

Gladstone and Ireland

Gladstone wrestled with the problems of Ireland for thirty years.

H.C.G. Matthew argues that while Gladstone failed in his objective to integrate Ireland into a United Kingdom his policy still dominates today's constitutional debates.

'My mission is to pacify Ireland', Gladstone famously declared on receiving the Queen's commission to form a government in December 1868. The word 'pacify' was, as always with Gladstone's vocabulary, carefully chosen. Pacification, not liberation (as his remark is often taken to mean) was his consistent objective for the next thirty years.

In Gladstone's younger years, he was a Unionist Conservative; his book, *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1838) defended the established (Anglican) Church of Ireland, which represented about ten per cent of the population. In 1853, when first Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gladstone extended income tax to Ireland (hitherto exempt): a highly Unionist action, in line with the tendency since the Act of Union to try to provide a consistent taxation basis throughout the UK.

Gladstone's views began to change, partly as a result of Ireland changing and partly as a result of Gladstone changing. Gladstone's approach to Irish policy was firmly in line with Peel's Tamworth Manifesto (1834), which among other things told conservatives that where a grievance was reasonably, justly and fully established, Parliament must respond to it with a solution. Gladstone was also much struck by a remark of Lord John Russell in the Commons in the 1830s, that while Scotland was inhabited by Scots, and England by the English, so Ireland was inhabited by the Irish. In respects this was a platitude, but one with significant implications, if by it we mean people who might think differently from the English.

In his first government (1868–74) Gladstone initially behaved in a fairly Unionist way. His disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and his first Land Act were intended to show that a British cabinet could respond to Irish grievances and to show that Irish grievances could

be met by the Westminster parliament: the executive could listen and make policy, the legislature could legislate for Ireland. Thus Ireland could be pacified by reform at Westminster. This approach was to an extent self-undermining, in the sense that if what was done by the Westminster parliament was not enough, then logically the cabinet and the parliament had to go a step further.

Another aspect of Irish policy for Liberal governments was that it was bedevilled by the more general problem of what to do about local government. Remarkably, there was in the UK no representative local government (outside some municipal corporations and ad hoc boards) until 1888. Part of the reason for the slow implementation of a change which had general support was that Liberal cabinets found local government reform conflicting with the recognition of nationality: should they go for the introduction of local government or should they make some recognition of nationality in which a higher level of devolution responded to the demands being made for Ireland by Isaac Butt's Home Rule Association in the 1870s?

In 1880, Gladstone returned to power and found, somewhat to his surprise, that Disraeli's government had allowed the development of the Land League, which had by 1880 become a formidable movement, with quasi-revolutionary overtones, successfully linking the earlier tenant-rights movement with a much wider and more profound agrarian unrest. Gladstone met the League with considerable resolve. He coerced its leaders, imprisoning Parnell. But, on the other hand, he introduced the second Land Act, more dramatic than the first, and an Arrears Act in 1882, which was passed despite the fact that the Phoenix Park murders had occurred only a few weeks earlier. The murders did not deflect Gladstone from his policy of coercion and conciliation.

Gladstone's second government, however, still failed to deal with the question of local



government, partly because of its Irish complications and implications. It also recognised, and Gladstone was foremost in recognising, that there were limits to what a Liberal government could do with coercion. It could not continue incarceration to solve a particular problem, if the upshot was that the demand by the Irish leadership would be one further step; the result of that would in the end be separatism.

Thus Gladstone moved to what turned out to be an attempt at a complete settlement of the Irish question in three stages (it remains unknowable whether Gladstone intended this from the start). The first stage was to include Ireland in the extension of household suffrage to the counties in 1884. The result of this was to enfranchise the Irish labourers and peasantry and to produce eighty-five home rule MPs (i.e. to confirm Home Rule as the aim of the representatives of most of Ireland). The second part of the settlement was the Government of Ireland Bill, establishing a parliament with two Houses in Dublin. The

third part was the third Land Bill, committing a sum perhaps as large as £100 million (the size of the annual budget) to buy out the Anglo-Irish landowners.

Of course, only the first of these measures was enacted. The Liberal Party split and in 1886 home rule was voted down in the Commons. But although it failed, it captured the main part of the Liberal Party and captured

the discourse about constitutional change in the UK to this day. From that time, changes to the constitution have always been discussed in terms of devolution rather than its more rational but less politically appealing alternative of federalism.

In 1893, Gladstone passed the second home rule bill through the Commons with a combination of Liberal and Home Rule support. It was then summarily rejected by the Lords. There was a curious self-contradiction about the Unionist position. On the one hand they argued that the Union was sacrosanct; on the other, that, on basic questions, only English votes counted, a very anti-Unionist view which left the non-English MPs little alternative in the long run but to become Homer Rulers.

The Gladstonian approach had various attractions. It offered a solution to the Irish sufficiently bold to attach the Irish Home Rulers to the Liberal Party and to gain the loyalty of the Irish electorate for home rule until the First World War. In the sense that Home Rule prevented an ear-

lier success for Irish republican separatists, Gladstone's approach was, as he intended, effective in maintaining the Irish within the Union. Home Rule was, explicitly, a political response to a grievance clearly stated and supported by the political representative of the area concerned. Gladstone in introducing the bill in 1886 stated that he would not do anything for Ireland which could not be done for other parts of the UK. But one can readily see that if Home Rule was applied to all parts of the UK, the idea that the Westminster parliament could remain unchanged was unsustainable (especially if, as was the case with the 1886 bill) the area receiving Home Rule lost its MPs at Westminster.

Today, this is the position that we are reaching (though not in the extreme form of a limitation of Westminster MPs to the non-home rule areas). Scotland has a Home Rule parliament; Wales will have an Assembly which may soon grow into one; Northern Ireland will have its Parliament restored if all goes well there. Only England, of the constituent parts of the UK, will be lacking, and the Westminster Parliament will become a part-English parliament, and a quasi-UK overseeing body.

England has always been the chief problem with the Home Rule approach to constitutional development. The advantage of home rule is that it is an autochthonous response to a stated national demand, which offers a means both of meeting and limiting local nationalism in the UK. Its disadvantage is that each grant of it is, in terms of the constitution as a whole, ad hoc. It presupposes that devolution can be accommodated without overtoppling or undermining the Westminster core. Home Rule has the further advantage that to pass it requires no other change in the constitution: it is passed by an Act of Parliament (and can in extreme circumstances be revoked by one) within existing constitutional procedures. No Constitutional Convention is needed to

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His Manner of Speech

From *A Diary of the Unionist Parliament 1895–1900* by Henry W Lucy

Mr Gladstone lived through a gradual, now finally established, change in the course of Parliamentary debate. Whilst he and



Mr Disraeli sat facing each other, it was the custom for the Leaders on either side to speak late in set debate.

One would rise about eleven o'clock, making way for the other between half-past twelve and one in the morning. With the meeting of the House earlier in the afternoon, and the establishment of the twelve o'clock rule, it has come to pass that, with rare ex-

ceptions, all the important speaking is done before dinner.

Mr. Gladstone was equal to either contingency. For his great speeches he carefully prepared, bringing down his notes and turning them over as he proceeded. As he often showed, preparation and attendant notes were superfluities. Some of his most powerful and effective speeches were delivered on the spur of the moment, called forth by an incident or argument of current debate. Even at times when party passion ran riot, the House delighted in his lapses into conversation on some topic brought forward by a private member on a Tuesday or a Friday night. He did not in these circumstances make a speech. He just chatted, and those privileged to meet him in private life know how delightful was his conversation.

Brought up in the Parliamentary school of Canning and Peel, he preserved to the last something of the old-fashioned manner. His courtesy was unailing, his manner dignified, his eloquence pitched on a lofty plane unattainable by men of modern birth. His place in the House of Commons remains empty, and to the furthest horizon there is no promise of its being filled.

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achieve it. But this is a weakness as well as a strength, for it means that changes with major implications are made without those implications being fully or consistently thought through.

The Blair Government's approach has been thoroughly Gladstonian. Problems are identified and picked off one by one. Home rule for Scotland and Wales, a settlement for Ireland, reform of the House of Lords, reform of the executive, reform of local government through the introduction of

powerful mayors, possible reform of the monarchy, reform of the relationship of the citizen to the state in terms of information and privacy, and a variety of other reforms: each of these is desirable in itself, but the aggregated result is to leave us with a shell of a constitution. To continue to work, the constitution will need to refer to an historic version of itself, but one which no longer in fact fully exists.

The upshot of this is, that while the Gladstonian constitutional approach has an honourable history in the Liberal Party and in the British political tradition, it may now be getting in the way of the fuller reconsideration which our constitution surely requires and deserves.

We need a Constitutional Convention to consider all the various elements of constitutional inadequacy and reform which face the United Kingdom, both centrally and with respect to its constituent parts, and to produce proposals for a new constitution.

This paper was delivered originally at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting in the National Liberal Club in July.

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