

The greatest obstacle  
to solving the irish  
question in the years  
1874 – 1886 essa...



There can be little doubt that question of land, with specific regards to tenant farmers and absentee landlords, was a major obstacle for the British government as they attempted to ‘solve the Irish Question’. However, in addition to the fact that there were other issues within Ireland which also formed obstacles to resolution, such as Home Rule, one must also consider the actions of the Disraeli and Gladstone administrations in this period and assess whether they too acted as obstacles to their own attempts to deal with Ireland.

The interpretation that the issue of land was the greatest obstacle has much to commend it. Some of the most serious crises in 19th Century Britain had come about as a result of ‘knife and fork’ issues (including the Chartist movement and the Plug Riots); the disastrous harvests of 1877-79 in Ireland which meant that many farmers unable to pay the rent for their land and were subsequently evicted by the landowners resulted in similar ‘knife and fork’ issues and caused great Irish unrest. This unrest manifested itself in violence, most notably in Connaught and in Phoenix Park in 1882, as the immediate threat to Irish people’s wellbeing sparked ‘direct action’ in such a way that issues such as a religion could. The violence resulted as a result of land issues, which is indicative of the fact that it was this issue which the Irish people felt most strongly about: this is evidence for the land issue being the greatest obstacle to the resolution of the Irish Question. Another factor which may lead one to think that land issues were the greatest obstruction to solving the Irish Question is the formation of the Land League by Michael Davitt in October 1879. Much like the violence carried out in the hope that land reforms would be implemented, the Land League’s formation and

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popularity shows that the Irish people thought of land issues as fundamental to the problem in Ireland.

Adding to the interpretation this interpretation of land issues is the fact that this issue even split the Irish, and with the Irish fighting amongst themselves, the entire Irish Question would become even more difficult to solve. Charles Parnell and the Home Rule Party had an uneasy relationship with the Land League, as the Land League's aim changed from the 'three Fs' (fair rent, fixity of tenure and free sale of the right to occupancy) to a fundamental opposition to the basic structure of land ownership; Parnell's position as a landowner himself put him in friction with this change in aims. This friction, however fleeting and small, and the 'direct action' employed by the Irish people show how large the issue of land was in Ireland at the time, and how obstructive it was to achieving peace.

However, another view on the greatest obstacle to solving the Irish Question is that there were issues other than land which made solving the Irish Question difficult. One such obstacle was the issue of Home Rule. Indeed, compared to the loophole-filled legislation passed through the 1881 Land Act in order to settle land disputes, the strength of the Home Rule movement was such that, in December 1885, Gladstone actually converted to believing that Home Rule was the only way to solve the Irish Question. His aim was to 'pacify Ireland', and the means by which he believed this to be possible was allowing Home Rule. In this way, then, solving the issue of Home Rule can be seen as the long-term solution to the wider Irish Question, while solving the issues of land were simply short-term measures to stave off unrest and excessive Irish violence.

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Another obstacle to solving the Irish Question was Gladstone's reluctant decision to employ coercion tactics. The Coercion Act of 1881 essentially constituted the suspension of Habeas Corpus, which would merely serve to alienate the Irish people even further, making resolution even harder and inciting a general anti-Anglican sentiment in Ireland not restricted to farmers and smallholders. In this way Gladstone's policy could be seen as more obstructive to long-term resolution than the land issues. Furthermore, Disraeli's policy of ignoring the Irish Question certainly obstructed the long-term resolution of the Irish Question. While the expectations of the Irish people were not nearly as great during Disraeli's time in office, meaning less active protest and violence in the short-term, ignoring the problem simply generated increasing resentment for the existing state of affairs, particularly with regards to land.

This resentment later manifested itself in the widespread boycotts and violence during Gladstone's administration. Here, then, it could be said that Disraeli's apathy regarding Ireland merely encouraged the anti-Anglican sentiment in Ireland, which manifested itself in the widespread violence of Gladstone's subsequent administration. A final point to note is that the very nature of the 'Irish Question' changed during the period 1874-1886; so land issues may well have the greatest obstacle to its resolution at one point, but by the time it mutated land issues were not as significant as they were previously. By 1881, with the passing of the Land Act and the relative appeasement of peasant farmers and smallholders, land ceased to be the issue it was, and Home Rule became the focus of Irish nationalist ambitions. It can thus be seen that there was a myriad of factors other than land which

acted as obstructions to the resolution of the Irish Question, with arguably greater importance and obstructiveness than land issues.

It appears that, although the issue of land was an indisputably huge issue which caused unparalleled unrest and violence from 1874-1886, it was eventually dealt with by Gladstone's Second Land Act halfway through the period, thereby being nullified as an obstruction to peace and the resolution of the 'Irish Question'. The long-term issues of Home Rule and the ineffectiveness of Disraeli and occasionally Gladstone were much larger obstacles to long term peace; after 1881, the resolution of the 'Irish Question' would only ever come about by addressing Home Rule and the attitude of politicians to Ireland, with Gladstone achieving the latter to some extent through the 'Hawarden Kite'.