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978-0-521-84176-4 - British Democracy and Irish Nationalism 1876-1906

Eugenio F. Biagini

Excerpt

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## 1 Home Rule as a ‘crisis of public conscience’

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Ireland can no longer be governed by the suspension of the safeguards of popular liberty, unless we are prepared to make their suspension the rule rather than the exception.<sup>1</sup>

During the past five years . . . [he] has been regarded as the loyal Liberal, and he alone, who followed Mr Gladstone w[h]ithersoever he went . . . The great Liberal Party has no creed but Gladstoneism [*sic*]. This is at once its strength and its weakness.<sup>2</sup>

### Crisis? What crisis?

‘I need scarcely mention that the ministers and religious bodies of all denominations were against us . . . Perhaps, after all, the strongest force against me in the fight was that . . . it was decided that the Irish vote should go Liberal.’<sup>3</sup> The frustration expressed in these words by a disgruntled candidate reflected a common experience among Independent Labour Party (ILP) parliamentary candidates during the thirty years following the 1886 Home Rule crisis.<sup>4</sup> Yet most historians have argued that the Gladstonian campaign to secure Irish self-government failed to move working-class electors.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Gladstone’s adoption of this cause is

<sup>1</sup> L.a., ‘The battle of to-day’, *NC*, 17 Nov. 1868, 4.

<sup>2</sup> G. Brooks, *Gladstonian liberalism* (1885), ix.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Special article by Mr John Robertson on the North East Lanark Election’, Lanarkshire Miners’ County Union, Reports and Balance Sheets, 1904, 10 (NLS). On the situation in other parts of Scotland see W. M. Walker, ‘Irish immigrants in Scotland: their priests, politics and parochial life’, *Historical Journal*, 15, 4 (1972), 663–4; I. G. C. Hutchison, ‘Glasgow working-class politics’, in R. A. Cage (ed.), *The working class in Glasgow, 1750–1914* (1987), 132–3.

<sup>4</sup> For other examples see Ben Tillett, ‘The lesson of Attercliffe’, *WT&E*, 15 July 1894, 6, and Lawgor, ‘South-West Ham’, *ibid.*, the latter about Keir Hardie’s problems with Michael Davitt and the Irish vote.

<sup>5</sup> G. R. Searle, *The Liberal party: triumph and disintegration, 1886–1929* (1992) discusses the period 1886–1905 under the heading ‘The “Problem of Labour”’, but does not include a chapter on ‘The problem of Ireland’, although the latter was much more of a problem for the Liberals at the time.

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generally regarded as one of his worst mistakes, brought about by his wish to retain the party leadership and resist the rising tide of social reform<sup>6</sup> – which Joseph Chamberlain and other ‘advanced Liberals’ felt to be absolutely necessary if the party was to retain its popular following. Consequently, Home Rule has been regarded not as a political strategy which the party adopted rationally, having considered possible alternatives, but as an ageing leader’s personal obsession. Allegedly, by imposing Home Rule on his followers, Gladstone first split the party, then lost his working-class supporters – thus indirectly ‘causing’ the foundation of the Independent Labour Party<sup>7</sup> – and eventually led British Liberalism towards its terminal decline.<sup>8</sup> The Liberals’ defeat in the 1886 election and their political impotence over the next twenty years have seemed to bear out this conclusion.

However, there are three main problems with this interpretation, which effectively sidelines the role of the Irish question in British politics. The first is that it takes little note of the fact that until 1921 the United Kingdom included the whole of Ireland and that the total number of Irish MPs accounted for about one-sixth of the House of Commons. Even within England, Scotland and Wales, the Irish, as a result of mass immigration, comprised a sizeable proportion of the working-class voters in many constituencies and knew how to make best use of their electoral muscle.<sup>9</sup> Thus, politically as well as morally, in the 1880s and 1890s the Irish question could not be ignored: indeed, more than social reform or anything else debated in Parliament, Ireland was *the* pressing question of the day and was treated as such by both Liberals and Unionists.

The second problem is that Liberal England did not ‘die’ in 1886: of course, it was alive and kicking both in 1906, when Gladstone’s heirs achieved a memorable election victory, and indeed throughout the 1910s and early 1920s. Moreover, even after its eventual ‘decline and fall’, liberalism continued to inspire and shape the political outlook of the main parties, and especially Labour, which from 1918 vied with the Liberals for Gladstone’s heritage. Thus the question to be answered is not about the demise of liberalism, but about its resilience and

<sup>6</sup> J. O’Farrell, *England and Ireland since 1800* (1975), 94; D. A. Hamer, ‘The Irish Question and Liberal Politics, 1886–1894’, in *Reactions to Irish Nationalism*, intro. by A. O’Day (1987), 253–4.

<sup>7</sup> T. W. Heyck, ‘Home Rule, Radicalism and the Liberal party’, in *Reactions to Irish Nationalism*, introd. A. O’Day (1987), 259; G. D. H. Cole, *British working class politics* (1941), 82–3.

<sup>8</sup> J. Parry, *The rise and fall of Liberal government in Victorian Britain* (1993), 306–9.

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Hamer, *The politics of electoral pressure: a study in the history of Victorian reform agitations* (1977), 315–17; O’Farrell, *England and Ireland*, 79–80, 91.

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pervasiveness, which, rather than undermining, the 1886–94 Home Rule agitation strengthened and further expanded, as Liberal politics went through a period of rapid transformation and redefinition of the very meaning of the 'liberty' to which the party was committed.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as the Liberal Unionists were electorally squeezed out of the political arena, the Conservative party took on board the rhetoric and some of the policies of old liberalism. The result was that, as John Dunbabin once put it, while before 1914 Britain seemed to have *two* liberal parties, one of which chose to call itself Unionist, after 1918 it had *three*, one of which chose to call itself Labour (significantly, a similar point has been made about politics in 2006).<sup>11</sup>

The third problem is that historians have tended to consider the Home Rule crisis in isolation, when arguably it was part of the broader debate on imperialism, liberty and democracy, which was so important in the United Kingdom during the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Therefore, whether one was in favour of or against Home Rule, the Irish question could not be ignored. Moreover, for those who supported Irish self-government, the latter became a test case of what the French democrats called *fraternité*, which in English could be translated as the politics of humanitarianism. This influenced a range of issues throughout the nineteenth century. It was central to Ernest Jones' Chartist notion of 'the people', those governed by 'their hearts and not their heads': he thought that 'God had created in mankind a natural love for humanity'.<sup>12</sup> It was very influential in the development of late Chartism into popular liberalism and, through pressure groups such as those associated with Exeter Hall, in the mobilization of anti-imperialism against the early manifestations of jingoism.<sup>13</sup> It was often religious in inspiration – as in the anti-slavery campaigns – but always non-sectarian. In fact, as Georgios Varouxakis has argued, a commitment to humanity as a form of enlightened patriotism brought together Positivists like Frederic Harrison, Utilitarians like J. S. Mill, Christian socialists like F. D. Maurice and Idealists like T. H. Green<sup>14</sup> – and we could add, Nonconformists such as the Quaker John Bright and the Baptist John Clifford, campaigners for

<sup>10</sup> J. R. Moore, *The transformation of urban liberalism: party politics and urban governance in late nineteenth-century England* (2006), 20, 263.

<sup>11</sup> M. Wolf, '“Cameronism” is empty at the centre', *Financial Times*, 20 Jan. 2006, 19. Dunbabin's comment was made during the conference 'Popular radicalism and party politics in Britain, 1848–1914', Cambridge, 4–6 April 1989.

<sup>12</sup> M. Taylor, *Ernest Jones, Chartism and the romance of politics, 1819–1869* (2003), 255.

<sup>13</sup> M. Finn, *After Chartism: class and nation in English radical politics, 1848–1874* (1993), 9–11, 177–9, 203–25.

<sup>14</sup> G. Varouxakis, '“Patriotism”, “cosmopolitanism” and “humanity” in Victorian political thought', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 5, 1 (2006), 100–18.

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women's rights and moral reform such as Josephine Butler, or indeed leaders of the labour movement including Henry Broadhurst and Robert Knight. In some cases it brought together Evangelicals and Secularists in campaigns against cruel practices.<sup>15</sup> It concerned itself with domestic affairs as much as international crises and, as Gill has argued in one of the most important works on the topic, it targeted the new 'democratic' electorate in an attempt to politicize compassion for electoral gain.<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, it often created a solidarity between Nonconformists and some Irish Nationalists – such as Michael Davitt – and provided much of the energy behind the coalition which supported and inspired the Home Rule 'crusade' from 1886.

Thus the main thrust of the present book is that Irish Home Rule, far from being an ephemeral Liberal aberration and the product of Gladstone's 'obsession', fired the public imagination of the peoples of the United Kingdom and came to dominate their understanding of liberty and citizenship. As politics was transformed both by the rise of the 'caucus' and by an aggressively populist and emotional leadership style, the Gladstonian insistence that policy should reflect moral imperatives made some contemporaries speak of the 'feminization of liberalism'. While this reflected contemporary gender stereotypes rather than any cultural or political reality, the present book argues that the synergy created by the 'Union of Hearts' reshaped popular expectations of liberty and citizenship in both Britain and Ireland, and acted as the single most important catalyst in the remaking of popular radicalism after 1885. Of such a remaking, the present book tries to provide an intellectual history – in other words, it is concerned with popular political ideas and programmes rather than parliamentary manoeuvring and legislative achievements.

In this respect, as well as in its subject matter, *British democracy and Irish nationalism* is the sequel of my *Liberty, retrenchment and reform*.<sup>17</sup> The latter is a study of the post-Chartist generation and their political culture, which I describe as 'popular liberalism'. Like Chartism, the latter was primarily about 'democracy' (as the Victorians understood it). In particular, during the twenty years between the beginning of the agitation for

<sup>15</sup> A. J. Reid, 'Old unionism reconsidered: the radicalism of Robert Knight, 1870–1900', in E. F. Biagini and A. J. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: liberals, radicals and collective identities in the British Isles, 1865–1931* (1996), 214–43; Chien-Hui Li, 'Mobilizing traditions in the animal defence movement in Britain, 1820–1920', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2002; M. J. D. Roberts, *Making English morals: voluntary association and moral reform in England, 1787–1886* (2004).

<sup>16</sup> R. Gill, 'Calculating compassion in war: the "New Humanitarian" ethos in Britain 1870–1918', Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2005, 11.

<sup>17</sup> E. F. Biagini, *Liberty, retrenchment and reform: popular liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (1992).

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the Second Reform Bill in 1864 and the passing of the Third Reform Act in 1884, the extension of the suffrage was regarded as a goal of supreme importance by working-class pressure groups and reform associations, including some large trade unions, such as the coal miners of the North-East of England. These groups were able to establish an alliance with the Liberal party partly because they were prepared to consider compromises (for example, the acceptance of 'household' instead of 'manhood' suffrage), and partly because they were now perceived to be pursuing non-revolutionary social and economic aims, fully compatible with the Gladstonian priorities of 'peace, retrenchment and reform'.

This in turn reflected the emergence of cultural and ideological affinities between middle-class and artisan radicals in the two or three decades after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The removal of the 'bread tax' and the adoption of free trade were followed by a long period of economic growth, which in due course improved standards of living. The old class-based enmity between Chartists and Liberals – based on the former believing that politics was an aristocratic conspiracy in which the middle classes were willing accomplices – was gradually replaced by a sense of national purpose and the conviction that free-trade economics was in the 'common interest' (and certainly in that of the working-class consumer). Self-help – both individual and collective, through friendly societies, for example – was not a mid-Victorian invention, but acquired a new viability in the climate of optimism and expansion after the 1851 Crystal Palace International Exhibition. 'Freedom' seemed to be all that people were asking for: friendly societies wanted to be 'let alone', trade unions knew the advantages of securing the labour market from the danger of repressive state intervention, while co-operatives and consumer pressure groups expected free trade to give them access to an unprecedented variety of cheap imports from all over the world. Moreover, free trade went together with the demand that all taxes on items of mass consumption be reduced or altogether repealed – in other words, that the working-class family be relieved of most of the fiscal burdens under which they had long been labouring. In turn, this was consistent with the Cobdenite and Gladstonian demand for 'retrenchment', or strict economies, at the Treasury. Slashing state expenditure – which was dominated by the military establishment, the cost of wars and the repayment of the National Debt (itself mainly incurred to pay for past wars) – made sense to working-class radicals. As for social services, such as existed, they were primarily provided by local authorities and funded through the rates, rather than by central government taxation.

A further, important component of the cultural context which made popular liberalism possible was Nonconformity, which had grown rapidly

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during the first half of the nineteenth century (by 1851 about one-half of churchgoers belonged to one or another of the many Dissenting denominations). Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Free Presbyterians and other groups – including Quakers and Unitarians – were characterized by a non-hierarchical, ‘democratic’ church polity and by proud self-reliance which made them sympathize with both political radicalism and economic liberalism. They stood for self-help in religion as much as in economics. Their commitment to popular education, temperance, social reform and humanitarian causes overseas was consistent with the traditions of English radicalism. Indeed, the latter had largely been shaped by Dissent especially in the seventeenth century, in the days of Cromwell’s republican experiment, the memory of which was rediscovered and celebrated by mid-Victorian radicals from all social backgrounds.

While Dissent, democracy and free trade provided the bulk of the culture, hopes, and ideas behind popular liberalism, the latter was also espoused by a large number of people who were neither religiously nor politically active, but who could, from time to time, be galvanized into activity by the inspiring populism of leaders like Bright and especially Gladstone. Their charismatic leadership helped late nineteenth-century Liberalism to become and remain as much of a mass movement as republicanism in contemporary France or social democracy in Bismarck’s Germany.

*Liberty* had no proper ‘Conclusion’ and ended, instead, with an analysis of how Gladstone was perceived ‘from below’. This was not because of some personal whiggish historical optimism about the rise and progress of liberty personified by Gladstone as a charismatic leader, but because then I was already planning a continuation, a ‘volume II’ dealing with the question of Home Rule and exploring whether popular liberalism had any counterpart in Ireland. The answer to such questions has now taken the shape of *British democracy and Irish nationalism*. The latter is anything but whiggish in its appraisal of late Victorian radicalism. It ends with radicals demanding a further extension of democracy and formulating a neo-Chartist programme under the banner of the National Democratic League. By 1906 the NDL was bringing together people belonging to various currents of radicalism, including members of socialist societies, who, in context, come across as surprisingly similar to their political forebears of the 1840s. Not much ‘progress’ here, one might be tempted to conclude. Moreover, the present book starts with a crisis – Home Rule – which proved politically insoluble and dominated the whole period under review. However, *British democracy and Irish nationalism* is not about the failure of a policy, but concerns the popular agitation for its adoption. The book ends in 1906, because I could not discuss the 1910s without

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opening up a whole series of new problems – including the rise of Labour in Britain and revolutionary nationalism in Ireland – which would require a further book and which, in any case, have already inspired a substantial literature.<sup>18</sup>

As I have already indicated above, this book is mainly an intellectual history not of the Home Rule crisis as such, but of its consequence and impact on the development of popular ideas of liberty and democracy. However, before proceeding, we need briefly to recall the political and electoral events which form the backdrop of our story. The general election of November 1885 was the first to be contested under the new system of uniform household franchise and more equal electoral districts, created throughout the UK by the Reform and Redistribution of Seats Acts of 1884–5. During the electoral campaign the Liberals had appeared to be divided between the moderate wing, headed by the Whig Lord Hartington, heir to the Duke of Devonshire, and the Radicals, led by Joseph Chamberlain. The former stood for continuity with the Palmerstonian tradition; the latter courted the working-class vote and prioritized social reform and church disestablishment. Both were anxious about Gladstone's supposedly imminent retirement and the future leadership of the party. But the Grand Old Man (the GOM, as he was affectionately or derisively called) was not eager to step down. In the past he had used 'big Bills' to renew the unity and purpose of the party at critical junctures, but it was not clear whether he would be able to do so again.

The Liberal party approached the contest with a programme which focused on local government, taxation and the reform of the land laws. Home Rule was not on their agenda but it was clear that something had to be done about Ireland. The latter had been a constant and pressing concern for the Gladstone government in 1880–5, when it had struggled to contain rural unrest, fight terrorism and reform the land laws, which were supposed to be the root cause of all the trouble. Home Rule was the central demand of the powerful National party, led by Charles Stewart Parnell. For months before the election Chamberlain and other radical leaders had been considering various plans to appease Parnell without destroying the parliamentary bond between Britain and Ireland, established by the 1800 Act of Union. On 16 June 1885 Dilke wrote to Grant Duff that although '[t]here is no liking for Ireland or the

<sup>18</sup> On these questions see P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (1971); D. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party, 1900–1918* (1990); P. Maume, *The long gestation: Irish Nationalist life, 1891–1918* (1999); and P. Bew, *Ideology and the Irish question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, 1912–1916* (1994).



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Irish', there was 'an almost universal feeling that some form of Home Rule must be tried. My own feeling is that it will be tried too late, as all our remedies are.'<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the issue acquired a new urgency because there was a widespread expectation that – under the new electoral law – the Nationalists would secure a much larger share of the Irish constituencies at the next election. The implications were clear: as Lord Rosebery put it during a speech he delivered (in Gladstone's presence) at a banquet in Edinburgh on 13 November 1885, 'if things turned out in Ireland as they were told they would, that question would absorb the minds of the men of the time and the energy of Parliament to the exclusion of every other'. He continued:

He did not pretend to say how that question would be settled, but he believed it could be settled in only one direction. If they could obtain from the representatives of Ireland a clear and constitutional demand, which would represent the wishes of the people of Ireland, which would not conflict with the union of the two countries, he believed that by satisfying that demand in such a way as not to require readjustment, they would cut off forever the poisonous spring of discontent.<sup>20</sup>

In the speech there was no explicit indication that Home Rule would be considered by the Liberals, although on that very day Gladstone – who was staying at Rosebery's country residence, Dalmeny House – shared with him both 'the idea of constituting a Legislature for Ireland' and a strategy for overcoming the opposition that such a plan was likely to generate within both Parliament and the Liberal party.<sup>21</sup> On the following day, the 14th, Gladstone actually drafted a Home Rule Bill based on the blueprint of a 'Proposed Constitution for Ireland', which Parnell had provided, at his request, on 1 November. Parnell's proposal, which was based on colonial precedents, was indeed 'a clear and constitutional demand' such as the one to which Rosebery had alluded. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that Gladstone's draft was produced *before* the election itself, when he still hoped that the Liberals would win a majority over the other two parties combined, so that they could deal with Ireland without having to seek the support of the Nationalists.

Even if that had happened, it is highly unlikely that Gladstone would have been able to persuade Hartington to support a Bill such as the one which he had already framed. However, the situation was further complicated by the actual results of the election (the polls were declared from 1 December). Although the Liberals did emerge as the largest party, with

<sup>19</sup> Cited in R. Jenkins, *Dilke: a Victorian tragedy* (1996), 210.

<sup>20</sup> 'Banquet to Lord Rosebery', *Ti*, 14 Nov. 1885, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Gladstone to Lord Rosebery, 13 Nov. 1885, in *GD*, vol. XI, 428.



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333 seats to the Conservatives' 251, Parnell secured 86 MPs – more than expected – and the Irish party was now in a position to hold the balance in the new Parliament. Tactical manoeuvring and political bargaining then began. Initially, Parnell decided to keep the Tories in office (Salisbury had formed a caretaker government in April 1885, following Gladstone's defeat over the budget and subsequent resignation). The GOM was obviously in a dilemma, but not over Home Rule – because, as we have seen, he had *already* drafted a Bill before the general election. It was over the feasibility of proceeding with such Bill without an overall Liberal majority and in a situation in which he would be dependent on Nationalist support.

However, on 17 December 1885 Herbert Gladstone leaked to the press the news that his father was planning to adopt Home Rule: this was the so-called 'Hawarden kite', which changed the political landscape completely. As a result the Nationalists were now prepared to oust the Conservative administration, which was defeated on 26 January 1886. On the 30th Gladstone received the Queen's commission to form a government. He intended to explore the viability of Home Rule, but was not, as yet, pledged to any specific proposal. Over the next few months he worked on what he perceived as a comprehensive solution to the Irish problem, consisting of land purchase and devolved government with a Parliament in Dublin.

The reputedly rapacious landowners were perceived as the source of all of Ireland's social problems, but could not be altogether abandoned to the mercy of a Nationalist government. Therefore, in order to restore social stability in rural Ireland, he asked the Treasury to sponsor the purchase and transfer of land from the gentry to the tenant farmers. The farmers would then repay the loan by means of terminable annuities, and the operation would be guaranteed by the newly constituted Irish Parliament. The latter was the subject of the second of Gladstone's 1886 'big Bills'. The Irish assembly would consist of two 'orders': the first would include elected MPs who would be returned – under the UK system of household suffrage – for the existing constituencies. The second would comprise both the Irish hereditary peers and a number of elected senators – men of property and standing who would be returned by a restricted electorate on a £25 franchise. The two orders would sit and deliberate together; however, each would have the power of veto, which could be exercised by voting separately whenever either so desired. The Dublin Parliament would legislate on domestic Irish matters, although the police force remained under imperial control. Moreover, London would retain full control of military defence, foreign affairs and commerce. Trade policy was a sensitive question, because of widespread

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concern – especially among Ulster industrialists – that a Home Rule Ireland would abandon free trade and introduce tariffs, which Parnell thought necessary to encourage the development of industry in the south. There would be no Irish representation at Westminster.

Unfortunately Gladstone had not prepared the party for such a dramatic development of his Irish policy and the shock was considerable. It soon emerged that the Land Bill had little chance of survival, both because its cost was regarded as prohibitive (amounting, as it did, to some £120 million, which was more than the entire UK budget for 1885), and because it proposed the spending of such a significant amount of money in order to ‘bail out’ the Irish landowners, a class regarded as particularly undeserving. Gladstone was also in trouble over the Home Rule Bill, particularly because the proposed exclusion of the Irish MPs from the London Parliament was perceived as a step which would inevitably lead both to constitutional clashes and, eventually, to Dublin’s full independence. In the end, a majority of the Liberal MPs supported the Prime Minister after he indicated his willingness to reconsider Irish representation at Westminster. However, from the start Hartington refused to join the government, while Chamberlain, having at first accepted, resigned from the Cabinet on 26th March, after realizing the full extent of the Premier’s proposals. No doubt, the fact that Gladstone mishandled him so badly contributed to the break between the two statesmen, but, as I shall argue in chapter 5, Chamberlain’s opposition to Home Rule sprang from fundamental attitudes, which had been taking shape in 1882–5.

In April the government was defeated by 341 votes to 311. Gladstone immediately decided to take the issue to the country and started a vigorous electoral campaign, which further deepened the party split between the Home Rule majority and the Unionist minority (including both Hartington and Chamberlain).<sup>22</sup> The general election took place on 13 and 14 July 1886. When the results were announced, it emerged that the Home Rule Liberals had secured only 191 seats and the Nationalists 85. The Unionists could count on 316 Conservatives and 78 Liberal dissenters. It was a decisive defeat for Home Rule, but the latter remained a live issue in UK politics: Ireland itself had again overwhelmingly voted for self-government, and Gladstone’s proposal had also been endorsed by a majority of Scottish and Welsh electors. The continuing relevance of Home Rule was further highlighted by the Unionist government’s

<sup>22</sup> G. D. Goodlad, ‘Gladstone and his rivals: popular Liberal perceptions of the party leadership in the political crisis of 1885–1886’, in Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, 163–84.