

Home rule: the irish question



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In the late nineteenth century the idea of Home Rule, did not mean complete severance from Britain, but more of a domestic home government controlled by the British parliament at Westminster. Although at the outset, the Home Rule Movement was made up of a few different groups, within a few short years, after 1870, it was to expand rapidly both in Ireland and abroad, become more catholic, tenant-dominated and politically successful. But the newly formed Home Rule party was not without its problems. Differences in the tactics of leading figures was to change the opinions of British public figures and

The Home Rule Movement in 1870 was founded by Isaac Butt (Barrister & MP for Youghal). The idea of Home Rule at that time meant a parliament in Dublin to control internal affairs such as education, police and roads, and the Westminster parliament dealing with external affairs i. e. war, peace, customs and trade. The king or queen of England would also remain sovereign of Britain and Ireland. The movement was made up of some protestants who believed the British parliament did not understand Irish affairs, and they did not trust the government, because the government had disestablished the Church of Ireland in 1869 and passed the 1870 Land Act, both of which weakened the position of landlords.

The 1872 Secret Ballot Act further weakened the landlord's control over tenants and they felt they could not influence a parliament in Dublin. The movement was also made up of fenians, who were using the movement to promote their own aims, and tenants who were not entirely happy with the 1870 Land Act. However, when the movements' candidates began to support land reform and church controlled education, it became more tenant-

dominated and catholic. As more catholics began to support it, more protestants, conservatives and landlords left.

The Home Rule association was mainly Dublin based and Butt saw the need for expansion. In 1873 he set up the Home Rule League and organised branches around the country. Membership was open to anyone for £1. In the same year he set up the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain to promote Home Rule among the Irish in Britain.

In the general election of 1874 Home Rulers won 59 seats out of 105 in parliament and with the forming of a new political party called the Home Rule party, the Liberals and Conservatives now had some serious opposition in government for the first time and the new group would support whichever party would grant them Home Rule. But they faced a number of problems at the outset. One of which was, that out of the 59 Home Rulers elected to parliament in 1874 only 20-30 of them were committed to Home Rule and only 2 in Ulster.

The biggest problem they faced was the fact that Butt was a weak leader, there was no central organisation, each constituency was separate and Butt was often absent from parliament owing to work. He worked as a barrister and had debts of over £10, 000. Butt adopted a policy of independent persuasion in a gentlemanly fashion in parliament. He brought in proposals each year which were easily defeated, mainly due to the fact that there were over 600 MP's in the House of Commons at that time and the majority of them were not interested in Irish affairs. Disraeli, Leader of the

Conservatives was mostly preoccupied with British foreign policy i. e. imperial and European affairs.

The party members soon became impatient with Butt's tactics and when John Biggar, a fenian from Belfast, brought in a policy of obstructionism, the party supported him. Butt disapproved of this because he said it upset British MP's whose support was needed to pass laws for Ireland. Parnell, MP for Meath, adopted the policy of obstructionism with vigor and gained much support from the fenians. In the late 1870's there was a split in the Home Rule Party between those who supported Butt and those who supported Parnell. The split was followed by Butt's death in 1879 and he was succeeded by William Shaw. Parnell still did not have enough support to sway the entire party and turned his attentions to the land question.

Parnell became president of the Land League in 1880 which built up his popularity. He gained the support of fenians in Ireland, and in America (Clan nGael) when he visited there. The Catholic Church also supported him (Archbishop Croke of Cashel). When an increased number of parnellites were elected in the general election of 1880, Parnell was elected leader of the Home Rule Party. Following the 1881 Land Act and Kilmainham Treaty, the murders of the British Chief Secretary and leader of the Civil Service (the Phoenix Park murders) gave Parnell his chance to persuade the British government to focus on the question of Home Rule.

Parnell set up the Irish National League - its main aim, to establish Home Rule. The Irish National League was built into a highly disciplined political party whose strength lay in its branch network (1, 200 branches). It was

supported by the Catholic Church. The functions of the branches were; to collect money, £60, 000 was collected between 1882 and 1885 and the money used for election expenses and to support MP's. Conventions were organised to select Home Rule candidates, many priests acted as chairmen. The branches also got voters out to vote on election day. Parnell now had highly disciplined full party backing at Westminster.