A MOST THANKLESS JOB: AUGUSTINE BIRRELL

AS IRISH CHIEF SECRETARY, 1907-1916

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Augustine Birrell was a man who held dear the classical liberal principles of representative democracy, political freedom and civil liberties. During his time as Irish Chief Secretary from 1907-1916, he fostered a friendly working relationship with the leaders of the Irish Party, whom he believed would be the men to lead the country once it was conferred with the responsibility of self-government.

Hundreds of years of religious and political strife between Ireland's Nationalist and Unionist communities meant that Birrell, like his predecessors, took administrative charge of a deeply polarized country. His friendship with Irish Party leader John Redmond quickly alienated him from the Irish Unionist community, which was adamantly opposed to a Dublin parliament under Nationalist control.

Augustine Birrell's legacy has been both tarnished and neglected because of the watershed Easter Rising of 1916, which shifted the focus of the historiography of the period towards militant nationalism at the expense of constitutional politics. Although Birrell's flaws as Irish Chief Secretary have been well-documented, this paper helps to rehabilitate his image by underscoring the importance of his economic, social and political reforms for a country he grew to love.

This study reviews Birrell's legislative achievements, setbacks and inaction while Irish Chief Secretary to determine how much his actions were influenced by his preconceived political views of the country, and by his friendship with the Irish Party. The agency of British and Irish Unionist leaders, paramilitary organizations and the

Great War are also considered to better understand his decision-making during this tumultuous time in Irish history.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE IRISH CHIEF SECRETARY

This dissertation seeks to enhance our understanding of Irish Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell's relationship with the Irish Parliamentary Party[1] before, during and after the political drama of the Third Home Rule Bill of 1912. As head of the Irish administration based in Dublin Castle from 1907-16 he passed an average of five pieces of legislation annually, making him the most productive Chief Secretary since the passage of the Act of Union in 1800. Birrell firmly believed in Ireland's right to self-governance, and, while Chief Secretary, fostered amicable relations with the leadership of the Irish Party, who he believed would be the men to lead a future Irish parliament in Dublin.

The "Irish Question," the label attached to the seemingly unsolvable British attempts to reconcile the demands of Irish Nationalists and Unionists within the framework of a United Kingdom, dominated parliamentary proceedings in Britain in the late 19th and early 20th century. Augustine Birrell took charge of Ireland's political administration in a period of deep agricultural unrest in the country, and at a time when the leaders of Irish Nationalism became increasingly vociferous in their demand that a third Home Rule Bill be carried through parliament. The idea of self-government for Ireland was a polarizing issue between the Protestant majority population in the

[1] The Irish Parliamentary Party was commonly called the Irish Party. I will use the shortened version throughout this paper.

Northeast of the country which wanted a guarantee of its position within the United Kingdom, and the majority Roman Catholic population throughout the rest of the island that wished for its own parliament in Dublin.

Historical analysis of the "Irish Question" frequently adopts a conventional approach whereby the overarching weight of the research focuses on the interaction between major British and Irish political figures. For the reader of post-1800 Irish history a typical library bookshelf has plenty of dust jackets that bear the names of great political figures such as Daniel O'Connell and Sir Robert Peel, Charles Stewart Parnell and William Gladstone, and John Redmond and Herbert Henry Asquith. We can learn much on the complexity of Irish politics through an assessment of these great men, but we can learn more by delving deeper into the machinations of Dublin Castle, and of the roles of successive Irish Chief Secretaries, who, in effect, acted as the chief executive of Ireland as well as a British minister of the crown. Augustine Birrell was one of the most consequential Chief Secretaries between the Act of Union and the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

An examination of Augustine Birrell's earliest viewpoint of Irish politics can provide us with a better understanding of his actions as Irish Chief Secretary. In 1889, during an election campaign stop in Aberdour, Scotland, Birrell first publicly expressed his views about the "Irish Question." He claimed seven hundred years of English control had yet to make the country a contented and happy part of the United Kingdom. The liberties of the Irish people, he explained to the crowd, particularly in Southern Ireland, were entirely decided upon by judges chosen by a non-Irish executive. England had,

after all these years, still been unable to govern the Irish through constitutional means or in accordance with the ordinary law. The time had come, he insisted, for Ireland to be given the dignity of self-government.[2]

The "Grand Old Man," William Gladstone had committed his Liberal Party to Irish self-government in the early 1880s. Although his first legislative attempt to secure Home Rule failed in 1886, creating an irreparable ideological split in his party, he and the majority of his colleagues remained committed to bestowing self-government upon the Irish people. In 1892, Augustine Birrell, during an electoral campaign stop in West Fife, continued to champion Ireland's cause. He stressed to his supporters that it was more hazardous to attempt to suppress the Irish people than to entrust them with the ability to govern themselves. Regarding the objections of the Protestants of Ulster he was certain a lot of the arguments put forth by them were simply bluster, and when the Unionists of Belfast discovered they had not been "sold into slavery" in a Dublin parliament they would soon enjoy the patriotic endeavor of self-government. He also countered the "vain delusion" that Arthur Balfour, during his time as a Conservative-Unionist Chief Secretary, had somehow managed to suppress the Irish nation and forever extinguish its desire for Home Rule. Even if Balfour was able to convert lawless paupers into law-abiding proprietors the Irish demand for self-government, he insisted, would not simply vanish.[3] The Conservative-Unionist Party, Birrell was convinced, had not

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[2] Glasgow Herald, July 4, 1889, 8.

[3] Birrell election address to the voters of West Fife, June 23, 1892, MS. 10. 1., Liverpool University Archives.

satisfied the Irish people through conciliatory economic and social measures because the demand of a people to govern itself could never be quashed.

Although the Liberal Party lost much of its enthusiasm for Irish Home Rule in the wake of several crushing electoral defeats in 1895 and in 1900 Birrell occasionally wrote on the issue. In an article published in the *North American Review* in 1901 he claimed that the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists exhibited neither courage nor understanding in their administrative handling of Ireland since 1886. In 1903 he edited the Liberal pamphlet *Eight Years of Tory Government*, in which he attacked the Opposition government's political, economic and social policies. On the issue of Ireland, Birrell lambasted the Irish Local Government Act of 1898. He wrote, "No one pretends that the Local Government Act of 1898 is a full measure of Home Rule, but in itself it gives the 'coup de grace' to many of the arguments used to confound Home Rule."[4] He was certain that Unionist attempts to mollify the Irish demand for self-government through such a conciliatory measure would never be enough. After a brief stint as the Liberal Party's President of the Board of Education in 1906 Birrell took up the Chief Secretaryship of Ireland in January 1907.

Chapter II examines Birrell's formative interaction with Irish Party leader John Redmond and his deputy John Dillon. Birrell established a cordial relationship with both men during the drafting of his Education Bill in 1906. The bond between these men

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[4] Augustine Birrell, *Eight Years of Tory Government 1895-1903* (London: Liberal Publication Department, 1903), 194. The Local Government Act of 1898 established democratically elected county and urban councils throughout Ireland, giving them fiscal and administrative functions.

grew upon Birrell's appointment as Irish Chief Secretary in January 1907. The Irish Council Bill of 1907 became the first major attempt by Birrell to provide the leaders of Irish Nationalism with more control over the administration of Ireland. This chapter uncovers how and why the Bill failed to satisfy the Irish Party despite Birrell's best efforts.

Chapter III focuses on Birrell's agricultural and educational reforms. Through close cooperation with the Irish Party he familiarized himself with the plight of those poor Irish tenants who had not benefited from previous land legislation. His seminal Irish University Act of 1908 endeared him to Nationalist Ireland because it enabled Ireland's Catholics to pursue a college degree without any religious restrictions.[5] This Act, however, shone a light on Ireland's stark regional religious differences and Birrell would soon realize the importance of this during negotiations over the Irish Home Rule Bill in 1912.

Chapter IV underscores the struggles faced by the Chief Secretary during the formulation of the Irish Home Rule Bill. The two General Elections of 1910 created a situation in which the Irish Party held the balance of power in the British House of Commons. The Liberal Party reengaged itself with the fractious issue of Irish self-government, and Augustine Birrell soon found himself acutely aware of the sectarian

[5] Born in 1850 in the village of Wavertree, a suburb of the port city Liverpool, Birrell, whose father was a Baptist minister, grew up in the tradition of liberal non-conformity. When ten years old he and his family moved into Liverpool Separated by 117 nautical miles, Dublin and Liverpool had strong trade connections, and a large Irish immigrant community made up of emigrants and seasonal workers resided in the latter. In his autobiography *Things Past Redress* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937) Birrell said he always had a soft spot in his heart for religious minorities including Catholics and Jews. The stories of those emigrants who fled Ireland to Liverpool during the Great Famine of 1845-51likely influenced his perceptions of the Irish people and of their politics.

divide within Ireland as Irish Unionists and Nationalists squabbled over the terms of the Bill. Birrell was a committed Home Ruler and continued to act as Redmond's mouthpiece during Cabinet discussions on the issue, but he quickly became acquainted with the militant voices of Ulster Unionism under the fiery leadership of Sir Edward Carson.

Chapter V follows Birrell's poor administrative handling of the deteriorating political conditions within Ireland from early 1914 to mid-1915. The creation of separate opposing paramilitary forces in Ulster and in the rest of Ireland left the country on the brink of civil war, which was only prevented by the distraction of war in Europe. A small but determined group of anti-British Irish Nationalists proved to be a challenge for the Chief Secretary's administration of Ireland. His trusted Irish Party friends Redmond and Dillon assured him this small group of separatists was unimportant and irrelevant. As a result, a seditious propaganda campaign was allowed to flourish in an already delicate political environment.

Chapter VI discusses the impact the wartime national coalition had upon Birrell and his Irish duties, and concludes with his resignation after the Easter Rising of 1916. During his final twelve months in office Birrell came under heavy criticism from the Opposition for not adequately enforcing law and order in Ireland. Much to the surprise of the Chief Secretary and Redmond, on Easter Monday over one thousand men staged an insurrection in Dublin city and declared an Irish republic. The rebellion and its aftermath dismayed Birrell and he decided to retire from politics for good two years later.

Historiography

In the late 19th century Irish historians were easily defined as either Nationalist or Unionist in outlook due to their blatant denominational and political positions. Scholars such as James Anthony Froude and William Edward Lecky wrote an unabashed Unionist-centric history of Ireland. In his *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (1872) Froude stressed the ascendancy of Protestantism over Roman Catholicism, insisted the Irish were incapable of self-government, espoused the superiority of the English race, and believed a revolutionary sentiment existed in the country only because the English were not authoritative enough. In 1892, Lecky published his *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* as a five volume work. He wished to correct some untruths he found in Froude's work, but agreed with him that the Irish were incapable of administering their own affairs.

Those who championed a Nationalist telling of Irish history included John George MacCarthy and William O'Connor. In 1871 MacCarthy wrote *A Plea for the Home Government of Ireland* in which he called for his fellow Irishmen to unite and demand Home Rule. Prophetically, he wrote that if Ireland was persistently rebuffed in its demand for self-government then a considerable portion of the population would seek complete separation. Published in 1881, William Anderson O'Connor's *History of the Irish People* sought to remove the stain of racial inferiority from political discourse. He argued that the Home Rule debate was not a battle of the races but a struggle between the right of self-government and the wrong of conquest.

Those contemporaries who wrote of the history of Ireland in the years following Birrell's resignation in 1916 were by and large politicians and journalists. Historical enquiry during the interwar era was mostly Nationalist or Liberal in outlook. Nationalist historians focused mainly on the Easter Rising as a watershed moment in Irish history. They studied the evolution of revolutionary and romantic Nationalist ideals operating inside a moderate political environment. Studies on the "Gaelic Revival" and on the emergence of those radical figures responsible for rebellion in 1916 dominated discussions at the expense of the Home Rule Crisis. The Easter Rising, these writers proudly announced, acted as the catalyst for creation of an Irish Free State with its own Dublin parliament [minus six counties in Ulster] in 1922. Those who did not ascribe to the traditional romantic Nationalist approach of their contemporaries kept their focus on the Liberal Party's lost opportunities for a successful resolution of the Home Rule debate. George Dangerfield's book *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1935) wrote of the successful Conservative assault upon the Liberal Party's very existence by those angry with the its passage of the Parliament Act in 1911 and those ideologically opposed to the Third Home Rule Bill. Other non-Nationalist scholars like J.L. Hammond, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (London: Longmans Green, 1938), focused on the difficulties faced by Liberal Party Prime Minister William Gladstone in the late 19th century as he attempted to legislate for Irish self-government in the face of obdurate Irish and British Unionist resistance.

The historiography of Ireland during Birrell's term as Chief Secretary has undergone extensive revisionism within the past forty years. One of the earliest

revisionists was Roy Foster, whose book *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) was an attempt to move beyond scholarship wedded to political predilections. Foster praised this new wave of academic scholarship among his contemporaries, and commended their "ability to appreciate half-tones, to be skeptical about imputing praise or blame, to separate temporary intentions from historical effects."[6] The Protestants and Catholics, and Unionists and Nationalists of Ireland have a strong sense of attachment to their history. In the religiously controlled schools of modern day Ireland the history textbooks tend to paint a glamorized picture of the past for their audiences; so, with alternative interpretations came hostility from those unwilling to accept this new, and much less self-serving, wave of scholarship.

The first and only major manuscript on Birrell's Irish career was Leon O'Broin's *The Chief Secretary: Augustine Birrell in Ireland* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1969). Born in 1902, O'Broin was swept up by the separatist *Sinn Fein* organization and joined it while still in school. Thoroughly researched, his book explains the challenges and achievements of a man who genuinely sought to improve the lives of the Irish people. Patricia Jalland has provided the best scholarly work on the Liberal Party's administration of Ireland during Birrell's time in Dublin Castle. Her doctoral thesis assessed the Liberal government's response to the growing Ulster Crisis from 1911-

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[6] M.A.G. O'Tuathaigh, "Irish Historical 'Revisionism': State of the Art or Ideological Project?," in *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism,"* ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 311.

1914[7], and, in a natural progression, her first major publication was aptly titled *The Liberals and Ireland: The Ulster Question in British Politics to 1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980). She is sharply critical of the Liberal Government for its clumsy handling of Unionist opposition to the Home Rule Bill. She also admonishes Prime Minister Asquith for his perceived half-heartedness and weakness on the issue. Jalland has also published a journal article on Augustine Birrell, in which she rightly claims the Chief Secretary had a just and independent outlook towards Ireland, and that over time he developed a shrewd and sympathetic working relationship with the leaders of Irish Nationalism.[8]

Lawrence McBride's *The Greening of Dublin Castle: The Transformation of Bureaucratic and Judicial Personnel in Ireland, 1892-1922* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991) describes Augustine Birrell as the man most responsible for creating a bureaucracy in Ireland filled predominantly with Catholic men affiliated with the Irish Party. During his Chief Secretaryship Birrell hired twice as many Catholic Justices of the Peace than Protestant because he knew these were the men who would be best representative of their constituencies once Ireland was granted self-government. Paul Bew's *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, 1912-1916* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1994) claims that Irish Party leader John Redmond missed a great opportunity in early 1914 to accept the exclusion of

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[7] Patricia Jalland. "The Irish Question in Liberal Politics 1911-1914" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1976).

[8] Patricia Jalland, "A Liberal Chief Secretary and the Irish Question: Augustine Birrell, 1907-1914," *The Historical Journal* 19, no. 2 (1976): 428.

Ulster's four Protestant-majority counties without a six-year time limit, thus allowing for the creation of a Home Rule government in Dublin before the outbreak of war on the continent. This would have allowed for Birrell to leave his no longer required post of Chief Secretary with his reputation intact.

In this new era of academic scholarship some historians have shifted their focus to localized issues to help explain the progression of high politics during Birrell's time in office. In *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland, 1891-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) Fergus Campbell argues that agrarian protests in the "bogs of Connaught" influenced Irish Party leader Redmond and his colleagues to pursue more radical policies than they would otherwise have done. Redmond threw his support behind the Ranch War 1906-09, and this ultimately forced Birrell to respond with a Land Act in 1909 to address the grievances of the peasantry in the West. Michael Wheatley studied five counties in central Ireland in the period 1910-1916 in his analysis of Redmond's support base during this tumultuous time. In his book *Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland 1910-1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) he found that on the eve of the Great War the Irish Volunteer Force had become a more popular organization than Redmond's party, and the Irish Party leader's pledge to utilize the Irish Volunteers lost him the support of many people not interested in aiding Britain during the Great War.

The bulk of the recent scholarship on early 20th century Irish history offers a critical reinterpretation of the major Irish and British political leaders, and a fresh look at the major political crises. My paper provides a fresh analysis of Chief Secretary

Augustine Birrell, and of his centrality to the narrative of events. The literature on Birrell has been limited to several articles and book chapters since O'Broin's monograph of 1969. Through a synthesis of the existing secondary source material on Birrell and a close inspection of his personal papers it is my hope to add constructively to the historiography by shedding new light on his achievements and failures, and on his interaction with the Irish Party during this fascinating time in Irish history.

CHAPTER II

ENGLISH EDUCATION AND AN IRISH COUNCIL BILL

Following the Conservative Party split in 1903 over the contentious issue of Tariff Reform, Prime Minister Arthur Balfour found himself in an increasingly precarious position due to the constant defections of anti-tariff "Free Food" Tories from his party.[1] Exasperated, he resigned in December 1905, and Liberal Party leader Henry Campbell-Bannerman was immediately charged by King Edward VII to form a government. The General Election of the following month resulted in the largest electoral victory in history for the Liberal Party. It won 397 seats in the House of Commons, while the opposition Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties mustered only 156. The Irish Party gained six more seats than in the 1900 election, bringing its total to eighty-two seats. With a massive majority in the House of Commons, even without its traditional Irish allies, the Liberal Party was well-placed to embark on a whole host of reforms. The Free Trade platform had been the Liberal Party's centerpiece of the 1906 election; however, the Irish Party believed the government's focus should be a Home Rule bill for Ireland, which would grant the Irish a self-governing parliament in Dublin.

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[1] Those in favor of Tariff Reform agreed with Liberal Unionist Joseph Chamberlain's plan for a system of preferential tariff agreements with British colonies in response to tariffs on British goods from her rivals Germany and the USA. Since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, Britain had been a free-trading nation, and a majority of the population supported free trade as a healthy and competitive way to ensure cheap and plentiful food. For an extended discussion on the issue see E.H.H. Green's article "Radical Conservatism: The Electoral Genesis of Tariff Reform" in *The Historical Journal* 28, no.3 (Sept, 1985): 667-692. Also see Travis Crosby's *Joseph Chamberlain: A Most Radical Imperialist* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011) for an excellent analysis on how Chamberlain's protectionist crusade divided the Conservative Party in the Edwardian era.

Augustine Birrell, although a committed Liberal, like many in his party was a realist when it came to the issue of Irish self-government.[2] The Liberal Party, having been out of office for a decade, was not prepared to jeopardize its plan for economic and social reforms in Britain by pursuing a fractious policy of Home Rule for Ireland. Birrell spent most of 1904 working within the Liberal Publication Department pumping out pamphlets and posters extolling the virtues of free trade, whilst Ireland rarely got mentioned. In June, during a speech in Oxford, he said that it was utterly out of the question for his party, once it returned to power, to introduce a Home Rule measure because no such legislation could possibly pass through the Conservative-dominated House of Lords. Therefore, he believed, to hold this "bogey issue" up as the focus of the Liberal campaign was a ridiculous idea.[3] Consequently, during the election campaign, the Liberals shoved Home Rule to the back of the political agenda, leaving the Conservative-Unionist coalition divided over Tariff Reform and unable to effectively use "The Union in Danger" as a natural rallying cry.[4]

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[2] The Liberal Party's core beliefs in the late 19th century included its advocacy of civil liberties, the pursuit of peace, responsible government expenditure and political freedom. Prior to 1885, its leader William Gladstone sought to mollify the Irish demand for self-government through economic, social and religious reforms. The 1885 General Election gave the Irish Party the balance of power in the House of Commons, and the results convinced Gladstone the time was right to give the Irish their own parliament. His Home Rule Bills of 1886 and 1893 both failed, and caused an irrevocable schism in his party. Ian Cawood's *The Liberal Unionist Party: A History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012) provides a comprehensive study of the Liberal Unionist Party, from its inception in 1886 with Lord Hartington as leader, to its alliance with the Conservative Party by the turn of the century. Roy Jenkins lengthy biography of Gladstone details the evolution of his beliefs on Irish politics and his eventual zeal for Irish Home Rule.

[3] Mr. Tuff, "Home Rule *HC Deb 12 April 1905 vol. 144 cc1484-517*," *Hansard*.

[4] John Kendle, *Walter Long, Ireland and the Union 1905-1920* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1992), 36.

Augustine Birrell was given the position of President of the Board of Education in Henry Campbell-Bannerman's new Liberal government, and, in typical Liberal fashion, immediately set out to remedy Nonconformist grievances surrounding Balfour's Education Act of 1902.[5] Traditional Liberal philosophy insisted that the tight bond between the Church of England and national institutions was counter to a free society. With a return of almost two hundred Nonconformist M.P.s in the Liberal landslide of 1906 Campbell-Bannerman felt compelled to remedy the outrage they felt over the 1902 Act. Balfour's Act provided tax monies for denominational instruction in voluntary [religious-based] elementary schools, owned primarily by Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Also, it firmly entrenched in many rural areas the Anglican Church as the sole provider of elementary education, and this Nonconformists found intolerable.[6] The Welsh Liberal M.P. David Lloyd George summed up the attitude of the Nonconformists in his party saying they wanted to "get rid of the priest, with his black scepter to ensnare and enslave the souls of children."[7]

On April 9, 1906, Birrell put his own bill before parliament. It proposed that all schools supported by government taxes should be managed by local councils and

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[5] Led by Lord Cranborne, the "Church Party", a faction loyal to the Church of England, had influenced Balfour's education policy to temper the growth of secularism in British schools. In many constituencies there was evidence Balfour's Education Act had alienated Nonconformists within the Conservative Party, thus exacerbating its electoral woes in 1906. See R.J.Q. Adams' *Balfour: The Last Grandee* (London: John Murray, 2008) & D.R. Pugh's "The 1902 Education Act: The Search for a Compromise," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 16, no.2 (1968): 164–178 for more on Balfour and the Education Act.

[6] R. Pattison, "The Birrell Education Bill of 1906," *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 5, no. 1 (1973): 34.

[7] Colin Cross, *The Liberals in Power 1905-1914* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1963), 39.

teachers, and they would not be compelled to give religious instruction. The Cowper-Temple clause in the 1870 Education Act, which allowed parents to withdraw their children from religious education, would now become universal through Birrell's legislation. This clause forbade board schools from teaching any religious catechism or religious formulary which was distinctive of any particular denomination. The Bill reached the committee stage early in June and was reported to the House with amendments on July 27.

The construction of the Bill gave Birrell his first prolonged interaction with Irish Nationalist leader John Redmond and Irish Party second in command, John Dillon, who were concerned with the fortunes of Roman Catholic schools in England. The first clause of the Education Bill proposed that a school would not be recognized as a state-maintained elementary school unless it was a school provided by a local education authority. Birrell spoke of the problems in the past between conflicting ownership of schools among private [religious] owners and local authorities, and pointed to Ireland as a case in point:

> "Dual control has had a gloomy history in this country and in Ireland. We know what comes out of it. I believe that the abolition of it in this case will save an enormous amount of time, temper and ratepayers' money."[8]

[8] Anna Tolman Smith, *The Education Bill of 1906 for England and Wales as it past the House of Commons* (Washington: G.P.O., 1906), 15.

Birrell's suggestion was that denominational instruction should no longer be financed from local property rates.[9] But, as a concession, denominational instruction could be provided by private means and outside school hours on two mornings a week in any school, ex-voluntary [religious] or ex-school board, for those children whose parents wished them to attend. He believed Anglicans would mostly use this option but was of the view Catholics needed their schools to have a much more specifically Catholic regime. So, to mollify Roman Catholic unease that the denominational character of their schools would be eradicated, Birrell took up his Cabinet colleague Haldane's suggestion that in any school where 80% of the parents requested the measure, there could be denominational instruction on every day of the week and no non-denominational Bible instruction at all.[10] Known as Clause IV, this provision allowed local educational authorities in urban areas [with a population over five thousand] to arrange that a school should continue denominational teaching as before, but under two conditions: four fifths of parents had to approve, and there had to be a state school option for those who did not.

Irish Party leader John Redmond expressed his concerns about the shortcomings of Clause IV. He wanted religious safeguards for parents who sent their children to these types of schools because it could be used, he feared, as an instrument of injustice and religious tyranny in the hands of a dominant [i.e. Protestant] majority. He demanded

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[9] In the United Kingdom "rates" refer to a tax on land and buildings paid to a local authority by a business and the owners of private property. A ratepayer was someone who paid such a tax.

[10] Ian Packer, *Liberal Government and Politics, 1905-1915* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 102-103.

that the voices of parents should be heard when it came to selecting school teachers suitable for the faith of their children. Although the bulk of Roman Catholic schools would benefit from Clause IV, there were a further five hundred that would not qualify because of the double operation of five thousand [population] and four-fifths [parental approval] rules.[11] Redmond insisted on qualifying the proposal to ensure these schools would be included. During his negotiations with the Irish Party, Birrell struck up a friendly relationship with John Dillon, whose brother Henry was a Franciscan priest held in high esteem in Rome. Dillon spoke up for the Catholic case during the second reading of the Bill, and declared that if faced with a choice between a completely secular system and a purely Bible-reading system [Protestant] of education, then, without a doubt, he would accept a purely secular one.[12]

Redmond and Dillon wanted a provision which would safeguard Catholic religious teaching in British schools, much like the protections afforded to Protestant religious teaching. It would be unfair, they argued, for Catholic schools to pay for their own maintenance, pay for their own Catholic teaching, and, in addition, have Catholic families pay taxes for the teaching of what to him was simply Protestantism in Protestant schools. Disagreements with Clause IV led Redmond and the Irish Party to vote against it. Also opposing the Bill was the fiery Liberal Unionist leader Joseph Chamberlain, himself a Unitarian, who, in May, during a debate on amendments to the bill, condemned Birrell for ingeniously and unjustly introducing the four-fifths clause to

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[11] Tolman Smith, *The Education Bill of 1906*, 23.

[12] F.S.L. Lyons, *John Dillon: A Biography* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968), 285.

pander to his Irish Nationalist friends, whilst Anglican schools, he believed, were to suffer disproportionately.

To quell the fears of some within his own party, Birrell accepted Cabinet modifications to the bill to satisfy those Nonconformists who opposed Clause IV. Summing up the position of Nonconformists, Lloyd George, the President of the Board of Trade, wrote that many of his constituents said "clause [four] was the worst endowment of sectarianism in the schools of this land that has ever been perpetrated by any government."[13] Cabinet revisions to the clause meant denominational instruction would now be confined to ex-voluntary [non state-funded] schools, and religious teaching would be excluded from ex-board schools. This further aggrieved the Irish Party, who remained unhappy with the lack of protection for Catholic schools; nevertheless, even without Redmond's support, the Bill passed the House of Commons with a majority of 192 votes. However, it could not overcome the biggest hurdle of all, the overwhelmingly Conservative House of Lords.

After the Bill received its second reading in the Lords, those opposed to it amended it to such an extent to protect denominational schools that it came back to the Commons barely recognizable. Birrell bemoaned that the Bill was returned to him a "miserable, mangled, tortured, twisted *tertium quid*." The massacre of his Bill in the upper chamber left him fuming and helpless to proceed with its passage. Consequently, his position as President of the Board of Education became untenable. In November,

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[13] Tolman Smith, *The Education Bill of 1906*, 24.

1906, in a speech to the Anchor Society in his constituency of Bristol, he stated that the House of Lords' proposals simply bolstered denominationalism. Their amendments perpetuated it, protected it, defended it and endowed it afresh with a large sum of public money to be taken every year from the pockets of the taxpayers. He compared the Lords interference to a Redistribution Bill that inserted a clause to take away M.P.s from Manchester and Birmingham and restore them to the infamous rotten boroughs of Old Sarum and Grampound.[14] It was not wise, he argued, for people to assume that the country could be divided by those who went to church and those who went to chapel, for some went to neither.[15] Protecting the vested interests of Anglicans, Catholics and other denominations in public schools was unfair in an increasingly secular society.

Born in Ulster, James Bryce, a legal scholar, historian and Liberal M.P. for South Aberdeen, was appointed Irish Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in November 1905. Though a firm believer in granting Ireland self-government his hands were very much tied when he assumed office, because the Liberals did not want to risk their plans for social reform in Britain by toying with the controversial idea of another Irish Home Rule Bill. Therefore, he saw himself condemned to a policy of palliatives and second bests from which some objects of value might be derived but certain to fail

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[14] A rotten borough was a parliamentary constituency that had declined in size but still had the right to elect members to the House of Commons. Prior the Great Reform Act of 1832 the constituency of Old Sarum could still elect an M.P. even though it had a population of fifteen and three houses.

[15] Augustine Birrell, *The Lords and the Education Bill: a speech delivered…at Bristol, on November 13th, 1906* (London: Liberal Publication Department, 1906), 4-5.

in securing a settlement of the Irish question.[16] The Irish Party was mistrustful of the partnership of Bryce and his Under-Secretary Sir Antony MacDonnell, because they did not actively attempt to foster a working relationship with Redmond and Dillon. In fact, Dillon, although he thought kindly of Bryce personally, thought little of him as an administrator and was happy to see him go at the end of 1906.

In 1905, Bryce, and his Under-Secretary MacDonnell, began a modest scheme of administrative devolution for Ireland. MacDonnell took up his Dublin Castle position in 1902 at the behest of George Wyndham [the then Conservative-Unionist Chief Secretary], and quickly came to believe, drawing on his experience in the Indian Civil Service, the Unionist policy of modest conciliatory reforms was the best way to address Irish Nationalist political, economic and social grievances.[17] It was understood that, due to his successful administrative record in India, MacDonnell would have the freedom to draft legislation for Bryce once he became Chief Secretary. His main aims were the maintenance of order, a solution to the troublesome land question on the basis of voluntary sale and, perhaps most importantly, the co-ordination of government departments to reconcile Irish Nationalist opinion and improve government efficiency.[18] An Irish Council Bill, he believed, would resolve this problem.

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[16] Fisher, H.A.L., *James Bryce* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 340.

[17] MacDonnell was a Liberal M.P. and Catholic with Nationalist sympathies, although his main focus throughout his public life was for the well-being of peasants who lived on and by the land. See Michael Brillman's comprehensive doctoral study of MacDonnell in "*Bengal tiger, Celtic tiger: The life of Sir Antony Patrick MacDonnell, 1844—1925"* (The University of Chicago, 2009).

[18] Papers in the possession of the Lady MacDonnell of Swinford, M.S. Eng. Hist b 206 f. 85, Bodleian Library.

Under great secrecy, something which alarmed Redmond and Dillon, in February 1906, MacDonnell submitted a proposal for a scheme of what came to be called devolution. He recommended the establishment of an executive council of thirty, partially elected, members who would be responsible for advising government policy.[19] Redmond was greatly wary of MacDonnell's plans, and suggested that within his scheme there lay ulterior motives to weaken politically the support base of the Nationalist party. At a speech in Coalisland on October 14, 1906, Redmond informed his audience that the Council Bill in its initial form was a weak attempt of administrative Home Rule, perhaps designed by its architects to weaken the voice of the Irish Party.[20] Bryce, too, had his concerns with the composition of the Bill. He wrote to MacDonnell in August, 1906:

> "The exclusion of any legislative function may prove to be a grave disappointment to all sections of nationalism….What one fears is that the ultra party, the fenian dregs, the *Sinn Fein* men, etc. etc., will, when our little chicken is hatched, cry out……J.E.R [Redmond], who already thinks himself in a tight place, will be in a tighter one."[21]

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[19] Ten would be nominated by the Lord Lieutenant and twenty elected indirectly by delegates of county councils.

[20] John Redmond, "Redmond at Coalisland," *Freeman's Journal*, October 15, 1906.

[21] Campbell, *Land & Revolution*, 111. *Sinn Fein* was a small separatist political organization formed on November 28, 1905. It would become the largest political party in the country after the Easter Rising of 1916. For more on its origins and how it came to prominence see Brian Feeney's *Sinn Fein: A Hundred Turbulent Years* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2002).

In December 1906, Chief Secretary Bryce jumped at the opportunity to take up the then vacant ambassadorial appointment in Washington. He was in despair over the controversy of the Council scheme, and this was a great way for him to escape his Irish woes.

After the scuttling of the Education Bill in the House of Lords, Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman decided it was time for a Cabinet reshuffle. Birrell realized that he was more likely than anyone else to be appointed to the now vacated position of Irish Chief Secretary.[22] Campbell-Bannerman agreed, but Birrell told the Prime Minister he was not eager for the position and joked that he hoped he was not selected because his leader viewed him as an enemy.[23] In a letter to the premier on December 27 Birrell reluctantly agreed to go ahead and accept the position. He said he was reassured by Bryce that he could manage the job, and although he feared a political impasse on the other side of the Irish Sea, he said he was ready for it.[24] Romantically, in the back of his mind, he hoped to be the Chief Secretary who resolved the vexatious problem of higher

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[22] Initially Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman considered six candidates for the position of Irish Chief Secretary. Birrell's attempts to safeguard Catholic interests in British schools endeared him to the Irish clergy, and his close co-operation with the leaders of the Irish Party propelled him to the top of the list of choices.

[23] Augustine Birrell, "Some Reflections on Ireland," MS 8 6 (1), Liverpool University Archives. Considering the average length of stay for a Chief Secretary in Ireland was two years, Birrell's joke had a certain degree of truth. The finger was always pointed at the leadership in Dublin Castle for outbreaks of violence, political quarrels and economic hardships. It was truly a thankless job fit for an enemy.

[24] Birrell to Campbell-Bannerman, December 27, 1906, MS 41239 f. 192, British Library Archives.

education in Ireland and establish a teaching university to which the Catholics of the country could flock with pride and confidence.[25]

In Dublin, on January 26, 1907, at a household dinner at the Vice Regal Lodge with Lord Aberdeen, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Augustine Birrell, a man well-known for his wit and charm, was officially installed as Irish Chief Secretary, Irish Privy Councillor, and Chancellor of the Most Noble Order of the Knights of St. Patrick; a position he would hold for over nine years. Some years later he quipped that he quickly learned three things about the country: nothing in Ireland was explicable, everything of unimportance was known and that it was such a small place.[26] Birrell was eager to get to working again with the Irish Party and duly sent a letter from Dublin Castle to Redmond on January 29 stating that he was excited to meet him at a Congested Districts Board meeting the following day.[27]

As Chief Secretary, Birrell, in theory assumed a political position that was ill-defined. Only answerable to the Lord Lieutenant, he was in effect governor of Ireland, with direct control over ten of the approximately forty-five [even this number was

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[25] Birrell, "Some Reflections," MS 8 6 (1), Liverpool University Archives.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Birrell to Redmond, January 29, 1907, MS 15,169/1, National Library of Ireland Archives. The Congested Districts Board was established in 1891 by Chief Secretary Arthur Balfour to alleviate poverty and congested (land of poor quality) living conditions in the West of Ireland. It was part of the Conservative strategy of "Killing Home Rule with Kindness." See David Hudson's *Ireland That We Made* (Ohio: Akron Press, 2003) for an excellent analysis of Conservative Party policy towards Ireland from 1887-1905.

unclear] administrative departments responsible for the governance of Ireland.[28] He found that some officials within Dublin Castle were answerable to him, while others worked totally independent of his control, and while some departments were voted in others enjoyed a long tradition of political patronage in the country. A few months into his position as Chief Secretary he made it known the system needed revision. He said to the House:

> "If anybody believes that the present system of administration of Irish affairs is sound and sensible, or that it is a system likely to train the Irish people in the habits of self-respect and economy I must wait and see how that individual makes out his case."[29]

In a veiled slight at the history of British governance in Ireland, and what can be clearly interpreted as his firm belief in the potential of Irish self-government, he claimed that the Irish people would never prosper under the current system:

> "It is not that Dublin Castle is a sink or seat of jobbery and corruption. It may have been so once. It certainly is so no longer. But it is, to use a familiar expression, "switched off" from the current of national life and feeling; and one

[28] In May 1907, while addressing the House of Commons, Birrell let it be known the exact number of departments responsible for the administration of Ireland was a matter of debate because many of them worked independently or semi-independently of Dublin Castle.

[29] Augustine Birrell, "Irish Council," *HC Deb 07 May 1907 vol. 174 cc78-195*, Hansard.

> cannot feel—I do not believe anybody within the walls of Dublin Castle can feel—that that is the way to secure the regeneration of Ireland.[30]

His sympathy for Irish Nationalism was evident right from the start of his tenure in Ireland. As a Liberal Chief Secretary he sought to "govern Ireland according to Irish ideas." He wished to strike up a cordial working relationship with the leaders of Irish Nationalism because he firmly believed these men would be in the near future the leaders of a self-governing Ireland. In the meantime, he would serve Irish interests as best he could at Dublin Castle and in the House of Commons. Although the Liberal government was backed by an overwhelming majority in the House of Commons, enough to push through much of their reform program there, Birrell and his colleagues were well-aware that a measure of Home Rule was virtually impossible given the composition of the House of Lords. The Conservatives in the upper chamber had made so many amendments to Birrell's Education Bill the previous year that it was barely recognizable and had to be scrapped. Any attempt at a Home Rule Bill without some prior reform of the House of Lords was, therefore, out of the question. It would be a waste of time and effort to spend so much time drafting a bill for it to be either voted down or amended to the point of being unrecognizable. Therefore, Birrell knew and accepted that he would have to try to appease the leaders of the Irish Party through more moderate reforms.

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[30] Ibid.

Liberal Cabinet members were aware of the task in hand for Birrell. Lord Morley, himself a former Liberal Irish Chief Secretary, told the Prime Minister that the "situation for Birrell will be mighty difficult, for he will have to bear all the odium of Sir A.M. [Antony MacDonnell] on his back, and that's a heavy load."[31] Campbell-Bannerman, on the other hand, felt his new appointment was up to the task of keeping MacDonnell in order as he went about his business. An editorial in the popular British newspaper *The Saturday Review* perhaps best summed up Birrell's position within the context of MacDonnell's council scheme:

> "Mr. Birrell's House of Commons reputation stands high, and his good temper and apparent simplicity will help him to parry criticism even more trying than that he had to meet in the education debates. At the same time to satisfy the Irish members that he is giving them Home Rule, and the English members that he is not, will be no easy business."[32]

Birrell admitted he knew little of Ireland from personal experience. He had read Irish novels and some historical texts, but his knowledge of the current political complexities of this little island was limited. Sticking to his long-held Liberal principles,

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[31] Morley to Campbell-Bannerman January 20, 1907, Campbell-Bannerman Papers, MS 41233 f. 229, The National Archives.

[32] *The Saturday Review,* January 19, 1907, The Papers of Herbert Asquith Reels 11-12 ff. 19-20, MSS Asquith 1 -152, Bodleian Library.

he sought to gain favor with the Irish Party, which he believed would have conferred upon it the responsibility of governing the country in the not too distant future.

At Birrell's behest, a government committee was set up to take another look at MacDonnell's administrative proposals in order to make the plan acceptable to Redmond and Dillon, and to ensure it still was moderate enough to survive the House of Lords unscathed. On March 6, in a memo to the Cabinet, Birrell explained that any administrative council, in order to effectively operate the many government departments, would need to have anywhere from eighty-eight to one hundred council members. Not only would it make it more efficient but it would, he believed, provide the Nationalists with a good working majority "as they must have in any system" put forward by the government.[33] In response to Irish Unionist objections to administrative changes, Birrell expressed his belief that it was impossible for any Chief Secretary to do even one tenth of what the Irish people had a right to expect. He wished the Unionists would "cease mumbling the dry bones of belated bigotry," and focus on meaningful political reforms.[34]

In late 1905, Redmond had expressed his opinion that a form of devolution as a first step toward Home Rule would be acceptable, but the proposed structure of the Council Bill was such that it became increasingly difficult for him to support. He was aggrieved at attempts to reconfigure parliamentary constituencies to provide the

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[33] Birrell to Cabinet March 6, 1907, Papers of Lord MacDonnell of Swinford, MS Eng. hist c 369 f. 92, Bodleian Library.

[34] Donegal News, March 16, 1907, 8.

Unionists of Ulster with more Council positions than their population merited.[35] For example, under the proposed scheme, Cork City, with a population of 76,122, would have the same representation as Londonderry with 39,151. Also, Cork would lose representation with its allocation of a solitary seat on the Council while Belfast was to be granted five. In a memorandum to the British Cabinet on April 29, Redmond warned:

> "In some of the constituencies, this appeal against disfranchisement would have added force and violence from historic traditions very familiar and very dear to Irish minds…..We are ready to conciliate Unionist opposition in Ireland and to meet fair demands from Ulster for greater representation through the nominated element, but we protest against both methods, redistribution and nomination, being used for this purpose"[36]

Redmond was also upset Birrell would not yield to his party's demand that the entire Irish political representation in parliament be ex-officio members of the proposed 107-member Council. Birrell, of course, knew this demand would be savaged by the

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[35] The Irish Unionist movement believed in the continuation of the political union between Great Britain and Ireland, so it opposed any form of Home Rule. Political opposition to Home Rule was greatest in Ulster, where the majority of Ireland's Protestant population lived. Within the nine counties of Ulster (population 1,581,696) 54.3% were of the Protestant faith, with 43.7% adherents to Roman Catholicism. The four North-Eastern counties of Antrim, Down, Londonderry and Armagh had substantial Protestant majorities, and it was here where opposition to Home Rule was the greatest. Patrick Buckland's book *Irish Unionism: Ulster Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973) is an excellent study on the emergence of Unionist resistance to Home Rule within Ulster from the 1880s onwards.

[36] Memorandum submitted by Mr. Redmond and others on the Constitution of the Irish Council April 29, 1907, Papers of Lord MacDonnell of Swinford, MS Eng. Hist. c 369 f. 111, Bodleian Library.

Unionist-dominated House of Lords. Nevertheless, he did accept Redmond's call for a fairer allocation of elected seats based on representation.

Further Irish objections included the veto powers granted to the Lord Lieutenant for Ireland.[37] Not only could he throw out Council proposals, he could institute his own policies at his own initiative. Intolerably for Redmond and Dillon, the Council was to exercise its control through committees which were to be placed under the direction of a paid chairman appointed by the Crown. Dillon, in a letter to Lord Morley, ridiculed the measure as nothing more than an attempt by MacDonnell and his colleagues to break up the Irish Party machine and its dominance of Irish politics. Dillon saw it as an underhanded approach to administer Ireland through non-political businessmen, and so "turn Ireland into a loyal and peaceful country, very subservient and manageable, purged of politics and devoted to the breeding of pigs and the making of butter."[38]

Birrell recognized early on that the Council Bill had put him in a tricky situation. He knew the plan gave his Irish Nationalist friends no legislative ability, but it was next to impossible to yield such a concession, because anything that resembled Home Rule would precipitate another fierce, prolonged and injurious clash at Westminster.[39] On the other hand, he feared that abandoning the measure outright would embolden Irish radicals such as the separatist *Sinn Fein* organization at the expense of the more moderate Irish Party. He made his thoughts known to Campbell-Bannerman:

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[37] The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland was the official representative of the monarchy and head of the Irish government.

[38] Lyons, *John Dillon*, 291.

[39] Westminster is commonly used as a metonym for the British Parliament.

> "If we were to drop the Bill there will be a tremendous row in Ireland & my position will become almost untenable and the whole situation (without any Crimes Act) very alarming."[40]

No matter how Birrell tried to present the Council Bill, when introduced to Parliament on May 7, he feared it was destined to fail miserably once the Irish Nationalist Convention met a few weeks later at the Mansion House in Dublin to discuss the measure.

Presenting his administrative scheme in the House of Commons, Birrell immediately set out to try to allay Unionist criticisms by informing them that the Bill did not contain any suggestion whatsoever of any new legislative power or authority. To justify his proposal, he spoke of the current administrative inadequacies in Ireland, and stressed that reforms were needed to make Dublin Castle work better and more efficiently for its people. To try to win the support of Redmond, Dillon and the Irish Party, he said he would endeavour to frame the new administrative system to:

> "make them capable of relaxation, perhaps ultimately of relinquishment, in response, to any proof we may receive from the Irish people of their fitness for self-government, their fitness for the assumption of those responsibilities."[41]

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[40] Birrell to Campbell-Bannerman, April 24, 1907, MS 41239 f. 239, British Library.

[41] Augustine Birrell, "Irish Council," *HC Deb 07 May 1907 vol. 174 cc78*-195, Hansard.

In this clever and carefully worded sentence he let it be known to the Irish Party that if it accepted this proposal it could be a useful stepping stone toward eventual Home Rule.

The Bill, in its final form, called for an administrative council of eighty-two elected members with a further twenty-four to be nominated by the Crown for the first term. The council was to have control over eight [the most important ones] of the forty-five Irish departments, and receive funds to administer them. These were the Local Government Board, the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, the Congested Districts Board, the Commissioners of Public Works, the Commissioners of National Education, the Intermediate Education Board, the Inspection of Reformatory and Industrial Schools, and the Registrar-General.

In his speech to the House, Birrell spoke of the necessity of a representative assembly for Ireland in a democratic age. It was not befitting of the British Government, he contended, to send someone to Ireland to control it with an iron fist. As a counterweight to this, he appealed to the concerns of the Ulster Unionist community, informing them that the Council included nominated members [sympathetic to the Unionist cause] who would safeguard their interests. As a further protection he highlighted the position of the Lord Lieutenant, who was granted the power of the veto, to exercise when he saw fit. The Chief Secretary knew he could satisfy neither side completely. Summing up his proposals he said:

> "If the new Council after some years is a success, why, then, I dare say it may pave the way to Home Rule. If, on the other hand, it is a failure, it appears to me

> that it would present a very considerable obstacle to persuading the electors in this country, who have been called the predominant partners, to accept Home Rule.[42]

Navigating the middle ground showed weakness in the eyes of Unionists and Nationalists alike, so the Bill came under vicious attack.

Arthur Balfour, leader of the Opposition and a former Irish Chief Secretary himself, condemned Birrell's measure as muddled and unworkable. On top of its many inadequacies, it gave, he believed, a platform for Irish Nationalists to thrust themselves into important political decisions:

> "As certainly as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, so certainly if you bring into being this semi-elected body, nominally for the purpose of controlling and administering these eight departments, it will be used by those who have the majority in it for political and Nationalist purposes."[43]

Balfour was sure the scheme would please nobody. Not only would it hurt British interests in Ireland, it would impose undue grievances upon the British people. Citing his own political experience in Ireland, Balfour claimed the Bill would be violently opposed by all those who claimed to represent the Protestants of Ulster, and expressed his

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

certainty that the Irish Party would reject it because of its failure to conform to their aspirations.

Redmond told the Commons he would not pass final judgment on the Council Bill until after the Irish Convention had an opportunity to look at and study it. He used the platform for the introduction of the Bill to espouse his party's desire for eventual Home Rule, just like that which had been conferred upon self-governing and prosperous dominions such as Canada and Australia. He condemned the Bill for not giving legislative power to the Council, saying he was not in favor of getting "maimed and dwarfed legislative powers." The nominated element was, Redmond believed, shamefully undemocratic because the Crown would fill the nominated positions with Ulster Unionists. He warned the House that even if the Bill was to be passed the following day, the Irish Party's demand for a resolution to the larger question of Home Rule would vigorously continue. If the scheme could be utilized with moderate success and aided the Irish demand for Home Rule then he would surely support it; nevertheless, the decision, he reminded them, would rest with the Convention in a few short weeks.[44]

On May 20, the day before the Irish Party Convention, at a caucus meeting organized by the "Molly Maguires" (the nickname of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish-Catholic fraternal organization which had a large following among the Catholic laboring classes in Ulster) word spread among the crowd that the Bill was to be thrown

[44] Ibid.

out by the Irish Party, so their representatives actively lobbied against it.[45] Adding to the pressure on Redmond to kill Birrell's Bill were widespread Nationalist newspaper attacks on the measure. The *Derry People & Donegal News* ridiculed it for its complete lack of legislative power, meaning it could not even be regarded as a stepping stone towards Home Rule.[46] The *Kilkenny People* was even more scathing in its commentary:

> "Some say half a loaf of bread is better than no bread so we should accept whatever the British government throws at us. Redmond a few weeks ago quoted the words of an American speaker – 'Half a loaf is better than no bread, but half a chronometer is not better than no watch.' The Irish Council Bill is worse than a half a chronometer and more like a grandfather clock that the Lord Lieutenant can tinker with as he pleases."[47]

The *Longford Leader* joined in and blasted the Liberal Party, stating it was better to reject the measure and risk the chance of the Tories regaining power because "for our part we'd rather a thousand times be ruled by open enemies than by false friends."[48] Nationalists throughout Ireland believed the great Liberal landslide in the 1906 election

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[45] O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary*, 14.

[46] Derry People & Donegal News, May 11, 1907.

[47] Kilkenny People, May 11, 1907.

[48] Longford Leader, May 11, 1907.

would bring with it the deliverance of autonomy for the country, and so this less than modest Bill was derided for falling so far below their expectations.

Redmond now feared a party split if he did not renounce the Irish Council Bill in its entirety. The mass of the Irish Party had been kept largely in the dark during its formulation, and once they saw what was offered they hammered it for its shortcomings. At the Convention, the party leader, followed by speaker after speaker, condemned the Bill as no palliative substitute for their goal of Home Rule. The *Echo* newspaper perfectly summed up the feelings of Irish Nationalists, stating that the greatest Liberal Party majority of modern times had the opportunity to offer so much more. Only offering the Irish partial control of eight departments of the Irish administration demonstrated the utter confusion of the government when it came to ruling over Ireland. The impression among many Nationalists was that the Chief Secretary was not enthusiastic about the Bill, and was even rather ashamed of it because of its shortcomings. Even Arthur Balfour was astonished by its timidity and undemocratic character and argued that it would satisfy no one.[49] The hostile reception from the Irish Convention meant Campbell-Bannerman, despite the Liberals having gained the Bill's acceptance in the House, had to shelve it because it was worthless without the active support of the Irish Party.

In this tumultuous first year on the job, Birrell quickly came to recognize the difficulty of his position as a Liberal Chief Secretary. He had the misfortune of inheriting from his predecessor Bryce a flawed and unacceptable scheme for

[49] The Echo, May 10, 1907.

administrative reform. Birrell had come to Ireland convinced his job was to pave the way for Irish Home Rule, but the secrecy of Bryce and MacDonnell in formulating the Council Bill, and Redmond and Dillon's non-committal approach to it, fostered much suspicion among both Nationalists and Unionists. Although the Irish Convention condemned the measure, Birrell felt the reasons for its rejection were never clearly revealed. He surmised that the Catholic clergy negatively influenced public opinion because, as part of the Bill, a new Education Department was to be created. The leaders of the Roman Catholic Church believed this was somehow an attempt to lessen their grip on the religious education of children.

Birrell thought Redmond and Dillon had been less than forthcoming over the past year regarding whether they would thrust their support behind it, and this left the Chief Secretary in a difficult situation. Six months before the Bill was even introduced Redmond had said:

> "When the hour of that Convention comes, any influence which I possess with my fellow countrymen will be used to induce them to reject any proposal, no matter how plausible, which in my judgement may be calculated to injure the prestige of the Irish party, and disrupt the national movement."[50]

[50] Louis Redmond-Howard, *John Redmond, The Man and the Demand: a Biographical Study in Irish Politics* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1910), 154.

Redmond certainly did Birrell no favors by discrediting the Bill in its infancy during his speeches to his party's constituents, while at the same time promising the Chief Secretary, during their official and personal correspondence, he would give the measure an honest appraisal before passing judgement on it.

Birrell was also disgruntled with Under-Secretary MacDonnell for his secretive drafting of the Council Bill while serving under Bryce. MacDonnell, upset that his work was destined to fail, criticized Birrell's attempts to pander to Redmond's overtures by reworking his original scheme. He threatened to resign if Birrell and his committee attempted to send a Bill through to the House of Lords that would, in his opinion, surely be rejected. Following Redmond's rejection of the finalized scheme, Birrell felt certain any future administrative legislation would have to go much further, with some sort of Home Rule mechanisms built into it. MacDonnell, on the other hand, believed a plan for administrative and financial devolution was the best [and only] approach because, in his mind, England was not ready to grant Ireland Home Rule for the foreseeable future. He claimed the Irish Question would become less significant as the years went by, due to the country's high level of Catholic/Nationalist emigration. Devolution, the Under-Secretary was certain, offered the best chance to rid Ireland of its bigotry, and remake it into a tolerant and buoyant country.[51] Reflecting on MacDonnell's stubbornness, Birrell informed the Prime Minister:

[51] MacDonnell to Birrell, September 7, 1907, MS Eng. hist. c. 354 f. 8, Bodleian Library.

> "Our poor dear Sir Antony still thinks that if the Bill had been 'much less' it would have gone through!! Our mistake has been to have touched 'Devolution' at all. 'Home Rule' we could not give….. we should have taken altogether our own line and left Sir Antony in the lurch."[52]

Irritated by the obstinacy of his Under-Secretary, Birrell told Redmond at this time that he had had "more than enough of MacDonnellism and would not swallow any more."[53] An Under-Secretary's function, he insisted, was to not hinder but support the Chief Secretary with his duties.

The failure of the Bill, as Birrell predicted, did cause much disquiet throughout Ireland. Redmond was certain the mere existence of the Bill had damaged his reputation among his voters, and therefore pushed the Chief Secretary for generous land and educational reforms to show his electorate an Irish Party-Liberal Party alliance was still best for Irish interests. Several months later, in a speech in Dublin, Redmond reflected that the demise of the Bill was probably a blessing in disguise. He was sure its failure served notice to the British government that it was impossible for Westminster to offer the Irish people anything short of full Home Rule, and this would be made clear during

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[52] Joseph O'Brien, *William O'Brien and the course of Irish politics, 1881-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 176.

[53] Dermot Meleady, *John Redmond: The National Leader* (Sallins, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion, 2014), 108.

the next General Election.[54] William O'Brien, that great champion of the Irish peasant, viewed the failure of the Council Bill differently. He stressed the psychological impact it had on the lives of ordinary people, whom, he argued, had been let down yet again by Redmond and his broken promises.[55] The Gaelic League [a prominent Irish social and cultural organization] and the newly formed radical *Sinn Fein* organization tied the suffering of the Irish people to continued British rule and the ineptitude of Redmond and his party. Former Chief Secretary Bryce went so far as to say that the radical *"Sinn Feiners"* had played a key role in fomenting enough discontent to ensure the Bill's failure.[56]

Whatever misgivings Augustine Birrell had about the proposed Irish Council and its chances for success he was certain he had to wed himself to Redmond and Dillon so he could tap into the pulse of general feeling among the Irish people. Home Rule, he was sure, would have to wait until something was done regarding the power of the intransigent House of Lords. For the time being, he would seek to continue to foster the good will of Irish Nationalists through substantive reforms. He felt it was impossible for the Irish fully to administer their own needs if they continued to have an English or

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[54] Redmond-Howard, *John Redmond*, 156-157.

[55] William O'Brien founded the United Irish League in 1898 with the objective of securing land reform. Disenchanted with the Irish Party's attempts to secure land reform, he believed this new political party, through agrarian agitation, would rescue the Irish peasantry from extreme poverty. The land issue is addressed in detail in Chapter Two. For more on the life of William O'Brien, Joseph O'Brien's biography *William O'Brien and the Course of Irish Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) is an excellent starting point. The best case study available on the influence of the United Irish League is John Noel McEvoy's thesis "A Study of the United Irish League in the King's County, 1899-1918"

[56] Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity, 1789-2006* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 365.

Scotsman come over to govern the country from Dublin Castle.[57] He had failed with an education measure in England, and he knew there was an Irish university question yet to be resolved, and, of course, a remedy was needed for the shortcomings of the Wyndham Land Act of 1903. Birrell's strategy of appeasement and reform solely directed towards the Irish Party was not the correct approach because he alienated himself from the voices of Irish Unionism, and over time this made his administration of Ireland that much more difficult.

[57] Freeman's Journal, November 25, 1907, 8.

CHAPTER III

PROBLEMS WITH IRISH LAND AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The Great Famine 1845-49 in Ireland, led to the deaths of one million people and the emigration of a million more. The large number of evictions of Irish peasants during the famine, and to a lesser extent in the following thirty years, along with continued emigration, caused a profound change in the average farm size, and altered the size distribution of holdings so by 1876 approximately eight hundred families owned fifty percent of the total land.[1] Peasant resistance to British landlordism in Ireland lay behind the establishment of the Irish Land League, which boasted over 200,000 members at its height in the early 1880s. Through a combination of intimidation and boycotting during the" Land War" of 1879-82, the League forced the British government to pay closer attention to the plight of the Irish peasant. A series of Land Acts were passed during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but, they did not improve the lives of the poorest in

[1] Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 375. By passing the Encumbered Estates Act of 1849 the British Government believed English investment in Irish agriculture could reinvigorate the economy. This Act allowed estates in severe debt to be auctioned off upon petition of creditors. Hundreds of estates with huge debts were auctioned off to wealthy British speculators whose primary objective was profit, and, rather than settle in the country, employed bailiffs and agents to exploit the Irish peasantry.

Irish society; therefore, successive Irish Chief Secretaries had to deal with periodic rural disorder from an organized peasantry.[2]

Before 1903, only eighteen percent of tenanted land had been purchased under previous Land Acts, and so, George Wyndham [Conservative Irish Chief Secretary 1900-1905], facing intense pressure from both the radical United Irish League and the Irish Party, threw his support behind the Irish Land [Dunraven] Conference of December 1902, which was a meeting of landlord and tenant representatives who wished to arrange a final solution to the land question. Representing the Irish landlords was Lord Dunraven who was also a Conservative member of the House of Lords and a moderate when it came to Irish economic and political reforms, Dermot Bourke who was the 7th Earl of Mayo and a fellow member of the House of Lords, Colonel William Hutcheson-Poe who, as High Sheriff of County Tyrone, represented Ulster's interests, and Colonel Nugent Everard who was the High Sheriff of County Meath. Representing the tenantry were William O'Brien, John Redmond, Thomas Wallace Russell [a former Irish Liberal Unionist and head of the Farmers and Labourers Union, which was a tenant-farmer protest movement in Ulster], and the Lord Mayor of Dublin Timothy Charles Harrington. Both sides agreed that while landlords should not be forced by the

[2] The Land Act of 1870 sought to protect tenants facing eviction, although it proved ineffective. The Land Act of 1881 established the principle of dual ownership of the land between tenant and landlord, with the aim of encouraging landlords to sell their holdings. It proved to be economically ineffective but helped pave the way towards peasant proprietorship. The Ashbourne Act of 1885 and the Land Act of 1887 provided further loans to tenants to purchase land at more favorable rates. Timothy W. Guinnane and Ronald I. Miller provide a thorough study on the effectiveness of the Irish Land Acts in their paper "The Limits to Land Reform: The Land Acts in Ireland, 1870-1909," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 45, no. 3 (April, 1997): 591-612.

government to sell their land, the Chief Secretary should propose legislation that would provide them a generous financial incentive to pay the difference between the price offered by the tenants and that demanded by the landlords.[3]

Wyndham, with cross-party support, proceeded with this final scheme of non-compulsory land purchase and proudly introduced a Land Act to the House of Commons on March 25, 1903. Despite British Treasury reservations surrounding its financial provisions, the Bill swiftly passed, and it signaled the beginning of the end for landlordism in Ireland. Wyndham's Act was for the most part a success. It resulted in approximately 300,000 sales, with 30% of tenanted land purchased from landlords by 1908. The Act chiefly benefited those farmers who were already on a stable economic footing and who were willing and able to proceed with land purchase. Unfortunately, it failed to solve the problems of indigent smallholders, evicted tenants, poor laborers and the landless in the countryside.[4] The following year, Irish peer Lord Muskerry, in a House of Lords discussion of the Act, reflected on its inadequacies:

> "The failure of the Land Act of 1903 to settle the land question, to promote goodwill between landlord and tenant, or even to check emigration, is due to the facts that the only classes it proposes to benefit are the substantial farmers

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[3] David Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898-1921* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1973), 77-94.

[4] For more on the build up to the Land Conference of 1902 and the subsequent Land Act of 1903 see Fergus Campbell's "Irish Popular Politics and the Making of the Wyndham Land Act, 1901-1903," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (2002): 755-773. Wyndham's Act turned the tide in the favor of the tenant, because they now had a legal interest in their holdings, and, despite the Act's shortcomings, no longer gave landlords the absolute right of property.

> already amply benefited by previous legislation, and that practically nothing has been done for the small tenants and cottiers, while at the same time the employment of labour has been, and will be still more, seriously affected by the displacement and exile of a residential proprietary and of the employing classes dependent on them;"[5]

Increasingly, those tenants who failed to benefit from Wyndham's Land Act turned their eyes towards the large untenanted grazing ranches as a source of land acquisition, thus culminating in the so-called "Ranch War" of 1906-1909.

At Halifax, three months after he was sworn in as Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell incorrectly asserted that Ireland was "in a more peaceful condition than she had been for the last six hundred years."[6] Soon after, he was duly apprised of increased criminal activity in the countryside, which was being spearheaded by Laurence Ginnell, a junior Irish Party M.P. for Westmeath North. A lawyer, staunch Nationalist and keen Gaelic revivalist, Ginnell was seen by the United Irish League as the pioneer of the anti-ranch/grazier movement. Prosperous graziers, who remained largely unaffected by Wyndham's Act, emerged out of an increasingly popular practice employed by landlords in the latter half of the 19th century. Landlords would lease large tracts of land, usually over 200 acres, to graziers on an eleven-month lease, who could then, based on market

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[5] Lord Muskerry, "The Irish Land Act," *HL Deb 22 February 1904 vol. 130 cc518-28,* Hansard.

[6] W. Alison Phillips, *The Revolution in Ireland 1906-1923* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923), 46.

conditions, fatten their cattle for sale in the British market. Landlords would typically auction their untenanted land each year to the highest bidder through local newspapers. Both sides benefitted because the eleven-month lease meant the graziers had no legal recourse if the landlord wanted them off the land, while the graziers benefited because they only needed to rent the land when market conditions were right. Furthermore, many landlords preferred this use of their land because, as a further bonus, landlords were more likely to obtain rent payment from eleven-month graziers than from ordinary tenants.[7] From the 1890s onwards the rights of graziers came under increasing scrutiny in the grazing counties of the West, from hungry and landless peasants who found the system unjust.

Birrell, therefore, had the dual problem of dealing with increasing criminal unrest from disaffected peasants, while at the same time finding a solution to the shortcomings of the 1903 Land Act. His Irish Nationalist allies, Redmond and Dillon, who had drawn much of their political strength from agrarian unrest over the past thirty years, were also thrust into the difficult position of demonstrating their loyalty toward the Liberal government, while, at the same time, championing the grievances among their support base. Birrell realized the task at hand and made his thoughts known in a speech at the Bradford Liberal Association in April 1907. Land legislation in Ireland, he insisted, had been held back too long because of red tape. Landlords who were willing to sell land to tenants experienced difficulties because:

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[7] David Seth Jones, *Graziers, Land Reform, and Political Conflict in Ireland* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 1995), 128.

> "a great cloud of lawyers come down and settle like a brood of crows, to blacken the whole field and delay the matter. It is the fault of an absurd system."[8]

He postulated that there was not a single conversant man in Ireland who would not admit that the 1903 Act needed amending, and hoped he could alleviate the suffering of the poorest in rural Ireland by passing legislation that made the transfer of land from landlord to tenant attractive, seamless and affordable.[9]

The first signs of rural unrest toward graziers occurred in July 1906 at Grange, Co. Limerick. Incidents of cattle driving occurred in Galway and Meath the following year, and, by 1908, criminal attacks on the property of graziers had spread to Westmeath, Sligo, Roscommon, Tipperary, Longford and Clare. These "cattle drives" involved releasing a grazier's animals from the fields and chasing them away from their owners' properties. Sometimes the livestock would be physically maimed and blinded as part of the drive. Letters of intimidation were also a popular method of applying pressure on a landlord to stop the practice of grazing. These eight counties, having the highest incidence of trouble, were proclaimed to be in a state of disturbance, and Birrell had to send extra Royal Irish Constabulary [R.I.C.] officers to help quell the disorder.[10] In a

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[8] Augustine Birrell, "Mr. Birrell: The Movement for Land Reform Two-Needs of Ireland," *The Manchester Guardian*, April 29, 1907.

[9] The Ulster Herald, April 27, 1907, 2.

[10] The Royal Irish Constabulary was the United Kingdom's armed police force for Ireland. A separate unarmed police force called the Dublin Metropolitan Police patrolled the cities of Dublin, Belfast and Derry, oftentimes working alongside the R.I.C.

House of Lords speech in 1908, the Marquess of Londonderry provided damning figures on the condition of Ireland. He said:

> "In November, 1905, when the late Government went out of office, there were 162 cases of boycotting; on November 30, 1908, there were 840. In January, 1906, there were 208 persons under police protection; on November 19, 1908, there were 351. In 1905 there were no cattle-drives at all; there were 635 in eleven months of 1908. In 1905 there were 270 cases of agrarian outrage; in eleven months of 1908 there were 537. In 1905 there were eleven persons fired at; in eleven months of 1908 there were forty. In 1905 there were eighteen cases of firing into dwellings; in eleven months of 1908 there were eighty-one."[11]

Many prominent Unionists including John Lonsdale, Walter Long, J.H. Campbell and James Craig lashed out at Birrell for being much too weak on agrarian outrages, and demanded a harsh response in the interest of law and order.

The Chief Secretary had to walk a fine line between not upsetting Irish Nationalist opinion and quelling the disturbances in the countryside. If he used the R.I.C. to crack down hard on the economically impoverished who did not benefit from Wyndham's Land Act this would surely play into the hands of the more radical elements in Irish society, and weaken the support base of his Nationalist allies. On the other hand,

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[11] The Marquess of Londonderry, "The King's Speech—Adjourned Debate," *HL Deb 17 February 1909 vol. 1 cc37-70,* Hansard.

if he did not uphold law and order, a central tenet of Conservative policy in Ireland, then he would continue to be ridiculed in the House of Commons for being weak on crime.

Making matters worse for Birrell was the non-renewal in December 1906 of the Irish Peace Preservation Act of 1881, which gave the government complete control over the sale, importation and carrying of arms.[12] This Act also gave the Lord Lieutenant the right to declare a district as being in a state of conflict and to appoint a force of special constables, under the command of a paid magistrate, to assist in policing the proclaimed area.[13] Birrell viewed coercive measures as contrary to his Liberal principles. Ireland, he believed, should be treated like any other part of the United Kingdom, and criminals should be dealt with under the ordinary law. He compared British coercive legislation in Ireland to that of the autocracy of Russia. In that country citizens were faced with the duality of a trial by jury and the power of an executive to deprive them of their rights whenever he saw fit. Birrell said he deplored cattle raiding, a symptom, he was sure, of land purchase problems, but the Irish had a right to be treated under the ordinary law.[14] Coercive Acts were, he maintained, a code of tyrannical laws, and not a cure for boycotting.[15] John Dillon had instructed Birrell's predecessor, Bryce, that while Home Rule legislation was pending he ought to govern the country in accordance with Irish

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[12] From 1830 to 1875 there were forty-seven coercive Acts imposed by the British government upon Ireland in the interests of law and order. Normally, these Acts were either renewed, amended or rebranded every few years otherwise they would expire under British law.

[13] Bew, *The Politics of Enmity,* 96.

[14] Augustine Birrell, "Criminal Law And Procedure (Ireland) Act (1887) Repeal Bill," *HC Deb 08 May 1908 vol. 188 cc565-648*, Hansard.

[15] Irish Independent, March 14, 1907, 5.

ideas.[16] For him, this meant economic and social legislation, as well as the repeal of coercive measures. Redmond described the Peace Preservation Act as not just an irritant and unfair but as "an open declaration of war upon every man in Ireland."[17] Its end was necessary for the Irish people to trust in British administration while Home Rule remained on the backburner.

In 1905, at a speech in Swinford, Co. Mayo, John Dillon voiced his opinion that the Wyndham Land Act was a "dismal failure" because the issue of the renting of untenanted grazing land had not been considered. Landlords successfully exploited this loophole at the expense of the landless. In a speech two days later in Tuam in Co. Galway, he called for the introduction of compulsory purchase of land in the West to remedy land grievances.[18] Similarly, in a speech in Roscommon, Redmond expressed his desire to break up the large tracts of land used for grazing in the West as the only solution to the plight of the people there.[19] For radical Irish Nationalist M.P.s Laurence Ginnell and David Sheehy, it was unjust for the landless poor in the West to have to choose between the indifference of landlords when it came to the possible sale of their lands and the possibility of jumping aboard an emigrant ship to escape extreme poverty.[20]

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[16] McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle,* 126.

[17] Redmond-Howard, *John Redmond: The Man and the Demand,* 32.

[18] John Dillon, "The Distress in the West," in *Freeman's Journal,* January 7, 1905.

[19] John Redmond, *Irish Times*, January 9, 1905.

[20] Laurence Ginnell, *Land and Liberty* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1908), 218.

Once the Ranch War erupted in the autumn of 1906, Redmond was largely silent on the issue because he wanted to avoid a division within his party between those who supported agrarian agitation and those who wished to distance themselves from such illegal activities. Disorder in the West reached its zenith in the autumn of 1907, owing in no small part to the Nationalist reaction toward the embarrassing failure of the Irish Council Bill. The universal condemnation of the Council Bill at the Convention in May had worried Redmond, who feared his inability to achieve more political autonomy for Ireland could result in his replacement as party leader. Soon after the Council Bill failure, he sent a letter to Birrell asking him to make his intentions known in regard to future economic and social reforms, which would, he hoped, help secure his position.[21] In July, Redmond, to bolster his political support, thrust his support behind Ginnell and Sheehy's coordination of cattle driving, and hoped this would force Birrell to pass land legislation on more favorable terms. At a speech in Battersea, Redmond called for "widespread and vigorous agitation in Ireland [and] especially a movement which will force the compulsory purchase of the grazing tracts in the West of Ireland."[22]

In June, West Belfast Nationalist M.P. Joe Devlin, in a letter to Dillon, had outlined the reasons for the change in party policy towards the land issue. After several conferences with Redmond it was agreed that:

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[21] Redmond to Birrell, May 28, 1907, Papers of John Redmond, MS 15,169 /1, National Library of Ireland Archives.

[22] Campbell, *Land and Revolution,* 106.

> "Prompt steps should be taken to give the country a lead and to deal with the situation that has arisen in consequence of the rejection of Birrell's [Irish Council] Bill."[23]

The Chief Secretary was aware that the failure of the Council Bill could have the twin effect of damaging the Irish Party's relationship with its constituents, and his relationship with Redmond and Dillon, if he did not respond with some sort of conciliatory measure on outstanding land grievances. He believed it a matter of honor for the government to resolve the issue by restoring evicted tenants or by finding them a new home.[24]

On June 27, 1907, Birrell introduced the Evicted Tenants Bill to the House of Commons. Before discussing its particulars, the Chief Secretary painted a gloomy picture of the West of Ireland, with its melancholy atmosphere, dilapidated hovels, and the rotting and saturated turf in the fields. He hoped what he now proposed would be taken by the population as a measure of good faith and good feeling.[25] The Bill was to provide for the compulsory [if need be] sale of land for the resettlement of thousands of evicted tenants. The second clause of the 1903 Land Act enabled evicted tenants to become purchasers of their former holdings. Thus far, Birrell informed Parliament,

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[23] Ibid., 107.

[24] Westmeath Examiner, February 16, 1907, 5.

[25] Irish Independent, June 28, 1907, 5.

under Wyndham's measure, only 1033 of 8041 applications for restoration to former holdings had been successful. To speed things up compulsion had to be part of this piece of legislation. After providing a detailed synopsis of his Bill, the Chief Secretary spoke of its necessity:

> "A measure of this sort, I honestly believe, will help to bind up many a well-nigh broken heart, and in some measure to staunch the bleeding wound. At all events, those of us who feel able to support this measure through its passage may feel certain that their own winter firesides will be all the brighter by their efforts, and that the roof-trees of their own homes, which probably are not half as dear to them as the cabin of the Irish peasant is to him, will stand all the faster."[26]

The Bill in its final form was given the Royal Assent on August 28. It resulted in the purchase of 26,000 acres and the resettlement of 3500 tenants either to their former property or to new holdings. Although Birrell had addressed a particular grievance, he had failed to satisfy the majority of people in the West who felt aggrieved at the vast tracts of untenanted ranch land still unavailable to them. Cattle driving, boycotting and intimidation continued, and was a source of constant frustration for his Irish administration.

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[26] Augustine Birrell, "Evicted Tenants (Ireland)," *HC Deb 27 June 1907 vol. 177 cc124-35,* Hansard.

Birrell referred to Ginnell as a "pestilent ass" because his inflammatory speeches throughout the latter half of 1907 allegedly caused much criminal unrest.[27] At the end of August the Under Secretary Anthony MacDonnell drew up a report on the activities of Ginnell and Sheehy for Birrell's perusal. He suggested that if their actions remained unchecked then the government would have no choice but to freshly employ the Crimes Act, which would in turn be a confession that the Liberal Government was unable to govern Ireland by ordinary law. He advocated for criminal proceedings against Sheehy and Ginnell based on the provocative nature of their speeches, labelling them "disruptive of public respect for law and order." He felt it was demoralizing for policemen to be chasing after cattle let loose by the agitators, and it was particularly upsetting for the rank and file police officer that so few convictions were made.[28]

In a speech on August 25, Sheehy had told his supporters that his doctrine was to turn cattle out on the road and let the police go after them. He also called for collective action against landlords who voted against the Evicted Tenants Bill in the House of Lords. He warned:

> "if wherever I find the people agreeing to sell to any individual of that House of Lords that voted against the Evicted Tenants Bill, I will be there to try to prevent the sale until the grabber is out, and the evicted tenant is in."[29]

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[27] O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary,* 20.

[28] MacDonnell to Birrell August 31, 1907, 18 M.S. Eng. hist. c. 372 f.2, Bodleian Library.

[29] Ibid, f.11.

In September, at Dunboyne, Co. Meath, he threatened potential graziers that if they took up the eleven month lease system any more they would have to face the consequences from the local population.[30] Likewise, Ginnell, in a July speech at Elphin, Co. Roscommon, called for agitation up and down the country toward the grazing system, through boycotts and cattle driving, until it was broken up.[31] In September, at a meeting in Meath, he said graziers should not be given another twenty-four hour's peace or grace until the lease system was destroyed.[32]

In a letter to his Under Secretary a day after the passage of the Evicted Tenants Act, Birrell took a swipe at the House of Lords, which had used its powers, he believed, simply to foment trouble. Frustrated with their amendments to his Bill he complained they haggled over the price of land as a mischievous way to protect the planter class. He was sure, if he and MacDonnell were given a free hand they could fix all Irish land problems within six months, but these "carrion crows" in the Lords made it next to impossible.[33] Redmond felt sorry for Birrell, and felt the landed class in the upper chamber, and their Conservative friends in the Commons, wished to hamper the Chief

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[30] David Sheehy, *Meath Chronicle*, September 28, 1907.

[31] MacDonnell to Birrell August 31, 1907, M.S. Eng. hist. c. 372, f.14, Bodleian Library.

[32] Laurence Ginnell, *Meath Chronicle*, September 7, 1907.

[33] Birrell to MacDonnell, August 29, 1907, MS Eng. hist. c 350 f.16, Bodleian Library.

Secretary's efforts so that he would become embroiled in the inevitable rural unrest in Ireland during the winter months, thus undermining his position.[34]

In Birrell's reply to MacDonnell's report, which called for criminal proceedings to be lodged against Sheehy and Ginnell, he recommended caution because he was certain it would do more harm than good. Furthermore, he believed it would be a direct Liberal challenge to the Irish Party if it was to sanction the arrest of any of its members. The Chief Secretary recognized their speeches were mischievous but reflected that they had a certain degree of truth to them. Furthermore, he tried to downplay Redmond's increasingly sympathetic views towards the agitators, informing MacDonnell that the Irish Party leader's speeches were feeble and verbose, and did not include a call to violence.[35] In a letter to the Irish Attorney General Richard Robert Cherry, Birrell claimed Ginnell's policy of clearing ranches of cattle and intimidation was probably a good strategy leading into the winter months because the onus would be on the government to implement reforms to deal with the crisis in the West. Like MacDonnell, he told Cherry he would not get involved in a policy of coercion because that was a Tory game not befitting a Liberal government.[36] It was easy for the Tories to have a dual policy of coercion and conciliation because that party had the House of Lords on its side.

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[34] Patrick John Cosgrove, "The Wyndham Land Act, 1903: The Final Solution to the Irish Land Question?" (PhD thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2008), 326.

[35] Birrell to MacDonnell, September 2, 1907, MS Eng. hist. c 350, Bodleian Library.

[36] The word Tory is synonymous with the British Conservative Party. Prior to 1832 those political supporters of traditional political and social institutions against the forces of reform were known as Tories.

For the Liberals, the House of Lords made it difficult to mollify the Irish through reforms, and so he had to deal with shouts of "firm government" from the Opposition.[37]

As the Ranch War intensified throughout the cold months in the West, Birrell grew weary of criticisms directed his way due to the lack of progress towards land reform. In a letter to Dillon on December 2, he said he wished Ginnell would cease denigrating him in the press.[38] He was most likely alluding to the speech Ginnell gave in Meath a day prior in which he advocated cattle scattering in Johnstown and Garmoylstown if land was to be let for grazing in the New Year. According to the police note taker the radical Irish M.P. said:

> "If Mr. Birrell were honest and thought badly of cattle scattering he would apply at once the only remedy now possible – to break up the ranches at once, instead of waiting to be forced to do it; and even the landlords and future historians might salute Augustine Birrell as a man."[39]

An arrest warrant was issued in Dublin by High Court judge Mr. John Ross for Ginnell to be sentenced for a period of six months. Birrell hoped this would both quell the

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[37] Birrell to Cherry, undated, D2166/3/1/10, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

[38] Birrell to Dillon, December 2, 1907, MSS 6455-6909 f. 146, Trinity College Archives.

[39] David Sheehy, "Inciting Cattle Drives: An Irish M.P. Committed To Prison Action By A ...," *The Manchester Guardian*, December 21, 1907, 4.

dissension among Unionists in the Commons, and lessen disturbances in the Irish countryside.

Hampering Birrell's ability to propose substantive land reform was the length of time it took the Dudley Commission to report its findings. When the Liberal Government came to power at the end of 1905, the new Chief Secretary Bryce had sought solutions to the continued agrarian problems facing Ireland. Without a good understanding of the problems facing Irish peasants, he was unwilling to legislate until the matter was thoroughly researched. Appointed in July 1906, the Dudley Commission held, over the course of two years, 116 meetings across Ireland and interviewed 559 witnesses to try to understand the problems in the West so they could be remedied.

The Irish Party leaders had differing views on the value of further land reforms. For Redmond, while he sympathized with the plight of the people in the poverty-stricken West of Ireland, rural lawlessness and cruelty to animals undermined the positive image of a respectable nationalism he was trying to generate.[40] He hoped for a meaningful measure from the Chief Secretary to address the shortcomings of the Wyndham Act, because continued unrest only hampered his argument that the Irish were a civilized people, ready for self-government. Dillon, the champion of the bloc of Irish Party M.P.s who supported agrarian agitation, wished for another land act, but believed a successful legislative remedy was potentially threatening to the Nationalist cause, insofar as it undermined the use of agrarian agitation as a weapon to be wielded in pursuit of Home

[40] Paul Bew, *John Redmond: Life & Times* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1996), 28.

Rule.[41] Nevertheless, Dillon viewed the landed aristocracy as a chief evil for Ireland, and understood cattle grazing to be an explosion of popular feeling against landlordism, which had desolated the country. He was outraged that there existed in western counties, such as Roscommon and Mayo, rich, grassy lands, inhabited by cattle, while humans were cast to the roadside in a state of beggary.[42]

The final report of "Dudley's Commission on Congestion in Ireland" was submitted to Birrell in May 1908. The area assessed encompassed 3.6 million acres [one sixth of total acreage of the country] with a population of 506,000 people. The term congestion was a misnomer because it was used to refer to people who were considered exceptionally poor, and not overcrowding. The Commission found that the average value of agricultural holdings was 3s 6d per acre compared to 12s 1d for rest of Ireland. The trouble, it concluded, was not the scarcity of land, but the scarcity of any but the poorest land. Nine-tenths of the population in the congested districts was dependent on the land for a living, but over three-quarters were living on holdings too small to support them in a reasonable standard of living. Thus, many peasants engaged in seasonal migration to make ends meet.[43]

On June 2, the Chief Secretary submitted the results of the Dudley Commission to the Cabinet along with its recommended actions for resolving the land crisis in the

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[41] Philip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: a Study of the Irish land Question* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), 158.

[42] Irish Examiner, March 1, 1909, 5.

[43] P. Ford and Grace Ford, *A Breviate of Parliamentary Papers, 1900-1916; the Foundation of the Welfare State* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 407.

West. Any future land act, it found, should ensure the enlargement of small holdings to an economic standard to aid in the continued relief of congestion. It also advocated compulsory powers be granted to the Congested Districts Board and Estates Commissioners for purchase not only of tenanted but untenanted land whenever necessary to relieve congestion. Any land acquired in this way would not be negotiated like the 1903 Act; instead, it should be given a value set by the Commissioners. A large increase in Treasury grants would be needed to help relief efforts.[44] Within his Cabinet memorandum Birrell claimed cattle-driving was the sole political movement in the West, with no talk of devolution or Home Rule. He warned the government:

> "the present situation in Ireland is capable of very dangerous development, and that past experience teaches us that we do not in the long run secure economy by simply refusing to listen to Irish demands."[45]

For Birrell, the resolution of land grievances was a top priority to ensure a peaceful and stable Irish society, and he set to work on drafting legislation to remedy the situation. The sorry condition of the people in the West of Ireland caused him great

[44] While land grievances existed throughout the entirety of Ireland, it was most pronounced in the West. Former Irish Chief Secretary Arthur Balfour addressed the issue in 1891. His Land Act established the Congested Districts Board to promote local industry through subsidy and education, and to encourage migration from uneconomic landholdings in the West. R.J.Q. Adam's *Balfour: The Last Grandee* (London: John Murray, 2007) demonstrates the intense challenges Balfour faced as Irish Chief Secretary as he sought to improve Ireland's economic condition. Fergus Campbell, in his book *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891-1921* charts the progression of agrarian discontent in the West, and the resulting land reforms.

[45] Augustine Birrell, Land Purchase Cabinet Papers, 1909, MS Eng. c 7636 f.4, Bodleian Library.

anxiety, and was adamant that, as long as he continued as Chief Secretary, he would not work in the interests of landlords, nor any other section of society, but for the interests of the Irish as a whole.[46] He knew an adequate money supply was crucial to the success of any further Land Act. Earlier in the year, in a Commons speech on government finances, Birrell pleaded for extra funds from a "reluctant and rebellious" Treasury to aid land purchases stemming from the 1903 Act.[47] Unfortunately, the British Treasury was burdened with the crippling costs associated with the Boer War, the arms race with Germany, and the finances associated with its social and economic programs.[48] Birrell hoped with an increased money supply the land issue could be successfully put to rest within the next ten to fifteen years.[49]

Introducing his Land Bill to the House of Commons on November 23, Birrell warned his colleagues that the entire peace and prosperity of Ireland were bound up in its soil. The Dudley Commission raised some alarming numbers on the plight of people in congested districts. Nine-tenths of the population lived on land worth on average £6 compared to a general average valuation of £22. The structure of many estates was found to be based on an old communal or tribal system of land holding, whilst the land itself was of poor quality. In fact, most of the holdings consisted mainly of rough grazing land,

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[46] Freeman's Journal, January 22, 1908, 16.

[47] Birrell, *Things Past Redress*, 208.

[48] Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History 1800-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press), 96.

[49] Augustine Birrell, "Civil Services and Revenue Departments Estimates, 1908–9," *HC Deb 18 March 1908 vol. 186 cc597-666,* Hansard.

and potatoes and oats were the only crops usually grown. The methods of cultivation were primitive, with little rotation of crops, insufficient drainage, and inadequate manuring. To address these problems the Chief Secretary argued access to new lands needed to be made available with adequate instruction on modern farming techniques; otherwise the people must either starve or emigrate. To achieve this, the great grazing lands of the West needed to be broken up.[50]

Birrell proposed to reconstruct the Congested Districts Board, greatly enlarge its area of operation and its funds, and grant it the contentious power of compulsory purchase. The Chief Secretary defended compulsion, saying that it was not such a terrible thing, because landlords would receive lucrative bargains under such circumstances. He was convinced the no one in Ireland was afraid of this "bugbear of compulsion," and there should be no delay in legislating this measure. The condition of Ireland would have been better, he was sure, had it been enforced much sooner.[51] John Redmond congratulated him on his "bold and far-reaching" measure of reform, even if it contained several defects. He lauded him for granting the Estates Commissioners the power of compulsion both inside and beyond the congested districts and was certain it would receive widespread satisfaction in Ireland. Redmond pointed to the evil done by British governments in the past who forced peasants off their fertile lands. The Irish Party leader lamented how much time and effort the Commons had to devote to Ireland's

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[50] Augustine Birrell, "Irish Land," *HC Deb 23 November 1908 vol. 196 cc1806-915*, Hansard.

[51] Drogheda Argus and Leinster Journal, August 28, 1909, 4.

economic difficulties in the past fifty years, and expressed hope that Birrell's proposals afforded the first real prospect of the final settlement of the land question.[52] Dillon appreciated Birrell's frankness on the terrible conditions of peasants in the West. Whereas the Chief Secretary had said the government must choose either rescuing these people from despair or protecting the cattle trade, Dillon countered that the cattle industry would actually benefit from the breaking up of grazing lands. Addressing the shortfalls of the 1903 Act, Dillon said the best way to judge the effectiveness of land reform was by the level of peace and contentment it brought to the country. Clearly, Wyndham's Act was a great achievement but it chiefly benefited more comfortable tenants, thus the agrarian unrest of the past few years was a testament to this shortfall.[53]

Unfortunately for Birrell he was unable to get the Second Reading of the Bill into the Commons before the Christmas break of 1908. A Second Reading would have allowed him the opportunity to divulge the intricacies of the Bill. This would have given his Irish friends in Parliament an opportunity to go to the countryside to explain the measure to the Irish people, and quell the tempers of the cattle-drivers. The ever-popular land agitator William O'Brien attacked the Bill for not going far enough to alleviate the suffering of the people. His condemnation made Redmond wary about an upsurge in criminal activities during the winter months.[54] Boycotting, cattle-driving and other forms

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[52] Ibid.

[53] John Dillon, "Irish Land," *HC Deb 23 November 1908 vol. 196 cc1806-915,* Hansard.

[54] Redmond to Birrell, December 1, 1908, Papers of John Redmond MS 15,169 /2, National Library of Ireland.

of intimidation soared as did Unionist attacks on Birrell for not granting more powers to the police to crack down on the criminals.

The Second Reading of the Land Bill was eventually introduced on March 30, 1909. Birrell proudly announced that Ireland was in the midst of a "gigantic agrarian revolution" whereby landlordism was on its way out. Seven million acres of land had changed hands and a further nine million acres would soon be sold. In response to Unionist criticisms of the Bill as nothing more than pandering to the Irish Party, Redmond reminded them that there was not one Unionist who was returned for an agricultural constituency who did not express himself in favor of compulsory purchase in Ireland. John Dillon commended the Bill for being the first one presented by a British government to apply a fix to the problem of congestion; the root, he was sure, of all land disorder in Ireland. He warned that if the Bill was thrown out or badly mutilated in the House of Lords, then land purchase would cease in Ireland because within the past year inadequate Treasury support had shifted the onus of land purchase costs onto Irish property taxes and, added that, the current system of land purchase was simply unsustainable.[55]

During the Third Reading of the Bill in September, Birrell came under increased scrutiny from Irish Unionists over the government's power of compulsion. Sir Edward Carson assailed him for practically avoiding debate on the compulsion clauses during the previous discussion of the Bill and expressed deep reservations about the power of the

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[55] John Dillon, "Irish Land Bill**,"** *HC Deb 30 March 1909 vol. 3 cc188-257,* Hansard.

Congested Districts Board. The Chief Secretary countered that parliamentary discussion surrounding the contentious People's Budget of 1909 left much less time to be devoted to the Land Bill. Birrell added that the 1903 Act had been irretrievably smashed beyond repair, and that his study of the various Land Acts passed in Ireland over the past fifty years had proven the Nationalist Party represented people who had sincere grievances about the shortcomings of these acts.[56] Carson criticized the Liberal government for pandering to lawlessness in Ireland and demanded the Bill be delayed by six months so the Opposition could fully examine its contents and ramifications. Redmond defended the Chief Secretary for his tenacity in resolving the land question, and expressed his hope that the House of Lords would not destroy the Bill, because if it were rejected there would be "widespread disappointment and irritation and resentment in Ireland." Dillon attacked the Unionists for their prejudicial and fear-mongering statements, and criticized them for not offering any practical alternatives. For him, the Wyndham Land Act had failed in its financial arrangements and it was unfair for Irish taxpayers to be forced to make up the shortfall. Like Redmond and Birrell, he hoped the Lords would not be so foolish as to destroy the Bill.[57]

The slow pace at which the House of Lords dealt with the Land Bill deeply frustrated Redmond, who warned Birrell that the people of Ireland were beginning to think the promises made by the government were all humbug.[58] In early November, the

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[56] Strabane Chronicle, September 25, 1909, 6.

[57] John Dillon, "Irish Land Bill**,"** *HC Deb 17 September 1909 vol. 10 cc2467-543*, Hansard.

[58] Redmond to Birrell, June 22, 1909, Papers of John Redmond MS 15,169 /2, National Library of Ireland.

Chief Secretary put forth the Lords' amendments to the Land Bill for discussion in the Commons. He told his colleagues he could not fathom the scrapping of the Bill at this juncture. Of the thirty-seven most significant clauses of the Bill, the Lords struck out twenty-four of them. Nine of the thirteen remaining clauses were radically altered, and sixteen new clauses were added to the Bill. In his typically witty fashion, Birrell rhymed off the clauses A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P and Q "not to show that I know the alphabet, but because those things are there." In a frustrated swipe at the upper house, he argued that the democratically-elected Commons was responsible for the government of the country, and if the Lords ruthlessly disregarded the need for legislation to preserve peace and prosperity in Ireland, then they would have truly declared war on the principles of representative government. If a settlement could not be reached then the Lords would have to shoulder the blame.[59]

Birrell did not want the hard work of the Dudley Commission and his formulation of a Land Bill that he firmly believed would be of great benefit to Ireland to go to waste. On November 10 he met with some of the more obstinate Tories including Lansdowne, Aikinson and Long, and brought with him Lord Cherry and British Attorney General Sir William Robson, in the hope of achieving a compromise acceptable to both parties. Those opposed to the Land Bill in its proposed form wanted landlords and tenants to have the right to come together under the provision of the Wyndham Act for

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[59] Augustine Birrell, "Lords Amendments," *HC Deb 05 November 1909 vol. 12 cc2180-241*, Hansard.

the purposes of sale and purchase. They were opposed to government interference on tenanted land if it was economically sound, while on the issue of compulsion they expressed deep misgivings but were prepared to recognize the principle within congested areas. Outside these districts they sought a tribunal to make rulings on individual cases rather than through compulsion. Afterwards, in a letter to Redmond, Birrell expressed his worry and anger that the obstinate state of mind in the House of Lords could ruin the bill because they had the propensity towards stupidity and nagging over the most trivial of things. Nevertheless, he was glad of their reluctant acceptance of compulsion, even if they had placed costly restrictions upon it.[60]

In its final form, the Land Act of 1909 represented a triumph for Birrell and the Irish Party. The Treasury provided more money for tenants wishing to purchase land, whilst both the Congested Districts Board and the Estates Commissioners were granted limited compulsory powers to deal with untenanted land in congested areas. This effectively resolved all but the most radical demands of the anti-grazier movement in the West. A judicial commissioner was tasked with deciding the price for land acquired this way, and it was purchased in cash. The Act was less favorable towards landlords because, unlike the generous provisions of the Wyndham Act, they were to be paid in stock for voluntary sales rather than with cash. By 1920, the various Tory Land Acts, and with the additional financing and compulsory sale powers within Birrell's Act, over £157,000,000 had been loaned to finance peasant purchase of over nine million acres of

[60] Birrell to Redmond, November 10, 1909, Papers of John Redmond MS 15,169 /2, National Library of Ireland.

Irish land, enabling over 200,189 tenants to buy their holdings. In 1870 only 3% of tenants owned the land on which they toiled, but by 1916 this had increased to 63.9%.[61] Birrell's Land Act of 1909 gave the Irish Party a solid mandate on which to continue to work in alliance with the Liberal Party for the betterment of the Irish people. Thankfully for both, agrarian unrest plummeted after the Bill received the Royal Assent on December 3, 1909.

Another reason for the flourishing relationship between the Irish Chief Secretary and the leaders of the Irish Party was the former's work towards resolving Catholic grievances in higher education. The Catholic hierarchy in Ireland had long pushed for the establishment of a Catholic College within the University of Dublin in which the Protestant Trinity College was the sole institution. In 1793, two hundred years after its establishment in Dublin, Catholics were finally admitted to pursue degrees at Trinity; however, the Catholic bishops had condemned Trinity as dangerous to the faith and morals of Catholics, and in 1906 reiterated their opposition to any form of "mixed education."[62] A principle tenet of Liberalism was non-denominational education, something Birrell had attempted with his Education Bill of 1906. The opportunity to address the problems in higher education in Ireland was, as Birrell phrased it, the reason

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[61] Peter Collins, *Nationalism and Unionism: Conflict in Ireland, 1885-1921* (Belfast: Queen's University of Belfast, 1994), 24.

[62] Dermot Moran, "Nationalism, Religion and the Education Question," *The Crane Bag* 7, no. 2 (1983): 80.

why he crossed to Dublin in the first place to give all Irish people access to "cheap, popular and good" higher education.[63]

The British Government had set up the Robertson [1903] and Fry Commissions [1906] to inquire into the condition of higher education outside of Trinity College, and to offer suggestions for a more inclusive system. Neither Commission offered a clear-cut course of action. Despite this, Chief Secretary Bryce decided to produce a scheme that called for the establishment of a new College suitable for Catholics alongside Trinity College in a reconstituted University of Dublin. The old Queen's Colleges of Galway, Cork and Belfast, founded in 1845 [but now failing badly], would be united with the University of Dublin. Bryce's scheme was immediately met with scorn by both the leaders of Trinity and their Irish Unionist allies who did not want any government interference in "the only successful British institution in Ireland." Likewise, Catholic religious leaders also condemned the measure, simply because they did not want any Protestant influence over Catholic education.[64] Birrell believed Bryce was much too hasty in creating a university scheme, and knew a different approach was needed for it to gain acceptance.[65]

Upon his appointment as Chief Secretary in January 1907, Birrell took up the challenge of creating a university which "the Catholics of Ireland could flock to with

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[63] Augustine Birrell, "Irish Universities," *HC Deb 31 March 1908 vol. 187 cc331-403,* Hansard.

[64] Moran, "Nationalism, Religion and the Education Question," 78.

[65] Birrell, *Things Past Redress,* 200.

pride and pleasure."[66] The rejection of the Irish Council Bill by the Irish Party Convention on May 21, 1907, left Redmond in an uncomfortable position, whereby he had to convince his voters it was still worthwhile to maintain the Irish-Liberal alliance. Believing he had lost electoral support, he pressed Birrell to push forward with his plans for higher education.[67] Recognizing the opposition of both Unionists across the country and the leaders of Trinity College towards Bryce's scheme, the Chief Secretary proposed leaving this historic Protestant institution as it was.[68] He recommended the abolition of the current Royal University in Belfast and the Queens' Colleges. In their stead there would be two new Universities. One would be the National University of Ireland in Dublin with constituent colleges at Cork and Galway, while in Belfast a new Queen's University would be established. Whereas Redmond wanted a universities bill introduced as early as May 1907 along the lines of Bryce's scheme, Birrell was much more cautious in his approach to formulating legislation, opting to take his time fully to understand the conflicting demands of all sides.

On the Catholic side Birrell interacted chiefly with the Dr. William Walsh, who was the Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland, and Fr. William Delaney, who was the head of the Catholic Defence League and President of University College.

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[66] Augustine Birrell, "Some Reflections on Ireland," MS 8 6 (1), Liverpool University Archives.

[67] Senia Paseta, "The Catholic Hierarchy and the Irish University Question 1880–1908," *The Journal of the Historical Association* 85, no. 278 (2000): 270-271.

[68] Augustine Birrell, "Irish Universities," *HC Deb 31 March 1908 vol. 187 cc331-403,* Hansard.

Birrell's proposals were not well-received by Walsh at first, and, reflecting on his discussions with the Archbishop, he quickly understood why:

> "To live in a Catholic city, as a Catholic Archbishop does, with this Protestant Elizabethan institution forever staring you in the face was no doubt galling to a proud prelate."[69]

Nevertheless, through skillful negotiation Birrell persevered. He knew the influence the Catholic clergy had over the Irish people, so he needed its support, otherwise any agreement struck with the Irish political leaders would be pointless.[70] He managed to win over Delaney by a common desire to negotiate a scheme which did not include Trinity College. Although Walsh was disappointed successive British governments had failed to establish a Catholic college within the University of Dublin, he came to realize that Birrell's plan had a good chance of passing through Parliament, and would not involve any attempt to force Catholics into a reorganized Trinity College.[71] Reflecting on his negotiations with the clergy, Birrell joked that in Ireland one could sometimes

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[69] O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary*, 23.

[70] In his book *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1900) Emmet Larkin argues a "Devotional Revolution" took place in Ireland during the years 1850-1875. The psychological impact of the Great Famine 1845-50, which killed one million people, coupled with modernizing clerical reforms, Catholic Church weekly attendance rose from 33% pre-1845 to 90% by 1890. In this environment priests had a great deal of influence over their flock.

[71] Paseta, "The Catholic Hierarchy and the Irish University Question, 1880–1908," 282.

succeed in sending a man to prison against his will, but never to a college. The present college system, he concluded, was provided without thought of what Irishmen wanted.[72]

Birrell found it easy to placate the leaders of Trinity College by simply fostering a plan that left it untouched. An ancient Anglican bastion of higher education in Ireland, Trinity College, having come under the scrutiny of the Fry Commission, nonetheless regarded itself as the home of liberalism, equality of opportunity, non-denominationalism and non-sectarianism.[73] The Fawcett Tests Act of 1873 had opened up the College to non-Anglicans, and its leaders claimed lecturers were appointed based on merit and not on their religious affiliation.[74] Its outright hostility to any sort of Catholic-controlled upper level education was succinctly articulated through its Trinity Defence Committee pamphlets. Whereas it claimed to offer an education based on freedom of thought and expression, it labelled Catholic education medieval in that it was based on authority and faith rather than free rational thinking, teaching only what bishops believed should be taught.[75] Birrell sought out Provost Anthony Traill and gained his support by promising him Trinity College would remain untouched.[76] In a

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[72] Ulster Herald, April 4, 1908, 8.

[73] Moran, *Nationalism, Religion and the Education Question*, 80.

[74] Fawcett's Act abolished the Anglican test oath for Dublin University and Trinity College. It was passed shortly after the failure of the Irish University Bill that same year. Liberal Party leader William Gladstone had proposed removing all religious requirements for students and faculty in all Irish colleges. Opposed by the Roman Catholic Church, most Presbyterians, and Trinity College, it failed on its Second Reading in the House of Commons.

[75] Moran, *Nationalism*, 80.

[76] Birrell, *Things Past Redress*, 202

speech to Trinity graduates at Manchester, Traill assured his listeners the Chief Secretary would not interfere with the college, and on those assurances, they would be poor patriots if they did not offer the Chief Secretary their full support for a non-denominational bill to address genuine educational grievances in the country.[77] For the Presbyterians of Ulster the offer of a new University in Belfast where no doubt its professors and students would be largely of the Protestant faith was acceptable. A harbinger of future events surrounding the Home Rule issue, Birrell recognized the necessity of creating universities both in the north and south of the country in order to make his scheme amenable to everyone.

On March 31, 1908, Birrell submitted his Universities Bill to the House of Commons. His recent experience, although not considerable, convinced him of the necessity of creating an educational environment which would provide good teaching and intellectual discipline across the country. Bryce's scheme of bringing the Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway [created by Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel in 1845] under the federal control of the National University in Dublin was unworkable due to "local patriotism", and Birrell was happy to announce he had a scheme that had "an extraordinary amount of support throughout the length and breadth of Ireland." He called for the creation of two new universities: one in Belfast and a National University of Ireland, which would have branches in Dublin, Galway and Cork. Although legally recognized as secular institutions, thus guaranteeing them public funds, Birrell accepted

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[77] "Dr. Traill and the Irish University Question." *Times* [London, England] Dec 6, 1907: 9.

the suggestion of the Catholic Bishops to establish senates to oversee the foundation and administration of both universities; as such, considering demographics, the Queen's University of Belfast senate was markedly Protestant in composition while that of the National University of Ireland was chiefly Roman Catholic.

Furthermore, the Bill allowed the new institutions to affiliate, or allow a constituent college to affiliate, for the purposes of university training and education. Birrell told his peers that a university which ignored the clergy of the country would undoubtedly start at a great disadvantage.[78] This meant the religious colleges of Maynooth [Catholic] and Magee [Presbyterian] could send their clergy to receive degrees from the new universities.[79] The inclusion of affiliate colleges raised a lot of eyebrows from disapproving politicians. Tory leader Arthur Balfour took a swipe at Birrell's reversal of direction on the question of education. Referring to the Chief Secretary' work on the failed Education Bill of 1906 Balfour said:

> "It seems to me that there is a rather violent change between bringing a Bill which was intended to destroy the denominational atmosphere in the places of education in this country and going across the Channel for the sole purpose of

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[78] Augustine Birrell, "Irish Universities," *HC Deb 31 March 1908 vol. 187 cc331-403*, Hansard.

[79] Due to restrictive controls on the teaching of Catholicism in Ireland during the 1700s candidates for the priesthood went to seminaries on the Continent to study. It was feared during the French Revolution priests studying abroad could be negatively influenced, and, in 1795, as a concession to the Catholics of Ireland during the war with France a partially-government funded college seminary was established in Maynooth, Co. Kildare. For further information on the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland the works of Emmet Larkin are of great value.

establishing a great academic institution in which the denominational atmosphere is to prevail."[80]

Birrell's under-secretary, Sir Antony MacDonnell, expressed his incredulity on this matter to the then, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Herbert Henry Asquith, saying that the Chief Secretary had not only delivered himself into Redmond's hands on the land issue but had delivered himself into the hands of the Jesuits on the universities issue.[81] Irish Unionists such as Ulster's James Craig vocally expressed their suspicions in Parliament that the Universities Bill was a roundabout means of establishing a university in Dublin that would be more or less Roman Catholic in nature. Another Unionist suggested that the Bill was a reward to the prelates for having declared their opposition to cattle-driving.[82] The Chief Secretary replied that, in its truest sense, a denominational university was one which prevented people from exercising their rights, and his bill was as un-denominational as allowed by law. In a retort to Craig, he joked that he thought he would have never seen the day that a Conservative-Unionist [the traditional party of the

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[80] Michael John Fitzgerald McCarthy, *Ensnared by the Jesuits: an Address on the Irish Universities Bill, 1908; With a Postscript Showing how the Bill was rushed through the House of Lords* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Auderson & Ferrier, 1908), 13-14.

[81] Eunan O'Halpin, *The Decline of the Union: British government in Ireland, 1892-1920* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987), 87.

[82] Ulster Herald, April 4, 1908, 8.

Established Anglican Church] would advocate the exclusion of clergymen from all participation in university education.[83]

Despite such criticisms, Irish Unionist Sir Edward Carson believed it was the right thing to do. During the Second Reading of the Bill on May 11 he said it was of the utmost importance to address the grievances of his fellow countrymen, and insisted it was:

> "…the duty of every Irishman, of whatever creed or politics, to wish God-speed to these Universities, and to do his best in a spirit of noble generosity to make them a great success; and I hope that the bringing of them into existence may be a step forward in the union of all classes and religions in Ireland for the progress of our country and its education."

Birrell spoke of his satisfaction that Carson was fully behind his bill. The Chief Secretary recognized that strife and contention were the hallmarks of his first few years in office, but tonight he was delighted to walk the path of peace and duly assist in laying the foundations of liberal seats of learning in Ireland.[84] He recognized it was likely the

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[83] Irish Examiner, May 26, 1908, 5. The Anglican Church played an active role in higher education in England.

[84] Drogheda Argus and Leinster Journal, May 16, 1908, 6.

new universities would foster a denominational atmosphere, but he would rather that happen that have no university at all.[85]

Redmond, although he had some reservations about the bill, supported the tireless work of the Chief Secretary. Responding to critics who felt Birrell was pandering to the Catholic bishops, the Irish Party chairman said it was impossible for the National University of Ireland to not have a denominational atmosphere. He pointed to the recently established University of Khartoum in the Sudan, which undoubtedly had an Islamic atmosphere because its students were largely Muslim, then so too, he concluded, the new university in Dublin would have a Catholic atmosphere, something that was simply a fact of life given Ireland's religious composition.[86] He was delighted Birrell's Bill would provide the youth of the country a great opportunity.[87]

Dillon was much more vociferous than his leader in defending the likelihood of a denominational atmosphere at the National University of Ireland. He challenged the opposition for their hypocrisy and fearmongering for charging the Irish Party as advocates of clericalism and as slaves to the Bishop of Rome. He reminded them that for hundreds of years Trinity College only allowed a Protestant to be Provost yet it was still labelled a non-denominational entity. Queen's College in Belfast had a rule in place that no man could be head of the college unless he was Protestant. He said there was:

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[85] Augustine Birrell, "Irish Universities Bill," *HC Deb 11 May 1908 vol. 188 cc765-872*, Hansard.

[86] According to the 1911 Census, out of the total Irish population of 4,390,219 73.8% were Roman Catholics.

[87] Birrell, "Irish Universities," Hansard.

> "no reason why in a country and a nation like Ireland, where the Catholics form the vast majority, they should be compelled to enter into institutions which are dominated, and must for years and years to come be dominated by their bitter enemies, and by men of other creeds."

He insisted that the Catholics of the country had a right to higher education outside of the hands of a small intolerant and domineering minority in the country. Praising Birrell, Dillon said the Irish Party, speaking for the general body of Catholics in Ireland, accepted his bill and thanked him for having proposed it. By persevering with the bill, in spite of the views of hard-line Conservatives, the Chief Secretary would render one of the greatest services to the Irish nation which had ever been given to an English statesman to render.[88]

The Universities Act received the Royal Assent on July 31, 1908, much to the delight of Redmond and the Irish Party. It gave the Irish leader the perfect platform upon which to continue to foster the Irish alliance with the Liberal Party. In September, Redmond addressed a meeting of the United Irish League in Dublin during which he said, to a chorus of cheers, that the University Act would rank with:

> "some two or three or four of the great emancipating measures of the last one hundred years, and which would stand as a landmark in the effort for the regeneration and freedom of their country."

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[88] Ibid.

Ireland now had, he rejoiced, a free university governed by Irishmen who would make it a great success.[89] The bond between the Chief Secretary and the Irish Party continued to grow, and Redmond wished to capitalize on this alliance with another push for Irish self-government. He knew, however, that the Conservative-dominated House of Lords had the final say on any Home Rule Bill, but this would all change in late 1909 when the upper chamber decided to reject the Liberal Party's financial budget, precipitating a major constitutional crisis.

[89] John Redmond, "Mr. Redmond: Praise for the Irish University Act and the Land Purchase Difficulty The Government and Land Purchase," *The Manchester Guardian [Manchester, U.K.]* September 2, 1908: 6.

CHAPTER IV

THE PARLIAMENT ACT AND IRISH HOME RULE

From 1907 onwards Britain had embarked on a massive shipbuilding program to bolster its defenses in an era of heightened imperialist ambition and militant nationalism on the European continent; so the Liberal Party found it increasingly difficult to fund its economic and social measures, such as the new and costly Old Age Pensions Act of 1908. The "People's Budget" of 1909 precipitated a constitutional crisis between the popularly elected House of Commons and the hereditary House of Lords. Introducing his budget to the House of Commons on April 29, Lloyd George declared warfare against poverty and squalidness. His proposal called for a supertax on those making over £5,000 a year, a levy on alcohol and tobacco, and a scheme to place a value on all propertied land, so taxes could be levied on land worth more than £50.[1]

Approximately seventy-five percent of the tax increase would be paid by the wealthiest ten percent of the population, and since many Tory and Liberal landowners in the upper chamber were wealthy landowners they were outraged. On November 30, after much discussion and debate the Lords rejected the Finance Bill, thus sparking a constitutional crisis which would play out through two General Elections in 1910. The

[1] John Grigg's *Lloyd George: The People's Champion, 1902-1911* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1979). The second of his four volume biography of the fiery Welshman, offers a remarkable insight into the Liberal M.P.'s crusade for social reform, culminating in the Budget of 1909.

Liberal Party hoped a sweeping electoral victory would provide it with a mandate to reform the upper house.[2]

Birrell had been slighted in the past by the House of Lords when they amended into oblivion his Education Bill of 1906, and was therefore happy to see its hereditary power challenged. He would appreciate the value of an upper house if it could examine legislation with an impartial eye, but firmly believed the Lords "ceased to play the part of an intelligent second chamber."[3] Even personal vendettas stood in the way of meaningful legislation. For example, the Liberal Lord Rosebery, a former prime minister, called the budget tyrannical and socialistic. Birrell reflected that Rosebery's hatred of Ireland was that of a jilted woman, because the Irish had helped bring down his government in 1895; therefore relying on his support was out of the question.[4] For him the Lords veto power simply meant, "I say no." When a government minister dissented or grumbled at Lords' amendments to Bills, Birrell remarked, the Lords would flippantly suggest they dissolve so the Tories could govern.[5] The Lords should only exist, he believed, if it had the capacity and willingness to exercise purely critical functions, but the present system was most unfair to the Liberal Party.

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[2] Fearing the fledgling Labour Party might capitalize on the Liberal Party's failure to pass meaning social legislation since it took office in 1906, Lloyd George and his fellow Liberals knew the House of Lords needed to be restrained.

[3] King's Speech (Motion for an address), *HC Deb 18 February 1907 vol. 169 cc571-672*

[4] O Broin, *Chief Secretary*, 36. In his first speech as prime minister in 1894 Rosebery unexpectedly announced that Home Rule for Ireland could only come when England gave its blessing. His remarks caused an uproar from both Gladstonian Liberals and the Irish Party.

[5] Freeman's Journal, Nov 29, 1910, 7.

The Irish Party took offense to Lloyd George's budget because of the proposed tax hikes on Ireland's powerful liquor trade, which, in brewing and distilling, was a main manufacturing interest in southern Ireland, and in retail employed many in Ireland's "shopkeeping" community.[6] The political crisis triggered by the Lords' rejection of the budget presented a fortunate opportunity for Redmond to push forward with his demand for Home Rule.[7] Redmond threatened his Liberal allies that unless an official declaration was made in favor of Irish self-government, he would instruct his Irish supporters in England to vote against Liberal candidates in the upcoming election.[8] Prime Minister Asquith reluctantly acceded to Redmond's demand, and on December 10, 1909, made a speech at the Royal Albert Hall in London, outlining his party's renewed commitment to a system of self-government for Ireland. On December 21, during his electoral address in his North Bristol constituency, Augustine Birrell told voters that the House of Lords had been the cause of "much misery, many crimes and chronic disloyalty" in Ireland, and warned that the imminent January election was either a vote for the Commons or for the

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[6] Stephen Gwynn, *John Redmond's Last Years* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1919), 42. A commonly held Irish Nationalist belief was that since the Act of Union came into force in 1801 Ireland's industries were continually suffocated by the British parliament, and unfairly exposed to the rigors of the U.K. marketplace.

[7] In accordance with Britain's "unwritten constitution" anything of financial consequence would carry unopposed in the House of Lords even if there were objections. On November 30, 1909, the House of Lords, which had not rejected a budget for over two centuries, rejected Lloyd George's bill by 350 votes to 75. The resulting crisis saw the Liberal Party call for a general election to seek a mandate from the British people for the budget. For more on Lloyd George and the People's Budget see chapter six of Travis Crosby's book *The Unknown Lloyd George: A Statesman in Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014).

[8] Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867-1921*(Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998), 230.

Lords.[9] Despite Asquith and Birrell's speeches, most Liberal candidates [61%] avoided addressing the polarizing issue of Home Rule during the election campaign for fear of losing their seats to Conservative-Unionist candidates. Instead, they focused primarily on the intransigence of the Lords toward the "People's Budget".

The January election saw the Liberal Party majority melt away as it returned 275 M.P.s [a loss of 104 seats from the 1906 election], while the Conservative-Unionists won 273 seats, the Irish Party eighty-three, the Irish Unionists twenty-one and Labour forty. This gave the Home Rulers the balance of power in parliament and a hold on the Liberals, meaning the Irish Question could not be brushed aside. Redmond was well-aware that the most important subject to address first was the veto power of the House of Lords, because failure to do so would ensure a Home Rule Bill could never become law. Eager to capitalize on the inconclusive election, Redmond addressed the House of Commons on February 21:

> "Our only business in coming to this House at all is to advance the cause which the right hon. Gentleman [Asquith], in his Albert Hall speech, rightly called the cause of full self-government for Ireland in all purely Irish affairs. Your British politics do not concern us, except so far as they impinge on the fortunes of our country."

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[9] Augustine Birrell, "Mr. Birrell: A Stirring Election Address," *The Manchester Guardian*, December 22, 1909.

He warned the House that he and his colleagues belonged to no English party, so it would be unwise to use the number of Irish Party MPs to calculate majorities.[10] On March 4, Redmond outlined his party's policy, stressing that if the Liberals did not deal with the Lords, then his party would not vote for the budget. Redmond was no fool, nor were Asquith and his Cabinet colleagues. Redmond knew he had to keep pressure on his Liberal allies for the good of his Irish Party and his own leadership, while the Liberals insisted that the Irish would be much worse off under a Tory government. A Liberal/Irish alliance was the only way for both parties to achieve their goals and to scuttle the Conservatives.

In February, Redmond met with Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, who was a Home Rule Tory, anti-imperialist, and close friend of former Chief Secretary George Wyndham. During their meeting, Redmond agreed with Blunt's assessment that Asquith, and other Cabinet members such as Richard Haldane [Secretary of State for War] and Sir Edward Grey [Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs], were not earnest about Home Rule, although they agreed the influential Lloyd George and Winston Churchill were sincere on the issue.[11] Redmond was correct in assuming Asquith was only half-hearted in pursuing Home Rule. The Prime Minister, like Haldane and Grey, was a Liberal Imperialist [those who felt the Irish issue had prevented the Liberal Party from becoming a truly national party], and had a personal distaste for having to rely on Irish votes to

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[10] Extract from Parliamentary Debates, vol. xiv Feb 21, 1910, MS 46/Q/1, U.K. Parliamentary Archives.

[11] Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries: Being a personal narrative of events 1888-1914 vol. 2* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1921), 289.

maintain a government. As such, a mutual mistrust existed between them.[12] During a lunch with Blunt in April, Dillon expressed his concern that the Liberal Party leader had lost much influence over his party, and that his marriage to his second wife, the socialite Margot Tennant, [who, he believed, was a Tory at heart] hampered the Irish cause.[13] Consequently, the Irish Party leadership continued to apply pressure upon their trusted ally Augustine Birrell to ensure their voice was heard during Cabinet discussions.

During his first few years in Ireland, Birrell had conducted an effective holding operation on Home Rule through meaningful reforms, and through the appointment to mid-level positions within the civil service and county court system of men clearly aligned with the Irish Party.[14] For him, the constitutional crisis presented a dual opportunity to rein in the power of the House of Lords, and to be able to push through a bill that would give the Irish people self-government. Immediately after the January election the Liberal Party submitted a Parliament Bill, which called for the Lords' veto on finance bills to be abolished, for any bill that passed the Commons in three successive sessions within two years to become law even if the Lords rejected it, and for the

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[12] Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution 1910-1921* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), 38.

[13] Blunt, *My Diaries*, 300.

[14] Birrell's advancement of Irish Nationalists to advanced positions within the Irish administrative bureaucracy is comprehensively charted by Lawrence W. McBride in his book *The Greening of Dublin Castle.* The Chief Secretary's appointments did not go unnoticed by the leaders of Irish Unionism. During a speech in the House of Lords the Earl of Donoughmore lambasted Birrell for being an undoubted Home Ruler who exercised his power of patronage to clearly favor the appointment of Irish nationalists to the Irish administration. See "The King's Speech-Adjourned Debate," *HL Deb 18 February 1909 vol. 1 cc71-112* in the online Hansard parliamentary debate transcripts for a detailed breakdown of Birrell's nationalist appointments in 1907.

maximum duration for a Parliament to be reduced from seven to five years. If the Lords tried to stop the Parliament Bill, Asquith warned he would go to King Edward VII to demand the creation of hundreds of new Liberal peers in the upper chamber to outvote the Conservatives, thus ensuring its passage.

The Chief Secretary was in a buoyant mood, and wrote to Asquith in February assuring him he could count on Redmond's support provided "we steam ahead" with the promises made in the Royal Albert Hall speech two months prior.[15] Furthermore, Birrell saw the Parliament Bill as the best remedy to finally get rid of the "No you shan't attitude" of the Lords.[16] Largely ignorant of the increasingly hostile sentiment of Irish Unionists in the North, Birrell could not have fathomed the consequences of Edward Carson's appointment as leader of the Irish Unionist Parliamentary Party just one week after his own optimistic correspondence with Asquith. Even before the Parliament Bill was tabled, British and Irish Unionists were becoming increasingly perturbed by the "dictatorial" nature of the Liberal Party, and took particular umbrage at Birrell's dismissive attitude towards Unionists in Ulster.[17] William Moore, a lawyer and Irish

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[15] Birrell to Asquith, Feb 1910, MSS Asquith 1 -152, The Papers of Herbert Asquith Reels 11-12, f.4, Bodleian Archives.

[16] Freeman's Journal, Nov 29, 1910, 7.

[17] A large number of Ireland's Protestant population lives in the northern province of Ulster. Concentrated mainly in its four northeastern counties, they opposed the creation of an Irish parliament located in Dublin. Their opposition crystallized into a political movement in the late 19th century, culminating in the creation of the Irish Unionist Party in 1891 and the Ulster Unionist Council in 1905. For an in-depth analysis of the development of Irish and Ulster Unionism see Peter Gibbon's *The Origins of Ulster Unionism: the Formation of Popular Protestant Politics in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975). Patrick Buckland is also a leading scholar on the development of Irish Unionism. His book *Irish Unionism* is a great starting point.

Unionist, believed the Chief Secretary was only capable of governing through flippancy and jest, given the Birrell's light-hearted nature and propensity for making jokes in the House of Commons.[18] Clearly, Birrell was out of touch with the general feeling of Protestants in the North of Ireland, and his facetious attitude would ensure a tumultuous road ahead for the passage of a Home Rule Bill.

The sudden death of King Edward VII on May 6, 1910, and the accession of his son George V, slowed the Liberal Party's assault upon the House of Lords. The new king, not wishing to begin his reign with a constitutional crisis, called for a truce to provide an opportunity for leaders on both sides to thrash out their differences. A constitutional conference convened on June 17, with four members from both the Liberal [including Birrell] and Conservative parties in attendance. They held twenty-two meetings over the next five months, and, although there was some discussion on reform of House of Lords, a compromise could not be reached, so the king's plan failed. The Irish leaders, much to their distress, were not invited to attend these meetings. During the conference discussions, Lloyd George had proposed the two main parties, working together perhaps in a coalition, could resolve the Irish question through a non-partisan approach. He suggested "Home Rule All Round", whereby England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales would all get their own devolved assemblies, thereby freeing up Westminster to take care of its own business, without relying on Irish votes.[19]

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[18] Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons 1884-1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 310.

[19] O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, 233.

Birrell, Redmond and Dillon were opposed to this federal scheme because they believed such an idea would complicate the Irish part of the question, and could delay or wreck Home Rule altogether.[20] For many Nationalists, they saw the federal proposal as a sinister way to destroy their aspirations of self-government, because it would undoubtedly lead to a years- long debate on political particulars that would never be resolved. Some Conservatives considered the idea of federal solution because it provided for the maintenance of the Union, and would dilute the Liberal-Irish-Labour alliance. Nevertheless, Opposition leader Arthur Balfour and other senior Tories did not see federalism as an ideal resolution to Ireland's political problems, so did not seriously embrace Lloyd George's proposal. The failure of the cross-party talks, at the behest of the king, meant the issue of the Lords' veto failed to be resolved, therefore Asquith decided to call another general election in December in order to get a mandate from the British people to reform the unelected upper chamber.[21]

Needing to raise funds for a second election, Redmond, and fellow party members T.P. O'Connor and Joseph Devlin, went to North America seeking financial support from Irish-Americans. At home, Redmond had adopted a much more conciliatory tone in his Home Rule speeches after Asquith's Royal Albert Hall speech of

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[20] Patricia Jalland, "United Kingdom Devolution 1910-14: Political Panacea or Tactical Diversion?," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 94, No. 373 (Oct., 1979): 767.

[21] For more on the debate on a federal solution for Ireland and Britain John Kendle's *Ireland and the Federal Solution: The Debate over the United Kingdom Constitution, 1870-1921* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) is an excellent resource. The federal debate was clouded in confusion over how it would impact the integrity of the British Isles, and it ultimately failed to garner enough support.

1909, but in the U.S.A., to appeal to the Irish community, his speeches, as they had always been on his tours of the country, were much more provocative. In a speech at Buffalo, New York, he dismissed the concessions given to Ireland by successive British governments as valueless, although such concessions could be used to strengthen the will of the Irish people to push forward in their goal for national independence. In contrast, in a speech in England several months later he assured his listeners that, given Home Rule, Ireland would be as loyal as the British dominions of Canada, Australia and South Africa.[22] Redmond's openly contradictory public speeches created much mistrust, and further embittered Unionists both in Ireland and England.

The December election was more or less a repeat of the January results. The Liberal Party won 271 seats, the Conservatives 272, making them the largest party in the House, Labour forty-two, and the Irish Home Rule Party eighty-four. Much like before, the Liberal Party candidates tried to avoid questions pertaining to Ireland during the election campaign, while the Conservatives played up the subject more in their appeal to those voters unsure about the future of the United Kingdom. Once again, it appeared Redmond and his party held the balance of power in the House of Commons. The first order of business for the Liberal Party was the passage of the Parliament Bill to limit the Lords' veto to three parliamentary sessions. Fearing a flood of Liberal peers into the

[22] Ian Malcolm M.P., ed., *Convicted: The Goal of Irish Nationalism Disclosed by Irish Home Rulers. A record of disloyal speeches, resolutions, etc. in Ireland and America*, MS D1507/A/3/6, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

Lords, the upper house reluctantly accepted the bill. A recalcitrant and morose Lord Selbourne remarked:

> "The question is, shall we perish in the dark, slain by our own hand, or in the light, killed by our enemies."

The Lords voted 131 to 114 not to attempt to amend the Parliament Bill, a result which signaled the death of the unbridled political power of the aristocracy.[23] Reliant once again on the Irish Party for a majority, Asquith had to give serious consideration to the future of Ireland.

In January, 1911, the Cabinet appointed a committee of seven ministers to discuss the entire Home Rule question. Birrell, along with Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel, Winston Churchill, Richard Haldane, Sir Edward Grey and Lord Loreburn as Chairman, examined the option of "Home Rule All Round" and the difficult matter of Irish finances. For Birrell, while he considered the idea of a federal scheme for Britain to be a practical idea, which would have the benefit of easing the workload of the imperial parliament in Westminster, he did not think it appropriate for Ireland.[24] Redmond and Dillon, concerned about the possibility of the Cabinet pursuing a federal devolutionary scheme, sent a memorandum to Birrell, warning him and his fellow committee members

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[23] George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, 65. The Parliament Act paved the way for future reform of the upper house because its veto power was now finite. No longer could power and privilege counter the wishes of the democratically-elected House of Commons.

[24] Meleady, *The National Leader*, 178.

that it would be a "serious blot" on any Bill if it did not follow Mr. Gladstone's plan [the Liberal Prime Minister who formulated the first two Home Rule Bills in 1886 and 1893] for the Irish legislature to be allowed to craft its own laws.[25]

The Chief Secretary supported the view of his Irish allies that the federal plan was unworkable for Ireland, and reassured Redmond of his intention to make any other solution than outright Home Rule impossible.[26] It would be unfair, he believed, to include Ireland in a federal scheme, because it would only cause much consternation and avoidable delay. Optimistic that his colleagues would heed his warnings, Birrell told a gathering of the National Liberal Club that a Home Rule Bill would be presented in the next parliamentary session "with the full support of a united Cabinet."[27] At a speech in Ilfracombe in October, Birrell told his audience that of the thirty five royal commissions established since 1880 to address Irish grievances very few had delivered tangible results. He labeled as preposterous those English newspapers which argued that the desire for Home Rule was dying out in Ireland. If the Liberals were to fall from power as a result of their commitment to Home Rule, he warned that the Conservatives would soon find out just how content Ireland really was. The worst thing for England to do, he

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[25] Birrell circulation of Memorandum received from Messrs R. and D., MS Eng. c 7035 f. 7, Bodleian Library.

[26] Jalland, *The Liberals & Ireland*, 39.

[27] Meleady, *The National Leader*, 194.

argued, was to continue to pay the administrative and social costs of a country that clearly wanted to govern itself.[28]

Throughout the first half of his Chief Secretaryship, Birrell maintained a publicly flippant attitude toward Irish Unionism. Spurred on by Redmond's dismissive attitude of the concerns of Protestant Ulstermen, he largely ignored the rising tide of antagonism that gripped the north of the country. Redmond viewed Irish Unionist objections as the "artificial product of continuing English conspiracy" to prevent Irish self-government and convinced Birrell the Ulster problem was mere bluster.[29] The Chief Secretary had immersed himself with Irish literature during his first few years in office, and sympathized with the plight of Ireland's Catholics. From Elizabethan times to Victorian times, he learned of their great suffering. To be a Catholic, he found, was to be an outcast, and to lose the rights to one's land. Pointing to such successful examples like South Africa and Canada, which were given the responsibility of self-government, Birrell claimed that "never in the history of the world has the referment of self-government failed."[30]

In the December election of 1910, the Chief Secretary wrote to the *Ulster Guardian* newspaper expressing his satisfaction that Liberal candidates were challenging Unionists for seats in Ulster, because electoral victory there would prove:

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[28] "*Home Rule for Ireland: A Speech delivered by the Right Hon. Augustine Birrell, M.P. (Secretary for Ireland), at Ilfracombe On October 19th, 1911"* (London: Liberal Publication Department), 10.

[29] Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), 153.

[30] Connaught Telegraph, October 28, 1911, 7.

> "how much Ulster is slandered by those who would have us believe that it is mainly inhabited by bigots who divide their time between crying 'To Hell with the Pope' and trembling at the thought of being allowed to manage their own affairs."[31]

What Birrell had failed to grasp was that the province of Ulster had undergone a rapid transformation during the previous thirty years, and with the firebrand Sir Edward Carson's rise to power as head of the Ulster Unionists, the Chief Secretary and his Liberal colleagues could no longer ignore their opposition.

Until the 1880s, Ulster's Protestants tended to vote for either the Conservative or Liberal Party, while a small number identified themselves with Orangeism [a movement that identified itself with defending Protestant civil and religious privilege]. In the face of two Liberal Party attempts to pass Irish Home Rule Bills in 1886 and 1893, Irish Unionists became increasingly organized and much more vociferous in their opposition toward Home Rule for Ireland, because, for them, they feared for their liberties in a predominantly Catholic-controlled parliament in Dublin. The voice of Ulster, Sir Edward Carson, let it be known that he and his followers were loyal subjects who were

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[31] Hugh Mack, Edward Archdale, Joseph Carr et al, "Ulster's Voice: Remarkable Protestant Manifesto to Mr. Birrell's Message," *The Manchester Guardian*, Dec 7, 1910.

one nationality with Great Britain; therefore, it would be unjust to subject them to a Dublin parliament.[32]

Upon his appointment as Chief Secretary in 1907, Birrell was viewed with mistrust by the Irish Unionist community because of his close friendship with Redmond. The *Belfast Newsletter* stated he "donned the livery of the Nationalists [when appointed] and has been their obedient servant ever since."[33] The passage of the Parliament Act in 1911 further fueled Unionist hostility towards Birrell, Redmond and the Liberal Party. The bill, which received the Royal Assent in August, limited the veto power of the House of Lords to three successive House of Commons sessions. For the Irish Party, it looked as though its alliance with the Liberal Party was finally paying off, and Home Rule might now become a reality. For the Unionists, it was an Irish/Liberal ploy to push through a bill for a Catholic-dominated parliament in Dublin that they clearly opposed.

Reeling from continued Liberal hegemony after 1910, many in the Conservative Party came to view Ulster as an appropriate area to exert their political energy. For them, the assault on property [the 1909 People's Budget] and the threat to the United Kingdom itself [Irish Home Rule] constituted reckless reform by a party intent on destroying the

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[32] Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War One and Partition* (London: Routledge, 1998), 9. Born in Dublin, Carson became a lawyer in 1877. Initially a supporter of the British Liberal Party, he was proud of Ireland's political connection to England. After the ill-fated attempt by Gladstone to pass a Home Rule Bill in 1886, Carson identified himself as a Liberal Unionist, vehemently opposed to such a measure. He was elected as a Liberal Unionist M.P. for the University of Dublin in 1892, and became Solicitor-General for Ireland, advising the crown on Irish legal matters. From 1900-1905 he was Solicitor-General for England. In February 1910 Carson accepted an invitation from Ulster politician James Craig to lead the Ulster Unionist Party's fight against Home Rule. See *Carson: The Man Who Divided Ireland* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2005) by Geoffrey Lewis for more on Carson's early life.

[33] "Our London Letter. By Our Private Wire," *Belfast Newsletter*, undated, MS. D2846/1/2/7, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

British constitution.[34] In November 1911, Andrew Bonar Law replaced Arthur Balfour as leader of the Conservative Party. Although born outside of the United Kingdom, his parents were of Ulster-Scots ancestry, and, as such, he threw his support behind the Irish Unionist campaign against Home Rule. In a speech at Belfast a few weeks after his appointment, he described the current government's Irish policy as:

> "Nothing better than the latest move in a conspiracy as treacherous as ever has been formed against the life of a great nation."[35]

He compared the present House of Commons to a marketplace where everything could be bought and sold. For him, the Liberal Party was out of control in its attack upon the English constitution, and he believed the rallying cry of the "Union in Crisis" could be enough to revive the fortunes of the Conservative Party, and return the country to a more stable constitutional footing. Despite the limitations placed on the House of Lords, both Law and Carson could rely on its support to hamper any proposed Home Rule Bill for Ireland. Lord Londonderry expressed his hope that Sir Edward Carson and the rest of the Irish Unionist M.P.s could mount a successful speaking tour of England and Scotland

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[34] Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972,* 465.

[35] Herbert Henry Asquith, *Memoirs and Reflections: 1852-1927 Vol. I* (Boston: Little Brown, 1928), 241.

to educate the electorate about the risk of ruin, bankruptcy and civil war in Ireland if Home Rule was passed.[36]

Realizing that a huge effort was necessary to gain public support in Britain, Carson and his colleagues decided to launch a massive propaganda campaign across the British Isles. From September 1911 to July 1914, Ulster Unionists delivered more than five thousand speeches in England, and almost four thousand in Scotland, supplemented with the distribution of approximately six million booklets, to garner sympathy for their cause. Across Ulster, the number of Unionist clubs rose from 14 to 371 in the space of three years.[37] In September, 1911, Carson addressed a gathering of 50,000 at Craigavon, during which he laid out his plans for the creation of a Provisional Ulster Government should Home Rule be enacted. This organized campaign of resistance gradually came to capture the thoughts of the Chief Secretary.

In March 1911, during a speech at the Oxford Union Society, Birrell reflected that he had grown to love Ireland during his four years as Chief Secretary, and continued to espouse his belief in the benefits of Irish self-government, arguing England's Act of Union of 1800 had damaged Ireland both socially and economically.[38] Outside of a

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[36] Lord Londonderry, "Parliament Bill," *HL Deb 10 August 1911 vol. 9 cc987-1045*, Hansard.

[37] O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867-1921*, 244.

[38] The Act of Union of 1800 created an official political union between Great Britain and Ireland. It abolished the Irish parliament, meaning Irish politicians were now elected to the British House of Commons. Birrell believed the transference of political matters to Westminster hindered the economic development of Ireland. For many in Ireland's nationalist community the tragedy of the Great Famine 1845-51 was direct evidence of misrule. Alvin Jackson's *The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland and the survival of the United Kingdom 1707-2007* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) provides a thorough examination of how the Act of Union impacted Ireland over the course of the 19th century.

"black patch" in Ulster [in reference to the increasingly vociferous Ulster Unionist resistance], Birrell viewed Home Rule as the realization of the dream of nationality for the country. Unionists argued that Protestants in the South and West of Ireland experienced persecution from their Catholic neighbors, but Birrell poured scorn on such claims, and viewed it as a sinister ploy to gain sympathy and votes from the British public. A spirit of toleration and good feeling between the majority and minority religion across the country, except in a small pocket of counties in the North East, so he was sure the rest of Ireland could "afford to laugh at the inane threats of a few popgun irreconcilables."[39]

In April 1911, Birrell, at the behest of worried Cabinet members, began to receive monthly police reports from the Royal Irish Constabulary concerning seditious meetings and military-style drillings across the North. Nevertheless, the Chief Secretary remained skeptical toward the threat of violence, and declined Home Secretary Winston Churchill's offer for him to use the British Secret Service to help survey Unionist troublemakers. Birrell believed much of the police force in Ulster to be under the influence of Unionist sentiment; as such they tended to exaggerate the strength of militant resistance to help the Ulster Unionists win political concessions.

By early 1912, senior Cabinet figures began to view grumblings in Ulster with a greater degree of seriousness, but not Birrell. In a meeting with Sir David Harrel, a former Chief Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, the Chief Secretary was

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[39] Cork County Eagle and Munster Advertiser, March 11, 1911, 4.

assured that armed resistance to authority was not possible. By February, both Lloyd George and Churchill, concerned at the possibility of insurrection, suggested that those counties in Ulster which did not want to be part of a Home Rule Ireland be given the mandate to opt out. The Cabinet did not follow through on their suggestions, but the Prime Minister became increasingly apprehensive about the consequences of not providing Ulster generous protections. In a letter to George V, he informed the king that if further evidence arose of the necessity to give Ulster special treatment, then the government could offer safeguards through an amendment in the forthcoming Home Rule Bill. Like Birrell, he knew there were those in Ulster who were outraged, but was unsure of the "real extent and character of the Ulster resistance."[40]

By January 1912, Augustine Birrell had assumed a leading role in framing a Home Rule Bill within the Gladstonian model of 1886 and 1893. He considered his party "bound to the Irish," and viewed himself as a caretaker who would ultimately relinquish his position to Redmond as the future leader of a self-governing Ireland.[41] The Irish Party leader was adamantly opposed to a separate Ulster government as a provision of the Home Rule Bill. In March, at a speech to the Liberal *Eighty Club* in London, Redmond, responding to the question as to why Home Rule was needed since Ireland was supposedly in a peaceable state, said his fellow countrymen were peaceful because they knew Home Rule was just around the corner. Further, he told his audience some newspapers spoke of the outrages that could happen in the Protestant-dominated city of

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[40] Asquith to George V Feb 7, 1912, MS Asquith 38 ff. 95-6, Bodleian Library.

[41] Jalland, *The Liberals and Ireland,* 42.

Belfast if Home Rule was carried, but few seemed worried about the real threat of violence throughout the rest of the country if it was rejected.[42] He was convinced neither coercion nor "killing Home Rule with kindness" had satiated the national ambition of the Irish people.[43] Birrell's loyalty to Redmond, the Liberal reliance upon Irish votes in the House of Commons, and the Prime Minister's uncertainty over the danger posed by Carson and his allies, meant Ulster received no safeguards when the Home Rule Bill was introduced in early April.[44]

On April 11, 1912, Asquith introduced the Irish Home Rule Bill to the House of Commons. He stated that the Parliament of 1912 faced the same scenario as in 1886, that four-fifths of the elected representatives of Ireland demanded their own government. He informed the House that the majority of Nationalist seats across Ireland were not even contested by Unionists because the result was always a foregone conclusion. In reference to Ulster, which he acknowledged had serious differences of opinion about how it should be governed, he claimed the province as a whole was represented by seventeen Unionists and sixteen Home Rulers.[45] While the Home Rule Bill would have religious safeguards for the minority in Ulster opposed to Home Rule, the Prime Minister warned that his

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[42] John Redmond, *The Home Rule Bill* (London, 1912) MS. ETJ 5431, British Library.

[43] The Cork Examiner November 30, 1911.

[44] Alvin Jackson and Alan O'Day are the leading scholars on the intricacies of the Irish Home Rule Bill of 1912. See Jackson's *Home Rule: An Irish History 1800-2000* and O'Day's *Irish Home Rule 1867-1921*,

[45] The province of Ulster consists of nine counties. According to the 1911 Irish Census the four north-eastern counties of Antrim, Down, Londonderry and Armagh had Protestant majorities. Protestants were slightly in the minority in counties Tyrone and Fermanagh, and accounted for one quarter or less of the population in counties Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan.

government would not allow a vociferous Protestant minority in Ulster to "veto the verdict of the vast body of their countrymen."[46]

Birrell reminded his fellow M.P.s that England had implemented eighty-six coercion acts since the Act of Union, yet the government had failed to keep order and peace in Ireland; therefore Ireland should be granted the right to govern itself.[47] In response to Unionist claims that the Irish people were less desirous of and even apathetic towards self-government, the Chief Secretary warned the Commons it would be a cardinal error to suppose this thorny subject, which had been wrestled with by British governments for the past one hundred years, had now worked itself out. It was wrong to say everything was fine with Ireland, and he reminded the Opposition that it was only a few years ago that they constantly harangued him for not suspending ordinary law in favor of coercive measures to combat supposed outrages across the country. Ireland, he was sure, would continue to have the weakest administration in the world until it gained the right to deal with its own affairs. Responding to Unionist claims there were two religions and two camps in Ireland, Birrell begged the question which of the two sides was the Christian religion and what was the name of the other. The perceived fear of having Roman Catholics in power was evidence that Ulster Unionists still adhered to the old ideal of a Protestant Ascendency in the country. This false idealism, he argued, was

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[46] Herbert Henry Asquith, "Course of Events Since 1893," *HC Deb 11 April 1912 vol. 36 cc1399-404*, Hansard.

[47] Annie G. Porritt, "The Irish Home Rule Bill," *Political Science Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (June, 1913): 307.

not grounds to boycott the right of the majority of Irishmen to seek the right to govern themselves.[48]

The Bill proposed having purely Irish questions be dealt with by an Irish parliament, whilst Westminster would continue to deal with all issues pertaining to the crown, army and navy, foreign policy and customs duties. Asquith viewed this as the start of a devolutionary process that would enable the Commons to deal with more pressing imperial matters. Carson poured scorn on Asquith's speech, claiming the Prime Minister's Bill simply pandered to the Irish Party, to whom he and his Liberal colleagues were reliant upon to retain a majority in Parliament. Redmond, refusing to get into a direct debate with the Unionist leader, informed the House that the principle of local assemblies that were self-governing had the sanction of the whole world. In his typical conciliatory tone, when things looked promising for his party, Redmond assured those Unionists fearful that Ireland would, in the future, demand outright independence, that those separatists who harbored such views were a small minority, and their feelings would soon dissipate when Ireland had its own government. In an appeal to the Protestants of Ireland, who feared political domination in a largely Catholic country, he assured them they could put as many safeguards as they wanted into the Bill.[49]

What Birrell and his colleagues had failed fully to appreciate was how the political landscape of Ulster had evolved over the previous thirty years. The "Union in

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[48] Irish Independent, April 17, 1912, 8.

[49] John Redmond, "Settlement of an Old Controversy," *HC Deb 11 April 1912 vol. 36 cc1424-514*, Hansard.

Peril" and "Rome Rule" had become effective recruitment tools for the Unionist cause, meaning a Dublin parliament ruling Ulster became an intolerable prospect. Sir James Craig told a London newspaper that the people of Ulster would prefer to be ruled by the German Emperor rather than by John Redmond and his band of papists.[50] *The Times* newspaper, a traditionally pro-establishment and pro-empire political mouthpiece, offered its appraisal of the bill:

> "It will not allay the fears or diminish the hostility of Unionist Ireland…The Bill is, in all essential points, the old impossible Bills of 1886 and 1893…Like them it is an attempt to find a middle way between positions hopelessly opposed, to reconcile the irreconcilable and fulfill conditions that are mutually contradictory."[51]

Despite Unionist protestations, the Home Rule Bill received its Second Reading on June 9 and reached the Committee stage two days later. The following day, a young Liberal M.P. named Thomas Agar-Robartes proposed an amendment to the Bill to safeguard what he believed were genuine Unionist grievances. His proposal called for the exclusion of the four predominantly Protestant counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down and Londonderry from the Bill. His suggestion unleashed a maelstrom of controversy as

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[50] O'Broin, *Chief Secretary*, 58.

[51] British and Irish Communist Organisation, *The Home Rule Crisis 1912-1914* (Belfast: B.I.C.O., 1972), 18.

both sides quarreled about its implications for Ireland. The Ulster Unionist leader Carson still held the position that the British Government should abandon the Bill altogether, although he did stress that if such an amendment was included then Tyrone and Fermanagh, counties with sizeable Protestant minorities, should also be included. Redmond voiced his anger at the Agar-Robartes plan and ridiculed such a proposed division of the Irish nation as "revolting and hateful."[52]

The Chief Secretary agreed with the Irish Party chairman, and stressed it was useless to pretend such an amendment could bring about a lasting settlement. He spoke with certainty that, in a Home Rule Ireland, intelligent men would not resort to armed resistance.[53] He argued it was a delusion to suppose Protestant feeling was so strong in Ulster that its shrewd inhabitants desired to be separated, especially since it economy was so intertwined with the rest of the country. He was convinced it was possible for a country to have religious differences while at the same time be able to join together to discuss political matters.[54] In response, Bonar Law, gave an incendiary speech at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire, seat of the Dukes of Marlborough, during which he promised Ulster the full support of his party, no matter what level of resistance they presented toward the Bill. This created a major problem for Birrell, Asquith and the

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[52] John Redmond, "The Government of Ireland Bill," *HC Deb 13 June 1912 vol. 39 cc1064-131*, Hansard.

[53] "News of the Week," *The Spectator*, June 22, 1912, 2.

[54] Communist Organisation, *Home Rule Crisis*, 20.

Liberal Party, because it implied the Conservatives would support Ulster even in the event of armed rebellion.[55]

Whilst discussions took place at Westminster regarding the Amendment, the Ulster Unionist leadership continued to seek ways to pressure the government to scrap the bill in its entirety. In Ulster, a grassroots campaign of resistance was organized by Captain James Craig, the Irish Unionist M.P. for East Down. The son of a wealthy Presbyterian whisky distiller, he initially showed little interest in politics; however, his service in the Boer War filled him with a great sense of pride for the British Empire, and it helped him understand Ulster's place within it. Craig was an able backbencher who worked tirelessly behind the scenes for the Unionist Party. Given Carson's temperament and powers of oratory the two men formed a formidable partnership. Craig believed the best way to demonstrate Ulster's opposition was through having the Unionist community sign a written oath, pledging to defend the province from the reach of a Dublin parliament. He earmarked Saturday September 28, 1912 as "Ulster Day" whereby those loyal to Ulster would sign the pledge.[56]

At Belfast City Hall the "Ulster Covenant" was first signed by Carson, Lord Londonderry [the former Viceroy of Ireland], representatives of various Protestant Churches and then Craig. In total, slightly less than half a million men and women

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[55] R.J.Q. Adams, *Bonar Law* (London: Thistle Publishing, 2013), 125.

[56] Patrick Buckland has written a concise and richly informative biography of James Craig, the fiery Ulster Unionist who would become the Prime Minister of the new state of Northern Ireland in 1921. See *James Craig: Lord Craigavon* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1980).

signed the pledge to oppose Home Rule for Ulster.[57] The Unionist leadership was buoyed by the public support for their opposition, but reaction outside Ulster was mostly muted. The following month, Birrell, while giving a speech in Bristol, observed that the impact of Ulster's "Solemn League and Covenant" upon the English people was a great failure, although he did agree the Ulster's difficulty with Home Rule had to be dealt with in a rational manner.[58] Redmond continued to stress there would be no concessions for Ulster, because Ireland was not a "British province or an English shire, but a nation, with a strongly marked individuality," and without Home Rule Ireland could never be either prosperous or loyal.[59]

Frustratingly for Birrell, his intelligence services in Ireland focused too much on Nationalist secret societies located in the South, and so he could not fully grasp the level of orchestrated resistance across Ulster. He wrote to the Inspector General of the Royal Irish Constabulary in July 1912, expressing his frustration that for the past five years he had received bountiful knowledge of "local intrigues and dissension" from "ruffians and

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[57] Drawing inspiration from the Scottish Covenant of 1638 (a defensive religious pact signed by Scottish Presbyterians facing accusations of treason by King Charles I), James Craig chose to label the Unionist oath the Ulster Covenant. Women added their names to a separate declaration pledging to support the men of Ulster in their opposition to Home Rule.

[58] "Mr. Birrell and Ulster," *Western Daily Press,* October 19, 1912. MS. PRO 30/67/29 f. 1461, The National Archives.

[59] J.E. Redmond, *The Justice of Home Rule: A statement of Ireland's claims for self-government* (Irish Press Agency, 1912), MS. ETJ 5425 f. 35, The British Library.

bullies" in the South, and stressed that there should be a greater focus on Ulster where clubs and organizations were arming themselves under the noses of the police force.[60]

As the Ulster Unionists became much more boisterous in the weeks and months following the introduction of the Home Rule Bill, Redmond decided in July to invite Asquith over to Dublin to show him how much the Irish people appreciated his efforts. Once in Dublin, Asquith, along with Birrell and Redmond, were the keynote speakers at a public meeting at the Theatre Royal where they were greeted by a rancorous crowd. Reflecting on his visit, Asquith viewed his initial drive through the streets of Dublin as a triumphal procession, and recalled how the crowd cheered for a full seven minutes when he rose to speak at the public meeting. He told the jubilant crowd that to allow a minority of people in Ulster:

> "to thwart and defeat the constitutional demand of a vast majority of their fellow-countrymen, and to frustrate a great international settlement, is a proposition which, in my opinion, does not and will never commend itself to the conscience or the judgement of the British people."[61]

The Prime Minister called Unionist demands for a referendum on Home Rule via an election as nothing more than a sinister campaign "purely destructive in its objects,

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[60] P.R.O. LONDON, C.O. 904/13.

[61] For Asquith's recollection of his visits to Dublin see The Earl of Oxford and Asquith, K.G., *Memories and Reflections, 1852-1927 vol. II* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1928), 43-47.

anarchic and chaotic in its methods."[62] Birrell spoke after the Prime Minister and he too received rapturous applause. After a few characteristic light-hearted jokes, he told the crowd that he would be disappointed if Home Rule dug a deeper channel between England and Ireland, and hoped it would lead to a more glorious, triumphant and prosperous union between them.[63] With Home Rule in place the two countries could, he believed, see likeness in their differences and love in their dissimilarities.[64]

In December, the Cabinet met once again to discuss the Agar-Robartes Amendment. Asquith was certain at this stage that any form of Ulster exclusion would make all other parts of the Home Rule Bill unworkable, while others, including Lloyd George believed a redrafting of the bill should be considered.[65] Carson and his followers had reluctantly agreed to consider the amendment because failure to do so would make them appear unreasonable to the British public. Walter Long, leader of the Irish Unionist Party from 1906-1910, in a letter to Bonar Law, wrote of the amendment as a carefully designed trap by the British government, because a Unionist rejection of the measure would give the Liberals the ammunition they needed to prove that Ulstermen were unwilling to even accept exclusion, meaning they must have no genuine grievances.[66] Reluctant to backtrack on their promises to the Irish Party, predictably, the Cabinet

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[62] Adams, *Bonar Law*, 122.

[63] Freeman's Journal, July 20, 1912.

[64] Irish Independent, July 20, 1912, 7.

[65] Meleady, *The National Leader*, 225.

[66] Kendle, *Walter Long*, 72.

rejected the amendment. This prompted Carson to write a letter to Asquith on December 30, insisting on exclusion for the whole nine counties of Ulster as a means of avoiding an outbreak of violence in the province, and warning the Prime Minister that the repugnance of a vast body of Ulstermen to Home Rule was as deep as it was vehement.[67]

Carson pressed home his concerns in a speech to the Commons on January 1, 1913. He argued it was unfair to change a government without the favor of its people. For Ulster, although there were a few counties with small Nationalist majorities that politically would prefer Home Rule, economically, the province as a whole reaped the benefits of the industries permeating out of Belfast. It would therefore be economically unwise to rely on a Dublin government for employment. Summing up his arguments, the leader of Ulster Unionism stated that were 200,000 more Protestants than Catholics in the province, and it would be unwise to parcel off a portion of it solely on the basis of religion.

The Prime Minister found Carson's speech to be "very powerful and moving" and promised to consider carefully the concerns of the Ulster Party. Redmond believed Carson's speech to be "serious and solemn," although he disagreed with his assertion the province of Ulster should be excluded from any bill, because it was most unfair for such a small minority of his fellow countrymen to dictate the shape of the Home Rule Bill.[68] Birrell viewed Carson's speech as another Unionist ploy to wreck the Bill in its entirety.

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[67] British and Irish Communist Organisation, *Home Rule Crisis*, 22.

[68] John Redmond, "Clause 1. (Establishment of Irish Parliament)," *HC Deb 01 January 1913 vol. 46 cc377-483*, Hansard.

The Opposition's alternative would be, he claimed, to offer the Irish people false promises of better times ahead in return for votes, with the subversive goal of sending a solid block of Unionists to Parliament at the expense of the Home Rule movement, which was, he believed, the soul of Ireland. Birrell added that the current mode of administration could not go on indefinitely, and the Ulster Unionists' supposed right to bring down this national solution was a right they did not possess.[69]

Carson's proposal to have all of Ulster excluded from the bill was rejected by the Liberal-Irish majority in the House of Commons, which meant the Bill passed its Third Reading on January 16. Revealingly, Bonar Law, during his speech against the Bill, asked Birrell if he could, upon his honor, guarantee Ulster would not be awash in blood once Home Rule was passed; however, the Chief Secretary refused to respond. In condemning the Bill in the upper house, Lord Ashbourne reminded the Lords that Ireland was not a united nation and that it contained at least two races. He ridiculed Asquith for going back on his word that he would guarantee the people of Ulster whatever concessions they wanted, because the proposed bill contained none of any real substance. Lord Curzon, in opposing the bill, used a succinct metaphor to describe the feelings of Ulstermen:

> "You compel Ulster to divorce her present husband, to whom she is not unfaithful, and you force her to marry somebody else whom she cordially

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[69] Irish Independent, January 17, 1913, 6.

> dislikes and with whom she does not want to live, because she happens to be rich, and because her new partner has a large and ravenous offspring to provide for."[70]

As expected, the overwhelmingly Conservative House of Lords rejected the Home Rule Bill two weeks later by a margin of 257 votes, but, under the constraints of the Parliament Act, they could only veto the legislation one more time before it became law if proposed a third time.

In a spell of heightened tensions within Ulster it was most unfortunate that the Chief Secretary spent most of his time outside of the country. In 1911, Birrell's wife fell ill with a brain tumor, to which she eventually succumbed in 1915. Her deteriorating condition meant Birrell increasingly spent his time by her side at their home in London, while fulfilling his obligations as Chief Secretary through the Irish Office in Downing Street, and communicating with Under-Secretary Sir James Dougherty in Dublin Castle via telegram. Dougherty therefore assumed responsibility for poring over the regular police intelligence briefings on Ulster. A committed Home Ruler, he was, like his Irish Party friend Dillon, skeptical of police reports concerning the build-up of militant resistance in the North, because he viewed it as mere Unionist hyperbole. Sympathetic to the Irish cause, Dougherty did not want to alarm the Liberal Party with Unionist propaganda. Therefore, the monthly reports he received from the Special Branch [the intelligence gathering unit of the police force] he forwarded to Birrell in London with

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[70] Lord Curzon, "Government of Ireland Bill," *HL Deb 30 January 1913 vol. 13 cc721-816,* Hansard.

notes on each file with some variation of the words "there is nothing very interesting in these reports."[71]

Ulster Unionist resistance towards the Home Rule Bill shifted into a militant phase in early 1913. Members of the Protestant Orange Order and Ulster Unionist clubs had been engaging in military drilling sessions from March 1912 onwards, and on January 13, 1913, these militias were formed into the Ulster Volunteer Force [U.V.F.] by the Ulster Unionist Council, in anticipation of the passage of the Home Rule Bill through the Commons.[72] Commanded by landowners, businessmen, and later retired British Officers, this citizen army soon boasted 100,000 recruits, and possessed a cavalry, a motor car corps, a special strike force, signalers and dispatch riders, and ambulance and nursing units.[73]

Although Birrell had been kept informed about the U.V.F. by the Royal Irish Constabulary, he believed, for the most part, its activities were exaggerated and designed to intimidate, rather than to be actively used to resist the implementation of the impending Home Rule Bill. In a memorandum for the Cabinet he had drawn up in late

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[71] Benjamin John Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Turning Points of the Irish Revolution: Intelligence and the cost of Indifference 1912-1921* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 40. Sir Antony MacDonnell resigned as Under-Secretary in July 1908. Sir James Dougherty had been Assistant Under-Secretary since 1895, and was Birrell's Under-Secretary from July 1908 until October 1914.

[72] The Orange Order is a Protestant fraternal organization in existence since the Glorious Revolution of 1688. British Broadcasting Corporation journalist Mervyn Jess' *The Orange Order* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2007) is a detailed survey of the history of the Orange Order. With 110,000 members at its height in mid-1914, the Ulster Volunteer Force, with Edward Carson at the top of its command structure, almost pushed Britain and Ireland to the brink of civil war. *Carson's Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) by Timothy Bowman sheds new light on this sometimes forgotten army of the Irish revolutionary period.

[73] A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: aspects of Ulster 1609-1969* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 168.

March, the Chief Secretary assured them there was little evidence to show anti-Home Rule sentiment was anywhere but in Belfast. Further, the police had assured him that many people who had signed the Ulster Covenant, when asked to engage in active resistance refused to do so. During a speech at Warrington, a month after the formation of the U.V.F, Birrell asserted that even if the issue of Home Rule was struck down after a future Conservative Party election victory, it would not make any difference to the Irish demand for self-government. Further, rejecting Ulster's demands to opt out of a Home Rule Bill, he claimed a large amount of money saved by farmers in the agricultural south and east and west of the country was spent in the industrial sector in the north-east of the country. Ulster's businessmen, he was sure, would have a long hard think about how they would be affected economically before committing to a policy of separation. The whole island, he added, was interconnected, meaning Ulster was Irish to the backbone, so separate consideration for the province was irrational.[74]

In April, Birrell sought to reassure King George V over an anonymous memorandum sent to the sovereign from an Ulster magistrate. The document claimed:

> "There are about 100,000 able-bodied Orangemen, nearly all armed with revolvers, prepared to follow their leaders to any length in resistance to Home Rule….Every lodge and club has its drill parade one night a week, and the squads and companies are frequently inspected by visiting ex-military

[74] Augustine Birrell, "Chief Secretary and the Home Rule Bill," *The Manchester Guardian,* Feb 17, 1913.

> officers….The counties are being apportioned or divided into military districts and sub-districts….It is now Catholic against Protestant; a religious crusade is being preached; party feeling runs higher and hotter than it ever did in my time."[75]

Birrell downplayed the memorandum, claiming it was nothing new, for most newspapers from the province regularly published such stories. He argued the numbers signed up to fight for the U.V.F. were greatly exaggerated, and reassured the king there was very little evidence to show the movement had taken any real hold outside of Belfast. He did caution, however, that a large military/police force would be needed to safeguard elections in Ulster in a post-Home Rule Ireland, because most of the Protestant population in the North did oppose the legislation with various degrees of bitterness.[76] Here, the Chief Secretary demonstrated a lack of conviction on the level of resistance coming from Ulster's Unionist community.

Birrell, in a letter to Lord Stamfordham, the private secretary to the Sovereign, claimed it was foolish to make too much or too little of Protestant and Unionist propaganda. Regarding claims the U.V.F. was acquiring weapons, he reassured the secretary that they only had in their possession cheap revolvers of an inferior continental pattern, quipping that they were probably as dangerous to their owners as to anyone

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[75] "Memorandum A. anonymous document sent to king from a magistrate in the north and B is Birrell's commentary on A April 22nd 1913," MS. Eng. c7035 f. 88, Bodleian Library.

[76] Ibid.

else.[77] In June, during a speech in his constituency of North Bristol, he decried the Ulster campaign as nothing more than a political move to destroy the Liberal government and the Home Rule Bill.[78] In mid-June, after the Unionists had failed with a parliamentary motion to defeat the Home Rule Bill, thus allowing it to pass its Second Reading unchallenged, Birrell again decried the tactics of the Opposition. He accused the Unionists of trickery, by attempting to woo the Irish people with generous financial subsidies if they voted against the Bill, while at the same time their mouths were full of sneers and their tongues continually uttered libels upon the character of the Irish people. Again admonishing the religious bigotry prevalent in Ulster, he believed the only cure for it was the spread of real religion built on love, knowledge and citizenship. Bonar Law's threat of civil war, if Ulster did not have its way, the Chief Secretary found to be reprehensible and unprecedented in the history of legislative proposals postulated in the House of Commons. In July, unable to attend an Irish Party dinner celebration of the second passage of the Home Rule Bill through the House of Commons on July 7, Birrell sent the gathering a letter within which he praised Asquith for his cooperation with the Irish Party. Full of optimism, the Chief Secretary expressed his belief that the political education of a nation could only be fulfilled through Home Rule.[79]

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[77] "Memorandum to Lord Stamfordham April 15th 1913 from Birrell," MS. Eng. c7034 f. 24, Bodleian Library.

[78] "Mr. Birrell and Ulster," *Western Daily Press*, June 27, 1913, MS. PRO 30/67/29 f. 1465, The National Archives.

[79] "Mr. Birrell's fine tribute to the Premier: The Home Rule Dinner," *The Manchester Guardian*, June 11, 1913.

On July 24, the Chief Secretary had an audience with the King George V at Buckingham Palace to further discuss his thoughts on Ulster. Here, he assured the king that even if Ulster attempted to establish a provisional government in Belfast as a counter to the Home Rule Bill, it would not even last a week before it collapsed because the North was so economically intertwined with the rest of the country. He conceded that, if absolutely necessary, Ulster could opt out of a Home Rule settlement for a period of ten years, followed by a referendum on its exclusion. Nevertheless, he stressed that these potential rebels in Ulster, before they even considered the possibility of civil war, would have to give to the civilized world a proposal of their own on how Ulster should be governed. He criticized the actions of the Conservative Party, and claimed their chief aim was to seek a General Election and for the Home Rule Bill to be shelved.[80] When the king suggested an immediate referendum should be called to resolve the crisis, Birrell said such a move was just like having a General Election, and that it was impossible to "compel people to think only of one thing by printing it on the back or front of their voting papers."[81] Asked if the Irish would accept the idea of an opt-out period for Ulster, Birrell responded that Redmond and his party could be tempted under threat of the dissolution of Parliament.[82] After his meeting with King George V, the Chief Secretary sent a letter to Asquith, vilifying those people he believed were feeding the king false

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[80] Fanning, *Fatal Path*, 76.

[81] Birrell to Asquith upon meeting with King at Buckingham Palace, MS. Asquith Reels 19-20 f. 109, Bodleian Library.

[82] Birrell hoped such a threat would compel Redmond to agree because dissolution could see Conservative electoral gains, and such a result could break the Home Rule Bill.

information on the state of Ireland. Some royal advisors had outrageously suggested 100,000 Orangemen in Liverpool would desert their homes when a Home Rule Bill became law to fight for Ulster's cause. Further, these gossipmongers had convinced the king that the desire for Home Rule outside Ulster was not very strong, and that all the Irish people wanted was continued prosperity.[83]

Soon after his visit with King George V, Birrell begin to confront the Ulster issue with a much greater degree of seriousness and urgency. In fact, his mere mention of an opt-out period during his royal visit showed that he had gradually come to accept the Unionists of Ulster needed to somehow be placated. In August, the Chief Secretary sent a letter to the Prime Minister, which included disturbing police reports compiled by Sir Neville Chamberlain, the Chief Inspector of the R.I.C., of increased drilling maneuvers, inflammatory speeches and further recruitment to the U.V.F.[84] He warned Asquith if a bloody war did erupt then they could not rely on the R.I.C. to quell the disturbances, because many of them were "Covenanters" or sympathizers to the Unionist cause. He advised the government to be ready with the military if indeed a "big shindy" did occur.[85] In early September, in a follow up letter to Lord Stamfordham, Birrell admitted

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[83] MS Asquith 38 f. 109. July 24, 1913.

[84] Not to be confused with Arthur Neville Chamberlain who served as British Prime Minister from May 1937 to May 1940.

[85] Birrell to Asquith August 20, 1913, MSS. Asquith Reels 11-12 f. 122, Bodleian Library.

there was a great perturbation among the Ulster Unionists, and it would be wrong now to suggest the threat of violence was a political bluff.[86]

Concurrently, Sir Edward Carson began to accept that Home Rule for Ireland was inevitable, and reluctantly pushed for the separate settlement for Ulster, not as a wrecking tool to bring down the bill, but as a lasting solution that would satisfy both sides. During a private meeting with Bonar Law on September 18, Carson informed the Conservative leader that "on the whole things are shaping towards a desire to settle on the terms of leaving Ulster out," although he expressed uncertainty that all nine of the province's counties would be included in such a settlement.[87] Two days later, Carson wrote to the Conservative leader, expressing his concern over the propensity for violence across Ireland if the Unionists tried to force the complete collapse of the Home Rule Bill. It was his duty, he believed, to try to seek terms.[88] In speeches at both Cahirciveen in September and Limerick in October, an infuriated Redmond, aware of exclusionary discussions among Ulster and British Unionists, condemned the threats of violence emanating from Ulster, and insisted his party could not agree to the political mutilation of the island via an artificial border. In a bid to conciliate the concerns of his fellow countrymen in the North he did hint at the possibility of "Home Rule within Home

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[86] Fanning, *Fatal Path*, 77.

[87] Jalland, *Liberals and Ireland*, 147.

[88] Alvin Jackson, *Sir Edward Carson* (Dublin: Published for the Historical Association of Ireland by Dundalgan Press, 1993), 32.

Rule," whereby there could be administrative devolution for the Protestant-majority counties within an overall self-governing framework for Ireland.[89]

On September 25, the 500 delegates of the Ulster Unionist Council held a meeting to discuss the implementation of a "Provisional Ulster Government" should Home Rule be enacted. The following month, in response to the deepening crisis, Asquith decided to hold talks with Bonar Law and Carson for a frank discussion of the crisis. Both men demanded the permanent exclusion of Ulster [the number of counties they were yet to decide upon] as a basis for a settlement. At this stage the Prime Minister did not entertain the thought of permanent exclusion, stating his conditions were that Home Rule in some form must be granted to Ireland, and there could be nothing done "to erect a permanent and insuperable bar to Irish unity."[90]

On November 13, Asquith sent Redmond a letter, asking him to be careful not to close the door to a possibility of an agreed settlement.[91] Asquith met the Irish leader on November 17 to listen to his views on the Ulster crisis, but did not pressure him into making any formal declaration of compromise. A week later, Lloyd George spoke to Redmond in person, insisting that the Liberal Cabinet was adamant that some sort of offer must be given to Ulster as the basis of a settlement, for coercion alone was out of the question. He warned there were several frontbenchers including himself and

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[89] Dermot Meleady, "The Third Home Rule Bill," accessed January 12, 2016 http://ashbournehistoricalsociety.com/the-1912-home-rule-bill-lecture-transcript/.

[90] Freeman's Journal, Oct 27, 1912.

[91] Asquith to Redmond November 13, 1913, Papers of John Redmond, MS. 15,165 /3, National Library of Ireland.

Churchill who would consider resigning if an agreement could not be reached, which would have serious consequences for Home Rule. On November 27, Birrell met with a clearly angry Redmond to assure him Lloyd George's views did not represent the views of the vast majority of the Cabinet, and no decision would be made without Redmond's input.[92]

In a letter to the Prime Minister, the Irish Party chairman expressed his dismay that "Orange threats have impressed, if not intimidated, the government." The exclusion of Ulster, he added, would not only mutilate the country, but would expose the Catholics of North East Ulster to intolerable oppression. Attempting to downplay the strength of Carsonism, he told Asquith that the Ulster Unionist leader had enemies within his own ranks because many Ulstermen did not want to see the country partitioned.[93] Despite Birrell's assurances to the contrary, an evident shift emerged within the Liberal Government over the Ulster crisis, with the majority leaning towards Lloyd George's plan for Ulster to be allowed to opt out for the foreseeable future. On the Unionist side, Bonar Law and Carson insisted that any possible inclusion should only happen by plebiscite, whilst Redmond and his party continued to demand the Irish nation not be divided.

To make matters worse for the British government the Irish National Volunteers was formed in Dublin with a primary objective to "secure and maintain the rights and

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[92] Meleady, *National Leader*, 255.

[93] Redmond to Asquith November 27, 1913, Papers of John Redmond, MS. 15,165 /3, National Library of Ireland.

liberties common to all the people of Ireland," and to act as a counterweight to the U.V.F. in the North.[94] Its founders represented both constitutional and militant nationalism, and its creation added to the powder keg that was Ireland by the end of 1913. Augustine Birrell, although less involved in matters of high politics, had now to deal with a serious situation in which two armed militias with opposing agendas existed in Ireland. As 1914 approached so too did the threat of war appear both in Ireland and on the European continent. The third and final reading of the Home Rule Bill approached with no end in sight to Ulster's objection and militant opposition. The Chief Secretary had much to contend with.

[94] Arthur Mitchell and Padraig O'Snodaigh eds., *Irish Political Documents 1869-1916* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989), 147.

CHAPTER V

THE ULSTER CRISIS AND HOME RULE ON HOLD

In January, 1914, Asquith informed Redmond that the Liberal Party had failed to convince Carson and Law to agree to Home Rule for Ireland even with the offer of generous safeguards for Ulster. The likelihood of civil discord when the Bill, in its extant form, passed its Third Reading later in the year convinced the Prime Minister that Ulster, nonetheless, had to be dealt with separately. In a letter to Carson on January 8, Asquith expressed his view that, although he objected to the idea of exclusion for Ulster, it appeared to hold the best opportunity to reach an agreed settlement of the Home Rule crisis.[1] Asquith's shift in stance, in the face of the militant atmosphere in Ireland, set the stage for a turbulent year, as Carson and his allies capitalized on the Prime Minister's pusillanimous attitude, while Redmond and his colleagues now had to contend, in their minds, with the outrageous prospect of a politically divided Ireland. In an increasingly polarized atmosphere, the Irish Chief Secretary found himself in a difficult position, as Irish Nationalists and Unionists quarreled over possible amendments to the Home Rule Bill.

On January 26, Birrell addressed his North Bristol constituents where he was warmly welcomed by members of the local branch of the United Irish League, who thanked him for his hard work on behalf of the Nationalist community. Birrell blasted

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[1] "Ulster exclusion from Home Rule Parliament, 1914, H.H. Asquith to Sir Edward Carson, 8 January 1914." In *Irish Historical Documents Since 1800,* edited by Alan O'Day and John Stevenson, 151, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1992.

Carson and his "army of Covenanters," stressing that it was a wicked thing for educated people in a modern world to follow a path towards anarchy. Furthermore, the Chief Secretary spoke of how the world would negatively view Ireland if its countrymen engaged in a civil war, simply because they could not agree to throw in their lot with each other and govern their own country.[2] Birrell was irritated by Carson's speech in Chester, several days prior, during which the Unionist leader claimed Ulstermen would be justified in resisting the imminent Home Rule Bill "to the last extremity".[3] What was to him incendiary talk forced the Chief Secretary into a difficult position. Birrell did not want to jeopardize his own cordial working relationship with Redmond and Dillon but was certain that Asquith's desire to seek a separate arrangement for Ulster would strain the Liberal-Irish Party alliance.

Also weighing on the Chief Secretary's mind was a report submitted in early January by Sir David Harrel.[4] His investigation revealed the increasing tension across the country. Whilst he spoke of the amiable relationship between Catholics and Protestants across the south of the country, Harrel was certain this bond would disintegrate should Protestants attack Catholics across Ulster upon the passage of the Home Rule Bill. He warned of apparent threats towards Redmond from separatist Nationalist organizations, and scorned the lackadaisical intelligence department in

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[2] Augustine Birrell, "Mr. Birrell: The Offer Ulster Has Refused," *The Manchester Guardian*, January 27, 1914.

[3] Sir Edward Carson, "Sir E. Carson and Home Rule: Unionist Leaders' Pledge Ulster's Right," *The Manchester Guardian*, January 24, 1914.

[4] Harrel continued to sit on various boards and tribunals long after his retirement as Irish Under-Secretary in 1902.

Dublin Castle for greatly underestimating the strength of Carsonism in the North. Such was the level of militancy in Ulster, Harrel warned the Cabinet, that even if Carson told his followers to stand down, few would do so.[5] Apprised of Harrel's findings, King George V was certain the risk of civil war was real and told Asquith a new offer had to be made:

> "I have always given you as my opinion that Ulster will never agree to send representatives to an Irish parliament in Dublin, no matter what safeguards or guarantees you may provide. For this reason I would point out to you the danger of laying before Parliament and the country, your proposed concessions (as) if they are to be your last word."[6]

Both the king and senior members of the Liberal Party finally convinced Asquith he needed to act swiftly to defuse the situation by providing Ulster with an alternative settlement.

A week later, on February 2, Redmond met with Asquith and a notably quiet and morose Birrell at 10 Downing Street, during which the Prime Minister told the Irish Party leader exclusion would have to be offered to Ulster. Asquith spoke of the alarmingly dangerous rhetoric emanating from Ulster and informed Redmond that the

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[5] Harrel to the British Cabinet, January 7, 1914, MS Asquith 39 f. 87, Bodleian Library Archives. Harrel was Under-Secretary for Ireland from 1893-1902, and formerly Chief Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan Police from 1883-1893.

[6] Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 1988), 300-301.

king wished for a General Election on the Home Rule issue, because during the second 1910 election the British people were not fully aware of the possibility of civil war in Ireland. Asquith assured the Irish Party chairman that if Ulster rejected reasonable concessions, then it would "deprive them of all moral force, and would avert any action by the King."[7] A recalcitrant Redmond sent a letter to Asquith two days later, in which he warned the premier that the Opposition would frame an amendment to the current bill as proof the whole thing was a failure and that the government had bowed to the threat of violence. Also, it would lead, he was sure, to an "explosion of popular condemnation" across Ireland because the government would have forsaken the Nationalists living in Ulster.[8]

Fellow senior Liberal M.P.s David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill offered their suggestions to help resolve the vexatious Irish dilemma. Lloyd George, like Redmond, was wary of giving the Conservative Party the chance to denigrate the Home Rule Bill as full of imperfections, because the Opposition surely would then seek to scrap the Bill in its entirety. Nevertheless, he knew his government could not employ force to impose the Bill upon Ulster, so in mid-February he proposed to the Cabinet a plan whereby those counties which wanted to opt out of Home Rule entirely might offer their inhabitants the chance to vote on exclusion. After a six-year period of Westminster governance those counties would then automatically enter into an all-Ireland Parliament.

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[7] Redmond Cabinet report, February 2, 1914, MS 15,257 /2, National Library of Ireland.

[8] Redmond to Asquith, February 4, 1914, MS Asquith 39 f. 111, Bodleian Library.

Since the current Liberal administration could not, by law, continue beyond December 1915, he hoped the next General Election could effectively settle the matter.[9]

Seeking to capitalize on what he saw as the Liberal Party leadership's uncertainty Irish Unionist M.P. Walter Long proposed an amendment in the House of Commons on February 11 that called for the Government of Ireland Bill to be postponed until it had been submitted to the judgement of the people via an election. In response, Birrell argued that while many in Ulster had justifiable concerns, it was unfair to use hyperbole and threats to bring down the bill via an election. To mollify the Ulster Unionists, the Chief Secretary offered his apologies to the Protestants of Ulster if he had said anything during his eight years in office that wounded their feelings. Attempting to defuse the hostile environment in the House of Commons he quipped:

> "I know I received this morning a statement, bearing an Ulster postmark, to the effect that I had got two daughters in Roman Catholic convents. I am sorry to say I have no daughters, and if I had I would far sooner see them happy married women than the inmates of any convent."

[9] Lloyd George Cabinet Paper, February 16, 1914, MS Asquith 39 f. 119-23, Bodleian Library.

On a more serious note, Birrell warned that it was prejudicial to assume that the people of Ulster had right on their side and that those in the rest of Ireland were mere Papists whom nobody need recognize.[10]

Two days before the Unionist amendment was put before the House, Birrell wrote to Redmond warning him of the great differences of opinion within the Cabinet concerning the Home Rule Bill in its current form. Bowing to tremendous pressure from the Liberal leadership to seek a compromise with the Ulster Unionists, the Irish Party leader agreed to a proposal to allow Ulster to "opt-out" of Home Rule government for a period of three years in the interests of preserving peace and hoped this would be the final negotiation on the issue.[11] After further examination of the "opt-out" period, the Cabinet found the offer of three years of exclusion from Home Rule to be politically impractical and leaned towards a six year plan as the best alternative. In a letter to the Irish leader on March 7, Asquith explained that a General Election would have to take place before the exclusionary period elapsed. Since the next election was a year away, it would be unwise for the "opt-out" period to expire in the middle of a new ministry.

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[10] Augustine Birrell, "Government of Ireland Bill," *HC Deb 11 February 1914 vol. 58 cc161-289,* Hansard.

[11] Redmond to Asquith, March 2, 1914, MS Asquith 39, Bodleian Library. After a popular vote, those Ulster counties which had a majority in favor of "opting out" would be included in the exclusion scheme. This plan was based on a proposed solution drawn up by Lloyd George in November.

Therefore, he recommended six years exclusion, so when it elapsed it would occur during a presumptive General Election year.[12]

After a private discussion with Birrell, Redmond and Dillon agreed to the Cabinet's six-year exclusionary scheme as "the very extremest limit of concession," therefore Carson's demand for exclusion was met, but with territorial and chronological limits attached. Birrell found the six-year exclusionary period for Ulster from the working of the Bill as a much better choice than an immediate referendum. The Chief Secretary was happy with the conciliatory gesture from Redmond and Dillon but feared that over the course of a long six years, further concessions could be demanded from the Irish Party leadership.[13] Former Irish Chief Secretary James Bryce believed Redmond took the correct path by agreeing to the six-year scheme, because he maintained it was of the utmost importance for the Irish Party leader to get a Home Rule Parliament established in Dublin, even if it only administered three quarters of the island.[14] Birrell informed the Cabinet that, though reluctant, the Irish Nationalist leaders had been persuaded to agree to the plan as the price for peace.[15]

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[12] Asquith to Redmond, March 7, 1914, MS 15,257 /2, National Library of Ireland. The Parliament Act of 1911 reduced the length of time between general elections from seven years to five years. The Liberal Party, with the help of Irish Party M.P.s won the 1910 General Election. At the latest, a general election would have to be called by 1915. Presuming 1915 was the election year then another general election would have to be called by 1920. The terms of the six-year exclusion scheme meant the fate of Ulster's counties could be decided during the 1920 General Election.

[13] Irish Examiner, March 23, 1914, 8.

[14] H.A.L. Fisher, *James Bryce Vol. II* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 122.

[15] John Spender, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford and Asquith Vol. II* (London: Hutchinson, 1932), 37.

As such, the new exclusion scheme was submitted by Asquith to the House of Commons on March 9. Barely palatable to the Irish Party leadership, to Sir Edward Carson and his Unionist allies it was intolerable. Carson warned the House that Ulster would not accept a "sentence of death with a stay of execution for six years." The popular Ulster newspaper, the *Northern Whig* observed that the offer of temporary exclusion was universally condemned and repudiated by the whole Ulster Unionist community.[16] Both Carson and Opposition leader Bonar Law's hostility towards the Liberal offer of temporary exclusion angered many in the Liberal Cabinet who believed their proposal to be extremely generous.

Churchill was particularly infuriated by the "doctrines of unconstitutional action" from the Opposition, and threatened the use of the British Army in Ulster to uphold the law if need be.[17] During a speech at Bradford on March 14, an excited Churchill went so far as to say there were worse things than bloodshed, even on an extended scale, in a veiled threat to the Ulster Volunteer Force should they threaten violence to seek political concessions.[18] Churchill warned that the self-elected members of the Ulster provisional government were engaging in a "treasonable conspiracy."[19] His inflammatory speech at Bradford coupled with his orders for the British Navy 3rd Battle Squadron's next practice

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[16] Northern Whig, March 14, 1914.

[17] Winston Churchill, *Amid these Storms; thoughts and adventures* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1932), 220.

[18] Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), 173.

[19] On September 23, 1913, five hundred members of the Ulster Unionist Council met to discuss the proposed operation of a provisional government for Ulster should the Home Rule Bill come into law.

to take place off the isle of Arran, only an hour's sailing from the Northern Irish coast, led many in Ulster to believe the British government sought to coerce them into accepting a Dublin parliament.[20]

As the Ulster crisis deepened, the government established a special committee spearheaded by Lord Crewe, the Liberal Leader in the House of Lords and former Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to examine ways to ensure that the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force did not get its hands on any more weaponry. Crewe, Birrell and their fellow committee members decided it was necessary to reinforce arms depots across the North of Ireland with British troops stationed in Dublin and for extra patrol boats in the Irish Sea. To make a bad situation worse, on March 20, sixty of seventy-seven British Officers stationed at the Curragh Camp, the main base for the regular army in Ireland, declared they were not willing to participate in any military operation against Ulster.[21] Embarrassingly, the government attempted to downplay the incident, claiming it had been a misunderstanding. Nevertheless, the unwillingness of British soldiers to move on

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[20] Paul O'Brien, *A Question of Duty: The Curragh Incident 1914* (Dublin: New Island, 2014), 66.

[21] The so-called "Curragh Mutiny" occurred shortly after Sir Arthur Paget, Commander-in-Chief of British troops in Ireland was summoned to London to discuss movement of eight hundred soldiers into Ulster in response to Lord Crewe's committee's findings. When he returned to the Curragh on March 20 he permitted officers with homes in Ulster to stay behind. Recognizing the sizeable number of officers with family ties to Ulster he called for those unwilling to march on Ulster to immediately report back so they could be dismissed from the service. Paget claimed to have extracted these concessions during his London meeting with Secretary of State for War J.E.B. Seely and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff Sir John French. Sixty of seventy-seven officers consulted elected for dismissal. The officers who resigned were not actually guilty of mutiny because they did not disobey any direct orders. Nevertheless, this event was a huge embarrassment for the Liberal government. Asquith insisted the whole debacle had been an honest misunderstanding, and that no official government orders existed to crush Unionist resistance in Ulster. The event emboldened Ulster's Unionists who were now convinced the Liberal Party could not rely on the support of the British army to enforce a Home Rule Bill upon the province. See Paul O'Brien's *A Question of Duty* for a detailed survey of the crisis.

Ulster had the dual effect of emboldening the Ulster Unionist community because it removed the threat of force, whilst convincing the leaders of Irish nationalism it could not rely on British troops to enforce a Home Rule Bill. In turn, this led to a dramatic increase in recruitment to the Irish Volunteers, further jeopardizing British rule in Ireland.

Attempting to defuse the volatile situation, on the Friday following the "Curragh Incident", the Chief Secretary spoke in the Connaught Rooms, London, to the National League of Young Liberals, warning the gathering not to be alarmed by sensationalist articles in the press. Responding to rumors of military intervention, he stressed that the forces of the Crown would never be used in Ulster, except to preserve the integrity of the king's dominions and to assist civil powers with the maintenance of law and order.[22] Since its inception two years prior, the Ulster Volunteer Force had been allowed to operate unhindered, and, as such, their leaders had become increasingly confident that Home Rule could never be imposed upon Ulster, especially after the "Curragh Incident". Reflecting on the Chief Secretary's reluctance to deal with the militant threat within Ulster before it blossomed into the current crisis, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, the renowned British poet and supporter of Irish Home Rule, believed Redmond was the culprit who convinced Birrell that the "Ulster movement was all bounce."[23]

Birrell's misreading of the Ulster situation was apparent in a paper he submitted to the Cabinet in early March, in which he expressed his view that the general conviction

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[22] Sir James Fergusson, *The Curragh Incident* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 98.

[23] Blunt, *My Diaries*, 422-423.

among the rank and file of the U.V.F. was that the prospect of civil war was out of the question.[24] During a tour of Ulster in late 1913, Birrell had boasted to a loyalist fisherman from Portadown that he knew of all goings on in the province.[25] The Larne gun running incident on the night of April 24 demonstrated that such an assertion was far from true. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Council, Major Frederick H. Crawford and Wilfrid Spender, both former British Army officers, successfully organized a covert major gun-smuggling operation into Ulster, with approximately 25,000 weapons and five million rounds of ammunition landing on the coast at Larne, Donaghadee and Bangor. Meticulously organized, the U.V.F. made great use of motor vehicles to unload the weaponry from the ships for distribution across the province. Reporting on the Donaghadee landing, *The Belfast Evening Telegraph* reflected on how smooth the operation went, whilst the "police and coastguards were powerless, and could only look helplessly on."[26] Although the importation of arms into the province was forbidden by law, the newspaper reported that the two dozen or so local police officers, some of whom were even sympathetic, were powerless to stop a large body of men backed by the support of the townspeople as they swiftly loaded the weapons into their vast transport of cars, trucks and wagons.

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[24]Birrell to Cabinet, March 5, 1914, Papers of Augustine Birrell, MS Eng. c 7035 180-374 f. 277, Bodleian Library.

[25] Ballymoney Free Press, November 6, 1913.

[26] Belfast Evening Telegraph, April 25, 1914.

The striking success of these Unionist militants in securing weaponry added to Irish Nationalist concerns that the authorities in Ulster were in connivance with the U.V.F., and actively supported their cause of a separate parliament outside of any proposed Dublin government. Redmond wrote to Asquith two days after the Larne gun-running incident, imploring him to take strong and prompt action by increasing the British military and naval presence in Ulster. He called for an increase of five thousand officers for the Royal Irish Constabulary, which could be achieved through a draft from among Southern Catholics not sympathetic to the law-breakers.[27] Nevertheless, in order to avoid bloodshed, both Redmond and Birrell were in agreement that the Prime Minister, who viewed the incident as a "grave and unprecedented outrage," not seek out and arrest those responsible for the gun-running for fear that it would lead to the worsening of an already delicate political environment.[28] Birrell told Asquith he had no information on the whereabouts of the smuggled arms but assured the Prime Minister there would be no trouble in Belfast. Attempting to downplay the severity of the situation, he assured Asquith that, although the leadership of the Orange Lodges and wealthy landowners were ripe for treasonous activities, Ulster's ordinary farmers were reluctant to become involved in radical actions against the government.[29] The rank and file of the Unionist community, he insisted, wished to avoid conflict, and would not blindly follow the orders of the U.V.F. leadership.

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[27] Redmond to Asquith, April 27, 1914, MS Asquith 39 f.51, Bodleian Library.

[28] Geoffrey Lewis, *Carson: The Man Who Divided Ireland* (London: Continuum, 2006), 156.

[29] Birrell to Asquith, April 29, 1914, MS. Asquith 39 f. 60, Bodleian Library.

On May 21, 1914, the Prime Minister entered a fiery House of Commons on the occasion of the Third Reading of the Home Rule Bill. Asquith spoke of his belief that the Bill:

> "both in its principle, in its detail, and in its machinery, is a wise and statesmanlike measure; that it provides safeguards adequate, and, indeed, abundant, for the protection of minorities against either religious, political, or social oppression."[30]

Claiming he was not bowing to the threat of force from militants within Ulster, Asquith told his colleagues that any new system of government for Ireland needed to be heartily received by its people, therefore an amendment was needed to satisfy this requirement in order to remove any possible suggestions "of injustice, of oppression, of coercion."[31] With the Liberal-Irish Party majority in the Commons, the Home Rule Bill passed its Third Reading on May 25, with Asquith's assurance of an Amending Bill for Ulster, over which no agreement had yet been reached.

Both the Irish Party on the one hand, and the Conservative-Unionist alliance on the other, abhorred Asquith's plan to introduce an Amending Bill after the Home Rule Bill had passed its final stages and become law. Redmond wanted the six-year exclusion

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[30] Herbert Asquith, *Third Reading HC Deb 21 May 1914 vol. 62 cc2181-214*, Hansard.

[31] Ibid.

scheme built into the Home Rule Act and not offered up as a separate amendment. He feared such an approach left his demand for a maximum of six years' exclusion in jeopardy because further amendments could now be added. To Bonar Law and Carson, Asquith's approach was a cowardly way to achieve the Home Rule Bill using the device of the 1911 Parliament Act, without adequately addressing the deep flaws within the measure.[32] Redmond told Birrell that Asquith's talk of an Amending Bill only served to encourage the U.V.F. to become more boisterous, and that such weakness only made the government increasingly susceptible to being bullied into granting even more concessions. The Irish Party leader asked the Chief Secretary to strengthen military garrisons across the North and remove disloyal police officers to the South to ensure that the U.V.F could not so freely dictate the political future of Ulster.[33]

Birrell wrote a memorandum for the Cabinet after an early June tour of Ulster. He informed his colleagues that the proposition of a separate Amending Bill would present no solution to the difficulties on the ground. Based on his discussions with the local police force he expressed his misgivings that an offer of six years' exclusion would not be enough to quell tempers in the North. The government would have to be prepared to deal with an outbreak of violence in Ulster, although he believed it would mostly

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[32] Carson and Law met with Asquith on May 5, during which the Prime Minister conceded Ulster could not be coerced into accepting the Bill once it became law. Carson warned the Liberal Party premier of bloodshed between Nationalists and Unionists in Belfast even with the offer of an Amending Bill with six years exclusion. For the Conservative-Unionists the permanent exclusion of Ulster with an option to join in the future was the only way to avoid conflict. Geoffrey Lewis does a thorough job explaining Carson's attitude in the early 1914 discussions of the Home Rule Bill. See his book *Carson: The Man who Divided Ireland*.

[33] Redmond to Birrell, May 13, 1914, MS 15,257 /2, National Library of Ireland.

confined to the city of Belfast, where a large number of Ulster's Nationalist community resided. Birrell suggested an Amending Bill with further generous safeguards would be needed, otherwise Carson and his followers would reject and fight what was currently on offer.[34]

The Amending Bill was introduced by the Liberal Government on June 23, and, in line with the proposals made in March, gave any Ulster county the option to vote itself out of Home Rule for a period of up to six years. The Bill was then sent to the Unionist-dominated House of Lords, which modified it to exclude the traditional nine counties of Ulster permanently from the operation of the Bill, which, of course, could never be accepted by the Irish Party. In an effort to find a resolution to the Ulster crisis, a deeply worried King George V called for a conference at Buckingham Palace in the hope of finding a compromise acceptable to all. From July 21-24, prior to a Commons discussion on the Lords' revisions to the Bill, Redmond, Dillon, Carson, Craig, Asquith, Lloyd George, Bonar Law and Lord Lansdowne met at the Palace.[35] The conference faltered over the area of Ulster to be excluded from the operation of the Home Rule Bill, with both sides adamant that their supporters would object to further concessions on the

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[34] O'Broin, *Chief Secretary*, 101-102.

[35] Asquith and Redmond hinted that the inclusion of a time limit could be dropped. A large majority of the Protestant population of Ulster's nine counties lived in Down, Armagh, Antrim and Londonderry. Although they had majority Catholic populations, a sizeable number of Protestants lived in Tyrone and Fermanagh. Counties Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal were overwhelmingly Catholic, and these counties Craig and Carson conceded should fall under the control of a Dublin parliament. The disagreement lay with Tyrone and Fermanagh, and both sides refused to budge over whether they should be excluded or not.

matter.[36] A sombre Asquith lamented to an associate on how differences over exactly how Ulster was to be partitioned was the greatest stumbling block to the negotiations:

> "I have rarely felt more helpless in any particular affair, an impasse with unspeakable consequences, upon a matter which to English eyes seems inconceivably small and to Irish eyes immeasurably big. Isn't it a real tragedy?"[37]

The conference broke down on its third day, and to Asquith's surprise Redmond, Carson, Craig and Dillon offered each other a friendly handshake despite the simmering tensions of the past few days. He thought it folly to try to understand the Irish people let alone govern them.[38] Later in the day the Cabinet met to discuss the points raised at the conference, but attention quickly switched to Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey who read the terms of Austria's ultimatum to Serbia. Winston Churchill recalled that discussions over the parishes of Tyrone and Fermanagh quickly faded into the mists and squalls of Ireland, now that Europe was on the brink of war.[39]

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[36] Patrick Maume, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life, 1891-1918* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 145.

[37] M.E. Collins, *Sovereignty and Partition, 1912-1949* (Dublin: Educational Company, 2004), 34.

[38] George Dangerfield, *The Damnable Question: A History of Anglo-Irish Relations* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976), 118.

[39] Ibid., 119. In response to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand the Austro-Hungarian government demanded Serbia suppress all anti-Austrian propaganda and root out all terrorist organizations within its borders. For more on the "shot heard around the world" see footnote 47.

On July 26, the yacht *Asgard* arrived at Howth harbor in Dublin with nine hundred guns destined for the Irish Volunteers. Unlike the Larne gun-running incident, the unloading of weapons occurred during daylight hours, and a curious crowd came to watch the Volunteers in action. William Vesey Harrel, the Assistant Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, called upon his officers, reinforced by one hundred of the King's Own Scottish Borderers [an infantry regiment of the British army], to intervene as the Irish Volunteers made their way back through Dublin with the weapons. The Volunteers resisted attempts to disarm them, slipping off into the crowd, and so the government forces backed down, leaving the scene empty-handed. As the soldiers left the area they were taunted and attacked with stones by a group of civilians. At nearby Bachelor's Walk the soldiers responded by firing into the crowd, killing four people and injuring thirty-eight more. Nationalist Ireland was outraged that the army had been called in to disarm the Irish Volunteers and commit a "massacre," while the U.V.F. experienced no such interference. An irate Redmond condemned the shootings, and wondered if compromise was now beyond his reach, such was the level of mutual hostility toward the British government.

The Chief Secretary immediately suspended Harrel from duty for taking it upon himself to call in the military regiment to disarm the Irish Volunteers. Birrell claimed the government had not desired to interfere with the importation of weapons destined for the Irish Volunteers because he chose not to prosecute those in charge of the illegal Larne

gun-running operation earlier in the year.[40] Bonar Law charged that Birrell had used his suspension of Harrel as a way to deflect blame for the violence, and declared that the Liberal Party had abnegated all authority in Ireland to the various paramilitaries. Former Conservative-Unionist leader Arthur Balfour condemned Birrell for not giving his officials in Ireland the public support they needed in a time of crisis.[41] As Chief Secretary in Ireland in 1887, Balfour was not afraid to publicly support police officers caught up in a riot in the village of Mitchelstown, County Cork. Although three Irish Nationalists lay dead after that "massacre," as it was referred to in the Irish press, Balfour praised the bravery of the Royal Irish Constabulary in charge of suppressing the riot. The police force, he believed, should always receive the full support of the Chief Secretary, but with Birrell this was never the case.[42] Birrell argued that it was wrong to discriminate between volunteers in one part of Ireland and volunteers in another part of the country, therefore his condemnation and suspension of Harrel was justified.[43]

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[40] In 1907 Redmond persuaded Birrell not to renew the Peace Preservation Act for Ireland, which gave the government full control over the importation, sale and carrying of weapons in Ireland, because he believed no militant threat existed to warrant such legislation. Weapons flooded into the country once the Act expired, and the government was fearful of reinstituting restrictions for fear of Nationalist cries that it was tantamount to coercion upon a peaceful population. On December 5, 1913, the British Cabinet fearful of the continuing growth of the U.V.F. and of the newly formed Irish Volunteers, convinced the king to issue two royal proclamations, which included a ban on the importation of arms and ammunition into the country and on the transportation of any weapons within the waters of the United Kingdom. Birrell wished to avoid direct confrontation with the Irish Volunteers and U.V.F. for fear of sparking a bloody conflict. In the aftermath of the Howth incident recruitment to the Irish Volunteers soared, making the Chief Secretary's job that much more difficult. See Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon's *The British Government, Intelligence, and the Cost of Indifference 1912-1921* for a detailed analysis of the British government's failure to properly act on the intelligence it received during the Ulster and Home Rule crises.

[41] Birmingham Daily Post, July 28, 1914.

[42] Adams, *Balfour,* 88.

[43] Augustine Birrell, "*Motion for Adjournment," HC Deb 27 July 1914 vol. 65 cc1022-66,* Hansard.

Despite Tory protestations to the contrary, a Royal Commission, set up immediately after the events in Howth, confirmed that the use of the military was not warranted by the circumstances on the ground and not utilized in accordance with the law.

Balfour was certainly justified in his criticism of the Chief Secretary. Throughout his tenure in Ireland, Birrell had shown little interest in the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Royal Irish Constabulary, frequently choosing to ignore their questions, and letting them deal with situations as they saw fit.[44] His *laissez faire* approach further hurt his standing within the Liberal Party. Charles Hobhouse, a Cabinet colleague, blasted Birrell after a party discussion on the Howth incident on July 27:

> "Birrell gave us the most lame and unconvincing account of Mr. Harrel's action. In the first place Birrell had not, save for a few days, been in Dublin for months, nor did it occur to him to go there now. Secondly, he had made up his mind on an *ex parte* statement of Dougherty that Harrel was willfully guilty…..The whole of the present difficulties in Ulster and Dublin are due to Birrell's own negligence of duties, and his habitual absence from Ireland."[45]

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[44] In his deposition to the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in May 1916 Birrell said he grew weary of having to sift through the many R.I.C. reports submitted to Dublin Castle. He preferred to spend his time engaged in matters of high politics, and allow his Irish administration to handle, for him, the mundane tasks of the Irish administration.

[45] Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Turning points of the Irish Revolution,* 80-81.

Asquith was both sorrowful and angry that such a tragedy could have transpired, and privately expressed his regret that he did not order a reshuffle of the Irish administration six months prior.

> "A weaker and more incompetent lot were never in charge of a leaking ship in stormy weather….poor old Birrell's occasional and fitful appearances at the wheel do not greatly improve matters."[46]

Birrell's shortcomings as Chief Secretary for Ireland *in abstentia* seemingly had left the country on the verge of civil war, but the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28 precipitated a chain of events that would thrust Britain into a continental war, thereby switching the focus away from deteriorating political conditions in Ireland.[47]

Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, after Asquith's ultimatum for German forces to withdraw from Belgium fell on deaf ears. Redmond and his followers rallied to the cause of Empire. The Irish Party leader had continually touted the loyalty of the Irish people toward Britain throughout his Home Rule campaign, and such

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[46] Jenkins, *Asquith*, 322.

[47] In this era of nationalistic and imperial fervor a series of defensive alliances existed within Europe. The assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the spark that finally ignited decades of mutual mistrust in Europe. Written by Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013) is an authoritative masterpiece on the political, economic and social conditions in Europe pre-1914 and how this all made the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in June, 1914 the powder keg for war.

loyalty could be expressed once again on the battlefield. Focussed on the war effort, Asquith decided to abandon the unresolved Amending Bill, and quickly drew up a Suspensory Bill, that postponed the coming into force of both the Government of Ireland Act and the controversial Welsh Church Act for the duration of the war. Both the Suspensory Act and the other two Acts received the Royal Assent on September 18. The war temporarily pushed Irish politics to the side, and Asquith was glad of the reprieve. On August 31 he confessed to his young confidante, Venetia Stanley:

> "The Irish on both sides are giving me a lot of trouble just at a difficult moment. I sometimes wish we could submerge the whole lot of them and their island for, say, ten years, under the waves of the Atlantic."[48]

Redmond, Dillon and other senior Irish Party members accepted the Suspensory Act out of loyalty in a time of war, and it gave the Irish Party leader a semblance of victory and that self-government was now an inevitability.[49] With a Home Rule Bill now on the Statute Book, Redmond believed he held the upper hand over Carson and his fellow Ulster Unionists because "civil war would be so fiercely condemned at such an hour of national peril that it could not show its head."[50] Meanwhile, Carson, assured by Asquith that the Act could be altered in accordance with his wishes after the war, viewed

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[48] Asquith, *Memories and Reflections Vol II*, 36.

[49] O'Brien, *William O'Brien,* 214.

[50] Patricia Jalland & John Stubbs, "The Irish Question after the Outbreak of War in 1914: Some Unfinished Party Business," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 381 (Oct., 1981): 796.

the suspended Home Rule Act as meaningless, and believed that anyone who attempted to put it into force in Ulster would be met with the might of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

Nevertheless, a buoyed Redmond pledged to the British government that the Irish Volunteers would secure Ireland's defense, and hoped this spirit of cooperation with the joint action by Nationalist volunteers in the South and Unionist volunteers in the North would encourage the political unity of the island after the war.[51] On September 20, two days after the Home Rule Bill received the Royal Assent, an elated Redmond visited an Irish Volunteer parade at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow, where he called for them to join with the British Army for the liberty of both Catholic Belgium and France. It would be a shame, he declared, for Ireland and its martial traditions if Irishmen refused to fight in defense of "right, of freedom and religion."[52] Redmond was convinced his speeches in support of the war effort both in the House of Commons and at Woodenbridge would bridge the political divide in Ireland, and by winter he and Carson would have come to a satisfactory political agreement.[53]

While Pro-British and Redmondite sentiment swept the country, it led to a split in the Irish Volunteers. The vast majority, roughly 158,000 recruits, sided with Redmond and rebranded themselves as the Irish National Volunteers. Those Irish separatists who opposed providing their ancient adversary with manpower in their time of need formed a splinter movement known as the Irish Volunteers. Led by Eoin MacNeill of the Gaelic

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[51] Redmond to Asquith, August 22, 1914, MS. Asquith 36 f. 77, Bodleian Library.

[52] Maume, *The Long Gestation*, 150.

[53] Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule*, 144.

League, this group of 9,000 men believed that, world war aside, securing Ireland's nationality was of primary importance. MacNeill and his followers declared that Redmond had violated Volunteer principles; therefore it was up to them to defend any assault upon Ireland's liberties.[54] They found it abhorrent that Redmond declared it to be the duty of the Irish Volunteers to "take foreign service under a Government which is not Irish," and could therefore no longer follow his leadership.[55]

Birrell was disappointed by the Irish Volunteer split, because the separatists made his job of maintaining law and order increasingly difficult. He viewed the seditious *Sinn Feiner* pamphlets and newspapers making the rounds in Dublin as wanton folly, out of touch with Irish opinion, and a "treacherous dagger" during a time of national peril.[56] Although he was reluctant to clamp down on the subversive literature for fear of stirring up further hostilities, he felt compelled to do so by because of outrage emanating from Ulster and England, and the risk of a "sham rebellion" in Dublin, if separatist newspapers continued to print whatever they liked.[57] Redmond, on the other hand, viewed the separatist *Sinn Fein* grouping with disdain, labelling it a "temporary cohesion of isolated cranks," with no policy and no leader.[58]

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[54] Breandan Mac Giolla Choille, *Intelligence Notes, 1913-1916* (Dublin: State Paper Office, 1966), 107-108.

[55] Joseph Finnan, *John Redmond and Irish Unity, 1912-1918* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 140.

[56] Finnan, *Redmond,* 142.

[57] Leon O'Broin, *Dublin Castle and the1916 Rising: The Story of Sir Matthew Nathan* (Dublin: Helicon, 1966), 40.

[58] Finnan, *Redmond,* 141.

With Home Rule on the Statute Book, albeit postponed for the duration of the war, Redmond sought, as he embarked on an intensive recruitment campaign, formal recognition of a distinct and separate Irish Army Corps to be used in the war effort. In his way stood the mistrustful Lord Kitchener, the newly-appointed Secretary of State for War, and the War Office.[59] As early as August 8, Redmond had tried to persuade Kitchener of the benefits of an Irish Volunteer force responsible for defending Ireland's coastline, yet the Field-Marshall was unmoved, and preferred to use British Territorials to defend the island from German invasion.[60] On September 3, Ulster Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson met with Kitchener, with the latter promising him permission to create a separate Ulster Division of the British army from former members of the U.V.F.; and on October 28, the 36th [Ulster] Division was finally authorized. Kitchener viewed the Irish National Volunteers as inefficient and lacking leadership, and did not want to waste valuable British resources to train and equip a Nationalist army that, after the war, he believed, could enforce Home Rule on its own terms.[61] Redmond believed Kitchener's stubbornness would hamper his recruitment efforts, and undermine his authority as the Prime-Minister-in-waiting of a new Irish Home Rule government. Despite Kitchener's rejection, Redmond adopted the 16th [Irish] Division as the unofficial name of the Irish National Volunteers. He continued to push Birrell for help, warning him in September

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[59] Lord Horatio Kitchener was born in County Kerry, Ireland, in 1850. His father was a Colonel in the British Army and purchased land in the country shortly before Horatio's birth. As such, the new Secretary of State for War harbored strong Unionist sympathies.

[60] Redmond to Asquith, August 8, 1914, MS. Asquith f. 73, Bodleian Library.

[61] Timothy Bowman, *The Irish Regiments in the Great War: Discipline and Morale* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 67.

that if "the existing volunteer organization is ignored and sneered at and made little of, recruiting in this country will not go ahead."[62]

To help influence the Cabinet to be more amenable to Redmond's demands, the Chief Secretary submitted a paper on the current state of Ireland. He informed his colleagues:

> "The Irish *have* changed, and their attitude to-day, north, south, east and west, towards England in her tremendous struggle with Germany and Austria is, speaking of Ireland as a whole, one of great friendliness."

The U.V.F. had 60,000 rifles for 100,000 men, while the Irish National Volunteers, 170,000 strong and closely allied to the Irish Party had only 10,000 weapons. Although sedition was actively encouraged by certain Irish Americans and Germans, the overwhelming majority of the Irish people, Birrell insisted, were loyal to the British cause.[63] Despite his optimistic report, the Chief Secretary did not make much headway in moving Asquith and the Cabinet to force Kitchener and the War Office into yielding to Redmond's demands. Whatever influence the Chief Secretary once had waned considerably in the wake of the Howth fiasco, and, on November 3, a frustrated and exasperated Birrell told the Irish Party chairman:

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[62] Stephen Duffy, *The Integrity of Ireland: Home Rule, Nationalism and Partition, 1912-1922* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 86.

[63] Birrell paper to the Cabinet on The State of Ireland, November, 1914, MS Eng. c 7035 180-374 f. 363, Bodleian Library.

> "I have stood the torture, for torture it has been so long, that I don't care what happens during the short time still remaining to me."[64]

That the Great War did not come to an end by the winter of 1914, as many had predicted, disheartened Birrell because, with Home Rule suspended for the foreseeable future, he had to continue in a job of which he grew increasingly weary, and that seemed to become more challenging by the day.

The initial enthusiasm for the war effort among Irish Nationalists faded as 1914 came to a close. Many of the National Volunteers were farmers' sons, and were reluctant to head to the trenches of Flanders.[65] Further, although loyal to Redmond, many National Volunteers continued to harbor the notion that to fight for Britain was a form of disloyalty to Ireland because of the acrimonious past between the two peoples.[66] The shortsightedness of the War Office in not acceding to Irish sentiment by refusing to authorize specific Irish regiments only exacerbated the hesitancy of many Nationalists to come to Britain's aid.[67] From late 1914 onwards, the separatist *Sinn Fein* organization, headed by Arthur Griffith, stepped up its anti-enlistment and anti-recruitment activity through its weekly newspaper *Sinn Fein*. Birrell viewed Griffith as an extraordinarily clever propagandist, who could write an argumentative article as well as anyone else, but

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[64] Birrell to Redmond, November 3, 1914, MS 15,257 /5, National Library of Ireland.

[65] Campbell, *Land and Revolution,* 197.

[66] Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 75.

[67] O'Brien, *Irish Politics, 216.*

viewed his paper as outrageous and treasonable.[68] The Chief Secretary knew he could use the newly-passed Defence of the Realm Act to suspend such publications and arrest their editors, but his newly-appointed Under-Secretary, Sir Matthew Nathan, warned him such action would only stir up unwelcome trouble, and would not lead to improved recruitment levels.[69] Further, Redmond and his party were against a tighter crackdown on the freedom of the press, so Birrell, assured by the Irish Party leader that the separatists were a small minority, responded to Unionist complaints in Parliament by dismissing the propaganda as a "mosquito press," small but noisy.[70] What could not be ignored, however, was English public opinion, which expressed incredulity that such provocative material should go unpunished during wartime. It was under this pressure that Birrell, in early December, sanctioned Nathan to clamp down upon the "rags" as Dillon had referred to them.

In early 1915, the Chief Secretary asked Asquith if he could be relieved of office because of his wife's severe illness. The Prime Minister persuaded him not to quit by suggesting he remain in London to focus on his wife and confine himself to a little parliamentary work, while Nathan took care of all essential matters in Ireland.[71] Asquith, perhaps blinded by his close friendship to Birrell or by his preoccupation with the war on

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[68] Birrell paper to the Cabinet on The State of Ireland, November, 1914, MS Eng. c 7035 180-374 f. 363, Bodleian Library.

[69] Nathan to Birrell, November 3, 1914, MS Eng. c 7033 f. 8, Bodleian Library.

[70] Maume, *Long Gestation*, 156.

[71] Lyons, *John Dillon*, 363.

the continent, believed him to be the best available man to continue to lead the Irish administration until the war was over. In a letter to his friend Miss Stanley, in which he ranked his Cabinet by ability, Asquith declined to place Birrell on the list, stating that he was "in a class by himself," such was the strong friendship between the two men.[72] While Birrell tended to the needs of his wife, who finally succumbed, after several years of suffering, to a brain tumor on March 10, the situation in Ireland gradually worsened, as Redmond's authority came under increased scrutiny from the influential Irish-American lobby, and from those at home who became increasingly skeptical about the war and the prospects for Home Rule.

As the war showed no signs of slowing down, separatist newspapers such as *Nationality* [funded by the revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood, and whose editor, once again, was Griffith], *Irish Volunteer* and *Spark* spoke of the moral corruption of Redmond and the Irish Party, of the threat of conscription, and of how the British were fighting solely for sinister economic reasons. The decision by the Liberal government, on May 25, in the wake of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign and a severe shortage of munitions, to form a coalition government with the Conservatives-Unionists

[72] Jenkins, *Asquith*, 340.

further emboldened those critical of Redmond's leadership.[73] Many Nationalists were outraged that the Conservatives-Unionists might now try to meddle with Irish Home Rule. Roman Catholic Bishop Michael Fogerty of Killaloe, a staunch Irish Party supporter declared:

> "Home Rule is dead and buried and Ireland is without a national party…What the future has in store for us God knows. I suppose conscription, with a bloody feud between people and soldiers."[74]

In the weeks leading up to the formal announcement of the coalition Cabinet, Birrell had sounded out Redmond to see if he would be willing to join. The Chief Secretary agreed with Redmond that it would be a misfortune for Ireland to have the Opposition in government but hoped the Irish Party leader would join the coalition because it would be viewed favorably from an English standpoint, and would virtually guarantee a positive result for Home Rule. Birrell expressed his disappointment about the prospect of the Ulster champion, Sir Edward Carson, joining the coalition, because it

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[73] With the advent of trench warfare at the start of the Great War a shift emerged in British military doctrine. Rather than have artillery assist with infantry attacks it was agreed Britain's 18-pounder field guns, the backbone of its field artillery at the time, should be used to primarily control events on the stable battlefield lines on the Western Front. However, according to R.J.Q. Adams in *Arms and the Wizard: Lloyd George and the Ministry of Munitions 1915-1916* (London: Cassell & Co., 1978), these guns were firing at an average rate of fourteen rounds per gun per day yet were only receiving seven rounds per gun daily from Great Britain. Rumors of a shell shortage began to circulate in the British press, and the War Office came under heavy criticism. With disastrous Allied military failures in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli in early 1915, Prime Minister Asquith came under extreme pressure to form a wartime government coalition to preserve national unity and to bolster the British war effort. For more on Asquith's dilemma see pages 297-300 of R.J.A. Adams' *Balfour: The Last Grandee.*

[74] Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland,* 107.

could make his position in Ireland untenable.[75] In a letter to Nathan he wrote that the thought of power-sharing with the Tories, and his surety that the war was nowhere close to ending, had left him in a foul and depressed mood, and said if his ship was torpedoed on his next visit to Ireland he would not mind because it would be better to drown in "salt water than in Irish Whisky".[76] In line with Nationalist tradition, Redmond declined the offer to take up a position in the British government, as did his senior party colleagues who were subsequently extended the offer.

Asquith's new Cabinet included nine Conservatives and one Labourite, but the Liberals continued to hold the major positions. The Irish Party was outraged that Carson was appointed Attorney General and viewed it as a major setback for the prospects of Home Rule, with Redmond informing the Chief Secretary that the only positive in such a distressing situation was that he was remaining on in his current role. On May 29, Birrell replied to Redmond:

> "The PM and I have had the most hellish fortnight of our lives. Cabinet should have been left alone with a war committee with everyone on it. Told Cabinet opposed to sharing the daily admin of Ireland affairs with anyone on Unionist side. It was a little difficult to close the doors altogether on their ugly faces."[77]

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[75] Birrell to Redmond, May 1915, MS 15,261 /3, National Library of Ireland.

[76] Birrell to Nathan, May 15, 1915, MS Nathan 449, Bodleian Library Archives.

[77] Birrell to Redmond, May 29, 1915, MS 15,261 /3, National Library of Ireland.

Birrell believed his position to be most uncomfortable and outright impossible with the likes of Balfour, Long and Carson in the Cabinet. He labeled Asquith's Cabinet reshuffle as "untrusting as a young woman making up her mind whether she will have diamonds or rubies in her engagement ring."[78] He also recognized the strain this caused the Irish Party-Liberal alliance, but he held no ill-will toward Redmond for not joining the coalition, because he knew it would have been antithetic to Irish Nationalist opinion and would have ended his career almost immediately.[79]

Irish Nationalists were outraged that senior Unionists now held office, and Redmond was savagely attacked in the press for not creating an adequate fuss on the matter and resultantly risking the implementation of the Home Rule Act after the war ended. The popular Nationalist *Independent* newspaper thought it bizarre that Sir Edward Carson, given the position of Attorney General, could now prosecute those who gave seditious speeches, since he himself was fond of making them.[80] Fear spread across the island that the Conservative-Unionist Party would now push for wartime

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[78] O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary*, 143.

[79] Augustine Birrell to the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland, June 1916, D1507/A/17/28, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

[80] David George Boyce & Alan O'Day, *The Ulster Crisis: 1885-1921* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 215.

conscription or at least mandatory registration for service, and that it should be extended to Ireland.[81] The Chief Secretary warned Nathan of the increased unrest in Ireland:

> "We may escape shipwreck and disturbances on a big scale in Ireland. I pray it be so. Ireland is, I am sure, in a rotten state, ripe for a row, without leadership."[82]

A livid Redmond told Asquith he was deeply disappointed that he received no consultation when the coalition was formulated, and expressed disbelief that Carson, the leader of Ulster Unionism and "apostle of physical force against law," should hold the position of Attorney General. He found the offer to himself of an unknown Cabinet position to be offensive, and the selection of James Campbell, a staunch Unionist, to be Lord Chancellor of Ireland, outrageous.[83] Campbell was vehemently opposed to Home Rule, and had previously spoken of civil war as the path of duty for Ulster's Unionists.

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[81] Long-held British and Irish opposition towards compulsory military service meant it was the only major European power to not have any form of conscription when war broke out in August, 1914. Instead Britain opted for a vast volunteer army, with two million men joining in the first few months. As the war dragged on the number of volunteers dwindled, averaging only 100,000 a month by spring 1915. In May 1915 Prime Minister Asquith appointed Lord Edward Derby as Director-General of Recruitment. The Coalition government passed the National Registration Act in July 1915, requiring all men and women between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five in England, Scotland and Wales, to register their names with the government, and to provide them with their form of employment. The results of this Act showed there were still five million men of military age who were not in the armed forces. Under the "Derby Scheme," introduced in October, military-aged men were encouraged to register their name with the promise they would only be called to serve in the army when absolutely necessary. Married men were assured they would only be called upon once the supply of unmarried men was exhausted. By December 1915 only 350,000 men volunteered under the Derby Scheme. For an extended discussion of Derby's recruitment drive see R.J.Q. Adams and Philip Poirier's chapter, "Lord Derby Shows the Way," in *The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain 1900-18,* (Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1987), 119-143.

[82] O'Broin, *Dublin Castle & the 1916 Rising,* 51.

[83] Redmond to Asquith, June 7, 1915, MS Asquith 36 f. 92, Bodleian Library.

To de-escalate the rift between the two men, Asquith rescinded the offer to Campbell, and promised Redmond that the Irish government would continue to be administered by Birrell and Nathan, without additional interference.[84]

Although Redmond was pleased that Birrell would continue his administrative duties unhindered, others were critical of Asquith's decision to continue to allow a "professional humourist" to handle what was clearly a worsening political situation.[85] John Henry Bernard, the Protestant Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, lamented that treason was openly preached across Dublin unchecked, and allowing Birrell to continue to hold the weakest position in the Cabinet was shocking. Ireland needed, he believed, a man who could rule, not someone who spent his time making jokes and "spouting humbug."[86] Dillon described the political situation in Ireland after the establishment of the new National Government as being at its worst since 1900, and recognized the increased hostility of the Irish clergy towards the Irish leadership.[87] Birrell, writing to Nathan in late August, recognized just how precarious the situation was in Ireland, owing in no small part to the massive loss of life on the continent.

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[84] Asquith to Redmond, June 9, 1915, MS Asquith 36 f. 102, Bodleian Library.

[85] Andrew Scholes, *The Church of Ireland and the Third Home Rule Bill* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 111.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Finnan, *John Redmond*, 142.

Ireland, he felt, was very sensitive because "doing anything there was like walking on the upturned faces of men."[88]

Between late May and late September the *Independent* [now with a wider readership than the Irish Party's *Freeman's Journal*] produced more than twenty articles and editorials critical of the party leadership, the inadequacies of the Home Rule Act, and the danger presented by Asquith's new ministry. The newspaper's campaign against Redmond and his colleagues increased already commonly held misgivings from the party's supporters. John Dillon believed the paper was "doing an immense amount of harm," to Nationalist opinion, especially since the war showed no signs of abating.[89] The separatist *Sinn Feiners* capitalized on the public mood by cleverly orchestrating an elaborate funeral for the veteran *Fenian* Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. A large crowd assembled at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin to watch the spectacle put on by the Irish Volunteers, and to listen to Padraig Pearse, a poet and political activist, rebuke the Home Rule Act:

> "They think they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but the fools, the

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[88] Meleady, *John Redmond: The National Leader*, 337.

[89] Birrell to Nathan, September 2, 1915, MS Nathan 449, Bodleian Library.

fools, the fools! – they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace."[90]

Clearly perturbed by the ostentatious display of anti-British and anti-war sentiment emanating from O'Donovan Rossa's funeral spectacle, Birrell wrote to his Under-Secretary to express his views on the matter. He was sure very few of those who attended the service actually cared for or even knew the man, and felt it was orchestrated simply to keep alive "a sham revolutionary sentiment." Nevertheless, he saw the spectacle as evidence of increased dissatisfaction with Redmond among the populace and believed the *Sinn Feiners*, who wished to keep alive the embers of *Fenianism*, sought some sort of violent reaction towards British rule in Ireland before the war was over. He took solace in his certainty that *Sinn Fein* lacked a decent orator or organizer but still found their actions to be disgusting during a time of national peril.[91] Making matters worse for Redmond and his Irish Party was his constant bouts with sickness during the spring and summer months of 1915, which hindered his ability in some way to rally Irish Nationalist opinion at a time when an overall somber mood had enveloped the country.

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[90] Freeman's Journal, August 2, 1915.

[91] Birrell to Nathan, August 3, 1915, MS Nathan 449 f. 216, Bodleian Library.

CHAPTER VI

THE NATIONAL COALITION, SEDITION AND THE EASTER RISING

The Chief Secretary had a difficult time adjusting to political life inside a national coalition. He would have preferred the creation of a War Committee of six to eight men from both parties to meet fortnightly to discuss the conduct of the war, while leaving the Liberal Party Cabinet unchanged.[1] Instead he had to content himself with working alongside the leaders of the former Opposition, including the intransigent Irish Unionists Sir Edward Carson and Walter Long, who were given the positions of Attorney-General and President of the Local Government Board respectively. His disdain for these rigid champions of Ulster Unionism had grown throughout the Home Rule Crisis, labeling them the "greediest pigs on record."[2] Birrell had previously jokingly confided to his private secretary at Dublin Castle, Thomas Philip Le Fanu, that he would sooner be split by "the Babylonian Whore [Rome] than by Sir Edward Carson," such was his antipathy for the man.[3]

Writing to Redmond shortly after the Coalition was formed, Birrell confessed that he loathed the idea of sitting next to Irish Unionists who believed or pretended to believe the Liberal government had tried and failed to organize a pogrom of Ulster's

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[1] Birrell to Nathan, May 6, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 182, Bodleian Library Archives.

[2] Ibid., f. 181.

[3] Birrell to Le Fanu, August 21, 1912, MS 8 3 (3), Liverpool University Archives.

men and women shortly before the Curragh Crisis.[4] Birrell assured Redmond he would not be forced to share his daily administration of Ireland with anyone on the Unionist side, although he did admit he found it challenging to close them out completely.[5] The Chief Secretary grew increasingly weary of the House of Commons, which had become for him a truly detestable place, full of bad-tempered outsiders, and felt his friendship with the Irish Party had been damaged as a result of the Coalition.[6]

Birrell was in a foul and depressed mood. Throughout the Ulster Crisis he had been repeatedly bypassed by more senior Cabinet members during their more serious political discussions with the leaders of Irish Nationalism and Unionism.[7] His wife's death earlier in the year only added to his gloomy demeanor, and was looking forward to the end of the conflict with Germany so Asquith would finally accept his request to resign from his position. Birrell was impressed with the competency of his Under-Secretary Sir Matthew Nathan, whom he believed would make an ideal successor once he himself was gone.[8] *The Freeman's Journal* newspaper, the voice of constitutional nationalism, understood the difficult position the Chief Secretary now faced, and

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[4] Lewis, *Carson,* 174.

[5] Meleady, *John Redmond: The National Leader*, 333-334.

[6] Birrell to Nathan, May 6, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 182, Bodleian Library Archives.

[7] O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867-1921,* 258. Both Asquith and Lloyd George actively inserted themselves into the Irish political crisis, and believed their superior powers of negotiation could resolve the escalating crisis concerning Ulster's fate within the Home Rule Bill.

[8] O'Halpin, *The Decline of the Union,* 105.

claimed he could not freely administer to the trusted representatives of Irish opinion because into the coalition stepped the "mouthers of sedition" from Ulster.[9]

Even after his wife's death in March Birrell continued to remain in Britain for long periods of time, because he had a great deal of faith in Nathan to administer from Dublin Castle, and because he believed he should be close to parliament, which now met almost daily, to better represent Irish interests during this time of national peril. Communication between Birrell and his Under-Secretary during the second half of 1915 chiefly concerned the increased volume of seditious literature in Ireland. This separatist propaganda contributed to heightened fears across England and Ireland that Germany would seek to encourage the Irish Volunteer Force to sabotage the British war effort. Nevertheless, Birrell made little attempt to coordinate directly the Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police to investigate, leaving them and the judicial division of Dublin Castle to their own devices.[10] Action was stepped up against the purveyors of seditious papers and pamphlets, especially those of a violent tone and those involved in anti-recruitment meetings; however, any time police officers attempted to make arrests on charges of sedition they were castigated by the moderate Nationalist press for their seemingly heavy-handed tactics. According to the findings of the *Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland* [1916], such was the volume of sedition across the country in 1915 that juries in Dublin, and magistrates across the land, owing to either

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[9] Freeman's Journal, May 6, 1916, 2.

[10] Fellow Liberal Cabinet member Charles Hobhouse pointed to Birrell's negligence of duties and habitual absence from Ireland as the reason for his lack of interaction with the Judicial Department. See page 80-81 in Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon's *Turning Points of the Irish Revolution* for more on this.

fear or favor, could not be trusted to make a legitimate decision based on the evidence in front of them. On top of this, the maximum sentence for those who were convicted was only six months' hard labor, seemingly a minor deterrent to the law-breakers.[11]

Amid the turmoil of the Ulster Crisis, Birrell had become increasingly skeptical of police reports pertaining to civil discord across Ireland. He believed those police circulars which did make it to his desk were, for the most part, biased in nature, because the top positions in the Irish judicial system at Dublin Castle were held by men with Unionist sympathies. In a letter to Nathan he described policemen in Ulster as "chock full of the same passions" as those who wished to rid the country of Papists.[12] The hard words of Carson and Craig in Ulster during the Home Rule Bill negotiations fostered a perverse wave of sectarianism in the North because, as the Chief Secretary described it, "the pulse of the machine [Ulster Unionist Party] is religious bigotry."[13] Reflecting upon a motorcar trip through Ulster in mid-October, Birrell told his son, Tony, of his disappointment that Protestants and Roman Catholics in the city of Belfast did not love each other as proper Christians should.[14]

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[11] Charles Hardinge, *Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland: Report of Commission* (London: Darling and Son, 1916), 7.

[12] Birrell to Nathan, July 30, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 212, Bodleian Library Archives.

[13] Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question*, 27.

[14] Augustine Birrell to Anthony Birrell, October 28, 1915, MS 8 2 (3), Liverpool University Archives.

The passage of the National Registration Act in July 1915 worried the leaders of Irish nationalism.[15] Irish Party leader John Redmond had assured his supporters in August 1914 that Irishmen would only be called upon on a voluntary basis to take up arms against Germanic aggression. The sharp decline in the intake of volunteers in both Britain and Ireland by mid-1915 led many to fear possible conscription to fill the ranks of the armed forces. In the House of Commons, several days before the passage of the National Registration Act, Birrell expressed his concerns that among the peasant population of Ireland there existed a very great dread of conscription.[16] The National Registration Act, although it only applied to Britain, gave anti-war Irish republicans the ammunition they needed to sow the seeds of discord through their penny papers. The Act, they claimed, was the first step towards conscription across the United Kingdom. The Chief Secretary, now spending much of his time in London, with Irish correspondence directed through the Irish Office at Westminster, initially expressed skepticism over the impact of separatist propaganda. Nathan sent him a copy of a *Sinn Fein* pamphlet in September, which he labeled the heaviest trash he ever read. Such

[15] A debate persisted in parliament between those who were willing to consider wartime conscription and those who were happy to continue to encourage voluntarism to the army. In spring 1915, enlistments averaged 100,000 per month but this figure could not be sustained based on government projections. Introduced by President of the Local Government Board, Walter Long, the Act called for all men and women in Britain between the ages of 15-65 who were not already members of the military, to register their personal details with their local registration authorities.

[16] Out of 1,325,000 men in Ireland 800,000 were engaged in land.

diatribe, he was certain, would "choke off anyone's enthusiasm" for *Sinn Fein* so its publication would do no harm to recruitment efforts in Ireland.[17]

On October 11, Lord Derby was appointed Director-General of Recruiting by Prime Minister Asquith.[18] Five days later he announced a new recruitment scheme to raise the number of volunteers to the army.[19] An uncertainty hung in the air as to how this would impact Ireland. Birrell was sure that conscription, if it came about, would not be applied to Ireland. He advised Nathan that if Asquith agreed to extend a conscription Bill to Ireland then "all the Irish Nationalists [Redmond included] will join hands….with the radical camp."[20] Nevertheless, Birrell realized parliamentary discussions concerning registration and recruitment levels in the midst of the Derby Scheme had changed attitudes in Ireland. Under-Secretary Nathan met with Dillon in November, during which the latter impressed upon Nathan the growth in strength of *Sinn* Fein, and expressed his certainty conscription would result in widespread civil discord.[21] Now cognizant of the growth of the anti-war separatist movement in Ireland, Birrell believed the conscription

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[17] Birrell to Nathan, September 24, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 255, Bodleian Library Archives.

[18] Published in mid-September, data from the National Registration Act showed there were roughly five million men of military age not part of the British army.

[19] Known as the Derby Scheme or the Group Scheme, men aged 18-41 were asked to "attest their willingness to serve," that is to say volunteer to be called up when needed by again registering with the local authorities. Those workers involved in significant munitions-related or other trades of national importance would be attested, but would not be called as long as they remained in those trades.

[20] Birrell to Nathan, undated, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 297, Bodleian Library Archives.

[21] Lyons, *John Dillon,* 366.

scare had weakened his Irish administration, perhaps to the detriment of Redmond.[22] Furthermore, he found John Redmond's support base and his appeal to have waned, because the "Bill [Home Rule] in the Statute Book" ceased to be a rallying cry from an increasingly disenchanted populace which saw no quick end to the war in Europe. Conscription would be extremely difficult to enforce in Ireland within this atmosphere, Birrell advised Nathan, because:

> "Dublin Castle would be responsible for conscription and soldiers would have to go from village to village to carry "all the Pats and Mikes" to custody. Shots would be fired…volunteers would parade in force."[23]

Also assisting the anti-recruitment *Sinn Feiners* were the mixed signals coming from the extremely influential Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. While a majority of the clergy had thrust its support behind Redmond and his recruitment efforts on behalf of Britain when the war began, some priests held anti-English sentiment and radical Nationalist attitudes. Archbishop Walsh of Dublin, who had worked closely with Birrell during the formulation of the Irish Universities Bill in 1908, offered only lukewarm support for the war, and castigated Redmond's recruitment campaign as the inevitable

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[22] Birrell to Nathan, November 16, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 289, Bodleian Library Archives.

[23] Birrell to Nathan, undated, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 297, Bodleian Library Archives.

result of his party's "parliamentary subservience to the Liberals."[24] Birrell recognized a growing number of disloyal priests, especially the younger ones, were coming out on their own as leaders of anti-recruitment efforts throughout the fall of 1915.[25] Worried about the growth of the Irish Volunteers, he warned Redmond fewer and fewer priests and laymen were committed to stamping out revolutionary sentiment.[26]

While the war against Germany and her allies dragged on, the British Treasury groaned under the burden of funding it.[27] In November, Asquith instructed his Cabinet to find ways to scale back expenditure in non-essential government programs. While Chancellor of the Exchequer Reginald McKenna focused on cost-cutting in Britain, the Irish Chief Secretary was tasked with finding savings in Irish government services. Birrell, as chairman of the newly formed Committee on Public Retrenchment, invited Irish Party M.P. John Pius Boland to be his party's representative on the panel. Much to Birrell's chagrin it was decided by Redmond that none of his party members should

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[24] Right Reverend Monsignor M. Curran, *Bureau of Military History 1913-21: Statement by Witness, Document No. W.S. 687 (section 1)*, 11. http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0687.pdf#page=1 Accessed August12, 2016. For more on the role of the Irish Catholic clergy during World War One I highly recommend John Martin Brennan's thesis "Irish Catholic Chaplains in the First World War" (M. Phil., University of Birmingham, 2011).

[25] Birrell to Nathan, undated, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 297, Bodleian Library Archives.

[26] O'Broin, *Dublin Castle and the 1916 Rising*, 54.

[27] Britain incurred debts equivalent to 136% of its Gross National Product. Its national debt rose from £650m in 1914 to £7.4b in 1919.

attend any discussions on retrenchment because this would allow them to freely approve or disapprove of any recommendations the committee might make.[28]

While the Committee on Public Retrenchment was only advisory in nature, it did alarm the Irish Nationalist community. It was understood that the British Treasury was bound to the financial terms of the Home Rule Act of 1914, so this new committee worried many who feared it was an underhanded attempt to undo what the Irish Party had fought to establish. Despite rumors of possible cuts to Irish language programs in schools and the possible closure of public galleries and other non-essential functions, Birrell and his fellow committee members, after having held three meetings, decided to abandon the economy enquiry. On December 6, the Chief Secretary reported to the Cabinet that any attempt to slash funding in Ireland on a large scale without legislation would prove contentious. He recommended the British government leave the Irish administration to its own devices to find areas where money could be saved. Many in the Irish Unionist community expected no less from Birrell, condemning his report as a clear demonstration of his continued and unabashed deference towards Redmond and the Irish Party.[29]

Augustine Birrell found very little joy as Irish Chief Secretary in his last few months on the job. The widespread panic in Ireland over conscription continued

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[28] Redmond to Birrell, November 30, 1915, MS 15,261/9, Papers of John Redmond, National Library of Ireland.

[29] Maurice Headlam, *Irish Reminiscences* (London: R. Hale, 1947), 70.

unabated through the medium of republican newspapers. He confessed to his Under-Secretary:

> "I was never more dissatisfied with the Irish cauldron – its bubbling and steaming contents, than I am now."[30]

He wrote to Redmond on December 19, stressing his deep concern over the state of the country. His Irish intelligence sources claimed the Irish Volunteers were growing steadily in size, now approximately 14,000 strong, while revolutionary propaganda continued to blossom in an uncertain environment.[31]

In October, Edward Carson resigned his position as Attorney General in protest towards what he perceived to be British military incompetency in the Gallipoli Peninsula.[32] Birrell found Carson's resignation speech to be dignified, but was glad to see him out of the Cabinet, joking that this now made a future run by Carson for the

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[30] Birrell to Nathan, November 16, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 289, Bodleian Library Archives.

[31] Birrell to Redmond, December 19, 1915, MS 15,169/4, Papers of John Redmond, National Library of Ireland.

[32] First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill suggested to Asquith the best way to break the stalemate on trenches in Flanders was to open up a second front in the East. His focus was the Ottoman Empire, which had been in a state of decline for a century. On January 15, 1915, the War Council agreed to a campaign on the Gallipoli peninsula. The initial naval bombardment of the peninsula proved to be a failure, and the major land invasion which followed became a bloody slaughter for the Allied forces. Within the first month the Allies lost 45,000 men, which Carson blamed on British forces having too few troops, and influenced him to support conscription to the army. Continual reports of military blunders and incompetency angered Carson, and he decided to resign his position as Attorney-General on October 19 in protest at the government's handling of the crisis in the East. For more on the disastrous Gallipoli campaign see Peter Hart's *Gallipoli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Hart is particularly damning of Churchill and those military generals involved in the campaign.

premiership impossible. The Ulster Unionist leader's time in Ulster had, Birrell believed, made him "unfit for friendly and close relations with Englishmen," and his volatility left him with very few friends at all.[33] No longer in the coalition Cabinet, Carson became de-facto leader of the Unionists skeptical of the coalition, thus making him Leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons.

Although pleased to see Carson gone, Birrell still had to contend with the leader of Ulster Unionism stirring the seeds of dissension in Ireland because of his insistence that Ireland should not receive special treatment should a Conscription Bill be put forth by the government. In a letter to his Under-Secretary on November 16, Birrell expressed concern about Carson's ugly temper for fear it could provoke an outbreak of violence in Ireland.[34] On December 2, a joint meeting of unionists and nationalists in the Ulster town of Newry extended invitations to both Carson and Redmond to address their proposed recruitment event. While Redmond gladly accepted the invitation, Carson did not, claiming:

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[33] Birrell to Nathan, October 20 & October 24, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 265 & f. 270, Bodleian Library Archives.

[34] Birrell to Nathan, November 16, 1915, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 289, Bodleian Library Archives.

> "the proposal would not serve any useful purpose, as I have already from time to time made known in Ulster my views as to supporting our comrades at the front by keeping up the necessary reserves."[35]

The event was cancelled as a result. Such a manoeuver by Carson only strengthened the circulation of stories within the Irish press that the British government had something more than voluntarism in mind in their upcoming recruitment legislation.

On December 20 Lord Derby sent his final report to the Cabinet. It showed that out of the five million men available for military service only 59% had registered under his scheme. Further, for those who did make themselves available only 275,000 volunteered for immediate service, while the rest chose to attest and await call-up. Glaringly, the report revealed that 38% of single men and 54% of married men in Britain publicly refused to enlist.[36] Lord Derby's dismal figures signaled the end of voluntarism as an effective tool for recruitment. Birrell viewed Derby's scheme of moral compulsion as rotten, and assured Redmond he was confident parliamentary discussions concerning the now inevitable prospect of conscription would not include Ireland. He confided to the Irish Party chairman that talk of conscription had made Westminster a gloomy place, and was sure the Christmas break would do nothing to lift his own melancholy mood.[37]

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[35] Freeman's Journal, December 9, 1915, 4.

[36] "Manpower Available For Forces," January 1, 1916, CAB 37/140/1, The National Archives, Kew.

[37] Birrell to Redmond, December 23, 1915, MS 15,169/4, Papers of John Redmond, National Library of Ireland.

After the winter recess Birrell wrote to Nathan about a recent visit he had had with Asquith. The Prime Minister offered his reassurance that Ireland would be excluded from conscription but expressed his concern that parliament's distraction by the war in Europe allowed for the menacing political situation in Ireland to fester and grow apace.[38]

On January 5, 1916, Prime Minister Asquith announced to the House of Commons the Military Service Bill.[39] The data drawn from Lord Derby's recruitment campaign calculated that 650,000 unmarried men not already in the military failed to register their employment details with the government. The 400,000 married men who registered with the Derby Scheme would not be called upon until absolutely necessary; therefore, Asquith insisted, to reach the figure of one million new recruits, which he believed was crucial for the war effort, it was necessary to compel single men of military age into the armed forces. To the shouts of "Why?" from several members of the Opposition, Asquith, using Birrell's line of argument, said the Bill was confined to include those who registered under Lord Derby's Scheme, therefore meaning it did not apply to Ireland.[40] The real reason for the non-inclusion of Ireland was the government's

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[38] Birrell to Nathan, January 2, 1916, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f 307, Bodleian Library Archives.

[39] The Bill received the Royal Assent on January 27. It stated all male British subjects age 18 to 41, who were either unmarried or were widowers without dependent children, were now automatically enlisted for general service. There were still exemptions based on work, and family hardship or ill-health. R.J.Q. Adams and Philip P. Poirier's book *The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain 1900-18* is an excellent resource on the issue. The Military Service Act breached generations of voluntarist traditions in Britain such was the magnitude of this piece of wartime legislation.

[40] "Military Service (No. 2) Bill," *HC Deb 05 January 1916 vol. 77 cc949-1074*.

reluctant acceptance of Redmond's argument that conscription on that island was "impracticable, unworkable and impossible."[41]

While Birrell could breathe a sigh of relief that conscription would not be applied to Ireland, Redmond expressed his opposition that conscription had to be applied at all to Britain. He questioned whether any proof existed that the Bill was necessary from a military point of view, and suggested a system of compulsion was "full of menace for the future of the country."[42] Six days later, during the Second Reading of the Military Service Bill, Redmond withdrew his and his party's opposition to the Bill on the grounds that the overwhelming majority [450 to 47] of British M.P.s were in favor of the measure. He said:

> "A prolonged exhibition of bitter controversy on the floor of the House, in the face of the enemy, would be a disaster and a scandal."[43]

Ulster Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson expressed his gratitude for Redmond's retraction of his opposition towards the Bill, and asked him to go a step further by allowing Ireland to be included. It was unfair, he contended, to allow Ireland to be given special treatment when the defense of the realm was at stake. Carson expressed his disappointment with Ireland's recruitment figures, claiming that out of 562,000 men of

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[41] Adams and Poirier, *The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain, 1900-18,* 138.

[42] "Military Service (No. 2) Bill," *HC Deb 05 January 1916 vol. 77 cc949-1074.*

[43] "Military Service (No. 2) Bill," *HC Deb 11 January 1916 vol. 77 cc14.57-574.*

military aged between nineteen and forty-one only 92,000 had enlisted. For him, voluntarism in Ireland was simply not enough.[44]

On January 10, Birrell provided the House of Commons with recruitment statistics for Ireland's four provinces. What it revealed was an indictment of Redmond's purported success of raising an adequate number of Irish volunteers for the British army. Since the outbreak of war in August 1914, Ulster had provided more men for combat than the other three provinces combined. This flew in the face of Redmond's insistence that voluntarism in Ireland was working. Birrell's private secretary Andrew Philip Magill suggested to Under-Secretary Nathan there would be a "great deal of crowing" in the North over this glaring statistic.[45] James Chambers, the Unionist M.P. for South Belfast, tabled a motion before the House of Commons to have Ireland included in the Conscription Bill. His proposed amendment was seconded by Captain James Craig, but it was quickly rejected in parliament. Both Carson and Bonar Law came to realize during the conscription debates that to attempt to compel the Irish people into the British army was a risk not worth taking because:

> "Nationalist members would be driven to employ an attitude of uncompromising hostility to the Bill and to the Government which introduced it."[46]

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[44] Ibid.

[45] O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary,* 161-162.

[46] Freeman's Journal, January 18, 1916, 4.

In early February the Chief Secretary, Redmond, and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland Viscount Wimborne embarked on a recruitment tour across Southern Ireland.[47] Birrell was in a relaxed mood, having been reassured by Nathan a few weeks prior that, although there were spasmodic reports of new Irish Volunteer branches being formed, the removal of the threat of conscription was surely going to retard the growth of the separatist movement.[48] On February 1 they addressed a huge crowd in County Galway in Western Ireland. Aware of increased *Sinn Fein* support, Redmond told the crowd that the small body of dissenters belonged to an entirely different stratum of Irish society, which explained their "imposition for evil." In an attempt to get more farmers' sons to join the army, he spoke of the fate of Polish landowners at the hands of the menacing Prussian planters.[49] Birrell had little to say to the crowd other than to commend the valiant Irish men currently fighting at the front.[50] Birrell's letter to Nathan after the visit to Galway exhibited a great deal of skepticism about Redmond's appeal, and his ability to encourage a wave of new recruits. He said that while Redmond's speech was good, the topic of recruitment was certainly not one the crowd was fond of.[51] The Irish leader, he

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[47] Viscount Wimborne replaced Lord Aberdeen as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in February 1915. Although his position was largely ceremonial, he insisted on an active role, and took charge of the Department of Recruiting for Ireland in October, 1915.

[48] O'Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 62.

[49] Freeman's Journal, February 3, 1916, 4.

[50] Cork Examiner, February 3, 1916, 2.

[51] Birrell to Nathan, February 1, 1916, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f 319, Bodleian Library Archives.

explained to Nathan, did not have the ability to stir the crowd like Daniel O'Connell of old; rather Redmond was more of a plucky fellow in an odd and unappealing situation.[52]

In Mid-March the Chief Secretary was shown as copy of a blatantly seditious anti-war article from *The Gael*, an Irish republican newspaper based in Dublin. Having been reassured by Nathan that separatist activity was only sporadic and lacked appeal, and warned by his good friends Redmond and Dillon not to arrest the anti-war/anti-British propagandists to prevent them from gaining the sympathy of the general public, Birrell's reaction made sense. He said no defense could be made for such publications, but believed it was:

> "far more likely to make a timid reader turn pale than to cause a bold one to turn out to be shot down."

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[52] O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary*, 163. Daniel O'Connell, often referred to as "The Liberator" or "The Emancipator," was Ireland's first major Nationalist leader of the 19th century. In 1823 he co-founded the Catholic Association in order to politicize Catholic grievances, which included the prohibition of Catholics from entering parliament. His organization was widely popular in Ireland, and forced the British government to pass the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. In 1840 O'Connell formed the Repeal Association, which sought to bring an end to the Anglo-Irish legislative union. His speeches drew large crowds and forced the British government to pay closer attention to Irish grievances. "The Liberator" died in 1844 after a bout with illness, but his fierce brand of nationalism helped inspire future generations. Patrick Geoghegan's two books *King Dan: The Rise of Daniel O'Connell 1775-1829* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2008) and *Liberator: The Life and Death of Daniel O'Connell 1830-1847* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2010) provide an excellent account of one of the most remarkable men in 19th century Europe.

While he was sure these sorts of publications were scandalous, they were not dangerous, although he admitted they probably hurt recruitment in the country.[53] Unfortunately for Birrell, he refused to listen to the opinion of Irish Unionists concerning the deteriorating political conditions across the country. Having read over and listened, in his view, to exaggerated police reports concerning unrest in Ulster and across Ireland from the moment he set foot in Dublin Castle in 1907, Birrell continued to gravitate towards skepticism.

In early 1916 Viscount Midleton, the leader of the Irish Unionist Alliance, and a former war secretary[54], approached Birrell in his office at the House of Commons with evidence from numerous reliable correspondents in Ireland that military-style drilling was going on in Dublin and elsewhere, and evidence from some quarters pointed to a determination to make some attempt at a rising, however reckless it might seem. The Chief Secretary dismissed his claims, saying that he laughed at such nonsense.[55] On January 20, Midleton again approached Birrell, calling his attention to speeches made by

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[53] Birrell to Nathan, March 19, 1916, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f 332, Bodleian Library Archives.

[54] Formed in 1891, the Irish Unionist Alliance, made up of Irish Conservative and Liberal Unionist M.P.s, sought to preserve Ireland's political union with the United Kingdom. Politicized unionism was much more prevalent in Ulster, where the majority of the Protestant population of Ireland lived. In 1905 a distinct Ulster Unionist Council was formed to counter the prospect of a Catholic-controlled Home Rule parliament in Dublin. This Council morphed into the Ulster Unionist Party, and in 1910 Sir Edward Carson became leader. After this division William St. John Fremantle Brodrick, The Viscount Midleton, became leader of the Irish Unionist Alliance, which then fought for the interests of Unionists in Southern Ireland.

[55] William St. John Fremantle Brodrick Midleton, *Records & Reactions 1856-1939* (London: J. Murray, 1939), 228-229.

Irish priest Michael O'Flanaghan[56] that Ireland should ally itself with Germany and fight for its independence. The Defence of the Realm Act of 1914 would have allowed Birrell to make arrests for those seeking to aid the enemy, but again Birrell dismissed him, and suggested that if he was so worried he should go himself to Ireland and visit with General Friend, the Commander-in-Chief of British forces there, and express his concerns to him. Seeking to defend himself from criticism, Birrell wrote to Midleton on February 25, explaining that as Chief Secretary he wished to foster the growth of loyalty towards the Empire on the island through both action and inaction. Ruling Ireland with an iron fist was not conducive to recruitment, and he told Midleton that he was more fearful of bombs and isolated acts of violence than of any sort of outlandish concerted rebellion.[57]

Irish Attorney-General Sir James Campbell continually advocated through early 1916 for the seizure of weapons from parading men in Dublin, but Birrell would not consider it because he was sure the Nationalist press would vilify him for having a double standard – one law for Ulster and the U.V.F. and another in the South.[58] Birrell believed Ireland lived under a microscope; therefore any sort of perceived provocation could have terrible consequences:

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[56] Also an Irish language scholar and Irish republican, O'Flanaghan served as *Sinn Fein* president from 1933-1935.

[57] O'Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 65-66.

[58] Gwynn, *John Redmond's Last Years*, 219.

> "The misery of the whole thing was this – you had armed bodies of volunteers all over the place…and if you could have got disarmament all round it would have been a blessing, but to disarm any one section of the population on the evidence that we had appeared to me to be a very dangerous and doubtful proposition."[59]

In March, Redmond received a letter from Bernard MacGillan, a Chicago-based journalist originally from Belfast, in which he warned the Irish Party leader of rumors among the Irish American community of a sinister plot by the I.V.F. to "drench Ireland in blood." Redmond showed the letter to Dillon, but it appeared neither of the men took it seriously because no evidence exists that it was ever forwarded to Birrell or to Dublin Castle.[60] Had Birrell been shown this letter he might not have been overly concerned because a Royal Irish Constabulary report delivered to him in March suggested the Irish Volunteers lacked the resources to make even a brief stand against a small body of soldiers. The report did stress, however, its findings were based on intelligence gathering in the provinces, and not in the city of Dublin which was within the jurisdiction of the Dublin Metropolitan Police.[61]

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[59] Shane Hegarty and Fintan O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the 1916 Rising* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2006), 16.

[60] Meleady, *John Redmond*, 366.

[61] "The Royal Irish Constabulary views the Political Situation in March 1916: Extract from the Confidential Report of the Inspector General for the month of March 1916," In *Irish Political Documents 1869-1916*, ed. Arthur Mitchell and Padraig O'Snodaigh, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989), 191-192.

The Chief Secretary's last piece of legislation before the Easter Rising was typical of a man who had wedded himself to the voices of constitutional Irish nationalism. The Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829 removed many of the remaining restrictions imposed upon Roman Catholics in Britain and Ireland, most importantly granting them the right to sit in parliament. Nevertheless, several penal sections within the Act continued to allow for the suppression of Catholic religious orders, societies and communities. The Irish Party called on Birrell to pass a Bill that would rid the country of such discriminatory practices, which they argued belonged to another era. It was unfair they insisted for brave Irish Jesuits and Franciscan monks to assist dying Irish soldiers on the firing line in Flanders, yet at the same time be classified as outlaws under British law.[62] On March 16, Birrell asked the House of Commons to give him leave to introduce a Bill to repeal these "long since obsolete and wholly abandoned provisions of the law." He found it preposterous certain religious orders could not appeal to the courts over legal matters on the grounds they were legally viewed as outlaws.[63] On April 5, Birrell formally introduced a Bill to repeal these provisions from the statute book, much to the delight of Redmond and his party.

In 1914, after the Irish Volunteer split between pro and anti–Redmondites, senior members of the secret revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood [I.R.B.] successfully

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[62] Freeman's Journal, March 20, 1916, 2.

[63] "Religious Orders, Ireland (Rating)," *HC Deb 16 March 1916 vol. 80 cc2273-4*

implanted themselves into important positions within the organization.[64] In early 1915, the I.R.B.'s inner-circle, which included senior members Joseph Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh and Padraig Pearse, began to discuss plans to utilize the Irish Volunteers to launch an insurrection against British rule in Ireland while the British Army was pre-occupied on the continent. In 1914, Padraig Pearse became the Volunteers' Director of Military Organization, and would use his senior position to help plan a rising. At the start of April, 1916, Pearse ordered all Irish Volunteers to gather at assembly points throughout the country on Easter Sunday [April 23] for three days of "field manoeuvers." Such was the secrecy of the inner circle of the I.R.B., Irish Volunteer Chief-Of-Staff Eoin MacNeill was unaware Pearse's plans were a cover for insurrection. MacNeill firmly believed the Irish Volunteer Force should only be called to arms if faced with suppression, and expressed certainty that open battle against the British Army would be folly.

On April 15 and 16 an apparently official document purporting to be from Dublin Castle was sent to the Irish press. Known to historians as the "Castle Document," it authorized the arrest of all members of the *Sinn Fein* National Council and known leaders of the Irish Volunteer Force, and it included orders to occupy all buildings used by both for their activities. Initially the press did not publish the document, most likely to avoid transgressing increasingly prohibitive wartime censorship regulations, but a

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[64] The Irish Republican Brotherhood was a secret oath-bound organization founded by James Stephens in Dublin in 1858. Its principal goal was to organize a rebellion in Ireland to overthrow the British government and establish a republic in its place. For further reading consult Owen McGee's *The IRB: The Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Fein* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).

copy of the document eventually made it into the hands of Dublin Corporation member and *Sinn Fein* vice-president Tom Kelly, who read it to the council on April 19. Dublin Castle claimed the document was bogus, but its authenticity continues to be the source of debate among historians.[65] It is widely accepted by present-day scholars that I.R.B. member Joseph Plunkett fabricated parts of the document to spur the Irish Volunteers to armed insurrection.

Unaware of the I.R.B.'s secretive plans to launch an insurrection on Easter Sunday, Eoin MacNeill, upon reading the document, was persuaded by senior colleagues to instruct regional and local commanders to be ready to mobilize their forces to defend their weapons if the British attempted to suppress them.[66] The British Navy's interception of a German ship [*The Aud*] full of guns destined for the Irish Volunteers, and the arrest of Sir Roger Casement[67] on the Southwest coast of Ireland prompted MacNeill, who was now approached by the I.R.B.'s inner circle to join with them in revolution, to issue a countermand to all Volunteers not to follow Pearse's request to

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[65] See Bill McCormack, "What is a forgery or a catalyst? The so-called 'Castle Document' of Holy Week 1916," in *Making 1916: Material and Visual Culture of the Easter Rising,* eds. Lisa Godson and Joanna Bruck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015) for his forensic analysis of whether and to what extent the Castle Document was a forgery.

[66] Michael Foy and Brian Barton, *The Easter Rising* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1999), 47.

[67] Born in 1864 in Dublin, Roger Casement served as a distinguished British Consul, and in 1911 received a knighthood for work. Due to poor health he retired from service and moved back to Dublin. He was swept up by the Irish Nationalist cause and helped to form the Irish Volunteers in 1913. Over time he became more radical, and during the Great War attempted to get financial and military support for the Irish separatist movement from the U.S.A. and Germany. Disappointed with Germany's half-hearted support to aid an insurrection in Ireland, Casement reached County Kerry aboard a German submarine on April 21, 1916, to deliver the news to MacNeill, whom he still believed to be in full control of the Volunteers. The British Navy received intelligence of Casement's whereabouts, and was quickly arrested on charges of treason, espionage and sabotage against the Crown.

begin parading on April 23. Despite MacNeill's orders the I.R.B. decided its plans for a rising would go ahead, albeit a day later on Easter Monday.

When Birrell and Nathan learned of the British Navy's interception of the *Aud*, laden with Germany weaponry, and of the arrest of Casement, they expressed relief and concurred this was now the end of any coordinated attempt at armed rebellion.[68] Redmond and Dillon were in London when they heard about the *Aud*, and the latter immediately rushed back to Dublin to consult with party members on the crisis. On Easter Monday about 1,600 men, under the direction of the I.R.B., launched an insurrection in Dublin city against British rule in Ireland. Irish Volunteer leader Eoin MacNeill's last minute attempt to stop the armed rebellion through his countermanding order, published in the *Irish Independent* newspaper, led to chaos and confusion, resulting in fewer rebels participating in the capital, and very few skirmishes in the West and South of the country. The insurgents quickly seized strategic locations across Dublin much to the bemusement of the local population, and in the early afternoon, upon the steps of the General Post Office, Padraig Pearse read a proclamation declaring Ireland an independent republic.

The Chief Secretary was at a Cabinet meeting in London when Commander-in Chief of Home Forces, Field Marshall Lord French informed them of the rising in Dublin. Birrell was startled by the news and wondered whether or not the insurrection was a response to the failed Casement landing, or if it had already been contemplated in

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[68] Meleady, *John Redmond*, 367.

conjunction with the arrival of weapons from Germany.[69] After answering several questions about the crisis in the House of Commons, Birrell set sail for Dublin early on Thursday. On his motorcar trip to the Viceregal Lodge through streets under British control, he saw evidence of the destruction of a city he had grown to love. On April 26 martial law was imposed in Dublin, and the next day Major-General Sir John Maxwell arrived in Ireland as the new Commander-in-Chief of British forces in the country. On April 28, Birrell reached Dublin Castle, where he met with Nathan, Attorney-General Campbell and Solicitor General James O'Connor, who all agreed it would be unwise to extend martial law to the rest of Ireland, for fear of stoking further unrest.[70]

The insurrection destroyed much of central Dublin, and the sight of the devastation left Birrell disconsolate. He told Asquith the violence had "shattered" him, and that it most likely would swallow up all the good that was to come from the Liberal government's Irish legislation.[71] Fortuitously for the rebels, only four hundred British troops were stationed in Dublin on the morning of the Rising. They hoped their actions would evoke a wave of public support but this did not materialize. Over the course of Easter week the revolutionaries were crushed by the better equipped and trained British reinforcements sent to Dublin from Liverpool. In all, 485 people were killed during the insurrection, including a large number of civilians, and the number of wounded

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[69] Birrell to Nathan, April 24, 1916, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16, Bodleian Library Archives.

[70] Birrell to Asquith, April 28, 1916, MSS Asquith 11-12, The Papers of Herbert Asquith f. 138, Bodleian Library Archives.

[71] Ibid.

exceeded 2,600. On April 30, Birrell wrote to Asquith to tell him the rebellion was almost at an end [Pearse signed an order for general unconditional surrender at 3:45pm that day], and that he expected the surrender of the rebels by Tuesday at the latest. He told his premier that what occurred in Dublin was not an Irish rebellion because the rebels did not represent nor did they have the support of the people of Ireland. He hoped the British response to the violence would not cause the violence to transform into a real rebellion. Ireland, Birrell knew from his time spent studying its history, had a long tradition of worshiping its martyred dead. Knowing his time was surely up as Chief Secretary in Ireland, Birrell told Asquith no-one could ever effectively govern Ireland from England, save for in a state of siege. He admonished those "loyalists" whom, he was sure, welcomed the violence for their own personal political gain. Birrell believed there were some Irish Unionists who wished for a return to their glory days of a Protestant Ascendency in Ireland, but he sincerely hoped something good could arise from the despair of it all.[72]

On May 2, aboard a small destroyer, Birrell set off from Dublin's docks to the Welsh port of Holyhead, as he made his way back to London to tender his resignation. Not an enthusiast of ships and stormy seas, this was his final departure from an island he had grown to love. When he reached London, Birrell first went to visit with the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street, whom he found to be deeply distressed by what had transpired in Dublin. Upon accepting the Chief Secretary's resignation, Asquith

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[72] Birrell to Asquith, April 30, 1916, MSS Asquith 11-12, The Papers of Herbert Asquith f. 141, Bodleian Library Archives.

proceeded to the nearest window where he quietly wept while jingling some coins in his pocket.[73] The following day Birrell announced his resignation to the House of Commons. He spoke of his regret that he made an untrue estimate of the *Sinn Fein* movement, and that he did not seek to disarm the disloyal elements in Irish society. In his defense, however, he asked the House to consider the consequences of such an action in the delicate political atmosphere. He pleaded for clemency for the "dupes" who were led astray by the rebel leaders, so that the tragedy would not be revered in Irish nationalist memory as a genuine rebellion with a long list of heroic martyrs.

Shortly after Birrell's speech John Redmond rose to pay tribute to the outgoing Chief Secretary. He said he held the same viewpoint as Birrell that the possibility of a concerted outbreak of violence on such a scale was remote, and therefore wished to share the blame which lay upon the Chief Secretary's shoulders. In a tribute to his friend, Redmond said:

> "The right hon. Gentleman leaves Ireland under melancholy circumstances, but he has some consolations. During his term of office he has conferred some great and imperishable benefits upon Ireland. His name will always be honourably associated in the minds of all classes of the Irish people with the creation of the National University, and with all that he has done for the educational interests of the country, and I can assure him that he takes with him into his retirement—and

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[73] Jenkins, *Asquith,* 396.

> it will be a consolation to him in the melancholy circumstances—the respect, the good-will, and, to use the phrase of the Prime Minister, the affection of large masses of the Irish people."

Carson, on the other hand, had nothing positive to say about Birrell's administration of Ireland, saying they had always been in direct conflict with each other, although he did express regret that his time as head of Dublin Castle ended under such unfortunate circumstances.[74]

The editors of the Irish *Freeman's Journal* newspaper, the paper of choice for Irish Party supporters, said Birrell's failure was the common failure of every Englishman who attempted to rule Ireland from Dublin Castle. They spoke of his remarkable achievements with land reforms and in higher education. The fruits of Birrell's successes would be garnered by future generations long after the fallout from the insurrection had been repaired. Good men and peace loving citizens, they were sure, would always remember the good he brought to the country as Chief Secretary.[75] On the other hand, for people like Viscount Midleton of the Irish Unionist Alliance, Birrell was primarily to blame for the Easter Rising:

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[74] "Resignation of Mr. Birrell," *HC Deb 03 May 1916 vol. 82 cc30-9.*

[75] Freeman's Journal, May 6, 1916, 2.

> "If Birrell had been a German spy, which he is not, he could not have done more against this country."[76]

The Church of Ireland's John Baptist Crozier, who was the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland was just as scathing, and said the Rising was an inevitable insurrection that everyone knew was coming except for the "professional humourist" Mr. Birrell.[77]

A Royal Commission of Inquiry was established under Charles, Baron Hardinge of Penhurst, a former Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office and Viceroy of India, to investigate the causes of the Rising. He was assisted by two other judges: Sir Montague Shearman and Sir Mackenzie Chalmers. The Commission began its work on May 18, and over the next nine days, in both London and Dublin, heard evidence from key political and military figures in Ireland including Augustine Birrell and Sir Neville Chamberlain, the Inspector General of the Royal Irish Constabulary. On the Commission's second day Birrell was called and examined. When asked for the reasons for *Sinn Fein*'s persistence and support over the past decade, Birrell pointed to British failures in Ireland from when the Act of Union took effect in January 1801. He suggested that if Catholic Emancipation had been passed in congruence with the Act of Union, if meaningful land reforms had taken place much sooner, if the Protestant Church

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[76] Duffy, *The Integrity of Ireland,* 101.

[77] Scholes, *The Church of Ireland,* 111.

of Ireland had been disestablished "a little bit more," and if the question of higher education had been addressed sooner then perhaps a movement such as *Sinn Fein* might never have arisen. Due to the meaningful reforms from both the Liberal and Conservatives governments over the past twenty years the *Sinn Fein* organization was, he claimed, largely restricted, but the controversy surrounding the Home Rule Bill allowed it to grow. Birrell suggested the Gaelic literary revival of the late 19th century evoked a latent desire for a separate Irish national existence, but he felt certain this would never translate into open rebellion. The suspension of Home Rule, and popular rumors that the Act would never be enforced even after the war was over benefited *Sinn Fein*. The inclusion of Carson, a man despised by many Irishmen outside of Ulster, in the Coalition government, made matters worse for the defenders of constitutional Nationalism.

Later in his testimony he focused on his role as Chief Secretary. He said that from the moment he took up the position in 1907 he believed it was his duty to spend most of his time in London because parliament had a bad habit of neglecting Ireland if the Chief Secretary was not sitting in on Cabinet legislative discussions. He stated that this did not hinder his administration of Ireland because he always remained in constant contact with Dublin Castle through his private wire at the Irish Office in London. Birrell defended his decision not to forcibly disarm the Irish Volunteers because:

> "You would have had to attack these people and disarm them, and whether that was done north, south, east or west, it would have resulted in bloodshed."

The administration's policy of non-intervention applied equally to Ulster and the rest of the country. It would have been unfair and unwise, he argued, to single out a particular group for disarmament. Furthermore, despite his reservations, Birrell said he came to accept Irish Party leader's John Redmond insistence that the *Sinn Feiners* were an insignificant bunch incapable of causing much harm.[78]

Writing to Nathan the following day, Birrell condemned the Commission for its bias against him. He expressed surprise that he was not to be called to the stand again for further questioning, but he was not terribly disappointed because the enquiry was a "meagre jejune performance." A Royal Commission such as this could only begin to scratch the surface of the problems in Ireland. He was particularly incensed that those witnesses who spoke ill of his administration were not cross-examined, and was convinced their biased reporting of events was bound to appear in the final report. Birrell's letter to Nathan, who had resigned his position as Under-Secretary on May 3, was one of sadness, anger and regret. He expressed his disappointment in his own shortcomings, found it infuriating both Redmond and Dillon declined to speak before the Commission where they could have defended his character, and was saddened to see the Irish press so full of negativity.[79]

The report of the Hardinge Commission was published on June 26, 1916. It stated that because of the war parliament had been in almost continuous session for the

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[78] "Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland 1916," D1507/A/17/28, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

[79] Birrell to Nathan, May 20, 1916, MS Nathan 449 Letters from A.B. 1914-16 f. 367, Bodleian Library Archives.

past two and a half years, meaning Chief Secretary Birrell could only remain in Ireland for short periods of time. To keep up to date on Ireland's state of affairs he relied mainly on reports from Under-Secretary Nathan and from Irish M.P.s in parliament, upon which he based many of his decisions. It also found the Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police ill-equipped to deal with political crimes, while the non-enforcement of the Unlawful Drilling Act of 1819 meant drilling and military exercises went unchecked by the government. The report was full of criticisms of the administrative and intelligence systems in Ireland and claimed that lawlessness was allowed to grow unchecked by its leadership. Ireland, it concluded, was administered:

> "on the principle that it was safer and more expedient to leave law in abeyance if collision with any faction of the Irish people could thereby be avoided"[80]

The report was a harsh indictment of Birrell, which concluded that he, as the administrative head of government in Ireland, was primarily responsible for the chain of events leading up to the Rising.[81] To escape the fallout from the report and to avoid reading harsh epilogues of his Chief Secretaryship in the press, Birrell retreated to his

[80] "Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland: Report of Commission," p12.

[81] Ibid., 13.

cottage in Norfolk, where he busied himself writing a biography of his father-in-law Frederick Locker-Lampson.[82]

On March 6, 1918, Birrell's long-time friend John Redmond succumbed to heart failure after battling through several months of illness. Saddened by his death he wrote a moving tribute to the Irish leader in *The Times* newspaper. Birrell said Redmond could always be trusted more implicitly than almost any other politician he knew because he was always a man of his word. The Irish Party leader, Birrell eulogized, "was constitutionally incapable of giving anybody away who had trusted him."[83] In December 1918, Birrell decided not to contest his parliamentary seat of North Bristol, because he was well and truly done with politics. Instead he focused on his favorite hobbies of reading and writing. In 1929 Birrell accepted an honorary doctorate from the National University of Ireland, but a stormy Irish Sea prevented him from crossing over to receive his degree, so he accepted it *in abstentia*. That same year, he wrote a letter to Andrew Magill, his former private secretary at Dublin Castle, with whom he had maintained a close friendship in his twilight years. Birrell said he often dreamed of Ireland and its beautiful scenery, but never of Dublin Castle or the Viceregal Lodge.[84] He said he was proud of his achievements in Ireland, and his only regret was that he should have resigned in 1914 when war erupted on the continent. By that stage he felt he had done all

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[82] Charles W. Magill, ed., *From Dublin Castle to Stormont: The Memoirs of Andrew Philip Magill 1913-1925* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), 7.

[83] Gwynn, *John Redmond*, 194.

[84] Birrell to Magill, December 5, 1929, MS Eng. let c 213 f. 132, Bodleian Library Archives.

he could for Ireland through his education and land purchase reforms, and he was proud to help secure the passage of the Home Rule Bill through parliament.[85] History associates Augustine Birrell with all that went wrong in Ireland during the Great War, but he spent nine years as Chief Secretary and for most of that time he delivered remarkable improvements for the Irish people.

[85] Birrell, *Things Past Redress*, 217.

CHAPTER VII

A BRIEF CONCLUSION

Between the enforcement of the Act of Union in1801 and Augustine Birrell's appointment in 1907 Irish Chief Secretaries had spent on average slightly less than two years in the job. The administration of Ireland was undoubtedly a challenging and thankless task for those willing to accept the responsibility of governing a remarkably polarized country from Dublin Castle. The French Revolution of 1789 inspired the growth of nationalist movements all across Europe including in Ireland. Throughout the 19th century Ireland periodically experienced outbursts of coordinated violence from those seeking self-governance. When Birrell became Chief Secretary in 1907 the Irish Party under the leadership of John Redmond, seeking to resurrect the case for a third Home Rule Bill for Ireland, proposed legislation that had been the undoing of the Liberal Party on two previous occasions.

Birrell's formative political years were much influenced by his party leader William Gladstone, who was a passionate champion of the necessity for Irish Home Rule. Furthermore, although he had no personal knowledge of Ireland before he crossed the Irish Sea in January 1907, Birrell, being a literary man, knew much of its rich political history.[1] His friendly political interaction with Redmond and Dillon throughout 1906, while he formulated an Education Bill for England and Wales, undoubtedly

[1] Birrell, *Some Reflections on Ireland*, MS 8 6 (1), Liverpool University Archives.

inclined him to remain close to them when he first reached Dublin Castle in an unfamiliar country.

Birrell's time as Irish Chief Secretary left a mixed bag of successes and failures, but it is incorrect, as many have done in the past, to condemn his efforts to better govern Ireland, or simply to treat his long administration as a mere prelude to the bloody Easter Rising of 1916. His close interaction with the leaders of Irish Nationalism resulted in remarkable achievements in land reform and education. His Land Act of 1909 was a landmark piece of legislation that addressed most of the peasantry's grievances, and effectively ended agrarian unrest across the country. The Chief Secretary's amendments to Wyndham's 1903 Land Act truly benefitted Irish farmers because:

> "By early 1913 about 250,000 holdings comprising eight million acres of land had been sold. Of these, only about one-third of the transactions had taken place under the provisions prior to the 1903 act. By March 1919 the Congested Districts Board had resold some 23,000 holdings (of some 585,000 acres) in its area of operation, and together with the Land Commissioners and Estates Commissioners had sold 285,000 holdings totaling 9.3 million acres. This amounted to about half of the agricultural land in Ireland."[2]

[2] Timothy W. Guinnane and Ronald I. Miller, "The Limits to Land Reform: The Land Acts in Ireland, 1870-1909," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 45, no. 3 (1997): 596.

Birrell successfully managed to hasten the demise of landlordism, a contentious problem that had been a source of major political and economic tension throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and by doing so brought about a fairer distribution of economic wealth. Redmond lauded Birrell's Irish University Act of 1908 as a groundbreaking reform measure, which allowed Ireland's Roman Catholic population to seek higher education without fear of religious persecution. Even Irish revolutionary Padraig Pearse, the leader of the famous 1916 insurrection praised the "honest Englishman" for his efforts.[3] The establishment of the National University of Ireland and Queen's University of Belfast solved sectarian problems in higher education, and young scholars today from all communities continue to enjoy the opportunities afforded to them with the establishment of these well-respected institutions.

This study has attempted to examine the depth and consequences of the relationship between Birrell and the leaders of the Irish Party. Nowhere was this more evident than during the dramas of the Budget Crisis 1909-1911 and the Home Rule Crisis 1912-1914. The Chief Secretary understood the importance of the Liberal-Irish Party alliance after the 1910 General Elections, and believed his trustworthy Irish partner Redmond's assessment of Ulster Unionism to be sufficient for him to base his policies. Birrell acted virtually as Redmond's voice during Cabinet discussions on the Third Home Rule Bill, believed Redmond when he told him the Ulster Unionist movement was mostly bluster, accepted his assurance that to disarm the Ulster Volunteer Force was a risk not worth taking, and honored the Irish Party leader's request to not disturb the

[3] Dermot Moran, "Nationalism, Religion and the Education Question," *The Crane Bag* 7, no. 2 (1983): 77.

voices of sedition during the Great War so as to not weaken the constitutional nationalist movement.

As a member of the British Cabinet, and as the Home Rule debate intensified in the early 1910s Irish Chief Secretary Birrell found himself increasingly spending his time in London, where he believed he could be most useful in representing the interests of the Irish Party. Most unfortunately, his wife's prolonged suffering with a fatal brain tumor, and the outbreak of the Great War meant he was rarely in Dublin during the second half of his administration. He gauged the gravity of political problems in Ireland often on the opinions of Irish M.P.s with whom he conversed at Westminster, oftentimes leaving himself vulnerable to biased opinions and misinformation. His absence from Ireland unfortunately kept him out of touch with the pulse of Ulster Unionism. In fact, even on his occasional trips to Ireland during his last four years in charge he rarely visited Ulster. One Ulster Unionist newspaper sneered that Birrell could probably only recognize by face a half dozen Ulstermen.[4]

Renowned Irish Party M.P. Stephen Gwynn, who represented Galway City from 1906-1918, once admitted to Lady Aberdeen that he and his fellow party members liked Mr. Birrell "more than is natural for Irish members to like a Chief Secretary."[5] Historian Denis Gwynn, the son of the aforementioned Stephen Gwynn, best summed up the relationship between Birrell and Redmond:

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[4] Presbyterian Witness, July 3, 1914.

[5] Elizabeth Anne Muenger, "The British Army in Ireland, 1886-1914" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1981), 64. Lady Aberdeen was the wife of the Lord Aberdeen who served as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1905-1915.

> "A real affection grew on both sides from their constant dealings with each other; and there can be few precedents for the extraordinary frankness with which Birrell kept Redmond informed of everything that concerned his Party. No politician in history has ever been less capable of deceit than Mr. Birrell."[6]

The close political connection between these two men influenced the Chief Secretary's political decision-making throughout his nine years in office, and this ultimately led to his undoing. His relationship with Redmond and the Irish Party meant he lost sight of his true obligation as a British Liberal Party cabinet member responsible for the fair and effective governance of Ireland. Such was his mindset that the leaders of Irish and British Unionism can hardly be blamed for their mistrust of him.

Scholarly studies of Irish history in the years leading up to the Easter Rising of 1916 have too often neglected the role of Augustine Birrell in helping to shape those events. He can no longer be simply regarded as the man who sat idly by while separatist movements flourished in the country. Birrell's legacy can best be remembered through the words of his good friend Sir Henry Robinson:

> "He was an ideal chief, and if legislative work was the criterion of a Chief Secretary's success his services would rank higher than those of any Chief Secretary except perhaps Gerald Balfour….But a Chief Secretary's reputation

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[6] Denis Gywnn, "John Redmond and English Politicians," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 21, no. 81 (1932): 26.

> will always be founded to a large extent on the relative prosperity and peacefulness of the country upon his appointment and his retirement, and judged by this standard Birrell stands condemned, as he found the country prosperous and peaceful and left it in a state of armed rebellion."[7]

Birrell's economic and social reforms were crucially important to the future of Ireland, and his political persuasion and alliance with the leaders of Irish Nationalism indirectly set the country on a course towards the establishment of an Irish Free State in 1922.

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[7] Sir Henry Robinson, *Memories: Wise and Otherwise* (London: New York Cassell & Co., 1923) 195-196. As Chief Secretary, Birrell was the *ex-officio* president of the Local Government Board of Ireland while Robinson held the position of vice-president. With Robinson at the wheel, both men enjoyed their motorcar trips together across the Irish countryside whether it was to meet with the Congested Districts Board, the Local Government Board or the Agricultural Department. In his book, Robinson said that Mr. and Mrs. Birrell were enamored by the beauty of the Irish countryside and always looked forward to their next trip with him in his Cadillac motorcar.

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Meath Chronicle

Irish Examiner

Drogheda Argus and Leinster Journal

Strabane Chronicle

British Papers:

The Times

Glasgow Herald

Manchester Guardian

APPENDIX

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