Democratisation and Polarisation in Ireland: the Covenant and the Third Home Rule Bill

Experiments in the British Constitution.

Margaret O’ Callaghan – draft paper
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Commemorations may be dubious monuments for some historians, but centenary commemorations give us one great gift - the ability to map a comparable duration from the past – in this case the 1880’s to 1912 - against the sense of a comparable period from our own time. For those of us who have lived through the northern conflict we can see that, for us, from 1886 to 1912 is an analogous timeframe to that period from the Anglo Irish Agreement of 1985 to now.

So we can think of the period from Gladstone’s first Home Rule Bill of 1886 to the Third Bill of 1912 and the Ulster Covenant of that same year as perhaps not so very long a period.
We can also perhaps recall that the 1880’s were game-changing in Britain and Ireland because the 1884 and 1885 reforms of the franchise marked the democratisation of politics. The numbers who could vote were massively increased.

This was a political revolution for all political parties as they entered uncharted territory in terms of how to deal with a mass electorate. For Albert Venn Dicey and for a host of other constitutional analysts this opened up a new chapter in the British constitution. The challenge, as those politicians and social analysts saw it, was to educate the new electorate into the mentality of the elite— to guide and control the protean masses. That was a long term aim in unchartered electoral waters.
But that game-changing democratisation of politics was more fundamental in Ireland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom because of Ireland’s demographics.

And because the British electoral system of first past the post rendered local minorities representationless in Ireland it meant the polarisation of politics on pro and anti Union lines, broadly reflecting religious persuasion. This was exacerbated as a consequence of Gladstone’s conversion to Home Rule.

Democratisation, the massively increased electorate, polarised popular politics on the ground through the elections of 1885 and 1886 and divided the country into pro and anti Home Rule camps. And in Ireland on the ground the pro=Home Rule case had the majority

Democratisation also divided the elites in Ireland and in the United Kingdom on the subject of Ireland.
So what you have is polarisation at the key moment of democratisation. That is not an accidental consequence of the democratisation of politics in Ireland but its absolute corollary - a result of the confessional and ideological geography of Ireland and its relationship with the British state and empire, products of its complex history.

As constitutional theorists of deeply divided societies Donald Horowitz and Arend Lijphart disagree on many things but they agree on one indicator for successful consociationalism in divided societies in the present, and that is the presence of cooperation between elites at the moment of mass democratisation. That is precisely what you do not get in Ireland.

Irish Unionists of all social classes are enfolded within the pro Union elite of both islands, and Irish nationalists are politically educated in Home Rule through the land question and the new cultural politics into a very different formation, and an oppositional one.
Eugenio Biaggini has argued for Irish Home Rule as a kind of subset of British Liberalism but that is I think a far from persuasive case.

There are sections of Irish nationalism that work closely with British Liberalism in the then coming decade of the 1890’s, and there is devout affection for Gladstone in Ireland as a kind of Home Rule enabler or deliverer, but effectively the process of democratisation works very differently in Ireland to how it works on the other island.

The Home Rule to which Gladstone was converted was however primarily conceived by him as a means of stabilising the Union in the light of a declension of what he perceived to be Irish ills—religion, land and administration. The Home Rule that Gladstone saw himself as embracing was essentially the arrangement for local administration put forward by Isaac Butt.
But the language of the Land War, the rhetoric of agrarian resistance both declared class war but also a new sensibility of popular nationalist Home Rulwe politics that was facilitated by the Parnellite newspaper *United Ireland* built out of Richard Pigott’s formerly motley collection of organs.

That Home Rule Irish nationalist rhetoric was both new and old. It carried forward an amalgam of older rhetorics - O’ Connell’s extreme language designed to embolden the weak, TD Sullivan’s ballads, the harder fenian texts, and an older language from agrarian secret societies and rural regulatory actions. This became the idiom of Irish nationalist self-representation from the 1880’s onwards..

During the 1880’s, particularly after the introduction of the First Home Rule Bill in 1886 - the speeches of Irish Nationalist MP beckoned to limitless Irish national patriotic vistas ahead - their own fields their own land their own territory. The Conservative strike-back after 1886 was to bring this language up as incitement to criminality. Parnellism and Crime, a massive enquiry into a near decade of the Irish movement established by the Conservative government of Lord Salisbury and his nephew Arthur Balfour examined the
political movement retrospectively as a criminal conspiracy. And as Irish Vhief Secretary Balfour’s main man of business and most trusted law officer was Edward Carson, the man whose career he made.

For whole categories of Irish landowners, Irish Unionists, English, Welsh and Scottish Unionists Home Rule was quite simply unallowable. That is what the tens of thousands of Irish Unionist Alliance and Property Defence Association pamphlets that flooded England from the eighteen eighties to the First World War were about- to explain to the English electorate that Ireland was a dangerous, savage and brutal place that could never be permitted any form of self government.

We think now teleologically through the Third Home Rule Bill and indeed the Fourth if you want to see the 1920 Government of Ireland Bill as such, and see the move in this direction as a gradual extending of the Home Rule project.

But what that obscures is the extent to which for most Tories, and gradually a very
large number of Liberals, Home Rule after 1893 when it achieved a commons majority but was blocked by the House of Lords was, it was hoped, a receding chimera.

Maurice Cowling, one of the most interesting conservative historical political analysts of the twentieth century in writing about the 1867, extension of the franchise was at pains to point out that straining at the railings of Hyde Park was not the reason for that reform. So too we need to remember, even if we do not go the full distance with Cowling or with Cooke and Vincent in *The Governing Passion* on 1886, that the connections between high and low politics were complex and refracting, not straightforward at all.

Parliamentary Irish politics took place in at least two theatres—Westminster and the hustings in Ireland. The fragmented Irish Parliamentary Party in the years after Parnell’s death in 1891 and the reunited UIL after the new century continued to speak in a hard rhetoric of quasi independence—Meleday’s book shows that Redmond’s
rhetoric in the 1890’s when he spoke on fenian Amnesty platforms with Maud Gonne, the Dalys of Limerick and others, could be very strong and sounds quite removed from the neo imperial tones in which he spoke by 1910.. William O’ Brien may have been the only Irish Parliamentary Party politician to see that the gap between what Home Rule promised, and the Irish nationalist electorate expected, and what the imperial state would allow, was huge.

The leverage of Parnell was gone before his fall. It was really gone from the irrevocable decision of the Conservative Party and Liberal Unionist allies to see Home Rule as a threat to Empire and unallowable. There is nothing in the public or private communications of any leading Tory politician in the succeeding two decades as far as I am aware that indicates otherwise, The threat and danger of Home Rule for the savage other place also does some electoral service for Tories and Liberal Unionists as a subset of wider imperial jingoism. It can help to win elections.
Killing Home Rule with kindness may be a well-worn cliché but the purpose of Tory governance in Ireland was to change the nature of popular politics by economic amelioration after firm repression. And it did appear to work.

The Irish party, or sections of it are very successful at cooperating with both Tories and Liberals in bringing a range of improvements to Ireland in these decades.

John Dillon’s worries about the dangers of successful land purchase measures taking the fire out of the Home Rule cause were not really that misplaced.

The Irish Councils Bill of 1908 represented the kind of Home Rule that Liberals were willing to offer and that Tories might have accepted.

But this year 1908, is one year after 1907, the year during which what James Joyce amusingly stated ‘Home Rule Comes of Age’ - it was twenty one years from the First Home Rule Bill of 1886.

And if you look at Tom Garvin’s work on the social
backgrounds of the revolutionaries it is clear that the respective generational cohorts who had grown up in the messianic language of imminent Home Rule lived in that frame of nationalist expectation. Had the Council’s Bill gone through in 1908 things might have placated this generation. That did not happen. The Irish issue was shelved again after 1908.

The collision of two sharply differentiated world views – the Irish nationalist and the British and Irish Unionist were lit up and exposed by the forcing ground of Asquith’s unforeseen and imposed necessity to introduce some form of so called Home Rule through the fall out of the second great change in the British constitution in these years- the Parliament Bill. Once again British parliamentary necessities that had nothing particularly to do with Ireland changed the ground of Irish nationalist and Unionist politics.

The Parliament Act similarly marked a revolution in governance. It confirmed the dimly seen reality of the 1880’s - that governance could no longer be restrained or
held back by the aristocracy of the House of Lords. It meant that Home Rule that had a parliamentary majority periodically since 1893 would automatically become law if the Act passed through the House of Commons on three successive occasions. It also gave Redmond the power to extract a promise to introduce such a measure from the Liberal government if it wanted his necessary support. It did not give him a balance of power, because the leverage that the nationalist representatives had briefly enjoyed under Parnell was unrecoverable after the Tories irrevocably pledged themselves against Home Rule in 1886.

Both of these changes – the representation expansion of the 1880’s and the constitutional revolution in the balance of power between the Houses of Lords and Commons- marked specific types of revolutionary consequences in Ireland, though both were initiated with little primary consideration of what their differentiated results might be there.
TP O’ Connor in a work published in 1929 wrote

‘And it has been seen that Ireland, under the urge of this movement, had gradually possessed the mind of Gladstone, and set him on with devotion to the idea of her emancipation, so that at the time this narrative approaches he was to make the bold leap to Home Rule that took English people’s breath away.

With the fact accomplished nowadays, all that hubbub may seem strange; but the younger generation who cannot understand these things have only to examine the literature and speeches of the time to see how Gladstone’s decisive advance was regarded with horror; how to so many otherwise well-balanced minds dismemberment of the Empire should seem imminent; how the then Prince of Wales expressed the opinion that Gladstone’s mind was going, and how the Queen was urging upon friends of his that he should retire from active leadership and go up to the Lords, where he would be impotent to carry forward these revolutionary
proposals into which she read a menace to the very throne’

Paul Bew quotes Frank Percy Crozier as saying that all kinds of Tory madnesses were allowable in 1912 ‘Because the constitution is suspended’ Frank Percy Crozier

But that is how so many Tories and Unionists saw it.

Democratisation had not brought the two islands closer together. It had in fact driven Unionists in both islands and nationalists in Ireland into two different world views. Social relations broke down between the upper echelons of the Liberal party

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\[\text{footnote}{\text{T.P. O’Connor, Memoirs of an old parliamentarian Vol 2 (London, 1929) p}}\]

\[\text{footnote}{\text{Frank Percy Crozier Impressions and Recollections (1920) Ireland forever (1932) DIB entry Richard Hawkins Michael Hopkinson (ed) The last days of Dublin Castle; the Mark Sturgis diaries (2000) Samuel Murray Hussey great great uncle, Col Richard Malone of Baronstown Co Westmeath an uncle, brought up in aunts house in Castleknock when not at Wellington. Came back from Canada in 1912 because of Ulster crisis, joined British League for the Defence of Ulster and the Union (1913). 3 August 1920 and enrolled under RIC service number 72229 to command the new force later known as the ‘Auxiliary Division RIC Dismissed 21 men after Trim raid. Tudor reinstated them pending a full enquiry. Crozier said this had been done for fear of what they might reveal and resigned on 19 February 1921, said Tudor and Macready controlled by ‘a small, silent, powerful, unscrupulous and vicious gang of men’.}}\]
in 1886. But in 1912 there was far more cross-party confabbing on Home Rule that the surface theatre might lead us to believe

Arthur Balfour decided to resign as leader of the Conservative and Unionist party in September 1911. One of his biographers Ruddock Mackay \(^3\) writes that his home at Carlton House Terrace was frequented by the liberal and social democratic Webbs and other Fabian friends of theirs over the following years. He did not confine his intellectual and social relationships to Conservatives. Through this set Balfour, according to FSL Lyons developed a friendship with Alice Stopford Green\(^4\) the most important historian for the Irish revolutionary generation, and Roger Casement’s closest friend and political ally.

Balfour\(^5\) turned down an offer to be on the key cross party Committee of Imperial Defence after retiring as leader, though he was briefed on

\(^3\) Ruddick Mackay (241 quoting Lyons 323

\(^4\) Alice Stopford Green *The making of Ireland and its undoing* (1911)

\(^5\) On Nationality and Home Rule Nottingham speech Gifford Lectures 1913
all that happened there by his former Tory colleague, now Liberal government minister at the Admiralty, Winston Churchill.

Balfour backed Churchill on redeploying the navy to North Sea and wrote in support of Churchill to his friend the Liberal Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey\textsuperscript{6}.

p243 My point is that there were close cross party communications in London throughout this crisis about Ireland.

Balfour in January 1913 finally agreed to sit on the relevant committee of the CID- the Invasion Committee - and spent seven months of 1913 on Home Rule and Anglo German relations. John Morley, the key Liberal advocate of Home Rule after Gladstone’s death. sat on that committee too and both of them attended ten further meetings before the summer of 1913. After 10 July 1913 Balfour was fully briefed by Maurice Hankey secretary of the CID.

Balfour signed the key report published in April 1914 with ten Liberal ministers, Lord Esher and key servicemen.

\textsuperscript{6} Mackay p243
I used to think that Roger Casement knew a few minor figures in the Foreign Office. But Tyrrell to whom he was very close was at the top of the Foreign Office. Casement’s thesis on the two British parties—the Conservative and Unionist Party and the Liberals—was that really from the point of Rosebery’s predominant partner speech in 1895 when he indicated a desire to drop Home Rule as a core policy, and certainly from the time of the new politics of the Boer War and the Committee on Imperial Defence at the turn of the century that neither the Tories nor the Liberals wanted to grant Home Rule to Ireland nor had they the slightest interest in so doing.

That is the true meaning of the Irish Council’s Bill of 1908. It was a realistic Liberal attempt to offer what the British political elite could just about tolerate. But by 1908 it was very much less that what Irish Home Rulers had been lead to expect. It was also more that anything Irish Unionists, particularly Irish Ulster Unionists would accept.
In January 1914 Bonar Law asked his former leader who he has displaced, Balfour’s advice on stopping Lords’ amendment to the Army Annual Bill thus forcing a general election. Balfour advised against it. The Curragh mutiny the next month made it unnecessary in any case.

In July 1914 Balfour was specifically excluded from the final Buckingham Palace Conference. Though the King and Bonar Law wanted him there Asquith would not have him. According to Asquith on Home Rule Balfour was a ‘a real wrecker’.

Getting the Third Home Rule Bill was an unintended and horrifying consequence of the Parliament Bill. No British party had any intention of introducing a Home Rule Bill if they could have got away with not doing so, The Liberals could not in 1912 because they needed John Redmond’s party and their votes to stay in power.

7 Mackay 247 Balfour to BL 3 Feb 1914 no
They had removed the veto power of the House of Lords so it could not endlessly 
block and piece of legislation. That included a Home Rule Bill.

As Ronan Fanning and others have pointed out Churchill and Lloyd George had 
tried to make some separate provision for Ulster before the 
Bill was introduced in January 1912. But Micawberesque hopings drove the 
Liberal government on. The Home Rule Bill was a fairly niggardly affair in any 
case but it was more than either of the two British parties had wanted to offer. The 
new debates on a federal UK, hinted at by Asquith tentatively through his strange 
introductory speech represented another map of a potential route of salvation from 
Home Rule for Ireland that came out of Milner’s kindergarted, that think-tank for 
the British empire that came out of the South African war. It was a wait and see 
policy that invited Unionists to do their best.

But really they were all just hoping for the best in a country without maps as the 
public debate opened up the yawning chasm between what Irish nationalists had 
become comfortable with expecting over three decades what Unionists had
fondly hoped they could see off forever and what any British government was prepared to give to Nationalists wholest wishing to retain the Union.

Balfour, ever one to call a spade a shovel, pointed out in the summer of 1916 that the game had changed. Give Redmond something there and then- this was after the 1916 Rising- what had been denied for so long- or his and John Dillon’s life’s work would be blown away. Sadly Balfour could not succeed in saving them in 1916 because his followers had heard the beat of a different drum and the language of a different process of democratisation for so long.

Democratisation meant polarisation in Ireland and collision was its ineluctable consequence, especially as government had run out of ideas and invited a free for all.