

The Liberals and Ireland 1912-16

Liberal ministers had to deal with more than the Great War during the period 1914–18. Dr Jeremy Smith examines the Liberal record on the Irish Question during this critical period.

On Friday 9 February 1996 a 500lb bomb exploded in Canary Wharf, ending an eighteen-month IRA ceasefire. Writing three days later the Sinn Fein president, Gerry Adams, declared that the resumption of violence was the 'total responsibility' of the British government who 'had been guilty of criminal neglect' (*The Guardian*, 12 February 1996, p.14). At one level these were simply the words of a politician apportioning blame. Yet they carried a deeper resonance. For by linking physical force Republicanism firmly to British procrastination, Adams was positioning himself inside a long-established tradition of Irish Nationalist legitimisation (the acknowledged corollaries to this legitimisation being that a British government would only take notice of violence, and when it did take notice it was inclined to over-react). Within this paradigm most of the 'great' episodes in Irish dissent can only be understood in terms of an exasperation born of vacillation in Westminster, whether it was the Catholic Emancipatory movements of the 1820s, Fenian activity of the 1860s, the Land Wars of the late 1870s and 1880s, the development of the Irish Volunteer movement or, more recently, the emergence of the IRA. No event demonstrates the force of this Nationalist hypothesis more clearly than the Dublin Rising of 1916.

The Liberal ministry under Asquith, in power when the Rising occurred, has long been regarded as the epitome of such prevarication and apathy, enshrined in Asquith's oft-quoted phrase, 'wait and see'. Indeed, well before the Dublin Rising the Liberal government was thought hesitant and irresolute in its Irish policy – its introduction of the Home Rule Bill in April 1912, for example, being seen as the consequence of dependence upon Irish Nationalist votes in the Commons rather than any ideological commitment. During the Bill's progress, Asquith, and his witty if inattentive Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell, singly failed to confront the build-up of resistance to it or to uphold law and order in Ireland, allowing the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and later the Irish Volunteers to mobilise unchecked and the traffic in arms to escalate. An arms ban was finally introduced in December 1913, several years too late and without the political will behind it to prevent the Larne and Howth gun-running episodes in 1914. Unionist leaders Sir Edward Carson and James Craig, and Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, all escaped prosecution despite their openly seditious speeches, a further show of political weakness that had rarely been extended to Irish Nationalist rhetoricians.

But, more seriously, Asquith fatally delayed his compromise plan to settle the differences between Nationalists and Unionists until the very last moment, early in 1914 – a moment of acute polarisation, with both sides highly organised, apparently well armed and thus ill-disposed to negotiate a settlement. 'As was so often and so tragically the case with British policy in Ireland, on each occasion too little was offered too late.' (P.Jalland, *The Liberals and Ireland*, London, 1980, pp 261–2).

Such prevarication and obtuseness were continued into the war. On the outbreak of hostilities the leader of the Nationalists, John Redmond, offered the Irish Volunteers to the British war

effort and requested a unified Irish Brigade, as had been granted to the Ulstermen; both were repudiated. This pointless effrontery to Redmond was compounded during the Cabinet reshuffle of 1915, when Sir Edward Carson was made Attorney-General. Yet more disastrously, the Home Rule Bill that the Nationalists had won constitutionally for Ireland was suspended for the duration of the war, a postponement that allowed physical force elements in Ireland to gain influence and eventually seize the initiative from the constitutional parties. By failing to provide any obvious recompense for the Nationalist party's loyalty to the British war effort, government prevarication provided a golden opportunity for more extreme Nationalists and Republicans, which they took in 1916. While Ireland unravelled into discord, Asquith appeared powerless and indifferent, watching passively from the cabinet table, and more concerned with writing sweet ditties to his love Venetia Stanley.

Yet to characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is to misunderstand its predicament and strategy. At one level Asquith would have argued that his approach was one of common sense where no viable alternative existed, and on a political question that had become, by 1910, structurally resistant to an easy, or indeed any, compromise, with Nationalists committed to all-Ireland Home Rule and Ulstermen determined to maintain nine, or at the very least six, counties of Ulster within the United Kingdom. Asquith's line was, therefore, one of damage-limitation and non-interference aimed at preventing a far more explosive situation, if not actual civil war – which he successfully achieved between 1912 and 1916 (indeed, before 1919).

To characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is to misunderstand its predicament and strategy

Yet at another level the apparent Liberal indifference had a more positive impulse behind it. Asquith realised early on that some form of temporary partition or special treatment would be needed to bring round the Ulstermen to the granting of Home Rule for the rest of Ireland. The difficulty lay in selling this to both sides. Allowing a sense of looming disaster and emergency to grow would encourage Nationalists into granting some concessions from their Bill, as was achieved by February 1914, whilst scaring Ulster into lowering its expectations; a not unreasonable scheme in light of recent research revealing strains and weaknesses within the UVF and plans for a Ulster provisional government. Thus behind Asquith's 'wait and see' there lurked a subtle attempt to manoeuvre both Irish parties into settlement. Before the success or failure of this approach could be tested, the outbreak of war deflected attention on to European affairs. But failure should not automatically be assumed. Facing the Ulstermen with the reality of implementing their rickety provisional government could well have been just the type of denouement necessary to push Carson and Craig to a settlement. (For insights on this see A. Jackson, 'Unionist Myths', *Past and Present*, 1992.)

Nor can we feasibly claim indifference for the period leading up to the Dublin Rising. Perhaps the most overlooked and undervalued fact is that Home Rule was actually put on the statute book by Asquith in September 1914, against the bitter opposition of Unionists and at some considerable political risk to his own position. The goal of O'Connell, Butt and Parnell had been won; constitutional nationalism had been vindicated. And far from laying the groundwork for the Rising, its suspension was followed by some 150–200,000 Irishmen signing up to fight in France (remember that only 1,500 Volunteers took part in the Rising). This underlines the point that before 1916, and perhaps for some time afterwards in many regions, Redmond and constitutional Nationalism remained in control of Ireland.

The charge of neglect ultimately rests upon the outbreak of the Rising in 1916. Yet in two significant respects such a claim appears groundless. Firstly, because the rising took everyone by complete surprise. Despite vague intelligence snippets, both the military and political arms of British rule in Ireland were unanimous in perceiving no serious threat to civil order. This was reinforced by Sir Roger Casement's earlier arrest off the Kerry coast and failure to land arms for the Volunteers, without which a 'practical' rebellion was impossible, just two days before Eoin MacNeill, president of the Volunteers, called off the movement's Easter manoeuvres. Thus, when Pearse and friends marched into the GPO on Easter Monday they did so to the astonishment not just of the British, but of many leaders of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Sinn Fein, including the likes of MacNeill, Hobson and Griffith. And yet with hindsight it is difficult to imagine how the government might have obviated the very slim possibility of rebellion without slipping into coercive measures that could easily have generated the very thing they sought to destroy. In light of this the eventual scale of the Rising, so small in numerical, geographical and military terms, was surely testament not to Liberal indifference but to the relative success of a passive, non-confrontational Liberal policy.

Secondly, the galvanisation of Irish popular opinion against British rule was less the product of the Rising than of the way in which the British authorities regained control – in particular, the imposition of martial law, evidence of atrocities that gained popular

infamy, such as the Sheehy-Skeffington incident, and the manner of the subsequent executions of the rebel leaders. In other words, what roused Irish opinion towards more extremist Nationalist forces, and Sinn Fein from 1917 onwards, was a shift in policy and approach *away* from Asquith's more low-key and non-interventionist line. Interestingly, many commentators have long speculated that a more liberal reaction to the events of 1916, playing down their importance, resisting executions and restoring normalcy as quickly as possible, would have successfully alienated (if not belittled) the extreme Nationalists and Republicans, undermined what popular sympathy existed for physical force solutions and reinforced the position of the Irish Nationalists and their commitment to the constitutional path.

At fault was not the failure of Liberal policy but its abandonment during the Rising itself

At fault, then, was not the failure of Liberal policy but its abandonment during the Rising itself, when arguably the situation most obviously required just such a liberal approach. In its place policy was handed over to the military authorities under the command of General Maxwell, who believed the restoration of order came by unleashing a robust coercive regime. This was perhaps an inevitable shift in policy given the circumstances. But it also reflected wider political developments: the growing strength of Unionist forces within the Cabinet since their entry in 1915, and the mounting controversy over the issue of conscription. Given this drift, the Rising marked a formal shift to an approach towards which policy had been sliding since 1915. It would finally reach there in June 1916, when Lansdowne and Long obstructed Lloyd George's attempts to introduce Home Rule immediately, thereby arguably frustrating the last hope of a peaceful resolution of the Irish problem, and leading directly to the strife and civil war of 1919–22.

Dr Jeremy Smith is Lecturer in Modern History at University of Wales, Lampeter, having previously taught at London Guildhall, LSE and Exeter. His book The Taming of Democracy: A Study of the Conservative Party 1880–1931 is due for publication in July 1996.

Labour, the Liberal Party and the Great War

The Great War laid many of the foundations for Labour's supplanting of the Liberals in the subsequent decade.

Mark Egan describes the relationship between the two parties during the war.

Looking back at the spectacular collapse of the Liberal Party during the 1920s – from being perhaps the dominant party in Britain's two-party system to its relegation to the margins of that system – it is surprising that the relationship between the Labour and Liberal Parties was relatively calm during the First World War. Some Labour activists opposed Britain's entry into the war; many opposed the government's handling of the conflict. However, after 1915 the Labour movement was for the first time represented in the Cabinet, and the Labour leadership neither opposed Britain's involvement in the war nor employed the internationalist socialist perspective on the conflict and its aftermath which some activists urged upon it. The harmony between the Liberal and Labour

Parties during the Great War was a sign of Labour's youth, and its continuing dependence upon its older, larger progressive partner. Nevertheless, the seeds of Labour's post-war growth were sown during the war, especially after 1917, and that growth stifles the Liberal Party to this day.

Arthur Henderson entered the Cabinet in May 1915 when Asquith formed an all-party coalition to prosecute the First World War; he was later to serve as the representative of labour in Lloyd George's coalition. Although Henderson was the first Labour MP to reach Cabinet level, the appointment was not controversial. The Liberal Party had operated an unofficial electoral pact with the Labour Party since 1903, a pact which ensured that in areas of