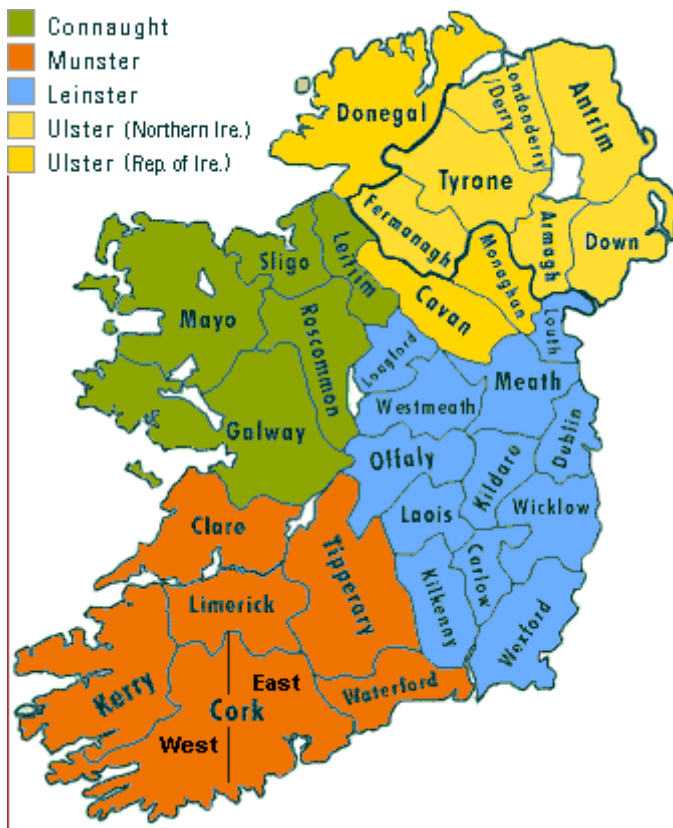


ENGLISH CULTURE. FACT FILES.

IRISH HISTORY. THE HOME RULE QUESTION.



Home Rule came to dominate domestic British politics in the era 1885 to the start of [World War One](#). Home Rule effectively started in [Ireland](#) in 1870 but in British politics, [Gladstone](#) was converted to it in the 1880's. Home Rule was the name given to the process of allowing Ireland more say in how it was governed – freeing them from the rule of London and thus appeasing those in Ireland who wanted Ireland to have more home derived power.

One of the main barriers to Home Rule for decades had been the House of Lords. In 1911, the Parliament Act effectively reduced their power to that of delay as opposed to one of outright rejection. In 1886 and 1893, there had been two Home Rule bills but both were rejected

and killed off by the Lords. The House of Lords saw the introduction of Home Rule as the start of the process whereby the power of London was reduced, first in Ireland – and then where else? The leader of the Irish Nationalist Party, John Redmond, had stated quite clearly in 1910 that it was the Lord's veto alone that came between Ireland and a successful Home Rule bill.

In 1910, Herbert Asquith's Liberal government had fought two general elections and they only held onto power by forming political alliances. In 1910, this was with the Irish Nationalist Party. In exchange for supporting the government, Redmond wanted something in return – Home Rule.

However, Home Rule was not a political vote winner for the Liberals and Asquith. When the Lords rejected the Home Rule bills of 1886 and 1893, there was barely a whimper of protest in mainland Britain. [Gladstone's](#) crusade in the 1880's and 1890's was not matched even in the Liberal Party. Even Asquith was not a natural supporter of Home Rule. In 1902, he said:

"Is it to be part of the policy and programme of our party that, if returned to power, it will introduce into the House of Commons a bill for Irish Home Rule? The answer, in my judgment, is No."

However, by 1910, Asquith was not in the position to bargain. If he wanted power in Britain as a whole, he needed Redmond's support. During the two election campaigns

of 1910, very few campaigning Liberal politicians even mentioned Home Rule. It was as if there was an attempt to bury the issue in mainland Britain – especially as it was known to be a contentious issue amongst the voting public at large. Even senior Liberal politicians were not in favour of Home Rule in 1910: Asquith, at best, was lukewarm; Sir Edward Grey was barely in favour of it; Lloyd George and Winston Churchill were more concerned with social reforms to the welfare system than with Ireland.

Redmond knew exactly where he stood with the Liberals. No-one could call the relationship between the Liberals and the Irish Nationalists a positive one and Redmond did not delude himself about this. However, in 1910, he was very much the reason why Asquith found himself Prime Minister again. Redmond could push for a speedy introduction of a Home Rule Bill but he had little control over what details was in it.

One of the major problems faced by Asquith was appeasing those in the region known as Ulster who were against any form of Home Rule.

The opposition to Asquith in Parliament had now adopted the title the Unionist Party. It comprised of an assortment of parties but was dominated by the Conservative Party. They were naturally opposed to Home Rule. Before 1910, the Unionists had put their faith in the House of Lords rejecting any form of Home Rule Bill – as proved to be the case in 1886 and 1893. After the Parliament Act of 1911, they could no longer do this. The Unionists feared that any form of Home Rule would lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom. In this they had the full support of many.

Some Unionists like George Wyndham, believed that the country had every reason to use every means at its disposal to stop Home Rule in its tracks – including using the army to stop Asquith!

"(The Tories and the King) have the money, the Army and the Navy and the Territorials, all down to the Boy Scouts. Why then should they consent to a change in the constitution without fighting?" (Wyndham)

By 1911, the Unionists were led by Arthur Bonar Law who was against Home Rule. However, despite all the arguments for and against Home Rule, a Home Rule Bill was introduced into Parliament in April 1912. Its contents were similar to the ones of 1886 and 1893. It would introduce:

1. Purely Irish questions would be dealt with by an Irish Parliament
2. Parliament in Westminster would deal with all issues relating to the crown, army and navy, foreign policy and custom duties.
3. Irish members would still be in Westminster.

Asquith saw this bill as the start of a process that would free up Westminster from would could be seen as local issues to deal with more important imperial issues – especially as Britain was the world's largest imperial power. In this sense, the Home Rule Bill was the start of a devolutionary process. Asquith knew that the Lords would not support the bill. He also knew that he had about two years from the start of the process (the bill being introduced) before time ran out to get a compromise through. In

a letter to Winston Churchill, it is clear that Asquith knew that a compromise was needed:

"I always thought that, in the end, we should probably have to make some sort of bargain about Ulster as the price of Home Rule."

However, all talk of Home Rule ended when World War One broke out. Redmond agreed that the issue should be postponed for the duration of the war. Many in Ireland agreed that this was the patriotic thing to do - even staunch supporters of Home Rule. They saw the threat of Germany as being a far greater issue to overcome. Many Irishmen joined the call to arms and fought in Western Europe. However, there were those who were greatly angered by what they saw as Redmond's acquiescence to Westminster, even if they were small in number. It was these people - [James Connolly](#), [Patrick Pearse](#), Eamonn de Valera etc. - who led the [Easter Uprising in 1916](#).