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The 1899 war between the British Empire and the two Boer republics in South Africa was a turning point not only for British imperial history but also for the parties in Parliament. The Second Boer War brought forward questions about imperialism, national identity and morality which resulted in a break in the alliance between the Liberal Party and the Irish nationalists. **James Fargher** analyses the impact of the war on the relations between the two parties and on the political history of Irish home rule.



AFRICAN WAR THE LIBERAL ALLIANCE



Boers at the
Battle of Spion
Kop, 23–24
January 1900

THE LIBERAL PARTY and Charles Stewart Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party had allied themselves in 1886 over the issue of home rule in Ireland. Although both parties had fallen into opposition after the Unionist victory in the election of 1895, a shared belief in home rule kept the Liberals and the now-fragmented Irish nationalists allied together until 1899.¹

But the outbreak of the South African War caused an intense wave of nationalist sympathy for the Boers amongst the Irish, who openly championed the Afrikaner farmers in their struggle. Whilst the Liberals had tolerated previous grievances between themselves and the Irish, in 1899 the nationalists separated themselves to such a degree that eventual reconciliation with the Liberal Party in the early twentieth century was to be difficult, and lukewarm, for both sides. The pressure of the Boer War and the issue of patriotism would cause both sides to renounce their alliance, ensuring that home rule would not be truly revived until 1910, when a desperate Liberal minority government was forced to make terms with the reunited Irish Parliamentary Party in order to control the House of Commons. But the sincere spirit of cooperation present in the nineteenth century had evaporated, after the allies turned against each other when

confronted with the South African War.

Originally, Gladstone had developed a personal passion for Irish home rule, and the Liberal Party had come to accept it as one of the reforms in the party's mission, beginning with the first Home Rule Bill in 1886. This platform was sincerely maintained even after the failures to pass Irish home rule in 1886 and 1893. Campbell-Bannerman, for example, felt that 'until the social order was restored in Ireland by some means or other [the Liberals] could not attend to the reforms urgently required for both Scotland and England'.² Although in opposition after the 1895 general election, the Liberals refused to repudiate their alliance with the Irish until 1899.

The Boer War marks the end of this awkward period between the allies and its influence merits further analysis. Some have argued that a passionate Liberal belief in home rule flowed from Gladstone to the eventual passage of the third Home Rule Bill in 1914, despite occasional minor breaks between the Liberals and the Irish nationalists. This conventional understanding points to Gladstone's two failed home rule bills and notes the reluctance of Liberal leaders to attempt to once again fight an impossible Parliamentary battle – even though they maintained their support for home rule in principle. Patricia Jaland, for example, in her book *The Liberals and Ireland: the Ulster Question in British Politics to 1914*, argues that 'without some such obligation to fulfil a historic pledge, some sense of commitment to a firm principle, the Liberal Party would surely have abandoned home rule entirely in the years after 1894'.³ This claim demonstrates a reasonable analysis of Liberal and Irish relations, but it confuses the genuine, or Gladstonian, alliance which both parties paid homage to before the South African War with the ungainly and tense relationship between the two parties from 1906 to 1914. Rapprochement, to some extent, did occur after the war, but with considerable difficulty and was marked by the dissension of the Liberal Imperialists, who jettisoned home rule as their Liberal Unionist predecessors had done in 1886.

Another view emphasises the underlying antagonism between

the two parties, and sees the demise of the Liberal alliance as inevitable. Historians in this field tend to argue that there was no lasting Liberal commitment to home rule from 1886 all the way to 1914, and that the Liberal alliance could never overcome the powerful nationalist currents of the multinational United Kingdom. Stephen Howe, for instance, argues that the various elements of the Irish Parliamentary Party could not balance Irish nationalism and loyalty to the United Kingdom, ultimately making a true Liberal alliance impossible.⁴ H. C. G. Matthew also commented on the disagreements between the Liberals and the Irish in the late 1890s, saying, 'the split over English education, the different standards demanded by the Irish of the Liberals and the Unionists, and the disputes within the Irish themselves brought a *de facto* end to the alliance'.⁵ It is true that the two parties were not inherently natural allies, but it is important to recognise the reluctance on both sides to formally end the alliance before the outbreak of war in 1899.

Furthermore, given this long history of cooperation, it is remarkable that an Irish Home Rule Bill was not introduced until as late as 1912. Indeed, H. W. McCready has commented that although it was entirely possible for the Liberals to re-introduce home rule into Parliament in 1906, 'it is striking that this electoral victory and the great impulse it gave to one of the most dynamic governments in the whole history of British liberalism was not followed, as had the last two liberal victories under Gladstone, by the introduction of a third home rule bill'.⁶ Although theoretically continuing to support home rule, the Liberal Party effectively abandoned this platform until after the 1910 general election. Not only, in McCready's view, was home rule unofficially dropped from the Liberal platform and only resurrected under the direst of circumstances,⁷ it 'cannot be explained solely by the fact that the liberals were long in opposition and then, in office, became dependent upon Irish support only with the election of 1910, important as those factors were'.⁸

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McCready even goes as far as to say that vitriolic Irish opposition to the Boer War 'alienated in very large measure the sympathy for Ireland and for home rule which had been created in a large section of the liberal party and aroused feelings of distrust and indignation in all sections of public opinion'.

for Ireland and for home rule which had been created in a large section of the liberal party and aroused feelings of distrust and indignation in all sections of public opinion'.⁹ However, and crucially, McCready states that the alliance disintegrated after the failure of the second Home Rule Bill and was non-existent during the late 1890s.¹⁰ This paper will attempt to show that, in fact, although the Liberal-Irish alliance may have arguably broken down by the late 1890s *de facto*, it was not formally repudiated until the outbreak of the Boer War, and that both the Liberals and the Irish referenced the theoretical alliance from 1895 to 1899 – indicating a reluctance to completely abandon the idea of a Liberal-Irish alliance until the outbreak of war in South Africa. The devastating split in 1899 meant that attempts to revive the alliance in the 1900s were hampered by the poisonous legacy of the war, and while partially successful, were dogged by defections from key Liberal leaders and marked by an absence of the previous commitment to Irish home rule.

It is useful to begin by examining one of the fundamental difficulties to the Liberal alliance, namely the religious division between the parties, and to appreciate the efforts subsequently required to uphold this partnership. By the late nineteenth century, the backbone of the Liberal Party was made up of Protestant Nonconformists, or Dissenters. Methodism in particular, one of the most influential of the Nonconformist sects, had a history of anti-Catholicism which stretched back to John Wesley himself.¹¹ This strain between the largely Nonconformist Liberal Party and the nationalist Irish Catholics was made apparent when Gladstone first made home rule a Liberal Party goal in 1886. Stephen Koss notes that:

... in 1886, the Grand Old Man embarked on an Irish policy that shattered his party and alienated a considerable number of Nonconformists ... even those who stood by him regretted it as a sell-out to Roman Catholics and hooligans (the two being more or less synonymous), who usurped priority from more legitimate Nonconformist claims.¹²

Nonconformists had enormous political influence over the Liberals, and they helped to form the Liberal agenda.

Despite this religious difference, the Liberals and the Irish maintained the Gladstonian alliance even after the defeat of the second Home Rule Bill in 1893. True, the Liberals began to concentrate on other reform projects, much to the frustration of the Irish, but this period following Gladstone's resignation was also marked by an interest in home-rule-all-round, which would 'simultaneously sol[ve] the nationalist problem and the problem of business congestion in the Commons ... Home-Rule-all-round enjoyed some popularity as a means of uniting the various nationalists within the Liberal Party'.¹³ Home-rule-all-round would ultimately founder with the collapse of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, but with the formation of a home-rule-all-round committee the Liberals still effectively demonstrated their commitment to the Irish, and members such as Richard Haldane could still boast 'he was a Home Ruler in 1886 and he was a Home Ruler in 1896'.¹⁴

This period after 1893 became, however, more fractious between the parties as they began slowly drifting apart, especially over educational matters which 'strained'¹⁵ the Liberal-Irish alliance, in the words of H. C. G. Matthew. Starting in 1896, for example, the Liberals and the Irish disagreed over the Unionists' Education Bill, which promised to give increased power to sectarian education. The Bill was an affront to the secular Liberals, but it was eagerly supported by the Catholic Irish nationalists, leading some to believe that 'the Irish are Catholic first and Home Rulers a long way afterwards'.¹⁶ It was true that the Liberals criticised the Irish for voting along with the Unionists, but the parliamentary alliance continued, despite this setback. Although they opposed government support of religious, especially Catholic, education, the Liberals were able to tolerate occasional deviations from the alliance, in this case quelling hostilities between their own Nonconformist voters and the Irish Catholics as well as 'still mak[ing] a pretence of reliance on the Irish vote to assist them in divesting the bill of

its sectarian character'.¹⁷ In a rare case of Irish National Federation and Irish National League unity, the Irish too 'pledged themselves to stand by the Nonconformists in trying to gain some protection against [certain] clauses'.¹⁸ The alliance was rooted in home rule and, to a lesser extent, a common opposition to the Anglican Church, and it is significant that even three years after the failure of the second Home Rule Bill the parties were able to maintain a veneer of cooperation over contentious theological matters. This desire to maintain the alliance would only change with the start of the Boer War, when even the *de jure* arrangement was repudiated.

This religious conflict would only plague the alliance when it uncomfortably juxtaposed the opposing national identities and when it reminded Liberals that their Irish allies were ultimately nationalists. A rift opened over the issue of a publicly funded Roman Catholic university in Ireland, which the Liberals firmly opposed due to their secularist principles, but which the nationalists saw as a matter of Irish autonomy. John Redmond, leader of the Parnellite Irish National League, exclaimed in the House of Commons in February 1898 that:

... to preserve this Liberal alliance Ireland has been called upon to pay and she has made great sacrifices ... it is my belief that the unity of the statesman of the century was sacrificed in order to maintain the Liberal alliance ... and all in return that Ireland has received is practically nothing.¹⁹

But William Harcourt, then leader of the Liberals, responded by reminding the Irish of all the Liberal sacrifices made for home rule and the current alliance.²⁰ John Dillon, leader of the Irish National Federation, which comprised the majority of the former Irish Parliamentary Party, suggested instead that the Liberals should, in compromise, reassure the House that 'Home Rule headed their programme'.²¹ What is noteworthy is the fact that all three leaders paid homage to the idea that the alliance was still active, even if having setbacks in the Commons.

In fact, in December 1898, the Irish even tried to use religious pressure to bring the parties closer together. When the government introduced yet another religious schooling bill, it was supported by the Irish, much to the frustration of the Liberals. The Irish nationalists used this opportunity to try to coerce the Liberal Party into raising home rule as its first priority, above all other Liberal reform efforts, the *New York Times* reporting the Irish as 'delighted because they calculate that the worse the position of the Liberal Party becomes, the greater will be its temptation to make terms'.²² This episode highlights the overwhelming Irish desire for national autonomy, and the paramount importance of the alliance as they attempted to persuade the Liberals to jettison other distracting reform projects in favour of home rule alone. Religious division, in this instance, served as a potential tool for strengthening the Liberal alliance. This would seem to reaffirm the idea that neither party had forgotten or abandoned the parliamentary alliance during the years of opposition.

The allies were also often in active agreement with each other over non-home rule issues during this period. For instance, John Dillon supported the Liberals over a dispute involving Parliament's South African Committee (the body responsible for overseeing events in South Africa, including relations between the British colonies and the Boer republics) where it appeared that the Irish nationalists were under-represented. Dillon and the Irish National Federation so enthusiastically cooperated with the Liberals that it even caused William O'Brien, head of the small United Irish League faction, to shout 'let the honourable Member for East Mayo tear himself away from the Liberal party and assert the rights of the Irish Members!'²³

Meanwhile, the Unionists attempted to subvert home rule by introducing the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898, which granted local autonomy to popularly elected county and district councils, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, alongside their policy of 'killing home rule with kindness.' In a bid for at least a shred of self-government, the Irish nationalists voted to pass the Bill, much to the

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dismay of the Liberals who saw it as unfairly enfranchising wealthy Irish landlords, as it would provide them with agricultural grants from the Treasury. Charles McLaren, a Scottish Liberal, opined:

as a Liberal and a supporter of the Irish Nationalist Party in all their political reforms, I have a right to ask why, on this occasion, they are deserting the Irish tenant in favour of the Irish landlord ... we have seen Irish Members watching, in apparent satisfaction, a Tory Government voting money in support of the landlords of Ireland.²⁴

Again, this speech emphasises the idealised unity of the parties. Their disagreement only stemmed from the fact that, for the Irish nationalists, the Local Government Act represented another step towards home rule whilst for the Liberals, it was a surrender to the landed, privileged class.

This is not to minimise the fact that the Liberal–Irish alliance had been slowly disintegrating due to parliamentary quarrels and Irish frustration over the lack of progress towards home rule. In February 1899, only a few months before the war, John Redmond called this situation ‘a shameful repudiation of the pledges to the Irish people.’²⁵ He went on to say that:

Home Rule is the most urgent of all questions of domestic reform, and therefore must be dealt with first. That surely was an essential condition of the alliance when we were told that the highest interest of Ireland was to support the Liberal Party. And it ... at any rate has gone to the winds. That ... was the programme and platform of the Liberal Party when the Irish alliance was entered upon, and it was on the faith of the condition that Home Rule should have foremost place in the programme of the Liberal Party that the Irish people – to their great sorrow, as I believe they now realise – consented to abandon the great man who had extracted that alliance from the Liberal Party.²⁶

In response, Haldane mused, ‘if the honourable Member desires to make cooperation with the members of the Liberal Party difficult upon this subject, I cannot help thinking that he selected the best possible means of doing it’.²⁷

betraying a note of fatigued exasperation.²⁸ The Irish nationalists had started to become more outspoken in their demands for Irish home rule, further alienating the Liberals who were both home rulers and aware that home rule had failed twice before, the second time before the insurmountable Lords. In spite of this, Redmond’s reference to the alliance demonstrates that it lived on, even if only on an abstract level, before the outbreak of the Boer War. It is significant that the Liberal Party refused to explicitly renounce the alliance until hostilities in South Africa began in 1899. Therefore, the dissolution of the alliance during the war is a powerful indicator of a sharp shift in consciousness for both the Liberal and Irish parties.

In August, the issue of Roman Catholic university education in Ireland once again surfaced. Trouble was brewing in South Africa, and Irish nationalist contempt for British imperial policy was polarising opinions. Robert Perks, a prominent Methodist Liberal Member, delivered a blistering speech against the Irish nationalists. He acknowledged that:

... the *unholy alliance* seems to have come to an end, or it will come to an end when my Irish friends thoroughly appreciate the fact that they will get nothing from Her Majesty’s Government ... How absurd it is for Irish Members to argue that English Nonconformists have no right to express an opinion on Irish religious questions, when they are the very men who come forward to help the Government saddle upon English Nonconformists an obnoxious system of elementary education!²⁹

It is difficult to say whether Perks was exaggerating the situation between the parties or if the alliance genuinely was on the verge of collapse even on a conjectural level. But the speech shows that some form of alliance had survived from 1893 to this critical moment, arduously maintained in the face of increasing strain.

Meanwhile, tensions were building up in South Africa, especially over the issue of the Uitlanders – settlers, largely British, who flocked to the Transvaal after the



discovery of massive gold deposits in the Rand in 1886. Sensing an opportunity to absorb the Boers into the Empire, the Unionist government had begun to demand unprecedented voting rights and exclusive civil liberties for the Uitlanders. Calls for war mounted, following continued refusal from the Boers to grant citizenship benefits to foreign gold prospectors. While the Liberals criticised the government's handling of the diplomatic situation with the Boer republics, ultimately they did feel a sense of imperial loyalty which the Irish nationalists did not. As storm clouds gathered, Robert Perks and another prominent Methodist MP, Henry Fowler, actively campaigned amongst Nonconformists to support the British position in South Africa. Perks announced at a public meeting that 'the Cape Colony and the Colony of Natal are as much British territory as the counties of Cornwall and Kent'.³⁰ The Liberal Party was trapped, needing simultaneously to appear patriotic as well as being morally opposed to war with the small republics. As Jeffrey Butler writes about the approach of the South African War,

Imperialism and Home Rule both involved the issue of security. Gladstone's actions on many issues raised at various times the question whether the Liberals could be trusted with the security of the nation ... The Venezuela crisis, the [Jameson] Raid, the Kruger Telegram, another Ashanti War, Dongola, the Jubilee, Omdurman, and Fashoda – put pressure on Liberal leaders ... to prove their patriotism.³¹

In contrast, the Irish nationalists continued to empathise with the Boers, seeing them as white fellow victims of British – specifically English – imperialism.

Hence, whilst William O'Brien's United Irish League drafted resolutions of sympathy with the Boers 'in [their] courageous opposition to the dishonest attacks of Rand capitalists and their allies in the British Ministry',³² the Liberals became critically alienated from their erstwhile parliamentary allies by such virulent attacks against the Empire. Despite their own principled opposition to the

war, the Liberals could no longer find any further common ground with the Irish nationalists. The nationalists celebrated any obstacle to British imperialism for patriotic reasons because, as Christine Kinealy notes in her book, *A Disunited Kingdom*, the Irish sympathised with the Boers as a free people fighting against British colonialism. She writes that 'many [nationalists] viewed [the war] as an attempt by British imperialism to crush the self-determination of the Boer people. This sentiment was particularly evident in Ireland, where Home Rule dominated the political agenda'.³³ The Liberal electorate may not have been in favour of the war, but they were acutely aware of the nationalists' anti-imperial rhetoric.

This stance came at a price, however:

But if the Liberals were often viewed with indifference or contempt by their Irish political allies ... in Unionist eyes they appeared to be taking again the part of England's enemies ... always with a blindness that was folly or an intent that could only be called treacherous, sapping and straining at the pillars of a great Empire.³⁴

It is also crucial to remember that the Liberal Party as a whole only began to denounce the methods of warfare (much less the war itself) as the conflict entered its counter-insurgent phase in mid 1900, and Kitchener began using the infamous 'methods of barbarism' to stamp out the Boer guerrillas.³⁵ Even Campbell-Bannerman's condemnation of the concentration camps and atrocities 'nearly finally split the Liberal front bench',³⁶ with Liberal Imperialist leaders such as Asquith and Grey dissenting.³⁷ At the outbreak of the war, Liberal opposition to the conflict was much more muted than it would later become. The fact that the Boers had declared war on the United Kingdom placed the Liberal Party in an awkward position, G. H. L. Le May affirming that 'technically the Boers were the aggressors; the fact that Kruger [President of the Transvaal] got his ultimatum in first alienated from the Transvaal much sympathy that it might otherwise have received in Britain',³⁸

underlining the dilemma in which the Liberals found themselves.

The joint Boer ultimatum had expired on 11 October 1899, demanding a withdrawal of all British troops from South Africa. When Britain refused, the South African Republic and the Orange Free State declared war. The war would be the tipping point for the Irish–Liberal alliance, severing the last connections between the various Irish factions and the Liberal Party, and proving to be too great of a rupture for the tottering Gladstonian alliance.

When Parliament was recalled to address the new war in South Africa on 17 October, John Redmond disgustingly remarked, 'there is now a state of war, and we are told the Liberals and Tories unite, and I am sorry to say in regard to English Liberalism that is largely true ... let the Liberals and Tories do as they will; thank God there are in this House a few men who ... will register their votes against this measure'.³⁹ He was followed by another Irish nationalist MP who stated that, 'our sympathies are entirely with the Boers ... as an Irish Member, I protest against this unjust war, and I trust that God will defend the right'.⁴⁰

In another case, Edward Saunderson, a staunch Irish Unionist, acutely remarked on 17 October:

I am happy to know that on this occasion, as on all similar occasions when this country is at war, party politics are forgotten, and Englishmen, whether they are Liberals or Radicals or Conservatives, stand shoulder to shoulder. The principal speakers in this debate have been Irish Members ... I think some surprise must be felt at the vigorous manner in which Roman Catholic Irishmen support the Boers.⁴¹

Saunderson perfectly captured the mood of the House when he observed the dramatic division of the British and the Irish nationalist Members. Speaking later during the war, one Irish nationalist declared that 'as long as that is the spirit which animates the Front Opposition Bench the Liberals are destined for a long time to sit on those benches' and they had become 'simply a mockery and a reproach'.⁴² To be sure, a few fringe and radical

Irish nationalist leaders:
John Redmond (1856–1918)
John Dillon (1851–1927)
William O'Brien (1852–1928)

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Liberals still stuck with the Irish in their bitter resistance to the war, but the overwhelming majority of the party (at least at the outset of war) refused to take the Irish position and angrily repudiated charges that the party as a whole was 'pro-Boer' or unpatriotic.⁴³

Indeed, the leaders of the Liberal Party in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords expressed a sense of solidarity with the government after war had been declared. Lord Kimberley, leader of the Liberals in the Lords, addressed the peers, saying 'whatever may be our opinions as to the past history of this melancholy business, we are ready as the usual supporters of the government to give our support to whatever measures may be necessary to vindicate the honour of the Empire and to protect its interests'.⁴⁴ Although Campbell-Bannerman, leader of the opposition in the Commons, stated that the Unionists' mishandling of the situation 'did more than anything else to end all chances of success from the negotiations',⁴⁵ he ultimately agreed that 'actual hostilities have commenced and an active aggression has been committed which is the plain duty of our Ministers, of Parliament, and of the people to resist'.⁴⁶ Campbell-Bannerman, and the vast majority of his party, felt that above all else British South Africa must be protected from the Boer invasions. In the words of *The Methodist Recorder*, the influential Nonconformist newspaper, 'there is a melancholy satisfaction in learning ... the Transvaal declared war against England, and that England never invaded the territory of the two Republics nor fired the first shot'.⁴⁷ With the exception of a small group of pro-Boer Liberals including Lloyd George (called the 'feeblest' section of the party by Kenneth Morgan⁴⁸) and before Kitchener's brutal counter-insurgent campaign, the Liberal Party noted its moral opposition to the war before voting through the money and supplies necessary for the Unionist government to wage war in South Africa.⁴⁹

In fact, when John Dillon moved to publish a statement condemning the war – '[it] has been caused by the assertion of claims which interfere with the internal government of the republic in direct violation of the terms of

the treaty of 1884, and by massing large bodies of British troops on the frontier of the republic'⁵⁰ – it was voted down with an overwhelming majority of 322 to 54. As the *New York Times* reported, 'the minority consisted mainly of Irish Members and a few Radicals ... the majority included the occupants of the front Opposition bench and the bulk of the Liberals'.⁵¹ Even Campbell-Bannerman and his Liberals refused to vote in favour of this amendment. Indeed, as the *New York Times* observed 'the Irish Members are not in high favour just now, even in the Liberal press, on account of their unpatriotic speeches'.⁵² The Liberals had utterly divorced themselves from the Irish; in the face of a common national enemy they had opted to reach out to the Unionists rather than to remain loyal to the now defunct Liberal alliance.

This was further reinforced as the debate over the war dragged on. When asked to clarify why the Irish sided with the Boers, Patrick O'Brien, Member for Kilkenny, replied 'what is more natural than that the people of Ireland "rightfully struggling to be free", should be with the Boers, who are also rightly struggling to maintain their freedom and to keep you out of the Transvaal?'⁵³ John Dillon criticised the government, saying that Great Britain had consistently neglected the Irish and that it ought to have 'shown the same zeal as she now displays on a gigantic scale for the removal of the largely ... bogus grievances of the Uitlanders'.⁵⁴ In fact, William Redmond, brother of John Redmond, was so spirited in his defence of the Boers that he had to be escorted from the House by the Serjeant at Arms.⁵⁵ He would go on to comment towards the end of the conflict, 'there ought to be some representative of the Liberal party in the House manly enough to adopt the policy of Mr. Gladstone long ago'.⁵⁶ Herbert Gladstone, the son of William Gladstone himself, even announced in December 1899, that 'the alliance between the Liberals and the Nationalists has been dissolved'.⁵⁷ This is noteworthy not only because he was the son of the Grand Old Man, but he also was to remain a principled home ruler throughout the rest of his career. His suggestion that the Liberal alliance had officially ended late in 1899 was therefore a significant one.

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Other Liberal leaders agreed, and during the war the party renounced the last pretences of an alliance with the Irish. Matthew notes that during the election of 1900, virtually no speeches were made regarding Ireland, and the party 'held to Herbert Gladstone's view that it was best to allow the question to fall as far into the background as possible'.⁵⁸ One year later, in the summer of 1901, Perks wrote a letter to Rosebery outlining the new electoral plan of campaign, part of which was 'to repudiate the alliance, [and] declare that Gladstonian Home Rule is dead'.⁵⁹ Matthew himself commented that, 'this aspect of the campaign had little to do with Ireland; it was a dissociation from the Irish in their capacity as pro-Boers',⁶⁰ and that 'these Liberal Imperialists thus committed themselves to the position of an absolute Liberal majority ... on the ground that unless the de facto breakdown of the alliance was explicitly and publicly accepted by the Liberals, they would not win over the "centre of the nation"'.⁶¹ For both electoral as well as principled reasons, the Liberals decided to officially end the last vestiges of the Irish alliance, which had been struggling ever since the defeat of the second Home Rule Bill. It is however noteworthy that it was the outbreak of the South African War which finally caused both sides to accept a formal termination of their partnership.

McCready further observes that both Herbert Gladstone and Campbell-Bannerman considered it unwise to pursue Irish home rule with the voters due to the nationalists' unpopularity with the British public following the outbreak of war.⁶² Many Liberals were shocked, for instance, when some of their former allies began openly urging Irish immigrants in South Africa to take up arms against government troops.⁶³ Campbell-Bannerman, a sincere home ruler, believed that the 'recent follies'⁶⁴ of the Irish nationalists during the war made it impossible for the Liberal Party to support home rule, at least in the immediate future. Gladstone, realising the hostile attitude towards home rule in Great Britain after 1899, managed to quietly drop it from the party's electoral platform in both the 1900 and 1906 elections.⁶⁵

As for the Irish, in February 1900 John Redmond put a bill

before the House demanding an end to the war in South Africa; he freely admitted that 'when the Empire is involved in complications a feeling of hope and satisfaction stir[s] the majority of Irish home and abroad'.⁶⁶ When icily asked whether he feared losing all prospects for home rule from the Liberal Party, Redmond retorted that 'Ireland has nothing to lose and everything to gain by raising her voice on the side of justice and liberty'.⁶⁷ Just before the proposal was voted down, by 368 to 66, one Liberal rose and 'said that there was one day that the Boers would never celebrate, and that was the day on which the British Parliament should surrender'.⁶⁸ The Liberals were patriotic Britons first and Irish sympathisers a long way afterwards. The war itself also was a major cause of the reunification of the Irish factions into the Irish Parliamentary Party in early 1900 and indicates perhaps a search for inner strength following their collective divorce from the Liberals.

In late 1905 the Liberal Party once again came to power, easily winning a majority in the House of Commons in early 1906 and ending their need to search for parliamentary allies. But unlike in the 1880s and 1890s, when the party had supported home rule, the new Liberal government had a drastically different Irish policy and relationship with the nationalists. Hamer notes that, 'the great causes of the past ... [such as] Home Rule ... had either turned sour or now aroused passions that seemed to Liberals very frightening and un-virtuous ... issues like the Irish Question became transmuted into *hideous and frightening new forces*'.⁶⁹ That swift change was due, in part, to the Irish reaction to the Boer War.

Lord Rosebery, the former Liberal leader, made an important speech in December 1901, speaking at length about the South African War before turning to party politics and 'called on Liberals to cast aside "fly-blown phylacteries of the past," including home rule'.⁷⁰ Although Rosebery no longer controlled the party, his influence was enormous and this declaration seriously threatened to cause a party split.⁷¹ Indeed, under him the Liberal Imperialists emerged as a powerful sub-group within the party, forming the Liberal League which

Due to lingering animosity over the Boer War and facing a possible mutiny from the Liberal Imperialists and their supporters,⁷⁹ Campbell-Bannerman embraced a more moderate, 'step-by-step' process after his victory in 1906.

included Henry Fowler, Asquith and Grey (the same group of men who had opposed Campbell-Bannerman's 'methods of barbarism' speech).⁷² The League was explicitly opposed to Irish Home Rule and it fed off Liberal resentment towards the Irish.⁷³

Although the war may not have made rapprochement impossible, it was certainly strained. A limited degree of cooperation existed between the parties after the Irish reunified in 1900 and the Liberals lost the khaki election of that year. However, McCready has speculated that warming Irish–Liberal relations, especially in the run-up to the 1906 election, were influenced largely by concerns that the Unionists would once again triumph. Failing to anticipate their landslide victory and desperate to pull themselves out of opposition, the Liberals reached out to fellow Irish MPs and Irish voters.⁷⁴ Rather than an indication of sincere partnership, this smacks more of political lobbying than of Gladstonian cooperation.

Interestingly, the Irish had more acutely sensed an upcoming Liberal victory, especially after the end of the South African War and the advent of new issues such as tariff reform. The stakes for the nationalists were high and they:

... had to exert every effort to secure that the liberal leader [Campbell-Bannerman] ... should not succumb to pressure from that section of the party ... which was still believed to be antipathetic to home rule, but should rather concede guarantees to the Irish party comparable to those which had made possible such close cooperation between the nationalists and the liberal party of Gladstone's day.⁷⁵

The war's legacy had clearly taken its toll on Liberal–Irish relations, resulting in a considerable swing in the party against Irish home rule, both amongst the backbenchers as well as the leaders of the Liberal League. The new antipathy towards home rule was now exemplified by the likes of Augustine Birrell, President of the National Liberal Federation, who remarked,

It is utterly out of the question in the coming Parliament to stand by the Treasury Bench

and introduce either of Gladstone's Home Rule measures. No such measure, by whomever introduced, could possibly pass, and, therefore, to hold it up as a thing which as to affect people's votes is ridiculous; it is a bogey, a bugbear.⁷⁶

And yet, surely home rule stood just as much chance of passing the Lords in 1906 as it had in 1893? Moreover, the party was happy to allow Duncan Pirie, Liberal Member for Aberdeen North, to introduce two Government of Scotland bills, one in 1906 and one in 1908, which promised home rule for Scotland.⁷⁷ Neither of these measures had the slightest chance of passing (although in 1908, the bill received support from nearly 30 per cent of the Commons⁷⁸), but they prove that it was *Irish* home rule specifically which the Liberals were keen to avoid.

Due to lingering animosity over the Boer War and facing a possible mutiny from the Liberal Imperialists and their supporters,⁷⁹ Campbell-Bannerman embraced a more moderate, 'step-by-step' process after his victory in 1906.⁸⁰ McCready has argued that this step-by-step approach was 'a surrender of the Gladstonian wing of the party to the position which the liberal imperialists had been promoting for some years', and indeed, this new policy came originally from Grey.⁸¹ After a year in office, a conservative offer was made to the Irish, proposing a Home Rule council in Ireland, some members appointed, a few elected, which would be in charge of petty Irish administration and be presided over by the veto-wielding Lord Lieutenant. Redmond '[denounced] it as totally unacceptable'⁸² and another nationalist MP refused to vote for the proposal because, 'I discovered in it the Liberal Imperialist alternative to Home Rule'.⁸³ Such a striking departure from Gladstone's vision of Irish home rule is remarkable, and surely is connected with the vicious divisions which split the Liberals from the Irish at the outbreak of war in South Africa. This new change in attitude came from those in the party 'in favour of scrapping home rule ... [or] further to defer it'⁸⁴ – those who had been influenced by the Irish attitude during the Boer War. In this manner,

the split between the parties in 1899 was perpetuated until 1912 by the war's poisonous legacy.

There was difficulty in rallying the Gladstonian home rule spirit in 1910 as well. The general mood of the party was not one of empathy for the Irish, and the partnership which the Liberals formed with the nationalists in 1910 was one of necessity, not choice. Grey (now Foreign Secretary), for example, reflecting upon the crisis in which the minority Liberal government found itself after the two 1910 general elections, suggested that even in these desperate times the Liberals should dismiss the idea of coalition with the Irish, believing that both the Liberals and the Conservatives had failed to win the nation's confidence and that 'we cannot inspire this by patching up working arrangements either with the Labour or Irish parties'.⁸⁵ It is significant that even the Foreign Secretary, when faced with a hung parliament, disdained to return to the Irish nationalists, the only hope which the Liberals had to cling on to power. The party would ultimately be forced to form a new partnership with the Irish, but not without strong reservations, not least from the Foreign Secretary and from Asquith, now Prime Minister.

The Irish themselves were extremely suspicious about the 1910 Liberal government's intentions. Thomas O'Connor, one prominent Irish nationalist leader, wrote to John Dillon to 'go straight ahead and do what we think right, fight through thick and thin with the Liberals ... get them to propose Home Rule immediately or break with them'.⁸⁶ Dillon agreed, and the united Irish prompted a Cabinet crisis when they refused to pass the budget through Parliament until a solemn promise was reluctantly issued by Asquith to pass home rule.⁸⁷

Ronan Fanning concluded that 'the government had little stomach for home rule',⁸⁸ and that the Irish had resorted to much arm-twisting until the Liberals finally passed the third Home Rule Act in 1914. To be sure, there were Liberals that genuinely supported the cause of home rule, and it is perhaps ironic that it was the Liberal Imperialists who ultimately conceded to the Irish.

When Gladstone embarked upon his home rule policy in 1886,

The Boer War marked the end of the Gladstonian relationship and created bitterness amongst many Liberals towards the Irish nationalists.

he had married his party to the Irish nationalists. Despite the failure of two home rule bills and the electoral defeat of 1895, the spirit of alliance continued between the parties, as has been shown through their relationship in Parliament. This loose home rule union would be maintained until the eve of the war in South Africa, when the Liberals were horrified to find that their allies not only opposed defending the two white British colonies, but even lobbied on behalf of the enemy.

The Boer War marked the end of the Gladstonian relationship and created bitterness amongst many Liberals towards the Irish nationalists. Although they managed, somewhat, to repair the alliance to a suitable degree to stumble together towards home rule in the 1900s, this process was not without serious opposition from Liberals influenced by the events of 1899–1902. This paper has attempted to underline the contribution which the war made to this political shift, amongst other factors.

The Boer War therefore snapped the connections which bound the Liberals and the Irish together in the cooperative, Gladstonian spirit. There was a sharp distinction between the degrees of Liberal support for home rule before and after the Boer War, and it was the war itself which caused the Liberal Party to explicitly renounce their shaky alliance with the Irish. Attempts to compromise throughout the latter half of the 1890s were replaced with a bitter divide over the war, and it is no coincidence that Herbert Gladstone announced that the alliance had ended in December 1899, nor that the Liberal League and its opposition to home rule was born during this period. In a larger sense, the Boer War demonstrates the powerful impact of imperial politics on the domestic front. It marked the end of the Victorian-era relationship between the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Liberal Party, both of whom would eventually be replaced with more radical groups, and heralded the coming of a more extreme Irish effort to achieve not only autonomy, but complete independence.

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study at King's College London, where he aims further to explore the links between imperial history and modern international politics.

- 1 In 1890, the Irish Parliamentary Party was rocked by the Parnell divorce scandal, which split the party into the Parnellite Irish National League and the anti-Parnellite Irish National Federation. A third faction, the United Irish League, was formed in 1898. All three were to reunite into the new Irish Parliamentary Party in 1900, largely in response to the Boer War. This paper will specifically address the relationship between the Liberals and these components of the IPP. These groups will simply be referred to generally as 'the Irish nationalists' or 'the Irish'.
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- 3 Patricia Jalland, *The Liberals and Ireland: The Ulster Question in British Politics to 1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 26.
- 4 Stephen Howe, *Irish and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 41.
- 5 H C G Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 270.
- 6 H W McCready, 'Home Rule and the Liberal Party, 1899–1906,' *Irish Historical Studies* 13, no. 52 (1963), p. 316.
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 317.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 D G Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 160–61.
- 12 Stephen Koss, 'Wesleyanism and the Empire,' *The Historical Journal* 18 (1975), p. 107.
- 13 Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists*, p. 267.
- 14 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 268.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 270.
- 16 'Will Fight to a Finish; Battle Between Nonconformists and Irish Catholics,' *The New York Times*, 24 May 1896.
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 Redmond, Speech to the House of Commons, 11 February 1898, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 53 (1898), 381.
- 20 *ibid.*

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22 Henry Norman, 'The News in London,' *The New York Times*, 18 December 1898.

23 W O'Brien, Speech to the House of Commons, 11 August 1896, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 44 (1896), 569.

24 C McLaren, Speech to the House of Commons, 17 May 1898, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 57 (1898), 1640. Emphasis added.

25 J Redmond, Speech to the House of Commons, 16 February 1899, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 66 (1899), 1189.

26 *ibid.*

27 R Haldane, Speech to the House of Commons, 16 February 1899, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 66 (1899), 1195.

28 In fact, the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes, one of the foremost Methodist preachers and a skilled orator called the Irish Catholics 'the spoiled darlings of party politicians', exposing perhaps frustration with the continued Liberal support for the Irish nationalists. (Henry Norman, 'As London Sees European Politics,' *The New York Times*, 5 February 1899.)

29 R Perks, Speech to the House of Commons, 3 August 1899, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 75 (1899), 1339. Emphasis added.

30 Michael Hughes, *Conscience and Conflict: Methodism, Peace and War in the Twentieth Century* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2008), p. 27.

31 Jeffrey Butler, *The Liberal Party and the Jameson Raid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 285.

32 'War Feeling in England,' *The New York Times*, 13 August 1899. This statement was actually written on behalf of the United Irish League by Michael Davitt MP, who would resign from Parliament in protest of the Boer War.

33 Christine Kinealy, *A Disunited Kingdom?: England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales 1800–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 83.

34 R B McCallum, *The Liberal Party from Earl Grey to Asquith* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), p. 83.

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39 J Redmond, Speech to the House of Commons, 17 October 1899, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 77 (1899), 134. Emphasis added.

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53 W O'Brien, Speech to the House of Commons, 23 October 1899, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 77 (1899), 555.

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62 McCready, 'Home Rule and the Liberal Party, 1899–1906,' p. 319.

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