and the hopes and desires of the Irish people? Was Australia not rejoicing and waiting almost to a man and woman for the day when her Constitution would be

confirmed by this House? Was not South Africa, after a great war and defeat, gratefully awaiting the day when the Treaty would be passed and the little minority of the republican in a constitutional manner would be permitted to express themselves as a minority? The people of Canada, too, were determined to have their Constitution and to work it. The case of Ireland is different. It is no use our pretending that it is not so. We cannot adopt the policy that by driving deeper into the soil the roots of a cactus, and by carefully covering it with soil, roses will grow later on. I pay my homage to the great spirit that reigns in this House to-day, and to the great spirit that pervades the people who sent Members to represent them in this House. I admire that spirit at its full value. In spite of all the bitter differences in the past, we are determined to come to a genuine and sincere unanimity upon this question. Were we settling the matter in dispute between ourselves here, that spirit would give us a permanent solution: but our unanimity does not affect the disunity in Ireland, and that point does not seem to be before this House as emphatically as it ought to be.

Was there ever an instance in the history of treaties where immediately after a treaty had been signed, two out of the five signatories had to repudiate their signatures as not having been put down with a bonâ fide and conscientious intention? The hon. Member for Spen Valley (Sir J. Simon) was pointing out to us the great improvement, which has taken place since the Treaty. I am sorry to hear argument of that kind being advanced on rather imperfect observation. [HON. MEMRERS: "Hear, hear!"] The imperfect observation which I wish to point out is not referred to in the spirit of the hon. and gallant Member for Burton (Colonel Gretton). It is quite in another direction. In the first instance, what is the constituent assembly which has sent us this document? Soon after the Treaty and, apart from anything that was ever contemplated at the time of the Treaty, a truce was entered into between the two factious parties in Ireland creating an artificial Dail to tackle the problem of the- Treaty. I take no sides with either of the Irish parties, but I maintain that truce—or that promise to observe a truce—was not fair to the people, of Great Britain, and it was certainly more than unfair to the people of Ireland. Under the truce it was decided to call an artificial constituent

assembly, and when the moment came, even that truce was not observed, and the so-called constituent assembly cannot on any bonâ fide and sincere principle of self-determination, be accepted as a truly and properly elected Dail representing the people of Ireland in the ratios and the proportions in which they stand. I was present at the last great Labour Conference in Ireland; I attended its sittings in Dublin and I saw there written down in black and white and heard proclaimed from the platform—"A plague on both your houses"—on both parties, both the pro-Treaty and the anti-Treaty party. I have heard it declared that Irish Labour, well organised, is determined to work for a worker' republic. These are the views which are being expressed, and the Labour party in Ireland is bound to come into its own, however much hon. Members may jeer or laugh. The Republicans are there; it is no use denying that they are there in very large numbers, and it is extremely doubtful, if coercive measures were not taken, whether they would not prove themselves to be the majority of the people of Ireland. These facts cannot be ignored, and they cannot be buried or covered up. We are assured by the Prime Minister that, according to Mr. Cosgrave, Ireland is only waiting for the Constitution to be carried through this House, and that they are going to work it out. Mr. Cosgrave knows that he had to shoot four human beings a week ago, and he has had since to take another life by violence—that of Erskine Childers. He knows that the prisons of Ireland are to be filled with thousands of men, and even some women, without charge and without trial. He knows that Ireland is to be prepared to receive this Constitution, not with joy and Hags and illuminations, but with martial law, penalties and threats, imprisonment and ships waiting to depopulate the country. [Interruption.] I will ask you, Mr. Speaker, to save me from those who are pretending to be my friends. I appeal to the Prime Minister and I appeal to the House.

Once, in 1801, our predecessors and your forefathers thought they had worked a great political trick and a mighty political charm when with great unanimity in Dublin and London they brought about the Act of Union. For 120 years that Act of Union has only produced distress to Ireland and disgrace to this country. I, as your friend—not as your critic nor as your opponent—feel that I am in conscience bound not to

be a party to another and a greater mockery. Until the Labour party in this country comes into power, until genuine self-determination is permitted to the people of Ireland, there is going to be neither peace nor fidelity to the Treaty, nor the carrying out of the Free State Government, nor any of the "tosh" we have been hearing of late. I am speaking in a most difficult position. I know I seem to be the friend of my enemies and the enemy of my friends, but time and history will prove my case. I shall not be at all sorry or ashamed to say that even if you were all unanimous, I stood aloof and away from you. Within five years this House will find the necessity for undoing this unanimous or semi-unanimous Act after more distress and more suffering. Let me predict that it will be the Labour party sitting on those benches which will have to afford real freedom to Ireland. Instead of merely expressing a pious opinion, I take my courage in my hands and true to my convictions I move this Amendment in order to create an opportunity for myself to vote against the Bill.