

Lord Mayor Laurence O'Neill, Alderman Tom Kelly and Dublin's Housing Crisis

Ruth McManus

Laurence O'Neill, described on the occasion of his election to a fifth successive term of office as a 'popular, useful, independent and energetic Lord Mayor',¹ was the last person to hold the office under the British regime and the first to hold it under the Free State administration. His term, then, straddled a very turbulent period in Ireland's political and social history. It began in the midst of the First World War and continued through the 'troubles' of the early 1920s, coming to an end – perhaps- with the abolition of Dublin Corporation in 1924. The word 'perhaps' is apposite, because O'Neill did not vacate the Mansion House until 1925 and as late as 1926 a court case failed to conclude that he was no longer lord mayor, with the judge suggesting that 'probably' he remained lord mayor.² In any case, it was O'Neill who was the proposer, in 1930, of the next elected lord mayor of the city, that well-known and charismatic leader Alfie Byrne, discussed in the following chapter.

The focus of this essay is on O'Neill's attempts, during his term of office, to address Dublin's housing problems. In this task, he shared common cause with Alderman Tom Kelly, long-time chairman of the Dublin corporation housing committee, and a man who was instrumental in shaping housing policy in the city.³ Both expressed a burning desire to address the appalling housing conditions of the poor of the city. This second individual, Alderman Tom Kelly, also has the distinction of having been elected lord mayor in January 1920. He did not take office, as he was interned without charge in Wormwood Scrubs prison at the time of his election, as a result of which his health was broken.⁴ In his absence, O'Neill remained on as lord mayor, while asserting that he would consult Kelly, pending the latter's recovery, and conduct the duties of lord mayor in accordance with Kelly's wishes'.⁵ As Kelly was not inaugurated as mayor, he never officially held the office. Together, these two men

¹ Irish Independent, 1 Feb. 1921.

² Irish Independent, 14 Dec. 1926.

³ Sheila Carden, *The Alderman, Alderman Tom Kelly (1868-1942) and Dublin Corporation* (Dublin, 2007) page number needed?.

⁴ Irish Times, 14 Feb. 1920.

⁵ New York Times, 24 Feb. 1920.

were instrumental in shaping housing policy at a crucial period in the city's development.

I

Born in 1874, Laurence O'Neill was educated in the Christian Brothers' Schools and at Belvedere College. First elected to Dublin corporation in 1908, he was elected unanimously to the position of lord mayor in January 1917, an event without parallel for some years in the city. O'Neill served as lord mayor of Dublin through the tumultuous period in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising, while the First World War still raged and through the War of Independence and Civil War. A moderate nationalist, he favoured a balanced, temperate approach to public office. For example, O'Neill expressed 'his ambition that the mansion house would be the meeting place of the citizens of Dublin, no matter what their social qualifications, political leanings, or creed may be'.⁶ While critical of the treatment of Irish prisoners in the wake of the 1916 rising, O'Neill pleaded for a temperate approach, cautioning his fellow citizens that the eyes of the world were upon them.⁷ He aimed to tread a middle ground, arguing the case for the people of his city while avoiding inflaming political sentiments. It must be recalled that this was a tremendously fraught period. The city was in grave distress, and early in his mayoralty, O'Neill spoke out on the 'food shortage peril',⁸ and presided over a conference into the relief of distress.⁹ In June 1917, O'Neill was present at an inquest into the death of a policeman which had occurred at a meeting concerning the fate of political prisoners. He led negotiations in a number of labour disputes, including that of the draymen at Boland's Mills,¹⁰ and he made appeals on behalf of the unemployed of the city, arguing that unless they were provided with work in the rebuilding of Dublin, 'the present state of affairs would make them all turn into Sinn Féiners'.¹¹

In his inaugural speech in January 1917, Laurence O'Neill identified the solution of the housing problem as one of his key aims.¹² When O'Neill made his first public appearance as lord mayor on 25 February 1917, he spoke on the topic of 'temperance and housing'. To his mind, 'the evils in their midst... might be traced to the wretched

⁶ Irish Independent, 30 Mar. 1917.

⁷ Irish Independent, 22 May 1917.

⁸ Irish Independent, 13 Mar. 1917.

⁹ Irish Independent, 15 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰ Irish Independent, 26 June 1917.

¹¹ Irish Independent, 30 June 1917.

housing system... It seemed to him a miracle that their poor people were even so good or so temperate, regard being had to the disgusting surroundings in which they lived'.¹³ This sentiment was shared by Alderman Tom Kelly, who had spoken in 1914 of life in the tenements, stating that 'those who, like myself, lived in them for years, know that life amongst the poor is only made tolerable by the help which one poor family renders another in times of stress, and until that state of affairs is permanently remedied, many of the social evils, in my judgement, will remain'.¹⁴ However, although a worthy cause, housing reform was a vexed one. By the time that Laurence O'Neill took office in 1917, house construction in Dublin was almost at a stand-still. Wartime conditions and shortages were an issue, while the need to reconstruct the city centre following the destruction of Easter 1916 inevitably diverted money from the housing budget. In addition to these practical issues, however, there was a significant political issue, that of the strained relations between the Local Government Board for Ireland, which controlled government funding, and Dublin Corporation.

II

In order to gain an insight into the challenge facing O'Neill with regard to housing, it is necessary to review the experience of the corporation's housing committee over the years prior to his election. In particular, the difficulties surrounding the proposed housing scheme at Fairbrothers' Fields, initiated in December 1912, illustrate the difficult circumstances under which housing reform was being attempted.¹⁵ Problems emerged at the site acquisition stage, when a lengthy process of compulsory purchase became necessary, overseen by the Local Government Board (LGB) with the appointment of an arbitrator in March 1915. However, in May of that year a circular was issued by the LGB restricting borrowing by local authorities. The Corporation's Housing Committee continued with the negotiations, on the basis that the work was of 'pressing necessity for reasons of public health' and therefore exempt from borrowing restrictions. Unfortunately, the LGB did not share that view, but by the time that the Housing Committee was informed that it was not exempt it was already 'irretrievably committed' to purchasing the site¹⁶. Eventually the Chancellor of the Exchequer

¹³ Irish Independent, 27 Feb. 1917.

¹⁴ RPDCD, 1914, vol. 2, p. 179.

¹⁵ RPDCD 110/1920.

¹⁶ Ibid.

stepped in, advising that the Treasury would advance the loans to acquire the site, but not to build on it. However, the Board of Works then refused to approve these loans, and it was not until December 1916, a full year later, that it finally advanced the money to acquire the lands.

Once the land was acquired, the Corporation had to search for some means of paying for the building work at Fairbrothers' Fields. The Housing Committee sought to gain a loan under the short-lived Housing (No. 2) Act, 1914 (which became law in August 1914, and operated for one year), and was supposed to provide £4 million for housing purposes in Great Britain and Ireland'.¹⁷ The necessary information was given to the Local Government Board in March 1915, but when a reply was not received, and the housing committee pressed for a decision, it was discovered that the case of Dublin had never been submitted to the Treasury by the LGB. 'The foregoing circumstances will give some idea of the vexatious methods with which the Committee had to contend in their efforts to carry on their pressing work'¹⁸. At a special meeting of the Corporation in October 1915, the Council passed a resolution declaring its lack of confidence in the LGB.¹⁹

Not for the first time, or the last, the plight of Dublin's poorest citizens apparently became subsumed into a battle of political wills. Given these circumstances, the very real efforts made by the housing committee, under the chairmanship of Tom Kelly, should not be underestimated. One of the most eloquent reports in the Corporation records is the late 1915 'digest of the case for immediate housing loans for Dublin', which summarized the appalling conditions in the city: 'The poorer citizens in thousands pine away and die in surroundings which give them no fighting chance of life. Delay to them is death, and are they to be told that the State has no time and no money to bother about them?'.²⁰ The report²¹ continued by referring to the 'countless millions' of pounds being spent 'on the prosecution of a war to which Dublin alone has sent some 14,000 men to fight the Empire's battle... Are they to find the Empire's

¹⁷ RPDCD 1920, no. 110, p. 364.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ RPDCD 1915, vol. 3, p. 123.

²⁰ RPDCD 35/1916, p. 351.

²¹ Peter Cowan, the chief engineer of the Local Government Board, went so far as to suggest that 'the rebellion of 1916, with its terrible results in loss of life, vast material waste, the re-birth of dying antagonisms, the creation of new enmities, and the setting back of the clock in many most vital movements for the welfare of Ireland might possibly have been prevented if the people in Dublin had been better housed' (Cowan, P.C., *Report on Dublin Housing*, Dublin, 1918, p. 31).

gratitude on their return represented in the refusal of the Government to allow the Corporation to lift their wives and children from the horrors of life in dilapidated tenement houses or cellar dwellings into the atmosphere of light and life in a sanitary, self-contained, comfortable home?'.²²

Although in September 1916, the Committee was informed that there was a possibility of obtaining money from American sources under the provisions of the Finance Act, 1916, negotiations fell through due to the prohibitive rates of interest demanded.²³ None of the Irish banks showed a disposition to give quotations for housing loans. Thus, 'every conceivable source was tapped with a view to obtaining funds for building, but without success, so that a hopeless deadlock was then created'.²⁴ This, then, was the circumstance which greeted Laurence O'Neill when he took office as lord mayor in February 1917.

III

Upon his election to the mayoralty, O'Neill found himself in the middle of an on-going campaign for the housing of Dublin's poor. His predecessor had promised a housing conference to consider the issue, but the new lord mayor was reluctant to proceed until funding, which appeared imminent, was secured.²⁵ On 5 April 1917, O'Neill led a deputation to Dublin Castle to seek assistance and to highlight 'the gravity of the state of affairs in Dublin owing to the lack of employment, and to urge the Irish Government to facilitate rebuilding operations by placing money at the disposal of the Corporation for the erection of dwellings for the working classes'.²⁶ The Chief Secretary Mr Duke responded in a favourable way,²⁷ and subsequently inspected the housing areas for which schemes had been prepared and was impressed with the distressing conditions he saw, promising to make immediate arrangements with the chancellor of the exchequer to advance the necessary money. Within a fortnight, it seemed that approval had been received and that funding would be forthcoming to allow the schemes at Spitalfields, Fairbrothers' Fields and McCaffrey

²² RPDCD 35/1916, p. 351.

²³ RPDCD 103/1917.

²⁴ RPDCD 110/1920, p. 364

²⁵ Irish Independent, 19 June 1917.

²⁶ Irish Times, 6 Apr. 1917.

²⁷ Irish Independent, 6 Apr. 1917.

estate to proceed.²⁸ The Chief Secretary, Mr Duke, was formally thanked by O'Neill at a meeting of Dublin Municipal Council 'for the great interest that he had taken, and was taking, in the work of housing'.²⁹

Unfortunately, this was not to be a brave new dawn for Dublin's slum-dwellers. Despite this flurry of activity in April 1917, negotiations dragged on and the promised funding did not materialize. By late 1918, grave concern was expressed by the Corporation regarding the differential treatment received by Irish local authorities compared to their counterparts in England with reference to financial aid for housing schemes. In November 1918, Tom Kelly, as chairman of the Housing Committee, spoke at a meeting of the Dublin Municipal Council at which O'Neill was presiding. Kelly outlined the failure of the Local Government Board to uphold its promises, claiming that 'the whole correspondence showed that the British authorities were simply playing with the housing business'.³⁰ In a final attempt to put an end to this impasse, the lord mayor wrote directly to the prime minister, Lloyd George, 'in the hope that the Corporation may obtain at an early date some definite decision as to the amount of State aid which will be available to enable the housing question here to be comprehensively dealt with'.³¹ His letter was prompted, he said, by 'a deep sense of his responsibility as Lord Mayor'. In it, O'Neill reminded the prime minister of the assurances received that Ireland would participate in government housing grants after the war, pointing to the fact that a consensus had been reached in 1914 that the housing problems in Dublin were beyond the resources of the municipality and that state aid was essential. He argued that the question was not a political one, but 'It is one which, on humanitarian grounds alone, demands immediate action on the part of the State, and the people of this city are entitled to know now what measure of assistance the Government proposes to enable the very grave conditions in Dublin to be grappled with'.³² Although the prime minister's reply, dated 26 November 1918, assured the lord mayor 'that I am taking steps to ascertain personally what is the

²⁸ Irish Times, 23 Apr. 1917. Laurence O'Neill was advised that £10,000 would be available immediately, followed by further amounts to total £100,000 by the end of the following March. This was to provide for Spitalfields (1st section), McCaffrey Estate (10 acre site, Mount Brown), St James's Walk, Fairbrother's Fields (22 acres) and Crabbe Lane. While Spitalfields was completed in 1918, and McCaffrey and St James's Walk were in the hands of contractors, it was not until December 1918 that the Local Government Board sanctioned the loan to build on Fairbrother's Fields.

²⁹ Irish Times, 17 Apr. 1917.

³⁰ Irish Times, 16 Nov. 1918.

³¹ Weekly Irish Times, 23 Nov. 1918.

³² RPDCD, 1918, vol. 1, pp. 126-128

actual position with regard to the progress of schemes for re-housing in Dublin', no further correspondence was recorded on the matter.³³

Little wonder that by the time he was making his third inauguration speech, in February 1919, O'Neill was rather gloomy with regard to the possibilities of what could be achieved. 'He admitted with regret that his previous two years had been very barren of results, and he had no great hope of accomplishing much in the year to come, because with the world turned upside down it was very difficult to concentrate one's mind on anything practical'.³⁴ He singled out the Local Government Board for criticism, stating that much more could and would have been done to improve housing conditions, had the LGB supplied the necessary information in relation to funding.

Throughout 1919 the efforts to obtain money to advance Dublin's housing programme continued. This was taking place against the background of an extremely grave political situation. There was huge frustration at the inaction of the LGB, contrasting with the clear-cut instructions for post-war housing schemes being sanctioned for local authorities in England. At the request of Tom Kelly, the Lord Mayor and Town Clerk wrote to the Irish banks to request a housing loan, but were turned down.³⁵ The difficulty of finding funding for housing remained an issue into 1920.

IV

Although they were not party colleagues, O'Neill and Kelly appear to have worked closely on the housing issue. Tom Kelly's strong voice, as chairman of the Dublin corporation housing committee, was very influential throughout the decade and appears to have largely determined the direction of housing policy for the city.³⁶ However, the highly charged external political environment was to intervene on 11 December 1919, when Kelly was taken from his bed by the military, deported and imprisoned without charge until February of the following year, effectively ruining his health. The outrage expressed by members of Dublin corporation at Kelly's arrest,

³³ RPDCD, 1918, vol. 1, pp. 126-128

³⁴ Irish Times, 25 Feb. 1919.

³⁵ Irish Times, 25 Nov. 1919.

³⁶ Murray Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes* (Liverpool, 1996), passim.

reported in the newspapers some days later, is palpable. The lord mayor stated that ‘he had never heard so much general indignation amongst all classes of the citizens as had arisen over his [Kelly’s] treatment and arrest. He went on to refer to Alderman Kelly’s interest in the housing of the working classes, and asked them to think what it was at this perilous juncture in their affairs to have such a man taken from amongst them, treated worse than the meanest criminal, spirited away and locked out of sight, God knew where, with no investigation, no charge, or no trial whatever...’.³⁷

When the usual Local Inquiry concerning the proposed housing scheme at Marino was opened in January 1920, lord mayor O’Neill, reluctant to proceed with the inquiry in Kelly’s absence, sent a telegram to the chief secretary for Ireland asking for Kelly’s release in view of his importance as both witness and advisor. P.C. Cowan, the inspector for the Local Government Board, ‘stated that no one could regret more sincerely Alderman Kelly’s absence than he did, as very many important issues needed to be worked out, in particular the great and dominating difficulty of finance, and the nature of the houses. He said that Kelly was one of the pioneers who projected schemes like these in Dublin, and that his heart and soul had been centred in this particular scheme. He added that Kelly would have been a principal witness if he were free’. W.J. Larkin of the Dublin Tenants’ Association also regretted the absence of Kelly, whom he described as ‘an honourable and upright citizen, and as clear a gentleman as there was in public life’.³⁸ In the event, the inquiry went ahead because it was generally felt that Tom Kelly would have been the last to wish the work to be postponed by even a day.³⁹ O’Neill paid warm tribute to Kelly when he stated that his efforts to improve housing conditions in Dublin were ‘worthy of the highest admiration’.⁴⁰ A resolution moved by the lord mayor at the Housing Committee meeting on 14 January 1920, and which was carried unanimously, stated that

We regret exceedingly that his confinement in a British gaol, without accusation or trial, has deprived us of his able counsel, and the citizens of the services of a man whose chief object has always been to improve the conditions of his native city.⁴¹

³⁷ Irish Times, 16 Dec. 1919.

³⁸ Evening Telegraph, 2 Jan. 1920.

³⁹ RPDCD, 1921, vol. 11, pp. 386-7

⁴⁰ Irish Times, 15 Jan. 1920.

⁴¹ RPDCD, 1921, vol. 1, p. 102

Although Kelly was released in February 1920, he never took office as lord mayor of Dublin, although when his health eventually recovered he returned to politics, and was elected as a city councillor in 1932 and Fianna Fáil TD for Dublin South in 1933, both of which positions he held till his death in 1942.⁴² Instead, Laurence O'Neill continued in as lord mayor. In 1924, when Dublin Corporation was controversially abolished, it was a mark of the esteem in which Laurence O'Neill was held that he was invited to accept the chairmanship of the Commission established to run the city, and to continue in office as lord mayor for a further period of four years. It is a reflection of O'Neill's sense of integrity that he declined the offer.⁴³

V

Dublin Corporation has frequently been criticized for its lack of action following the publication of the report of the Housing Inquiry in 1914. However, political circumstances made it extremely difficult for local government to function effectively. The inner city schemes which continued to be developed in the period from 1914 to 1920 were a considerable improvement on the horrors of the tenements. What is remarkable, is that whereas house-building almost ceased in British cities due to the Great War, in Ireland, despite the political situation, it did continue, albeit on a reduced scale. This was principally as a result of municipal activity in Dublin,⁴⁴ and due in no small part to the work of Alderman Tom Kelly and of Laurence O'Neill.

O'Neill was undoubtedly popular and highly respected, as his – at the time - unrivalled record of re-election demonstrates. At the time, Mr. Forrester stated that

it was the first time in the history of Dublin that a man was elected purely for his own personal worth, for his own intrinsic value, probity and utility, rather than for any other considerations... despite the withdrawals of ... grants..., the ejection of the administration from the City Hall and Municipal Buildings, the constant harassment, raids and imprisonments of the members of the Council... they still survived, undeterred and undismayed, with an administration that strengthened under each rebuff, grew confident under each attack...⁴⁵.

⁴² Coleman, Marie, 'Thomas Kelly', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* [online].

⁴³ Irish Independent, 20 May 1924.

⁴⁴ Fraser, 1996, p. 168

⁴⁵ Irish Times, 1 Feb. 1921.

O'Neill continued to argue for relief, to support ecumenical undertakings, and to do the best for all of the citizens. In late 1920 he facilitated the establishment of the Irish White Cross, whose general council included two Catholic bishops, two bishops of the Church of Ireland, the chief rabbi, the ex-president of the Irish Methodist Conference, the lord mayor and mayors of nine Irish towns and cities, several Dáil deputies and some leading members of the Society of Friends. Its brief was to alleviate distress arising out of the Irish war of independence. In an appeal for funds, O'Neill argued that

in a time of political disturbance and violence it is still possible for men and women to forget their differences, religious and political alike, and to bend all their energies to a constructive effort for the preservation of their country... no political distinctions exist in suffering, and none must exist in its relief.⁴⁶

O'Neill employed a similar tone when commenting on the completion of the first houses constructed by the St. Barnabas public utility society in East Wall. His speech at the opening ceremony in June 1921 reveals both his concern for housing the poor and his strong belief in a moderate, ecumenical middle ground in political terms. He said that it was particularly pleasant 'to find ladies and gentlemen of different degrees and forms of thought and religion gathered together with the one common object of benefiting their fellow citizens', expressing the hope that this scheme would be 'a beacon of light, the influence of which would spread throughout their beloved land'. In laying the name-stone of the society, the lord mayor specifically thanked Reverend Hall, who had initiated the scheme, 'for the splendid patriotic services he had rendered to the locality, and indeed, by his example, for the whole city', as the housing of the working classes was a subject that must concern everyone.⁴⁷

Laurence O'Neill's commitment to the poor of Dublin continued after he left office. In 1927, for example, as chairman of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society, he referred to the great number of people who were in dire distress in the city, and called for an increase in public subscriptions.⁴⁸ O'Neill was elected to Dáil Éireann as an independent TD at the 1922 general election but did not contest the 1923 general election and was an unsuccessful candidate at the September 1927 general election. He was elected to the Irish Free State Seanad Éireann at a by-election on 20 June 1929 to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Henry Petty-

⁴⁶ Irish Independent, 14 Mar. 1921.

⁴⁷ Church of Ireland Gazette, 8 July 1921.

⁴⁸ Irish Independent, 29 Apr. 1927.

Fitzmaurice. He was re-elected to the Seanad for a 9 year term in 1931 and served until the Free State Seanad was abolished in 1936. He was nominated by the Taoiseach on the 2 January 1940 to the 3rd Seanad. He did not contest the 1943 Seanad election and died in July of that year.