

There are moments in history when the times demand so much that it seems impossible to meet them. Intractable conflicts or cross generational feuds can settle on human affairs like an immovable perma frost. Each age has problems that seem too much to confront and cause many to shy away or to slip into an easy but barren anger. Yet in the crucible of such historic tests heroes emerge, men and women who rise to the challenges of their generation. Nelson Mandela was such a hero, one who will endure across the ages.

He was as President Obama put it “the Great Liberator of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” a man who met the historic task his time was presented with.

The pitch black horizon of apartheid South Africa seemed hopeless to many. A slide into the blood stained feuds of racial civil war appeared inevitable when the cracks appeared in the regime. Against that backdrop of mounting tension the calm presence of Mandela forged a common destiny that once seemed impossible. The rainbow nation was born under the remarkable leadership of a visionary who saw above and beyond the narrow limits that pre-occupied others.

His story is the perfect antidote to the relentless cynicism that infects politics, his achievements are a rallying cry to those engaged in the world around them and his legacy is an enduring challenge to us all to transcend our prejudice.

Many in Ireland heard that rallying cry and stood up against the grave injustice they saw in the apartheid regime. The 12 Dunne Stores workers who spent such long days on the picket line from 1984-1987 embodied direct action against the fundamentally flawed regime. For those 11 women and one man the example of the lone figure of Mandela condemned to hard labour in the desolation of Robben Island inspired them to take a stand.

Tony Ward, Hugo McNeill, Donal Spring, Moss [Keane](#) and Ciaran Fitzgerald, appalled by the sheer inequity of the South African state, spurned the chance to tour with the Irish team. They played their part in what way they could in rising to the challenges of the time.

Mandela lauded the Irish as the “original freedom fighters”. These men and women made sure it rang true. It’s easy in retrospect to join the cacophony of praise but at the time it was a genuine moment of courage in that act of solidarity.

Years later speaking with Mandela’s successor Thabo Mbeki he impressed upon me the deep sense of appreciation the ANC had for the work of the Irish anti-apartheid movement. The small but personal acts of defiance by men and women on a small island on the fringes of Europe resonated with those in the midst of a great struggle against an historic injustice. His visit here in 1990 electrified the nation and underlined the deep bond between us.

Nelson Mandela embodied the fact that one man not only can make a difference but is morally obliged to and across the globe people have responded to that call.

That call has not faded with his death. The world he has departed from still labours under grave injustices. The basic, inalienable equality of each man and woman by virtue of our shared spark of humanity remains a forlorn dream in many corners of the globe. South Africa found a true leader to emerge as a beacon of light in the moral darkness of apartheid. For those of us who enjoy the basic rights of a democracy we are charged with the solemn responsibility to support those people where government of, by and for the people is a distant hope.

Much ink has been spilt on the life of Mandela over the past number of days and rightfully so. But I fear that humanity of the man may be buried under the avalanche of plaudits. The arc of his life's journey from radical activist to peacemaker was undertaken at immense personal cost. The physical toll of hard labour was matched by the personal loss of strained marriages and a distant family during his incarceration. We cannot know the emotional price paid on the long road to freedom.

His imprisonment was not the consequence of a flash of youthful zeal like so many revolutionaries. He reflected upon what actions were necessary and committed to them. He stood as the first accused and was committed to living for his beliefs but also if necessary to die for them because he fully appreciated their immense value.

He was 42 years of age when he was put in prison, married with children. He put all of this at risk because he firmly believed in the greater good. He endured the solitude of the prison system and the physical toil of hard labour sustained by that belief. There are thousands of prisoners of conscience scattered across bleak redoubts of despotism who share in that sacrifice. To emerge from it without a heart turned to stone is a truly remarkable testament to the man.

His life urges us to rise to the challenges of our time. His legacy demands that we are willing to raise the awkward questions and probe the complacent consensus even when it is more comfortable to turn a blind eye. He leaves us with his own challenge to elevate ourselves beyond the immediate to see what is important and to work for that.

Nelson Mandela will be laid to rest in the beautiful sweeping panorama of the South African plains in the village he was born. Back then in 1918 South Africa was engaged in the bloody twilight of the First World War where black and white alike fought and died in the mire of war. Over his lifetime a dramatically racist society institutionalised its worst aspects with the creation of apartheid in 1948. The South Africa he leaves behind in 2013 is unimaginable different from the one he was born into. This is thanks in so many ways to the moral and political leadership he showed in crucial moments.

The times placed a great task before Mandela but he rose to the challenges and in the face of impossible odds secured a remarkable achievement of the Rainbow nation. Today our thoughts and prayers are with his family and his people. But our work, our convictions and our inspiration from him lives on and in that sense so does he. His heroism is his legacy.

