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BRITISH OPINION, IRELAND, AND THE WAR, 1916-1918 *

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IN the January 1916 issue of the *Nineteenth Century* the Reverend Robert H. Murray¹ contributed the first of two articles on Irish insurrectionary movements during the wars with France at the end of the eighteenth century. He prefaced his text with some homilies directed at the British government of his own time :

During the early months of the present War the prospects of the invasion of these islands by sea as well as by air were discussed and prepared for by naval and military authorities. As the struggle developed month by month there has been less discussion of such contingencies. The magnificent work of our Fleet has lulled us into a complete sense of security. We do not foresee an attack upon the East Coast of England: we have almost forgotten our fears with regard to the West Coast of Ireland. And yet a scheme for the weakening of England by a raid upon the West Coast of Ireland might yet form a portion of the German plan of campaign. For it was through Ireland that former generations of English enemies looked to strike their deadly blow at the object of their hatred and envy. . .²

These were extraordinarily prophetic words: before the second of his articles was published there took place in Dublin, on Easter Monday, 1916 a rebellion which, in conjunction with the landing of arms from a German ship on the west coast of Ireland, was aimed at overthrowing British rule and establishing an Irish Republic. Once again England's difficulty was to be Ireland's opportunity. And, as Mr Murray remarked ruefully in his second article, 'events have marched since January. It is reasonable to imagine that if the subject of the Irish invasions of the past was of interest to the general reader some months ago, it is not likely to have been lessened by the necessity which, alas, has recently focussed the attention of the United Kingdom upon Ireland.'³

Irish revolutionary activity, as Mr Murray and the British government and people discovered to their cost in 1916, has often been inspired and shaped by British military involvement elsewhere. But the obverse is also true: that British policy towards Ireland has, at crucial moments, been influenced and decided by

* I wish to acknowledge the kind permission of the First Beaverbrook Foundation to quote material from the Bonar Law and Lloyd George papers; of the Librarian of Birmingham University for the Austen Chamberlain papers; and of H.M.S.O. for Cabinet minutes and papers.

¹ The Reverend Canon Robert H. Murray (d. 1947), chaplain of the Royal Hibernian Military School, Dublin, 1904-11; chaplain to the Forces, 1914-16; canon of Worcester Cathedral, 1933-40.

² 'Ireland in Two Wars', in *Nineteenth Century*, lxxix (Jan.-June 1916), 153-72.

³ 'Humbert's Invasion of Ireland in 1798', *ibid.* lxxx (July-Dec. 1916), 191-208.

military and strategic considerations. In 1798, as the second of Mr Murray's unexpectedly topical articles related, the United Irishmen took advantage of the war with France to raise a rebellion. England could not afford a disaffected Ireland on her flank. And, therefore, once the rebellion was crushed, the British government set out to restore the situation. The solution which the government decided upon was to make a legislative union between Great Britain and Ireland, a union which came into effect in 1801. From the British point of view, this union was little short of a military necessity. Britain was alone in the struggle against France, and a restless and disaffected Ireland was a source of danger; Ireland conciliated and closely bound to England would secure the western flank of the British Isles, and would also be a source of manpower, since at this time Ireland contained about one-quarter of the total population of the United Kingdom.

The military danger and also, from the recruitment angle, the military advantages of Ireland, were ever-present considerations in the formulation of British policy towards Ireland in the nineteenth century; and they were among the main arguments against Irish self-government when, in the latter part of the century, proposals were put forward for the establishment of a parliament in Dublin. On three occasions between 1886 and 1912 Liberal governments framed 'home rule' bills aimed at setting up a subordinate legislature in Dublin. On each of these occasions, Unionists in Great Britain and Ireland argued that such a parliament would make Ireland the Achilles Heel of the empire, a source of comfort and indeed strength to England's enemies in time of war.⁴ Irish Nationalists replied that a self-governing Ireland would be a loyal Ireland, an asset to the empire. In the nineteenth century, when England was only marginally involved in continental war, or else was fighting 'small wars' in her empire, such a discussion was essentially academic. But when, in August 1914, Britain was drawn into a major European conflict which swiftly became a world war, then these grave matters, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, would be put to the proof.

The outbreak of war in 1914 quickly dwarfed the three-cornered home rule conflict between Britain, Unionist Ulster and Nationalist Ireland which had threatened to break into open civil war; and it also brought a temporary easing of the tension in Ireland itself. There was in all parts of Ireland a genuine and spontaneous sympathy with the allied cause.⁵ John Redmond proclaimed that the British government could, if it wished, withdraw all its troops from Ireland,

⁴ For a forceful statement of these points see S. Rosenbaum (ed.) *Against Home Rule – the Case for the Union* (London, 1912), especially pp. 11–12, and the essays contributed by Admiral Lord Charles Beresford on 'Home Rule and Naval Defence', pp. 189–94, and by the Earl Percy on 'The military disadvantages of Home Rule', pp. 195–203.

⁵ There was also, of course, the calculation by both Nationalists and Unionists that in helping the war effort they were thereby establishing a claim on the gratitude of Great Britain which would stand them in good stead when the home rule struggle should be renewed.

and leave the defence of the country to 'us, in comradeship with our brethren in the north'.⁶ Recruits in Ireland flocked to the colours, Irish battalions were raised in London, Glasgow and a number of other cities,⁷ and Irish Nationalists and Unionists were quite prepared to wait for the end of the war before renewing the home rule controversy. It seemed that it was with justification that Sir Edward Grey declared in August 1914 that Ireland was 'the one bright spot'⁸ on the map of Europe.

And yet – only four years later – he might well have confessed that Ireland was the one dark spot. In August 1914 Europe was in the throes of crises; but at home the leaders of Irish Nationalist and Unionist opinion were united in pledging their loyalty to England. By November 1918 England had won the victory; but amidst the clamour of joy and thanksgiving there was Ireland, demanding 'to be confronted publicly with England at the Congress of the Nations, that the civilized world having judged between English wrong and Irish right may guarantee to Ireland its permanent support for the maintenance of her national independence'.⁹

This catastrophic reversal of fortune was nowhere in sight in 1914. On the outbreak of war, the immediate reaction of the political parties in Great Britain was, naturally enough, to seek a compromise on divisive issues.¹⁰ But first of all Redmond insisted that Asquith at least place the home rule bill on the statute book, even if its operation should be suspended until the end of the war.¹¹ On 15 September 1914 Asquith announced that this would be done, at the same time giving an assurance that, before it came into effect, the government would introduce an amending bill dealing with the area to be excluded from its operation. He also declared that the coercion of Ulster was 'unthinkable'.¹² Even this limited concession to Irish Nationalists, even this paper constitution, was bitterly resented by Unionists, Lord Robert Cecil denouncing the government's 'sharp practice' which demonstrated that they were 'no longer fit for the society of gentlemen'.¹³ Lloyd George was disappointed with what he regarded as the Opposition's lack of patriotism: 'these differences', he complained to Austen

⁶ 5 *Hansard*, LXV, col. 1829, 3 Aug. 1914.

⁷ J. A. Jackson, *The Irish in Britain* (London, 1963), p. 124.

⁸ 5 *Hansard*, LXV, 1824, 3 Aug. 1914.

⁹ 'Ireland's Message to the Nations', issued at the Mansion House, Dublin, 21 Jan. 1919, in *Ireland's Request to the Government of the United States for Recognition as a Sovereign Independent State* (1919), pp. 121-2.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the arrangements made between the parties see Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War: July 1914 – May 1915* (London, 1971), pp. 135-42.

¹¹ For Redmond's insistence on this, see D. W. Savage, 'The Irish Question in British Politics, 1914-16', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University (1963), pp. 21-39.

¹² 5 *Hansard*, LXVI, 882-93. Redmond declared that the government's action had transformed Ireland from 'the broken arm of England' into one of the strongest bulwarks of the Empire' (col. 912).

¹³ Hazlehurst, *op. cit.* pp. 139-40. See also Sir C. Petrie, *Life and Letters of Sir Austen Chamberlain* (London, 1939-40), II, 5-14.

Chamberlain, 'ought to be settled. It is our patriotic duty to find a settlement and I wish I were convinced that Mr Balfour was doing his best to achieve that end.' 'I should be sorry', he added, 'if differences as to home rule should prevent co-operation between parties in resisting the common enemy.'¹⁴

This exchange was important, for it showed the way in which most British politicians viewed the Irish question after 1914; and it indicates the kind of thinking which was eventually to cause a breakdown in Anglo-Irish relations by the end of the war. For Ireland was perceived as essentially subordinate to the war effort, as fairly low in the British order of priorities; and the pattern of Anglo-Irish relations was determined by the strategic necessities of the greatest conflict in which the British empire had been engaged since the French wars of over a century before.

For nearly two years of this conflict, however, Englishmen were allowed to forget the Irish question. John Redmond, though strongly critical of any talk of applying compulsory military service to Ireland, continued to urge Irishmen to join the army; Protestants and Catholics alike became, in Kipling's words, 'King George's men'; and all seemed well in Britain's Achilles Heel. But other Irishmen were planning a very different kind of war, in a different cause. A group of Irish separatists, spearheaded by the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Citizen Army of James Connolly, believed that the war offered an opportunity for a rebellion against British rule which, even if it were unsuccessful in a military sense, would in the long run rouse Nationalist Ireland from the torpor into which it had sunk under the leadership of John Redmond. On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, Patrick Pearse announced from the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin that a provisional government of the Republic had been established, and called upon the Irish people to rally in support.

The Easter Rebellion came as 'a bolt from the blue' to the British people even more than to the Irish.¹⁵ Details of the rising were slow to reach the British press, partly because the rebels had cut telegraph wires, and also because government censorship prevented the publication of news from other than official sources; and it was not until the Monday following the rising that, for example, *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* were able to present a comprehensive record of the events.¹⁶ But once British newspapers had begun to assimilate the information, their comment was surprisingly moderate in tone. Condemnation of the instigators of the rebellion (mistakenly labelled 'Sinn Feiners') was universal; but, except in the right-wing press, there was no denunciation of the Irish Nationalists as a whole. The *Morning Post* lamented that 'it seems to be the fate of Ireland to act as a lodestone to the enemies of this kingdom'¹⁷; but most

¹⁴ Hazlehurst, p. 137.

¹⁵ *Quarterly Review*, ccxxvi (July-Oct. 1916), 224.

¹⁶ *The History of The Times, the 150th Anniversary and Beyond*, pt. II (London, 1952), p. 545; D. Ayerst, *Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper* (London, 1971), p. 390.

¹⁷ *Morning Post*, 27 Apr. 1916.

newspapers regarded the rebellion as an insult and a blow to Ireland as much as it was to England. To the *Manchester Guardian* it was 'the wild act of a small and violent faction'¹⁸; and even the *Daily Telegraph*, while bemoaning the fact that the already overburdened British government was now saddled with a 'new anxiety', admitted that it was 'unreasonable to make capital against Home Rule out of this criminal insurrection of the Sinn Feiners'.¹⁹ But perhaps one of the most significant comments came from a local newspaper, the *Nottingham Journal and Express*. In a leader column it noted that its own regiment, the Sherwood Foresters, had suffered the 'death and wounding of many officers and men' during the fighting in Dublin; but it nevertheless admitted that the whole episode had 'demonstrated beyond the possibility of cavil the loyalty and enthusiasm for the common cause of Britain and her allies of the Irish nation in the mass'.²⁰

The ground, therefore, was well prepared for the initiative on the Irish question which Asquith announced on 25 May in the house of commons, following his visit to Ireland of a fortnight before. He told the House that he had authorized the minister of munitions, Lloyd George, to open fresh talks with Irish Nationalist and Unionist spokesmen.²¹ His statement received enthusiastic support in the British press, and Lord Northcliffe was quick to swing his influential *Times* and *Daily Mail* behind the government's new departure: 'this damnable business', he had written to his brother Cecil Harmsworth on the eve of Asquith's announcement, 'needs to be settled *now*, otherwise the hotheads will get to work, both in Ulster and elsewhere'.²² The house of commons also seemed to be alive to the urgency of the situation, and, observed *The Times* lobby correspondent, 'with that sure instinct which rarely fails them in difficult times, gave the new conciliator the best possible send-off on his delicate mission'.²³

At first, all went well for Lloyd George's 'delicate mission', and he was able, within a short time, to secure a measure of agreement between himself, Carson on the one hand, and Redmond on the other. This is not surprising. Lloyd George possessed unique qualities as a negotiator, and he was dealing with men

¹⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Apr. 1916.

¹⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 and 28 Apr. 1916. See also *Daily Mail*, 27 Apr. 1916; *Daily Express*, 26 Apr. 1916.

²⁰ *Nottingham Journal and Express*, 4 May 1916. In the fighting at Lower Mount Street, the Sherwood Foresters suffered losses of 4 officers killed and 14 wounded, and 216 other ranks killed and wounded (Alison Phillips, *The Revolution in Ireland, 1906-1923* (London, 1923), p. 101).

²¹ 5 *Hansard*, LXXXII, 2308-2311. Asquith's proposals for the future government of Ireland were described in a cabinet paper, 'Ireland. II. The Future', 21 May 1916, Cab. 37/148. For his letter inviting Lloyd George to 'take up Ireland', see Lloyd George papers, Asquith to Lloyd George, 22 May 1916, D 14/1/5.

²² R. Pound and G. Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (London, 1959), p. 501. For examples of newspaper comment see *Daily Mail*, 26 May 1916; *The Times*, 26 May 1916; *Daily Telegraph*, 26 May 1916; *Western Morning News* (Bristol), 26 May 1916; *Glasgow Herald*, 26 May 1916; *Scotsman*, 26 May 1916; *Observer*, 28 May 1916.

²³ *History of The Times*, p. 547.

who were anxious to see his negotiations succeed. For Carson, the prime consideration was a settlement, so that the war effort would not be hampered by continuing unrest in Ireland; for Redmond, a settlement was essential, not only for the sake of the war, but for the survival of his own party, for already his hold on the country had been weakened by the executions which followed the suppression of the rebellion.²⁴

It is outside the scope of this paper to describe these negotiations in detail²⁵; but, briefly, what Lloyd George offered was the immediate establishment of a self-governing parliament in Dublin, with the exclusion of the six counties which now comprise Northern Ireland.²⁶ It has sometimes been assumed that the question of whether partition was to be temporary or permanent was the cause of the failure of the Lloyd George negotiations.²⁷ But an examination of the archives shows that this was not the case. Lloyd George was indeed trying to gloss over the question of partition; but so were the Irish Nationalists, who knew that their very existence depended upon an Irish settlement here and now. Much has been made out of Lloyd George's assurance to Carson that 'we must make it clear that at the end of the provisional period [i.e. after the war] Ulster does not, whether she wills it or not, merge in the rest of Ireland'.²⁸ But this was not a promise of Ulster's permanent exclusion. If this ambiguous phrase meant anything, it was simply a promise that there would be no *automatic inclusion* – in other words, there must be further negotiations after the war to clear up this point.

Carson was satisfied with this. But why did not Redmond ask for definite assurances on inclusion? It was not because the matter was not raised, for on 10 July in the House, Carson, referring to the settlement, remarked 'I also understand . . . that the six counties will be definitely struck out of the Act of 1914. Of course, at any time afterwards they could be included by a Bill?' To

²⁴ 15 rebels were executed by the British army between 3 and 12 May 1916. The verdict of Captain Cyril Falls on the executions is that 'the number actually executed was very small by comparison with that usually following a revolt in such circumstances' ('Maxwell, 1916, and Britain at War', in F. X. Martin (ed.), *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916* (London, 1967), pp. 203–13). It is a verdict worth remembering in the light of subsequent feeling in Ireland over the executions.

²⁵ The most thorough account of the complicated transactions of May–July 1916 is that of P. J. Buckland in his Ph.D. thesis, 'Southern Unionism, 1885–1922', Queen's University of Belfast, 1969, ch. viii, 'The Rising and Reaction'. I have referred throughout to the unpublished version of this research, which is somewhat fuller than the published work, *Irish Unionism One* (Dublin, 1972).

²⁶ 'Headings of a Settlement as to the Government of Ireland', Cd. 8310 of 1916. There was more than one draft of the Lloyd George proposals, but the official version does not differ substantially from the other drafts.

²⁷ Keith Middlemas states this in his introduction to *Tom Jones, Whitehall Diary* (London, 1971), iii, 1.

²⁸ Quoted in F. S. L. Lyons, *John Dillon: a biography* (London, 1968), p. 288.

which Asquith replied: 'They could not be included without a Bill'.²⁹ And yet this did not elicit from the Irish Nationalists a demand for a specific guarantee that partition would not be permanent. A letter from Captain W. H. Owen, Lloyd George's 'scout' in Dublin, throws light on Nationalist thinking. Owen had discussed the matter with Joseph Devlin, leader of the Nationalists in the excluded area, and therefore a man to whom partition was of vital importance:

I asked him whether he thought it advisable that any fresh statement of the proposal should be made in the House of Commons before Friday. He said 'no', because Sir Edward Carson might think it his duty to place a fresh interpretation upon them, and so lead the Ulster Nationalists to believe that their exclusion was in fact permanent. This would prevent their accepting the proposals on Friday [i.e. at a meeting of the Ulster Nationalists in Belfast on 23 June to discuss the Lloyd George plan]. *As to the apparent difference of opinion between Mr Redmond and Sir Edward Carson whether exclusion is permanent or temporary, he thinks that this is more apparent than real, that it actually represents two legitimate views of the same proposal, and may easily be cleared up afterwards.*³⁰

Redmond's eventual rejection of the Lloyd George plan came, not because Redmond suddenly discovered that he had been deceived, but because opposition from British and southern Irish Unionists forced him into a corner, and obliged him to take a stand which he would otherwise have avoided.

The behaviour of Unionist members of the cabinet holds the key to the failure of the 1916 negotiations. And of particular importance was the behaviour of two men: Walter Long and Lord Lansdowne. These were the only Unionists whom Lloyd George took into his confidence in the early stages of the talks – the rest of the cabinet did not see the proposals until 18 June. Both these men had a special connection with Ireland. Long had been Chief Secretary in 1905-6, and had sat as M.P. for South County Dublin from 1906 until 1910. Lansdowne was a prominent southern Irish Unionist politician and landlord. If the assent of these two could be secured, then the chances were that the settlement would go through. Long was at first favourable to the plan³¹; but the southern Irish Unionists quickly put pressure upon him to change his mind.³² On 11 June he

²⁹ 5 *Hansard*, LXXXIV, 61-2. The possibility that exclusion might be permanent was aired in the *Irish Times*, which on 23 June 1916 published a report to the effect that Carson had secured a written promise from Lloyd George that six county exclusion was to be permanent (Lyons, op. cit. p. 388, fn. 1).

³⁰ Lloyd George papers, Lloyd George to Asquith, 20 June 1916, enclosing a letter from W. H. Owen to Lloyd George, 20 June 1916, D 14/3/21. The italics are mine.

³¹ 'You can render a service to Ireland, Great Britain and the Empire, the extent of which no man can reason', he wrote to Lloyd George on 23 May 1916 (D 14/1/9).

³² It is possible to trace the process by which southern Irish Unionists pressurized Long in letters from Long to Lloyd George, 29 May, and 11 and 12 June 1916, Lloyd George papers, D 14/1/37, D 14/2/28, 33. See also G. F. Stewart, vice-chairman of the Irish Unionist Alliance, to Long, 31 May 1916, D 14/1/45. Southern Unionist activity is documented by P. J. Buckland, in 'Southern Unionism', chap. VIII. Buckland's verdict is that 'the southern Unionist agitation precipitated the Cabinet crisis in the summer of 1916 and prevented a moderate solution of the

protested to Lloyd George that the Unionist party in Ireland was being driven to a settlement which they knew to be 'morally wrong and wrong politically', and he rejected Lloyd George's plea that a settlement was necessary for the sake of the war, declaring that he had 'excellent authority for the opinion . . . that whatever may be said or written the U.S.A. will not interfere with the supply of munitions or other supplies'.³³ On 27 June Long and Lansdowne concerted their resistance in the cabinet, arguing that home rule would be regarded as a surrender to force, and would only invite further pressure for concessions.³⁴

By the end of June Asquith was faced with the possible disintegration of his administration. Lord Robert Cecil had added his voice to those Unionists who opposed the plan³⁵; Austen Chamberlain was uneasy³⁶; Lansdowne and Long had consolidated their opposition; and Lord Selborne had resigned from the Board of Agriculture.³⁷ How would Asquith and Lloyd George cope with the situation? Lloyd George seems to have been hoping that the prime minister would give a lead, and, if his own evidence is to be believed, he was constantly pressing Asquith for action and firmness.³⁸ And yet, at the cabinet meeting of 27 June, Lloyd George, far from firm, intervened in the discussion:

to point out that, if the resignation of Unionist members of the Cabinet could be averted, by a further consideration of possible safeguards for the maintenance of naval and military control during the war, he would do his best to secure that such an arrangement [sic], and he suggested that a small committee of the cabinet (4 or 5 members) should at once be appointed to discuss [ed] its terms.³⁹

Why did Lloyd George preach firmness and practice weakness? Why did he not appeal to public opinion for support, as he was to do five years later in the Anglo-Irish negotiations of 1921, and use public and parliamentary pressure to force the wreckers to back down? Why did not Asquith support him in such a move? The answer is simple: Lloyd George, like Asquith, feared that to push matters to the proof would break up the government and perhaps irreparably damage the British war effort. Moreover, public opinion itself was confused and divided, and the enthusiastic newspaper response to the Lloyd George settlement

Irish question' (p. 214). The southern Unionists also launched an impressive propaganda campaign in Great Britain, using especially the *Morning Post* (Buckland, op. cit. pp. 235-7).

³³ Lloyd George papers, Long to Lloyd George, 11 June 1916, D 14/2/28.

³⁴ Asquith papers, Asquith to the king (cabinet letter), 27 June 1916, MS Asquith 8, fo. 171. Lansdowne explained his objections in a cabinet paper, 'The Proposed Irish Settlement', 21 June 1916, Cab. 37/150.

³⁵ Bonar Law papers, memorandum by Lord Robert Cecil, 26 June 1916, 63/c/62. See also Cabinet Paper by Lord Robert Cecil, [5] July 1916, Cab. 37/151/11.

³⁶ Asquith Papers, Austen Chamberlain to Asquith, 23 June 1916, MS Asquith 16, fo. 207.

³⁷ Lloyd George papers, Asquith to Lloyd George, 17 June 1916, enclosing letter from Selborne to Asquith, 16 June 1916, D 14/3/9.

³⁸ Christopher Addison, *Politics from within* (2 vols., London, 1924), pp. 258-9. See also Trevor Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott* (London, 1970) pp. 222-4.

³⁹ Asquith papers, Asquith to the king (cabinet letter), MS Asquith 8, fo. 171.

bid was not shared by all sections of opinion. In June and July 1916 Bonar Law was bombarded with letters and telegrams from people protesting against the plan, which was denounced as 'a breach of the party truce', a 'treacherous home rule scheme', 'a most dangerous expedient at a most critical time', a disaster for Great Britain and the empire.⁴⁰ And some newspapers now warned that a ministerial crisis was too high a price to pay even for an Irish settlement.⁴¹ The game was not worth the candle. 'A break-up of the Cabinet just now', Lloyd George told Lord Riddell in a masterly piece of understatement on 16 July, 'would be a misfortune'.⁴²

This was a feeling shared by the Unionists, who were themselves anxious that Ireland should not bring down the government. On 30 June Austen Chamberlain wrote to Lord Lansdowne imploring him to stay, in order to secure for the Unionists the insertion of certain clauses in the home rule bill which would safeguard national interests.⁴³ On 5 July Lansdowne and Long sulkily agreed not to resign – but only on condition that during the war the imperial executive should remain paramount in Ireland.⁴⁴ Here, then, was common ground between the Liberal and Unionist members of the cabinet. They would, as it were, strike a bargain: the home rule plan would be put into action, but only under certain conditions. Thus would national unity be saved; and Lloyd George and Asquith joined with the Unionists in imposing further qualifications on the settlement. On 17 July Asquith did show some signs of resolution, when he warned Lord Robert Cecil, Long and Lansdowne that he could 'not assent to the suggestion that the matter should be postponed until after the war'. But after this glint of steel, the concessions followed. The draft home rule bill should be amended to provide that the excluded counties would not be placed under a Dublin parliament against their will; and the Nationalists should be informed that, after an Irish parliament had been set up, Irish representation in the imperial parliament would be reduced, though restored if an amending bill were brought in.⁴⁵ But by this time Redmond had drawn too heavily on his political capital to make further concessions to the government, and on 24 July he bitterly acknowledged that all hope of a settlement was over.⁴⁶

The breakdown of the 1916 negotiations caused regretful comment in the British press. 'The only alternative to some form of Irish local administration is the continuance of martial law, and this means the ruthless guerilla opposition

⁴⁰ These letters are in the Bonar Law papers, 53/3/8.

⁴¹ See e.g. *Scotsman*, 27 June 1916; *Sheffield Telegraph*, 27 June 1916; *Western Morning News*, 28 June 1916.

⁴² Lord Riddell, *War Diary* (London, 1933), p. 201.

⁴³ Austen Chamberlain papers, Austen Chamberlain to Lansdowne, 30 June 1916, AC 14/5/9.

⁴⁴ Asquith Papers, Asquith to the king (cabinet letter), 5 July 1916, MS Asquith 8, fo. 179.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* same to same, 19 July 1916, MS Asquith 8, fo. 185.

⁴⁶ 5 *Hansard*, LXXXIV, 1427-70, 24 July 1916. Redmond had earlier warned Lloyd George of the dangers of tampering with the settlement (Lloyd George papers, Redmond to Lloyd George, 7 July 1916, D 14/3/49). See also Denis Gwynn, *The Life of John Redmond* (London, 1932), pp. 519-20.

of the Irish party in the House of Commons', commented the *Daily Express's* leader writer: '... We confess that we view this state of affairs with the greatest misgiving.'⁴⁷ The *Daily Mail* tracked down the culprits. 'Lord Lansdowne and his friends are living in the seventeenth century... It is preposterous that these people, who represent nobody but themselves, should be allowed any longer to stand between Ireland and a measure of self-government.'⁴⁸ 'Now we have the old stone tied once more round our necks', groaned the *Daily Telegraph* on 25 July. But the *Telegraph* hoped that another effort at settlement would be made later on 'when we hope that public opinion will range itself even more unmistakably on the side of those who are working to bring peace and not a sword to Ireland'.

Efforts would be made later on. For the question of Irish home rule could not be separated from the prosecution of the war, and the British government was under international as well as domestic pressure to make another attempt at settlement. Between July and December 1916 Irish issues were debated in the house of commons about half a dozen times. Shortly after Lloyd George became prime minister in December 1916, his opposite member in Australia telegraphed him explaining the importance of an Irish settlement to the war effort. The effect on Australian opinion would be profound, and 'we should be a really united people'; and he stressed that if Lloyd George could get the Unionist to:

realize that a disaffected Ireland not only makes ideal of imperial unity impossible but gravely imperils existing imperial relations, prevents empire putting forth maximum man power and strength generally, I feel confident that an immediate settlement could be effected (sic).⁴⁹

In the same month Sir Cecil Spring Rice warned that the Irish question was 'poisoning our relations with the United States... If we could settle it by consent... perhaps we might have some prospect of a permanent settlement with this country.'⁵⁰ At home C. P. Scott described the dangers of letting the situation drift. The only alternative to a 'pacifying measure' was 'systematic coercion', and 'thus when peace comes and we begin to talk about freedom and liberation we may be seen with Ireland seething with disaffection and held down by military force'.⁵¹ On 22 March 1917 the war cabinet at last began to wake up

⁴⁷ *Daily Express*, 25 July 1916.

⁴⁸ *Daily Mail*, 26 July 1916.

⁴⁹ Lloyd George papers, prime minister of Australia (W. M. Hughes) to Lloyd George, telegram received on 29 and 30 Dec. 1916, F 32/4/14. See also war cabinet minutes, 21 Dec. 1916, and 1 Jan. 1917, Cab. 23/1.

⁵⁰ Lloyd George papers, copy of extract from a letter from Sir Cecil Spring Rice to Lord Hardinge, 5 Dec. 1916, F 60/2/1. For full discussion of the impact of the Irish question on Anglo-American relations see D. W. Savage, op. cit. chs. III and V, and Alan J. Ward, *Ireland and Anglo-American Relations, 1899-1921* (London, 1969), chs. V and VII.

⁵¹ Lloyd George papers, C. P. Scott to Lloyd George, 4 Mar. 1917, F 45/2/6. For British newspaper comment see e.g. *Yorkshire Post*, *Birmingham Post*, and *Liverpool Courier*, 8 Mar. 1917; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Mar. 1917; *Observer*, 11 Mar. 1917; *Daily Mail*, 23 Mar. 1917.

to the situation and to cast round for a policy⁵²; and in the house of commons the same day Bonar Law admitted that, in spite of the attendant risks, 'it is worthwhile for us, on our own responsibility, in some way or another to make another attempt'.⁵³

The entry of the United States into the war gave further incentive. Lloyd George had tried to use America to convince the recalcitrant Unionists in the Cabinet that his 1916 plan must go through; and in April 1917 he re-deployed his arguments. 'At every stage', he told Sir Edward Carson, on 25 April, 'the Irish question is a stumbling block in the conduct of the war. It has done much harm in Australia . . . Now that America has come in I get the same representations from that side.' It would seem, too, that Lloyd George himself added to these representations, if Miss Stevenson's diary is to be believed:

D has sent a message through Dr. Page, the American Ambassador, to President Wilson (secretly) asking him to send a message urging that the Irish question should be settled. He thinks if he can get this it will be a very great help, and will influence Carson.⁵⁴

Lloyd George's confidence increased: 'I think I am going to settle the Irish question, Pussy,' he exclaimed (with more affection than accuracy) to Miss Stevenson on 26 April.⁵⁵ But by the beginning of May the Irish members were becoming impatient with the government's failure to produce a plan. At last, on 16 May, the prime minister outlined his proposals. These were, either an offer of home rule, with the exclusion of the six north-eastern counties, as in 1916; or a 'Convention of Irishmen of all parties for the purpose of producing a scheme of Irish self-government'.⁵⁶ Most Irish politicians found the latter part of the scheme acceptable. This was a relief to the British. Whether or not it would result in a settlement was problematical; but it would at least leave England free to get on with the main business of winning the war. 'D is hopeful that peace may reign for a few months at least in that quarter', wrote Miss Stevenson with candour 'though I do not know whether he has any hopes of the Convention ultimately solving the Irish puzzle'.⁵⁷

The announcement of the Convention, which was to begin its deliberations in July 1917, was well received in the British press. 'We think', commented the *Western Morning News*, 'the Empire and our Allies will be satisfied that by their proposals the Government has sought to conciliate Ireland'.⁵⁸ 'We all

⁵² War cabinet minutes, 22 Mar. 1917, Cab. 23/2.

⁵³ 5 *Hansard*, xci, 2137, 22 Mar. 1917.

⁵⁴ A. J. P. Taylor (ed), *Lloyd George: a diary by Frances Stevenson* (London, 1971), p. 155.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 156.

⁵⁶ War cabinet minutes, 16 May 1917, Cab. 23/2. The proposals were announced in the house of commons on 21 May (5 *Hansard*, xciii, 1995-2039).

⁵⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *Lloyd George: a diary by Frances Stevenson*, p. 158. For a full account of the Irish Convention see R. B. McDowell, *The Irish Convention* (London, 1970) and P. J. Buckland, 'Southern Unionism', chs. ix-xi

⁵⁸ *Western Morning News*, 17 May 1917.

want', wrote the *Daily Telegraph*, 'to put an end to a state of affairs which is productive of immense evil, not only to Ireland, but to Great Britain and the Empire'.⁵⁹ The *Daily Mail* at last saw light at the end of the tunnel. 'So far as Great Britain is concerned', it wrote, 'the last obstacle to a settlement of the Irish Question is removed. It is now solely and wholly in the hands of the Irish themselves.'⁶⁰

And while the settlement of the Irish question remained in the hands of the Irish, the British people and their government turned their attention to the serious business of the war, and to the Passchendaele offensive of the autumn of 1917. The sober deliberations of Irish politicians in Trinity College Dublin must, in truth, have seemed remote to the families who were losing sons, brothers and fathers in the mud of Flanders, and Lloyd George's admonitions that public comment on the Convention be kept to a minimum⁶¹ were scarcely necessary. 'As far as *The Times* goes', wrote Geoffrey Dawson on 20 December, 'I am as far as possible avoiding the subject altogether so long as the Convention is in being, and personally I feel that every day it sits is a day gained'.⁶² But once again the political fate of Ireland was inextricably bound up with the fortunes of war. At the beginning of 1918 resentment began to build up in Great Britain against the government's failure to apply any of its conscription measures to Ireland. Conscription had first been introduced, amidst great controversy, in Great Britain in March 1916, and further measures had been passed since then.⁶³ So far Ireland had escaped.⁶⁴ But whereas in 1916 the plentiful supply of volunteers from Ireland⁶⁵ and their gallant performance in the field of battle had blunted the edge of criticism,⁶⁶ by 1918 the flow of volunteers had dwindled to a

⁵⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 1917.

⁶⁰ *Daily Mail*, 22 May 1917.

⁶¹ Lloyd George appealed on 21 May 1917 for 'no publication, authorized or unauthorized' of its proceedings until its conclusions were arrived at (5 *Hansard*, xciii, 1998).

⁶² Dawson to Alison Phillips, *History of The Times*, p. 551.

⁶³ For an account of the earlier conscription measures and the whole conscription question see Denis Hayes, *Conscription Conflict* (London, 1949), chs. xii-xxi, and John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (London, 1970). Walter Long, for one, had pressed hard to have Ireland included in the 1916 bill.

⁶⁴ It has been argued that in fact the manpower reservoir in Ireland was much lower there than elsewhere. The Irish Registrar General and the War Office admitted that 'the male population of Ireland is chiefly composed of young men up to 18 and over 50 as a large proportion of the remainder emigrate . . .' (Owen Dudley Edwards and Fergus Pyle, 1916: *The Easter Rising* (London, 1968), p. 110).

⁶⁵ On 5 Jan. 1916 John Dillon gave the numbers of new Irish recruits to the British army up to 15 Dec. 1915 as 91,555, of which 50,196 were Roman Catholics and 41,353 Protestants (5 *Hansard*, lxxvii, 1043).

⁶⁶ Though *Punch*, as early as Oct. 1916, dropped some strong hints in a cartoon entitled 'Another Injustice to Ireland': a 'gallant Irish soldier' was depicted asking an 'able-bodied civilian', 'An' who's to fill the gaps in th'ould rig'ment if ye don't join up?', to which the civilian replied: 'Sure, it's myself that'd go willingly if they'd only compel me' (*Punch*, 11 Oct. 1916). On the performance of Irish soldiers in the Great War see Henry Harris 'The other Half Million' in O. Dudley Edwards and Fergus Pyle, 1916: *The Easter Rising*, pp. 101-15.

trickle. English people would not have been human if they had not felt resentment at the situation. In March 1918 the great German offensive fell on the Western Front, and the government was compelled to consider a new conscription bill taking every male British subject who was, or had been, in Great Britain since 14 August 1915, and who had attained, or should attain, 18 but not 51 years of age.⁶⁷ It was difficult to scrape the bottom of the barrel in England, Scotland, and Wales, while Ireland got off scot free; and Lloyd George, despite his earlier misgivings about the wisdom of introducing conscription in Ireland,⁶⁸ found himself unable to resist the tide of public and political opinion. In cabinet meetings held between 27 and 29 March 1918 ministers emphasized the difficulty of a drastic application of compulsory military service in Great Britain if Ireland continued to receive exemption⁶⁹; and on 6 April Lloyd George himself admitted that 'we cannot go to the House of Commons and ask our people to make sacrifices, sacrifices which the Irish in America are making, and leave the Irish at home out'. But with the stick came the carrot: whatever the outcome of the Irish Convention, which should report within a matter of days, the government would take up the responsibility of producing a new home rule bill, and pass it into law.⁷⁰

The government's new military service Act, which became law on 10 April, empowered it to extend conscription to Ireland by Order in Council. And there can be no doubt that this was a move which had the full support of the British people. Some Liberal newspapers warned against it. The *Manchester Guardian* was, as usual, the voice of reason, suggesting that 'the first and greatest military gain that we can look for in Ireland is the satisfaction of the Irish people, which will set free the troops that we are now obliged to keep in the country'.⁷¹ The *Daily Chronicle* also protested.⁷² But the Liberal press evidently did not speak for all the Liberal electors. On 15 April 1918, F. E. Guest, Lloyd George's Chief Whip, sent to the prime minister reports from Liberal agents on local feeling about the military service bill. His report concluded that 'progressive opinion' was 'strongly opposed to the application of conscription to Ireland'; but in most areas, including Scotland, Devon and Cornwall, Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire, the general feeling was that equality of sacrifice was necessary and should be enforced.⁷³ Asquith, for his part, failed to oppose the government's

⁶⁷ Hayes, *op. cit.* pp. 306-13.

⁶⁸ Lord Riddell, *War Diary*, pp. 239-40.

⁶⁹ War cabinet minutes, Cab. 23/5. See also 'A minutes', 1 Apr. 1918, Cab. 23/14.

⁷⁰ War cabinet minutes, 5 and 6 Apr. 1918, Cab. 23/6. The Report of the Irish Convention was published as a command paper, Cd. 9019 of 1918.

⁷¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 6 Apr. 1918. See also 8 Apr. 1918, 'emancipation must come first recruitment afterwards'.

⁷² *Daily Chronicle*, 8 Apr. 1918. See also *Northern Echo* (Darlington), 10 Apr. 1918 and *Daily News*, 17 Apr. 1918.

⁷³ Lloyd George papers, F. E. Guest to Lloyd George, 15 Apr. 1918, F 21/2/19.

policy, arguing that he could not do so at a time of such military crisis.⁷⁴ And even C. P. Scott showed a flash of temper, remarking to L. T. Hobhouse on 29 March that the Irish were 'perhaps just now a good deal more comfortable than any other people in Europe'.⁷⁵

Substantial sections of Liberal opinion favoured conscription for Ireland, and Lloyd George himself was aware that organized labour was particularly resentful of 'combing out' while Irishmen were omitted altogether.⁷⁶ What did Conservative opinion feel about the second part of the deal, the introduction of a measure of home rule? Once again, the pressures of war broke down the barriers of principle: if home rule for Ireland would help to win the war, then home rule there must be. As early as October 1916 the *New Statesman* noted that 'except in the *Morning Post* the Irish Question is never discussed nowadays in the English Press in terms of the old party shibboleths'.⁷⁷ And in the spring of 1918 few Unionist newspapers were prepared to hold out against home rule, particularly if it was the price of military conscription.⁷⁸ This was also the general feeling in the constituencies where Unionist party chiefs took a sample of opinion in May 1918. Local Unionist opinion was by no means unanimous, and Unionists were divided on the issue. But of sixteen districts sampled in England and Wales, only three (south and west, south-west, and metropolis [west])⁷⁹ were definitely hostile to home rule.⁸⁰

The division of opinion in the country was reflected in the Unionist party. The 1916 negotiations had almost split the party between those who were prepared to swallow home rule for the sake of the war, and those who wished to postpone the issue, at least until after the war had ended. But the issue could not be postponed. The war had altered the whole perspective of British politics, and the Unionists, like it or not, formed part of a coalition government which had tried, however unsuccessfully, in 1916 to modify the Union. Moreover, the Irish Convention had not been entirely a waste of time, for in 1918 the southern Irish Unionists, whose hostility to Irish self-government had helped to wreck the 1916 settlement, fell into disarray, with some of the more moderate elements, led

⁷⁴ Edward David, 'The Liberal Party divided, 1916-18', in *HJ*, xii, 3 (1970), 509-33. Asquith did lead a mass abstention of the Liberal opposition on the second reading of the Military Service Bill. Some 30 Liberal back-benchers, with Labour and the Irish members, joined in the opinion that 'this measure diminishes the naval and economic power of the nation without adding commensurate military strength'.

⁷⁵ T. Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott*, p. 341.

⁷⁶ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (2 vols, London, n.d. 1936?), II, 1599-1600.

⁷⁷ *New Statesman*, 21 Oct. 1916.

⁷⁸ See e.g. *Observer*, 31 Mar. 1918; *Birmingham Post*, 17 Apr. 1918; *Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1918; *Yorkshire Post*, 11 Apr. 1918.

⁷⁹ South and West included Monmouthshire, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Dorsetshire, Wiltshire, and Gloucestershire; South-West included Somerset, Devon and Cornwall; Metropolis (west) included St. Pancras, Hampstead, Paddington, Kensington, Hammersmith, Chelsea and Westminster.

⁸⁰ Bonar Law papers, Sir George Younger to J. C. C. Davidson, 3 May 1918, enclosing a bundle of replies from district agents on Unionist feeling about home rule, 83/3/11.

by Lord Midleton, preparing themselves to co-operate in making a home rule parliament for the whole of Ireland a working proposition.⁸¹ By April 1918 most Unionists in Great Britain also were becoming reconciled to the fact that they were defending a losing cause. 'The old purely unitary policy of the Unionist Party has become impossible', wrote Austen Chamberlain to Lyttleton Gell.⁸² 'A considerable number of the younger generation of Conservatives are by no means disinclined for a measure of home rule, as a war measure', declared Ian Malcolm.⁸³ 'I am anxious to get conscription through in Ireland', remarked Lord Robert Cecil in Cabinet on 6 April 1918, 'and am prepared to pay a high price to obtain men in this emergency. . . . If I vote for Home Rule it is because I hope thereby to get conscription'.⁸⁴ 'You have got to keep yourself right with Great Britain, the Dominions and America', L. S. Amery advised Lloyd George. 'That is where the tender of a Home Rule measure comes in.'⁸⁵ But what sort of home rule measure? How could Unionists reconcile their principles with the new set of facts that confronted them in 1918? How could they face the prospect of coming to terms with the establishment of some kind of Irish legislature which, they had always argued, was the half-way house to separation?

To find the answer to these questions, Unionists turned their attention to a political system which, while satisfying Irish aspirations, would nonetheless remain fundamentally British. That system was federalism, the establishment of regional parliaments in the United Kingdom which would handle purely local matters but would be subject to the imperial parliament for the conduct of policy common to all, such as defence, foreign affairs, and customs. If Ireland were given a governmental system which could be applied equally to the rest of the United Kingdom, then not only would Irish nationalism be neutralized, but the Ulster question would be settled as well, since Ulster's case for exclusion would be 'completely modified if the measure is one which gives real guarantees for the permanence of the United Kingdom as a single sovereign unit'.⁸⁶ A form of home rule could be conceded, not on grounds of nationality, but on grounds of national efficiency. All that was required, therefore, to settle the Irish question was an administrative reorganization which would benefit, not only Ireland and Ulster, but the rest of the United Kingdom as well. Even Lord Selborne, who had flounced out of the Cabinet over home rule in 1916, agreed that 'the conviction has become more widely diffused that that kind of devolution, which is

⁸¹ R. B. McDowell, *The Irish Convention*, pp. 127-84, esp. pp. 165 ff; P. J. Buckland, 'Southern Unionism', chs. xi, xii, esp. pp. 355-79.

⁸² Austen Chamberlain papers, Chamberlain to Lyttleton Gell, 22 May 1918, AC 31/1/14.

⁸³ Lloyd George papers, Ian Malcolm to Lloyd George, 15 Apr. 1918, F 3/3/8.

⁸⁴ War cabinet minutes, 6 Apr. 1918, Cab. 23/6.

⁸⁵ Lloyd George papers, Amery to Lloyd George, 29 Apr. 1918, F 2/1/22.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Amery to Lloyd George, 1 May 1918, F 2/1/23. See also Austen Chamberlain papers, Austen Chamberlain to Lord Hugh Cecil, 10 Apr. 1918, AC 18/2/9. I have discussed this point more fully in 'British Conservative Opinion, The Ulster Question, and the Partition of Ireland, 1912-21', *Irish Historical Studies*, xvii, 65 (Mar. 1970), 89-112.

called the federal solution, has become an absolute necessity owing to the appalling prospective congestion of parliamentary business if the needs of the Empire and the domestic concerns of England and Scotland are not to suffer fatally from neglect after the war'.⁸⁷ Such a solution, if applied at once to Ireland, would also help England and the empire during the war, for, as Walter Long, another convert, remarked, 'if we can boldly adopt the Federal principle for the United Kingdom we shall I am sure get the support of the Dominions and the United States of America.'⁸⁸ Devolution, Austen Chamberlain remarked, was 'the true Unionist policy in the altered circumstances of the time'.⁸⁹

It was the Government's hope that federalism would form an acceptable compromise, reconciling Irish and British Unionists to the idea of a home rule parliament in Dublin, and reconciling Irish Nationalists to sharing the common responsibilities of the United Kingdom in war.⁹⁰ But the federal home rule-conscription policy ('using Home Rule as the jam for the powder of Conscription', as the *Spectator* put it)⁹¹ ended in frustration and failure, uniting all sections of non-Unionist opinion in Ireland against the Government. On top of this came new accounts of seditious movements in Ireland. From the middle of 1917 the Government's agents had been keeping an anxious eye on developments,⁹² and in May 1918 they came forward with evidence purporting to show that 'the Sinn Feiners considered it essential for the success of their next rising to have German assistance'.⁹³ The evidence was, as Maurice Hankey remarked, 'of a most flimsy and ancient description',⁹⁴ and even Lord Curzon pointed out

⁸⁷ Austen Chamberlain papers, Selborne to Walter Long, 31 May 1918, AC 15/1/33.

⁸⁸ Lloyd George papers, Long to Lloyd George, 7 May 1918, F 32/5/31.

⁸⁹ Austen Chamberlain papers, Chamberlain to Lyttleton Gell, 22 May 1918, AC 31/1/14.

⁹⁰ For a full discussion of federalism, and the Government's attempts to frame a federal constitution for the United Kingdom in 1918, see John Kendle, 'Federalism and the Irish Problem in 1918', *History*, LVI (1971), 207-30. Middlemas, *Whitehall Diary*, III, 4-11 contains valuable information on the discussion of the Committee on the Government of Ireland Amendment Bill which, under the chairmanship of Walter Long, began work on 15 Apr. 1918. A file containing the proceedings of this committee, together with relevant documents and Long's interim report of 14 June 1918, is in Cab. 27/46.

⁹¹ *Spectator*, 20 Apr. 1918. Maurice Hankey, with equal epigrammatic skill, described the Government's policy as 'gilding the conscription pill with the Home Rule Bill' (Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets, 1877-1918* (London, 1970), I, 521.) Lloyd George, however, always maintained that conscription and home rule did not hang together. 'Each must be taken on its merits' (*ibid.* p. 522).

⁹² See e.g. war cabinet minutes, 24 July 1917, Cab. 23/3 and esp. appendix G.T. 1261, and *ibid.* 1 Nov. 1917, Cab. 23/4.

⁹³ War cabinet minutes, 414A, 22 May 1918, Cab. 23/14. See also 408A, 10 May 1918, Cab. 23/14, and 8 May 1918, Cab. 23/6. The 'evidence and documents in the possession of the Government showing the active connection between the leaders of the Sinn Fein Movement and the German Government' were later published as a Command Paper, 'Documents Relative to the Sinn Fein Movement', Cmd. 1108 of 1921, xxix, 429.

⁹⁴ Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets*, I, 554.

that it 'provided ample evidence of German designs, but not of Sinn Fein complicity'.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it was enough to allow the Government, in Lord Curzon's words, to 'adjust our policy' to 'the facts of the case as they were before us'.⁹⁶ This 'adjustment' involved the abandonment of federal home rule, or any other kind for that matter, and also of conscription, for the Irish were to be given a chance to show their mettle by raising 50,000 volunteers for the British army by October 1918. By that time, the allied victory was assured, without the full complement of men from Ireland⁹⁷; but the home rule-conscription policy had done irreparable damage to the Irish Parliamentary Party, and to the cause of constitutionalism in Ireland. In the general elections of December 1918 the Sinn Fein party reaped the reward of British blundering by winning 73 seats as against 6 by the home rulers. The victory of Sinn Fein was not as impressive as it looked, and it was a vote against the home rule party and policy rather than for any particular form of republicanism. But it also marked the point at which Nationalist Ireland gave notice of secession from the Union.⁹⁸

The paradox of the situation was that Nationalist Ireland was turning away from home rule just when the British people were at last accepting its inevitability. 'The English and Scotch electors . . . are getting tired of the Irish question and want it settled', commented the *Saturday Review* in April 1918.⁹⁹ And the Lloyd George coalition was well aware of the public mood, and of the need to incorporate plans for an Irish settlement in its election programme – particularly in view of the fact that the war had been fought, at least ostensibly, for the rights of small nations. A few days before the armistice there had been an embarrassing debate in the House of Commons on T. P. O'Connor's motion that 'before the British Government takes part in any proceeding for the resettlement of Europe . . . the Irish question should be settled in accordance with the principles laid down by President Wilson, that all nations, large and small, should have free self-determination as to their form of government. . . .'¹⁰⁰ On 22 November Professor W. G. S. Adams, a secretary to Lloyd George from 1916 to 1918, was requested to prepare a memorandum on the 'Policy of the Government with regard to Home Rule' for confidential circulation to Ministers

⁹⁵ War cabinet minutes, 414A, Cab. 23/14.

⁹⁶ 5 *Hansard*, xxx (Lords), 330, 20 June 1918. The gist of Curzon's speech was threshed out in Cabinet on 19 June 1918 (war cabinet minutes, Cab. 23/6).

⁹⁷ Some 11,000 recruits were in fact obtained from Ireland between Aug. and Oct. 1918 (Robert Kee, *The Green Flag* (London, 1972), p. 623).

⁹⁸ For an analysis of the election results see Kee, *op. cit.* pp. 626–7. Kee shows that the total anti-republican vote, including Unionists, was 557,435, as against 485,105 for Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein, of course, had a majority of the Nationalist vote alone.

⁹⁹ *Saturday Review*, 20 Apr. 1918.

¹⁰⁰ 5 *Hansard*, cx, 1962, 5 Nov. 1918. For a selection of war aims declarations by British statesmen, which proved an embarrassment in the Irish context, see *Ireland's Request to the Government of the United States of America*, pp. 35–8.

'to assist them in their speeches when referring to this subject'. Adams's memorandum began by asserting that:

The Government, despite the heavy pressure of War Policy and Administration have earnestly desired and sought to effect a settlement of the Irish question. They have made it plain that a settlement was a matter of great importance for the sake of good feeling between Great Britain and Ireland as well as on Imperial and International grounds.

It listed the various abortive attempts made by the Government to settle the problem since 1917, giving references to ministerial pronouncements, official correspondence, relevant command papers; and it concluded that the Government had further defined its policy in its election manifesto, signed by Lloyd George and Bonar Law:

namely, that 'it is one of the first obligations of British statesmanship to explore all practical paths towards a settlement of this grave and difficult question on the basis of self-government. But there are two paths which are closed – the one leading to complete severance of Ireland from the British Empire, and the other to the forcible submission of the six counties of Ulster to a Home Rule parliament against their will.'¹⁰¹

These were limitations that John Redmond was prepared to accept in 1916; but they were utterly unacceptable to Irish Nationalist opinion in December 1918. 'We are all home rulers today', declared *The Times* in 1919¹⁰²; all except Irish Nationalists, who now rejected home rule and its adherents.

Why did the British Government make such catastrophic mistakes in Ireland between 1916 and 1918? Partly, the series of blunders was the result of the political situation, of the fact that the Unionists were, since 1915, members of the Government, and Asquith and Lloyd George alike had to pay a certain price for their support. Party politics, political intrigue, are part of the explanation; but not the only, nor indeed the main, part. The fundamental reason for the failure of British policy in Ireland was that it was based, not upon long-term considerations, but upon the exigencies of the war-time situation. The three major British policy decisions taken after 1914 – the initiation and then the abandonment of negotiations in 1916; the Irish Convention; and, most important of all, the home rule-conscription policy – were all taken, not on their merits, but out of the necessities of war. By the end of the war the balance sheet was as follows: the British government and people had abandoned all opposition to Irish self-government and had acknowledged the need for some kind of Irish settlement; but the process by which they had arrived at this decision had effectively precluded any chance of home rule being accepted in Ireland. 'The price of the Irish Sybil's books is rising', the home ruler William O'Brien

¹⁰¹ Lloyd George papers, 'Points on the Policy of the Government with regard to Home Rule', n.d. (Dec. 1918?), F 69/8.

¹⁰² *The Times*, 26 Mar. 1919.

warned in 1917. 'The kind of settlement that might have been effected five years ago can never be effected again.'¹⁰³

The legislative union between Great Britain and Ireland which came into force in 1801 was, to the British, nothing short of a military necessity. It was the work of a government influenced by strategic considerations and acting under military and political pressure. Over 100 years later, British statesmen, acting under similar pressure, made a series of decisions which, within a short time, brought about the end of that union. It is, perhaps, both ironic and appropriate that the Union should have been the creation of one great and desperate conflict, and the casualty of another.

¹⁰³ *Nineteenth Century*, LXXX (Jan.-June 1917), 959.