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# The Irish Question, 1800-1900: Home Rule

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The Act of Union of 1801 saw Ireland lose its parliament and resulted in the Irish Question being at the forefront of British politics throughout the nineteenth century. While the Protestant ascendancy had vehemently opposed the new political arrangement, they became its strongest supporters, unlike their Catholic counterparts who had hoped the union would lead to Catholic emancipation. The failure to deliver on emancipation, largely due to King George III's opposition, led to the political mobilisation of Irish Catholics under Daniel O'Connell's leadership in the 1820s. O'Connell was a powerful orator and organiser, and succeeded in utilising the Catholic Church in mobilising the peasantry into an effective political force. The Catholic Rent allowed all sections of Catholic society to participate in a major political movement and the Catholic Association put Catholic emancipation at the top of the political agenda in both Ireland and Britain. O'Connell was returned as MP for Co. Clare in the 1828 by-election and this forced the government to accede to Catholic demands, with Catholics being permitted to enter parliament the following year.

Throughout the 1830s, O'Connell, allied with the Whigs, secured concessions and benefits for Ireland, and later in the decade he initiated a campaign for the Repeal of the Union, which meant the restoration of the Irish parliament in Dublin, using similar tactics to those which had secured Catholic emancipation. Monster meetings were held throughout the country to advance the Repeal cause and tens of thousands participated. The British authorities were worried by these developments and O'Connell was forced to cancel the Clontarf demonstration in October 1843, after it had been outlawed by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel.

This sounded the death-knell for the Repeal movement and Irish constitutional nationalism for a generation. Young radicals who had previously supported O'Connell, now criticised his political philosophy and methods and established the Young Ireland movement which advocated more revolutionary methods to secure Irish independence.

The failure of the potato crop in 1845 was an important factor in the demise of political agitation as the Irish population was more concerned with survival and the Peel and Russell administrations were criticised over their Irish relief operations. The massive exodus during the Great Famine of 1845-50 also affected Britain as tens of thousands carrying disease crossed the Irish Sea to escape death and famine, arriving in cities such as Liverpool which led to attacks on Irish emigrants. Within Ireland, the Young Irelanders ill-fated rebellion attempt in 1848 lacked public support, but indicated the emergence of militant nationalism as an alternative force in Irish nationalism.

One of the major consequences of the Great Famine was high emigration levels: between 1845 and 1855, 2.1 million people left Ireland. The majority settled in the United States of America, creating an Irish nation abroad and for the rest of the century both militant and constitutional nationalists looked to these exiles for support. Militant nationalists were the first to exploit this group and on 17 March 1856 the Fenian movement was established in New York by the former Young Irelander John O'Mahony, whose objective was to secure Irish independence using military methods. James Stephens became the movement's organiser in

Ireland and initially the authorities were unaware of its activities, but this changed in November 1861 when the former Young Irelander Terence Bellew MacManus, was reburied in Dublin with the Fenians playing a prominent role. The Fenian movement had 50,000 members at its height and infiltrated the British Army regiments in Ireland. It could also rely on tens of thousands of Irishmen fighting in the American Civil War and it was envisaged their military experience could be used in Ireland when the rebellion took place. The American Fenians were also expected to finance the rising. The rising was postponed in 1865 because of divisions in the American movement, the capture of most of the Irish leaders and its infiltration by spies and informers. When the rebellion occurred in March 1867 it was a disaster, with only some parts of the country taking part, and was quickly put down by the authorities. The Fenian impact was greater in Britain as a result of events in Manchester in November 1867 which resulted in the execution of three Fenians after a policeman was killed during an attempt to rescue two Fenian leaders, and on 13 December 1867 when people were killed and injured at Clerkenwell after the Fenians blew up part of the prison wall in an effort to free one of their comrades. For the first time the Irish had brought their military campaign to mainland Britain and while the indigenous population was angry, others believed Irish grievances needed to be addressed. The Liberal Party leader, W.E. Gladstone, fought the 1868 general election on the principal of 'Justice for Ireland' and for the next twenty-five years was the principal British politician to put Ireland at the top of the political agenda in Britain.

The late 1860s saw the different strands of Irish nationalism uniting under the Amnesty Association, which was established in June 1869 to secure the release of Fenian prisoners. It held a series of nationwide demonstrations which also highlighted other grievances such as agrarian reform, Catholic university education and repeal of the Act of Union. While different organisations existed throughout the 1860s to promote these issues, such as farmers' clubs and the National Association, they acted in isolation and there was little cooperation between them. The Amnesty Association helped unite these groups and at its head was Isaac Butt, a former Conservative MP and Protestant, who had defended with distinction the Fenian prisoners at their trials.

In May 1870, the Home Government Association was established in Dublin with the aim of securing Home Rule for Ireland. Butt was the most prominent political figure present and in September 1870 outlined his political ideals in a pamphlet, *Irish Federalism: Its Meaning, Its Objects and Its Hopes*, and indicated he did not want the breakup of the empire. The Home Government Association was more of a pressure group to secure Home Rule, and while it contested by-elections it depended on local political groupings and farmers' clubs to provide a local organisational framework. The national leadership and central office in Dublin contributed little and as a result had little control over the selection of candidates. The candidates in the early electoral contests were landowners with Conservative leanings who failed to secure cross-party support and in January 1871 John Martin became the Association's first elected MP. The movement suffered as it was primarily Dublin-based and no attempt was

made to extend its influence into the provinces. In November 1873, it attempted to revive its flagging fortunes with a national conference at the Rotunda, Dublin, and became the Home Rule League (also known as the Home Rule Party). The movement hoped to put in place better organisational structure because a general election was imminent. The suddenness of the 1874 general election meant the party was once again reliant on local organisations to select its candidates and conduct the electioneering. Fifty-nine Home Rule MPs were elected, but only one-third were committed to the cause, as the rest had only taken on the principle to retain their parliamentary seats. The election also saw the return to parliament of Fenians such as Joseph Biggar and John O'Connor Power, and a tenant farmer, William H. O'Sullivan. In 1873, Butt had secured the Fenian leadership's support for constitutional action on the basis that if progress was not made within three years he would espouse more revolutionary methods.

The period 1874-80 was a time of great challenges for the Home Rule movement. The Conservatives under Benjamin Disraeli were in power with a comfortable parliamentary majority and were not interested in Irish affairs. Bills in favour of Home Rule were introduced by Irish members, but were heavily defeated. The party allowed its MPs a free vote on all issues except Home Rule, and this weakened its effectiveness and coherence, leading to growing disillusionment within Ireland and the radical section of the party. From April 1875 Joseph Biggar, John O'Connor Power, Charles Stewart Parnell and others engaged in parliamentary obstruction, delaying the business of the House of Commons. This was opposed by Butt and the more moderate members, but supported by sections such as

the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain, which elected Parnell its president in August 1877. By this stage Butt was increasingly absent from the House of Commons because of financial difficulties, leaving the party without effective leadership and direction. His death on 5 May 1879 occurred when the party appeared to be on the decline and he was replaced by William Shaw.

The radical section of the Home Rule Party used the agrarian agitation that was established in the west of Ireland in 1879 to further its political aims and provide it with leadership. Parnell was elected president of the National Land League on 21 October 1879 and wanted the movement to become a national organisation because of the political power which tenant farmers had in the east and south. At the 1880 general election, Parnell used the Land League to have his candidates elected in those constituencies where the agitation was strongest and became the party's leader on 17 May. The Whig section gradually left the party over the coming months leaving Parnell in control of a more disciplined organisation. While he remained head of the agrarian movement, Parnell found it increasingly difficult to control its rank and file members. Gladstone's 1881 Land Act satisfied most tenant farmers, in particular the land courts which fixed judicial rents. The party had difficulties meeting the expectations of the various agrarian groupings and decided to test the act with selected cases. In October 1881 Parnell was imprisoned and issued the 'No Rent Manifesto' from Kilmainham Jail which called on the tenants to withhold their rents while their political leaders were incarcerated. When they were released in May 1882, Parnell realised the agrarian movement

could not be controlled and established the Irish National League on 17 October 1882, whose aim was to advance the Home Rule movement, although it included farmer and labourer grievances. Local branches were established throughout the country, but the organisation was firmly controlled by the national leadership.

The Home Rule movement between 1882 and 1885 became a centralised, disciplined party under Parnell. Parliamentary candidates had to take a pledge at selection conventions, promising to vote in accordance with the leadership's directives. Many of the newly elected MPs who were not financially independent were paid a salary by the party, ensuring total loyalty. Home Rule was greatly facilitated by the 1884 Franchise Act which increased the Irish electorate nearly six-fold, and the 1885 Electoral Act which created single seat constituencies. Most of the new voters were Catholics and nationalists, steadfast in their support of Home Rule, which became the dominant political issue in British and Irish affairs after 1885. Parnell's party secured eighty-five seats in Ireland and a seat in the Scottish Ward in Liverpool at the 1885 general election. The party now held the balance of power in parliament and played the British parties against each other, and while initially supporting the Conservatives, it changed sides when Gladstone came out in support of Home Rule. Home Rule created great divisions in Britain and not only split the Liberal Party, with ninety-three MPs voting against the 1886 Home Rule bill, but saw also the emergence of the Irish Unionist Party, who opposed the establishment of an Irish parliament, maintaining that 'Home Rule meant Rome Rule'. Their concerns were allayed when a Conservative/Liberal Unionist

government came to power under Lord Salisbury with a policy of 'Killing Home Rule with Kindness'. The Conservatives and their allies were in power between 1886 and 1906, except for a three year period, and passed legislation for land purchase schemes, the 1898 Local Government (Ireland) Act, and the Congested Districts Board. The decline of Home Rule was aided by Parnell's fall in 1890 at a time when the issue was gaining momentum in Britain and Ireland. Parnell's divorce case caused a split in the Irish Parliamentary Party between those who opposed the former leader, who died in 1891, led by Justin McCarthy and John Dillon, and Parnell's supporters led by John Redmond. Throughout the 1890s, both sides were as opposed to each other as they were to the Conservatives and it was only in January 1900 when the party united under Redmond's leadership that the focus returned to Home Rule. In this period, 1893 was the only occasion when Home Rule legislation was introduced into parliament, but the House of Lords resoundingly defeated Gladstone's second attempt to provide Home Rule for Ireland. In the 1890s, an increasing number of Irish people expressed their nationalism through cultural organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Revival movement, indicating the demise of Home Rule. The Home Rule question not only dominated Irish affairs in the nineteenth century, but also had a major impact on the British political landscape.

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