

FEATURE

How unionism united a century ago to win fight against Home Rule

A CAMPAIGN MARKED BY A DEGREE OF BITTERNESS AND CONSTITUTIONAL INSTABILITY NOT SEEN SINCE THE 17TH CENTURY

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This month marks an important centenary. In January 1914 the Conservative Party (known then universally as the Unionist Party) entered the final phase of a militant, two-year campaign against Herbert Asquith's Home Rule Bill for Ireland – a campaign marked by a degree of bitterness and constitutional instability not seen since the 17th century.

Asquith was howled down in the Commons; Churchill was struck on the forehead by a book hurled at him from the Unionist benches; sittings were suspended in disorder.

The cause of the strife was the refusal of Asquith's minority government, dependent on the support of 85 Irish Nationalist MPs, to call an election or hold a referendum before implementing legislation to establish an all-Ireland devolved parliament in Dublin. The issue had hardly featured at the most recent general election in December 1910 when the parties had been locked in bitter dispute over the Liberals' plan to end the Lords' veto on legislation. The Irish Nationalists delivered a majority for Home Rule in the Commons where the Unionists were the largest party; in the Lords, the overwhelming Unionist majority against it was due to be over-ridden by the new Parliament Act no later than the summer of 1914.

Andrew Bonar Law, the toughest and most outspoken leader the Conservative Party has ever had, repeatedly pressed the case for an election in some of the strongest language ever used by a senior Tory politician.

"We do not recognise the Liberal cabinet", he said, as "the constitutional government of a free people. We regard them as a revolutionary committee which has entered by fraud upon despotic power."

Thanks to Ulster's resistance, the Unionists possessed the power to prevent a devolved parliament in Dublin exercising power throughout Ireland. In January 1914 some 100,000 men, organised and trained (quite legally under warrants granted by local magistrates) as members of the Ulster Volunteer Force, stood ready to carry out the orders of a provisional government, set up in shadow form by Sir Edward Carson, which made clear that it would take power in Ulster as soon as Asquith's legislation came into effect. By the spring the UVF would be equipped with 35,000 rifles and ammunition procured in the Kaiser's Germany. This remarkable citizens' army presented a fine spectacle on parade, winning fulsome praise from an English woman who watched a contingent in the grounds of Belfast Castle: "No one who wasn't there can realise the feeling it gave one to see those thousands of men, with their heads bowed while the prayers were offered up, join in 'O God our help in ages past', and to see them marching past, old men and boys, rich men and poor men, side by side, all cheerfully ready to sacrifice themselves for the cause they hold so dear."

The UVF received the full support of Bonar Law, a man deeply conscious of his family's Ulster roots, who visited the Province frequently, often in the company of large groups of English MPs. For the first time Unionists throughout the entire United Kingdom were brought together effectively in partnership within a common political movement. Some 5,000 Unionist meetings in England were addressed by Ulster colleagues. Over six million Ulster Unionist pamphlets were handed out in constituencies in Great Britain. In the early months of 1914 over 1,250 people drawn from 116 constituencies visited their fellow Unionists in Ulster. Nothing like it had happened before – and no similar demonstration of Unionist unity would ever occur again.

Bonar Law was prepared to concede that Nationalist Ireland could have Home Rule if Unionist Ulster was exempted



A Home-Rule defeat, 1912 (lithograph) by Samuel Begg. The Third Home Rule Bill, passed by the House of Commons by 10 votes in 1912 but rejected by the House of Lords, finally passed using the Parliament Act in 1914 to become the Home Rule Act

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from it, so removing from the whole of Ireland the spectre of civil war. That was the clear message conveyed in a speech which the Unionist leader delivered in Bristol on 15 January 1914.

"We think Home Rule is a great evil, but we think civil war is an evil infinitely greater, and if the Government could make to us any proposal would do away with the prospect of civil strife, we... should be ready to consider it. Ulster has been given an unshakeable commitment that it would not be forced under the authority of a Dublin government. We intend, with the help of the Almighty, to keep that pledge. We are bound in honour to Ulster to use every means – any means – which seem to us effective, to prevent the coercion of Ulster.

Bonar Law went on to reveal that cross-party talks had already taken place to explore the possibilities of compromise.

"There have been conversations between party leaders, but so far they have been without result", he said.

Long hours of wrangling over the terms of an Ulster

deal lay ahead. There were times when the prospect of civil war seemed to be advancing, not retreating. In mid-March the possibility that extra troops would be drafted into Ulster to confront the UVF precipitated a threat of resignations among officers serving in Ireland, the notorious Curragh Mutiny.

Slowly, however, compromise inched forward.

Full agreement on how "the coercion of Ulster" was to be avoided had not been reached when the First World War broke out in August 1914. The precise boundaries of Unionist Ulster – the area to be excluded from the Home Rule Bill – remained in dispute. But the partition of Ireland had been firmly accepted in principle as the only way of resolving the crisis (as indeed it was). Nationalists in Ireland and the left in Britain who, then and later, denounced partition as "a crime against the Irish people" put the sanctity of their beliefs before their obligation to secure peace.

In the long-term interests of the entire British Isles, partition should have been

carried out as Bonar Law intended, leaving Unionist Ulster (finally defined as the six counties that became Northern Ireland in 1920) under direct Westminster rule. The records of Bonar Law's private conversations with Asquith, referred to in his January speech, show that "he dismissed as unacceptable all schemes for giving [Ulster] a local legislature and executive of its own. Legislation must remain with the Imperial Parliament. The Ulster men could not (without sacrificing their root principle) recognise any other law-making process." But Lloyd George in 1920 insisted on installing a separate parliament at Stormont which perpetuated searing local divisions – with disastrous consequences 50 years later.

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