

Home Rule for Ireland

For and against

At a time when the United Kingdom continues to review its internal constitutional arrangements, **Matthew Kelly** explores how this constitutional debate can be traced back to Gladstone's decision to promote Home Rule for Ireland and how these proposals evolved over time and were challenged.

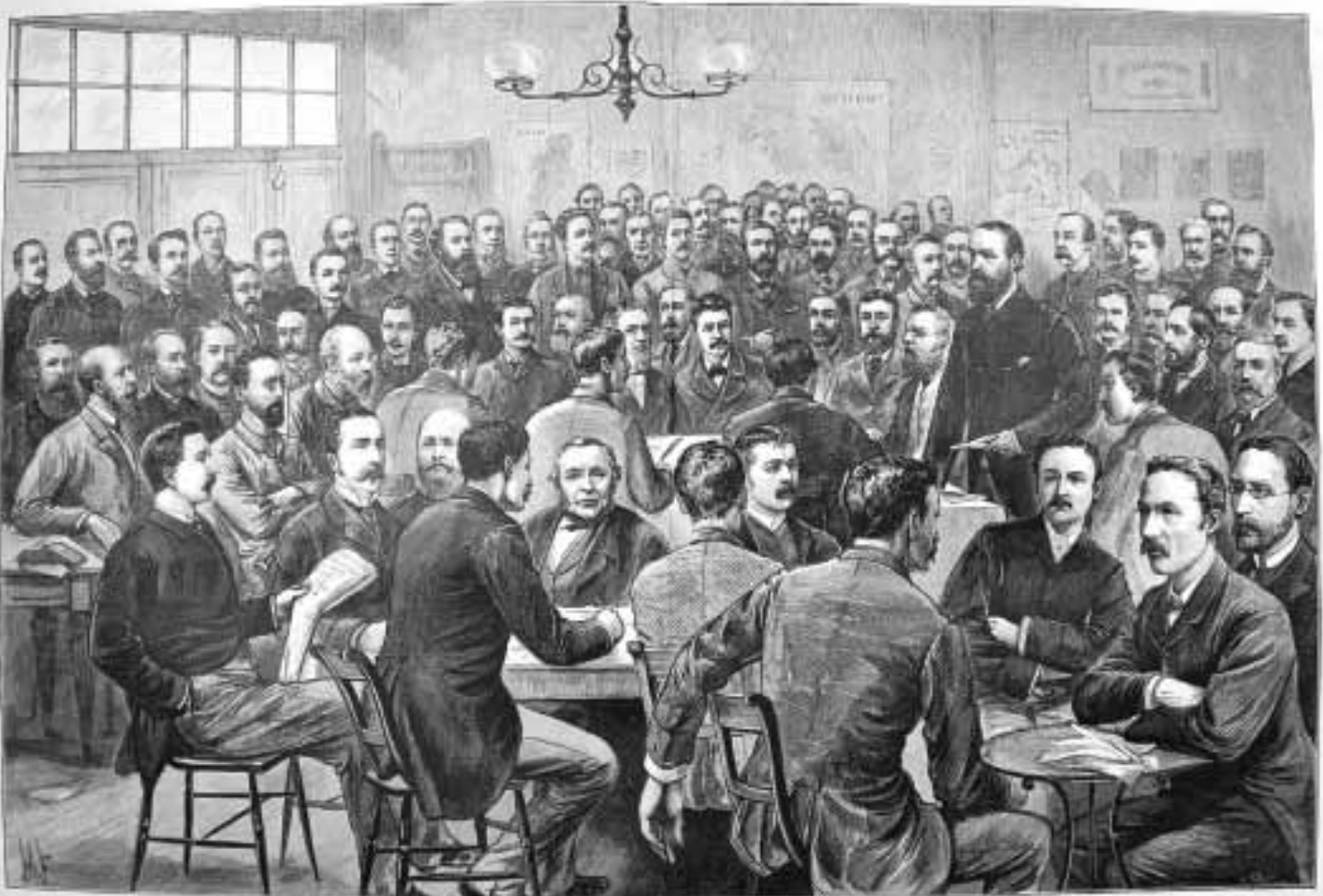
Irish political history decisively entered a new phase in the early 1870s when the Home Rule idea began to be discussed. It would dominate Irish politics until the First World War, generating a remarkably cohesive nationalist movement. Periodically, Home Rule also became the dominant question in British politics. 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.

Convinced Home Rulers did not seek Ireland's secession from the Union or complete separation, possibly under a republican system of government. Nor did Home Rulers demand the repeal of the Act of Union. Instead, Home Rule prospected a form of devolved government within the Union, which would see Westminster devolve certain responsibilities to an Irish executive formed from and answerable to an elected Irish Parliament. Successfully implemented, Home Rule would leave the Union intact with British sovereignty over Ireland uncompromised.

To understand Home Rule the constitutional context must be grasped. The Act of Union (1800) created a new state called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. It did not absorb Ireland into Britain and Ireland was never a part of Britain, as the name of the state then and its successor state, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, reminds us. Instead, the Union unified the British and Irish parliaments, translating the Irish component from Dublin to Westminster. At the same time, the Union created a peculiar form of British government. Ireland was governed through an executive appointed by the government and based at Dublin Castle. Highly centralised, this was emphatically a form of imperial government, maintained by a mixture of state patronage and force.¹ Technically, opposition to Home Rule was Unionist because it favoured the continuing unity of the Irish and British parliaments; polemically, Unionists represented Home Rule as a separatist threat to the British-Irish connection.

Under the leadership of Home Rule's principal originator, Isaac Butt (1813-79), an Irish Protestant Tory, the Home Rule Party did not aim to become a mass-based or democratic organisation, but an association of like-minded gentlemen MPs. Butt defined 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. The Home Rule idea achieved full coherence only when framed in an imperial context. Orthodox Home Rulers were convinced that to so reconstitute British-Irish relations represented not a pragmatic political compromise, but the best possible outcome for Ireland. As such, they were no less idealistic than their separatist nationalist critics.

Although the campaign's primary organisation was the Irish Parliamentary Party, after 1879 it nurtured and largely dominated a succession of mass membership organisations like the Land League, the Irish National League, the United Irish League and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. The Party also had close links with partner organisations in the United States and the British Dominions, an important source of party income. Importantly, orthodox Home Rule thinking never achieved a comfortable ascendancy over the Home Rule movement. Many supporters, including leading activists, expressed their support for Home Rule in ambiguous terms, blurring the



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distinction between Home Rule and separation, or participated in political campaigns, particularly focused on land reform, which encouraged a rhetorical separatism and non-lawful political activism. After 1879, when the movement came under the charismatic leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell, most Irish nationalists, often including those associated with the revolutionary Fenian movement, identified as Home Rulers to some degree or another, enjoying the unity the term's ambiguity allowed.

British supporters, however, were keen to prove Home Rule's moderate and workable nature. The three Liberal Home Rule Bills placed before the House of Commons in 1886, 1893 and 1912 gave Home Rule clear meaning, revealing the extent to which Liberal governments believed Ireland should be self-governing.² Consequently, the relationship between Irish Home Rulers and their British sponsors could seem a 'Union of Hearts', but the reception of the proposed settlements by Irish nationalists were shaped by rituals of scepticism and dissatisfaction. A Home Rule Bill equal to the expectations fostered by the Home Rule party was scarcely conceivable, while

'In the Lion's Den', cartoon by John Fergus O'Hea from the *Weekly Freeman*, 23 July 1887.



the accompanying parliamentary process, mired in detailed discussion of individual clauses and dogged by financial questions, could not but diminish the romance of the 'national struggle'.

The most important British advocate of Home Rule was of course William Gladstone, Prime Minister, 1868-1874,

1880-1885, 1886, and 1892-4. His decision in late 1885 to place a Home Rule Bill before the House of Commons transformed British-Irish political relations. When justifying his decision, he emphasised Irish readiness for self-government, with all that this implied about the right of Britain to make this decision, and made clear his conviction



that the means by which the Act of Union had been brought about were 'unspeakably criminal'.³ This represented an extraordinary concession to Irish nationalism, suggesting the Prime Minister had come to see the British connection as Irish nationalists did.

Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill provoked a split in the Liberal Party and it was defeated in the House of Commons, precipitating a general election which the Conservatives decisively won. When Gladstone returned to office in 1892, elected in part on a Home Rule platform, he could be sure the Bill would pass relatively smoothly through the Commons but could only hope that the Lords would recognise the electoral mandate Home Rule had attracted. When the Lords threw the Bill out, Gladstone went into retirement, Lord Rosebery took over the Liberal leadership and in 1895 the British electorate returned the Conservatives to office. Resolutely anti-Home Rule Conservative governments followed until the Liberals returned to power in 1906.

Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill outlined a system of devolved parliamentary government for Ireland in which two 'orders' would sit together in the same chamber. The first order would be composed of MPs elected under the existing householder franchise (as established by the 1884 Reform Act). The second order comprised the Irish peerage and a number of elected senators, men of property who would be returned through a more restricted £25 franchise. The two orders would sit together, each having the power of

veto and the right to vote separately if so desired. Gladstone hoped this system would have the effect of elevating the Irish peerage in the eyes of the people, reviving respect for the 'natural rulers of Ireland' and diminishing 'the influence of nationalist agitators and ultramontane priests'.⁴

Under Home Rule, Westminster would retain control over policing, military defence, foreign affairs and commerce, this last denying the Irish full control over trade policy and the sensitive question of tariffs. Crucially, there would be no representation of Irish MPs at Westminster, raising the spectre of taxation without representation. The 1893 Bill broadly adhered to the provisions of the first Bill as regards Irish control over domestic matters, but it retained Irish representation at Westminster and proposed an Irish Parliament consisting of two houses. The lower house would consist of the 103 MPs elected on the existing franchise and the upper house would be composed of 48 members elected by voters who owned or occupied land with an annual valuation of £200 or more.

The question of whether Gladstone's commitment to Home Rule was motivated by 'Irish ideas', according to which he had famously declared his intention to govern Ireland on taking office in 1868, was the subject of immediate political controversy and much subsequent historical debate. The Tories, of course, accused Gladstone of opportunism and it is true that his 'conversion' to Home Rule propelled him into office with the votes of Home Rule MPs in late 1885. And there is

little doubt that Gladstone's personal authority helped Liberalism's 'non-conformist conscience', troubled by the Catholicity of Irish nationalism, accept Home Rule.⁵ However, Colin Matthew argued that Gladstone's commitment to Home Rule was part of an evolution in his thinking and did not involve an 'inward struggle' or the 'resolution of contending tensions'.⁶ Recent interpretations add that Gladstone's commitment was a part of the 'deeper rhythms of Liberal politics' with Home Rule considered a democratic and liberal alternative to coercion.⁷ And whether or not Home Rule fulfilled a nationalist agenda or delivered a just extension of local government, Eugenio Biagini contends that an 'elective affinity' rooted in an anti-jingoistic, democratic politics had developed between British liberalism and Irish nationalism in the late 1870s.⁸ For those Liberals who recognised that Ireland was a distinct nation with distinct national rights, Home Rule would see these rights aligned with British interests.

British opponents of Home Rule are easily denounced as anti-Irish and anti-Catholic, men and women who allowed sectarian prejudice, often expressed with a racist inflection, to dictate their politics. Home Rule's Tory opposition also stands accused of defending the Union by encouraging loyalist extremism, seemingly licensing political violence and resistance to the crown authorities. In a notorious public letter, the Conservative MP Lord Randolph Churchill told a Scottish Liberal Unionist that 'Ulster will fight; Ulster will be right'.⁹ Lord Salisbury (Prime Minister 1886-1892, 1895-1902) could be more provoking still. On 10 May 1886, he compared the Irish in racially disparaging terms to Hottentots and Orientals, suggesting that 'self-government ... works admirably well when it is confined to the Teutonic race, but it does not work so well when people of other races are called upon to join in it'.¹⁰ Similarly, Salisbury's major speech opposing Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill emphasised how 38 Home Rule MPs had in the past been identified by judges as associated with organisations which mutilated cattle, withheld rents and even murdered people.¹¹ In the Tory imagination, the Irish Home Rule campaign was a criminal conspiracy and the Irish 'assassins'.

There can be little doubt that many British Unionists shared an affinity for Irish Unionists as a Protestant people under siege, their hard-won liberties apparently threatened by Catholic Ireland. As Salisbury put it, the securities offered by Gladstone's

Cartoon depicting the Irish National League as the 'Irish Vampire', with Parnell's head. *Punch*, 24 October 1885.



bills were no more than 'paper barricades' that would prove ineffectual as Dublin gradually but inevitably assumed full independence. Home Rule would not answer the Irish Question for, again in Salisbury's words, there was 'no middle term between government at Westminster and independent and separate government at Dublin'.¹²

Like many Tories, Salisbury's position was not as crude as his most notorious flights of rhetoric suggest. He consistently believed that Ireland's problems were

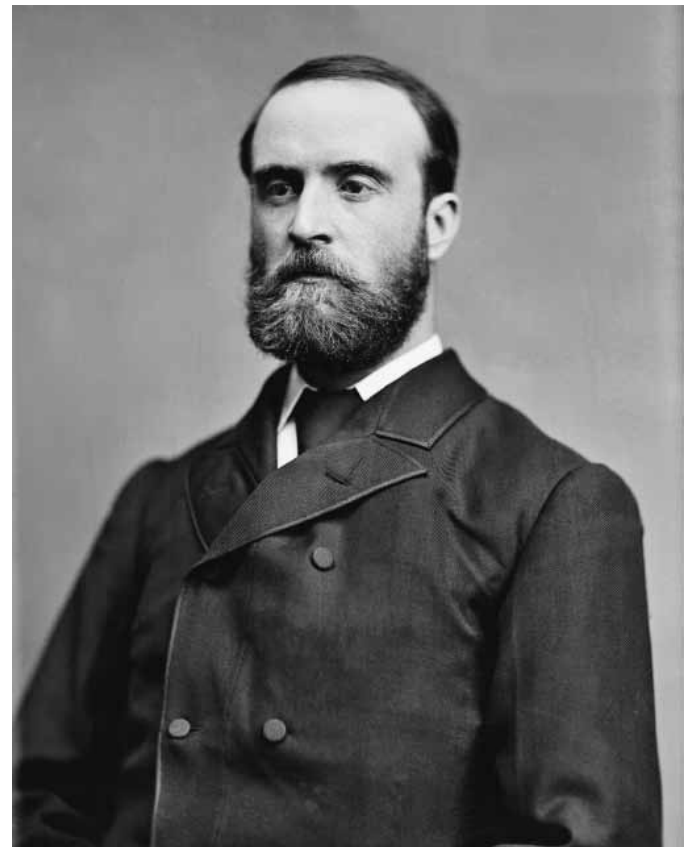
material and he believed Ireland would benefit from a widening of the 'base of property'.¹³ Similar thinking motivated Tory Irish Chief Secretaries such as Arthur Balfour (1887-1891), Gerald Balfour (1895-1900) and George Wyndham (1900-1905). Their 'constructive unionism', sometimes referred to as 'killing home with kindness', sought to improve Ireland's infrastructure and economic capacity. Harbour walls were strengthened and light railways built, and agencies were established to enhance Ireland's economic potential, notably the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction. Most important was the legislation that allowed tenant farmers to buy out their landlords, creating what was then referred to as a 'peasant proprietorship'.

G. K. Peatling argues that Unionist thinking fits into the broader context of late nineteenth-century imperial thinking. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, German unification and the so-called 'scramble for Africa' suggested history would favour large expansionist states that were sufficiently resolute when facing down challenges to their authority. The idea that large states and empires would break up along nationalist lines, so powerfully influential in the 1850s and 60s, had become outmoded.¹⁴ How could Britain hope to retain control of India once it became clear that they could not hold Ireland?¹⁵

Irish Unionists had much in common with British opposition to Home Rule, but the distinctiveness of their politics should not be lost. Irish Unionism was a political form of Loyalism, a Protestant creed forged by the violent religious political conflicts of the seventeenth century. Its adherents professed a personal allegiance to the Crown and the permanency of the Protestant Act of Settlement (1701), and it was sustained by the rituals of loyalist associations like the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys.¹⁶ Unionists, sometimes sincerely, sometimes for political effect, claimed Home Rule the latest nationalist synonym for either separation, repeal or Rome Rule. Some Unionists claimed Irish nationalists were not nationalists at all, but Romanists eager to subject the country to the dictates of the Vatican. They also thought Ulster's dynamic industrial economy was threatened by the prospect of a Dublin government imposing tariffs on Ulster's booming linen and shipbuilding industries. What was more, Home Rule would humiliate Ireland, demoting the country from a partner state of the imperial power to a colony. Thus the Act of Union was imagined to guarantee the fundamental rights and liberties of the Irish Protestant and uphold the dignity of Ireland.

For all their outward unity, Unionists were a very diverse group. There were the members of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and gentry, formed of landowners and often Trinity College or Oxbridge-educated members of the higher professions. There was the Protestant middle class, often the product of Ulster's rapid industrial and commercial development in the nineteenth century, but to be found

Charles Stewart Parnell.
Library of Congress



in smaller numbers throughout the country. And there was the Protestant working class and tenant farmers, both overwhelmingly concentrated in Ulster, but also found in smaller numbers elsewhere in the country.

The concentration of Protestant population in Ulster was of enormous political significance. For just as Home Rule was the nationalist politics of the new democracy, so Unionism supplanted the old Irish loyalism of the elites with a democratic politics of the masses. By the late nineteenth century, loyalism had gone from being based on the shared interests of the landed elite throughout the British Isles to being rooted in an Ulster democracy projecting a specifically Ulster identity.¹⁷ If Ireland's old Protestant elite were to maintain their pre-eminence, they needed to align with the populist Loyalism of the Protestant working class, however prone to an intense and sometimes violent sectarianism. Unionism's success was built on the successful integration of the Protestant classes and its capacity to present a united front was proportional to the relative threat of nationalism at any given moment.

Irish separatist opposition to Home Rule was based on the idea that British government in Ireland was a form of political despotism, whose local agents were an imperial settler class and their 'West Briton' accomplices were to be found among Irish Catholics and state agents like the Royal Irish Constabulary and a corrupt judiciary. Separatists believed that a deliberately nurtured sectarianism served to uphold this power complex by dividing the Irish people against themselves and they insisted that Ireland was not a colony but a nation under imperial rule.¹⁸ Separatists further maintained that Home Rule would confirm Ireland in its servitude, the Irish people accepting a subjugated place in the British Empire.

The political significance of separatism was undermined by the ability of the Home Rulers to blur ideological lines, presenting Home Rule as separatism by



of the Home Rule party and the revolutionaries. Although having few formal members before the First World War, Sinn Féin's capacity to attract attention is a reminder that so-called 'advanced' nationalism was not limited to purist republicans.¹⁹

The Liberal Party returned to power in 1906 but without any particular enthusiasm for Irish Home Rule and it took the greatest constitutional crisis of twentieth-century British politics to revive its old commitment. When Lloyd George's radical budget of 1909 was thrown out by the Lords, the government went to the country in February 1910 to seek a mandate for the budget. Although the Liberals could then form a majority with support from the Home Rule Party, still the Lords refused to bend to the will of the Commons. Determined to win a mandate for the reform of the House of Lords, the

other means. Nonetheless, separatist activity, however marginal, could be found throughout Ireland, particularly in working-class organisations. In the 1880s a renewed separatist presence surfaced through cultural nationalist organizations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Young Ireland Societies, and then in the 1890s through the Gaelic League and the movement to commemorate the centenary of the 1798 United Irish rebellion. Few Home Rule politicians could afford to ignore the way separatist sentiment resonated with the wider population and many platform orators, facing a rowdy outdoor crowd, found a little rebellious speak went a long way.

In the first years of the twentieth century, Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin complicated the picture further. Griffith rejected republican absolutism, arguing that the 1782-83 complex of legislation that created 'Grattan's parliament' had seen Ireland achieve full independence. Consequently, Griffith argued that Ireland did not need to embark on a foolhardy revolution, but should instead withdraw its representatives from parliament, set up an executive and assembly in Dublin, and assume the constitutional rights and liberties illegally confiscated by the British government through the Act of Union. Taking inspiration from the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich* of 1867, Griffith sought to find common ground between the strict constitutionalists

government went again to the country in December. The Home Rule MPs again held the balance of power and Asquith committed his government to a new Home Rule Bill. Threatened with the creation of hundreds of the Liberal peers, the Lords passed the Parliament Bill in August 1911. The removal of the Lords power of veto over Commons legislation transformed the Irish Question, removing what seemed the principle obstruction to a Home Rule Bill. In April 1912 Asquith placed the third Home Rule Bill before the House of Commons.

The near certainty that a Home Rule Bill would pass into law saw the main site of political struggle pass from the Palace of Westminster to the towns and villages of Ireland. The Ulster League and Covenant was signed by 471,414 Ulstermen and women, pledging to resist by force the implementation of Home Rule and soon after the Ulster Volunteer Force presented British and Irish observers with a well-organised force of 85,000 men.²⁰

The Liberal Party recognised that the UVF offered a real threat to law and order in Ireland, which was not helped when the Conservatives stoked up further defiance, arguing that the Liberals were abusing their power by threatening to



use the Parliament Act to push through the Lords a Bill for which they had no distinct mandate. Jeremy Smith argues much of this talk was 'bluff and bluster', saying that Conservative strategy was to prolong the crisis until the Liberals were forced to go to the country, at which point the electorate would reject the Liberals and Home Rule would be sidelined.²¹ However, the growing possibility of separate treatment for Ulster – first raised in an amendment by a little-known backbencher in June 1912 – finally roused nationalist Ireland. When Eoin MacNeill sounded the call in November 1913, many nationalists joined the Irish Volunteers, pledging to uphold the will of parliament in the face of Unionist anarchy.²²



Soldiers of a British cavalry regiment prepare to leave Ireland following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921.

With Ireland divided into two armed camps, European war broke out in August and in September the government passed a Home Rule Act accompanied by a suspending motion, aiming to settle any outstanding difficulties and implement the Act at the end of the European conflict. John Redmond, the Home Rule leader, immediately committed the Irish National Volunteers – now a force some 180,000 strong – to the war effort, pledging their service to ‘wherever the firing line extends’, a confident gesture reflecting the continuing vitality of Home Rule.²³ Only 10,000 separatists seceded from the movement to form the Irish Volunteers and it was a radical republican minority of this minority, with support from James Connolly’s socialist Irish Citizen Army, which occupied Dublin’s General Post Office on Easter Monday 1916 and declared an Irish republic. The rising was suppressed – the leadership faced a British firing squad some weeks later – and the British resorted to military government. Interning without trial of thousands of men dramatically undermined Irish nationalist support for continuing attempts by Home Rule politicians, Unionists and the government to reach an agreement on the implementation of the 1914 Bill.

What happened next can be understood through the extraordinary life of Erskine Childers, Irish Protestant, imperial enthusiast, and author of the hugely successful spy novel *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903). In his *The Framework of Home Rule* (1911), Childers argued that if the Irish were granted ‘responsible government’ they would behave responsibly: their apparent unruliness was a consequence of Britain’s denial of their right to be self-governing. ‘A true Union’, he argued, had ‘not even been attempted.’ Childers thought Irish nationalism was ‘a form of democratic revolt suppressed so long and by such harsh measures as to exhibit features easily open to criticism.’ Nonetheless, Childers firmly believed in the virtues of the British Empire and the prospects of continuing unity between the ‘English-speaking races’. Much of his argument was rooted in his understanding of the forceful means by which Dominion Status was achieved by the Canadians, the Australians, the New Zealanders and, most importantly, the South Africans, many of whom were of Irish descent and now content to be a part of the British Empire. If the British had failed to learn from Ireland how not to treat the colonies, he argued, Britain could now learn from its treatment of the colonies how best to treat Ireland.²⁴

It was not to be. When Sinn Féin won an overwhelming majority of Irish seats at the 1918 general election and established an Irish parliament, the British refused to respond constructively. Following the war of independence (1919–21), the partition of Ireland (1920) and protracted negotiations, Ireland was granted Dominion Status, but Childers’ first-hand experience of the negotiations convinced him that Ireland was too geographically close and Britain too conscious of its power and prestige for the Irish to be allowed to exercise the de facto autonomy enjoyed by the other Dominions. He rejected the settlement, identified strongly with the anti-treatyite republican minority in the new Irish Parliament, and eventually played an active propagandist role in the consequent civil war (1922–23). Childers was executed by an Irish Free State firing squad for the possession of an illegal firearm in November 1922, bringing to an end the most remarkable political trajectory of modern Irish politics. The new Irish Free State, a compromise born of revolution, proved good at counter-revolution.²⁵

Home Rule survived the revolutionary conflagration in the one place where it had been most determinedly resisted. When the six counties of Northern Ireland were carved out of nine counties of Ulster in 1920, it was granted a form of Home Rule. In the event, Home Rule did not deliver Ireland over to Rome but Northern Ireland over to Protestant rule. Only the most myopic observer could deny that by the late twentieth century, sectarianism, a crudely majoritarian polity, and a British government profoundly neglectful of its responsibilities had made Northern Ireland a failed state. Unionists had been right to highlight the weak safeguards Home Rule legislation offered minorities living under its provisions. It would take another burst of intensive British–Irish negotiation in the 1990s to make Home Rule within the Union begin to work.

In the 1880s, Gladstone had argued that Ireland’s legitimate needs could only be met if the UK’s non-Irish majority recognised the historic integrity of the Irish nation and fulfilled its moral obligation to respond positively to its democratically expressed demands. British politicians keen to maintain the Union and alarmed by the seeming momentum of Scottish nationalism would do well to heed the lesson.

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