



MINI PROFILE

John Redmond

BY DONAL FALLON

JOHN EDWARD REDMOND was born on 1 September 1856 at Ballytrent House in Wexford. He was the son of William Archer Redmond, a Home Rule MP who would profess that Ireland possessed an “indefeasible right to be governed by an Irish Parliament”. Sharing his father’s belief, John was first elected a Member of Parliament in 1881 for New Ross, representing the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP). In a single evening, Redmond would make his maiden speech and be suspended and expelled from the House.

A committed Parnellite, he became an important figure in the minority of the IPP that remained loyal to its leader after his downfall, stating “it is because I believe that your maintenance is necessary to the success of our cause”. Following Parnell’s death, Redmond took over the leadership of the Irish National League, the Parnellite faction, but by 1900 political unity was restored.

His relationship with advanced nationalists was complex. While he opposed the use of physical force, he was a vocal supporter of the Amnesty Association in the 1890s. He championed the cause of Fenian prisoner Thomas Clarke, describing him as “a man of whom no words of praise could be too high”.

Under his leadership, the IPP once more became an important force in Westminster, holding the balance of power from 1910. He utilised this importance to push the Liberal Government of HH Asquith on the issue of Home Rule. The outbreak of the First World War saw the postponing of its implementation, and Redmond encouraged the Irish Volunteer movement to support the British war effort, insisting famously that “the interests of Ireland — of the whole of Ireland — are at stake in this war”.

It is this decision which has dominated much of the historical discourse and debate around his career.

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Asquith’s flawed Irish compromise

The British prime minister’s delays and indecision ultimately condemned Ireland to partition, writes **Ronan Fanning**

WHEN Herbert Henry Asquith became Prime Minister on 8 April 1908 his Liberal Party was enjoying its last ever overall majority in the House of Commons. That enabled the new Prime Minister to do what he most wanted to do about Ireland: nothing.

A barrister by profession, Asquith was not a wealthy man. He never forgot that the split over the first Home Rule Bill in 1886 had condemned the Liberal Party to almost 20 years in the wilderness of opposition. This explains why the guiding principle of his Irish policy from the moment he entered 10 Downing Street until the moment he left it in December 1916 was that Ireland should never again deny him power.

Things changed when the two general elections in 1910, caused by the constitutional crisis over the reduction of the powers of the House of Lords, once more reduced the Liberal Party to dependence on John Redmond’s Irish parliamentary party for its working majority in the House of Commons. The price for the Irish party’s support was a renewed commitment by Asquith’s government to introduce home rule once the obstacle of the inbuilt Unionist majority in the House of Lords had been dismantled.

This seemed to have been achieved by the Parliament Act of 1911. But although the act destroyed the House of Lords’ permanent veto on home rule, it sanctioned a two-year veto. A Home Rule bill could be and was introduced in 1912, but it could not be enacted before the summer of 1914. This created the perfect climate for Asquith’s preference for procrastination. The enforced delay gave concrete expression to his principle of ‘Wait and See’, the phrase he repeatedly used in the House of Commons when asked about his Irish policy.

This also explains what happened on 9 February 1912 when, after the most significant cabinet discussion of Irish policy since Gladstone’s conversion to home rule in 1886, Asquith’s government decided on the terms of the third Home Rule Bill. The pragmatists, the most powerful of whom were David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, proposed the temporary exclusion of Unionist Ulster from the terms of the bill. But Asquith preferred procrastination because he feared that publicly grasping the nettle of partition



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MARK CONDREN

would so alienate John Redmond and his party that it would put at risk his majority in the House of Commons.

In the end, as the prime minister informed the king, the Cabinet ‘acquiesced’ — that most Asquithian of words — in three conclusions:

• Firstly, that the Home Rule Bill ‘as introduced should apply to the whole of Ireland’;

• Secondly, that the leaders of the Irish Parliamentary Party ‘should from the first be given clearly to understand that the Government held themselves free to make such changes in the Bill as fresh evidence of facts, or the pressure of British opinion, may render expedient’; and

SNAPSHOT

HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH

Born: Yorkshire, 12 September 1852

Educated: City of London School; Balliol College Oxford

Affiliation: Liberal

Career: Lawyer, MP (1886-1924), Home Secretary (1892-95), Chancellor (1905-08), Prime Minister (1908-1916)

Died: Berkshire, 15 February, 1928

• Thirdly, that ‘if, in the light of such evidence or indication of public opinion, it becomes clear as the Bill proceeds that some special treatment must be provided for the Ulster counties, the Government will be ready to recognise th[at] necessity’.

The cabinet’s conclusions amounted to a tacit invitation to revolution: the more seditious the Ulster Unionists became, the more persuasive would be the ‘fresh evidence’ and the more likely that ‘public opinion’ would indicate that they must receive ‘some special treatment’. A mass rally in Belfast, on 9 April 1912, when 100,000 Irish Unionists marched in military formation past Andrew Bonar Law (the leader of the Conservative Party) and Edward Carson was but the first of many instalments of such evidence.

Privately, Asquith, like Lloyd George and Churchill, favoured exclusion. Publicly, he was determined to postpone unveiling what he believed was an inevitable compromise until the last possible moment. ‘I have always thought (and said) that, in the end, we should probably have to make some sort of bargain about Ulster as the price of Home Rule,’ he reminded Churchill when the Irish crisis was coming to a head in September 1913. ‘But I have never doubted, that, as a matter of tactics and policy, we were right to launch our Bill on its present lines.’

Asquith, moreover, clearly understood the risks of such a strategy and he spelt them out in a memorandum for the King in the autumn of 1913. After acknowledging that the enactment of the Home Rule Bill in its original form entailed ‘the certainty of tumult and riot, and more than the possibility of bloodshed’ in Unionist Ulster, he went on to paint a much bleaker scenario if the bill were abandoned.

‘If the Bill is rejected or indefinitely postponed, or some inadequate and disappointing substitute put forward in its place, the prospect is, in my opinion, much more grave. The attainment of Home Rule has for more than 30 years been the political (as distinguished from the agrarian) ideal of the Irish people. Whatever happens in other parts of the United Kingdom, at successive general elections, the Irish representation in Parliament never varies...

‘It is the confident expectation of the vast bulk of the Irish people that it will become law next year. If the ship, after so many stormy voyages, were now to be wrecked in sight of port, it is difficult to overrate