

The Liberal Government came close to granting Ireland Home Rule in 1914. **Jeremy Smith** examines why it failed and what happened after.

Asquith, the Third Home Rule Bill and the Easter Rising

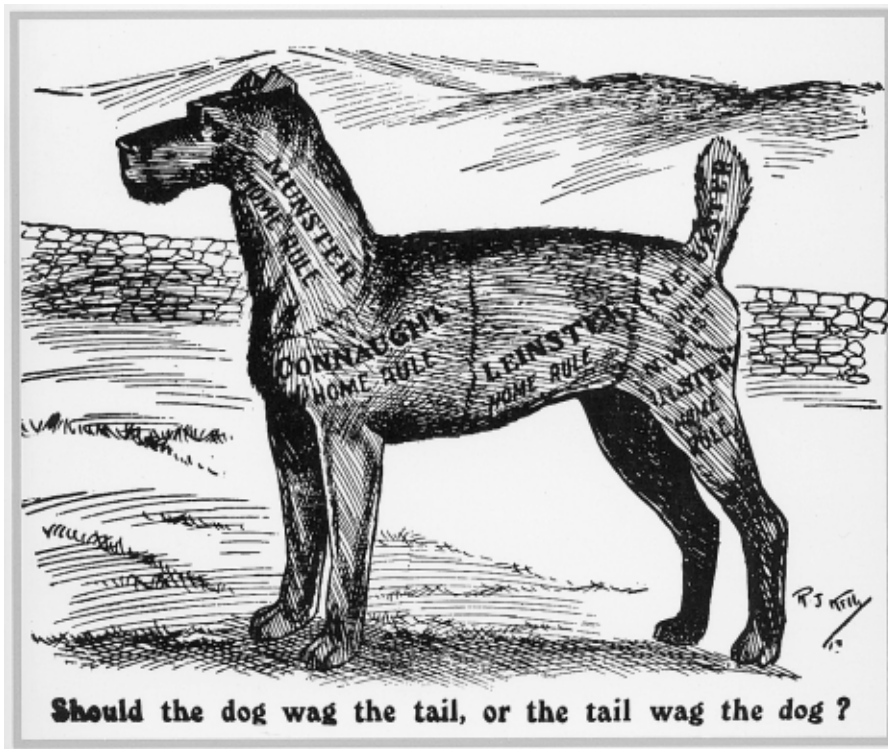
An abiding myth of Anglo-Irish history has been the notion that British policy in Ireland was characterised above all else by ‘too little, too late’. Whether it was Catholic Emancipation in 1828, Disestablishment in 1869, Gladstone’s land reforms of the 1870s or the Home Rule bills of 1886, 1893 or 1912 (which were not just late but never actually arrived), the British Government has displayed an unerring knack towards poor time keeping. Explanations of this trait range from Machiavellian self-interest to colonial techniques of ‘divide and rule’, and from a basic misunderstanding of Irish people and society, to an almost institutionalised tendency towards prevarication and apathy in the governance of Ireland.

Irish Republicanism has developed this myth further. Physical force is held to be legitimised by the evidence that a British government will only take notice of violence and that when it does so it tends to over-react. Within this paradigm most of the ‘great’ episodes in Irish dissent must be understood as justifiable pressure on a recalcitrant authority, for example Fenian activity in the 1860s, the Land Wars of the 1870s and 1880s, the development of the Irish volunteer movement or most recently the emergence of the IRA.

For subscribers to the prevarication and apathy model, no period more clearly demonstrates the force of the hypothesis than the Liberal ministry of Asquith between 1910 and 1916. The drift towards civil war from 1912 and then the Dublin Rising of 1916 have long been attributed to the almost criminal neglect of a Prime Minister who was allegedly more concerned with love-ditties to Venetia Stanley or befuddled with

claret, and to a Chief Secretary – Augustine Birrell – whose days were spent composing verse or witty ripostes. Historians have read Asquith’s oft-quoted phrase ‘wait and see’ as an enduring epitaph for his government’s mishandling of Ireland.

There is much to commend such a representation. Well before the Dublin Easter Rising in 1916 the Liberal government was thought hesitant and irresolute in its Irish policy – its introduction of the Home Rule Bill in April 1912, for example, was seen as the consequence of dependence upon Irish Nationalist votes in the Commons rather than any long-standing ideological commitment. During the Bill’s progress, the Government signally failed to confront the build-up of resistance or to uphold law and order in Ireland, allowing the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and later the Irish Volunteers to mobilise unchecked and with little hindrance to their attempts to acquire arms. Indeed an arms ban was not finally introduced until December 1913, several years too late and without the political will behind it to prevent the Larne and Howth ‘gun-running’ episodes in 1914. Unionist leaders Sir Edward Carson and James Craig, and Andrew Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, all avoided prosecution despite their openly seditious speeches, a show of political weakness that had rarely been extended to Irish Nationalist rhetoricians. More seriously, Asquith fatally delayed his compromise plan to settle the differences between Nationalists and Unionists until the very last moment, early in 1914. By this stage, with the acute polarisation of attitudes and opinions, and both sides highly organised and apparently well armed, it is difficult to imagine a more



unpropitious moment in which to negotiate a settlement. 'As was so often and so tragically the case with British policy in Ireland, on each occasion too little was offered too late.'

Liberal prevarication continued into the war. Unlike the Ulstermen, Nationalists under their leader John Redmond had followed a constitutional path to achieving their goal, yet were forced to watch their keenly won Home Rule bill suspended for the duration of the war. The postponement allowed elements advocating physical force in Ireland to gain influence and eventually to seize the initiative from the constitutional parties. On the outbreak of hostilities Redmond offered the Irish Volunteers to the British war effort and requested a unified Irish Brigade, as had been granted to the Ulstermen; both were repudiated.² This pointless affront to Redmond was compounded during the Cabinet reshuffle of 1915, when Sir Edward Carson was made Attorney-General. By failing to provide any obvious recompense for the Nationalist party's loyalty to the British war effort, government 'wait and see' provided a golden opportunity for more extreme Nationalists and Republicans, which they took in 1916. Yet even in the days leading up to the Easter Rising, with intelligence reports alerting Dublin Castle to the possibility of a rising at Easter, Birrell

could inform a close acquaintance that 'I laugh at the whole thing'.³ While elements of Ireland gently smouldered, the British Government appeared powerless and unconcerned, more preoccupied by the forthcoming Fairyhouse races than by troubling thoughts of insurrection.

But to characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is to misunderstand its predicament and strategy. On one level Asquith would have argued that his approach was one of common sense, where no viable alternative existed, and on a political question that had become, by 1910, structurally resistant to an easy, or indeed to any, compromise. To use a modern term, Ireland was already experiencing 'zero-sum' politics, with Nationalists committed to all-Ireland

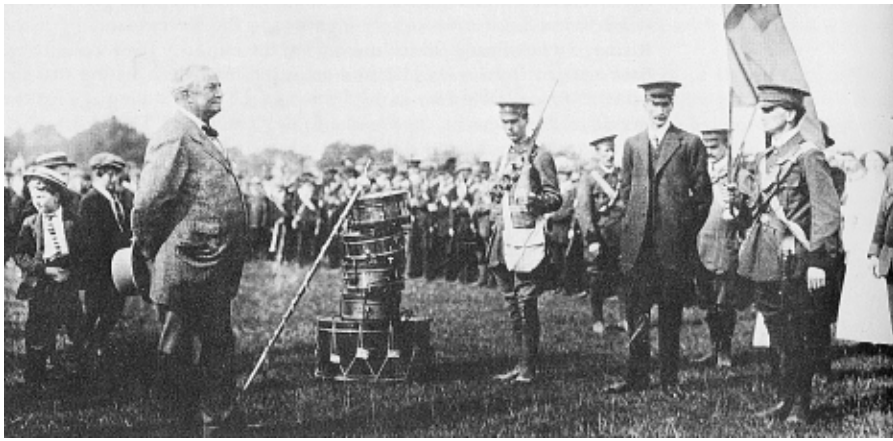
Home Rule and Ulstermen determined to maintain nine, or at the very least six, counties of Ulster within the United Kingdom. Asquith's line, therefore, was one of damage-limitation, aimed at preventing a far more explosive situation, if not actual civil war – an aim he successfully achieved between 1912 and 1916 (indeed, we might argue before 1919). To characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is therefore to misunderstand the dilemmas it faced and tactics it was employing.

Indeed, this apparent Liberal indifference might have had a more positive impulse behind it. Asquith realised early on that some form of temporary partition or 'special treatment' would be needed to appease the Ulstermen so that Home Rule could be granted to the rest of Ireland. The difficulty lay in selling this to both sides. Asquith calculated that by allowing a sense of looming disaster and emergency to develop, Nationalists would be encouraged into accepting some compromises to their Bill, as was tentatively achieved by February 1914. On the other hand those same pressures could scare Ulster into lowering its expectations; a not unreasonable assessment in light of recent research revealing strains and weaknesses within the Ulster Volunteer Force and plans for a Ulster provisional government.⁴ So behind Asquith's policy of 'wait and see' there lurked a subtle attempt to manoeuvre both Irish parties into settlement.

Before the success or failure of this approach could be tested, the outbreak of war deflected attention on to European affairs. But failure should not automatically be assumed. Facing the

Unionist leaders: Sir Edward Carson and Andrew Bonar Law





Nationalist leader: John Redmond and Irish Volunteers

Ulstermen with the reality of having to choose between implementing their rickety provisional government and actually taking up arms against a British Army, could well have been just the type of *denouement* necessary to push Carson and Craig into a settlement.⁵ In addition, it should not be overlooked that the Home Rule Bill was actually put on the statute book by Asquith in September 1914 (though suspended for the war) against the bitter opposition of Unionists and at some considerable political risk to his own position. The goal of O'Connell, Butt and Parnell had been won and constitutional nationalism vindicated. And far from laying the groundwork for the Easter Rising, the Bill's suspension was followed by some 150,000 – 200,000 Irishmen signing up to fight in France for the British Empire – in contrast to the 1,500 Volunteers who took part in the Rising. If this was neglect, then it was productive, successful and for the British army an invaluable injection of men.

The charge of neglect ultimately rests upon the outbreak of the Easter Rising in 1916. Yet in two significant respects such a claim appears groundless.

First, the Rising took everyone completely by surprise. Despite many vague snippets of intelligence, both the military and political arms of British rule in Ireland were united in perceiving no serious threat to civil order. This was based upon Sir Roger Casement's earlier arrest off the Kerry coast and failure to land arms for the Volunteers, without which a 'practical' rebellion was impossible. Moreover, on the very day of the planned rising, Eoin MacNeill, president of the Volunteers, called off the

movement's Easter manoeuvres, the cover under which Dublin was to be seized. Thus, when Patrick Pearse and friends marched into the GPO on Easter Monday they did so to the astonishment not just of the British, but of many leaders of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Sinn Fein, including the likes of MacNeill, Hobson and Arthur Griffith. Given this universal amazement it is difficult to imagine how the government might have obviated the very slim possibility of rebellion, particularly without slipping into coercive measures that might actually have generated the rebellion they were trying to avoid. Furthermore, the eventual scale of the Easter Rising, so small in numerical, geographical and military terms, was surely testament not to Liberal indifference but to the relative success of a passive, non-confrontational Liberal policy.

Second, the galvanisation of Irish popular opinion against British rule was less the product of the Rising than of the way in which the British authorities regained control – in particular the imposition of martial law, atrocities committed by British soldiers that earned popular infamy, such as the killing of the pacifist writer Sheehy-Skeffington, and the manner of the subsequent executions of the rebel leaders. In other words, what roused Irish opinion towards more extremist Nationalist sentiment, and towards Sinn Fein from 1917, was a shift in policy and an approach away from Asquith's more low-key and non-interventionist line. Interestingly, many commentators have long speculated that a more liberal reaction to the events of 1916, playing

down their importance, resisting executions and restoring normalcy as quickly as possible, might have successfully alienated (if not belittled) the extreme Nationalists, undermined what popular sympathy existed for physical force solutions and reinforced the position of the Irish Nationalists and their commitment to the constitutional path.

At fault, then, was not the failure of Liberal policy but its abandonment during the Rising, when arguably the situation most obviously required just such a liberal approach. In its place policy was handed over to the military authorities under the command of General Maxwell, who believed the restoration of order came by unleashing a robust coercive regime. This was perhaps an inevitable shift in policy given the circumstances. But it also reflected wider political developments, including the growing strength of Unionist forces within the Asquith Cabinet since their entry in 1915, and the mounting controversy over the issue of conscription. Given this drift, the reaction to the Easter Rising marked the formalisation of a policy that had had been sliding towards 'militarism' since 1915.

As Roy Douglas demonstrates in the article that follows, this would reach a climax in June 1916, when the Unionists Walter Long and Lord Lansdowne obstructed Lloyd George's attempts to introduce Home Rule immediately, thereby frustrating perhaps the last hope of a peaceful resolution of the Irish problem, and leading directly to the strife and civil war of 1919 – 22.

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1 Jalland, P., *The Liberals and Ireland*, London (1980) pp. 261–2.

2 Bew, P., *John Redmond*, Dublin (1996).

3 The Earl of Midleton, *Records and Reactions*, London (1939) p. 229.

4 Jackson, A., 'The Larne Gun-Running Incident', *History-Ireland*, (1.1.1993); and Foy, M., *The Ulster Volunteer Force: Its domestic development and political impact*, PhD, Queen's University Belfast (1986).

5 Jackson, A., 'Unionist Myths, 1912–1985', *Past & Present*, (1992); see also Jackson, A., *Sir Edward Carson*, Dublin (1993).