

Breaking the silence: Partition and John Redmond's Cahirciveen Policy

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On 28 September 1913, just four days after the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council's provisional government and on the anniversary of 'Ulster Day' the year previous, John Redmond travelled to Kerry, visiting the birthplace of Daniel O'Connell before journeying onward to Cahirciveen. There, he outlined his policy on Ulster in response to the most recent developments in that province.

After months of refusing to be drawn into making a definitive statement on the issue, pressure from the British Cabinet succeeded in forcing Redmond to yield at Cahirciveen. Redmond's policy was one of intransigence. He denounced the '*implacable*', '*irreconcilable*' stance of Unionist Ulster claiming it had its root in '*the old spirit of ascendancy*'. History was a powerful tool in this speech and the shadow of the Liberator was used to great effect by Redmond, placing the constitutional demand of Irish Nationalism in stark contrast to Ulster's threatened rebellion. Despite Ulster's threats, Redmond left the road to dialogue open at Cahirciveen. He would gladly discuss with Edward Carson '*every single provision of the [Home Rule] Bill with the earnest and sincere desire to accommodate every detail*'. The principle of Home Rule itself, however, '*having succeeded after thirty years of unparalleled sacrifice and having been passed twice by a majority of over a hundred*' would not be up for discussion.

In summary, John Redmond's Cahirciveen policy was the last great defence of the principle of a constitutionally-created, all-island Irish Home Rule settlement. Thereafter, through pressure, threat, and even duplicity, the Irish Parliamentary Party would be brought to concede first the principle and then the reality of Ulster partition by March 1914. Cahirciveen was the origin point of this process.

Kerry in the Home Rule era

Although not as well remembered nowadays as post-independence Kerry TDs such as Fionán Lynch, Tom McElstrim, Austin Stack, and UCD Historian-cum-politician John Marcus O'Sullivan, Kerry's Home Rule MPs of the Redmond era were significant figures. Dingle born Thomas O'Donnell, MP for West Kerry, was a prominent Gaelic Leaguer and national school teacher in Kenmare prior to his entry into politics. There he rose through the ranks of the United Irish League and made a name for himself in defence of small farmers. He also made headlines when he riled the Speaker of the House of Commons by attempting to give him maiden speech *as gaeilge*. MP for North Kerry, MJ Flavin, earned himself the nickname of 'Supplementary Falvin' such was his enthusiasm for grilling the Chief Secretaries with questions and follow-ups during his time at Westminster. East Kerry was something of a swing seat, witnessing bitter electoral battles and the unseating of independent nationalist Eugene O'Sullivan for electoral intimidation in the summer of 1910. His cousin, Timothy O'Sullivan then took the seat, holding it for the IPP until he was unseated by Piaras Béaslaí, one of the most skilled political journalists of the independence struggle, in 1918.

South Kerry, the constituency in which we are now sitting, was somewhat different. Here sat an Irish Party MP of quite a different background and calibre, John Pius Boland, senior whip of the Irish Parliamentary Party, came from the wealthy Boland's milling and baking family in Dublin. He was educated at the University of Bonn, the University of London, and at Christ Church Oxford. A lawyer by training, he was called to the Inner Temple in London at the age of twenty-seven. The year before that, as a student visiting the ruins of classical antiquity, he had found himself in Athens just as the first modern Olympic Games were being held. He entered the tennis competition and won gold in both singles and doubles. Refusing to have the Union Jack raised behind him on the podium, he received his medals from the King of Greece under an Irish flag. This patriotic act won him huge acclaim at home and played no small part in his being offered the safe seat of South Kerry in 1900, a seat he held until the decimation of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the 1918 general elections.

When John Redmond visited south Kerry almost 102 years ago, on 28 September, he paid warm and heartfelt tribute to his friend and party colleague Boland. Of the party whip, he stated:

There is no more valuable member of the Irish party today [as Mr Boland]. He is, and has been for some years, one of our whips. Late and early he has been at his post and no one can accurately gauge how much of our Parliamentary success has been due to his vigilance and devotion. In addition to this, there are certain subjects which in a sense he has made his own. I have been in the habit for some years, of placing in his hands all matters connected with the thorny question of education, and Catholic interests in England and Scotland and Wales. He has been, as a rule, my medium of communication with the British Hierarchy, and he has repeatedly received the thanks of the Bishops of England and Scotland for his services. In addition to this, he has devoted himself with great perseverance and self-sacrifice to the question of Irish industries. It is largely due to his services that the Irish Trade Mark was established, and he has been lavish, both of his time and his money in promoting industrial interests connected with Ireland, and on the whole, therefore, I say to his constituents in South Kerry that they have every reason to be proud of such a representative.

Boland may not have been a native Kerry MP; as a Dublin and London resident, and something of a citizen of the world, he may well have been open to the charge of being an absentee MP also. However, the record of the House of Commons shows that he most certainly kept up with the concerns of South Kerry through constituency correspondence. Taking 1913 alone, Boland made ninety-eight interventions in the House of Commons, most of them questions and the vast majority relating to situations arising in his constituency.

Redmond's comments on Boland were, however, not the reason he had made such a long journey to the Kingdom of Kerry. As the parliamentary recess of 1913 began, Redmond chose the home of Daniel O'Connell to deliver his inaugural speech of a campaign in Ireland. While Dublin was embroiled in the lockout, it was a very different situation that was keeping Irish MPs and British cabinet ministers awake at night in the autumn of 1913: Ulster. Cahirciveen was where Redmond chose to put on the record his policy on partition.

In advance of Redmond's visit, the ground had been softened up and the lay of the political landscape scouted out by Joseph Devlin, MP for West Belfast, President of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, protégé and leading young light of the Irish parliamentary party. Along with John Redmond, the MP for Mayo East and former leader of the anti-Parnellites in the 1890s John Dillon, and TP O'Connor, MP for Liverpool's Scotland Division and the party's point of access into the world of the British Liberal élite, Joseph Devlin was one of the four MPs who constituted the inner leadership of the Irish party. Coming a fortnight before Redmond's visit, Devlin only travelled as far as Tralee but, in doing so, he rallied the forces of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), who would be essential to ensuring the marshalling and success of Redmond's scheduled visit to Kerry on 28 September.

Redmond's visit to Kerry had been announced in the press as early as 13 August, giving more than six weeks to lay preparations. A committee was formed under the chairmanship of the local parish priest, the Rev. Canon Browne. It was decided that Redmond would speak from a specially erected platform outside the Carnegie Library and, to pay for its construction, Cannon Browne and local justice of the peace Edward Fitzgerald subscribed a pound each, equivalent to about €280 in today's money.

The *Kerryman* reported that the principal streets of the town were handsomely decorated for the occasion and that bands from across the region were called upon to become the central element of a procession, including horsemen, which went out to meet Redmond on the outskirts of Cahirciveen, Redmond having motored from Killarney to get there. The principal marshals of this procession were Denis J. O'Connell, Maurice Fitzgerald, president of the Cahirciveen AOH, Patrick Godfrey, James Leslie, Thomas J. O'Connor, and Patrick Keating. On the committee with Cannon Browne in Cahirciveen were Edward Fitzgerald, who had pledged the money towards the platform, John Pius Boland as the constituency MP, several of the aforementioned marshals, Joseph F. Mannix, Medical Doctor and Justice of the Peace, Patrick O'Connell Burke, T Golden, John Curran, Bartholomew Sheehan, Timothy O'Donoghue, and Michael Conway of the United Irish League which was the Irish party's constituency branch organisation.

At least seven separate bands eventually took part in the processional party with brought Mr Redmond into Cahirciveen. These were: the Listowel band, the Killarney band, Tralee Boherbee band, Tralee Strand-road band, the Tralee Christian Brothers' Monastery Band, and the Cahirciveen brass band. It is unclear whether the Dingle brass band, who promised to come 'weather permitting' ever made it - I haven't gone as far as to look up the weather reports for September 1913.

From triumph to crisis

So it was that on 28 September 1913, just four days after the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council's provisional government, John Redmond arrived in Kerry, visiting the birthplace of Daniel O'Connell before travelling onward to Cahirciveen where, having met his elaborate welcoming party complete with tubas and fine stallions at 11:30am, he entered the town at 12 noon on the dot.

There, he outlined his policy on Ulster in response to the most recent developments in the province. Redmond told his audience that his silence up to that point had been

deliberate, as he had not wished to say anything ‘*which might interfere with the prospect, no matter how vague ... of Home Rule being passed by agreement.*’¹ Following the foundation of the Ulster government, Redmond could no longer stay silent. While offering safeguards to Ulster unionists, John Redmond used his Cahirciveen speech to renew his vehement opposition to the idea of Ulster’s exclusion.

While this may appear a generous concession, the state of feeling in Ulster had, by the autumn of 1913, deteriorated to such an extent that Redmond’s offers of safeguards amounted to little more than rhetoric. Responding to the former Lord Chancellor, Lord Loreburn, who had recently suggested that an all party conference was the surest route to solve the Ulster question, Redmond pointed out that the fact that Ulster unionists had been unmoved by this appeal for compromise only emphasised their intransigence.

Redmond’s Cahirciveen speech was on a Sunday. The day before, Saturday, 27 September, Edward Carson had held a mass rally and an inspection of the Belfast Division of the Ulster Volunteer Force outside that city. *The Belfast Telegraph* reported that 12,000 men, described as ‘*drilled and efficient*’, had taken part in the event. This rally had been used as the platform from which Carson declared and unveiled the formation of a Provisional Government for Ulster, constituted by the Ulster Unionist Council. Carson’s rally was also used to unfurl the flag of the new Ulster government. This was reported as having comprised of a red hand surrounded by nine stars, representing all nine counties of the province of Ulster which, despite having a Catholic and Nationalist majority if such a large area was included, Carson claimed wished to exclude themselves from the operation of Home Rule.

Signalling his near-total abandonment of Westminster solutions to Ulster’s grievance, within a week of his Belfast review, Carson was in Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, telling an audience that he was no longer interested in addressing political audiences: ‘*I want to address myself in the future to those who are prepared to fight.*’ The militarisation of unionist resistance was reaching an unprecedented high water mark. In this spirit, John Redmond attempted a two pronged riposte at Cahirciveen, on one hand he emphasised the moderation and commitment to constitutionalism being shown by nationalist Ireland. In this he was largely successful. The other prong of Redmond’s response was to play down the gravity of the threat posed by Ulster. Redmond mocked the military posturing of Ulster’s unionists, calling out Carson, Londonderry, and Craig by name, saying that they ‘*were busily engaged on the side of the Nationalists, but only as humourists*’. Redmond reminded his audience ‘*of the children’s game, “Let us pretend”*’. They [Carson, Londonderry, and Craig] were like so many Poo Bahs.’ Concluding on this point, Redmond ventured that ‘*the whole agitation in Ulster was but a gigantic and preposterous absurdity.*’ *The Times* of London sneered at the Cahirciveen speech and discounted Redmond’s flippancy over the situation facing the Empire. In a supreme example of metropolitan snobbism, *The Times* claimed that, while Redmond’s arguments ‘*may appear convincing to the farmers of Cahirciveen ... we doubt whether the British public will feel that they contribute anything significant towards the solution of the great problem with which we are now faced.*’ Understandably, Redmond would not budge on the

¹ *Freeman’s Journal*, 29 Sept. 1913

principle of Home Rule. More defiantly, he would not entertain or make comment on the exclusion of Ulster, which had been defeated by a vote of the House of Commons as far back as June 1912.²

Redmond's London based colleague, TP O'Connor, was unimpressed by Redmond's statement at Cahirciveen, writing to John Dillon two days after the speech, he argued that a more detailed statement was necessary to instruct the British Cabinet. O'Connor felt that further concessions on control of education, or even the much more drastic step of time-limited exclusion for the North-East, were worth considering. Dillon had been the main backer of Redmond's relatively steadfast stance at Cahirciveen.

However, O'Connor disagreed, saying that:

*It is evident to me that the Tory Party as a whole is somewhat alarmed by the position of Carson and would grasp at any compromise which would save their faces.*³

By launching a pre-emptive strike, O'Connor hoped to regain the initiative from the Unionists. O'Connor also wrote to Joseph Devlin, the other member of the party's inner leadership at this time, explaining that [Lloyd George] had proposed at the beginning of the struggle that Ulster should get the option [of a plebiscite], feeling confident then that it would be refused, and that he still thought this would have been wise tactics.⁴ O'Connor continued, assuring Devlin that Lloyd George had '*discussed quite calmly and amicably our difficulty in agreeing to a proposal which would look like the betrayal of our fellow-Nationalists in Ulster.*'⁵ While O'Connor had doubts, as far as the rest of the party leadership was concerned, Redmond had given the Government as much of an outline of the Nationalist position as was necessary at Cahirciveen, including an unambiguous rejection of partition.⁶ Dillon felt strongly that any further statement of intent by the party, particularly in writing, was deeply inadvisable.

From O'Connor's vantage point, Dillon's insistence that the party had already outlined a policy on Ulster though the Cahirciveen speech was deeply flawed. In many ways, the Cahirciveen policy was no policy at all: it ignored the strength and depth of unionist opposition and pledged the party to plough on in its demand for Home Rule without seriously acknowledging the depth of feeling or the scale of the threat emanating from Ulster.

There is not sufficient time to go into the intense negotiations, including complex proximity talks with unionist and nationalist leaders, that followed during the autumn and winter of 1913. In short, following the revelation by Lloyd George that Ulster already possessed 5,000 rifles, that 95,000 rounds of ammunition destined for the province had been intercepted, and that, even as early as November 1913, there were signs that the army could not be relied upon to pacify Ulster, Redmond and Dillon joined O'Connor in conceding to the principle of time-limited exclusion for an undetermined portion of the North-East. There then followed months of pressure to

² An amendment to exclude four Ulster counties was raised in the House of Commons by the Liberal MP for Cornwall, T. G. R. Agar-Robartes but successfully defeated. See Bew, *Ideology and the Irish question*, p. 56.

³ O'Connor to Dillon, 30 Sept. 1913 (T.C.D., D.P., MS 6740/194).

⁴ O'Connor to Devlin, 1 Oct. 1913 (N.L.I., R.P., MS 15,181/3).

⁵ O'Connor to Devlin, 1 Oct. 1913 (N.L.I., R.P., MS 15,181/3).

⁶ Dillon agreed 'fully and heartily' with Redmond's Cahirciveen speech: Dillon to O'Connor, 2 Oct. 1913 (T.C.D., D.P., MS 6740/196). For a summary of the speech from an Irish Unionist perspective, see *Irish Times*, 6 Oct. 1913.

bring Devlin, as the only MP representing an Ulster constituency within the Nationalist leadership, on board. With a heavy heart, Devlin capitulated in late February of 1914.

When an all party conference finally convened almost on the very eve of Britain's entry into the First World War, the government could thus start negotiations safe in the knowledge that all the top players in the Irish party had privately conceded the principle of partition to them. Two years later, Joseph Devlin sank into a deep depression and resorted to drink in the wake of renewed partition pressures after the 1916 Rising. He felt that he had sold his constituents and his principles in a Faustian pact. Writing to John Dillon in May of 1916 when Ulster's fate was again under consideration by Lloyd George, TP O'Connor reported that he had '*been with Joe almost night and day ... he [Devlin] is a man of somewhat uncertain moods, as you know, and now and then he relapses into regrets that he ever consented to help us with regard to Ulster two years ago.*'⁷

The truth is that there was no happy ending to John Redmond's trip to south Kerry in September 1913. While he left Cahirciveen with the sounds of cheers and brass bands ringing in his ears, in London, he was backed into a corner and concession led to demand for further concession. Partition would be hardwired into every proposed settlement of the Irish question from that point onwards.

Conclusion

By focussing on Redmond's Cahirciveen speech, one gets a glimpse into a milestone in one of the most fluid periods in the history of the Ulster question and the emergence of partition. Redmond outlined his policy at Cahirciveen but, in a sense, his speech was a refusal to unveil a new policy or to grant fresh concessions. It was a statement of standing firm, of emphasising the patience of Irish nationalists in the face of Ulster's posturing. If the Cahirciveen policy represents the zenith of Nationalist 'no surrender', then the other aspect of the message delivered in Kerry is the building up of the persona of John Redmond himself.

Kerry was not chosen at random. Cahirciveen was not chosen at random. By going there, by holding a 'monster meeting' as some contemporary papers described it, and by going on pilgrimage to the ancestral home of O'Connell, Redmond was forging for himself an identity which he hoped to use on the imperial stage. In reporting on the meeting, *The Kerryman* stated '*Since the days of the Liberator probably no event in the history of Kerry was more impressive, enthusiastic, or inspiring than was the welcome which was accorded to-day in Cahirciveen to Mr John Redmond, the faithful and trusted Irish leader.*' The same sentiment was contained in the resolution of Killarney District Council delivered to Redmond at Cahirciveen which stated

'It was the genius of the great O'Connell that struck the first blow ... of a system of oppression that had no parallel in civilised Europe. The work which he so gloriously commenced has been carried through successive leaders – through Butt, through Parnell – at last [it has] been brought under your own able guidance to its victorious conclusion – the Home Rule which, under the name of Repeal, was the great object of O'Connell's life and labours. We feel that the spirit of the Liberator is looking down on us to-day from the shadows

⁷ O'Connor to Dillon, 18 May 1916 (T.C.D., D.P., MS 6741/308).

of his native mountains, and we hope and believe that the new Irish nation which is about to be created under a restored Irish Parliament will be worthy of his high ideals.'

Clearly, while Carson was building an army, Redmond was building a lineage. On balance, the tangible power of Ulster was more powerful in swaying British politicians than a reminder of nationalist history but this form of lineage building was hardly without precedent.

Just as medieval monarchs would visit Charlemagne's seat at Aachen or Irish bishops would go to visit the national saint's resting place at Downpatrick, here, Redmond was constructing for himself a link to past greatness. He was taking from O'Connell a posthumous blessing, and placing himself in the heritage of leaders of the united Irish race. This idea of an Irish race, both in Ireland and in its diaspora, was important to Redmond at this time. By placing himself in historical lineages such as O'Connell's at home and by standing as the leader of Ireland abroad, especially through his presiding at the various Irish Race Conventions held throughout the English speaking world, Redmond elevated himself and found legitimacy on a British and imperial stage. It all started in South Kerry.

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