

## Ireland

Douglas Kanter examines the central role Irish policy played in Gladstone's first government.

# Gladstone's First M



'Visit of the tithe proctor in Ireland', illustration from John Clark Ridpath, *Life and Times of William E. Gladstone* (1898)

**I**RISH AFFAIRS LAY at the heart of Gladstone's first ministry. He rose to the premiership in December 1868 on a promise to redress Irish grievances; and his failure to do so was, at least in part, responsible for his fall in February 1874. The ends of Gladstone's Irish policy were clear from the outset of his administration, because he had outlined them in speeches, addresses, and private utterances over the course of the previous year. He aimed to promote 'civil justice and equal rights' in Ireland, in order to 'pacify' a country that had been agitated by Fenianism for much of the decade.<sup>1</sup> Underlying these

objectives was a belief that the Union was experiencing a crisis of legitimacy across the Irish Sea. 'The great evil' afflicting Ireland, Gladstone claimed, speaking to an English audience, was 'the estrangement of the minds of the people from the law, from public authority, from this country'.<sup>2</sup> A policy founded on civil justice, he maintained, would align Irish opinion with the law, 'making it loved', and would 'make these kingdoms united, not merely by the paper bonds of law, but by the blessed law of concord and harmony, which is written on the heart of man'.<sup>3</sup> These idealistic appeals to justice and

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fraternity, in turn, were informed by a shrewd appreciation of the disruptive capacity of Irish nationalism, and by a corresponding anxiety for 'the unity and integrity of the empire'.<sup>4</sup> Liberal reforms, if promptly applied, would 'bring Ireland into the condition of being a great part of the strength and a great part of the glory of this Empire, instead of being, as hitherto ... our danger and our reproach'.<sup>5</sup> Gladstone's approach to Ireland was thus predicated on the conviction that social justice would encourage social order, and enhance imperial security, by legitimising the state.

Though Gladstone lucidly articulated the ends of Liberal governance in Ireland prior to his appointment as prime minister, he was less explicit with respect to the means. His most famous formulation, offered at Southport in December 1867, was guarded and ambiguous. Irish policy, he suggested on that occasion, 'should be dictated, as a general rule, by that which may appear to be the mature, well-considered, and general sense of the Irish people'.<sup>6</sup> This construction had the merit of gesturing toward Ireland's historical and cultural distinctiveness, but it was deliberately short on details. Gladstone unveiled the centrepiece of his programme in March 1868, when – still in opposition – he introduced parliamentary resolutions in favour of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as he noted in October, the status of the church, while 'indeed a great question, is but one of a group of questions. There is the Church of Ireland; there is the land of Ireland; there is the education of Ireland'.<sup>8</sup> An emphasis on these subjects aligned Gladstone with the popular Irish platform, but every administration since Lord Palmerston's death in 1865 had recognised the need to address Irish concerns in these areas. And, adopting a longer perspective, the attempt to cultivate a moderate, non-sectarian Irish unionism through reform – though it represented a dramatic break with Palmerstonian liberalism – dated back to the 1830s, with even the rhetoric of 'justice to Ireland' owing a debt to the Liberal politicians of that decade.<sup>9</sup>

The distinctive character of Gladstone's engagement with Ireland thus derived less from the broad contours of his policy agenda than from the idiosyncratic political outlook that set the parameters for his understanding of Anglo-Irish relations. He blended a Burkean commitment to prudential reform, grounded in a belief 'that early and provident fear' was 'the mother of security', with a conviction that it was possible to reconcile colonial populations to metropolitan rule by winning 'hearts and minds' through a reliance on the loyalty of 'the whole community' rather than a 'little knot or clique' within it.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, he was animated by a providential view of politics, which linked the rise of Fenianism to the sins of British misgovernment and emphasised a need for atonement through reform. The 'painful and horrible manifestations' of Fenianism, he suggested at Southport, 'may, perhaps, in the merciful designs of Providence ... have been intended to incite this nation to a greater search of its own heart and spirit and conscience with reference to the condition of Ireland and the legislation affecting that country'.<sup>11</sup> On this analysis, it became possible for Gladstone to imagine himself as a high priest of politics, offering 'before the Eternal Throne ... the arduous public work' of Irish reform.<sup>12</sup> He was, after all, 'confident that in serving the right we are serving the God of right and justice'.<sup>13</sup> These considerations gave to his campaign the urgency, earnestness, and moral force that were its hallmarks.

After Gladstone took office on 3 December 1868, however, emollient rhetoric and an insistence that God was on the prime minister's side were bound to be less significant than the prosaic details of Liberal legislation and the quotidian activities of the Irish executive. In political terms, Gladstone's achievement in 1868 had been to ally Irish liberals, moderate nationalists, and Catholic churchmen to a reinigorated British Liberal Party. This coalition helped the party secure 66 of Ireland's 105 parliamentary seats at the general election that year, its best showing since the Great Famine.<sup>14</sup> The challenge for the administration was to respond to the grievances of these diverse

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## Gladstone's first ministry and Ireland

Irish constituencies through a programme that satisfied their sectional interests. But Irish reform also had to be acceptable to Liberal opinion in Britain, given the need to govern through the instrument of the cabinet and to legislate through the medium of parliament. The prime minister and his colleagues, consequently, were obliged to operate in two distinct political contexts simultaneously, and to balance the demands of Irish pressure groups against the preoccupations of the British elite.

There were signs from the outset of Gladstone's first ministry that the premier would find it difficult to bridge the divide between Irish and British opinion. Indeed, he seems not to have fully appreciated the extent to which he had raised expectations by his ostensible pledge to govern in accordance with Irish ideas, which (like other Gladstonian *obiter dicta*) seemed radical only when its qualifications were ignored. In staffing his administration Gladstone demonstrated little awareness of Irish popular opinion. His senior Irish appointments were sufficiently well received – the lord lieutenantcy went to Earl Spencer, the (Anglican) nephew of a celebrated Catholic priest; the chief secretaryship was pressed on Chichester Fortescue, a progressive Irish Protestant whose brother was a resident landlord in County Louth; and the Irish lord chancellorship was bestowed on Thomas O'Hagan, the first Catholic to hold the position since the revolution of 1688.<sup>15</sup> But the prime minister kept William Monsell, the most prominent Irish Catholic Liberal with pretensions to high office, out of the cabinet, and he failed to make good use of O'Hagan's political services.<sup>16</sup> The composition of the government ensured that Gladstone's advisers on Irish matters tended to be Liberal Irish Protestants from a landed background, when they were not simply his British cabinet colleagues. Though the premier himself was to be the primary interpreter and expositor of the *vox populi Hibernica*, he was remarkably insulated from the leaders of Irish opinion.

The administration's early successes temporarily masked these deficiencies. Its first significant actions signalled Gladstone's desire to govern Ireland through popular consent rather than executive fiat. At the opening of parliament in February 1869, ministers announced that they would permit the restoration of habeas corpus in Ireland, which had been suspended for nearly three years in response to Fenian activity.<sup>17</sup> Less than a week later, Fortescue revealed that the government intended to release forty-nine of the eighty-one civilians who remained imprisoned for Fenianism.<sup>18</sup> The prime minister saw such concessions to public opinion as a means 'to draw a line between the Fenians & the people of Ireland, & to make the people of Ireland indisposed to cross it'.<sup>19</sup> Initial reports from across the Irish Sea appeared to vindicate his approach.<sup>20</sup>

Gladstone followed these conciliatory gestures with the introduction of the government's

signature Irish legislation – a bill for the disestablishment and partial disendowment of the Church of Ireland. On this measure, uniquely, he prepared the ground carefully in both Ireland and Britain, ascertaining the wishes of the Irish Catholic hierarchy in 1867, and rallying the Liberal Party around disestablishment the following year.<sup>21</sup> With a united party, galvanised by the recent general election, disestablishment was a foregone conclusion. As Gladstone explained when he brought in the Irish Church Bill in March 1869, from the first day of 1871 church law would no longer be enforceable in Ireland, Irish bishops would cease to sit in the House of Lords, and the 'ecclesiastical corporations' associated with the Church of Ireland 'would be dissolved'.<sup>22</sup>

Disendowment, however, was a more contentious affair. In framing the legislation, Gladstone treated the Church of Ireland's 'temporalities' (property and possessions) as a capital sum, which he valued at about £16 million.<sup>23</sup> Using the secularisation of the Canadian clergy reserves in 1854 as a precedent, he proposed to apply some £7 million to the satisfaction of vested interests in the church, and to the provision of 'glebes' (land and houses) for the clergy on easy terms. Most of the remaining capital was to be diverted to secular Irish purposes.<sup>24</sup> Critics of the scheme preferred a more generous financial settlement for the church, as well as the concurrent endowment of the various denominations in Ireland from the balance of the funds. In the Lords, dissident Whigs joined with the Tories to force amendments to the bill along these lines. Gladstone and his colleagues refused to concede on concurrent endowment, but the cabinet – overruling the prime minister's objections – sweetened the financial deal for the church, and the bill passed in July.<sup>25</sup> Disestablishment was also accompanied by the elimination of grants to the Catholic seminary at Maynooth and the Presbyterian community.<sup>26</sup> These provisions, broadly popular among the Nonconformist constituency that comprised much of the Liberal Party's base in Britain, were rendered acceptable in Ireland by the generous one-time capital advances offered as compensation.<sup>27</sup>

The Irish Church Act proved to be the ministry's signal Irish achievement. Catholics welcomed the measure.<sup>28</sup> Though Protestants were, unsurprisingly, less effusive, and some disaffected Irish conservatives responded to the prospect of disestablishment by endorsing the restoration of the Irish parliament, most Anglicans grudgingly accepted the settlement.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, clerical opponents of the measure were prepared, with the benefit of hindsight, to concede that it ultimately conduced to the 'spiritual advantage' of the church by calling forth 'the energy' of its members – much as Gladstone had predicted in the course of debate.<sup>30</sup> The favourable terms on which the church was disendowed, moreover, left it in a financially sound position.<sup>31</sup> The act also had beneficent social consequences, as church

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'Master Willy Gladstone, under the tuition of Fenianism, is brought to learn that "the Est-ab-lish-ed Church in Ire-land is a great in-just-ice". Ben Disraeli, who breaks down in his lesson, is flogged and sent back to his seat. The Head Master (Professor Stephens) declares Willy a most docile and promising pupil.' (*Weekly News* (Dublin), 2 May 1868)



lands were sold off to thousands of tenant farmers over the next decade in order to realise the capital sum necessary to implement the legislation's dis-endowment provisions.<sup>32</sup>

As the Irish Church Bill made its way through parliament, however, problems related to the maintenance of law and order resurfaced. In May, Spencer was obliged to proclaim Londonderry City, giving authorities exceptional powers under the Peace Preservation Act, after rioting broke out during a visit by Prince Arthur.<sup>33</sup> Several days later, ministers were saved from an embarrassing controversy when the mayor of Cork, who had made public comments apparently condoning the recent Fenian-inspired attempt on Prince Alfred's life in Australia, resigned from office ahead of a government effort to remove him.<sup>34</sup> More worryingly, a campaign for the amnesty of the remaining Fenian prisoners roared to life over the summer, and agrarian crime began to increase over portions of southern Ireland in anticipation of the administration's Land Bill.<sup>35</sup> As popular pressure mounted, Gladstone, Spencer, and Fortescue found themselves at cross purposes, with the prime minister supporting a further release of Fenians and the Irish executive lobbying for the passage of coercive legislation.<sup>36</sup>

While the deadlock continued, ministers began to consider the outlines of an Irish Land Bill, which was to be the focal point of the 1870 parliamentary session. Gladstone recognised the

importance of devising a satisfactory measure – 'it is a question of the security of the Empire, & of the happiness of millions of God's creatures' – but he professed uncertainty about the nature of the Irish demand.<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, an Irish Tenant League advocated a bill granting farmers fixity of tenure at rents set by judicial valuation.<sup>38</sup> On the other, more moderate proponents of land reform pressed for the legalisation and extension throughout Ireland of the Ulster tenant right, by which outgoing tenants received 'goodwill' payments from either the landlord or the incoming farmer.<sup>39</sup> The prime minister's failure to give a strong lead provided space for alternative proposals to emerge from within the cabinet. John Bright, long associated with the radical demand for free trade in land, sought legislation for the establishment of a peasant proprietorship.<sup>40</sup> Fortescue, in contrast, suggested that the government introduce a measure recognising tenant right where it existed, but elsewhere providing Irish tenants with compensation for improvements made to their holdings, as well as payments for 'disturbance' (eviction).<sup>41</sup> The prime minister was unenthusiastic about these suggestions, and in the course of the autumn he developed a proposal for the recognition and extension of the Ulster tenant right. Though his plan was in line with historicist and relativist developments in British thought, and had the additional advantage of inoculating British landlords against demands for



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analogous legislation, it failed to convince a sceptical cabinet, and was set aside in December.<sup>42</sup>

When Gladstone introduced the Land Bill to parliament in February 1870, consequently, he presented a compromise measure, which owed its greatest debt to Fortescue's proposals but incorporated a limited scheme of land purchase along the lines recommended by Bright.<sup>43</sup> The prime minister hoped that the legislation would end 'wanton eviction' and constrain 'unjust augmentations of rent'.<sup>44</sup> If the measure operated as intended, he maintained on its second reading in March, it would provide Irish farmers with 'stability of tenure', rather than the fixity of tenure demanded by more radically inclined Irish politicians.<sup>45</sup> Making a virtue of necessity, on the bill's third reading in May Gladstone emphasised that the cabinet had 'deliberately and advisedly declined to meet the popular demands in Ireland' while framing its provisions.<sup>46</sup> As the measure made its way to the statute book, however, he privately expressed 'intense ... anxiety' about 'the difficulty of bringing British ideas into harmony with Irish wants'.<sup>47</sup>

The prime minister's misgivings proved to be well founded. In parliament, the bill was sufficiently moderate to ensure that the prolonged debates which accompanied its passage were something of a 'sham fight', and the Land Act received the royal assent in August 1870 with few substantive alterations.<sup>48</sup> In Ireland, however, the measure was received with disappointment. Tenant right activists, predictably, complained that it 'caused universal dissatisfaction', but more moderate voices also conveyed their displeasure.<sup>49</sup> The Land Act failed as a political settlement, with nationalists – concluding that they had nothing to expect from continued alliance with the Liberal Party – joining disaffected Irish conservatives to launch the home rule movement in May.<sup>50</sup> It was scarcely more successful as a social and economic intervention. The measure served as a modest deterrent to rent increases and evictions, but many outgoing tenants were unable to make use of the compensation provisions. Few farmers sought to purchase their holdings under the so-called Bright clauses, deeming the terms of sale to be insufficiently generous. Only in Ulster, where the legal recognition of the tenant right tacitly granted security of tenure at moderate rents, did the act prove truly effective.<sup>51</sup>

If the passage of the Land Act alienated nationalists, the administration's simultaneous resort to coercion placed new strains on its relationship with Irish liberals. Spencer and Fortescue finally overcame Gladstone's opposition to extraordinary legislation in March 1870, when the cabinet approved an alteration of the Peace Preservation Act.<sup>52</sup> The amended measure, enacted in April, strengthened the power of the authorities to regulate and search for arms, detain suspects, impose curfews, and move or forego trial by jury in disturbed districts. Most controversially, it authorised the Irish executive to suppress nationalist

publications deemed to be 'treasonable or seditious'.<sup>53</sup> Not only did the legislation call into question the anodyne properties of the government's Irish policy, but it also weakened the case for the discharge of the remaining Fenian prisoners, whom the prime minister remained anxious to liberate. Only in November, as the amnesty agitation began to revive, did Gladstone convince the cabinet to approve a further partial release of convicts, on condition of their banishment from the country.<sup>54</sup> This stipulation, which removed some of the most committed Fenians from the reach of the authorities, was scarcely calculated to enhance imperial security.<sup>55</sup> The gesture, moreover, failed to placate the advocates of amnesty, because a handful of civilians, along with sixteen soldiers, remained imprisoned for Fenianism.<sup>56</sup> Gladstone was unable to secure their freedom, and the grievance survived his ministry.

The government's hard line did little to damage it in the eyes of the Catholic Church.<sup>57</sup> But the continued support of the Irish Catholic hierarchy was contingent upon the ministry's willingness to deliver a satisfactory measure of university reform. For the bishops, this meant state recognition of, and support for, the struggling Catholic University, which they had established in Dublin some two decades earlier. Gladstone's hostility to ultramontanism left him unsympathetic to this particular Irish idea – 'it seems to me that in the main we *know* what we ought to give them whether they will take it or not' – and anxious to defer the introduction of a measure that might offend clerical sensibilities.<sup>58</sup> The proceedings of the Vatican Council, which defined papal infallibility in July 1870 and provoked an anti-Catholic reaction in Britain, furnished the prime minister with a pretext for delay.<sup>59</sup>

The decision to procrastinate on university reform, however, was accompanied by a loss of direction and initiative in Irish affairs, which the administration never recovered. In 1871, the government secured the repeal of the Ecclesiastical Titles Act of 1850, which had prohibited the assumption of territorial titles by members of the Catholic hierarchy throughout the United Kingdom. But the measure, though odious, had never been enforced, so its abolition redressed a symbolic injustice rather than a practical cause of complaint.<sup>60</sup> Its repeal, in any case, was overshadowed by a renewed recourse to coercion, as the Irish executive determined that the Peace Preservation Act had failed to suppress agrarian crime in County Westmeath and adjacent districts.<sup>61</sup> Once more, Gladstone fought a rearguard action against repression, but in February he succumbed to cabinet pressure. Anxious to distance the government from coercion, he insisted that the state of Westmeath be referred to a parliamentary committee of inquiry before legislating – a decision that looked perilously like an abnegation of ministerial responsibility, though it failed to insulate the administration from Irish Liberal criticism.<sup>62</sup>

After the Westmeath committee reported in March, Fortescue's replacement as chief secretary, the Marquess of Hartington, introduced a bill for the local suspension of habeas corpus. Following the passage of the so-called Westmeath Act in June, Spencer proclaimed Westmeath and portions of King's County under its provisions.<sup>63</sup>

Westmeath was soon quiet, but problems of Irish law and order continued to bedevil the government. In August, Gladstone found himself obliged to defend the Dublin Metropolitan Police against accusations that constables had employed excessive force in breaking up an amnesty meeting in the Phoenix Park. Nationalist attempts to link the suspension of habeas corpus in Westmeath with police brutality in Dublin may not have been entirely fair, but they underscored how frail the legitimacy of the state remained in Ireland.<sup>64</sup> The following year, ministers consented to the repeal of the Party Processions Act of 1850, designed to restrain Orange demonstrations in Ulster, though they had long been aware that such a decision would alienate northern Catholics.<sup>65</sup> Predictably, the annulment of the measure was followed by ferocious sectarian rioting in Belfast during the summer marching season.<sup>66</sup> Though the rest of the country was largely 'free from serious crime' by this time, the cabinet refused to reconsider the Peace Preservation Act or the Westmeath Act.<sup>67</sup> Instead, ministers approved the renewal of both measures in 1873, Gladstone signalling his consent 'with a groan'.<sup>68</sup>

The government's difficulties with coercion were compounded by a revival of religious controversy, which placed new pressure on the alliance between the Liberal Party in Britain and the Catholic Church in Ireland. In May 1872 Judge William Keogh, a notorious figure in nationalist circles, voided the return of a home ruler at a County Galway by-election on grounds of undue clerical interference in the contest, delivering a fiercely polemical decision.<sup>69</sup> Though Spencer anticipated that the judgment would 'lead to a horrible mess', ministers announced proceedings against twenty-two Catholic priests, including Bishop Duggan of Clonfert, in July.<sup>70</sup> Their declaration 'excited the R.C. party against the Government', and jurors in western Ireland refused to convict when the first three cases went to trial in February 1873, leading the Irish law officers to abandon the remaining prosecutions.<sup>71</sup> By this time, a second and more protracted source of sectarian tension had emerged. In November 1871 Cardinal Cullen suspended Robert O'Keeffe, the parish priest of Callan, County Kilkenny, after O'Keeffe became embroiled in a series of disputes in the diocese of Ossory. O'Keeffe had been serving as a manager of the local national schools and a poor law chaplain, but following Cullen's action he was removed from both offices. A number of high profile lawsuits ensued, and O'Keeffe's case came to the notice of the Commons in August 1872, with anxious backbench liberals joining

hostile conservatives to condemn what they regarded as inappropriate clerical influence in public appointments.<sup>72</sup> Though the government judiciously refused to commit itself while legal action was ongoing, the issue provoked 'the No-Popery passions' of the house.<sup>73</sup> The controversy, moreover, was slow to resolve, and continued to inflame anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain through 1873.<sup>74</sup>

As the government's reform programme stalled, and its relationship with Irish liberals and churchmen began to sour, the campaign for home rule gathered momentum. Home rulers won eight of the thirteen Irish by-elections held in 1871–72, with the movement's leading advocate, Isaac Butt, among the victorious candidates. A handful of Irish Liberal MPs, sensitive to the shift in the political wind, also announced their support for home rule.<sup>75</sup> Gladstone was obliged to decline invitations to visit Ireland in both years, because Spencer and Hartington feared that nationalist demonstrations might embarrass the administration if he came.<sup>76</sup> Though the prime minister privately expressed a remarkable degree of sympathy for a federal reform of the Anglo-Irish relationship, his public comments on home rule ranged from apparently hostile to merely noncommittal.<sup>77</sup>

Had Gladstone produced a satisfactory Irish University Bill, perhaps he could have salvaged the government's position. But in framing the legislation he disregarded the wishes of the Catholic hierarchy, insisting that 'no direct endowment cd. be made to a R.C. University or College'.<sup>78</sup> Instead, the prime minister redefined the Catholic 'grievance', which he 'held to consist in this, that an R.C. educated in a college or place where his religion is taught cannot by virtue of that education obtain a degree in Ireland'.<sup>79</sup> Even if Gladstone had been more sympathetic to the demands of the Irish Catholic Church, the staunch opposition of English Nonconformists, encouraged by Henry Fawcett's annual parliamentary motion for an unsectarian reform of the University of Dublin, made a settlement along lines desired by the bishops impossible.<sup>80</sup> The prime minister's response to these competing pressures was to keep his own counsel during the measure's long gestation. When Archbishop Manning, the Irish hierarchy's conduit to Downing Street, sounded Gladstone on the bill in 1870, he was rebuffed.<sup>81</sup> The two leading Catholic officeholders in the government, O'Hagan and Monsell, were also shut out of deliberations.<sup>82</sup> Prominent figures at the University of Dublin were similarly neglected.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Gladstone did not personally consult a representative of the university until the regius professor of Greek, John Kells Ingram, helped him to settle some of the measure's outstanding details on the eve of its introduction.<sup>84</sup>

When the prime minister presented his plan for Irish university reform to the Commons in February 1873, consequently, he unveiled legislation

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## Gladstone's first ministry and Ireland

that had been formulated with little input from the most interested parties. Gladstone's measure sought to affiliate various institutions of higher learning in Ireland, including the Catholic University, to the University of Dublin. A reformed governing body, intended to be broadly representative of Ireland's denominational demography and funded primarily out of Trinity College Dublin's endowments, would be empowered to examine students, award prizes, and confer degrees, but would not interfere with the internal affairs of the constituent colleges.<sup>85</sup> The prime minister's scheme attempted to square the sectarian circle, allowing the state to recognise the Catholic University without offending Protestant sensibilities. But its initially favourable reception in the Commons was not shared by Cullen, who complained 'that the Bill was in opposition to what the R Catholics had been working for in Ireland for years ... that it perpetuated the mixed system of education to which he had always been opposed, that no endowment or assistance was given to the Catholic University'.<sup>86</sup> At the end of February, the legislation was 'condemned by the united Bishops'.<sup>87</sup> Their censure proved to be fatal to the measure, which was defeated on its second reading in March, with thirty-seven Irish liberals delivering the opposition a narrow majority.<sup>88</sup>

Despite an abortive resignation attempt in the aftermath of the division, the government survived for another eleven months. But, as Gladstone later reflected, the ministry 'never recovered from the blow ... on the Irish Education Bill'.<sup>89</sup> The rejection of the measure has been convincingly portrayed as ending the alliance between Irish Catholics and British liberals.<sup>90</sup> The prime minister, who lost his equilibrium in the aftermath of the vote, did what he could to widen the breach. In public, he was brusquely dismissive of the notion that Ireland ought to be governed by Irish ideas.<sup>91</sup> In private, he contended that the administration was absolved from its Irish commitments.<sup>92</sup> Much of Gladstone's ire was directed at the Catholic bishops, to whose opposition he attributed the loss of the University Bill. Accordingly, an autumn ministerial reshuffle resulted in 'the introduction ... of three eminent "No Popery" members' to junior office, and the first draft of Gladstone's election address, read to the cabinet in January 1874, 'spoke of resisting "Ultramontane" aggressions'.<sup>93</sup> Though the objections

of his colleagues led to the excision of the offending passage – and the address did include a Delphic reference to local self-government that could be interpreted as a sympathetic allusion to home rule – it was evident to Hartington that the prime minister was 'not looking for support from Ireland'.<sup>94</sup> It came as no surprise, therefore, that when the poll was called in February Irish constituencies returned home rulers for sixty seats, against only ten for liberals.<sup>95</sup>

Gladstone resigned from office on 17 February 1874, bringing his first ministry to a close. Though the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland had been a monumental achievement, and was to prove an enduring one, on balance the government's Irish mission ended in failure. Much of the responsibility lay with Gladstone himself, for the resonant rhetoric that helped carry him to the premiership in 1868 was not matched by a corresponding ability to redress the sectional grievances of those Irish interest groups that had rallied behind the Liberal Party at the election. Perhaps Gladstone was bound to disappoint them, because what he took to be 'mature' and 'well-considered' Irish ideas – essentially, the views of cisalpine Catholics and Liberal Protestants – were in tension with the 'general sense of the Irish people'.<sup>96</sup> In any case, the high moral purpose evinced by the prime minister on Irish matters at the outset of the administration was not maintained to its end.

But Gladstone's incapacity to satisfy popular demands also reflected the deeper structural problem of aligning British and Irish opinion, given the different political cultures, underpinned by the disparate social and economic conditions, prevailing on the two islands. Despite an opportune consensus on disestablishment, the reforms desired by popular politicians in Ireland were either too radical (in the case of land) or too clerical (in the case of higher education) for the Liberal government to concede. As this became evident to Irish observers, the frail legitimacy of the Union, which Gladstone hoped to buttress through conciliatory legislation, was further undermined. Over the course of his administration, consequently, the coalition of liberals, moderate nationalists, and Catholic churchmen that sustained the Liberal Party in Ireland dissolved, only to be gradually reconstituted by Isaac Butt under the umbrella of home rule. Ironically, a Liberal

government that entered office on a promise to secure the empire by doing justice to Ireland presided over the most formidable nationalist mobilisation in a generation, as well as the precipitous and permanent decline of the Irish Liberal Party. It would be almost a decade before Gladstone, in very different circumstances, sought to reengage with Irish popular politics.

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