

# Liberals and Ireland

The Northern Ireland Assembly has now been in place since 1998. A power-sharing Executive is governing. The major campaigns of republican and loyalist terrorism are relatively quiescent and relations between North and South and between Unionists and Nationalists are on a wholly new footing. This has all come at the end of a generation in British politics where the three major parties at Westminster have held to a largely agreed approach. While there were minor differences of emphasis, Northern Ireland has not been a matter of substantial inter-party dispute or even debate over the thirty years of 'the Troubles'. It was not always so. Attitudes towards the Irish Question were for long time a defining characteristic of the two major parties in British politics. For the Tories it was a matter of keeping the place under control. For those of a Liberal disposition it was a problem to be resolved. This timely collection of papers looks at how Liberals have approached Ireland and her problems.

Perversely I would read the last paper in the collection first. Michael Steed's review of Stephen Howe's *Ireland and Empire* demonstrates how the colonial paradigm is an inadequate basis for understanding the relationship of Britain and Ireland. Instead he identifies key moments as 'missed opportunities' when the relationship went wrong, when it might so easily have been otherwise. One such moment was the failure of Grattan's Parliament, analysed by Mark Pack in his article on Charles James Fox. A second is considered by both Alan O'Day and – in detail – Ian Machin, namely Gladstone's inability to carry his 1886 home rule bill and the split in the Liberal party which ensued, leaving the party in the political wilderness for twenty years, aside from his last short ministry. And a third is described by Jeremy Smith in his article on Asquith. We forget that that much admired, yet much criticised, Prime Minister did actually place home rule on the statute book, only for his government's unnecessarily harsh reaction to the Easter rising of 1916 to drive constitutional Nationalism into the arms of Sinn Féin in a matter of weeks.

I was unaware of the extent and longevity of Lord John Russell's interest and commitment to Ireland before reading Jonathan Parry's sympathetic article, which shows his prescience in addressing – albeit unsuccessfully – the power of the churches in Irish society. Iain Sharpe's review of Peter Gray's *Famine, Land and Politics* describes the more conventional memory of Russell as the Prime Minister who failed to resolve the problems brought about by the failure of the potato crop in 1846.

But the century is dominated by W. E. Gladstone for whom Ireland was a mission. He pursued the question with evangelical zeal. First he tried coercion. When this failed he tried reform, especially land reform. Then he tried doing business with Parnell, but this too was unsuccessful and he resorted to the repression of the Coercion Acts. Finally he turned to Home Rule. Perhaps one of the reasons why Ireland became such a destructive experience for Gladstone was that he saw it and treated it as one homogenous country – a small country like Norway where he had spent a holiday in 1885, becoming, through the experience, a convert to Home Rule. Tony Little's review of the *Gladstone Centenary Essays* describes other influences that were also at work, including his experience of Egypt and his response to Edmund Burke's writings on America and Ireland. The terms devolution and subsidiarity are more commonly used and very widely accepted in the new Europe, and the principle that decisions should be taken by those people responsible who are as close as possible to those concerned is now a fundamental liberal principle espoused across a wide political spectrum. Why then should Gladstone and the Liberals have broken their back in attempting to implement this principle? Were they simply too far ahead of their time?

The experience of the first two Home Rule Bills made the Liberals more wary of the Irish question, but it was inescapable. When it returned to plague Asquith and Lloyd George they realized that while Ireland is of course one country in a physical sense, its social and political geography is much more complex. This was the beginning of a realisation that it is not necessarily nation states but communities that

are the key to identity and self-government. Communities have a complex social, cultural and economic definition rather than being a simple matter of physical geography. It was this greater sophistication as well as pressures from the Irish Unionists (both Liberal and Conservative) and the chicanery of the Tories generally which led them to explore partition as an option. Roy Douglas describes how (Welsh) Liberal wizardry – for which read pragmatism – was applied to the problem and in a remarkably short time the partitionist settlement came into being. Neither side in Ireland wanted it, but both could live with it, and did, for fifty years.

In recent decades the Lloyd George 1921 settlement has had a bad press, not least amongst liberals, while the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement is lauded on all sides. Is this fair? The main components of the 1998 Agreement are as follows. There is an acceptance that the future constitutional position of Northern Ireland should be a matter for the people who live there, and this recognition is to be maintained by the British Government and has been reflected in the Irish Constitution. New co-operative institutions have been established within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between the United Kingdom and the Republic of

Ireland. A series of measures have been put in place to protect human rights and equality of opportunity. There has been a new start to policing and the administration of justice. The transition from conflict to stability should require measures on prisoners, the decommissioning of weapons and demilitarisation, all of which have come about in varying degrees. The Agreement has been validated by the people of the island of Ireland, both North and South.

By comparison, the Treaty of 1921 gave Dominion status to the twenty-six Southern counties but maintained some links with the United Kingdom. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 had already created a parliament in Belfast for Northern Ireland because the people who lived there had made clear their wish to opt out of a united Ireland. The new parliament was elected by a proportional voting system. The Council of Ireland was to create a North-South institution. While international human rights instruments were still some way in the future, there were efforts to heal the community divisions such as the attempts by Lord Londonderry to develop an integrated education system. Thus, while not every measure of the 1998 Agreement is identifiable in the instruments of the 1920s, there are remarkable similarities.

What then went wrong? There are at least three elements. First, as with the unsuccessful 1973 Heath/Whitelaw Sunningdale initiative, the 1921 Treaty emerged after a relatively short but intense period of violence. The former Taoiseach, John Bruton, has argued in a recent Princeton lecture that armed action, even as a tool of an otherwise justifiable struggle for independence, has had in the long term a negative outcome in Ireland. What seems clear is that in both 1921 and 1973 not enough was done to deal with the sequelae of the violence.

Secondly, the focus in 1921 was on creating acceptable arrangements, but in those days the process of bringing people to accept outcomes was less well understood. We have come a long way in the understanding of ‘process’ since then. Liberals always love a good debate on the constitutional minutiae which are the content of settlements, but while these matters are of importance the process by which people reach and accommodate themselves to an outcome is the key to success in conflict resolution. The process that led to the Belfast Agreement began after the Westminster election in 1987 with the so-called ‘talks about Talks’. While some would rightly quote even earlier dates as seminal there is little argument but that a long period of work is necessary in most successful ‘processes’ of this nature.

There is also a third element, which is specifically liberal. The early 1920s saw the demise of political liberalism. In other realms the liberal ideas of people like Beveridge and Keynes were taken up but misinterpreted by non-liberals in government. I believe there is a legitimate argument that the subsequent Troubles of 1968 – 1998 were in part the long-term result of a failure fully to implement the settlement Lloyd George had put into place. One could hardly hold the Tories responsible for they simply continued with their traditional misguided approach. It was the neglect of Northern Ireland by the British Labour Party which demonstrated that in this area as in so many others they were unworthy inheritors of the Liberal mantle. The Southern counties moved to independence, became a republic, left the Commonwealth and stayed out of

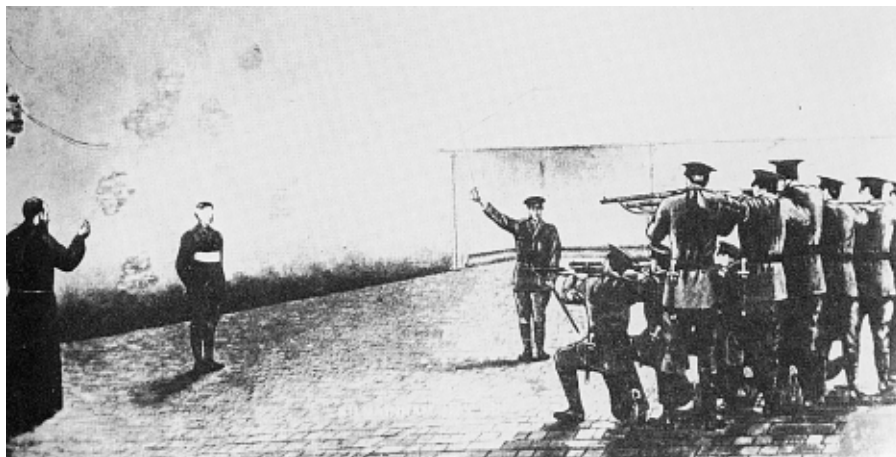
#### Provisional IRA in Belfast



NATO. The Council of Ireland never functioned. Berkley Farr's article on Northern Ireland from 1920 to 1970 shows how proportional representation was dismantled in the North and the movement for integrated schooling was crushed by church interests. The alienation of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland was ignored by the political establishments in both London and Dublin and political life stagnated.

A new Ireland had to wait until the tide of liberalism flowed again, both at home and abroad. Robert Bell's review of Gordon Gillespie's *Albert McElroy* shows how the Ulster Liberal Party was briefly able to take advantage of this, but the future of liberalism in Northern Ireland was not to lie with the ULP. Denis Loretto's personal memoir describes the foundation of the Alliance Party – now the ULP's de facto successor – and conveys much of the atmosphere of being a political activist during the Troubles.

One important theme unites all of these papers, which is again topical after the events of 11 September. David Blunkett's recent anti-terrorist legislation lies in a direct line with the similar initiatives of the Gladstone Cabinet's 1881 Coercion Bill, the Asquith Coalition's response to the Easter Rising, Lloyd George's use of the Black and Tans, and – more recently – Roy Jenkins' 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act while he was Home Secretary. To what extent can a liberal society set aside its normal conventions of democracy and justice in order to contain a violence that acknowledges neither? There is no doubt that liberal democracy must be defended against attacks from without and within. The difficult question is how to conduct that defence, and liberals often find it a challenge to strike the right note. Some liberals have a profound struggle with any use of force and I am reminded of the exasperated remark about one Northern Ireland Secretary that 'he argued with his conscience over every decision – and the result was always a draw'. That sort of uncertainty is however scarcely less disastrous than the alternative tendency to overreact, often nourishing the very opposition that one is trying to suppress. There is not a simple answer to this problem but in the post-Sep-



Executions after the Easter Rising, 1916

tember 11 world it is one of the most important questions confronting us. A serious study of the successes and failures of repression in Ireland would be of wider value to those who are asking how liberal democracy can be defended. For myself, I am certainly convinced that the abandonment of our principles is not the right way to defend them, but I am reminded also of the Biblical injunction to be 'wise as serpents as well as harmless as doves'.

I return to the theme of 'missed opportunities'. I believe that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement will be looked back upon by historians as another seminal moment in the history of Britain and Ireland. But there are likely to be immense dangers on the way. For Republican and Nationalist the Agreement represents a process which is continuing, that opens the way to the possibility of a united Ireland. For the Unionist it represents a process that has now ended. 'Concessions' were made in exchange for promises from the other side with regard to a cessation of the threat of violence and a commitment to make Northern Ireland work as a valid political entity. Perceptions and what is happening on the ground will be all important. The perception that Sinn Fein have been the 'winners' in a process that was intended to be even-handed has alienated Unionists and is worrying Nationalists. And on the ground the recent demonstrations over school attendance in north Belfast, where a previously Unionist area is now evenly split between the communities, are a sharp reminder of the impact of demography as Protestant (Unionist) numbers decline in relation to

Catholic. This will fuel the Unionist perception of themselves as a community under threat and has the potential to provoke Loyalist violence.

The challenge for liberals will be to create the conditions in which both Unionist and Nationalist will be able in due course to make an informed decision, uninfluenced by violence, as to whether their future is best aligned with a new and united Ireland, with a Northern Ireland that remains British but that fully and unambiguously accommodates its Irish heritage, or with some combination of the two, possibly within the framework of the European Union.

Political liberalism has now risen to a new high-water mark with the success of the Liberal Democrats in the 2001 Westminster election, the Lib-Lab coalition governments in Scotland and Wales, and the recent actions of the Alliance Party in respect of David Trimble's re-election as First Minister which arguably saved the Good Friday Agreement and the power-sharing administration in Belfast. Surely it is no mere coincidence of history that Ireland has made the greatest strides in addressing its ancient feud when liberalism has been on the move.

This collection of essays charts the fascinating story of British Liberalism and Ireland and is timely evidence that we will be better able to face the challenges that lie ahead when we can understand the history that has gone before.

*Lord (John) Alderdice is Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and President of the British Group of Liberal International. He is a former leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.*