1. The Third Home Rule Bill

The Third Home Rule Bill of 1912 was an effort by the Liberal government of the day to accommodate nationalist opinion in Ireland which favoured the establishment of an Irish parliament in Dublin. The movement for “Home Rule” was committed to constitutional methods to attain a measure of self-government whereby Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom.

Two previous efforts to establish such a settlement had been made by Liberal Governments. The first bill, in 1886, had split the Liberal Party, and was consequently defeated. The second, in 1893, passed in the House of Commons but was rejected by the House of Lords.

With this third attempt to establish Home Rule, the Liberal government under Herbert Asquith was relying on the support of Irish Nationalist MPs at Westminster to help guide the bill through Parliament. The Liberals had already passed legislation to limit the powers of the Conservative-dominated Lords – the second chamber could delay but no longer veto such a bill. Thus, it seemed the alliance of the Liberals and Irish Nationalist MPs would deliver an Irish Parliament at this third attempt.

2. Ireland in 1912

In 1912 Ireland had a population just under 4.5 million. The majority lived in the countryside, working in a largely agricultural economy. The main exception to this was the North-Eastern corner of the Ireland – the larger part of the province of Ulster which would later become Northern Ireland. Like the rest of the United Kingdom, this region had industrialised through the 19th century, with ship-building, textile manufacture and the production of linen leading this process. The North-East also differed from the rest of Ireland in that the population was largely Protestant – Catholics were in the majority in the more rural South and West.

Differences between the North-East and the rest of Ireland further increased with efforts to revive the native Irish language and Irish cultural practices from the late 19th century. Though this movement involved leading Protestant figures such as W. B. Yeats and the first President of independent Ireland, Douglas Hyde, most Ulster Protestants felt they had more in common with those across the Irish Sea in the industrial centres of Great Britain.

3. Nationalist Concerns

Cultural and religious differences, augmented by divergent economic interests, had combined to produce political divergence in Ireland in the 19th century. Unlike the industrial and Protestant North-East, many in the mainly Catholic and rural South and West of Ireland felt that their interests were not always best represented by a London Parliament. Moreover, even in the South and West, where Catholics were far more numerous, the Protestant minority were seen as enjoying a position of economic advantage.
The energies of a growing Catholic middle class were thus essential to the emergence of the Home Rule movement, with a Dublin Parliament – where Catholic MPs would hold a majority – being seen as a means to redress the political imbalance in Ireland. Many other Irish Catholics had also thrown their weight behind the Home Rule movement. Attracted by the promise of land reform, they also felt their grievances would be best addressed by an Irish Parliament.

Land reform had been a focus for Charles Stewart Parnell. An MP from 1875, Parnell was elected president of the newly founded National Land League in 1879. When the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, failed to deliver the reforms that Parnell had hoped for he withdrew his support for the Liberal Government and joined the opposition as the widely accepted leader of Irish Nationalism.

4. Unionist Concerns

The alliance of the Catholic middle class and rural population behind Home Rule served only to unite Irish Protestants in their opposition to such a prospect. They were concerned about the influence that the Catholic Church would have in a Parliament where Protestants would be in a clear minority, and the possible threat that this would pose to their religious and civil liberties. In the North-East, there was also anxiety regarding how an Irish Parliament would represent industries like ship-building, clearly tied into the economy of the British Empire. Indeed, economically, Belfast had more in common with Liverpool and Glasgow than Dublin, and worried that an Irish Parliament would be preoccupied with the interests of MPs representing more rural and agricultural constituencies in Ireland.

By the time of the Third Home Rule, Protestant opposition to a Dublin Parliament was concentrating its efforts where Unionism was strongest, in the North-East of Ireland. In September 1912, over half a million people signed the ‘Ulster Covenant’ – some in their own blood – which pledged them to defy Irish Home Rule “using all means which may be found necessary.” Adding substance to this threat, in 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was established as a Unionist militia dedicated to resisting the prospect of an Irish Parliament. However, Nationalists responded by forming the Irish Volunteer Force (IVF), with the implicit aim that the majority will in Ireland for Home Rule would not be defeated by Unionist opposition.

5. Constitutional Struggle

Mirroring the situation in Ireland, politics in Great Britain were also polarised at the time of the Third Home Rule Bill. The Liberals had traditionally supported Irish Home Rule, seeing it as a way to reconcile Irish Nationalist aspirations with the Union. The Conservatives historically opposed it, seeing the creation of an Irish Parliament as the first step in the break-up of the Union and the British Empire. A number of ‘Liberal Unionists’ broke with the Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, over Home Rule in 1886. They formally merged with the Conservatives in 1912 to form the Conservative and Unionist Party.

The Third Home Rule Bill was also part of a larger political and constitutional struggle at Westminster, as the Liberal government found its efforts at radical reform resisted by the Conservative-dominated Lords. This situation renewed the alliance between the Liberals and the Irish Nationalists. By supporting the Liberal agenda for reform, including the limitation of the Lords’ power of veto, the Nationalists were rewarded with the Third Home Rule Bill. As it was the Lords’ veto that had defeated the Second
Home Rule Bill, Irish Nationalist and Liberal reformist interests had become intertwined.

Correspondingly, the Conservatives' urge to support Ulster Unionists' efforts to defeat Home Rule, and so derail the Liberal programme of reform, was also strengthened. Thus the campaign for the creation of an Irish Parliament became part of a greater struggle at Westminster – for political supremacy between the Liberals and the Conservatives, and between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The political and constitutional futures of both Britain and Ireland were at stake in the battle over the Third Home Rule Bill.

6. Herbert Asquith and Andrew Bonar Law

Herbert Asquith, Prime Minister from 1908-16, was the man at the centre of this crisis. He was following in the footsteps of William Gladstone, the Liberal Prime Minister who had introduced the first two, and unsuccessful, Home Rule Bills. However, unlike Gladstone, who had devoted great energies to resolving the 'Irish Question', Asquith's alliance with Irish Nationalism was more pragmatic – a means to see through the Government's own reform programme.

It was Asquith's Chancellor, David Lloyd George, who was the real power behind this reformist agenda, and who had sparked the confrontation with the Lords with his radical 'People's Budget' of 1909. Designed to increase taxes in order to fund welfare reform, this had been thrown out by Lords. As well as sparking a constitutional crisis, the Lords' rejection of Lloyd George's budget led to a general election and a hung Parliament where the Liberals were forced to turn to the Irish Nationalists to remain in office. This marriage of convenience created an uneasy alliance, contrasting the combined opposition of the Conservatives and the Unionists who shared a greater ideological commitment.

Andrew Bonar Law became leader of the Conservative Party in November 1911. Born in New Brunswick, Bonar Law was a Glasgow iron merchant who had strong family connections with Ulster where he was a frequent visitor. He took over a Conservative Party which in 1911 had suffered three successive election defeats. The prospect of Home Rule gave Bonar Law the opportunity to re-unite his party around a cause to which he was personally so deeply committed. He gave the Conservatives' full support to the Ulster Unionists, declaring to a rally at Blenheim Palace in July 1912, that "I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster will go, in which I shall not be ready to support them".

7. John Redmond

Pictures –49 (main), 23, 56, 4, 2

John Redmond was leader of the Irish Home Rule Party from 1900 to 1918. An MP from the age of 24, he was a moderate Nationalist who had supported Parnell and had worked hard to reconcile relations with Unionism. Redmond saw Home Rule as a means to improve governance in Ireland, but felt that the country should remain within the United Kingdom.
The argument from Redmond was that only a devolved Irish administration based in Dublin and run by Irishmen could administer the country effectively. In 1886, Parnell stated that "as a Nationalist, I do not regard as entirely palatable the idea that forever and a day Ireland's voice should be excluded from the councils of an empire which the genius and valour of her sons have done so much to build up and of which she is to remain".

Many Irish Protestants felt that Redmond underestimated the depth of Unionist opposition to the prospect of Home Rule. By the time he began to engage seriously with Unionist concerns, the huge mobilisation of the Protestant North-East meant that any agreement over a Home Rule Parliament would involve at least a portion of Ulster being excluded from Dublin’s administration.

8. Edward Carson

Edward Carson was leader of the Irish Unionist Alliance and Ulster Unionist Party between 1910 and 1921. Born in Dublin, Carson had a successful legal career, prosecuting (amongst others) Land League agitators. He also defended the Marquess of Queensberry in the libel action taken against him by Oscar Wilde.

In a speech in 1921, Carson stated:

“There is no one in the world who would be more pleased to see an absolute unity in Ireland than I would, and it could be purchased tomorrow, at what does not seem to me a very big price. If the South and West of Ireland came forward tomorrow to Ulster and said – ‘Look here, we have to run our old island, and we have to run her together, and we will give up all this everlasting teaching of hatred of England, and we will shake hands with you, and you and we together, within the Empire, doing our best for ourselves and the United Kingdom, and for all His Majesty's Dominion will join together’, I will undertake that we would accept the handshake.”

The compromise of Irish partition was a cause of great disappointment to him, and his speeches in the House of Lords in the 1920s were marked by much bitterness. His advice on resigning as party leader in 1921 was for the Catholic minority of the new Northern Ireland state to be treated fairly.

9. Passing of the Bill

Though opposed to Home Rule for any part of Ireland, Carson thought that the threat to exclude Ulster from such an arrangement – effectively partitioning Ireland – would be enough to force Redmond to reconsider the prospect of an Irish Parliament altogether. On New Year’s Day 1913, he proposed an amendment to the Home Rule Bill which would exclude all nine counties of Ulster from rule by Dublin. However, as it became clear that Irish Nationalists would not surrender the ambition for self-government, Carson began to accept that the best that could be achieved was to prevent Ulster coming under such a jurisdiction. He effectively gave up on the idea that Southern Irish Protestants could avoid such a fate.

Similarly, Redmond accepted that he could not effect the establishment of an all-Ireland parliament in the face of Ulster Unionist opposition. However, the size of the
territory to be excluded from Dublin rule – whether all nine counties of Ulster, or only those where Protestants were in the majority – and whether this exclusion was to be temporary or permanent, continued to be debated with a series of proposed amendments to the Home Rule Bill. These issues had still not been resolved by the outbreak of the World War I in August 1914, with which the Third Home Rule Bill was effectively put on ice. The expectation was that the European conflict would be short, and the Home Rule issue could be resolved at its conclusion.

10. The First World War

When World War I broke out, many UVF members enlisted in the 36th (Ulster) Division of the British Army. Unionists hoped that this loyalty would be rewarded with the abandonment of the Home Rule Bill. Correspondingly, Redmond also called on members of the IVF to enlist in the British war effort – a means to show that Irish Nationalists could also remain loyal to the Empire in its hour of need, and so should be granted Home Rule. The 10th (Irish) Division, 16th (Irish) Division and 36th (Ulster) Division all sustained massive losses in key battles during the war.

Though most of the IVF heeded Redmond’s call, some saw the opportunity to make a bid for full independence for Ireland. In Easter 1916, they led an unsuccessful armed rebellion against British rule in Ireland. By the end of the War, Republican separatism had replaced the Home Rule movement as the pre-eminent Nationalist political force in Ireland. However, the Irish state which Republicans fought to achieve was even less palatable to Ulster Unionists than the Home Rule Parliament that Nationalists had sought before the War.

Ongoing conflict served to radicalise Nationalist Ireland in favour of a complete separation from Britain. Correspondingly, losses of the 36th Ulster Division served to renew the bond between Protestant Ulster and Britain in a common experience of sacrifice. Thus, World War I, as well as dividing Europe, further polarised the peoples of Ireland. The two sides could not compromise, and the result was the partition of Ireland.