

Was the failure to secure Home Rule in Ireland prior to World War One inevitable?

In this essay, I aim to determine the inevitability of the failure to secure Home Rule in Ireland prior to World War One. In order to do so, I will firstly explain the impact of the Act of Union in 1800 that resulted in the formation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and its relationship to the Irish question in British Politics. Secondly, I will present an overview of the introduction of Home Rule in Ireland and its reception. And thirdly, I will analyse the social, civil, and political conditions within Ireland during the writings and campaign for the Home Rule Bills of 1886, 1893 and 1912-1914 respectively.

In 1798, an uprising led by the Society of United Irishmen, who were inspired by the Age of Revolutionary events in America and France, sought to emancipate Ireland from the clutches of British rulership. At the heart of the rebellion were the oppressed Catholics whose role and mobilization within the rebellion fuelled more hatred towards them. In addition to this, the death of many Protestants and the migration of others increased the level of bitterness between the religious groups. British response to the uprising comprised of its suppression and the initiation of protocols that would tackle the Irish question, that is, the degree of autonomy that should be leveraged to Ireland. For British Prime Minister William Pitt, the best course of action would be to unite the Kingdom of Great Britain—Britain and Scotland— and the Kingdom of Ireland. The merge would eliminate the Irish Parliament and result in the representation of Ireland at the Westminster parliament in Britain. The agreement, which was called the Act of the Union received Royal Assent on 1st August 1800, before coming into full effect on 1st January 1801. While Pitt hoped that the decision would stabilize British-Irish relations, it actually resulted in the contrary. Irish desire for liberation from Britain manifested itself through ‘the agitation for the repeal of the union, violence and political pressure’¹. Additionally, the distress caused by the Irish question resurfaced repeatedly in British politics and would continue to plague the empire for the duration of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Believing that he had the solution to the Irish question, Protestant lawyer Isaac Butt, established the Irish Home Government Association in 1870. This was preceded by the rise of Fenians in Ireland, a group comprising of radicalized members who were centred upon opposing British rulership and appealing for self-government in Ireland². Butt was inspired by the Fenians and their devotion to establishing Ireland as a republic and defended the Fenians in the court of law. Through his organization, he hoped to achieve public support for the establishment of Home Rule. His version of Home Rule revolved around maintaining British-Irish relations and securing a parliament for Ireland that would govern its own domestic affairs³. For Butt, achieving Home Rule would secure economic benefits to Ireland and stabilize the nation in the aftermaths of its religious crisis following the debate for the repeal of the Catholics in 1848, famine and land ownership rites⁴. While he was focused on creating and ensuring the flourishing of the Protestants in Ireland, he also grasped the

¹ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis: Resistance to Home Rule 1912-1914* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 19

² Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 22-23

³ Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 28

⁴ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question: Two Centuries of Conflict* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), p. 76-79

significance of the Catholics collaborating with Protestants for the sake of the union and sought out to involve them in the negotiations of his organization.

However, before Butt was able to view the Irish question in that manner, he had to go through a period of change where he re-evaluated the meaning behind the rise of national consciousness for the affected Irish religious groups and accept that leniency was required to foster a stronger British-Irish relationship. In 1873, under pressure from the members of the association to take more decisive action concerning the progress of Home Rule matters, Butt substituted the Home Government Organization for the Home Rule League⁵. The meeting covered a range of issues pertaining to the Irish Nation and the best course of action to take. Butt's ability to represent Home Rulers was under questioning as he faltered in producing coherent debates with the House of Commons⁶. More so, Butt's idea for Home Rule was perfect, but the failure to implement and execute it encouraged the bitter contention between the two religious groups who viewed each other as a means for their own detriment. Liberal British Prime Minister William Edward Gladstone's influence on the people before his conversion to Home Rule was also an unanswered element in the pursuit of the Irish question. The face of the Home Rule League would soon change with the emergence of Protestant and Nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell.

Parnell's approach to Home Rule differed from Butt's as he preferred a more radicalized approach to opposing British rulership and gaining attention for the Irish concerns that were underpinned by Britain's laissez-faire approach to Ireland. Parnell was influenced in his radicalism by Joseph Biggar, who believed in the concept of obstruction. It was centred upon the agitation and delaying of the course of action by parliament by conducting lengthy debates for various acts to be passed by parliament. And Parnell implemented it for his cause through the form of procedural motions, adjournments, and amendments⁷. This approach was condemned by Butt as he felt the principle would not appeal to the hearts of British Members of Parliament or cause them to appease Ireland with Home Rule. For this sentiment, Butt was correct as Parnell's behaviour was aggressively condemned by the MPs and the newspapers in Britain.

Nevertheless, Parnell's action found support in the eyes of the Irish people, and soon that of the liberalist Ministers of Parliament. In the general election of 1880, Gladstone returned to parliamentary office as the Prime Minister. Gladstone's concern for Ireland was inspired by the example of Norway and he acknowledged the fact that peace in Ireland would never be possible if some degree of independence was not afforded to it⁸.

His primary campaign goal was to 'pacify Ireland' by making the present conditions tolerable. In order to do this, Gladstone understood the importance of addressing the land issues plaguing the country⁹. It was a feat that Parnell had sought to bring about but was seen as a means of reform. He supported the implementation of the National Land Act but was viewed by British politicians and conservatives as a revolutionist in pursuit of war¹⁰. Protestant opposers to Home Rule feared that giving their support would cause them to be deprived of their rights, subject them to various form of

⁵ Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 35

⁶ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*, p. 84

⁷ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*, p. 85

⁸ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, p. 20

⁹ Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 73

¹⁰ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*, p. 94

oppression and establish popery in Ireland. Catholics, on the other hand, saw Home Rule and any movement towards it as a means of bringing justice for the incomprehensible number of hardships they faced. For Catholics, Home Rule and Nationalism would not be complete without ensuring justice was administered to all. Additionally, to them, the notion of justice for all could not be administered if it was dominated by Anti-Catholic Protestants. However, although contentions brewed in Ireland, the overall loyalty towards Home Rule was as a result of the land act and the charismatic qualities of Parnell¹¹. In 1885, criticisms about Parnell's leadership capabilities and the direction of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP)— which was substituted for the Home League Association— towards reform rather than Home Rule emerged as he reintroduced the Prevention of Crime Act. These types of reforms were viewed as coercion methods which Britain required before adapting Home Rule¹².

On the British side of the debate, Gladstone foresaw that Home Rule would not be possible without the comprise of the Conservative groups, but any hope of forging a union proved to be impossible once the news of his political conversion was released to the public by his son¹³. In the 1884 governmental elections, the Liberals won the majority with eighty-six (86) of the votes thus retaining power over the Conservatives. And in 1886, Gladstone formed a parliamentary party that was committed solely to earning Irish vote for the Government of Ireland or Home Rule Bill. The news of his conversion affected the Liberalist eventually causing them to split into pro-home rule and anti-home rule groups. Those who remained with Gladstone did so out of loyalty and not due to the Home Rule Bill. The first Bill was constructed without consulting the Irish Party or the cabinet and covered the conditions for self-government in Ireland, yielding authority in all matters excluding defence, foreign policy, trade, and navigation¹⁴. Gladstone's proposal included the liberation of Catholics from exclusion to Office, removal of Irish representation at Westminster, the abolition of endowments and adjustments to the powers of Irish chamberlains¹⁵.

The First Home Rule Bill was met with dissatisfaction by the both the Whig Right and Radical Left liberal party and the centre of the discontent was based upon the nature of Gladstone's proposal for Ireland. While Gladstone addressed the issue in Ulster with regards to the demands and fears of the Protestant minority over the possibility of Catholic rulership, he did not estimate the nature by which that could pose a threat to his Home Rule prospects. It was this tool that was utilized by Lord Randolph Churchill to destabilize Gladstone's government and encourage the promotion Orange loyalism for anti-home supporters in Ulster. After the rounds of debates concerning the feasibility of the bill, Home Rule was defeated by three hundred and forty-three (343) to three hundred and thirteen (313); with ninety-three (93) of those votes against Home Rule coming from the Whig Liberals¹⁶. The split in Gladstone's parliament had severely injured his prospects for Home Rule and established more anti-home rule support. In addition, the defeat of the Home Rule Bill resulted in the temporary lose of power for Gladstone and his influence. Following this, the 1886 contested elections saw the Conservatives defeating the Liberals with three hundred and sixteen (316) to one

¹¹Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 83

¹² Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 94

¹³ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, p. 20

¹⁴ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, p. 20

¹⁵Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 109

¹⁶ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, p. 23

hundred and ninety-one (191). The Liberalist Union secured seventy-eight (78) votes and gave their support to the Conservatives resulting in the formation of government¹⁷.

The decision against the passage of Home Rule in 1886 was marred with violence in the Ulster provinces, such as Belfast, against Catholicism. Moreover, the years following this were based upon the Conservatives determination to maintain British Irish relations through the union and counter attacks by Unionists to appeal against the legitimacy of the Nationalists desire for Home Rule in Ireland. As Gladstone struggled to retain momentum, Parnell's influence came under scrutiny when news of his affair with a Member of Parliament's wife sparked outrage. Ulster Unionist used this as a means of attacking the support for Home Rule and discrediting Parnell's capacity for steering the religious Ireland to independence. From the defeat of Gladstone in the first Home Rule Bill and Parnell infidelity, Liberalists support during elections varied over the next decade.

Refusing to accept defeat, Gladstone remobilized his tactics for the presentation of the second Home Rule bill in 1893. He was re-elected back into Parliament in the previous year, following the collapse of the Conservative government run by Lord Salisbury. His campaign had been centred around cultivating change within Ireland. It was a necessary decision to ensure the survival and preservation of Ireland following the death of Liberalist leader Parnell. Almost immediately, he begun constructing the Second Bill— though in silence—and made the adjustments to the concerns that were highlighted during the debate of the first Home Rule Bill. Those adjustments involved pursuing all possible points of arguments for and against self-governance, consulting national factions to ensure their input was reflected, create and effective strategy and accurately evaluate the short comings of the First Home Rule Bill¹⁸. Additionally, the 1893 Home Rule Bill, placed more emphasis upon the position of Ulster. Gladstone hope to achieve a version of Ireland with Ulster being included in Home Rule, however the province insisted on the separation treatment of Ulster, using force as a means of instituting their claim.

Whether Gladstone's confidence in the Bill was solid is questionable, as the fierce opposition during the debate of the Bill resorted the Prime Minister to redirect the time frame of the debates. The lengthy debates on the First Home Rule Bill had resulted in its weaknesses being exposed and subsequent rejection. Arguably, Gladstone may have been attempting to avoid any means by which the Bill would not be made into law. While the Bill passed in the House of Commons with a majority of only thirty (30) votes, it was defeated by the Conservative Pro-Unionist House of Lords by four hundred and nineteen (419) to forty-one (41). The Pro-Unionists were concerned with ensuring that no Home Rule legislation would succeed in Westminster since they believed that Catholics were too unstable to manage their own affairs. Not only did they encourage the British Irish hatred, but also resorted to Parnell's tactic of parliamentary obstruction¹⁹. Nationalist support by this time was also divided, and it culminated to the loss of power for the Liberalists.

The resulting course of action was the dominance of Conservative Power from 1894-1905 under the leadership of the Lord of Salisbury. Their agenda was centred upon reforming Ireland and killing Home rule with kindness. This was successful as the agenda distracted the people from the political atmosphere and to the detriment of pro-home supporters, the Liberalists did not pursue Home Rule

¹⁷ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*, p. 101-102

¹⁸ Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 155

¹⁹ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*, p. 108-109

any further. In addition to this, other events in Ireland captivated the attention of the Parliament. From 1894 -1910, Ireland was plagued by a series of crises; the Boer War encouraged Irish unity on account for their hatred to English Imperialists. The outrage from Ireland was as a results of Britain's reluctance to acknowledge the independence of Boer. Fuelled to this was the aggravation of land wars in Ireland about the oppressed Catholics. The presence of the old age issue regurgitated sentiments for the passage of a Home Rule Bill, and as a result the Unionist agenda to Home rule began to dissipate²⁰.

The Liberalist returned to power in 1905 following the resign of Balfour, the Conservative leader. Their agenda for Home Rule would be delayed by another five years following more crises which affected the welfare, economic and constitution of Ireland. During the budget crisis in Ireland, John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) who was advocating for Home Rule for Ireland, demanded from Herbert Henry Asquith, the British Prime Minister a pronouncement of Home Rule²¹. The House of Lords rejection of David Lloyd George's finance Bill and the general elections of January and December 1910 forged an alliance of sorts with the IPP in the guaranteeing of granting Home Rule to Liberalist. This guarantee was as a result of their support with the Unionist.

Asquith desired to appease the pro-Home rulers but failed to consider the Ulster problem. The notion of Home Rule was still volatile as volunteers led by Ulster Unionist Edward Carson were being mobilized in 1912 and 1913 to oppose through the use of force any form of Home Rule for Ireland unless partition is acknowledged. Asquith's approach to Ulster's defiance was one of passivity, negligence, and gullibility. His misjudgement of Ulster's threats and handling of the situation prolonged the extent of violence that was initiated by Carson. Through a serious of negotiations and peace talks with the Ulster Unionists, Home Rule was implemented in Ireland, but suspended due to the outbreak of World War 1.

In conclusion, I have presented an overview of the journey of Ireland to Home Rule. I began by explaining the significance of the Act of the Union in 1800 and the followed it by examining the origins of Home Rule by Isaac Butt up until the emergence of radical leader Charles Stewart Parnell. I have also looked at the impact of Parnell and William Gladstone through the history of the Home Rule Bills of 1886 and 1893. And finally, concluding with the 1914 Home Rule Bill. With this information, I agree that the failure to obtain Home Rule in 1886 and 1893 was inevitable. In 1886, Home Rule was introduced to a new parliament that could not grasp its importance at the time as Irish history was stained with bitterness, resentment and oppression between Protestants and Catholics. In addition to this, the negligence of Britain and Gladstones lack of consultation with the national leaders during the construction of the Bill only added to its inevitability. In my opinion, Irish future could not have been secured unless the two opposing religious groups allowed for compromise, reform, and reconstruction. The 1893 Bill was not only an improvement of the first, but also an indication of Gladstone's commitment to give Home Rule to Ireland. As zealous as he was, the split of his party, the news of Parnell's infidelity and the commitment of Unionists towards the cause of anti-home rule made it in my view impossible for Home Rule to be achieved.

The last Home Rule Bill of 1912-14 was the only one that I think would have been successful. Gladstone hopes that Home Rule would be granted on the grounds of honour rather than humiliation failed to become a reality. Ultimately, I think it was the fact that Ireland faced a series of

²⁰ Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 185, 199

²¹ Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 236

crises of a semblance to their past that prompted the groups of Liberalist and Conservatives to be unified on the decision, even though Unionist wanted no part of it.

Arguably, Asquith's lackadaisical nature to Ulster benefited Ireland in the end as that brought a period of stability to the land after years of turmoil and violence. While the Bill would be delayed for a few years, due to WW1, it would offer consolation to those who sought for independence from Britain.

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