

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

The concept of Home Rule was initially suggested at the beginning of the 1870s; this ushered in a distinctly new period of history for Irish politics. The concept of Home Rule would control Irish politics until the tragic series of events which concluded with the declaration of World War One in 1914, producing an unlikely united nationalist movement. From time to time, the question of Home Rule became the leading issue in British Politics. Dr Connor Mulvagh argues that:

Liberal support for Home Rule and Conservative opposition did more to define party political identity in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain than any other single issue.<sup>1</sup>

The Home Rulers wished for the Act of Union to be revoked and for Ireland to regain its independent parliament but still be a part of Great Britain. There was opposition to the Home Rule movement, who believed that it was a positive thing for Ireland to have the Act of Union and wished to keep Ireland in it. This group was known as the 'Irish Unionists'. The majority of them were affluent protestants. Opposed to the 'Irish Unionists', were the 'Irish Nationalists', a group that believed that Ireland could construct an independent country. Whilst the 'Irish Republicans' were individuals who wished to establish an autonomous Irish republic. Republicans and Nationalists diverged as Nationalists wished for a self-governing nation over all other issues.

The fight for Home Rule dealt with a significant obstacle under the Conservative party between 1874-1880. Benjamin Disraeli led the party during this time. The party had a secure government majority and had little concern for Irish politics. Irish members of Parliament presented bills regarding Home rule; however, they were swiftly quashed. The Conservative party permitted their members a free vote on every matter barring Home Rule. This impaired its capability and consistency and led to increasing disappointment amongst the Irish.<sup>2</sup>

The failure of Home Rule was inevitable due to a large amount of opposition to the idea. After the first Home Rule Bill failed in 1886, the Irish Unionists created an association named the 'Irish Unionist Alliance' to combat Home

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Connor Mulvagh, *RTE Century Ireland*, <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/home-rule-for-ireland-q-a> [17th November 2022]

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Moran, GALE, <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/gerard-moran-irish-question-1800-1900-home-rule> [19th November 2022]

Rule. This association was extremely powerful, even though it only had a small quantity of members. They secured substantial financial contributions from wealthy businessmen who would have lost the most from the implementation of Home Rule. The Irish Unionist Alliance acquired backing from the Conservative party, who were the opposition, as they believed that if Ireland left Great Britain, other countries in the British Empire would also attempt to leave. These are the 'British Unionists'. Due to this, Parliament's two separate parties opposed each other regarding the matter of Home Rule.

The failure of Home Rule was inescapable as the House of Lords were firmly opposed to Home Rule and had the power to reject any bill outright. They greatly opposed Home Rule as they believed that its establishment would be the beginning of London's power reduction. They feared it would start with Ireland, and then other countries in the British Empire would follow suit. They viewed Ireland as the first domino in an exhaustive line and took action to put an end to the first two bills. John Redmond, an Irish nationalist member of Parliament (MP), asserted that the House of Lords' rejection alone stood between a Home Rule bill becoming law and implemented in Ireland.

Home Rule was likely to fail as in 1910; the Liberal government had no choice but to align themselves with other political parties, as this was the only way they could secure a majority and hold onto leadership. They allied with Irish Nationalist Party. In return for endorsing the Liberal government, the Irish Nationalist Party wished for something in return: Home Rule for Ireland. Whilst, this might sound like something that would help obtain Home Rule, the assistance from the Liberal government would not materialise.<sup>3</sup> The Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, and the Liberals found that Home Rule was not a priority for the British people. When the House of Lords rebuffed the first two Home Rule bills, there was little backlash from the English people. Even Herbert Asquith did not genuinely believe in Home Rule. He stated, in 1902, that:

Is it to be part of the policy and programme of our party that, if returned to power, it will introduce into the House of Commons a bill for Irish Home Rule?

The answer, in my judgement, is No.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Raymond Turner, 'Opposition to Home Rule', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol.11 No.3, (1917) p.448-460 (449)

<sup>4</sup> C N Trueman, The History Learning Site, 2015, <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/ireland-1845-to-1922/home-rule-and-ireland/> [27th November 2022]

At the time it was argued that most people thought that Home Rule was not just needless for the interests of Ireland and would also be a disadvantage to the Irish population. The British believed:

That whatever might be the result with respect to that country, without doubt self-government, so far as it tended to separation and the erecting of an independent or hostile government, would be fatal to some of the largest interests of England and the British Empire.<sup>5</sup>

It can be argued that Home Rule would fail as there would be consequences as a result of the separation that could not be fairly set aside. One of the most significant issues would be Ulster, along with fundamental aspects of geography and global relations. Britain wanted global relations that had been strong and influential previously to continue to be as crucial during this time and that these relations must not, on any account, be dilapidated in the plans of the MPs; it was believed passing a Home Rule bill would greatly affect these issues.<sup>6</sup>

Another reason failure was inevitable was the perceived financial drawbacks of Home Rule; it was persistently stated that considerations of finance meant that the venture was destined to fail. The report of financial writers in 1916, regarding Home Rule documented that Great Britain's yearly subsidy towards Ireland would be approximately £6,500,000; the majority concurred that subsidy for Irish expenditures would be, at a minimum, £2,000,000.<sup>7</sup> It was feared that employers of labour would be forced out of Ireland due to the economic consequences of Home Rule. which would result in substantial numbers of manual labourers migrating to other parts of Great Britain, in order to provide for themselves and their families. This causes another issue as labourers in countries with an influx of men will have inferior pay and reduced work.

One of the biggest impediments to Home Rule was Ulster, a region in Ireland largely populated with Protestants and unionists. William Gladstone and Charles Parnell did not view Ulster unionism as a significant obstacle to the success of Home Rule; this was a monumental mistake. Infuriated and snubbed, Ulster Unionists began a campaign which performed a vital part in obstructing any allowance of self-rule to any region of Ireland for more than a

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Raymond Turner, p.448

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.449

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.450

generation.<sup>8</sup> This led to Parnell addressing the threat of Ulster unionists and how it was a mistake to dismiss the threat they opposed. In May of 1891, he gave a speech stating:

Ireland can never enjoy perfect freedom, Ireland can never be united; and as long as there is an important minority who consider rightly or wrongly...that the concession of legitimate freedom to Ireland means harm and damage to them, either to their spiritual or temporal interests, the work of building up an independent Ireland will have upon it a fatal clog and a fatal drag.<sup>9</sup>

The nationalist newspapers ridiculed his speech as a desperate plea from a man who was rapidly losing power; due to his involvement in the O'Shea divorce case.

One argument for the failure being inevitable was the fact that they did not have overwhelming support from England, Scotland and Wales. Many people from these countries believed that the Irish people no longer experienced the violations they once did and were no longer being subjugated to abuse anymore. They argued that now Ireland significantly self-ruled and that this could be seen as:

In Ireland urban and rural district councils, county councils, and boards of guardians were chosen by popular election; while Irish elementary and technical education, fisheries, agriculture, congested districts, and old age pensions were administered by committees manned by Irish.<sup>10</sup>

In relation to the improvement of the economy, the restoration of profitability for the Irish masses had been achieved mainly by the rightful generosity of Britain. The British government allocated a substantial amount of money for Irish farmers' acquiring land. These Irish farmers were loaned money at affordable rates for long periods of time.<sup>11</sup>

A reason why a large number of people did not support Home Rule was because they believed it would be dangerous for Ireland to self-rule. Home Rule was pushed the most doggedly by Irish politicians who wished to lead Ireland following the implementation of Home Rule. It was thought that if

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) p.2

<sup>9</sup> Paul Bew, *C.S. Parnell* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), p.30-31

<sup>10</sup> Edward Raymond Turner, p.451

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p.451

Britain no longer ruled Ireland, it was assured that the country would fall in to the hands of politicians that led influential organisations, such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and their associated groups.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians had authority over the Irish party and were despised not only by unionists and Protestants but additionally by the utmost honourable and reputable Catholics within Ireland.<sup>12</sup> Cardinal Logue had described them as 'A pest, a cruel tyranny, and an organised system of blackguardism.'<sup>13</sup> A lack of public support meant that it was inevitable that Home Rule could not succeed prior to World War One. Support for Home Rule increased in Ireland after the Easter Rising of 1916. It was argued that the Order would use tactics to increase and conserve the power of the Order and its allied groups. It was accused that they 'would be using unseen power, coercion by boycotting, intimidation, and destruction of property'.<sup>14</sup>

It was persistently incited that the main criticism was that under the control of the head of these organisations, Ireland would be in an inferior position compared to when they were under the constraints and management of British rule.

Ultimately, It was inevitable that Home Rule would fail as Britain could not take the risk of giving Ireland independence; it would be too dangerous. It was clear that Ireland not only wanted Home Rule but complete separation from Great Britain and saw Home Rule as just the start. John Redmond even stated in his speeches in America that he was awaiting the end goal of an independent Ireland.<sup>15</sup>

Stretching from Shetland to Dover, the British Isles occupied the strongest strategical position in Europe. They mounted guard over the northern countries, and the navy watching the outlets from the North Sea made it impossible for their most dangerous naval competitors to attack the trade routes along which came the necessary supplies of food.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.452

<sup>13</sup> Proinsias O'Conluain, *Ancient Fraternal and Friendly Order*, [Radio documentary], RTE, Documentary On One, 18 July 1976 <https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/646826-radio-documentary-ancient-fraternal-and-friendly-order> [6th December 2022]

<sup>14</sup> Edward Raymond Turner, p.453

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.456

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.457

The accessible shoreline to the west offered easy access entry to every route worldwide. However, if other countries were in control of Ireland or allied themselves with foreign countries in wartime, Britain would find itself to be in the most fragile location throughout Europe, as Britain would be situated in the middle of enemies in Ireland and enemies in Europe. Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan delivered his judgement regarding this issue, stating:

It is impossible for a military man, or a statesman with appreciation of military conditions, to look at the map and not perceive that the ambition of Irish Separatists, if realised, would be even more threatening to the national life of Great Britain than the secession of the South was to that of the American...Ireland, by geographical position, lies across and controls the communications of Great Britain with the outside world, save only...the North Sea and the Baltic.<sup>17</sup>

However, An argument can also be made that the failure of Home Rule was not inevitable as the Home Rulers occupied the power difference between the Conservative party and the Liberal party. The two parties were equally proportioned, and the Home Rulers found themselves in an excellent position to broker for what they wanted. They wanted a Home Rule Bill introduced in a trade for endorsing the Liberal Party, customarily seen as an ally concerning the Irish question. The endorsement from the Home Rulers gave the Liberal Party the needed majority to constitute a government. This could indicate that they had the power to get a bill through the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

In reviewing this topic, several reasons why Home Rule was likely to fail are the same, if not similar, to why Home Rule was likely to succeed. If Home Rule had succeeded in Ireland, the Catholic Church would have played a major role in the governing of Ireland. This would have been beneficial to Home Rule as they had the support of mighty Rome and other Catholic countries. However, this is the same reason it was likely to fail, as Great Britain would never concede to give such power to the Pope and the Catholic Church. They would never wish to have the Church governing a free Ireland. The protestants in Ireland would be at the mercy of the Pope and devout Catholics; The government viewed the Irish protestants as their responsibility, as many of them migrated to Ireland from England and Scotland. If home Rule had succeeded, the Irish protestants would have viewed England as abandoning them to the tyranny of the Catholics and Rome.

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<sup>17</sup> The Irish Unionist Alliance, Facts of Radical Misgovernment; and the Home Rule Question Down To Date, (Dublin: The Irish Unionist Alliance, 1909) p.29-30

To conclude, this essay examines the failure of Home Rule prior to the start of World War One and whether the failure was inevitable. There were many significant and complicated reasons to why Home Rule failed. It was believed that Irish people were untrustworthy, dangerous and wanted complete separation from Great Britain and not just Home Rule.

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