

Opposition to Irish Home Rule, 1885-1922

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Focus

Irish Home Rule was the proposal to establish a devolved Parliament in Dublin, much like Holyrood in Scotland today. It was one of the most important issues in British politics from the mid-1880s to the advent of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland in 1920-21. The campaign to oppose Home Rule was conducted in and outside Parliament, and took on different characteristics in Ireland (where it was the dominant political issue in these four decades) and in the rest of Britain (where it was often eclipsed by others).

The historical background to the campaign stemmed from the Act of Union – effective from 1801 – which incorporated Ireland

within Great Britain, creating the United Kingdom. The Act abolished the Dublin parliament, and Ireland was represented at Westminster by 100 MPs and 32 peers. While Ireland kept its own courts of justice and civil service, it was governed from Westminster by an appointed executive based in Dublin Castle. The majority of the population were Catholics living in the countryside, most of them agricultural labourers or tenants at will. They were often poor, illiterate, and beholden to Protestant landlords. Catholics were initially formally excluded from public office until Catholic Emancipation (1829), debarred from British universities (until 1871), and mandated to pay for the upkeep of an Anglican established Church via tithes (until 1869). In the general election of 1874 (the first held under secret ballot) 60 of the MPs returned for Ireland were Nationalists agitating for the restoration of the old Irish Parliament, which they believed would redress the political and economic grievances of the Catholic majority. In the election of 1885 the Nationalists, led by Charles Stewart Parnell, won 86 seats, encroaching even into the Unionist heartland of Ulster, and achieving a clean sweep in the rest of the country. This large block of well-disciplined MPs enabled Parnell's party to agitate for reforms (especially regarding rent and ownership of Ireland's arable land) and create such mischief at Westminster that 'the Irish Question' became difficult to ignore.

While Irish independence had negligible support among the British establishment, a minority were prepared to consider devolving some powers back to Dublin via a measure of home rule. The vast majority, however, took the view that devolution would weaken the authority of the British Empire, strengthen the already overbearing deleterious power of the Vatican in Ireland, and subject the propertied loyalist minority to the tyranny of a Catholic majority intent on retribution. It was thus an enormous surprise to all when, in late 1885, the Liberal Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone suddenly announced his conversion to an extensive measure of Home Rule, proposing to devolve to Dublin powers over all matters exclusively affecting Ireland. Britain would retain control over defence, foreign affairs, trade, and

coinage. Apart from restrictions on Customs and Excise, Ireland would also control her own taxation, and continue to return MPs to Westminster (which in itself was controversial, in much the same way as today's 'West Lothian Question' in Scotland).

Gladstone's force of personality and political authority carried most Liberals with him, but a large number rebelled and voted with the Conservatives, and the bill was defeated by 30 votes in June 1886. Gladstone resigned, and went to the country on the issue of Home Rule. The dissident Liberals fought the election as 'Liberal Unionists' in an alliance with the Conservatives, and won a landslide victory, securing 393 MPs (of which 316 were Conservatives and 77 were Liberal Unionists), compared to the Liberals' 192 and the Irish Nationalists 85. Although it was predictably popular in Ireland, Home Rule almost certainly contributed to heavy Liberal defeats across the rest of Britain. While more independently-minded than today, MPs and activists in this era felt considerable loyalty to party, and the willingness of the Liberal Unionists to desert an enormously popular leader and injure their party, is testimony to the strength of contemporary unionist feeling that Home Rule must be averted at all costs.

Although the Bill had been defeated, the events of 1886 made it likely that the Liberal party (now purged of its anti-Home Rule element) would introduce it again when they returned to office. Sure enough, a second Home Rule Bill was attempted in 1893, and a third in 1912. The opponents of Home Rule thus knew what they were up against from the start. Their first objective was to prevent the Liberals returning to government. When that could not be achieved, they had to use either the House of Lords or other extra-parliamentary means to keep it from the statute book.

Contention

In contrast to many of the other case studies in this volume, the campaign against Home Rule was about averting rather than achieving change. In the minds of the anti-Home Rulers, this meant the burden was on proponents to articulate a contention sufficiently pressing to warrant the disruption and violence that

creating a Dublin Parliament was sure to have. Unsurprisingly, the opposition was at its fiercest when the Liberals were in office, and a Home Rule Bill seemed possible. This was the case during 1885-56, 1892-93, and 1911-14. Outside those times of immediate danger, the aim of the campaign was essentially to militate against apathy, especially in Britain after 1893, where the electorate was widely reported to be sick and tired of the Irish Question, which many saw as peripheral to their lives.

The campaign in Britain primarily consisted of the so-called 'Unionist alliance' between the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties, which remained firm throughout the period. The dissident Liberals who left in 1886 were mainly drawn from the old aristocratic whig faction led by Lord Hartington. While it would not be inaccurate to place them on the right of the party, many held the Conservatives in contempt, viewing them as unintelligent and reactionary. The smaller Liberal Unionist faction was led by the Birmingham radical Joseph Chamberlain whose followers – largely adherents of their leader's municipal Socialism – were on the opposite side of Liberalism. For their part the Conservatives – led by Lord Salisbury – were still dominated by the aristocracy and gentry, which had won just two elections in the previous 56 years. While electorally formidable on paper, the Unionist alliance necessitated that politicians and party activists work together with their natural political enemies to prevent Home Rule. The Liberal Unionists maintained a consistent Parliamentary representation of between 25 and 77 MPs, but also contributed money, influence, and activists to the Conservative cause. While predominantly a campaign led by this party alliance, opposition to Home Rule also energised groups and individuals without particular party persuasion throughout the country. For example, from the 1880s, a large number of working men's clubs, debating societies, and other social organisations became 'constitutional clubs' which maintained at least the veneer of party independence, but were nonetheless committed to empire, throne, and the maintenance of the United Kingdom.

In Ireland the campaign was primarily conducted by popular organisations. The Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union (ILPU) was set

up in 1885, and by 1891 had evolved into the better-known Irish Unionist Alliance (IUA). The first objective for both the ILPU and IUA was to ensure that elections in Britain went the way of Unionism, and that their British friends did not get distracted by other pressing political issues. The second was to pre-emptively organise resistance to any Home Rule bill enacted: to refuse to recognise a Dublin Parliament, obey its laws, pay its taxes, and to resist it by force if necessary. Although some propertied Catholics were involved in the ILPU and IUA, the vast majority were Protestants. They were, unsurprisingly, strongest in Ulster (especially in the six most north-easterly counties), which also represented the most prosperous parts of Ireland, with a booming linen and shipbuilding industry centred in Belfast. Unionism also had a small (and rapidly diminishing) base in the South, concentrated around Dublin and wealthy landowning families in Kerry, Waterford, and Leitrim. While but a small holdout, southern Unionism was politically important because it made it possible to present the campaign as a national – as opposed to merely regional – cause in a country which was around three-quarters Catholic. The leaders of the IUA were Edward Saunderson and from 1910 the formidable Sir Edward Carson, backed up the organiser James Craig. This main grassroots body was also supported by numerous smaller organisations, including the Unionist Clubs Council, the Ulster Defence League, and the various lodges of the Orange Order.

Values and arguments

To understand the Unionist campaign it is first necessary to appreciate the political culture in which it operated. From 1886 until 1918 around two-thirds of adult men could vote in both Britain and Ireland, and elections were primarily conducted through vibrant public speaking campaigns, where huge audiences (of both voters and non-voters) were common. Constituency candidates would often make more than 100 hour-long public speeches even in a three-week campaign, and these were thoroughly reported (sometimes verbatim) by a diligent local press. Candidates would be applauded, cheered, hissed, and would routinely be the target

of hecklers, missiles, and sometimes physical assault. Holding the stage against such opposition, and skilfully and wittily putting down hecklers, was part of the art of the accomplished stump speaker. On the national stage, party leaders would also make huge set-piece speeches reported in national dailies such as *The Times*. Posters, handbills, election songs – and an element of beer, violence, and bribery – added further spice. External pressure groups would often join the fray to agitate for various causes, from Irish Home Rule, to women's suffrage, to anti-vivisectionism. While this vibrant political culture was most associated with elections, similar public meetings and campaigns routinely took place at other times, usually at moments of political excitement.

The Unionist campaign against Home Rule had to adapt its case to fit this contemporary political environment. It had to be able to produce arguments sufficiently entertaining, punchy, and pithy to ride the hurly-burly of the platform, but substantial enough to stand up to the sober criticism of next morning's press. While these arguments took many forms, and were tailored to various local audiences, the most common drew on deep-seated historical values, norms, and prejudices which had to be re-explained, restated, and reinvented to maximise their power and salience when used in public speeches and campaign literature. The most famous exposition was Oxford Professor A.V. Dicey's popular *England's Case Against Home Rule* published in 1886. Dicey expounded three main arguments, which formed the core message of the Unionist campaign.

The first drew on the contemporary stereotype of the Irish as a foolish, drunken and hot-headed race who had produced little of cultural value. Their backwardness, it was argued, made them susceptible to demagoguery and cultish and monolithic behaviour, which explained their fascination with the autocracy and flashy ornamentalism of the Catholic Church. These tendencies made them unsuited to independent self-government, which was proven by the unhappiness, disorder, and poor economic performance that had characterised the period between 1783 and 1800 when Ireland had enjoyed legislative devolution through the 'Grattan

Parliament'. These 17 years – hitherto the subject of little historical interest – were now subjected to rigorous scholarly analysis by both sides in attempts to prove whether the Irish could be trusted to self-govern or not. It should be remembered that Social-Darwinist thinking was influential at this time, especially the racialist view that different peoples possessed essentialised characteristics which made some natural colonial masters, and others natural colonial subordinates. British Unionists were able to demonstrate their point with well-worn comic stories of the stupidity of 'Paddy'. Of course, while this humour was mainly directed against Catholic Irishmen, Protestants also often disliked it, feeling that they were also being tarred with a generic anti-Irish brush.

The second argument – that the loss of Ireland would mean the start of the disintegration of the British Empire – tapped into the imperialist mindset of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. During these years, the British Empire comprised 20-25% of the land mass of the Earth, and its imagery festooned public life, with imperial symbols appearing on biscuit tins, flags, and towels. Imperial exploits were the subject of songs, theatre, and popular fiction. Heroes such as Cecil Rhodes and Lord Roberts were venerated. A popular children's picture book, *The ABC for Baby Patriots*, published in 1899, contained the passages 'C is for colonies... rightly we boast, that of all the great nations, Great Britain has most' and 'E is our Empire where the sun never sets... the larger we make it, the bigger it gets'. Although it would be a misnomer to suggest that a majority of the British public were flag-waving imperialists (indeed, such gaudy jingoism was also widely criticised) imperialism represented a powerful rhetorical resource. It played on the fear of the slippery slope: that if the beloved institution of the British Empire were compromised even slightly, the precedent would lead to the disintegration of the whole. The third and perhaps most important argument drew on an appeal to not abandon fellow Protestant loyalists who would be left to the tender mercies of the Catholic majority, egged on by a vengeful priesthood. The anti-Home Rulers assumed that a government would be installed in Dublin that would

immediately subject the Protestants to civil and religious persecution. It would also implement confiscatory Socialism, subjecting the rich counties of Ulster to punitive redistributive taxation and forcibly divesting Protestants of their land and property. This argument was founded on the elite belief that democratic political systems were suitable only for settled nations of high political intelligence and not for those that were sharply divided on class or sectarian lines, where democracy would give open licence for the majority to tyrannise the minority. An heroic image was promoted of the virtuous loyal Ulsterman holding out for the Empire in a land inhabited primarily by his enemies. Whereas there had previously been little attempt to differentiate the characteristics of the Ulsterman from the population in general, he suddenly found himself depicted as stout, manly, and resolute, standing erect beneath the Union Jack. Despite hailing from Dublin, Edward Carson became the living embodiment of the broad-shouldered straight-taking Ulsterman who would lay down his life for the Crown. For their part, Ulsterwomen were depicted as darkly beautiful, but also as possessing courage and pluck, being prepared to fight to the death should their menfolk fall. The militarised depiction of Ulsterwomen, particularly carrying weapons carried an additional shock factor.

My research into East Anglian politics provides a flavour of what these arguments sounded like when articulated from the political platform. In 1886 for example, Lord Elcho (Conservative candidate for Ipswich) remarked in a speech in 1886:

“If this Bill was passed, they knew every landlord in Ireland would leave the country. Every landlord employed a certain amount of labour, and, putting the number of persons employed at five by each landlord, then the absence of five thousand employers would mean that 25,000 persons would be thrown out of employment”

In the same election, Robert Bourke (Conservative candidate for King’s Lynn) argued:

“There must come a time in the life of an empire [...] and they would see it if they read history, for history after all was the

reflection of the future [...] when the rottenness will show itself and lend to disintegration. The moment a show a rottenness [sic] to the core was the moment at which they began to break up.”

In 1910, the tempo had seemingly been raised still higher. Colonel Kerrison at South Norfolk predicted that:

“Our loyal friends should be handed over to the tender mercies of Roman Catholicism. If we handed them over body and soul to the followers of a creed which was in reality bitterly hostile towards us, we should be doing our fellow creatures a grievous wrong, which we should everlastingly regret.” (Applause)

In the same election NP Jodrell, the candidate for North-West Norfolk, commented on what he saw as ‘Irish characteristics’:

“There exists in that people a certain characteristic, – if I may say so, a want of backbone, a want of stability in self-governing qualities, and a tendency to violent excitement. (Hear, hear.) They are not able to govern themselves; they have never been able to govern themselves since the dawn of history, and I repeat it, that the institutions under which we live – Parliament, jury system, laws, what you like – that have made the British empire and keep it going, are made in England and nowhere else.”

Methods

The first Home Rule bill had been sprung on Parliament, but once it was defeated the Unionist movement held most of the aces. The trump was simply that Home Rule’s proponents were directly challenging the longstanding consensus view of British politics since 1801, and this meant their enemies were fighting an uphill battle. Despite carrying the majority of Liberals with him, Gladstone had created an electorally formidable opponent in the shape of the Unionist alliance. Indeed, the Conservatives plus Liberal Unionists conceded an overall majority to the Liberals in only one election in this period (1906). With the Liberals out of office, Ireland could return Nationalists for all 100 constituencies if she wished, and still not achieve Home Rule.

The Unionists' electoral advantage was founded on the strength and flexibility of the alliance. Having two parties and two sets of leaders allowed the Unionists to appeal to a broader group of voters and remain anchored in the political centre. They also were able to keep the majority of newspaper editors on their side. The Conservatives plus Liberal Unionists also commanded a large majority in the House of Lords who would, if constitutionally viable, use their veto to derail Home Rule bills which passed through the lower house. This happened in 1893, when the second Home Rule Bill was squeezed through the Commons but crushed in the Lords.

In Britain the campaigning strategy of the Unionist alliance was to capitalise on its inbuilt advantage. The 'whig' element of the Liberal Unionists had brought with it the majority of the Liberal party's main donors, and the Conservatives were already well-funded. This financial advantage allowed them to run campaigns and field candidates wherever they wanted, and leave few seats uncontested. It also allowed Liberal Unionists to fight in constituencies where some (or all) of the existing Liberal party organisation remained with the Gladstonians. They were able to employ agents, conduct speaking tours, pay for propaganda – and bankroll the returning officers' expenses – despite being a new party. These financial challenges would normally have represented a huge obstacle for a budding party, as Labour (which was emerging at this time) could testify. Many wealthy British donors were also sending money, speakers, and (after 1913) guns across the Irish Sea, which meant the Ulster Unionists seldom ran short of resources.

The Unionist alliance also attempted to defeat its opponents in elections through superior organisation. The ability to tactically run Liberal Unionists in parts of the country where the Conservatives were comparatively unpopular (such as Scotland and Wales) and allow the Tories to concentrate on areas where they were strong, allowed the alliance usually to fight on its own terms. The Liberals, starved of cash and without such a ruthless party machine, left numerous seats uncontested, and often made

poor tactical decisions on where to concentrate their limited resources. Between elections organisers like Aretas Akers-Douglas and Captain Middleton made tactical choices where to send visiting speakers (often from Ulster), distribute propaganda, and when and where to campaign hard on Home Rule to achieve maximum effect. In short, the alliance played the system expertly, and was usually at least one step ahead of its Liberal opponents. It also bears repeating that Home Rule was in itself widely seen as a vote-loser for the Liberals, and raising its spectre usually represented an easy hit for a Unionist speaker, even if there were many occasions when the cause (at least in Britain) was pushed down the agenda by other issues, and where overusing it sometimes risked giving the impression of flogging a dead horse.

Although winning elections – and dominating Parliament – was the primary strategy for the anti Home Rulers, this could not succeed forever, as the Liberals were likely to return to office sooner or later, especially if they were coy about their Home Rule ambitions. More worrying for Unionists was the possibility that the Liberals might be reliant on Nationalist MPs to govern (whose price for co-operation would surely be Home Rule) and this would force the hand of even a reluctant Liberal Prime Minister. In Ireland, Unionists were acutely aware of this ticking time bomb, especially after the passage of the 1911 Parliament Act, which replaced the Lords' veto with the ability merely to delay bills for two years. The campaign began to organise intensely at the grassroots to prepare for possibility that the first line of defence in Westminster might be breached.

To be useful the IUA had to adopt a different strategy from its Unionist allies in England. While the latter could target elections and persuade the undecided, Irish Unionists could gain comparatively little through such approaches. This was simply because, as a largely sectarian cause, there was little chance of changing anyone's mind on Home Rule (especially by 1911). There was also comparatively little to be gained by running more efficient electioneering efforts, because it was more or less impossible for the Unionists to win any more than 25 Irish seats. The campaign thus

relied on publicity-grabbing demonstrations of Unionist resolve to reject any Dublin Parliament, and resist it by force if necessary. In 1905 the Ulster Unionist Council was formed in Belfast to act as a provisional government if Home Rule was passed. But it was in 1912 – when it looked likely the Liberals would introduce a third Home Rule Bill and back it up with the Parliament Act – that the IUA's campaign really went into overdrive.

Carson's most famous publicity step was the creation of the Ulster Covenant in September 1912. This document pledged the signatory to refuse to recognise a Dublin Parliament, obey its laws, or pay its taxes. The Covenant was signed by Carson beneath the largest Union Jack ever made, at an enormous ceremony. Carson – a gifted platform orator with a particularly personal speaking style – described the Covenant as 'you trusting me and me trusting you'. It was abetted by every conceivable propaganda device: postcards, films, badges, pamphlets, posters, and photos. Many of these used gaudy and powerful symbolism: the red hand of Ulster, William of Orange, the King, Moses, and idealised images of Carson himself. These were accompanied by huge public meetings under the slogans 'Home Rule is Rome Rule', 'Ulster will Fight, and Ulster will be Right', and 'No Surrender'. Carson, meanwhile, was almost deified with carefully choreographed appearances, using the most dramatic modern lighting techniques. His cult of personality was such that James Craig declared in August 1913 that 'Sir Edward Carson has been sent from heaven'. In addition to generating nigh-fanatical enthusiasm (the Covenant eventually gained 471,414 signatories) Carson also managed to galvanise Irish Unionism's disparate strands as never before, uniting working-class organisations, bourgeois loyalist industrialists, and the embattled southern landed gentry.

While the Covenant represented a graphic display of Unionist solidarity (and helped keep British attention focused westwards) it did not demonstrate anything particularly new. That both sides (nationalists as much as loyalists) were passionately and even fanatically devoted to their respective causes was already obvious, but even the largest displays of Irish Unionist enthusiasm could

not hide that they were in the minority. Regardless of the Covenant, the third Home Rule bill was passed by the Commons at the end of 1912, and the Lords duly used their remaining blocking power to delay it for two years. But this meant that time was running out to stop Home Rule.

Carson had one final card to play, which was to threaten violent resistance. By expanding the terms of the Covenant it was comparatively easy for the IUA to transform the document into a call to arms, and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was founded in January 1913. This militia soon boasted 85,000-100,000 men pledged to take up arms against Home Rule. The UVF was regularly – and publically – drilled in military manoeuvres. Initially they used wooden weapons, but after the Larne gun-running in April 1914 (when prohibited military-grade weapons were secretly landed on Ulster beeches) the marches assumed a thoroughly more menacing character, with the most modern machine guns paraded on platforms through Belfast. The official police (who were themselves largely loyalist) either could not – or would not – stop the marches. The message was made abundantly clear: Carson and his private army now effectively controlled Belfast, and Home Rule could not be implemented without something approaching civil war. If the Liberal government balked from implementing their policy, they would almost certainly have to resign and face a general election where it looked highly likely (judging from recent by-elections) that they would lose.

Outcome

We do not know whether Carson's actions would have defeated the third Home Rule Bill, because the outbreak of war in July 1914 stalled implementation of the policy. Both sides – the UVF virtually to a man, and the majority of the Irish Volunteers (the equivalent militarised Nationalist movement) – became absorbed in the war effort. In 1916 a small group of the Volunteers – some of them members of the nascent Sinn Fein – led a violent uprising in Dublin, and occupied the General Post Office. By the time the British authorities intervened to put down what became known

as the Easter Rising, 466 people had been killed. In Westminster there was increasing talk that partition after the war might be the only solution, and even Carson himself had privately been starting to entertain the idea. The argument was rendered still more compelling when, in the general election held shortly after the Armistice in 1918, the radical Sinn Fein almost entirely overturned the old Nationalist Party, capturing 73 seats. Sinn Fein boycotted Westminster, and in 1919 formed its own breakaway government (Dáil Éireann) and declared independence. Fighting followed for the next two years, and British politicians – preoccupied with post-war reconstruction in a world turned upside down – tried to come to a compromise to solve the Irish problem once and for all.

The solution eventually reached was to create of Northern Ireland out of the six most Protestant counties of Ulster, and to annexe the remainder. The UVF had been all but wiped out on the Somme, and the will to resist partition greatly weakened. Carson – highlighting the Protestant minorities in the South and the exclusion of the remaining three Ulster counties of Monaghan, Cavan, and Donegal – declared his deep unhappiness with the compromise, but was in private relieved to retain as much of Ulster as he had. As well as the stranded Protestants, many Catholics (who made up 34% of the population of the new Northern Ireland) felt abandoned. Insofar as this represented a resolution, it was a product of the circumstances arising from the aftermath of war. The devastation meted out on both sides made some form of compromise possible where it would not otherwise have been, and politicians after 1918 took advantage of the moment to beat out the best possible solution to what had seemed an insoluble problem.

For British and Irish Unionists partition represented both success and failure. They had failed to maintain Ireland within the Empire, which – just a decade before the Easter Rising – still looked achievable. Outside the times of political excitement discussed above, Ireland was mostly peaceful in this period, and enjoyed steadily improving living standards. Unionists believed

that by governing Ireland sensibly (and by judiciously redressing the roots of grievances over faith and land) they would be able to ‘kill Home Rule with kindness’ and depoliticise the Catholic majority. But a newly radicalised generation of nationalists – perhaps in part galvanised by the militarisation of the UVF – seized a chance which many believed had disappeared with the retirement of Gladstone in 1894. Insofar as the Unionist cause had succeeded, it gave Protestants a homeland – and almost certainly a larger one than their numbers alone justified (Carson had suspected privately that just four counties might be offered). They had also defeated two Home Rule bills, and may well have beaten the third if the war had not happened. The Unionists did in the end defeat Home Rule, but the penalty was partition.

Finally, the struggle created founding fathers for both Irish states. Carson stands today atop a high column in front of the Stormont Parliament while Éamon de Valera, who fought in the Easter Rising, occupies a similar position in the history of the new Irish Republic.

Analysis: the weakness of the Unionist Campaign

Although the Unionists were a formidable movement – both at parliamentary and grassroots level – they suffered from an inherent weakness common to most reactionary campaigns: namely, their opponents only had to succeed once to win, whereas they had to succeed many times. One disaster or moment of political excitement could ruin years of patient nullification and once lost, the old constitution would be all but impossible to resurrect.

This was a key problem because it was challenging to keep the British (and particularly the English) electorate permanently interested in the Irish question. For much of the period Home Rule was pushed off the agenda by other issues, and the fear that a bill would slip through under the radar was ever present in Ulster. Had the war not happened (and supposing the Unionists had won the general election expected in 1914 or 1915) it still seems unlikely that continually raising and re-raising the Home Rule phantom was a sustainable electoral strategy that would have

yielded success *ad infinitum*. To permanently defeat Home Rule would have required skilled statecraft and a gradual redress of Irish grievances through the existing system of government. To be fair to the Unionists, their stewardship of Ireland in the period after 1886 was generally both prudent and conscientious. It is the stuff of speculation, but if they had managed another decade of killing Home Rule with kindness, twinned with an innovative measure of Irish local government, while somehow taking the edge off Unionist and Nationalist tensions, perhaps they could have succeeded in gradually asphyxiating the Irish Question, and maintaining the United Kingdom as constituted in 1801.

In terms of tactical errors, it can be argued (with the benefit of hindsight) that the militarisation from 1912 was counterproductive. Not only did it galvanise the Irish Volunteers (who raised considerably more soldiers than the UVF), radicalise nationalism (which led to the birth both of Sinn Fein and the IRA), but it also demonstrated that Unionism was now a movement isolated in Ulster. The absence of enthusiasm outside the six most Unionist Ulster countries made it easier for British academics and politicians to begin to think of partition as a viable solution. By the time it was placed on the immediate political agenda in 1918, the idea was no longer seen as revolutionary. Whether partition represented a defeat or victory for the unionism campaign, however, remains an open question.

Selected further reading

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