

Irish nationalism :the fight for self- government

Government



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Since the late twentieth century, Ireland has been subject to varying types of English rule. There has been much debate on the degree of English rule in Ireland, but the call for a united Ireland was very popular among many Irishmen. Nationalistic feelings in Ireland saw a steady growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with many different movements looking to achieve Irish self-government. These nationalistic movements can be categorized into three groups: constitutional, revolutionary, and cultural nationalism.

Whether by politics, violence, or education, Irish nationalistic groups each had their own ideas on how to achieve independence from English rule. Each group had its strengths, as well as its weaknesses that contributed to the overall success of the nationalistic movements. Constitutional nationalism, which encompassed nationalism through political forces, mainly involved the vision of Home Rule. Home Rule was the idea of having an Irish parliament to control domestic matters while Britain controlled external Irish affairs. The face for the Home Rule movement was Charles Stewart Parnell, a political leader and Irish landlord.

Parnell is most commonly known as the founder and leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. He turned the Home Rule movement into a major political force dominating legislation, and proving it to be a vast encompassing party by gaining the widest possible support. Parnell was deemed the "Uncrowned King of Ireland", possessing enormous political skills leading him to be extremely successful in the field of practical politics. However, political scandals led his leadership to be called into question and put his whole political career on the line.

Charles Parnell's skills led him to many accomplishments in politics. Parnell was elected president of the Irish National Land League in 1879 which campaigned for land reform, including the reduction of tenants' rents during a time of economic disaster. He not only raised an enormous amount of funding for famine relief during a trip to America, but Parnell also used his position as president to gain the support of tenant farmers in his fight for Home Rule. The support that came from the Land Movement and its mass appeal aided Parnell in bringing the Home Rule party under the wing of the movement.

One of Parnell's greatest accomplishments was the conversion of William Gladstone and the Liberals to Home Rule. During the election of 1885 the Conservative party used Parnell in order to gain an electoral advantage. This tactic succeeded giving them the majority of seats in Parliament and ultimately leading to the Liberals under Gladstone coming to power with Home Rule party. Although Parnell enjoyed great success as the leader of the Home Rule party and as a notable force in the fight for domestic Irish self-government, his weaknesses limited the extent to which his political skills could carry him.

Parnell accomplished a great amount in the fight for Home Rule, but ultimately he failed to achieve it. The reason he was unsuccessful was due to his greatest weakness, the scandal with Katherine O'Shea. During the time Parnell was elected leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party he began a relationship with Katherine O'Shea, wife of Captain William O'Shea. His fall from power occurred when Captain O'Shea filed for a divorce naming Parnell

as the guilty party. “ It was therefore Captain O’Shea and the divorce case which brought down Parnell”[1].

Although many leading politicians had known about Parnell and O’Shea’s affair for some time, it was when Parnell did not challenge Captain O’Shea’s allegations that shocked the public. This caused Parnell to be revealed as an adulterer and discredited him as a leader. Gladstone was forced to distance himself from Parnell due to the fact that the Liberals had no chance of winning the next election with ties to Parnell. Without the support of Gladstone, Home Rule was not a possibility. In the end, Parnell’s strengths were his greatest weaknesses.

His pride and iron will kept him from contesting Captain O’Shea’s allegations allowing O’Shea’s side of the story to go unchallenged and ultimately leading to Parnell’s fall from power. Constitutional nationalists such as Charles Parnell used politics in pursuing Irish self-government. The strength of this method is that it delivers concrete results. Although Parnell was not able to achieve Home Rule himself he was able to gain support for the party, leading the way for John Redmond to get the third Home Rule Bill passed by the House of Commons.

Before this time, no success of this magnitude had ever been achieved in the fight for Irish independence. The weakness of constitutional nationalism is that it is a time consuming method. It took two initial Home Rule Bills to be rejected, the first of which being introduced in 1886, until the third was passed in 1914. Parnell dedicated his political career to the pursuit of Home Rule and was not able to see it passed before his death. Even when the third

Home Rule Bill was passed, the process of it becoming a law was suspended pending the end of World War I.

Constitutional nationalism is successful in that it delivers results in the fight for Irish self-government; however, the process is long and grueling. Revolutionary nationalism was a more forceful, rebellious method in pursuing Irish self-government. Revolutionary nationalists were not afraid to use violence including assassinations, bombings, and even uprisings. The most popular uprising in the struggle for Irish independence was the Easter Rising, which took place shortly after Britain's entrance into World War I. The main group involved in this revolutionary nationalistic movement was the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood, or I. R. B. , devised a rebellion to overthrow Britain's government in Dublin following the time tested dictum that England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity. While Britain had surely forgotten about Ireland and Home Rule, focusing its attention mainly on the war, the I. R. B. used it as an opportunity to rebel. Patrick Pearse, a key leader in the rising, chose Easter for the uprising for its biblical connotations of sacrifice and resurrection; he saw the rising as a ' blood sacrifice'.

The rebels hoped to take control of Dublin as well as initiate riots in order to start a revolt, in turn removing English rule. However, the rising was a military disaster. On top of many of the rebel's plans being disrupted by the British, poor organization also led to an unsuccessful rebellion. Upon capture many of the rebels were condemned to execution including James Connolly, who was carried to a firing squad tied to a chair due to an injury sustained during the rising.

The nature of these executions led to anger among many Irishmen and turned the rebels into martyrs. The rising led to control of Irish politics shifting from the Irish Nationalist Party to the recently I. R. B. infiltrated Sinn Fein. This shift led the way for constitutional nationalists to push for a challenge to Britain's control of Ireland. Revolutionary nationalists took a more direct approach in the fight for Irish self-government. Rebellions, such as the Easter Rising, sought to overthrow government in a revolution without political involvement.

This approach is strong in that it has been successful in the past, as seen by the American and French revolutionary wars. A revolutionary approach can shift power almost instantly rather than going through years of political negotiations. However, when unsuccessful, revolutions end in meaningless bloodshed. The Easter Rising at first seemed to be a failure, resulting in the deaths of many Irishmen for no reason. Instead, Britain's reaction resulted in the rebels becoming martyrs, and the British losing the hearts of the Irish people.

Although the Easter Rising resulted in the deaths of many Irishmen, it also opened the door for constitutional nationalists to take control of parliament in the 1918 general election and for revolutionary nationalists to initiate the Anglo-Irish war. While constitutional nationalists focused on politics and revolutionary nationalists focused on rebellions, cultural nationalists focused on the revival of Gaelic culture and language. Just as constitutional and revolutionary nationalism was important in the fight for Irish self-government, so was cultural nationalism.

It helped to foster a spirit of earnest nationality, invoking feelings of patriotism in young Irishmen. The Gaelic Athletic Association was established to do just this. Founded in 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association aimed to establish an independent Irish organization dedicated to promoting athletics as well as preserving Irish nationalism. The Gaelic Athletics Association not only encouraged education about Gaelic language and culture, but was also formed as an anti-British group closely associated with the Irish nationalistic cause.

This association caused the GAA to get caught up in the troubled politics of the early twentieth century. In 1920 British soldiers interrupted a football match in Dublin firing shots into the crowd and onto the field killing fourteen people. This was a response to political violence that had occurred in Dublin earlier that day. This event came to be known as Bloody Sunday. However, the Gaelic Athletics Association was a non-violent one that was subject to the repercussions of being associated the nationalistic cause. The GAA is claimed to have been founded by the I. R.

B. with the goal of getting Irish youth involved with an organization in order to form a physical power capable of pressuring the Home Rule party of the future. Although the association had no violent or political intentions, it provided the depth that the Home Rule party needed in order to secure an independent, self-governing Ireland. Cultural nationalists were strong in that they united Irishmen in the fight for Irish nationalism. Cultural nationalists promoted camaraderie through athletics and focused on a revival of nationalistic feelings as well as Gaelic culture.

They provided a unity of Irish people that was necessary to the success of a self-governing Ireland. However, cultural nationalists did not provide any concrete results in the pursuit of Irish independence. They brought together the Irish people but only to the extent that they were prepared to join a constitutional or revolutionary force. Nationalistic feelings were high in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Many nationalistic movements that existed sought to set up Irish self-government in one form or another.

These movements were constitutional, revolutionary, or cultural nationalistic groups. Each group possessed both strengths and weaknesses. Constitutional nationalists succeeded in political battles relating to domestic rule. However, their means were often time consuming and presented results that were not very certain. Revolutionary nationalists, on the other hand, were able to change the tides of the Anglo-Irish governmental struggle almost instantly. The bloodbath that resulted in their physical force, however, was the weakness of their methods.

Finally, cultural nationalists were able to unite Irishmen in the fight for self-government promoting nationalistic feelings. Unfortunately, they provided no real means of progressing Irish nationalism in the fight for self-government. Constitutional nationalism had the most impact with the Home Rule party as well as the Dail Eireann (Assembly of Ireland) which helped to establish a treaty following the Anglo-Irish war in order to establish the Irish Free State. However, without the physical presence to back up the political force, Irish self-government would not have been possible.

As Eamon de Valera stated, the way to Irish independence was " first battling England with votes, and if that failed, with rifles. " All in all, each form of Irish

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nationalism contributed in some way to lead Ireland into a self-governing country.

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