

Liberal Unionists

The defection of the Liberal Unionists in 1886 was the greatest blow the Liberal Party suffered in the nineteenth century. **Tony Little** explains what happened and suggests that there are still some unanswered questions.

Out from under the umbrella

‘This, if I understand it, is one of those golden moments of our history, one of those opportunities which may come and may go, but which rarely returns.’ Gladstone was at his most persuasive as he wound up the debate on the second reading of the Government of Ireland Bill on the night of 7 June 1886. But his final words, ‘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’¹ betrayed that he knew he faced defeat.

We were heavily beaten on the 2nd Reading, by 341 to 311. A scene of some excitement followed the declaration of the numbers: one or two Irishmen lost their balance. Upon the whole we have more ground to be satisfied with the progress made, than to be disappointed at the failure. But it is a serious mischief. Spoke very long: my poor voice came in a wonderful manner.²

The stoic note in Gladstone’s cryptic diary suggests that even after the scale of the defeat was known the Liberal leadership were underestimating the damage done to the party. The split, which was crystallised in the biggest Commons division to date, was as significant as the break up of the Tories in 1846 over the Corn Laws. Some ninety-three Liberals voted against the whip and others sympathised with the rebels. The great separation kept the Liberals out of power for all but three of the next twenty years and deprived the party of the leadership of both its Radical and Whig wings. It created a new party, the Liberal Unionists, which maintained a parliamentary presence into the twentieth century.

The crisis of 1886 is perhaps the most heavily analysed of all incidents in late nineteenth-century politics but attention has been so much on the implications for the two major parties that the significance of the Liberal Unionists in their own right has

been neglected. And despite the degree of attention, there remain a number of unanswered questions which would repay further study.

There are two main theses explaining the great disruption of the party. One may be described as the ‘conspiracy theory’.³ In this *haut politique* version of events, the ageing Titan, Gladstone, saw off a two-pronged attack on his leadership by Hartington for the Whigs and Chamberlain for the Radicals but was unexpectedly outmanoeuvred by Churchill and Salisbury for the Tories.

The alternative ‘great forces’ explanation argues that the growing democratisation of the political system inevitably drove the aristocratic elements of the Liberal Party into the arms of the Tories to protect their landed interests.⁴ Meanwhile, the remnants of the Liberal Party, obsessed with Ireland, took an inordinately long time to discover the need to appeal to the wider electorate through New Liberalism, creating the frustrations which inevitably led to the formation of the Labour Party. In this theory the defection of Chamberlain was a lucky bonus for the opposition.

A third explanation, which is gaining ground, focuses on the unfortunate collision of views over Ireland without which the party would have had time to develop new leaders and policies to succeed Gladstone. But if Ireland was an accident was it just waiting to happen?⁵

Each of these summaries is of course a caricature of the views held on a complex issue but are offered as route-maps through the complex pot-pourri of principles, personalities and power plays which follows.

Gladstone’s umbrella

After several fruitless attempts, the modern Liberal Party was formed in 1859 out of a coalition of

Whigs, Radicals and Peelites with ancillary support from Irish members. Although the majority of the party, even then, described themselves simply as Liberals,⁶ the terms Whig and Radical continued to be used and can be a source of confusion in the struggles of the 1880s. 'Whig' was used not only for the small coterie of aristocratic families of the 'Cousinhood' but more widely for those with links to the gentry and land rather than industry, and often indiscriminately for any Liberal of moderate views. Similarly, 'Radical' covered not only those of firm utilitarian views but also those who argued vigorously for one or more of the single-issue reform campaigns.

Despite the diversity of its parliamentary membership, the Liberals formed the government between 1859–66, 1868–74 and 1880–85. Disraeli's 1874–80 government was seen as a temporary disturbance allowing the Liberal Party to recuperate from Gladstone's great reforms.

Following Palmerston's death in 1865, Gladstone had become the dominant personality in the party, and in spite of a crisis over the 1866 reform bill, its inevitable leader. His reforming government of 1868–74 came to grief over internal disputes on education policy and Ireland. Gladstone's disgust and, at sixty-five, a longing to spend a retirement in settling accounts with God led him to resign the leadership of the party in 1875. He was succeeded

jointly by Lord Hartington in the Commons and Lord Granville in the Lords. However, and perhaps inevitably, Gladstone could not keep out of politics. The Bulgarian atrocities of 1876 gave him the excuse he needed.⁷ His return disrupted Hartington's leadership but Gladstone's loathing for Disraeli's (now Lord Beaconsfield's) foreign policy, expressed through the great Midlothian speechmaking campaign of 1879–80, made a second premiership unavoidable. It also sowed the seeds of the 1886 secession.

Shannon is highly critical of Gladstone's leadership in 1880–1885 but argues a convincing case.⁸ Gladstone performed best leading from the front in a positive campaign imbued with moral conviction. His victory in 1880 was achieved on the negative theme of undoing the evils of Beaconsfieldism. Consequently, he failed to give the cabinet a strong lead but despite continuously threatening, failed to retire. The failure to lead was exasperated by Irish obstruction in the Commons and by a divided government reaction to various foreign, especially colonial, events which forced themselves haphazardly onto the agenda. Into the vacuum created stepped special-interest groups with a variety of nostrums for reform. In the cabinet, Joseph Chamberlain and Charles Dilke were the spokesmen for action. The radicalism of Chamberlain and Dilke was resisted by Hartington, who came to be seen as obstructive to

domestic reform in a manner which had not been necessary under his own leadership of the party. The continuous feuding within the cabinet required the continuation of Gladstone's leadership — only he was able to enjoy the confidence of both sides and he provided the oratorical skills to give cohesion to the diversity of views within the wider party, the umbrella under which they all sheltered.⁹

While all concerned recognised the desirability of sheltering under the umbrella, the tensions of working together and the jockeying for the succession created the initial ingredients for the crisis. The marked differences in the personality of Gladstone, Hartington and Chamberlain¹⁰ are seen as a further but frequently exaggerated complication.

Inevitably for senior Victorian politicians, all were rich. Gladstone inherited wealth from his merchant father but had to make it work to help rescue his wife's family from financial embarrassment. He had an establishment education and an early entry into politics. He was extremely energetic both physically and mentally and driven by an evangelical need to justify himself to his Maker. His movement from the Tory to the Liberal Party did not undermine his desire to see the aristocracy play its full part in the leadership of the nation. A high church Anglican, he derived considerable support from the nonconformist masses. An efficient administrator and persuasive orator, it was spitefully thought that he was always able to convince himself that his self-interest was also the interest of the nation.

Chamberlain and Hartington were of a younger generation, both in their early fifties in 1886. Lord Hartington was heir to the Duke of Devonshire, one of the largest landowners in the country. Known for his keen interest in horse racing,¹¹ he enjoyed a full social life, mixing with the Marlborough House set surrounding the Prince of Wales. He conveyed the impression that his involvement in politics was purely *noblesse oblige*, for which he had to endure endless ennui. However, Reginald Brett, his former secretary, later Lord Esher, made it clear that 'apart from politics he has no *real* interest in life; and cut off from them

Gladstone addresses the cabinet in 1883, a rather fanciful artist's impression. Chamberlain is recognisable by his monocle, near the pillar. Hartington is second from the right with Harcourt to his right.



he would be in reality as bored as he appears to be by them'.¹² Very straightforward, with a 'pulverising style of argument',¹³ he led by virtue of his position rather than through organisation, oratory or policy development.

Joseph Chamberlain could not have been a greater contrast. His fortune was made in manufacturing in Birmingham. His political fortune grew from his dynamic mayoralty of the city. He entered national politics through the organisation of nonconformist protests over the 1870 Forster Education Act. His strength was in the efficient electoral organisation of Birmingham, which he was attempting to expand into a national grassroots radical campaigning body through the National Liberal Federation (NLF). At that time the NLF was very far from national and was perceived more as a caucus forcing radical policies on to resistant moderates. While his sharp tongue and publicity-seeking gained him enemies, he was a prickly character, easily offended. Unlike Hartington, Chamberlain was a complex man prone to manoeuvre and to see plots in the actions of others. Ambitious, he sought leadership for what he could accomplish and to wean the party away from Whiggish leanings. But it is important to recognise that his differences with Hartington were purely political and that imperialism was a common bond.¹⁴

The gage of battle

Two other key ingredients must be considered — the 1885 election and Ireland. The 1884 Reform Act, which widened the franchise in county constituencies, was the major Liberal achievement of 1880–1885 but it was passed only after a confrontation with the House of Lords. Speaking to the Annual Conference of the National Union of Conservative Associations in 1883, Randolph Churchill, a rising star of his party, declared 'Parliamentary reform is the gage of battle, and the Party which carries it will have power for a quarter of a century'.¹⁵ His opponents shared Churchill's view and were prepared to allow the Tories a significant part in the redistribution of seats, in order to win a more democratic electorate.

There were four important consequences:



Originally captioned 'Brains, Birth and Brummagen', this caricature shows Gladstone, Hartington and Chamberlain on the government front bench before the great divide.

- The wider electorate opened up to Chamberlain and his allies the prospect of a radical Liberal Party free of the drag of Whig/aristocratic influences.
- There was stiff competition to woo the new county electorate with radical policies — particularly the provision of municipal allotments (popularised as 'Three Acres and a Cow'). As a corollary, Whig fears and disenchantments intensified, with some of the younger Whigs acting as a ginger group to offset the better organised radicals.
- The focus on the new electorate seems to have diverted Liberal attention from the consequences of redistribution on the boroughs and cities. The creation of single-member seats and the elimination of small boroughs worked against the Liberals, creating havens of 'villa Tories' in the suburbs.
- Most significantly, it was in no party's tactical interest to exclude Ireland from the reform or to reduce the number of Irish MPs in proportion to the population. It was also recognised that this would be to the benefit of the Home Rule party at Liberal expense.¹⁶

Following a reform act and the redistribution, it was the convention that a general election would be held soon after the preparation of new registers. But before this happened, the second

Gladstone government had lost the will to live. The government had nearly fallen under the public uproar that followed General Gordon's death at Khartoum in February 1885. Polite but exhausting argument continued over a range of issues in the cabinet and the government took the opportunity of a budget defeat in June 1885 to give up its seals. Quite why remains a mystery. The Liberal leadership had been warned of the likelihood of defeat. Why did they not tighten whipping? Why did Irish Liberals support the rebels and risk hastening an election which would lead to their defeat? Why did the government push the Home Rule Irish MPs into the hands of the Tories?

Lord Salisbury formed a minority Conservative administration with their support and an election was called for November 1885 but not before the already convoluted Irish problem had been given another twist.

'Ireland, Ireland! that cloud in the west, that coming storm'¹⁷

Since 1800, Ireland had been a part but always an uncomfortable part of the United Kingdom. Its MPs always formed a distinct group but for most of the period allied to the other British political parties. Following a brief Fenian uprising in 1867, Isaac Butt renewed efforts to create a constitutional party to win greater autonomy for Ire-

land. Under his reasoned leadership, some modest electoral success was achieved. In 1874, some fifty-nine Irish MPs were willing to describe themselves as Home Rulers but of these probably thirty could be more appropriately described as Liberals, eighteen previously sat as Liberals.¹⁸ Indeed, McCalmont's Poll Book, while happily listing the appropriate MPs as Home Rulers in the constituency results, does not distinguish these Irishmen from Liberals and Conservatives in the summary tables even as late as 1880.¹⁹

Charles Stuart Parnell, a Protestant landlord, succeeded Butt but took time to consolidate his hold on the party. Even before Butt's death in 1879, Parnell had not played by the rules. In Parliament, he ignored the conventions of debate, aiming to obstruct the progress of any but sympathetic Irish business. Outside parliament he developed a complex relationship with those who preferred direct action and violence,²⁰ not condoning the violence but building on the grievances of both the poor agricultural labourers and the tenant farmers. These tactics were critical in consolidating support for the Home Rule party among previous Liberal voters and in the wider electorate created by the 1884 Reform Act. Hostility to the Irish tactics was crucial in the divide in the Liberal Party in 1886.

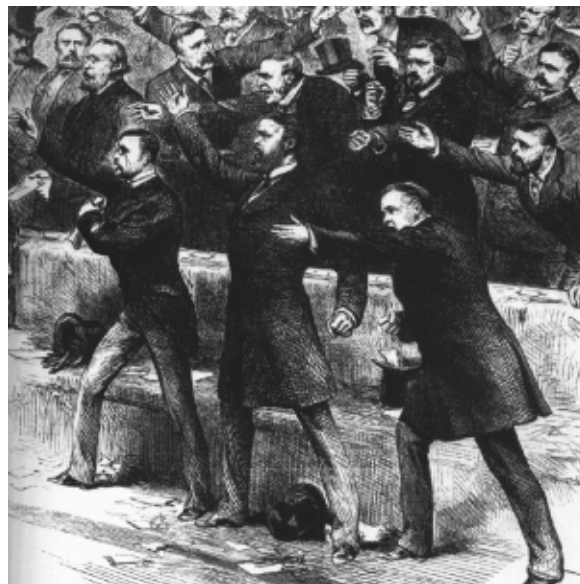
The Liberal Government of 1880–85 was unprepared for Irish difficulties and perplexed by the task. John Morley, who later held office as Irish Secretary, spoke of Lord Frederick Cavendish, Hartington's brother, spending the afternoon before his assassination in 'that grim apartment in Dublin Castle, where successive secretaries spend unshining hours in saying No to impossible demands, and hunting for plausible answers to insoluble riddles.'²¹ G. O. Trevelyan, who succeeded Cavendish, wrote: 'No-one could understand what it is to be the representative of the central government in the face of the false and unscrupulous men

who are forever seeking to discredit English rule in Ireland by the personal ruin of the Minister who represents it in the House.'²²

Gladstone's policy on Ireland has been categorised by H. C. G. Matthew as 'coercion and conciliation', heading off Irish agrarian violence by firm action but seeking to meet Irish grievances with the objective of reconciling the Irish to their link with England.²³ However, as harshly but not inaccurately characterised by Salisbury, 'every successive instalment of concession was wrung from them by agitation on the other side, so that even the grace and value of their vicarious generosity, whatever it may be, is absolutely lost'.²⁴ In particular, Gladstone, who retained a touching faith in the paternalistic leadership role of the aristocracy, never succeeded in breaking the link between the nationalist and agrarian grievances.

The dissatisfaction with Irish policy was a significant source of discontent within the cabinet. Hartington, whose family were important Irish landowners, and whose brother died at the hands of Irish terrorists, favoured the smack of firm government. Forster resigned from the government rather than see it brokering deals with Parnell.

Chamberlain, unwilling to see coercion as a lasting policy, opened his own channels to Parnell to develop schemes for local government. Unfortunately his intermediary, Captain O'Shea, the husband of Parnell's mistress Kitty, proved to be a source of misinformation, leading Chamberlain to believe that he had been double-crossed by Parnell. Writing to Gladstone in October 1885, he complained: 'I cannot see my way at all about Ireland. Parnell has shown that he is not to be depended



Home Rule MPs obstructing the House of Commons during a coercion bill.

upon. He will not stick to any minimum even if he could now be induced to formulate another.'²⁵ Chamberlain's mistrust was shared by his fellow Birmingham MP, John Bright, a radical of an earlier generation. Of a conversation with Gladstone early in 1886 he records 'I thought he placed too much confidence in the leaders of the Rebel Party. I could place none in them, and the general feeling was and is that any terms made with them would not be kept, and that, thro' them, I could not hope for reconciliation with discontented and disloyal Ireland.'²⁶

Lord Salisbury's short minority administration added one more incendiary ingredient to the mix. Lord Carnarvon, Salisbury's Viceroy for Ireland, had a secret meeting with Parnell in which he created an impression of empathy with Home Rule. (This was unauthorised and was later repudiated by Salisbury when it became public.) Parnell urged Irish electors on the mainland not to support the Liberals in the general election and raised the ante in negotiations Mrs O'Shea undertook with Gladstone on his behalf.

'Keep your ranks still, firm and steady'²⁷

The 1885 election confounded Lord Randolph's prophecy and the expectations of the other party leaders for a large Liberal majority. On the back of 'Three Acres and a Cow', the Liberals did well among the new county elec-

Successive secretaries spend unshining hours in saying No to impossible demands, and hunting for plausible answers to insoluble riddles.

torate, though the new members were as likely to be Whigs as radicals. The Tories gained in the cities from the creation of single-member seats and from Parnell's boycott of English Liberals. By some contemporary estimates 25–40 seats were lost to the Liberals by Irish intervention and, while modern computations suggest a figure as low as six, Parnell had further alienated the party most likely to be sympathetic to his aspirations.²⁸

As foreseen by Gladstone, the biggest gainers were the Irish Nationalists increasing representation from sixty-five ahead of the election to eighty-six, a clear majority of the 103 Irish seats and a majority even within Ulster. Conservatives held eighteen Irish seats in 1885 compared to twenty-six in 1880. The Liberals were eliminated.

T. A. Jenkins argues that Chamberlain was the biggest loser.²⁹ His push to create a Radical party independent of the Whigs had failed. Jenkins also makes a good case of continued commitment by the aristocratic Whigs to Liberalism during the 1885 campaign.³⁰

Far from winning an overwhelming majority, the Liberals had slipped back. Parliament was hung. Table One summarises the results for the 1880 and 1885 elections. However, the bare numbers are slightly misleading. The Liberal majority for 1880–85 was generally better than indicated. Firstly, party allegiance was sometimes secondary to local factors and secondly the Home Rulers of 1880 were not a homogenous group and some had a stronger allegiance to the government than to Parnell — only twenty-three voted for Parnell's leadership of the party, with eighteen against.

The arithmetic suggests that a Conservative government would not be able to maintain itself in office for any length of time and certainly under modern party disciplines it would have quickly failed. However for Gladstone, who could never rely on the discipline of his own side and whose political maturity had been gained during the confused party politics of the Crimean War, bringing down the Tories would not have been the prime consideration. The Home Rulers of 1885 were a better disci-

Table 1: Election Results 1880–1885³¹

	Liberal	Conservative	Home Rule	Majority
1880	359	238	63	58
By-elections	-19	17	2	
1885	335	249	86	0

plined group than in 1880. Parnell waited to be wooed.

For each of the major Liberal leaders, leaving the Conservatives in and vulnerable to Liberal votes on important measures looked the most attractive option. But beyond a shared interest in not renewing their own quarrels their motivations were very different. Hartington was comfortable with Tory policies and would have been happy to back tough Irish coercion proposals. His greatest anxiety following the election was to obtain a face-to-face meeting of the Liberal leadership to secure a coordinated approach.³² Chamberlain thought the Irish would be more amenable to Liberal proposals when they had had a sustained taste of Tory rule.³³ Gladstone, already secretly convinced of the necessity for Home Rule and believing that the Tories were willing to concede, thought that Tory-led proposals supported on an all-party basis would be the best solution.

Since the Irish Home Rulers had been siding with the Conservatives and no party had an independent majority in the Commons, Lord Salisbury determined to meet the new House in government. But he too was content to bide his time and, unlike Disraeli in similar circumstances, Salisbury neither sought to outflank Gladstone in bidding for Irish support nor rushed to entice the moderate Liberals.

Who knows what would have happened if Liberal nerves had held but, in the critical period between the election results in November 1885 and the meeting of the House in January 1886, the course of history was transformed by some ill-omened spin doctoring. In December, Gladstone's son Herbert, apparently concerned by fears of Chamberlain's rivalry to his father, briefed the press on his father's conversion to Home Rule.³⁴

The Liberal leadership sheltering under the Gladstonian umbrella. Chamberlain is forging ahead with the Unauthorised Programme. Hartington, holding Gladstone's hand, is dragging his heels while John Bright brings up the rear.





CALLING THEM HOME.

Chamberlain and Hartington resisting the summons of Gladstone at the end of the 1885 election campaign.

'Men like these will lead, not school us'

Despite its crucial importance, Ireland had not played a dominant part in the election where on the Conservative side a low-key approach best preserved freedom of action and, among Liberals, the greatest debate had been between advocates and opponents of Chamberlain's Unauthorised Programme. Indeed, Gladstone's Irish policy has been described as 'a night cavalry ride around the flank of his own army'.³⁵ In defence, Shannon has highlighted Mr G's attempts to prepare his colleagues, and in particular Hartington, for what Gladstone saw as inevitable.³⁶ His oblique style left Hartington perplexed and the party in consternation when Herbert launched his 'kite'. The kite also doomed Gladstone's efforts (always likely to be futile) to persuade Salisbury, through his nephew Arthur Balfour, to adopt Home Rule.

Extraordinarily, even in January 1886, Gladstone tried to maintain the fiction of 'freedom of action' and as 'an old Parliamentary hand' intended 'to

keep my counsel'.³⁷ Hoping to exploit the Liberal divisions, the Conservatives lost the support of the Irish during the debate on the Queen's speech, by taking up coercion. In part, they were outmanoeuvred. The Liberals defeated them not on Ireland but on a 'Three Acres and a Cow' amendment put down by Chamberlain's lieutenant Jesse Collings. Gladstone formed his third government proposing 'to examine whether it is or not practicable' to introduce a 'Legislative body, to sit in Dublin'.³⁸ On this basis he was able to entice Chamberlain

into office and bought time to further his party's education.

But not all were taken in. The Whig rebellion had begun. Eighteen Liberals voted against Collings' motion and a further forty-nine abstained or were absent without a pair. Two Independent Liberals also abstained. This was a substantial proportion of the margin of Liberals over the Conservatives. Sixteen of the eighteen who voted against, and both the Independent Liberals, subsequently also voted against Home Rule and stood as Liberal Unionists. This group was predominantly from the moderate end of the party. Twenty-four of the abstainers and two who were paired were also Home Rule rebels. Of the previous Liberal cabinet, not only Hartington but Lord Selborne, Lord Derby, Lord Northbrook (from among the moderates) and Bright (from the radical wing) declined to serve.

Pledged to oppose Home Rule himself, Hartington at least was initially willing to stand on the sidelines while the government tried its experiment. A success for Gladstone would open the way for his retirement and a reversion

of the leadership to Hartington. Failure would give Hartington the chance to initiate or support a policy more to his own liking.

By March the 'enquiry' had turned into proposals for draft legislation on Home Rule and a land purchase scheme. Gladstone's penchant for bold leadership had reasserted itself. At this point Chamberlain and Trevelyan resigned from the cabinet and the road to the split was open. Gladstone had hoped that a 'slow fermentation in many minds, working towards the final product'³⁹ would convince his colleagues of his policy and it can be argued that for the bulk of the party it worked. There was little enthusiasm for Home Rule⁴⁰ but, for most, a grudging acceptance of Gladstone's proposals and a willingness to trust the old leader were sufficient.

For Chamberlain it was inadequate. His presence in the government had maintained his status in the party and he had hoped either to convince the government to return to his scheme of extensive but purely local government for Ireland or to promote land purchase as an alternative, not a supplement, to Home Rule. In this he had failed.

'In their ranks, spread wild distraction'

The revelation of Gladstone's plans opened a vigorous debate. On 8 April the first reading debate of the Home Rule bill began and, unusually by modern standards, was spread over four days. Within the Liberal Party, the opponents of Home Rule began conspicuously to organise their resistance. Nevertheless, the period up to the second reading in the middle of May (deliberately?) provided the opportunity for negotiations and compromise as the scale of the potential rebellion became known.

From the beginning, Hartington set his heart against the bill, speaking in the first reading debate on 9 April. On 14 April, he shared a platform with Salisbury at the Opera House, Haymarket, with Peter Rylands to represent the radicals. The meeting was chaired by Lord Cowper, a former Liberal Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and attended by three other Liberal peers and fourteen

dissenting Liberal MPs in addition to a selection of Tory luminaries. Three other Liberal peers and three MPs sent apologies.⁴¹ Hartington's boats were burnt but joint meetings were too great a novelty for grassroots Liberals and there was no repeat. A meeting of dissident Liberal peers was held in Lord Derby's house on 15 April attended by 48, with letters of support from a further 16. There was a steady stream of Whig resignations from Household appointments.

On 22 April the Liberal Unionists proved they meant business by establishing that sine qua non of British politics a 'Committee'. In addition, an office was set up, at 35 Spring Gardens, to form, as George Goschen put it to Lord Wolmer, 'a centre whence information can be given, and whither news can be carried.' Hartington entrusted the organisation to three young Whig MPs, H. R. Brand (the son of the Speaker), Craig Sellar and Albert Grey.⁴²

The radical wing of the unionists, hesitated as to an appropriate strategy. The seizure of control of the National Liberal Federation by Gladstonian activists on 5 May must have acted as warning of the strength of grass roots opinion. Labouchere, a loyalist radical MP, an inveterate gossip and deal broker, appointed himself intermediary between Chamberlain and the government. Chamberlain cleverly focused the debate on retaining Irish members at Westminster, an ancestor of the West Lothian question. Cleverly, because the presence of the Irish MPs at Westminster was the key symbol of Imperial unity and more cynically, getting rid of the Irish members and their obstructive tactics was possibly the most attractive feature of the whole bill to uncommitted Liberals. A concession to Chamberlain would probably have alienated as many as it reconciled. Nevertheless, at one time, it was believed that Gladstone would make sufficient concessions to prevent Chamberlain's group slipping into opposition. Gladstone opened the second reading debate on 10 May. It is generally agreed that this speech did not match the standards either of his first reading contribution or the June winding-up speech but more impor-

tantly, the moment came and went without the concessions Chamberlain had expected. Why?

Gladstone remained optimistic throughout the process. In mid-April he was described by Hamilton as 'full of confidence and determination', arguing that 'if the bill is carried by a small majority (say twenty), he will consider it a defeat.'⁴³ Did this optimism influence Gladstone's judgement? It is more likely, he recognised that concessions to Chamberlain would be 'treated as an acknowledgement of his superior greatness & wisdom, & as fresh point of departure accordingly'.⁴⁴ Most probable of all, as Herbert reported to Labouchere, it was 'because father had not sufficiently mastered the difficulties which presented themselves to his mind.'⁴⁵ Where Gladstone did not want to make progress, none doubted his ability to find difficulties in the detail.

For Chamberlain this was the final straw. 'The attempt at a compromise having come to an end under circumstances which almost amounted to a breach of faith',⁴⁶ he set about consolidating the opposition among his own supporters. On 12 May a meeting was held at 40 Prince's Gardens, Chamberlain's South Kensington home, attended by fifty to sixty MPs, plus ten letters of sympathy, out of sixty to seventy invited.

Two days later Lord Hartington arranged a meeting at Devonshire House

with sixty-four MPs present and nine letters of regret. This demonstrated the growing collusion between the two unionist wings as Chamberlain attended with eighteen of those from his own meeting and spoke. The extensive and prestigiously Whig, Liberal Unionist Committee was unveiled on 23 May, featuring twenty-five peers, including five dukes, and twenty-eight MPs.

The proceedings and attendees at these caucus meetings were openly reported in the newspapers and the government can have had no illusions as to

'Never, never, never'.

the scale of opposition to the bill. Following the meeting at Devonshire House, *The Times* thoughtfully provided a list not only of those attending the 'private' meeting but also further lists of those declared and probable opponents of the government's bills. According to this report there were 122 likely opponents, 180 supporters and thirty Liberals undeclared.⁴⁷

Gladstone was never an enthusiast for party meetings and it is a measure of the government's desperation that he was persuaded to address a meeting at the Foreign Office on 27 May. The invitation was extended to those 'in favour of the establishment of a legislative body in Dublin for the management of affairs specifically and exclusively Irish'⁴⁸ — discouraging to hard-line opponents but flexible to waverers. 260 responded. The conciliatory tone, effectively killing land reform while keeping

Chamberlain gains the backing of his local, Birmingham, party to butcher Gladstone's Irish bills.



the door open to Irish representation at Westminster, and the offer to recast the bill after a second reading vote of principle won over some of the doubters.⁴⁹ Two days later, in a moment of Thatcherite vehemence, the game was lost. Baited across the chamber by Michael Hicks Beach and Lord R a n d o l p h

'All the world over I will back the masses against the classes.'

Churchill that in order to stay in office the government would 'reconstruct' the Home Rule bill, Gladstone responded: 'Never, never, never'.⁵⁰

Chamberlain called another meeting of his supporters on 31 May in Committee Room 15 of the House where he put the choice of walking out or voting against. He then read a letter from John Bright, announcing the old radical leader's decision to vote against, though apparently advocating others to abstain and ward off dissolution. Bright's action spoke louder than his words. Only three of the fifty-five present were willing to support the bill, thirteen voted for abstention and thirty-nine to oppose. No further talks or pleas prevailed.⁵¹

'Every man in combat straining'

The cabinet met the day after the defeat and resolved to ask the Queen to dissolve parliament. An election was called for July. This decision was reached quickly and with little dissent within the government. Historians have passed by equally speedily. Yet it should be considered the most damaging development to Liberal unity in the whole dispute. Each of the previous Liberal governments, in 1866, 1874 and 1885, had been ended by internal rebellion but in each case time was bought for the hard feelings to soften, for new rallying calls to be found. On these earlier occasions Liberals were not called to fight Liberals.

Characteristically, Gladstone's case in cabinet was based on precedent and constitutional propriety but it is equally clear that it had a strong political base. What were his alternatives?

- Staying in office after such a major

defeat, simply abandoning the policy, could not be reconciled with any Victorian sense of honour.

- Retirement to allow the reformation of a Liberal government under Hartington would have appealed to the dissidents. Before the event, it was the outcome they imagined. But it was not in keeping with the fighting character displayed by Gladstone throughout his career.

- Resignation would have bought time. The Tories, even if backed by the dissidents, would need time to establish a minority government and formulate a policy before calling an election. If the Conservatives could not form a government, Gladstone would have bought time and demonstrated that there was no alternative.

- An immediate dissolution would test the public popularity of Home Rule and optimistically drive the dissidents into the wilderness.

Clear evidence exists that the alternatives were canvassed. On 24 April, Hamilton records a conversation with Lord R o s e b e r y , Gladstone's eventual successor, 'He would much prefer Mr G's resigning. A dissolution would split the Liberal Party into *smither-eens*.' On 19 May, Gladstone met with the Chief Whip, Arnold Morley, and Francis Schnadhorst, the chief agent and 'arch-wirepuller'. Schnadhorst was asked directly: 'dissolution or no dis-

solution?' He had no doubt that an immediate appeal, attended as it might be with risks, was preferable to any appearance of "showing the white-feather" ... The Tories might gain more seats than they would lose ... but Mr G would come back at any rate with a more united party of his own.'⁵² This argument gelled well with Gladstone's own thoughts as expressed in a letter to Sir Joseph Pease a few days earlier: '... the body of the nation, so far as we can judge, has hailed our imperfect efforts with enthusiasm.'⁵³ Hamilton, a senior civil servant, himself put the case against dissolution and for delay, as late as 2 June, without success. Gladstone was, as Churchill declaimed a few weeks later, 'an old man in a hurry'.

The contemporary Gladstonian view of the election is summarised by Morley. 'No election was ever fought more keenly, and never did so many powerful men fling themselves with livelier activity into a great struggle ... Mr Gladstone's plume waved in every part of the field ... The incomparable

One of the key factors behind the break up of the party in 1886 was Gladstone's reluctance to retire.



"RETIRE!—WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

Table 2: Election Results 1886⁵⁸

	Conservative	Liberal Unionist	Gladstonian Liberal	Home Rule
At the dissolution July 1886	251 317	101 77	232 191	86 85
Gains/Losses	66	-24	-41	-1

effort was in vain. The sons of Zeruah were too hard for him, and England was unconvinced.⁵⁴ Although unopposed, Gladstone carried out the by now traditional oratorical assault on Mid-Lothian. But he extended his speechmaking to Glasgow, Manchester and Liverpool (where he declared ‘all the world over I will back the masses against the classes’, earning the Queen’s rebuke). He stood for Leith as well as Mid-Lothian to drive out W. Jacks, a dissident who had recanted but turned coat a third time.⁵⁵ However, this frantic activity by a seventy-six year-old leader and his opponents was not matched by the same dedication in the constituencies, 219 out of the 670 were uncontested compared to thirty-nine in 1885.⁵⁶

Preparations on the other side had begun early. In March, Salisbury and Hartington had opened talks, with parallel discussions between Chamberlain and Churchill, and by early April had agreed an electoral pact. Tories would not stand against incumbent Liberal Unionists in exchange for encouragement for Liberal Unionist supporters to vote Conservative elsewhere. With considerable effort by the Tory whips against the natural inclination of local Conservative associations, the deal held. Only three Liberal Unionists faced a Tory opponent, including Salisbury’s son-in-law Lord Wolmer, though as many as eight others stood down in the face of Conservative hostility.⁵⁷ A Radical Unionist Association was formed on 17 June.

In the outcome, parliament was again hung, and while the consolation for Liberals was that even in these most adverse circumstances the Conservatives could not quite win a majority, the balance of power had shifted. The overall results of the election are shown in Table Two.

The popular vote was 1,344,000 for the Gladstonian Liberals, 397,000 for

the dissidents and 1,041,000 for the Conservatives but since the 219 uncontested seats meant that there were 1,700,000 fewer votes than in 1885 it was not a true test of electoral feeling. The uncontested seats favoured the Conservatives over Liberals by about 2:1 though only one seat, Lincolnshire–East Lindsey, changed hands by this method. The Liberal Unionists faced no contest in twenty-nine seats but it was the Irish Nationalists who faced the fewest contests.

Gladstone resigned rather than meet the new House. His ambition for one last great achievement had brought failure, a noble failure, for which Ireland continues to pay. He had also failed to obliterate the dissidents. In the Commons the loss was largely numerical. The social background of MPs was not substantially changed.⁵⁹ They continued to represent every type of constituency though there had been a retreat from the high water mark in the counties and Liberals would become more reliant on the Welsh and Scots who also harboured hopes of devolution. The desertion of the Whig Lords was important. The residual Liberals could only muster forty-one for the vote in the Lords on the second Home Rule bill. The loss of the peers was also felt in the wealth of the party both centrally and locally. Worse, the election had given the Liberal Party a clear leadership and purpose and had left it tantalisingly close to its ambition. The illusion

that ‘one more heave’ would resolve the Irish conundrum was not shattered until Gladstone’s retirement nearly ten years later.

‘And the fight be won’

The Liberal Unionists had won. They had preserved British imperial unity. But the consequence was not what they expected. Gladstone neither retired nor did the loyalist Liberals abandon his policy. Despite the narrow base of their disagreement with the majority of the party, the Unionists had been forced to establish a new electoral organisation at short notice. The dissidents had fought and survived the general election, even holding the balance of power in the Commons. This guaranteed their continued importance at Westminster.

In part their electoral survival reflected the loyalty of constituents to established members and in part the electoral pact with the Conservatives. But there are reasons to suggest they had prospects of long-term survival. Geographically, Unionists were strong in Devon, Cornwall, parts of Scotland (especially around Glasgow) and East Lancashire — areas where a more militantly Protestant tradition continued to have an influence. Chamberlain’s organisational skills ensured a solid block of loyal unionist voters in the West Midlands. But as with so many defecting groups of MPs, they lacked both the organisational and ideological strength to hope to form a majority party.

With the editor’s permission, the tale of this dilemma will be told in a future issue.

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Table 3: Liberal Unionist Results

The Fate of the Rebels		Liberal Unionist Victories	
Returned unopposed	25	Returned for existing seat	62
Returned in contest	37	Abstainers joining LUs	4
Abstainers joining LUs	4	New members replacing LUs	3
Beaten by Gladstonians	12	Won from Gladstonians	7
Beaten by Conservatives	2	Won from Irish Nationalists	1
Retired	21		
Total	101	Total	77

- 1 Quoted in J Morley, *Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 1903.
- 2 Quoted in H C G Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898*, Oxford, 1995, p255.
- 3 This thesis is intriguingly set out in A B Cooke and J Vincent *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885–86* Hassocks 1974
- 4 For example see G Goodman *Liberal Unionism: The Revolt of the Whigs*, Victorian Studies, 1959.
- 5 For an analysis of the Whig commitment to Liberalism prior to the Home Rule crisis see T A Jenkins *Gladstone, Whiggery and the Liberal Party, 1874–1886*, Oxford 1988. The Radical wing of the party is less well served. T W Heyck, *The Dimensions of British Radicalism*, University of Illinois Press 1974 contains a useful statistical analysis but hits the wrong tone in its analysis of issues and the complexity of views within the party
- 6 For the classic analysis of the composition of the party in the mid-century see John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1858–67*, Hassocks 1976.
- 7 See R T Shannon *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999. For further detail see Shannon *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, Thomas Nelson, 1963.
- 8 R T Shannon *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999, passim.
- 9 For a fuller development of this argument see D A Hamer *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, Oxford, 1972.
- 10 Caught up in the Crawford divorce scandal, which effectively ended his political career, Dilke played a minor part in the crisis.
- 11 In October 1891, Lord Salisbury wrote to his nephew 'Hartington is at Newmarket and all political arrangements have to be hung up till some quadruped has run faster than some other quadruped.' (R H Williams (ed) *The Salisbury-Balfour Correspondence 1869–1892* Hertfordshire Record Publications, 1988)
- 12 M V Brett (ed), *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher*, Vol 1, Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934, p125.
- 13 Op cit Vol 2 p299
- 14 For a fuller profile of the Liberal leaders see D Brack et al *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, Politicos, 1998.
- 15 Ld Randolph Churchill, Speech 2 October 1883. Cited in P Marsh *The Discipline of Popular Government*, The Harvester Press, 1978.
- 16 In August 1884, Gladstone estimated that the Irish 'so called National Party' would increase its numbers from 'a little over forty to near eighty'. H C G Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898*, Oxford 1995, p 180.
- 17 Gladstone in a letter to his wife, 12 October 1845
- 18 Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867–1921*, Manchester University Press, 1988, p38. O'Day analyses all the attempts to secure Home Rule up to the creation of the Irish Free State
- 19 J Vincent and M Stenton (ed) *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book*, reprinted by Harvester Press 1971.
- 20 Eg in the Land War of 1880/82 from which we derive the term 'boycott'.
- 21 J Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 1903 Vol III, p67.
- 22 Trevelyan to Gladstone 20 August 1883 quoted in T W Heyck, op cit
- 23 H C G Matthew, *Gladstone and Ireland*, Journal of Liberal Democrat History, No. 20, 1998.
- 24 Ld Salisbury, Speech in Liverpool, April 1882. P Marsh, op cit
- 25 Letter 26 October 1885. J L Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, MacMillan 1933, Vol II, p 114.
- 26 20 March 1886. R A J Walling (ed) *The Diaries of John Bright*, Cassell, 1930, p537. Later he refers to Home Rulers as 'the criminal gang in Parlt. and in Ireland.' p557.
- 27 This and subsequent sub-headings are taken from *The Liberal March* as in the *Liberator Song Book* 10th Edition 1995.
- 28 Alan O'Day, op cit.
- 29 T A Jenkins, op cit.
- 30 Chamberlain had forecast 'The Tories will be smashed and the Whigs will be extinguished.' To A J Mundella, 7 October 1885 in T W Heyck, op cit.
- 31 1880 Figures taken from Alan O'Day op cit. By-election data from *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book*. 1885 results from *The Liberal Year Book*, 1918 cited in *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book*.
- 32 B Holland, *Life of the Duke of Devonshire 1833–1908*, Longmans 1911, Vol.II, p95 et seq. Gladstone was equally reluctant to call a meeting.
- 33 J Chamberlain, *A Political Memoir*, ed C H D Howard, The Batchworth Press 1953.
- 34 M R D Foot, *The Hawarden Kite*, recently reprinted in *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, No. 20, 1998.
- 35 T W Heyck, op cit.
- 36 R T Shannon, *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999, p374 et seq
- 37 House of Commons 21 January 1886.
- 38 Gladstone, memo reprinted in H C G Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898*, Oxford 1995, p239.
- 39 Gladstone to Granville 9 December 1885 in A Ramm (ed) *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville, 1876–1886*, Oxford, 1962 vol II p414.
- 40 A typical response was that of Sir W Harcourt, Chancellor of the Exchequer, gossiping with Hamilton, a former secretary to Gladstone, 30 January 1886: 'We none of us believe in Mr.G's plan; but we have no alternative policy to suggest.' D W R Bahlman (ed) *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton, 1885–1906*, The University of Hull Press, 1993, p21.
- 41 *The Times* 15 April 1886
- 42 D G Boyce (ed), *The Crisis of British Unionism*, The Historians' Press, 1987, p10.
- 43 14 April. D W R Bahlman (ed) op cit, p34.
- 44 Cited in R T Shannon *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, p429
- 45 11 May 1886. Cited in J Chamberlain, *A Political Memoir*, p217–8.
- 46 Chamberlain, op cit p219.
- 47 *The Times* 13th May reports on Chamberlain's meeting; 15th May on Hartington's; 24th May on the Liberal Unionist Committee.
- 48 J Morley, op cit vol III, p332
- 49 Chamberlain's whip, W S Caine, estimated that after this meeting thirty dissidents were lost or shaky. Chamberlain, op cit p 222.
- 50 J Morley op cit, vol III, p335. Chamberlain, op cit p 222.
- 51 For the text of the letter see Chamberlain, op cit p 224.
- 52 D W R Bahlman (ed) op cit p 35, p37–8.
- 53 Gladstone to Pease 15 May 1886. Cited in Shannon op cit p434.
- 54 J Morley op cit, vol III, p342–5
- 55 Jacks remained inconsistent. Gladstone relinquished Leith for Mid-Lothian. Jacks unsuccessfully contested the by election as a Liberal Unionist but successfully fought Stirlingshire as a Gladstonian Liberal in 1892.
- 56 *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book* op cit, Introduction pxix
- 57 P Marsh op cit p112.
- 58 For the state of the parties at the dissolution I have added to the Liberal Unionists, who voted against Home Rule, known opponents who abstained or who later stood as Unionists. Abstainers whose allegiance was unknown or who stood as loyalists were added to the 228 who voted for the bill. A petition at Ipswich had cost the Liberals two seats in April 1886, preventing Chamberlain's lieutenant Collings voting against Home Rule. The Liberal Unionist outcome is sometimes stated as seventy-nine but this includes two Tories who adopted the Unionist label as a convenience.
- 59 For a detailed analysis see W C Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis*, Oxford 1988.

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