Britpolitics Fact Sheet – Events around the First World War- Irish Home Rule

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As the First World War unfolded there were also other events, which at the time seemed more significant to people in the British Isles, also taking place. One of these was Irish Home Rule.

Parliament had just passed an Act to establish Home Rule for Ireland and the Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, announced in July 1914 that there would be special arrangements for Ulster for at least six years. In the same month the King called all the parties together to try to agree the details but without success.

The Irish Embassy has held a fascinating seminar on whether the Government of Ireland Act, which was suspended once the war broke out, could have solved the ‘Irish problem’. You can see it on the BBC Parliament website – Briefings Irish Home event. Mary Kenny, during the seminar, illustrates the contemporary importance of the Act when she said that King George V’s diary was full of concern with Ireland while he notes, without much comment, that an Archduke has been assassinated in the Balkans.

# Decisions by Prime Minister Gladstone

Decades of unrest amongst the Irish Catholic population over religious and land issues and a raft of legislation, which failed to satisfy Irish nationalists, led the Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone, in 1886, to conclude that Home Rule, similar to the devolution that Scotland achieved in 1998, was the only solution.

His attempt to introduce a Home Rule Bill split the Liberal Party, which did not achieve a majority government again until 1906. The new Liberal Government did not pursue Home Rule and, in any case, the Conservative majority in the House of Lords would have rejected it.

# The impact of the Constitutional Crisis 1909-10

The situation was dramatically changed by the constitutional crisis of 1909-10. The Lords voted out the Government’s Budget, Asquith lost his overall majority in the two general elections required to gain a mandate for Lords reform and came to depend on Labour and Irish Party MPs, and the Parliament Act of 1911 removed the Lords absolute veto. John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Party, expected Home Rule in return for his support of the Government.

The panel for the Irish Embassy seminar, with Fergeal Keane in the chair, consisted of three distinguished professors with different perspectives and John Bruton, Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of the Irish Republic from 1994 to 1997. Discussion covered an assessment of John Redmond, whether the Home Rule Act would have worked, the role of British politicians, the impact of the war and of the 1916 Easter Rising. The period 1914-16 marks a transition from the possibility of a constitutional settlement represented by Redmond to a revolutionary solution represented by the leaders of the Dublin uprising.

# The Government of Ireland Act 1914

The passing of the Government of Ireland Act 1914 was a triumph for John Redmond. Not quite the political wizard that Alex Salmond is, he was completely in control of his party which had won 74 of the 103 Irish seats at Westminster, and was widely respected as an able and honourable politician.

In 1918, he died a broken man with his reputation in tatters and his party was almost wiped out by Sinn Fein in the general election later that year. The panel debated whether the Act could have been successful. For Richard Toye it had too many flaws and speakers doubted whether Asquith intended to implement it anyway.

Lord Paul Bew was more positive but cautioned that Scottish nationalism has not been satisfied by devolution so why should the much stronger Irish nationalism have lived with Home Rule. John Bruton, however, felt that the consequence of the Act would have been direct control of Ulster from London and, with continued Irish representation at Westminster, Catholic rights in the North would have been protected. Instead the Northern Irish state created in 1922 excluded them.

Reaction of the Conservative Opposition and Ulster Unionists

The reaction of the Conservative opposition at Westminster and of the Ulster Unionists, led by Edward Carson and part of the Conservative Party, was dramatic and led to bitter scenes in the Commons.

When Ulster threatened armed rebellion, this was also the only time in the last 300 years when British army officers were in revolt against their Government, which was considering whether to put down any rebellion, and senior officers were even briefing the Opposition Party more effectively than the Prime Minister. Speakers questioned whether the Government could have faced down this opposition.

There was general agreement that the Easter rising changed everything. Redmond, pro-French anyway, believed he owed a debt to the Government to support the war and his speeches persuaded Irish people to enlist. He was not alone in expecting the war to last a few months, as all other European wars from 1865 to 1913 had.

Instead, it was more like the attrition of the American Civil War but on a larger scale and with trenches and Redmond was implicated in the carnage that killed Irish as much as British men.

The repression of the rising, which had little public support at the time, and the attempt of the Government to introduce conscription in Ireland swung support towards Sinn Fein and a guerrilla war against the British lasted until 1921.

The compromise agreed between British and Irish negotiators, which partitioned Ireland and made the South an independent state but within the Commonwealth, split the Irish republican movement.

F.E.Smith, one of the Conservative politicians most vociferously against Home Rule in 1914 said, when he signed the Treaty, this is my political death warrant”, and Michael Collins, the IRA commander who had been the main Irish negotiator said, “this is my actual death warrant”.

# Implications of the Failure of Irish Home Rule

The implications of the failure of Irish Home Rule reverberated down the decades. The pro and anti Treaty groups fought a bitter civil war in Ireland in which Collins was killed and the conflict coloured the ideology of what are still the two main political parties in the Republic, Fine Gael for the Treaty and Fianna Fáil against. With Fianna Fáil dominant from the 1930s, Redmond was airbrushed out of official Irish history.

The failure to safeguard the interests of Catholics in the North led to the Troubles. Speakers at the Seminar felt that only now could Redmond and the 1914 Act be discussed dispassionately. This is recent though. In 1997, the new Fianna Fáil Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern took down the portrait of John Redmond that his Fine Gael predecessor, John Bruton, had hung in the prime ministerial office and replaced it with one of the leaders of the Easter Rising. The speakers also acknowledged that it is only now that Republican opinion is accepting the claim to self- determination of Ulster Protestants.

In our time, we are lucky that the issue of Scottish independence will be decided by constitutional means one way or another.