

# The Evolution of Devolution

*Tony Little examines the lessons from the first Home Rule Bill of 1886*

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Devolving power has been Liberal Democrat philosophy for so long that it has become an instinctive reaction to solving community problems. Gladstone's contribution to the development of this philosophy and his efforts to apply it to Ireland through a Home Rule Bill still have lessons for today, not only for the Irish peace process but also for a Scottish parliament.

## *The Home Rule Plan*

When looking at the 1886 Home Rule Bill, we should remember that neither Ireland nor England enjoyed local government as we know it today. County councils were not established until 1888. Gladstone sketched the essence of his bill on a single sheet of paper at Lord Rosebery's home in November 1885. For the details he drew upon the example of Canada, which enjoyed considerable autonomy but within the Empire.

He aimed to devolve domestic policy to an Irish legislative body (carefully avoiding the word parliament) but reserved defence, colonial, foreign and trade policy to Westminster. As introduced, the bill excluded Irish MPs from the British parliament. The complex composition of the Irish legislative body offered protection to the protestant minority and detailed arrangements were made for sharing the cost of defence and other imperial policies. The Irish were to be allowed to control the police and levy taxes, though not impose trade protection. To complete his strategy for Ireland, the Prime Minister intended a Land Bill which would have fulfilled the Irish dream of a peasant proprietary but more importantly, removed the risks to the big Irish landlords. No special arrangements were made for Ulster.

Gladstone's plan was seen as a constitutional upheaval. Why was such drastic action necessary?

## *A Most Distressful Country*

Ireland was the last part of the British Isles to become part of the United Kingdom, losing its domestic parliament in the 1800 Act of Union. It retained a militant nationalist tradition which erupted into violence through the Fenians and later the IRA. But the real problems of Ireland were social and economic. Catholic emancipation in 1829 did not end social discrimination, as Northern Ireland still testifies. Ireland remained more heavily dependent on agriculture than industrialised England and, outside Ulster, had a system of land tenure which left small farmers very vulnerable to crop failures such as those of the 1840s. Unbelievably, none of this posed a serious threat to British

politics, not even the devastating Irish famine, until Parnell became leader of the nationalist movement.

The nineteenth century Irish electoral system mirrored that of Britain, usually with a delay in reforms crossing the Irish Sea. Corruption and violence were more pronounced but then they were not uncommon in England. Despite intimidation, on balance voters followed self interest within the existing system rather than revolutionary ideals. Through an attractive agrarian programme, Parnell combined this economic interest with a denominational identity and constitutional pressure towards nationalism.<sup>1</sup> At home, Parnell mobilised popular forces in the Land League, inventing the boycott as an effective peaceful campaign tactic while maintaining ambiguous links with militant Fenian groups. In Westminster, he perfected parliamentary obstruction to keep Irish grievances in the headlines. We owe the rules limiting Commons' debates to his effective parliamentary campaigns.

Throughout the period, the British approach to Ireland changed little and is still recognisable today. Irish problems were not tackled until they erupted into rural violence which naturally required the restoration of law and order before any other action could be undertaken. Normal civil rights gave way to the use of the military and the banning of insurrectionary groups: 'coercion'. The breathing space bought by coercion was used to introduce reforms which were always too little, too late, providing the fuel for the next nationalist campaign.

The rise of the Home Rule party, confirmed in the 1880 election, all but destroyed the Whig/Liberal party organisation in Ireland and pushed the Tories on to the

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**Mediawatch:** a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers, major magazines and academic journals from 1988; plus articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals from 1995.

**Thesiswatch:** all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats!)

*Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy of either of these free of charge; send an A4 SSAE to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.*

## The Life Story of David Lloyd George

*An epic film, tracing the life of the last Liberal Prime Minister, will receive its second London showing in February. Made in 1918 with Lloyd George's blessing, the film mysteriously disappeared months later before it was cut and completed. Discovered in 1994 in Viscount Tenby's barn, the film has been restored by the Wales Film and TV Archive, and was shown in Cardiff and London during 1996. Book your tickets early: the last showing was sold out!*

**3:40pm Sunday 23 February**

**National Film Theatre, South Bank, London**

defensive, even in Ulster. In practice, this was not such an enormous loss to the Liberals as it might appear, for two reasons. Firstly, the 1880–85 Gladstone government fell apart from personal dissension and Whig–Radical tensions, though the frustrations were magnified by Parnell's obstructive tactics. Secondly, while the Home Rule party was obstructive of the government for its own ends, recent analysis of divisions in the House of Commons suggests that it tended to act more as the extreme left wing of the Liberal party, more sympathetic to radical policy objectives than Tory.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Holding The Balance***

The failures of the Liberal government led to a caretaker minority Tory government which held office until the new electoral register was prepared following the 1884 Reform Act. It was led by Lord Salisbury with Lord Carnarvon, a man prepared to govern without coercion and willing to negotiate with Parnell, as the principal minister for Ireland. In the ensuing election, Ireland returned 86 Home Rule MPs, holding the balance between 333 Liberals and 251 Conservatives. A period of hectic manoeuvring, familiar to anyone involved with a hung council, gave Parnell's disciplined troops the leverage they required.

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Who would pay Parnell's price? Gladstone sensed that Parnell was at heart a constitutional rather than an extra-parliamentary politician; he believed home rule was a conservative measure, which would preserve the Union, and that the high number of Parnellite MPs showed that the time was ripe for action.<sup>3</sup> He even convinced himself that the Tories should introduce a Home Rule Bill

themselves and was willing to allow them to continue in office to achieve it. Salisbury's narrower vision, his cynical view of Gladstone and his unwillingness to sacrifice party forestalled any prospect of cooperation. On the famous 'Three Acres and a Cow' amendment to the Queen's speech, the 75 year-old Gladstone took up the challenge.

Even as he formed his third government Gladstone was aware of difficulties with his own party, but persisted in the mission to pacify Ireland that had started with disestablishment and land reform in his first government of 1868–74. When the final terms of the Home Rule Bill were announced, two ministers, Trevelyan and Chamberlain, resigned from the cabinet and the scale of the Liberal rebellion was sufficient to ensure that the bill was as good as defeated before its second reading debate began. The 92 Liberal rebels formed their own breakaway Liberal Unionist party (shades of the SDP), striking an electoral pact with the Tories at the ensuing general election and maintaining them in government.

Surprisingly, the social composition of the remaining Gladstonian Liberals in the Commons was little different even after the rebellion.<sup>4</sup> In the Lords, the loss of the Whigs was more significant. Over time some rebels drifted back to the Gladstonians but Chamberlain's organisational and oratorical skills kept the Liberal Unionist Party as an important parliamentary force into the twentieth century. These destructive few months deprived Liberals of power for the best part of twenty years.

### ***The Reason Why***

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to condemn the Liberal rebels for their lack of wisdom but for the immediate future their vision of an ever-expanding British Empire looked more in keeping with the spirit of the times. The opponents to Gladstone's strategy still need to be answered.

The Prime Minister himself was not inclined to give much ground to the Ulster extremists. They were and remain irreconcilable to what they saw as Rome Rule in a way that English protestants have never been. Provision was made for the protestant minority in the construction of the electoral arrangements, but not specifically for Ulster.

Salisbury's pessimism always expected a bloody revolution, but one which coercion could postpone until after his lifetime. He would not give way to the blackmail of Parnell's balancing vote. Then as now Tories saw a federal system as the destruction of the union.

The Whig rebels, such as Hartington, Selborne and Carlingford, included major Irish landlords and it has been traditional to see them as fighting for the rights of property. Gladstone's land bill would have protected them financially but was still castigated as an unwarranted government interference in contractual arrangements. Like the Tories, the Whigs had detailed criticisms, particularly over policing, judges and taxation – which mostly betrayed English mistrust

of Irish abilities, summed up offensively by Salisbury when he said that the Irish were no more capable of ruling themselves than Hottentots or Hindus. Hartington, who had led the Liberal Party after 1874, has even been accused of trying to mount a coup against the Grand Old Man, but most historians would accept that he acted out of principle.<sup>5</sup> Like the Tories he was instinctively but unimaginatively unionist and in the following years drifted progressively closer to the Conservatives, serving in the 1896 and later Conservative governments.

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If the Whigs provided the bulk of the numbers in the Liberal rout, the brains were supplied by Joseph Chamberlain. This is all the more surprising as Chamberlain had earlier proposed a scheme for democratic local government in Ireland. But Radical Joe drew a clear distinction between delegating limited functions to a central government board in Dublin and giving legislative power to an elected body. Have we solved this dilemma for Scotland?

It was Chamberlain who posed what is now known as the West Lothian question – devastating because it cannot be answered logically.<sup>6</sup> If Irish MPs were excluded from Westminster, in what way were they still part of the union? What would happen when Wales and Scotland also asked for home rule? If Irish members were admitted to Westminster, why should they vote on British matters when the British could not vote on Irish affairs?

Limiting the numbers or narrowing the measures on which the Irish could vote would always be a compromise whose boundaries could not be justified in principle. Exclusion failed to satisfy the unionists, inclusion failed to satisfy English members who wanted an end to Irish obstruction. Gladstone's wavering from one to the other pleased nobody.

Despite his failure, surely Gladstone's generous strategy for Ireland was right. Even his failure bought thirty years' peace for Ireland, as the Irish party continued to back the Liberals in the hope of Home Rule one day. In 1893, a Home Rule Bill passed the Commons but not the Lords. Asquith's government achieved a Home Rule Act but its implementation was suspended when the First World War broke out. It is ironic that the debate started by the Home Rule bill fostered a cultural nationalism in Ireland which laid the foundations for the Irish rebellion of 1916.<sup>7</sup> It is even more ironic that the only part of the UK to enjoy Home Rule has been Ulster, during the years of the Stormont parliament.

*Tony Little is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. This article appeared in an edited form in Liberal Democrat News last year.*

## Notes

1. K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland 1832–1885* (OUP, 1984).
2. W. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis* (OUP, 1988).
3. *Letters of Queen Victoria 1886–1901*, Vol 1 (John Murray, 1930), pp. 84–89.
4. Lubenow, *op cit*.
5. A. B. Cooke and J. R. Vincent, *The Governing Passion* (1974).
6. J. L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, Vol 2, 1885–1895* (Macmillan, 1933).
7. R. Kee, *The Bold Fenian Men* (Quartet Books, 1976).

## Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis – or if you know anyone who can – please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.

### ***The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.***

*Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.*

### ***The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–***

***79.*** *Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. Ruth Fox, Flat 4, Sefton Court, 133 Otley Road, Headingley, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS6 3PX.*

### ***The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;***

*the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.*

### ***The Lives and Political Careers of Archibald Sinclair and***

***Clement Davies.*** *Ian Hunter, 62 Rothschild Road, Chiswick, London W4 5NR.*

***The Liberal Party 1945–56.*** *Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*