

Home Rule and the Third Government of Ireland Act Part 1

The Home Rule Movement was initiated by Isaac Butt in 1870. Its premise was to establish a parliament for the Irish people by constitutional means. The Movement gradually evolved into the Irish Parliamentary Party, which sat in Westminster Parliament. The Irish Parliamentary Party had tried unsuccessfully, on two occasions (first in 1886 then in 1893) to bring in Home Rule. On both occasions, these Acts gave severely limited powers but none the less still failed to pass through the two houses of the British Parliament.

It would not be till 1910, after two general elections, which resulted in hung parliaments whereby neither of the main parties could form a government that the Irish Parliamentary Party found itself in a position to argue the case for Home Rule once more. Under its leader John Redmond, the Irish Parliamentary Party offered its support to the Liberals on the basis that they would introduce a third Government of Ireland Act.



John Redmond

The Liberal Leader Herbert Asquith introduced the Third Government of Ireland Act on the 11th of April, 1912 where it passed by a slim majority but was rejected by the House of Lords. On previous occasions, the House of Lords had the right to indefinitely, veto any piece of legislation. In 1911, the laws were changed so that an Act could only be vetoed by the Lords for a maximum of two years. By 1913, the Act was passed again by the Commons but rejected by the Lords. This meant that once the Bill passed the Commons floor a third time it would be sent straight for Royal Assent and signed into law.

This Act provided for much more than the previous Home Rule Bills. Ireland would have had a parliament with an upper and lower house, while retaining a much reduced representation in the British Parliament. An important part of the third Home Rule Act lay in the abolishment of Dublin Castle as an administration centre. Dublin Castle was synonymous with British misrule and tyranny in Ireland, the institution's abolishment would have been welcomed by the vast majority of Irish people.

The Act had severe limitations. The Head of Executive was the Lord Lieutenant, someone who would be answerable to a Westminster Government. He had the power to both veto or postpone bills. In addition, the Westminster Parliament could amend or veto any bills it so wished. The Irish representation would also affectively be halved in Westminster meaning its previous power to act as kingmaker would be greatly diminished. All revenue gained outside of the Post Office would also be returned to England. This was a far step from independence.

Despite these limitations, the Unionist population who controlled the industrial heartland of the Northeast of Ireland were quickly raised in alarm at the proposed Home Rule Act. They felt that Home Rule would mean "Rome Rule", as nationalists tended to be Catholic, though not exclusively (Irish Citizen Army founder Jack White, Countess Markievicz and Erskine Childers were just some of the many Protestants that influenced the Rising). The fear of the introduction of Home Rule caused the Unionists to form what they called the "Ulster Volunteer Force", a well armed and well trained paramilitary force which would fight the introduction of Home Rule to Loyalist Ulster. This action of introducing the gun into Irish politics in the 20th Century made it necessary for the Nationalists to form the Irish Volunteers, a similar paramilitary organisation to insure Irish self governance.

By 1914, Prime Minister Asquith had agreed with Unionist Leader Edward Carson that a subsequent amending bill of the Government of Ireland Act excluding 6 of Ulster's 9 counties would be desired. John Redmond would spend the rest of his career trying to find a compromise that would bring Home Rule without partition.

The Act was passed by Westminster in 1914 but its enactment was postponed till after the conclusion of the First World War.