

An Intractable Problem? Gladstone and Irish Home Rule

On attaining office as Prime Minister for the second time in April 1880, Gladstone could have said 'my mission is to pacify Ireland', as he had said when starting his first premiership in 1868. For Ireland was once again in turmoil. Neglected by the Disraeli Government of 1874–80, it experienced towards the end of that period a severe agricultural recession which had pronounced political effects.

Gladstone's first Government had disestablished the Church of Ireland by an Act of 1869, and had aimed to alleviate the position of the tenants by the Irish Land Act of 1870. But the provisions of the latter measure, scarcely adequate at the best of times, availed not at all in the conditions of the later 1870s, when tenants could not pay rent because of an agricultural slump and the fall in prices of their goods on the market. Evictions of the tenantry had multiplied: there were just over 2,000 in 1877, but nearly 10,500 in 1880. Familiar signs of violent revolt against the landlords, including murder and the maiming of farm animals, made their appearance.

Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irish MP since 1875, organiser of effective obstruction in the House of Commons and unquestioned leader of the Home Rule party by May 1879, encouraged the agrarian revolt. In October 1879 the Irish National Land League was formed, with two Fenians (members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood) as secretaries, two more as treasurers, and Parnell (not himself a Fenian) as president.

The League soon obtained large amounts of money from Irish emigrants in North America and Australia. Under the effects of the Secret Ballot Act of 1872 a majority of MPs with Home Rule opin-

ions had already been returned by the Irish elections in 1874. Although these opinions had not then been well enough defined to form the ideological basis of a separate party, by 1879 the Home Rulers were generally more militant and determined and formed a more cohesive party. This was because of Parnell's effectiveness and the wide social discontent and disruption which now lay behind the political demand for Home Rule. In the general election of 1880 the Home Rule party advanced, gaining some sixty-five of the 105 Irish seats.

As in 1868, something had to be done for Ireland by the new premier. Gladstone's second ministry was beset from the start not only by the Irish difficulty, but also by the claim of atheists to enter Parliament which was repeatedly presented by Charles Bradlaugh. Largely because of these two problems, important electoral reforms to which the Government gave a high priority were not carried until the second half of the ministry, in the years 1883, 1884 and 1885.

Gladstone was less decisive about Ireland than he had been in 1868. He had then had a clear programme of intended Irish reform, but in 1880 he had nothing in view beyond further reform of the land law. He certainly was not as yet a Home Ruler. Indeed, Home Rule seemed completely beyond the prospects of government action, as Gladstone's new cabinet consisted very largely of Whig aristocrats who were, for the most part, natural opponents of Home Rule. (Some of them feared for the safety of their Irish estates.) The only radicals in the cabinet were John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain – and both of these, ironically, were to become Liberal Unionists in 1886, along with most of the

Whig aristocracy whom they had often opposed in the years 1880 – 5.

A Liberal premier who declared himself in favour of Home Rule in the early 1880s would have broken up his party by driving Whigs and some radicals out of it, as actually happened in 1886. Gladstone had the firm intention of keeping his strongly divisive party united (as he still hoped he could manage to do in 1886, when he nevertheless decided to introduce Home Rule). So the legislative contribution of Gladstone's second ministry (1880 – 85) to the Irish question was modest, though less so than Disraeli's in the previous Government. The only purely Irish measure that succeeded in getting through Parliament, apart from a Coercion Bill, was a new Land Bill in 1881. (In addition, a government bill of 1880 providing compensation for eviction was introduced; this passed the Commons but not the Lords.)

The Irish Land Act of 1881 was more purposeful than that of ten years before. It gave the tenants the famous 'three Fs' (fixity of tenure, fair rents, and free sale of produce) for which they had long been agitating. Although it was quite effective, and was privately welcomed by the Home Rulers, the new Act did nothing to quell the agrarian violence. Parnell had partially supported the bill in Parliament, but he continued to encourage the agitation.

Against the wishes of Gladstone, Chamberlain and Bright, an Irish Coercion Bill had been adopted by the cabinet. It became law in March 1881 after great obstructive efforts by the Home Rule MPs. The measure suspended the Habeas Corpus Act, and gave the Irish executive in Dublin Castle unlimited powers of arrest. Under these terms, Parnell and two other Home Rule MPs were imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol for six months from October 1881. The combination of land reform and coercion had failed spectacularly in its main object of stopping lethal agitation. In the ten months which followed the passage of the Coercion Bill, the number of agrarian outrages rose by sixty per cent compared with the preceding ten-month period.

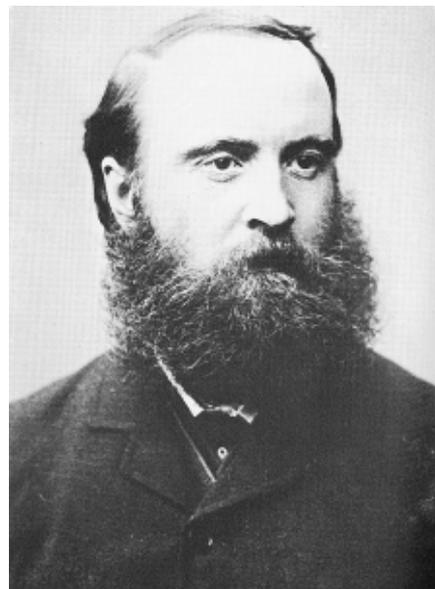
Thus, Irish agitation was reaching greater and greater heights and the

Government had yet to find a solution. In its continuing quest for one, Parnell and his imprisoned colleagues were released after an informal agreement had been reached in April 1882 that the Government would finance payment of rent arrears owed by Irish tenant farmers, in return for a commitment by Parnell to try to end disorder in Ireland.

This prospect of peace was soon shattered. The Irish Viceroy, Lord Cowper and the Chief Secretary, W.E. Forster, who had supported coercion, were replaced by Earl Spencer and Lord Frederick Cavendish respectively. Cavendish and the Under-Secretary, Thomas Burke, were immediately murdered in Phoenix Park by members of a secret society, the Invincibles. A stiffer Coercion Act followed, which the Home Rulers had to oppose, while an Arrears Bill was passed which was not generous enough to be used by most of the tenants who owed rent. So the stalemate continued; but, partly because of the influence of the 1881 Land Act and the 'Kilmainham Treaty' (the agreement between Parnell and the Government), it did so much more quietly until 1885.

At last in Ireland there was something which resembled peace. Into this void came some fruitful legislation from which the Home Rule party benefited – including determined and successful moves to prevent electoral bribery in the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883, and the enfranchisement of many more potential Home Rule voters by the Franchise Act (Third Parliamentary Reform Act) of 1884. The latter was passed as the result of an agreement between Gladstone and Lord Salisbury, the Conservative leader, to accompany it with a grand scheme of redistribution of constituencies. This scheme made most constituencies single-member ones and made the size of their electorates much more equal.

The enlarged franchise and single-member constituencies were established in Ireland as well as Great Britain by the new legislation. The effect was to give a large boost to the electoral prospects of Parnell and his party. The bargaining power of the Home Rule party consequently rose, as the



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leaders of both Liberals and Conservatives were well aware. Gladstone supported an attempt by Joseph Chamberlain in early 1885 to side-track Home Rule by conferring more restricted devolution through county boards and a national council instead of through an Irish Parliament.

This proposal gained important Irish Catholic support but not that of the (incidentally Protestant) Parnell, and it was defeated in cabinet after a sharp division. Parnell then listened to Lord Randolph Churchill, who produced a Conservative offer to end coercion. The upshot of this was that the voting of Home Rule MPs was instrumental in carrying a Conservative amendment to the budget in June 1885. Gladstone resigned, and an ensuing minority Conservative Government, led by Lord Salisbury, held office until the beginning of 1886.

The seven-month period of this Conservative ministry was crucial to Home Rule and to the British political parties. Parnell kept his party's bargaining power to the fore. It had already been seen that he would countenance Conservative as well as Liberal approaches. Moreover, the Conservatives had the advantage of possessing a majority in the House of Lords, which might pass a Conservative Home Rule measure but almost certainly would not pass a Liberal one. On practical grounds, therefore, Parnell would have preferred an attempt to carry Home Rule by the Conservatives rather than

the Liberals. So too – with the addition of a naturally strong desire to preserve Liberal unity – would Gladstone.

Parnell was encouraged by the actions of the Conservative ministry. The Conservatives had promised to end coercion in Ireland, and they did so. They also carried the first scheme of State-assisted purchase of Irish land by the tenant farmers. The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Carnarvon, favoured granting a certain Home Rule status. He held secret conversations first with Justin McCarthy, Parnell's chief lieutenant, and on 1 August 1885, authorised by Salisbury, with Parnell himself.

By the time these conversations took place, Gladstone was also veering towards accepting Home Rule. When he actually became a Home Ruler is not easy to pinpoint because of the secrecy in which all political communications on the matter were conducted until the end of 1885. But Gladstone had initiated and carried – with Salisbury's agreement – the large franchise extension and constituency changes of 1884 – 85. He must have foreseen (as Salisbury also would have done) that the increase in strength of support for Home Rule gained through these changes would influence one major party or the other to introduce a

Home Rule measure. So it seems very likely that both Gladstone and Salisbury were ready to adopt Home Rule from June 1885, when the Redistribution Bill was carried in the Lords and subsequently became law.

Preferring as he did that the Conservatives should introduce a Home Rule measure (which he knew that he might well support but that many Liberals assuredly would not), Gladstone tried to preserve ambiguity in his communications on the subject until he was forced into the open in December, causing Salisbury to drop his approaches to Home Rule and transferring the political difficulties of introducing the question to Gladstone.

In correspondence with Gladstone, Parnell sent him a moderate proposal for Home Rule (more limited than Gladstone's own bill of 1886) on 30 October, but obtained no reply until after a general election was held in late November and early December. Parnell decided that the Conservatives should be given as much support as possible in this election, so that either they, if they formed the next Government, would introduce Home Rule, or the Liberals, if the next ministry were to be theirs, would be so much in need of Home Rule support that they would bring in the desired bill.

Parnell therefore exerted his strong influence over the majority of Irish immigrant electors in Great Britain by issuing a special manifesto on 21 November, two days before polling began, urging them to vote Conservative. Apart from the return (for the Liverpool Scotland division) of the single Irish Home Rule MP ever to represent a constituency in Great Britain, T.P. O'Connor, it has been estimated that this manifesto shifted some twenty urban seats to the Conservatives.

The Liberal returns in the counties increased, however, and when polling concluded the Liberals had won a majority over the Conservatives only slightly less than in 1880 – but one which, at eighty-six seats, exactly equalled the total number of Home Rule MPs returned. The result was untidy and not encouraging to any of the parties, even Parnell's. The Conservatives on the face of it would find it very





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hard to govern at all. The Liberals might only be able to govern with Parnell's support, and this would weaken any prospect of a Home Rule bill getting through the Lords.

Into this situation of renewed stalemate came the action (still puzzling today) of Herbert Gladstone, a Liberal MP and William's youngest son, who was acting as his father's secretary. Probably he had primarily the idea of Liberal strength and unity in mind, based on support for Home Rule. On 19 December 1885 William Gladstone resumed his contact with Parnell, telling him that it would be for the best if the Conservative Government (still in office) were to introduce 'an adequate and honourable plan' for settling the question of Irish government. But before that, on 15 December, Herbert Gladstone had seriously hampered the prospect of this happening by telling some newspaper editors that his father now supported Home Rule. Two papers published the news on 17 December, and it appeared widely in the press on the following day.

A response to extraordinary political tensions, Herbert's indiscreet disclosure created extraordinary new ones. The Conservatives had been presented with an unmissable opportunity to embarrass and divide the Liberals. There was now little possibility of an alliance between Parnell and the Conservatives to carry Home Rule with the backing of Gladstone and most of the Liberals. The

Conservative leaders – who would in any case have had grave difficulty in trying to get their followers to support Home Rule – seemed now likely to leave an effort at Home Rule to Gladstone, who would have his own difficulties with his party. The Liberal party was not prepared to adopt Home Rule, and was not going to be suddenly jolted into accepting it (on a unified party basis) by the naive action of Herbert Gladstone. Opposition to Home Rule by most Whigs in the party was very likely, if only because many Whigs had estates in Ireland and would fear possible expropriation by a Home Rule Parliament. The Conservatives were likely to ally with Whigs to oppose Home Rule and defend the Union. The outcome of the political crisis bore out this likelihood.

Salisbury resigned on 28 January 1886 after being defeated on an amendment to agricultural policy. Gladstone commenced his third min-

istry, and formed a new cabinet on 3 February. There had been some conversions to Home Rule among leading Liberals, but hopes for party unity in the matter, which Herbert Gladstone had probably harboured, were not being realised. Several Liberals refused to join the cabinet on account of the premier's suspected Home Rule intentions. Chamberlain resigned his office at the end of March, when a Home Rule bill was being discussed in cabinet.

William Gladstone introduced the bill in the Commons on 8 April, and explained the intention behind it of establishing an Irish Parliament in Dublin which would have legislative powers over all subjects except reserved ones which would include defence, foreign and colonial relations, trading and customs matters, and coinage. After sixteen days of debate the Commons rejected the bill by 343 votes to 313. The Conservative opposition was swelled by ninety-three Liberals (mostly Whigs, but including seventeen radicals such as Chamberlain), who became known as Liberal Unionists. The Liberal dissenters had been instrumental in defeating the bill.

Home Rule was only beginning its fraught parliamentary career, however. The Liberal division and the depression of 1886 and after were succeeded by more prosperous times. Questions of Irish self-government and independence continued to exercise a prominent role in British politics until the early 1920s and, since their re-emergence in the mid-1960s, have been doing so once again.

Ian Machin is Professor of Modern History at the University of Dundee.

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