



## The Irish Question and The Ulster Question: Then and Now

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I face the difficulty facing anyone on this side of the Irish Sea who talks about Ireland.

First, that Britain has never been comfortable governing Ireland. In 1886, Gladstone declared that 'The long, vexed and troubled relations between Great Britain and Ireland exhibit to us the one and only conspicuous failure of the political genius of our race to confront and master difficulty, and to obtain in a reasonable degree the main ends of civilised life'. I agree with that.

And second, that there is a feeling that perhaps we have never understood the Irish. In 1912, an Irishman wrote to the *Manchester Guardian*, claiming that '99 Englishmen out of 100' knew nothing about Ireland and that 'to the average Englishman Ireland means a troublesome island somewhere in the Atlantic, where the natives run half naked over bogs flourishing shillelaghs whilst behind them all lurks a mysterious conspirator known as 'the Priest'.' I hasten to say that this has never been my view!

Ireland was joined to the rest of the United Kingdom in 1801 after Acts of Union passed by the British and Irish parliaments. The Act was carried in the Irish parliament by corrupt means, and in virtue of a promise of Catholic emancipation, a promise not honoured until 1829. The Union never achieved general acceptance in Ireland.

The Catholic population of Ireland regarded itself as belonging to a conquered and stigmatised people ruled by coercion, especially after the famine of the 1840s in which a million died and another million emigrated. Ireland lost in total around a quarter of her population.

The arrangements for governing Ireland were quite different from those in any other part of the kingdom. Although Ireland sent MPs to Westminster, her executive and administration were in Dublin. The head of the executive was the Chief Secretary for Ireland, in effect the Secretary of State for Ireland, and usually a member of the British Cabinet. He tended to spend nine months of every year in London. After 1871 no Irishman by birth was appointed, and some were total strangers to the country.

Ireland was administered by boards with members nominated by the Chief Secretary, almost always belonging to the Unionist and Protestant ascendancy. Arrangements for preserving law and order were quite different from those in the rest of the country. The Royal Irish Constabulary, by contrast with police forces elsewhere, was a national and centralised force, used for internal security and seen by many Catholics as in effect an army of occupation since most of its officers belonged to the Protestant minority. For almost the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland was governed by special coercive legislation which had no counterpart in the rest of the United Kingdom. Between 1800 and 1912, there were 86 coercion acts, including a Peace Preservation Act (Ireland) by which any person possessing or suspected of possessing arms or ammunition could be arrested without a warrant, an Act repealed by the Liberals in 1906. The Crimes Act of 1887 allowed the Lord Lieutenant to prohibit organisations he thought 'dangerous' and to allow offences of agrarian violence to be tried by a magistrate without a jury. It remained on the statute book until Irish independence in 1922.

Government in Ireland, then, was in form free but in reality autocratic. The Catholic majority although represented through MPs in the Commons played hardly any role in governing or administering their country. Ireland, by contrast with Scotland and Wales was not integrated with the rest of the United Kingdom.

In 1885, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reform Act extended the vote to agricultural workers, giving Ireland for the first time a popular franchise. When the legislation was being prepared, the Liberal Home Secretary feared that 'there would be

declared to the world in larger print what we all know to be the case, that we hold Ireland by force and by force alone, as in the days of Cromwell, only that we are obliged to hold it by a force ten times larger than he found necessary --- We have never governed and we never shall govern Ireland by the good of its people'. After 1885, nearly every Irish constituency outside Ulster returned to the Commons a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party, a party whose main policy was Home Rule - what would now be called devolution, giving Ireland responsibility for her domestic affairs, while leaving foreign policy, defence, economic policy and social security remaining with Westminster. Until 1914, the Irish Party always won at least 81 of the 103 Irish constituencies.

What, then, was the Irish Question? It has become a tired quip that, as soon as the English thought that they had answered it, the Irish changed the Question. But, in reality, the Question hardly changed at all though it had two parts to it.

The first part of the Question asked whether a liberal society had the right to rule an unwilling, geographically concentrated minority, through a form of government that it rejected. Ireland was, as we have seen, governed by those opposed by the majority of her representatives. Whether Liberals or Conservatives were in power in London, the Chief Secretary and the Irish administration were in the hands of a party which had only minority support in Ireland. Irish representatives unless they belonged to the minority Unionist community played no part in the government of their country. The constitutional implication of the Anglo-Irish Union of 1800 had been the legal equality of Ireland with the rest of the kingdom; but to most in Ireland, the relationship seemed one of subordination. Ireland seemed a dependency not a partner. John Morley, a leading Liberal and a former Chief Secretary of Ireland declared in 1902 that the government of Ireland was 'a very good machine for governing a country against its own consent'. Ireland was ruled, not by consent, but by a mixture of paternalism and coercion.

From 1886, the Liberal answer to the Irish question was Home Rule or devolution. But a bill of 1886 was defeated in the Commons, 93 Liberals refusing to support it. A second bill in 1893 passed the Commons, but was defeated in the Lords. In 1912 a third bill was to be introduced. By 1912, the absolute veto of the House of Lords had been removed. The Lords could do no more than delay legislation for two parliamentary sessions. So Home Rule was likely to become law in 1914.

Home Rule, the Liberals hoped, would transform Irish attitudes towards the Union which would then become, in Gladstone's words a Union of Hearts. But many otherwise liberally minded people were opposed to Home Rule since they believed that, even though tainted by corruption, the Union with Ireland was the consummation of a long historical process uniting the British Isles under one parliament. Many remembered the American civil war from the 1860s in which the South had seceded but had been forcibly reunited with the rest of the United States. Significantly, Gladstone, the Liberal Prime Minister who first formulated Home Rule proposals, supported the right of the South to secede. But Joseph Chamberlain, a Unionist, was on the side of the North, and many liberal-minded people agreed with him. Germany and Italy had also been reunited by force, and many liberals had little sympathy with those who might want to break up these countries.

Opponents of Home Rule believed that it was but an unstable half way house, a slippery slope to independence which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both Liberals and Conservatives opposed. Far from proving a barrier to separatism, it would, so they believed, encourage it and intensify the conflict between Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. A Dublin Parliament would provide an additional forum for Irish nationalists. Inadequacies in the government or administration of Ireland would always be attributed to the British government's failure to provide sufficient funds or concede sufficient powers to the Irish Parliament; and the Dublin Parliament would give nationalists greater leverage to protest and agitate. Moreover, Home Rule would not be accepted as a final settlement, despite what nationalists said. Their ultimate, albeit unspoken objective, critics suggested was not a mere revision of the legislative relationship, but independence. Speaking at Cork in 1885, Parnell, the nationalist leader, had said, 'No man has the right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation --- No man has the right to say to his country, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no further'.' An independent Ireland would, so many believed, constitute a danger to Britain as a hostile base for enemy troops as it had been during the rebellion of 1798 when part of the country had been occupied by French troops.

Whether opponents of Home Rule were right, that it would have led to Irish independence can of course never be known, though the proposition is currently being tested in Scotland, on which the jury is still out.

But, even more than the disintegration of the United Kingdom, Home Rule, many believed, would lead also to the disintegration of the Empire. 'If Ireland goes,' Lord Salisbury, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Prime Minister,

believed, 'India will go fifty years later'. In fact India became independent in 1947, just twenty five years after Ireland became independent in 1922. Both were to be partitioned, and had, arguably, only been held together by British rule.

The first part of the Irish Question, then, asked how Ireland was to be governed in a liberal polity. But there was a second part of the Question, occasioned by the presence of a large Protestant minority, amounting to just over a quarter of its population. In most of Ireland, the Protestants were a scattered minority, but in the province of Ulster they were in a majority of around 56%. In three counties of Ulster – Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan, - now part of independent Ireland – they were a distinct minority comprising between a fifth and a quarter of the population. In Fermanagh, and Tyrone, they were a more substantial minority comprising around 45% of the population. But in the remaining four counties – Antrim, Armagh, Down and Londonderry - they were in the majority, and in Antrim and Down an overwhelming majority. Nationalists tended to believe that the Protestant minority had been 'planted' there by James 1 in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century to subjugate the Catholics, and were, therefore, an alien element in Ireland. The Protestants were certainly 'isolated from the mainstream of Catholic and Gaelic culture', which had remained immune to the Reformation. But unionists argued that there had been an English and Scottish presence in Ulster well before the 17<sup>th</sup> century and before the Reformation. There had, they insisted, been a Scottish presence in Ulster from earliest times, with immigration from Scotland being 'fairly continuous for centuries before 1609'. Nor had the plantation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century covered the whole of Ulster, since three of its counties - Antrim, Down and Monaghan - had not been plantation counties at all. But the Protestant population had come to occupy the more fertile areas, the Catholics the less fertile, and the Protestants had come to assume the character of a dominant minority enjoying a monopoly of power. The Ulster Protestants felt their main links to be with Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom rather than the Catholic population of Ireland, from whom they felt separate, not only in religion, but also in nationality and ethnicity. Unlike the majority in Ireland, they accepted the premiss on which the Act of Union had been based as an expression of a single British nationhood. And while, in the rest of Ireland, the Protestant population was largely concentrated amongst the better off, in Ulster it embraced every social class. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, differences between Ulster and the rest of Ireland were accentuated as Belfast became an industrial city, while in agriculture there was a different system of land tenure in Ulster from that prevailing in the other provinces.

From the end of the eighteenth century, the rise of Irish nationalism and the growth of a modern sense of Irish identity exacerbated the conflict. For, although some Irish nationalist leaders – for example, Wolfe Tone and Parnell - were Protestants, Irish nationalism came to be identified with the Catholic majority and by 1886, the terms Catholic and Nationalist and Protestant and Unionist had become largely interchangeable.

**It is the superimposition of a nationalist conflict upon a religious one which explains the persistence and depth of the Irish problem.**

So the conflict between the two communities had deep historical roots. In 1919, Lloyd George was to declare that what had begun as 'a family quarrel', had 'degenerated into a blood feud'. The Protestants were determined to resist submission to a Dublin parliament, entailing rule by men they regarded as disloyal, a view intensified when nationalist MPs cheered enemy victories in the Boer war. They also believed that a Nationalist government would be corrupt and priest-ridden. Home Rule, they said, would mean Rome rule. And Ulster Unionists regarded Home Rule as being tantamount to expulsion from the kingdom. They were not mollified by being told that Home Rule was distinct from separation. 21<sup>st</sup> century experience with Scotland may show that they were right. It is too early to tell.

The scattered Protestant minority outside Ulster, comprising largely the middle and upper classes, would find it difficult to resist Home Rule, but in Ulster where opposition to Home Rule came from every section of society, Unionists could certainly resist.

The basic aim of Unionists, however, was, not to secure partition, but to defeat Home Rule. 'If Ulster succeeds', the Unionist leader, Sir Edward Carson declared in 1911, 'Home Rule is dead'. For many unionists believed that, without industrial Ireland centred on Belfast, an Irish parliament would not be viable and so Home Rule itself would not be viable. But once it was clear that the southern Unionists could not prevent Home Rule, Unionists were determined to save Ulster from the wreckage. Partition, which began as a tactic to defeat Home Rule, was to become a compromise solution.

To many in Britain, Ulster seemed to have right on her side. The case for Home Rule, after all, was based upon self-determination. But did not Ulster also have a right to self-determination? Ireland, after all, contained one-fifteenth of the British population, Ulster one quarter of the Irish population. The Irish nationalists declared that they did not wish to be ruled by Westminster. The Ulster Protestants declared that they did not

wish to be ruled by Dublin. 'We are sure', Carson and his followers declared, in a letter to *The Times* on 30 December 1912, that Ulster 'will, regardless of all consequences, refuse to submit to the government it is proposed to force upon them. Their resistance', the letter continued, 'seems to us righteous. To drive out a loyal, industrious, thriving, and contented population from under the authority of the Imperial Parliament and Executive to which they cleave and to place them under a Government which they abhor, is an act of gross tyranny unparalleled in the history of our country. Such tyranny it is right to resist'. The signatories to the letter urged the British people not 'to be deaf to the claims of a free population to remain under a Government they love; to be saved from a Government they hate'. This appeal was a powerful one at a time when British identity was still, to a large extent, defined by religion. Britain before 1914 was a determinedly Protestant country while Catholics still facing a considerable degree of social discrimination.

The Irish nationalists had indicated that they did not regard themselves as British, but as Irish, and their Irish identity was, they believed, incompatible with rule from Westminster. The Ulster Protestants responded that they were British. The nationalists insisted that Ireland was a unity, comprising a single nation. Ireland, being an island, must, they argued, remain under a single unit of government. But that view, unionists argued, ignored the realities of ethnicity, religion and nationality. The Ulster argument was, in a sense, stronger than that of the nationalists. For Ulster, unlike the nationalists, was not asking for a privilege – the privilege of a separate legislature within the United Kingdom. All that the Ulster Unionists were arguing for was the maintenance of their existing constitutional position.

In 1886, Joseph Chamberlain had insisted that Ireland 'consists of two nations'. But for an Ulster Unionist, Ulster could not, by definition, be a separate nation. The essence of Unionism was that Ulster was part of the British nation. Ulster did not, therefore, seek a Home Rule parliament of her own. What she wanted was continued rule from Westminster as part of the United Kingdom. In the words of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant signed in 1912, unionists sought 'to preserve for ourselves and our children our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom'. The Unionists sought, by contrast with the nationalists, not special treatment, but the same right to be governed and taxed from Westminster as was enjoyed by every other British citizen. The nationalist claim was based on nationhood, the unionist claim on citizenship. While the Unionists neither understood nor sympathised with the nationalist claim, few Liberals understood or sympathised with the unionist claim, nor did they understand the strength of Ulster's case. Many Liberals regarded Ulster Unionists as a disaffected minority within Ireland, and were prepared to offer extensive guarantees for minority rights in the Home Rule constitution. But the Ulster Unionists did not regard themselves as a minority in Ireland, but as part of a majority within the United Kingdom. They were not, therefore, to be conciliated by minority guarantees, however, generous. They would not under any circumstances accept rule from Dublin.

What, then, would happen in Ulster when Home Rule reached the statute book? Could she resist Home Rule? The Ulster question seemed to raise fundamental questions of identity and allegiance lying beyond the to and fro of electoral politics. The majority in the United Kingdom had no right, Unionists believed, to extrude a part of the country against its wishes. Ulster had an absolute right to remain in the United Kingdom for so long as its people wished. Were that right to be threatened, Ulster had, so Unionists believed, every right to disobey the law, since the contract binding them to government had been broken. And Ulster would fight against the government in the name of the king, in the name of a higher law. They would become King's rebels, as their ancestors had been when, in 1689, they had disobeyed the orders of James II. Their loyalty was contractual rather than unconditional. It depended upon the British government respecting their constitutional position. Ulster's stance was strongly supported by many army officers, a number of whom came from Anglo-Irish families and were steeped in the history of the American civil war which was part of the syllabus at Sandhurst. And indeed Ulster Unionists were accustomed to assume the mantle of Abraham Lincoln, especially since 1 July 1913 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg. Home Rulers on the other hand were seen as rather like the secessionists in the Americans civil war. In their rebellion, so Unionists believed, Ulster would be supported by the rest of the country. In July 1912, Bonar Law declared at a rally at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, 'They [the Liberals] may perhaps carry their Home Rule Bill through the House of Commons but what then? I said the other day that there are stronger things than Parliamentary majorities', and he ended his speech with these fighting words. 'I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I should not be prepared to support them and in which, in my belief, they would not be supported by the overwhelming majority of the British people'. This and other speeches were thought by supporters of Home Rule to be outrageous, and indeed Bonar Law as leader of the opposition was suggesting that it was permissible to resist an Act of Parliament by any means. He insisted that what he was saying was little different from what had been said before and indeed in line with the Whig

doctrine of resistance to oppression. Bonar Law used the analogy of 1689 asking, 'how – can the descendants of those who resisted King James II say – that they have not a right, if they think fit, to resist -- - the imposition of a Government put upon them by force'. Even further, Bonar Law was to declare that, not only would the army refuse to obey orders to march against Ulster, but that he would encourage them in this course. In November 1913, speaking in Dublin, he repeated the analogy with 1689, declaring that James II 'had behind him the letter of the law just as completely as Mr. Asquith [the Liberal Prime Minister] has now. ----- In order to carry out his despotic intention the King had the largest army which had ever been seen in England. What happened? There was no civil war. Why? Because his own army refused to fight for him'. And these were not idle threats. Even before the Home Rule bill had been introduced into the Commons, Carson told Ulster Protestants to be prepared 'the morning Home Rule passes ---to become responsible for the government of the Protestant province of Ulster'. 'The people of Ulster', Bonar Law told Asquith in July 1914, 'knew that they had a force which would enable them to hold the province, and with opinion divided in this country [i.e. the rest of Britain] it was quite impossible that any force could be sent against them that would dislodge them; --- therefore they knew that they could get their own terms, and it was certain that they would rather fight than give way ----'. In other words Ulster would declare a UDI once Home Rule was on the statute book.

If Ulster was determined to resist Home Rule by force, the British government could only include them in a Home Rule bill by an even greater display of force which would require use of the army. This raised three questions. The first was whether the army, some of whose senior officers were themselves Irish Protestants, would obey orders to coerce Ulster into a Dublin parliament. The second was whether the British people would be prepared to support coercing Ulster. The third and perhaps most important question was how Ulster could be permanently held under a Dublin parliament against its wishes. The answer could only be - by British armed forces subduing her and turning her into a conquered province while a Home Rule parliament was being established in Dublin; and then, once that parliament had been established, the Protestants of Ulster would somehow accept Home Rule so that the troops could be withdrawn. One only has to state such an assumption to appreciate its absurdity.

So, from the beginning, the Liberal government appreciated that it might well have to exclude Ulster from the Home Rule bill. But this raised two questions – what was Ulster – and- for how long should she be excluded -permanently or only for a specific period. The latter was in a sense a bogus question. For, if it was decided in 1914 that Ulster could not be coerced, it would be even more difficult to coerce her later on after she had been formally excluded. But exclusion did not, for Liberals at least, imply permanent partition. Of the four dominions then in existence, only New Zealand had not been partitioned. The others - Canada, Australia and South Africa – had all begun with partition but were now unified, but unified by consent rather than by force.

In March 1914, Prime Minister Asquith suggested a compromise. He proposed that, on the petition of 1/10 of the electorate, any county in Ulster – and the county boroughs of Belfast and Derry - could choose to vote itself out of a Home Rule Parliament for a period of six years from the first meeting of the Irish Parliament. After that period had ended, it would be automatically included unless Westminster decided otherwise. Since there would be two general elections during that six year period, it was open to British electors to decide, if they wished, to alter these arrangements. The practical consequence would be that just four counties – Antrim, Armagh, Down and Londonderry – would vote for exclusion. But the Unionists demanded more than the four counties. Carson rejected this saying, 'We do not want sentence of death with a stay of execution for six years'. Unionists objected to the fact that, after the six year period, Ulster could be **compelled** to enter a Home Rule parliament. They insisted that Ulster could enter such a parliament only on the basis of **consent**. Under Asquith's proposal, the British voter, but not Ulster, would be required to consent in the two general elections during the six year period.

So there seemed to be a deadlock; and at this stage, Winston Churchill who was the First Lord of the Admiralty in the Liberal government, added fuel to the flames. Speech at Bradford, 14 March 1914, he said, 'If Ulster seeks peace and fair play, she can find it. She knows where to find it'. That was the conciliatory part of his speech. But it was drowned out by the confrontational part which, as so often with Churchill, was the more memorable. The government's offer was, he said, its last, 'I do not say in detail, but in principle'. Rebellion or disaffection in Ulster would be firmly put down. Were the Unionists to persist in rejecting the government's offer, Churchill went on, this would show that they 'prefer shooting to voting --- they would rather use the bullet than the ballot'. He then attacked the Conservatives 'There is no measure of military force which the Tory party will not readily employ. They denounce all violence except their own. They uphold all law except the law they choose to break. They always welcome the application of force to others. But they themselves are to remain immune. They are to select from the Statute book the laws they will obey and the

laws they will resist'. He ended with a magnificent peroration. 'If there is no wish for peace, if every concession that is made is spurned and exploited, if every effort to meet their views is only to be used as a means of breaking down Home Rule and of barring the way to the rest of Ireland, if Ulster is to become a tool in party calculations, if the civil and Parliamentary systems under which we have dwelt and our fathers before us for so many years are to be brought to the crude challenge of force; if the Government and the Parliament of this great country and greater Empire, is to be exposed to menace and brutality, if all the loose, wanton and reckless chatter we have been forced to listen to all these many months is in the end to disclose a sinister and revolutionary purpose – then, gentlemen', he concluded, 'I can say to you let us go forward together and put these grave matters to the proof'. Never one to waste a good phrase, Churchill was to repeat this last sentence in his challenge to Hitler in January 1940.

Churchill's speech won him great popularity amongst Liberals. But it inflamed the Unionists who were led to believe that the government was about to embark on drastic measures by arresting Carson and other Ulster leaders and overawing Ulster through a display of military force. And it rapidly became clear that some senior army officers would not take part in any coercion of Ulster.

To try to achieve a settlement, King George V called a conference at Buckingham Palace in June 1914. The issues had, as we have seen, been narrowed to two matters relating to exclusion - time limit and the area to be excluded. The conference first considered area to be excluded. It never managed to consider the time limit since it rapidly became deadlocked. Nationalists insisted on county option -which would mean that four counties would be excluded from Home Rule. Unionists insisted on a clean cut of the whole province. The Conference then considered dividing Ulster. But it came to be deadlocked on Tyrone. Redmond, the nationalist leader, insisted that he could never agree to Tyrone being **excluded** from Home Rule. Carson, the unionist leader, insisted that he could never agree to Tyrone being **included**. There was a similar deadlock over Fermanagh. Carson then proposed six county exclusion so that both Tyrone and Fermanagh would be excluded but that too was unacceptable to the nationalists. This was in fact the **first time** that a six county Ulster, the current Northern Ireland, was suggested as the proper unit for exclusion. In an attempt to break the deadlock, Asquith proposed 'with great diffidence' that, if the Conference could agree on everything except Tyrone, 'some impartial authority might be selected who would undertake the task of fairly dividing Tyrone'. That too was rejected both by nationalists and by unionists. The Conference broke down. It had not even discussed time limit. On the day before the Conference ended, Asquith wrote to his girl friend, Venetia Stanley, of 'that most damnable creation of the perverted ingenuity of man --- the County of Tyrone. The extraordinary feature of the discussion was the complete agreement (in principle) of Redmond & Carson. Each said, 'I must have the whole of Tyrone, or die; but I quite understand why you say the same'. The Speaker, who incarnates bluff unimaginative English sense, of course cut in, 'When each of two people say they must have the whole, why not cut it in half?' They wd. neither of them look at such a suggestion --- Nothing could have been more amicable in tone, or more desperately fruitless in result ---'. 'Aren't they a remarkable people', Asquith told Venetia, 'and the folly of thinking that we can ever understand, let alone govern them'.<sup>1</sup> After the Conference, Asquith told the King that, if county option was accepted, he was prepared to allow continued exclusion after six years, a significant concession.

The Home Rule bill became law on 15 September 1914, six weeks after the First World War had begun, But its operation would be suspended until the end of the war. Asquith promised that he would re-introduce an Amending bill in the next parliamentary session before Home Rule came into effect so that it could be modified with 'general consent', so that Ulster, however defined, could be excluded. He insisted that it would be 'absolutely unthinkable' amidst 'this great patriotic spirit of union' to use 'force, any kind of force, for what you call the coercion of Ulster'. But what was to count as Ulster was not defined.

Many historians believe that Britain was near to civil war in 1914 over Ulster. In my book, *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain*, I explain why I do not myself share that view. There was certainly a threat of armed revolt from Ulster. But Ulster posed a threat of civil war only if she could command support from this side of the Irish Sea, and by 1914 that was becoming doubtful. The Conservatives indeed were increasingly worried as to the international implications of the Ulster conflict, and fearful that enemy powers might take advantage of it. On 15 March 1914, the day after Churchill's Bradford speech, Austen Chamberlain, a leading Unionist, noted in his diary, that 'the extraordinary Austro-German outburst of feeling against Russia at this moment is not wholly divorced from the spectacle of our domestic difficulties, and that, if for any reason our participation were impossible, Germany might provoke a quarrel with Russia or France'. The Conservatives would not have pressed their Ulster policy were it to damage the unity of the country in face of a hostile

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p.122.

Germany. They were aware that precipitate action would lose the support of public opinion in Britain. But, in any case what would Ulster be rebelling against? By August 1914, her right to exclusion had been accepted by Liberals and also, though unwillingly, by nationalists. Asquith's important concession, after the Buckingham Palace Conference, that there would be exclusion on the basis of county option without time limit gave the Unionists much of what they were fighting for. There was, admittedly, no agreement on the area to be excluded, but, as Lloyd George was later to put it, 'Men would die for the Empire but not for Tyrone and Fermanagh'. There would, no doubt, have been riots and fighting in Ulster and perhaps elsewhere in Ireland, and the borders of the excluded area might well have been eventually determined by force. But the fighting would probably not have spread to this side of the Irish Sea. The Ulster Unionists, to be successful, would have needed wide public support outside Ireland. The public on this side of the Irish Sea would have asked itself why there should be a battle for something that had already been conceded. Unionists outside Ireland would not have supported armed rebellion against an Act of Parliament which was giving Ulster much of what it sought, and the public would not have supported it either. It was, therefore, not clear, who would fight who in a civil war nor what they would be fighting about.

Liberals and Conservatives were in fact much closer in Irish matters than either were prepared to admit. At the outbreak of war, home rule on the basis of partition appeared a *fait accompli*. And perhaps a Dublin parliament which would follow, as Redmond hoped, conciliatory and consensual policies, would not, in the end, have appeared as dangerous to the Protestant population of Ulster as had been believed, in which case Ireland could have been reunited just as Canada, Australia and South Africa had been reunited after initially being partitioned. Carson, the Unionist leader, certainly hoped that this would prove the case. He was an Irish Unionist who saw Home Rule admittedly as a second best, but partition as a third best. He hoped that Home Rule could, with conciliation on both sides, be a prelude to unity.

So, in 1914, Home Rule seemed to have solved the Irish Question. When war broke out, Redmond declared that the government could take all British troops out of Ireland. Nationalists would defend it, joining with Ulstermen to do so. Unionists cheered and waved their order papers. On 18 September, the day on which Parliament was prorogued, the Labour MP Will Crooks asked MPs to sing 'God Save the King'. The nationalists joined in and Crooks cried out 'God Save Ireland!' to which Redmond replied 'And God Save England Too!' At Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, on 21 September, Redmond declared that 'This war is undertaken in defence of the highest principles of religion, morality and right'. And on 15 September, when the Commons was debating the Home Rule and suspensory bills, he declared 'in this war, I say, for the first time, certainly for over a hundred years, I feel that her [i.e. Ireland's] interests are precisely the same as yours. She feels and will feel that the British democracy has kept faith with her. She knows that this is a just war. She is moved in a very special way by the fact this war is undertaken in the defence of small nations and oppressed peoples'. He was thinking of course of Belgium and Serbia. Redmond had always hoped that Home Rule would transform feelings between Britain and Ireland, that enmity would be replaced by friendship. Home Rule had won goodwill for Britain.

The promise of Home Rule, then, did much, for a short time at least, to mollify historically embittered Anglo-Irish relations. It was because of Home Rule indeed that Redmond was able to express the support of his party for the British war effort. Whether Home Rule, in the absence of war, would have proved a final settlement is of course impossible to know. It might well have stimulated an Irish demand for dominion status, independence within the Commonwealth, as was eventually to be achieved, after much fighting, in the Anglo-Irish treaty in 1921. Without the war, there might have been a peaceful evolution to this status rather than the bloody conflicts that were to ensue – the Easter Rising of 1916, the Anglo-Irish guerrilla war, the Black and Tans and the Irish civil war. Britain seemed to have accepted that, in future, Ireland would be governed by consent, not by force. And the Irish government seemed to have accepted partition as a regrettable necessity. But it was not to be fully and formally accepted by the nationalists until the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 1998, in which Ireland as well as Britain accepted that Irish unity could not be achieved until a majority in Northern Ireland consented to it. The Irish people agreed in a referendum to amend Articles 2 and 3 in the constitution which had laid claim to the whole island of Ireland. It may be argued that the Agreement yielded a retrospective mandate for partition and retrospective legitimation of the solution so tortuously reached by 1914, a solution which recognised, as far as was possible, the right of self-determination of both nationalists and unionists. Partition indeed appeared inherent in the very nature of the Irish problem.

But the war changed everything. After it, Home Rule was to be implemented, ironically, only in the six counties of Northern Ireland, which preferred continued rule from Westminster. But Home Rule was no longer acceptable to Irish opinion. By 1918, the Irish party had been electorally obliterated by Sinn Fein, which sought independence. Ireland outside the six counties moved to independence in 1921 after a vicious

guerrilla war, and then in 1949 left the Commonwealth. Relations between Britain and Ireland became more hostile. Ireland supported Britain's war effort in 1914 but not in 1939 when she remained neutral.

After the 1914-18 war, the Irish problem reappeared. In Churchill's graphic words from his book on the war called *The World Crisis*. 'Then came the Great War --- Every institution, almost, in the world was strained. Great empires have been overturned. The whole map of Europe has been changed --- The mode of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world, but as the deluge subsides and waters fall, we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that have been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world'.

Ireland settled down after a brutal civil war to become a parliamentary democracy. Northern Ireland emerged as a statelet comprising six counties. Until 1972 it was run by the Unionists, but not in a spirit of conciliation. Instead there was gross discrimination against Catholics, particularly in housing and employment. This led, in the 1960s to the growth of a civil rights movement and then to an upsurge of terrorism by the Provisional IRA which sought to secure Irish unity by violent methods.

But in 1998, the British and Irish governments negotiated the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, a huge step forward. It was accepted by both governments that Irish unity could only be achieved by consent. In the absence of such consent, it was agreed that in Northern Ireland the Nationalist minority as well as the Unionist majority would enjoy a guaranteed place in governing the province so that discrimination against the minority would end.

In recent years, pressures for Irish unity have increased for two reasons. The first is Brexit, the second is demographic change.

Brexit has made Irish unity appear more plausible. For, in the Brexit referendum of 2016, Northern Ireland proved more favourable to Britain's membership than any part of the United Kingdom except Scotland. 56% voted to Remain and 44% to leave. The majority in Northern Ireland could argue that Northern Ireland was being extruded from the EU against its will. So, in Northern Ireland as in Scotland, the Brexit referendum seemed to offer encouragement to nationalists. There was clearly a majority on the island of Ireland for EU membership. And Northern Ireland would find it easier than Scotland to rejoin the EU, since with Irish unity, she would be joining with an existing member state, and, unlike Scotland, would not have to re-negotiate her membership. Northern Ireland's position would be analogous to that of East Germany which also became automatically part of the European Union when in 1990 she joined with West Germany. Northern Ireland is unique in that it is the only part of the United Kingdom that could rejoin the European Union automatically.

The Northern Ireland Protocol which is part of the EU Withdrawal Agreement between Britain and the EU, negotiated by Boris Johnson in 2020, provides further encouragement to Nationalists. For, under its provisions, Northern Ireland remains in the EU internal market, and also, in effect, in the EU customs union. The island of Ireland therefore becomes a single economic unit. Ties with the rest of the United Kingdom are loosened since there is a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea. Unionists in Northern Ireland strenuously reject the Protocol, but Nationalists can argue that the economic unity of Ireland should be accompanied by political unity.

After the Brexit referendum, one Irish commentator went so far as to suggest that 'for the first time in my life, the prospect of a united Ireland is not only credible but inevitable'. Polls in Ireland show a majority for unity, and Unionists need no longer fear that it would mean rule by Rome, since, following the exposure of sexual abuse scandals in Ireland by the Catholic clergy, the position of the church has been gravely weakened. But, according to a poll in the *Irish Independent* in April 2021, the majority favouring unity in the Republic was reduced to 46% were it to involve an increase in taxes and to 13% were the Republic to take on the whole of the subsidy by which the United Kingdom supports Northern Ireland. The British would clearly not continue that subsidy. As Sir Edward Carson argued in the pre-1914 debates, divorce is not generally accompanied by wedding presents!

And it would be a mistake to believe that all of the 56% who voted Remain in the Brexit referendum were also supporters of Irish unity. It is in particular highly unlikely that the 34% of self-designated Unionists who voted Remain were also voting to join with the rest of Ireland.

But there is a second factor favouring Irish unity – the facts of demographic change which has led, for the first time, as the 2021 census shows, to a Catholic majority in Northern Ireland. Protestants had already lost their cultural and electoral dominance. Unionists no longer have a majority either at Westminster or in the Northern Ireland Assembly where Sinn Fein is the largest party as indeed it is in Ireland. And, according to



the 2021 census the Protestants are no longer in a demographic majority either. 45.7% of the resident population in Northern Ireland are Catholics or brought up as Catholics compared to 43.8% Protestant. For the first time Catholics outnumber Protestants in an entity designed to secure a permanent Protestant majority, Unity, therefore, could be brought about through the facts of demography.

But we must be careful in interpreting these figures. For the Catholic population in Northern Ireland is by no means unanimous in its desire for unity. And the percentage vote for the two main nationalist parties – Sinn Fein and the SDLP – has remained strikingly stable - 40% in the 1998 Assembly election and slightly less - 38% - in 2022. Sinn Fein's success has been largely due to switches from the other main nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party rather than conversions from outside the Nationalist camp. The Unionist vote, by contrast, is split between the DUP, the Ulster Unionist party and Traditional Unionist Voice, while some Unionists vote for the Alliance party which is neutral on the border. But perhaps more important, the census figures probably mask the growth of secularisation in both Protestant and Catholic communities. Northern Ireland's constitutional future is more likely to be determined not by Sinn Fein nor by the Democratic Unionist Party but by those in the secularised middle ground. And perhaps neither Nationalists nor Unionists have yet made a convincing case to that middle ground for the option they favour.

But even if demographic change were to bring about Irish unity, it would be dangerous without strong Unionist consent since it would otherwise leave a large disaffected and possibly violent Unionist minority in the Republic. It is dangerous to assume that Unionists, even if in the minority, would accommodate themselves peacefully to a united Ireland, especially an Ireland in which Sinn Fein could come to power in Ireland as it has in the north. In the past, both British governments and Irish nationalists have under-estimated Unionist intransigence – the resistance to Home Rule before 1914, the resistance to the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 which provided for power sharing between the two communities in Northern Ireland, and resistance currently to the Protocol which caused rioting in the province in 2021, rioting which ended only out of respect when the Duke of Edinburgh died.

In 1993, the then Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, declared that 'Stability and wellbeing will not be found under any political system which is refused allegiance or rejected by a significant minority of those governed by it.' That was true of Northern Ireland in the years of Unionist dominance. It could also be true of a united Ireland which contained a large disaffected Unionist minority. And perhaps calls for Irish unity undermine the prospects for reconciliation between the two communities in Northern Ireland, a reconciliation which is desperately needed.

The fundamental problem in Ireland has in a sense been the same since the Irish nationalist claim was raised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is that there is no way of drawing lines on the map which does not leave at least one group – whether Nationalists or Unionists- as part of a disaffected minority in at least one of the polities so created. The problem was blurred when Britain was a member of the EU since the border in Ireland was of much less importance. But Brexit has reinstated the importance of the border and re-emphasised the importance of the nationalist and unionist identities.

What then is the answer? After 1918 it was clear that the answer could not be found in forcing Irish nationalists to remain within a polity that they rejected. But the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement shows that complete separation is not the answer either, and that the Northern Ireland problem can only be resolved through closer relationships between Britain and Ireland.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish nationalist, Henry Grattan, accepted that total separation was not the answer, declaring that 'The Channel forbids Union, the Ocean forbids separation'. The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement constituted a recognition by both Britain and the Irish Republic that the manifold links between the two countries could not be contained within a framework which would make the two countries as foreign to each other as, for example, Chile and Nigeria.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gladstone, the great Liberal Prime Minister, also appreciated that neither total separation nor partition could of themselves resolve the Irish problem. Instead, a permanent solution would require both the recognition of separate nationalities, but also their transcendence in a wider framework, through institutions which, while expressing separate identities, also provide for expression of the ultimate inter-connection between all those living in these islands. That permanent solution has still to be achieved.