

# Liberal government mishandled the home rule crisis



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Do you agree that the Liberal government mishandled the Home Rule crisis 1912-1914? The Third Home Rule bill of 1912-1914 was to lead to a severe political crisis, one which caused a remarkable threat to the British constitutional government and the greatest danger of violence in Ireland since the 1798 rebellion. The country witnessed a division in loyalties with the formation of two private militias, which were both supplied arms by Britain's main rival Germany.

It ultimately strained the loyalties of certain sections of the armed forces, and was to see the Conservative opposition with the aid of the Unionists, indulge in a style of government which bordered on treason. Even today, nearly a century after the crisis, the main issues have still not been fully resolved, however some highly regarded historians still find this a very awkward matter to approach without portraying any personal feelings.

Leading historian Joseph Lee, in his book *Modern Ireland 1912-1985* believes that the attitudes of the unionists towards the Irish were bordering on a form of racism, while in comparison ATQ Stewart can be seen as defender of the unionist point of view especially in "The Ulster Crisis". His work tends to justify the armed resistance to the Liberal government. A matter of such intense emotion must be scrutinized very carefully and this is what is intended to be portrayed in this essay.

I will argue that the Liberal government made an already difficult situation worse by procrastination, they held off in the hope that Redmond would eventually succumb to the pressure and compromise as he knew there was no hope for support from the Conservatives. This proved to be a

misjudgement as it only encouraged the Unionists and Conservatives to be more intransigent and undermined Redmond's political position in Ireland, furthermore dismaying some Liberal supporters.

However in the long term it did of course encourage the nationalists to threaten violence in order to get their way. The reality of the issue is simple; that the majority of the country where Catholic Irish which wanted Home Rule and this should have been taken in consideration however on the contrary the minority the Protestants where opposed to Home Rule and like their rivals where willing to achieve their goal by any means necessary.

The historian Patricia Jalland argues this should have been grasped from the beginning of the crisis. There are many elements which contributed to this serious position and one must begin with the momentous election of 1906. In this election the Liberals won a landslide victory thus dashing the hopes of Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party's expectations of Home Rule. The support for the Conservative and Unionist Party was so dismal that Campbell-Bannerman did not require the Irish Nationalist support.

In fact it led to the leading Liberal and future Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith even announcing his distaste for Irish politics saying that " it will be no part of the policy of the new Liberal government to introduce a Home Rule Bill in a new parliament". The Liberals had little thought for Ireland, the Home Rule issue had played no part in their electoral campaign and even though it was still included in their programme they did not believe it to be a matter of urgency as historian Alvin Jackson states "... he New Liberals were apparently more concerned with British social and welfare issues than with

any Irish preoccupation. " Augustine Birrell, the Liberal Chief Secretary for Ireland proposed the introduction of an Irish Council Bill in 1906, providing for a Council of 106 to administer eight of the most important Dublin departments. Essentially this was set up to appease English critics of Home Rule. It offered only a small concession to Irish national feeling.

The main downfall of this proposition was the failure of the Liberals to adequately consult with the Irish politicians, convincing to John Redmond that he would have to act cautiously when dealing with the Liberals on matters which related to Home Rule. Initially he was tentatively favourable of the proposition saying " that its enactment would be an aid and not a hindrance to Home Rule" however faced by the obvious strength of feeling at the United Irish League convention Redmond's party rapidly retracted its tentative welcome for the proposed bill and a unanimous resolution was passed that the party should reject it.

This incident raised interesting questions about the Liberals' approach to Irish affairs. Alan O'Day has questioned why such a practical generation proved to be impractical when dealing with ' Irish Question'. Most notably even Liberal historian George Dangerfield believes that the failure to deal with Ireland satisfactorily caused the downfall of what was known as Liberal England. Seemingly it was seen as important to solve the Irish issue, because if they mishandled it, it would have an everlasting effect on the rest of the United Kingdom.

The return of the Liberal Government to power opened up new political possibilities; with Asquith as Prime Minister and Lloyd George as Chancellor

of the Exchequer. They prepared for a vigorous struggle with their peers and as expected, the radical ' People's Budget' which was introduced in 1909 was to wage " implacable warfare against poverty and squalidness" . This proposal was arrogantly rejected by the Lords. The Conservative party was determined to use the House of Lords veto to defeat this proposal.

By January 1910 election the Liberals were so reduced in numbers that they now needed the support of Redmond's party to stay in power. The Lords, where left with no option but to accept the ' Peoples Budget' and in April 1910 a Parliament Bill was introduced to deny peers the right to reject bills outright. Once again the Lords rejected the bill and as the issue could not be resolved the only option was to have another election. The outcome of the December election was to be almost identical to that of January, with the Liberal's still requiring the support of the nationalists to stay in government.

To show his gratitude for the nationalist support throughout the crisis Asquith promised Redmond's party Home Rule. It is essential to remember that Asquith was aware that the Home Rule crisis had split the Liberals before, but knew that he could not succeed in office without compromising his parties' position on the matter. Inevitably in 1911 his peers succumbed to the pressure and passed the Parliament Act henceforth, bills which had passed the Commons in three parliamentary sessions in two years would become law despite the rejection of the Lords.

Seemingly now if Asquith upheld his promise to allow Home Rule; then Ireland would have its own parliament by 1914. An essential point of argument is that again of Patricia Jalland who said that when offering Home

Rule to the Irish, Asquith should have proposed some form of exclusion from the beginning as it would not be viable to enforce Home Rule on the solid block of Ulster unionists who, supported by the Conservative party, were determined to resist Home Rule by 'any means necessary'.

Irish unionists were appalled at this, they believed the deal between the Liberals and the Irish Nationalists was a corrupt parliamentary bargain. They argued that allowing Home Rule would jeopardise the security and honour of the British Empire, self-evidently which was then the greatest force for civilization and order in the world. However well the unionists played the political game, inside and outside parliament; they only ever achieved partial success. Fundamentally unionists wanted not only to preserve Ulster from Home Rule but Ireland as a whole.

The protestant people in Ireland would be put under a catholic majority which would have no respect for their religious freedoms thus denying them their democratic rights and ultimately 'Home Rule would equal Rome Rule' and that in an age of enthusiastic Christian conviction these fears meant something. The support which the unionist received from the Conservatives was essential to the resistance of Home Rule especially with their willingness to support extra parliamentary and even violent methods. Their leader Andrew Bonar-Law a Scot of Ulster descent assured his audience at a demonstration in Balmoral "... hat the Conservative Party regarded their cause as the cause not of Ulster alone but of the Empire" exclaiming that they " would do all that men could do to defeat a conspiracy as treacherous as had ever been formed against the life of a great nation. " Belfast and its region had prospered, it was the only part of Ireland to have industrialised <https://assignbuster.com/liberal-government-mishandled-the-home-rule-crisis/>

over the years and unionists felt that this would be sacrificed to support the interests of the agricultural economy which was the predominant industry on the island at the time.

According to ATQ Stewart the Ulster unionists were willing to defy the will of parliament as they had "... distinguished between the Crown to which they were permanently loyal and the government of the day, which had no permanence and which they were entitled to resist if they took away their citizenship. " Furthermore another key group not to be overlooked are the southern Irish unionists; there was a vast difference in the numbers as they were the minority in an overwhelmingly catholic population.

This situation obliged them to play down the religious objection to Irish self-government and to disavow the use of violence unlike that of their fellow unionists in the north. Historian Robert Kee feels it could be argued "... in the Irish situation, regard for minorities had to be abnormally acute just because religious differences made it difficult for this spirit to be applied in the normal way. " There was of course a safeguard in the Third Home Rule Bill to safeguard the protestants however none of these safeguards could provide the absolute certainty that they wanted.

It was clear by 1912, that opposition to Home Rule in Ulster could only be overcome by coercion, and that inevitably would lead to disastrous consequences, however that been said in January 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force was established by the Ulster Unionist Council who had met previously in September 1912 to institute Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant. A document signed by 237, 000 men including unionists Carson and Craig who

claimed to protect British "... citizenship and... the unity of the Empire... using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the... conspiracy... The volunteer force which had derived from this crisis was grow beyond expectations by June 1913. According to historian F. S. L Lyons the nationalists underestimated the support which the UVF had received and the Freemans Journal had headlines such as ' The Orange Farce' and ' Playing At Rebellion' mocking the organisation. Redmond himself believed that Carson was bluffing, however the real bluff was the governments and Carson was calling it. It could be argued that Redmond should have been doing the same. Patricia Jalland argues the same point as Churchill that Ulster's claim for special consideration could not be ignored.

Asquith introduced the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912. It was at this point, Jalland argues, that Asquith should have introduced some element of exclusion. I find it difficult to disagree with her argument, as Redmond would have had to accept a compromise as a point of principle- as would the unionists. The Conservative opposition would have been undermined, there would have been no private militias, no gun-running, no so-called Curragh Mutiny, and the debate on the conditions of Home Rule would have been confined to Parliament.

This point is endorsed by Alvin Jackson in his more recent work Home Rule: an Irish history. Instead we had the heightened atmosphere which surrounded the organisation and signing of the Ulster Covenant in September 1912. More ominously in January 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force was formed and supplied with weapons by Germany, in reply to these actions the Irish Volunteers were established; they too were supplied

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weapons by Germany. When an attempt was made to seize the weapons by the British troops it resulted in the death of three civilians.

This was shortly followed by the so-called 'Curragh Mutiny' overall this episode greatly increased the confidence of Ulster unionists; they firmly believed that the government had intended to crush them but its plan had failed for lack of military support. Certainly thereafter ministers were convinced that they could not trust the army to quell opposition to home rule in the province. For Irish nationalists, the events merely confirmed their increasing doubts about Asquith's real commitment to allowing Irish self-government and about his willingness ever to grapple with unionist militancy.

Unsurprisingly in the summer of 1914 the Buckingham Palace conference failed and further disaster was averted by the outbreak of the World War One in August 1914. Finally, when one reviews this drift to apparent disaster it is easy to see the logic of Jalland's argument she maintains, if the Liberal Government under Asquith had included some form of exclusion in the 1912 Home Rule Bill, both Redmond and Carson would have had to accept it, and unionists would have seemed to be acting unreasonably if they had rejected it.

This intervention would also have impeded the establishment of opposing sectarian armies. However, the Liberal government failed to include this in the Third Home Rule Bill and if the outbreak of war had not halted the Bill's progression, then a civil war was likely to have occurred in Ireland.