

What was to blame for the failure to secure Home Rule for Ireland in the decades before World War One?

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During the decades that proceeded World War One the political landscape in both Britain and Ireland was often dominated by the idea of Home Rule for Ireland. This formed a part of the broader and longer running Irish Question. During the period three separate bills were presented to Westminster and yet on all three occasions Home Rule for Ireland failed to materialise. This essay will endeavour to discover and discuss the reasons behind these failures in a bid to understand and appreciate what exactly was to blame for these unsuccessful attempts to establish this policy. The Paper will begin with a brief outline of what home rule for Ireland entailed and where the concept originated. Following from this will be reviews of the three attempts at enacting the policy into law and finally a discussion and evaluation in conclusion to determine what or who was to blame, if anybody, for their breakdowns.

The roots of Home Rule for Ireland originate in 'Daniel O'Connor's unsuccessful Repeal movement of the 1840s'¹, who sought to repeal the Act of Union of 1801. Home Rule is a rather ambiguous title and what it meant and entailed shifted over time and depended on which side of the argument you sat but it was initially a form of devolution for Ireland whilst remaining within the union. In 1870 The Home Government Association was set up by Isaac Butt and used Home Rule as its slogan.² It soon developed from this group and expanded to become the Home Rule Party, also known as the Home Rule League, in 1873.³ Butt saw Home Rule:

in terms intended to appeal to Irish Protestant and British public opinion and he believed that the achievement of Home Rule would satisfactorily reconcile Irish nationality to the British Empire.⁴

In essence, he wanted a conservative approach to appease the Irish nationalists without too much disturbance of the British or the unionists as that was what he envisioned as being best for all concerned. In the 1874 general election they won 59 seats⁵ growing in power. From 1879 the party had moved on from the moderacy of Butt to a new 'charismatic'⁶ leader in Charles Stewart Parnell⁷. Under his leadership the party further grew in power and political clout. Matthew Kelly states that post 1879, under Parnells leadership the party 'nurtured and largely dominated a succession of mass membership organisations'⁸, these included the 'Land

¹ Oxford Reference, 'Irish Home Rule'

<<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100011936?msclid=9c22f718b03f11ecb1bff8eb81d4a4a4>> [Accessed 30/3/22].

² Britannica Encyclopedia, 'Home Rule' <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Home-Rule-Great-Britain-and-Ireland>> [Accessed 30/3/22].

³ Ibid.

⁴ M.Kelly, 'Home Rule For Ireland For And Against' *Historian*, Iss 124, (Winter 2014/15) p.30.

⁵ T. Mohr, 'Irish Home Rule And Constitutional Reform In The British Empire, 1885-1914'

<<https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/3900?msclid=d91faf45b14111ecb67d818495648864>> [Accessed 30/3/22] p.1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ C. O'Brien, 'Charles Stewart Parnell' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Stewart-Parnell>> [Accessed 31/3/22].

⁸ M. Kelly, 'Home Rule For Ireland For And Against' p.30.

league' and the 'Irish National league' amongst others⁹. This effectively united a wide range of nationalist issues and opinion under the banner of The Home Rule Party and included moderates and members of the 'revolutionary Feinian movement.'¹⁰ According to Kelly, this meant they were able to enjoy 'the unity the terms ambiguity allowed'¹¹ and through this unity and increasing power, Parnell was able to put pressure directly on the British government in Westminster. With his own personal political astuteness and guile coupled with the new strength of the party, Parnell was able to make a series of political manoeuvres¹² that interfered with British politics to promote the problems and concerns of Ireland. In the 1885 general election The Liberal party under William Gladstone returned the most MP's but crucially had no majority. This gave Parnell and the parliamentary Irish party their greatest influence yet as they now held the balance of power in Westminster. They initially sided with The Conservatives, but this broke down and a Liberal government took office in 1886 propped up by the backing of Parnells Irish Parliamentary Party.¹³ The party was now able to put direct pressure on the Prime Minister by wielding their weight to ensure that the government was 'committed to granting Home Rule to Ireland.'¹⁴

Gladstone was now converted as well as committed to Home Rule but 'the obstacles that lay ahead remained formidable: the House of Lords, Ulster, the kaleidoscopic Liberal Party itself.'¹⁵ He set about drawing up proposals for the first Home Rule Bill in 1886. Defining what Home Rule involved was no easy feat with such an array of opinion to appease. After much wrangling the bill proposed an Irish 'legislative body'¹⁶ or devolved assembly with Britain maintaining power over 'matters of defence, foreign policy and international trade.'¹⁷ There were also 'provisions included to protect minorities' namely the protestants of Ulster. Parnell accepted the terms of the agreement even though they 'fell short of Feinian aspirations'¹⁸ and the bill was introduced to parliament in June 1886. After the second reading of the bill in the House of Commons, Gladstone spoke these famous words:

Go into the length and breadth of the world, ransack the literature of all countries, find, if you can, a single voice, a single book...in which the conduct of England towards Ireland is anywhere treated except with profound and bitter condemnation...Think, I beseech you, think well, think wisely, think, not for the moment, but for the years that are to come, before you reject this bill.¹⁹

The government notion was resoundingly beaten in the House of Commons, 'MPs voted 341 to 311 against'²⁰ and the ballot caused a split within his own party with 94 members voting against the government.²¹ Marie Coleman describes these events as 'the first serious

⁹ Ibid, p.30.

¹⁰ Ibid p.31.

¹¹ Ibid p.31.

¹² C. O'Brien, 'Charles Stewart Parnell' Political Manoeuvres.

¹³ T. Mohr, 'Irish Home Rule And Constitutional Reform' p.1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ K. Hoppen, 'Governing Hibernia: British Politicians And Ireland 1800-1921' (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016) p.243

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid,

¹⁸ C. O'Brien, 'Charles Stewart Parnell' Political maneuvers

¹⁹ K. Hoppen, 'Governing Hibernia' p.244.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

manifestation of Irish political unionism, supported by Conservatives and a unionist faction within Gladstone's own Liberal Party.²² This preceded the fall of Gladstone's government and many of the Liberal Unionists who voted against the Home Rule bill went on to 'form the Liberal Unionist Party'.²³ The general election of 1886 that followed the resignation of Gladstone saw the Conservative party gain power with the ability to govern with a majority supplied from an alliance with Liberal Unionists.²⁴ Although beaten, Gladstone was still convinced that Home Rule for Ireland was the best way forward and he now led a party that which no longer contained his leading opponents of the argument.

Home Rule was off the political agenda for a time with the Unionist Conservative government in power but in 1892 Gladstone returned to office. The general election of that year enabled him to form a minority government with the support of the now split Irish Parliamentary Party. The split was the result of the Parnell divorce scandal in 1890²⁵ and the Irish nationalist contingent in Westminster now consisted of The Irish National Federation and the Irish National League. Gladstone had been handed another chance to make a second attempt for Home Rule backed by a Liberal and Irish Nationalist majority in parliament and armed with a mandate of sorts from the British and Irish public. This attempt duly arrived in the form of the Second Home Rule Bill in 1893. The bill was vehemently challenged by unionists from Ulster and the Conservatives at every stage but finally managed to make it through the House of Commons with a majority of thirty-four. However, the bill was later to be thrown out of the House of Lords by a margin of 419 to 41. It was yet another resounding defeat but hardly a surprising one as the House of Lords and the Conservative Party contained the majority of landowners in the United Kingdom and Ireland, the very people who potentially had the most to lose from Home Rule. Gladstone resigned six months later and Home Rule seemed to be dead in the water once again. Unionism carried a large majority within England and there was little support from the British public as they viewed Home Rule as a weakening of the empire. Home Rule seemed more distant than ever, if not impossible while the House of Lords maintained its powers and veto ability.

It would not be until 1912 that a third bill would be created. Following the rejection of the Liberal Party's budget by the largely Conservative House of Lords in 1909²⁶ a crisis in the constitution ensued. With the seal of two general elections as a sign of public approval the Parliament Act would 'remove the power of the House of Lords to reject money bills and to replace the Lords' veto over other public bills with the power of delay'.²⁷ At last, with the Lord's power of veto removed, the Irish Home Rule movement had a credible chance of successfully implementing their proposals. The second election of 1910 saw The Liberal Party once again relying on the Irish parliamentary party to secure power and in April 1912.

²² M. Coleman 'The Creation Of Northern Ireland: Home Rule For Unionists' < <https://www.agendani.com/the-creation-of-northern-ireland-home-rule-for-unionists/> > [Accessed 30/3/22].

²³ U.K Parliament, 'Two Home Rule Bills' < <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/legislativescrutiny/parliamentandireland/overview/two-home-rule-bills/?msclid=eb1ba01eb1bd11eca9723be41bb0176d> > [Accessed 30/3/22].

²⁴ K. Hoppen 'Governing Hibernia' p.244.

²⁵ Ibid, p.246.

²⁶ U.K Parliament, 'Parliament Act 1911' < <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseoflords/house-of-lords-reform/from-the-collections/from-the-parliamentary-collections-the-parliament-act/parliament-act-1911/?msclid=1550d8d4b1e011ec837974878333f89> > [Accessed 30/3/22].

²⁷ Ibid.

Prime Minister 'Asquith placed the third Home Rule Bill before the House of Commons.²⁸ With the assurance this time around that there could be no interference from within the House of Lords to the bill becoming law and a majority able to carry the motion through the House of Commons, the fact that the bill would indeed pass seemed to reverberate around Ireland. In response the people of Ulster, fiercely Unionist raised a paramilitary force called the Ulster Volunteers.²⁹ In response the nationalists created their own force, the Irish Volunteers which pledged 'to uphold the will of parliament in the face of Unionist anarchy³⁰.' The situation was in danger of turning from a political argument to one that involved force of arms and it became known as the Home Rule Crisis. The Conservatives were as determined as the men of Ulster to derail the Home Rule Bill, but they had little political leverage or mobility available to them. Their solution was to add their support to 'the defence of Ulster's 'right' to remain outside the Home Rule Bill.'³¹ This support was 'vigorous and definite'³² in the hope that the situation would escalate to a point where yet another general election was called and the Tories would hopefully return to power. This policy of the Conservatives was 'strengthened further by the Curragh mutiny in March 1914, when senior British army officers refused to deploy force against Ulster unionists if they were ordered to do so³³'. The crisis was averted, even if this was to prove temporary, by the intervention of World War One. The government passed the Home Rule Act but its implementation was to be put on hold until after the war was over.

In conclusion, within a situation and series of events as complex and turbulent as the one described in this essay it is very difficult to apportion blame to any one side, individual or organisation for the inability to secure Home Rule for Ireland in the decades leading up to World War One. There is perhaps blame to be placed in varying proportions on all involved for different reasons. One could reasonably argue that the disunity within the Liberal party was one reason, leading to the failure of the First Bill to even make it out of The House of Commons. Likewise, the people of Ulster wishing to not become a protestant minority in an independent Ireland did whatever they could to prevent all three bills from becoming law, even to the point of creating an armed group. On the Nationalist side, over exuberant radicalism and similarly to the Ulster people an unwilling stubbornness to give ground can also be shown. However, the largest and by far the most overwhelming portion of blame is laid at the door of the Conservative Party and The House of Lords with the majority of the Lords being Conservative. They consistently voted against proposals on all three occasions to block the bills in parliament and aided the split of the Liberal Party by allying themselves with their unionists in the knowledge that a split Liberal Party could not win an election. Furthermore, The Lords blocking of the second bill at numbers of 419 to 41 shows the scale of the class divide that existed and to a certain extent still does today. These were wealthy

²⁸ M. Kelly, 'Home Rule For Ireland For And Against' p.34.

²⁹ M. O'Callaghan, 'Irish Partition Was A Deliberate Process On The Part Of The British' <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/irish-partition-was-a-deliberate-process-on-the-part-of-the-british-1.4557195#:~:text=The%20partition%20of%20Ireland%20was%20not%20an%20act,partitions%3B%20a%20landmark%20in%20the%20genealogy%20of%20partitions.?msclkid=9f5c41d0b1ac11eca49a6efa38a18958>> [Accessed 30/3/22].

³⁰ M. Kelly 'Home Rule For Ireland For And Against' p.34.

³¹ J. Smith, 'Bluff, Bluster And Brinkmanship: Andrew Bonar Law And The Third Home Rule Bill' *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Mar,1993), p.166.

³² Ibid.

³³ M. O'Callaghan, 'Irish Partition Was A Deliberate Process'.

landowners and gentry who had vested, financial interests in seeing Ireland stay within the United Kingdom. By the time that the third bill was passed, they still would not give up the fight, deciding to fan the flames of the Home Rule Crisis by wading in and declaring full support for Ulster, who knows where this would have stopped if the World War One had not have stepped in. It would seem apparent then that the Conservative Party and the House of lords are to blame for the failure to secure Home Rule for Ireland, for reasons of power, greed and financial gain.

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