



Unit 4:

THE HOME RULE CRISIS, 1912-14

A Short History

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HOME RULE PARTY REUNITED

The Irish Parliamentary Party (also known as the Home Rule Party) reunited in 1900 after a bitter, decade-long split between the Parnellites and anti-Parnellites. Wexford-born leader of the Parnellites, John Redmond, was chosen to lead the united Home Rule Party into the new century. While he was widely regarded as a fine speaker, John Redmond lacked Parnell's charisma and struggled to inspire young Irish nationalists to support the long-divided, ineffectual Home Rule Party. New movements such as the Gaelic League, the GAA and Sinn Fein proved more attractive to many.

Redmond's political ambition was Irish self-government as part of the British Empire with the King as head of state (Home Rule). The Conservative Party was in power in 1900, so and there was no prospect of Home Rule in the near future. Nationalists became more optimistic in 1906 when the Liberal Party under Campbell-Bannerman won an overwhelming victory in the general election and returned to power with a majority in the House of Commons.



THE RETURN OF THE LIBERAL PARTY, 1906-1909

Unlike 1893 and 1886 - when the first two Home Rule bills were introduced by Prime Minister William Gladstone - the Liberals did not need the votes of the Irish Party to remain in power in 1906. It was impossible for Redmond to get a commitment from the Liberals to bring in Home Rule Bill. The Liberals concentrated instead on bringing in the social reforms promised during their election campaign. The Conservative-dominated House of Lords rejected several of these reforms between 1906 and 1909.

SINN FEIN

Founder of the Sinn Fein Movement, Arthur Griffith often criticised Redmond and his party for their failure to deliver Home Rule. He set out a programme for a more radical form of independence, proposing that Irish MPs abstain from taking their seats in Westminster. Sinn Fein had some success in winning council seats in local elections, but the Parliamentary Party continued to dominate nationalist Ireland.

THE 1909 BUDGET CRISIS

Redmond's opportunity finally came in 1909 when the House of Lords used its power of veto to stop the Liberals' 'People's Budget' of that year. Prime Minister Asquith called a general election, promising to 'clip the wings' of the House of Lords' by getting rid of their veto, thereby allowing for the passing of more progressive social reforms.

In December 1909, knowing he might need the support of the Irish Nationalists, Asquith promised to introduce a Home Rule Bill if the Liberals were re-elected. Redmond responded by calling on Irish voters in the UK to support the Liberals. The results of the general election of January 1910 were dramatic: The Irish party won 71 seats and held the balance of power in Parliament.

For the first time since Parnell, the Liberals were dependent on the Irish Party to remain in power. The election of December 1910 again returned a Liberal government dependent on the support of the Irish MPs. Redmond's popularity rose to new heights and Sinn Féin sank back into insignificance.

THE PARLIAMENT ACT

Passed on 18 August 1911, the Parliament Act ensured that the House of Lords would no longer be in a position to stop the progress of a Home Rule bill into law. The Lords could now only delay legislation for two years. In April 1912, Asquith introduced the Third Home Rule Bill into the House of Commons. Passed in the Commons, the bill was predictably defeated in the House of Lords, but all the Home Rulers had to do was wait until 1914.



UNIONIST RESISTANCE TO HOME RULE

After the passing of the Parliament Act in 1911, Ulster unionists became louder and more determined in their objections to Home Rule. They believed that their way of life would be threatened under a Dublin-based government with nationalist and Gaelic values. They also feared that the economic security of an industrial Ulster would be poorly managed by the agrarian south. They also feared Catholic rule, viewing 'Home Rule as Rome Rule'.

In February 1910, Southern Unionist MP and Trinity-educated barrister, Sir Edward Carson was elected leader of the Irish Unionist Party. He was the public face of Ulster unionism in these years, but James Craig was the mastermind behind the anti-Home Rule campaign between 1912 and 1914. Like Carson, Craig's ambition was to stop Home Rule completely, but if that proved impossible, he was willing to accept partition. Addressing a massive gathering of 50,000 Unionists at Craigavon, Co. Down on 23 September 1911, Carson said, 'We must be prepared ... the morning Home Rule passes - ourselves to become responsible for the Government of the Protestant Province of Ulster'.

On 13 November 1911 Andrew Bonar Law became the leader of the Conservative party. With strong family links to Ulster, he was passionate about the Unionist cause and considered the province as an important symbol of the British Empire. The alliance between the Conservatives and the Irish Unionists was sealed on 9 April 1912 when Bonar Law addressed a massive gathering of Unionists at Balmoral show grounds on the outskirts of Belfast, pledging support to Ulster unionist resistance to Home Rule.

GROUP OF NATIONAL
VOLUNTEERS AT THE
COURT HOUSE IN
WATERFORD, 18 APRIL
1915



Three months later at a huge Unionist rally at Blenheim, Bonar Law declared 'I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I should not be prepared to support them.'

THE SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT & THE ULSTER VOLUNTEER FORCE

In September 1912 Unionism's deep-seated opposition to Home Rule was expressed in almost half a million signatures on the Solemn League and Covenant and the supporting Women's Declaration.

In January 1913, Carson, sanctioned the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), marking the move to a paramilitary form of opposition to Home Rule. By mid-July the Home Rule Bill had been passed twice by the House of Commons and twice defeated in the House of Lords. Privately, Carson had come to accept that Home Rule for the rest of Ireland could not be stopped and unionists and Conservatives now focused on a compromise where Ulster would be left out of Home Rule settlement.

In September 1913, the Ulster Unionist Council set up a 'government in waiting' with Carson as chairman. Speaking at a huge demonstration in Newry in the

same month, Carson declared that the day Home Rule was made law, the UVF would become the 'Army of Ulster' under an Ulster 'Provisional Government'. In a speech in Limerick in October 1913, John Redmond condemned unionist threats of violence and ruled out any possibility of excluding part of Ireland from Home Rule. The nationalists, he said, could never accept the 'mutilation' of the Irish nation. Redmond did, however, hint that he was willing to consider the idea of 'Home Rule within Home Rule'.

THE IRISH VOLUNTEERS

In answer to the establishment of the UVF, southern nationalists formed the Irish National Volunteers (INV) in November 1913 in order to safeguard Home Rule. Apparently under the control of the respectable academic Eoin MacNeill, the founding members of the INV included extreme separatists who rejected Home Rule and waited for an opportunity to stage an uprising against British rule.

1914: A CRUCIAL YEAR

In January 1914, having failed to reach an agreement with Carson and Bonar Law, Asquith needed to offer something to the Ulster unionists in order to avoid civil war.

In the following month, Redmond and Dillon reluctantly agreed to exclude Ulster from Home Rule for six years after which the province would be included unless the Westminster parliament resolved otherwise. Carson immediately rejected the idea calling it 'a sentence of death with a stay of execution of six years'.

THE CURRAGH MUTINY

On 21 March 1914, fifty-seven of the 77 army officers stationed at the Curragh Camp, County Kildare declared that they would resign their commissions in the event of being ordered to move against the UVF. The Curragh Mutiny demonstrated that Asquith could not depend on the support of his own troops in Ireland and the episode greatly increased the confidence of Ulster unionists. For Irish nationalists, it merely confirmed their increasing doubts about Asquith's commitment to granting Home Rule.

Nationalist concern grew when the UVF successfully landed 35,000 German rifles and five million rounds of ammunition at Larne, Donaghadee and Bangor on the night of 24-25 April without interference from Crown Forces.

On 25 March 1914 the final reading of the Home Rule bill was carried in the Commons by seventy-seven votes and was ready to receive the royal assent. The Ulster Unionists, however, were now prepared to stop its introduction by force if necessary. In the meantime, the Parliament remained deadlocked on the issue of Ulster's exclusion from Home Rule. King George V increased the pressure on Asquith to resolve the crisis. The Buckingham Palace Conference met for three days between 21 and 23 July 1914. While John Dillon and John Redmond were prepared to accept the idea that

that some areas of Ulster with protestant majorities would be permanently excluded from Home Rule, they could not reach agreement on the borders of these excluded territories. The conference broke down and nothing was resolved.

John Redmond did not want to alienate the Liberal party by being involved with a militarist organisation like the Irish Volunteers, but he was also aware that he needed to appear in control of what was happening in Ireland. In May 1914, MacNeill accepted Redmond's demand for the addition of 25 Irish Party nominees onto the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers. Redmond's nominees were kept in the dark about the importation of 900 Mauser rifles and 29,000 rounds of ammunition that had been purchased in Hamburg to Howth, County Dublin on 26 July 1914. There were now two forces of armed volunteers in Ireland.

The very real prospect of civil war was only averted by international events. On 3 August 1914, Britain was at war with Germany. The King granted his royal assent to the Home Rule Bill on 18 September 1914, but its operation would be suspended until the end of the war when the parliament would have the opportunity to make special arrangements for Ulster. John Redmond supported the British war effort in the belief that it would help to deliver a united Home Rule Ireland. Two days later, passing through Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, Redmond addressed Volunteers on parade and called on them to enlist and go 'wherever the firing line extends'. The result was an immediate split in the Volunteers – the majority of 160,000 National Volunteers supported Redmond and the minority of 12,000 Irish Volunteers, led by Eoin MacNeill, opposed his position. This minority was heavily infiltrated by the IRB who had secretly decided to stage a rebellion using the Volunteers while England was distracted by the War.