CHAPTER 6

Federalism
The Acme in the Science of Government

> If we are not governed according to Irish ideas, we are governed as slaves.[1]
>
> Isaac Butt (1870)

> That, in accordance with the ancient and constitutional rights of the Irish Nation, we claim the privilege of managing our own affairs by a Parliament assembled in Ireland, and composed of the Sovereign, the Lords, and the Commons of Ireland.[2]
>
> The Home Rule League (1873)

In 1861, a young graduate from Trinity College Dublin called William Edward Hartpole Lecky anonymously published a book called *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*. It was Lecky's first historical work. The book's pointed introduction expressed dismay with the state of Irish political life, bemoaning the sectarian split between 'an English party' (meaning the Protestants of Ireland) and 'an Italian party' (the Catholics). 'We look in vain', he lamented, 'for an Irish party'.[3] Lecky found solace in the eighteenth-century Irish Patriot tradition, the anatomy of which he plotted through character profiles of Jonathan Swift, Henry Flood, and Henry Grattan. Daniel O'Connell, the fourth and final of Lecky's 'leaders', represented a rather different political culture. While Lecky was struck by the 'genius' of O'Connell, he condemned the Liberator for harnessing Catholic, clerical, and democratic sentiments, factors which stoked the 'sectarian and class warfare' that blighted nineteenth-century Ireland.[4] But Lecky also conceded that the underlying reasons for Ireland's problems predated O'Connell.

[1] Isaac Butt, *Ireland's Appeal for Amnesty: A Letter to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone, MP* (Glasgow: Cameron and Ferguson, 1870), p. 27.
[2] *The Irish Home Rule League: Resolutions of National Conference* (no publishing details, 1873), p. 1.
[3] [W. E. H. Lecky], *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland* (London: Saunders, Otley, and Co., 1861), p. 3.
[4] Ibid., p. 266.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Like many of his contemporaries, Lecky believed that the nineteenth-century zeitgeist was tending towards 'the universal recognition of the rights of nationalities'.[5] He observed that in most countries since the turn of the century, 'national life' depended on the 'Government', not just as an agent that 'discharged certain business', but as a facilitator of 'political education' and 'a great representative of popular feelings'.[6] Parliaments were institutions that granted a people certain political gravitas, a site that symbolised a mature and nuanced public opinion. National parliaments housed rancorous political debates which ultimately resulted in resolution, ending any 'ill-feeling' that agitated the people. But 'little or nothing of this kind', Lecky lamented, 'is to be found in Ireland':

> Severed from their ancient traditions, and ruled by a Legislature imposed on them contrary to their will; differing essentially in character and in temperament from the nation with whom they are this associated; humiliated by the circumstances of their defeat and by the ceaseless ridicule poured on them through every organ of the press, the Irish people seem to have lost all interest in English politics. Parliament can make their laws, but it cannot control or influence their feelings.[7]

For Lecky, the Union was in crisis. The Acts of 1800 swept away the Irish parliament with the promise of Ireland's incorporation into the British state; but the relationship had grown dysfunctional, with the Irish deprived of a meaningful expression of 'national government'.

Lecky prophesied – correctly – that Irish representatives in Westminster, emboldened by a hatred of Britain, would bring parliament to its knees.[8] The religious sectarianism and poverty that blighted Ireland were symptoms of a disturbing political problem that stemmed from a lack of attachment to the structures of power. Ireland's redemption could only come with the emergence of a man who could combine the virtues of Lecky's four 'leaders' – Jonathan Swift, Henry Flood, Henry Grattan, and Daniel O'Connell – fusing the loyal Patriot tradition of the eighteenth century with the democratic Catholic tradition of the nineteenth century. Whether this leader would unite the Irish people behind a restoration of the Irish parliament or 'complete fusion with England' did not concern

[5] Ibid., p. 293. One such contemporary was John Stuart Mill, who published his *Considerations on Representative Government* in the same year as Lecky's *Leaders*. Mill argued that a successful representative government must give expression to 'national feelings and character'. *Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861), p. 2.

[6] [Lecky], *Leaders of Public Opinion*, p. 268. [7] Ibid., p. 272. [8] Ibid., p. 294.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Lecky: the point was that a public mind cleansed of sectarianism 'will eventually triumph', 'whatever direction it may act'.[9]

Much had changed when Lecky returned to *Leaders of Public Opinion* for a second edition ten years later in 1871. The threat from the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) had manifested itself in open revolt in 1867, and the coming of William Gladstone's Liberal administration the following year profoundly altered the possibilities of Irish politics. Lecky despaired of Fenianism, privately claiming that clandestine conspiracy tended to prove how 'absolutely incapable' the Irish were of self-government.[10] When the second edition of *Leaders of Public Opinion* appeared, a new organisation called the Home Government Association was lobbying for a form of federal self-government christened 'Home Rule'. Lecky rewrote the introduction to take account of these changes. He looked to Gladstone as the leader of the future, the man with the capacity to unite the Irish people one way or another: Lecky believed that the government's remedial Irish policy would result in either 'extinguish[ing] the desire of the people for national institutions' or making self-government irresistible.[11] Lecky repeated his belief that the institution of government should be a focal point for the national self. The problem with the British government was the perception that it was a government *of* Ireland rather than a genuine *Irish* government.[12] For Lecky, this did not necessarily mean 'Home Rule'; indeed, he did not believe that the political conditions were in place in Ireland for responsible self-government.[13] Nevertheless, he challenged the governing classes to empower the political talent of Ireland by expanding Irish influence over the imperial legislative programme and increasing the role of local government.[14] His argument was that a genuine *United* Kingdom should fulfil the Irish craving for self-government. Existing constitutional arrangements were not static but could be remoulded and improved if the political will – and, crucially, the understanding – were there.[15]

[9] Ibid., p. 308.
[10] Donal McCartney, 'Lecky's *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 14, no. 54 (1964), p. 125.
[11] W. E. H. Lecky, *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871), p. xxiv.
[12] Ibid., pp. xviii–xix.
[13] Elizabeth Lecky, *A Memoir of the Right Hon. William Edward Hartpole Lecky* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), p. 88.
[14] Lecky, *Leaders of Public Opinion*, 2nd ed., p. xix.
[15] Donal McCartney, *W. E. H. Lecky: Historian & Politician, 1838–1903* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994), p. 59.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Lecky entered the parliamentary fray in 1895 as the member for Dublin University. By this time, he was a firm liberal opponent of Home Rule, having equated the agitation by the Parnellites during the late 1870s and 1880s with agrarian lawlessness and political extremism. An older and more pessimistic Lecky tied himself more firmly to the Union: the third and final edition of *Leaders of Public Opinion* was published in 1903, with a notable toning-down of the national sentiment of the previous versions.[16] The direction of Irish politics since 1871 increased his hostility to the principle of Home Rule, as political influence had 'passed into the hands of men who have proved during a long succession of years their disloyalty to the Crown [and] their hatred of the Empire'.[17] For Lecky, the Union had failed to accommodate Irish national sentiment, but by the end of the nineteenth century, the political mood in Ireland had become so warped that solace could only be found in the constitutional connection with Britain. The government of Ireland had, in Lecky's eyes, become an insurmountable puzzle.

The three editions of the *Leaders of Public Opinion* chart Lecky's political journey from an ambition to resurrect the Irish Protestant Patriot tradition to liberal unionism. His biographer has opined that Lecky was 'never quite in step with his contemporaries'.[18] But another way of viewing Lecky's body of work is as a window into the fluidity of political life before the Home Rule crisis of the 1880s. It was possible to argue from the vantage points of 1861 and 1871 that the constitutional framework of the Union could yet provide the material and symbolic benefits of self-government for Ireland. Moreover, it was not a political oddity to find an Irish Protestant calling for the greening of British governmental practices in Ireland to match a rising expectation for 'soft' forms of self-government. To return to the first edition of *Leaders of Public Opinion*: the 'master-curse of Ireland' was 'sectarian animosity'. The challenge was to find forms of political discourse that eradicated this evil.[19] For Lecky, the most appropriate constitutional status of Ireland was that which contributed most to an anti-sectarian common good. But the shape of such an arrangement eluded even Lecky.

Federalism and the Union

However uncertain Lecky was about the future constitutional shape of Ireland, one lost historical opportunity can be gleaned from his work.

[16] McCartney, 'Lecky's *Leaders*', pp. 133–4.
[17] W. E. H. Lecky, *Leaders of Public Opinion*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), i, p. xii.
[18] McCartney, 'Lecky's *Leaders*', p. 141. [19] [Lecky], *Leaders of Public Opinion*, pp. 275–6.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Lecky's overview of Henry Grattan's career in *Leaders of Public Opinion* contained a powerful critique of the constitutional architecture adopted by the Acts of Union in 1800. 'The conditions of Irish and English politics are so extremely different', observed Lecky, 'and the reasons for preserving in Ireland a local centre of political life are so powerful, that it is probably a federal Union would have been preferred'.[20] Federalism, as envisaged by Lecky, would have instilled the virtues of self-government into the Irish; a parliament in Dublin had the potential to act as a conductor for national sentiment, fostering responsible governing practices within the broader rubric of the Union. A small number of writers who contributed to the pamphlet debate over the Union from 1798 to 1800 raised the prospect of federalism as the constitutional basis for the United Kingdom, but generally dismissed the concept as too complex and potentially unstable.[21] Lecky's perspective was, of course, coloured by its retrospective nature. He positioned the decisions taken in 1800 as a missed opportunity to reconcile Ireland to the British imperial project, casting federalism as the means to balance responsive local government and the need for a strong, unified administration to provide guidance on matters of war, peace, and empire. With some seventy years of operating the alternative path of federalism, the Union in Ireland, in Lecky's view, might have retreated as a contemporary political issue.

Despite his historical vindication of federalism's applicability in Ireland, Lecky was not an advocate for the federal idea when it reappeared on the Irish political scene in 1870. Federalism, for Lecky, was a road not taken by a previous generation, not a realistic solution to contemporary problems. Under an incorporating Union, Lecky asserted, the Irish lost the prestige and tempering influence of a parliament; political argument had been replaced by appeals to passions, reasonable compromise jettisoned in favour of sectarianism.[22] In the third edition of *Leaders of Public Opinion*, published in 1903, Lecky asserted that the rhetoric of Home Rule had injected disloyalty into the Irish body politic, paradoxically heightening the sense that the Irish were unable to operate a responsible form of self-government.[23] The moment for self-government, Lecky pessimistically suggested, had long since passed.

[20] Lecky, *Leaders of Public Opinion*, 2nd ed., p. 196.

[21] For example, see Anon., *Necessity of an Incorporate Union Between Great Britain & Ireland Proved From the Situation of both Kingdoms: with a Sketch of the Principles upon which it Ought to be Formed* (London: J. Wright, 1799), pp. 46–8; and Sir John Jervis, *A Letter Addressed to the Gentlemen of England and Ireland: on the Inexpediency of a Federal-Union Between the Two Kingdoms* (Dublin: John Whitworth, 1798).

[22] McCartney, *W. E. H. Lecky*, p. 62.

[23] Lecky, *Leaders of Public Opinion*, 3rd ed., i, p. viii.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

This argument was countered with much force during the 1870s. Federalism – or 'Home Rule', as it was christened – gained traction as a constitutional idea in an influential pamphlet written by Isaac Butt in 1870. The publication helped to popularise a Dublin-based political society called the Home Government Association, which was established several months before. In 1873, the Association was replaced by a parliamentary movement called the Home Rule League, which put federalism – and later, more nebulous definitions of Irish self-government – onto the high political agenda. Butt was a key figure in popularising the notion of 'Home Rule' and played a crucial (if uneasy) role in expanding the campaign beyond the drawing rooms of Dublin during the 1870s. At first glance, he was an unusual candidate as a 'national leader', with his previous history within the ranks of Irish Toryism. As his writings during the Famine demonstrated, however, Butt's support for the incorporating Union was conditional; added to the sense of fluidity in his constitutional thought was his celebrated legal defence of several high-profile Young Irelanders in 1848, which placed Butt in the forefront of the Irish popular imagination. Butt's standing within Catholic Ireland was further enhanced during the 1860s through the publication of several influential texts advocating tenant rights and (echoing his earlier court-room work) assuming the defence brief for several IRB men on trial. He was, in many ways, the natural candidate as president of the Amnesty Association, a body created in 1869 that lobbied for the release of IRB prisoners on the grounds that their actions were driven by patriotic and not criminal sentiment. Butt was by 1870, then, an esteemed and popular figure throughout much of Catholic Ireland.[24] But the old Tory in him persisted, not least in his ambition, nurtured as the editor of the *Dublin University Magazine* in the 1830s, of building a space within Irish political life for Protestants to partake in 'national' issues.

Butt unquestionably undertook an unorthodox political journey, but there was a striking degree of consistency underpinning his shifting constitutional thought. Despite this, the first historians of early Home Rule portrayed Butt's advocacy of federalism as a political conversion from firebrand Protestant Toryism to 'moderate' nationalism.[25] The fact that

[24] R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848–82* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998; first published 1985), pp. 170–1.

[25] David Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1964), p. 125; Lawrence J. McCaffrey, 'Isaac Butt and the Home Rule movement: a study in conservative nationalism', *Review of Politics*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1960), p. 75; Terence de Vere White, *The Road of Excess* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan Ltd., 1946), p. 183.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Butt's early reputation was built on his celebrated retort to Daniel O'Connell's Repeal of the Union motion at the Dublin Corporation in 1843 appears to give credence to the idea of a sudden conversion from unionism to 'nationalist' ideas of self-government.[26] While the conversion thesis is compelling, such a perspective overlooks the inherent *unionism* of Butt's federalist project and the wider rationale for Home Rule. As Butt personified, Irish constitutional thought was not a binary choice between incorporating unionism and self-governing nationalism: 'Home Rule', as defined by Butt, was an ambitious political programme that sought a historic compromise between these two positions by reimagining the Union. As one pamphleteer put it in 1870, federalism plotted a middle way between the constitutional endpoints of incorporating Union and O'Connellite Repeal.[27] Butt's vision of a federal union held the ambitious promise of reconciling the respective competing British and Irish aspirations of centralisation and self-government.

What had changed, then, in Butt's constitutional thinking between 1843 and 1870 was not a belief in unionism itself, but which form the Union should take. The path to federalism was signposted in Butt's increasingly vehement writings on land reform and prisoner amnesty during the 1860s, issues that he framed as test cases of the health of the Union.[28] In 1870, Butt published his most significant statement on the amnesty question as an open letter to the Prime Minister, William Gladstone. He elevated the government's response to the Fenian prisoner issue as a watershed moment. 'Its decision determines', Butt asserted, 'whether we are admitted into a partnership with England on equal terms, or whether we are to be governed as a conquered country'.[29] If the government behaved in a manner that was dismissive of Irish perspectives, then the conclusion was that the incorporating Union was not fit for purpose. Returning to a mantra that appeared in the *Dublin University Magazine* during his editorship in the 1830s, Butt surmised that 'If we are not governed according to Irish ideas, we are governed as slaves'.[30]

Butt's articulation of a federal union in 1870 as the ideal constitutional framework to link Britain and Ireland would not, therefore, have surprised his more careful observers. Federalism had the attraction of enshrining

[26] For Butt's speech at the Dublin Corporation, see Chapter 4, p. 173.
[27] 'Protestant Celt', *Irish Nationality in 1870*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: E. Ponsonby, 1870), p. 35.
[28] Colin W. Reid, '"A voice for Ireland": Isaac Butt, environmental justice, and the dilemmas of the Irish land question', in Matthew Kelly (ed.), *Nature and the Environment in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p. 57.
[29] Butt, *Ireland's Appeal for Amnesty*, p. 7. [30] Ibid., p. 27.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Irish participation in the imperial parliament while also creating a responsive assembly in Dublin to legislate for Irish domestic issues. In the face of decades of British legislative indifference to 'Irish ideas', Butt hypothesised that restructuring the Union on federal principles was the only method to secure representative government for Ireland within a unionist framework. This had become a time-sensitive matter. Like many British and Irish contemporaries, Butt interpreted Fenianism as primarily a manifestation of social grievances, to which the government response was inadequate. If these injustices were not addressed, he warned, the more doctrinal separatism of the IRB would gain traction rapidly. Centralised and unrepresentative government had poisoned Irish political culture, Butt lamented, breeding a 'passive disloyalty' within the Catholic population. 'They are not ready, nor do they intend, to take arms against the English Government. But they have a respect and a regard for those who have done so.'[31] Ireland was, in other words, a land of O'Connellites, eager to achieve good government through constitutional reform; but separatism remained an alluring alternative and stood to benefit most from legislative inertia. Home Rule was Butt's solution to the Irish problem, creating a federal constitution to reset the Union settlement based on equality, while satisfying the Irish national yearning for self-government. Federal Home Rule also had another glorious purpose: the resurrection of the ethos of patriotic Toryism and the demonstration that unionism was not incompatible with leading the 'national' movement.

The Utility of Federalism

Federalism was something of a vogue topic for European political thinkers during the nineteenth century. Interest was piqued by Alexis de Tocqueville's coverage of federal constitutional arrangements in his *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840). Tocqueville's analysis concluded that a federal constitution fitted the United States but was wholly inappropriate for most European countries.[32] This set the tenor of mid-Victorian discussions about federalism in Britain. Two of the most notable engagements with the idea came in the form of John Stuart Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) and Edward A. Freeman's *History of Federal Government from the Foundation of the Achaean League to the*

[31] Ibid., p. 21.
[32] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (London: Fontana Press, 1994), pp. 163–70.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Disruption of the United States (1863). Mill suggested that several factors were required to ensure such a federal arrangement was successful, such as a shared political identity and equality of power between the contracting states.[33] Freeman historicised the concept in his work, hypothesising that federalism was a compromise political constitution, holding the ground between two 'widely distant extremes'.[34] Through these writings, and the debates they prompted, the principles of federalism became embedded into political discussions about potential constitutional change within the United Kingdom during the 1860s and 1870s. The argument over the applicability, or otherwise, of federalism in Britain and Ireland illuminates how sovereignty was conceptualised within a multinational political union by contemporaries. But as the Home Rulers quickly realised in the early 1870s, the political and intellectual mood in Britain was decisively against radical constitutional tinkering.

Butt's definition of Irish Home Rule followed Freeman's logic in positioning federalism as a compromise between imperial unity and Irish self-government. While Butt was not explicit about this, his scheme rendered the term *Irish Home Rule* a misnomer, as he framed constitutional reform as a United Kingdom-wide ambition. The original definition of Home Rule as a federal arrangement during the 1870s marked a turning point in conceptions of Ireland's place within the Union and, as such, deserves scrutiny as a form of nationally minded unionism. The federal ideal as promoted by Butt placed an emphasis on 'normalising' the Irish experience of Union through the creation of regional parliaments across the two islands. Early Home Rulers envisaged the United Kingdom as the political entity to be reformed; Home Rulers after 1880 placed the focus more exclusively on Ireland. As this shift in constitutional focus suggests, the political language of Home Rule moved dramatically from the early 1870s to the 1880s, assuming a more separatist edge.[35]

Butt's conception of federal Home Rule was, then, very different from the more aggressive form it took from the 1880s. If J. W. Good's decision to include Butt and the early Home Rule movement as a variation of Irish *unionism* in 1920 now seems paradoxical, this is because of the prevailing assumption that schemes for self-government must be nationalist-inspired

[33] Mill, *Considerations*, pp. 298–300.

[34] Edward A. Freeman, *History of Federal Government, from the Foundation of the Achaean League to the Disruption of the United States* (London: Macmillan, 1863), p. 2. Freeman's book was billed as the first of several volumes, but it was the only volume that appeared.

[35] This is a major theme of Matthew Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882–1916* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

and thus anti-unionist. Good, who was the literary editor of the *Freeman's Journal* in 1920 and future assistant editor at George Russell's *Irish Statesman*, was one of the few observers who accurately positioned Butt within the spectrum of Irish political thought, describing the Home Rule leader's modus operandi as 'an experiment in constructive Unionism'.[36] For some drawn to the resurrected ideal of self-government, however, that was precisely the problem. The discontent with Butt's leadership that escalated in the second half of the 1870s within Home Rule circles was as much a negative reaction against his ambition to harmonise Ireland's place within the Union as frustration at a lack of parliamentary progress under his polite and 'moderate' leadership.

The first organisation that championed Home Rule was the Home Government Association. It drew strongly from Protestant and Conservative ranks, as many from this fold rebelled against Gladstonian Liberalism's assault on the Church of Ireland.[37] Explanations for the genesis of Home Rule tend to stress the immediate context; indeed, the rise of Home Rule alarmed some contemporary unionist observers. Thomas MacKnight, the editor of the Belfast liberal daily, the *Northern Whig*, later recalled the 'strange language' of 'Tory Fenianism', highlighting the unstable nature of political thought during the early 1870s.[38] Appreciating the fluid political boundaries of nineteenth-century Irish political thought is crucial to any understanding of the emergence and rationale of the Home Rule idea. As the trials and tribulations of the 1830s and 1840s revealed, there was a history of patriotic thought within Irish conservative circles that predated the immediate origins of Home Rule.[39] Federalism, as offered by Butt as the first definition of Home Rule, can be viewed as the logical destination of nationally minded Irish Toryism of the *DUM* hue, and not solely as a cynical leap by a class reacting to the Gladstonian attack.

This was the context in which Butt's *Irish Federalism! Its Meaning, its Objects, and its Hopes* was published in 1870. The pamphlet quickly went

[36] J. W. Good, *Irish Unionism* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1920), p. 148.

[37] See, for example, J. J. Golden, 'The Protestant influence on the origins of Irish Home Rule, 1861–1871', *English Historical Review*, vol. 128, no. 535 (2013), pp. 1483–516; K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 327; Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History, 1800–2000* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), pp. 19–21; Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, *Cosmopolitan Nationalism and the Victorian Empire: Ireland, India and the Politics of Alfred Webb* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), p. 73.

[38] Thomas MacKnight, *Ulster As It Is: or Twenty-Eight Years' Experience as an Irish Editor*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1896), i, p. 225.

[39] See Chapter 4, and also Joseph Spence, 'Isaac Butt, Irish nationality and the conditional defence of the Union, 1833–1870', in D. G. Boyce and A. O'Day (eds.), *Defenders of the Union: A Survey of British and Irish Unionism since 1801* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 71.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

through three editions that year, with a fourth and final edition appearing in 1874 as the result of a popular upsurge in favour of the Home Rule cause.[40] The federal underpinnings of Butt's proposal represented a fervent critique of the operation of the incorporating Union, while advocating Ireland's right to participate as an equal within the structures of the United Kingdom and wider empire.[41] Federalism was driven by a desire to create more effective representative institutions, which ultimately would strengthen the Union. The young polymath George Sigerson argued in 1868 that 'Ireland has not yet fully received the benefit of institutions analogous to those of England, that is to say, of institutions which harmonize with the popular sentiment, and are not imposed on the people against their will'.[42] This was, in essence, the same criticism of the Union that Butt articulated from the mid 1860s until his death in 1879.

Butt's federalism emerged from a fevered period of activism, thinking, and publishing since the mid 1860. His powerful pamphlet from 1866, *Land Tenure in Ireland; A Plea for the Celtic Race*, made the case that Fenianism represented a war on 'the institutions of landed property' for a very good reason: 'landlordism and the land system was the impersonation of English dominance and misrule'.[43] He believed that reform of the landed system would weaken the appeal of Fenianism, rationalising that the Irish sought agrarian justice, not an overthrow of the state or the abolition of property. Butt outlined this conundrum in a striking manner. 'If the rights of property are to be exercised for the extinction of the people', he powerfully affirmed, 'we must not wonder if the people begin to think that their only hope of safety lies in the extinction of all rights of property in land'.[44] The logic of this stance pushed Butt into articulating an early justification of Home Rule, based on the idea that 'laws and institutions are gradually moulded to the wants and wishes of the people' in 'self-governed nations'.[45] Implicit in this argument was a rejection of the centralisation of the incorporated Union, which denied the Irish a constructive outlet to shape British policy, with disastrous consequences *in*

[40] J. P. McAlister to Isaac Butt, 19 September 1874, Home Rule League Letter Book, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), D213/94.

[41] Isaac Butt, 'Advertisement to First Edition, August 1870', *Home Government for Ireland: Irish Federalism! Its Meanings, its Objects, and its Hopes*, 4th ed. (Dublin: Irish Home Rule League, 1874; first published 1870), p. iv.

[42] 'An Ulsterman' [George Sigerson], *Modern Ireland: Its Vital Questions, Secret Societies, and Government* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1868), p. viii.

[43] Isaac Butt, *Land Tenure in Ireland; A Plea for the Celtic Race*, 3rd ed. (Dublin: John Falconer, 1866), p. 9.

[44] Ibid., p. 65. [45] Ibid., pp. 71–2.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Ireland. By 1871, Butt was critiquing the operation of the Union state with a strain of separative language: 'The whole system of Irish government is one of neglect of Irish interests and contempt and defiance of Irish opinion.'[46] Despite the powerful rhetorical flourishes deployed by Butt, however, he was far from rejecting the principle of Union itself.

The preface of Butt's first edition of *Home Government for Ireland* was dated August 1870, several months after the founding of the Home Government Association. The advancement of federalist ideas was made within the wider context of renewed disaffection with the structure of government in Ireland. In 1869, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa topped a by-election in Tipperary while in prison, signalling the popular sympathy for the incarcerated IRB men and anger at the government's refusal to concede an amnesty. The result was deemed void, and in February 1870 another Fenian, Charles Kickham, came within four votes of holding the seat. In July 1870, the *Nation* carried a snapshot of the national mood, delivered with a rhetorical clout reminiscent of the Young Ireland generation: 'If our experience of that Parliament has taught us any political truth more clearly than another in the course of the last seventy years, it is that there is to the rational judgement no medial stage, between the absolute fact of provincialism we suffer, and the absolute fact of autonomy we claim.'[47]

Butt was central in channelling this anti-government sentiment and moulding it into the language of Home Rule. Indeed, one of his most notable successes was convincing the leadership of the IRB to adopt a position of benevolent neutrality towards the parliamentary campaign during the mid 1870s.[48] Butt was respected by Fenians because of his past defences of IRB prisoners and his powerful rhetoric in favour of self-government; but what was overlooked (ironically) was that the federal formula for self-government aimed to *strengthen* the Union. He had previously argued that the application of 'justice and liberality' in Ireland would create loyalty and contentment with the British connection.[49] By 1870, Butt had moved to the belief that only an Irish legislature offered the means to reach this end. Butt's conception of federalism provided the means to dampen the separatist impulse of Irish nationalism, channelling its restless energy constructively through the creation of national and imperial political spaces.[50]

[46] Isaac Butt, *The Irish Deep Sea Fisheries: a Speech, Delivered at a Meeting of the Home Government Association, 1871* (Dublin: Irish Home Rule League, 1874), p. 5.
[47] *Nation*, 23 July 1870. [48] Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 188.
[49] Isaac Butt, *The Irish Querist: a Series of Questions Proposed for the Consideration of All Who Desire to Solve the Problem of Ireland's Social Condition* (Dublin: John Falconer, 1867), p. 30.
[50] Butt, *Irish Federalism*, pp. viii–ix.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Butt rejected the O'Connellite idea of Repeal of the Union, which was still prevalent within Irish discourse after the Famine. For Butt, Repeal was anti-imperial and hence damaging to Ireland's standing in the empire. Repeal implied a return to the pre-1800 political landscape, with the second coming of 'Grattan's Parliament'.[51] Critically, this conception of Irish self-government surrendered Irish representation at Westminster, which threatened (in Butt's eyes) to relegate Ireland's status as an integral component of the imperial metropole, turning the clock back to the provincial eighteenth-century conception of 'colonial-national' independence. As we have seen, Butt's strain of Irish Toryism rejected Repeal on these grounds during the 1830s and 1840s; his convictions were as strong during the 1860s and 1870s. '[I]n a Federal Union', Butt asserted in 1870, 'Ireland would take a higher place, and would exercise a greater influence that she did so, or ever could do, under the Constitution of 1782'.[52] The task pursued by Butt was, therefore, doubly ambitious: part of his target audience was Irish Repealers who were not only sceptical of the *performance* of the Union but, in several notable cases, of the *principle* of Union. He conceded that it was also necessary to convince 'thoughtful and intelligent Englishmen' of the virtues of federal reform, as this was the group who would ultimately pass legislation.[53] It would prove a difficult balancing act.

In moving towards the federal ideal, Butt categorically rejected the notion that Gladstonian Liberalism could sufficiently reshape the Union in a manner that would promote harmony across the three kingdoms. The Liberal assault on the pillars of what remained of the Protestant Ascendancy – most notably, the Church of Ireland – was, for Butt, a sufficient demonstration of the corruption of the original ethos of Union. 'We are not now governed by a Parliament administering a treaty of Union', Butt declared, 'but by a supreme Parliament claiming and exercising the supreme control and absolute power of legislation, exactly as if Ireland and England had always been one country, as if an Irish Parliament had never existed, and a treaty of Union never had been made'.[54] If Union implied partnership, the British had corrupted this ethos through an avalanche of exceptional legislation. Federalism offered the means to restore the original unionist ideal of 1800, creating a political chamber to scratch the itch of Irish distinctiveness while contributing to the greater imperial project.

Irish Federalism made a compelling case in many regards, but the pamphlet is strangely lacking in analysing historical and contemporary federal examples. Discussion of the 'real-life' experiences of federalism was relegated to a few pages and centred on the Achaean League, the

[51] Ibid., p. iv. [52] Ibid., p. v. [53] Ibid., p. iv. [54] Ibid., p. 18.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Dominion of Canada, and the Swiss Cantons. The federal system of the United States, which formed a crucial component within the worldview of other intellectuals who wrote about constitutional reform during the 1860s and 1870s, such as Walter Bagehot and Freeman, received only one sentence. Readings of American federalism were viewed through the prism of the Civil War, a cautionary tale to British observers of the instability of peculiar constitutional arrangements that divided sovereign power.[55] When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Walter Bagehot wearily recorded that 'it is impossible for Englishmen not to observe that the whole mischief has been, not caused but painfully exacerbated by the unfortunate mixture of flexibility and inflexibility in the United States Constitution'.[56] Butt may have strategically left out the high-profile example for fear of (further) antagonising educated opinion. The only reference to the American example in Butt's pamphlet is a single colourless sentence referring to the United States as 'only another illustration of the universality of the instinct which teaches men that nations as well as individuals may combine, and that there is no inconsistency between the existence of a legislature regulating the internal affairs of each portion of the confederation and a central legislature, directing with efficiency and unity the combined power of all'.[57] The shadow of the Civil War loomed large, to the extent that the American example of federalism, in Butt's reading, potentially presented more problems than virtues.

Other Home Rulers, such as John George MacCarthy, did, however, embrace the American model.[58] The federal system in the US informed a large part of the contributions of Thaddeus O'Malley, the self-styled 'father of federalism in Ireland', who had edited the *Federalist* newspaper during the 1840s.[59] O'Malley emerged from his retirement in 1873 to publish a substantial pamphlet, *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism*, which offered a sustained expansion of Butt's ideas. O'Malley pressed the case that the American constitutional experiment, which divided sovereignty between the states and the centre, empowered a 'small people' and a 'great nation' simultaneously.[60] Individual states, regardless of their

[55] J. W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 123.
[56] *Economist*, 20 April 1861. [57] Butt, *Irish Federalism*, p. 16.
[58] John George MacCarthy, *A Plea for the Home Government of Ireland* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871), p. 42.
[59] Alfred Webb, *A Compendium of Irish Biography: Comprising Sketches of Distinguished Irishmen, and of Eminent Persons Connected with Ireland by Office or by their Writings* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1878), p. 403. For O'Malley's arguments during the O'Connellite era of Repeal, see Chapter 3, pp. 112–13.
[60] Thaddeus O'Malley, *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism* (London: Wm. Ridgeway, 1873), p. 31.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

size or population, were treated as equals: Delaware and New Jersey had the same political worth as Pennsylvania and New York.[61] The distribution of power within the US prevented the growth of tyranny and unaccountable government; this sharply contrasted with the lopsided nature of the incorporating Union, which left English interests dominant over Irish, Scottish, and Welsh concerns. In balancing the interests of the states and the central government, O'Malley saluted federalism as the high point of constitutional design, 'the acme in the science of government'.[62]

It is therefore telling that Butt chose not to pursue this line of argument in his own writings on the subject. His dismissal of the United States as 'only another illustration' of federalism, rather than the model *par excellence*, represented an effort to play down the negative connotations of federalism and democracy within *British* (quite apart from Irish) political thought. It is no coincidence that the beacon of the federal ideal according to Butt was Canada, which, unlike its North American neighbour, was an integral component of the British Empire. Butt reasoned that federal self-government transformed Canadian attitudes, channelling potential rebellion into responsible government, while strengthening the transatlantic bonds of empire. Given that this example also highlighted a precedent for federalism within the British Empire, it was unsurprising that Butt chose to exploit it. Indeed, the Canadian parallel became a staple of Home Rule discourse during the 1870s and remained in use by imperially minded nationalists throughout the Edwardian period.[63] The nature of the comparison, however, altered over time. Butt interpreted Ireland as a Quebec to the United Kingdom's Canada, while a later generation of Home Rulers saw Ireland as Canada itself, an important shift in perception. There were also some more concrete connections between Butt's movement and Canada. While the organisational spread of the Home Rule League (the body that superseded the Home Government Association in 1873) remained patchy through the 1870s, there were various efforts to cultivate Canadian links: surviving correspondence reveals the existence of sympathetic expatriate associations in Quebec and Montreal. These associations championed Butt's cause in North America, explicitly deploying the example of Canada to explain the fundamental principles and goals of the Home Rule project.[64]

Butt's cautious attitude to US federalism also showcased his wider anxiety about the development of democratic mass politics during the

[61] Ibid., p. 43. [62] Ibid., p. 43.

[63] For example, see Colin W. Reid, *The Lost Ireland of Stephen Gwynn: Irish Constitutional Nationalism and Cultural Politics, 1864–1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 95–6.

[64] Rev. J. Galbraith to Edward Murphy, 13 August 1875; J. P. McAlister to T. Moloney, 5 April 1876, Home Rule League Letter Book, PRONI, D213/130–4 and D213/192–3.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

1860s and 1870s. Home Rule in later years became intertwined with democratic rights, but it should not be forgotten that the brand was popularised by an Irish Tory unionist who viewed the involvement of the masses in politics with deep suspicion.[65] The colours that Butt wore politically may have changed from his *Dublin University Magazine* days, but his underlying philosophy had not. His hostility to democracy and fears of a tyranny of the unenlightened majority formed a central component of his argument for federalism in 1870. Butt reasoned that the Irish Reform and Franchise Acts of 1832, 1850, and 1868 had inadvertently amplified the problems inherent within the British-Irish connection.[66] By expanding the political nation through the increased franchise from the 1830s to the 1860s, nationalist sentiment became a more significant factor in shaping electoral culture in Ireland as the century progressed. 'The moment the Irish vote appeared as a distinct power', argued Butt in 1870,

> detached from, and uninterested in, the questions of English policy, that moment the system of intrigue and bargains, and compacts, became the inevitable result – and from that moment the House of Commons was incapable of fulfilling, even for England, the true functions of the representation of the people.[67]

The United Kingdom was, in other words, threatened by the expansion of the franchise: democratic passions, powered by national grievances, threatened to outgrow the structures of the incorporated Union state.

In this context, federalism was a logical shift for the United Kingdom to make. Butt surmised that it made sense for England to have a parliament that represented only English affairs, as much as it did for Ireland to have its own assembly. There was no 'representative system' of government within the United Kingdom because the existing centralised structures of executive power indirectly encouraged competition and disunity, rather than union and harmony, between the component countries. The logic of Butt's point was that only through substantially redrawing the constitutional map of the United Kingdom could long-term stability be achieved.

There were additional benefits to a federal model. Butt posited that a new constitution would require new leaders, which offered the possibility for the redemption of the Irish landed class. He was greatly attracted to the idea of fusing aristocratic responsibility with democratic sentiment.

[65] See, for example, Eugenio F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[66] For an outline of the main features of these acts, see Hoppen, *Elections*, pp. 1, 31–3, and Colin Barr, 'The Irish Reform Act of 1868', *Parliamentary History*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2018), pp. 97–116.
[67] Butt, *Irish Federalism*, p. 48.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

If democracy is the future, reasoned Butt, its populism can be checked in the upper houses across the various parts of the United Kingdom. Federalism thus presented the upper orders in Ireland with the means to contribute to national politics, a sphere that had been largely removed in 1800 with the abolition of the parliament in Dublin. Butt feared that the political, religious, and property rights of Irish Protestants could not be guaranteed within the current system (as the Liberals' Irish agenda demonstrated) but could be protected within a federal constitution that claimed their allegiance. Despite such an appeal, Butt was certain that federalism offered more than protection of the old Protestant order from which he came: it represented nothing less than the means to re-assume the leadership of the nation. He warned of the grave consequences if the 'natural leaders' shirked from the challenge. 'It is the duty of the upper class of Irish society to place themselves in the front of a national government for self-government. It is the opportunity of a reconciliation with the people which they may never have again.'[68]

Butt's wish to inspire the Irish aristocratic and landed classes to assume a leadership role within the national movement remained one of the most enduring ambitions of the Home Government Association and its successor body, the Home Rule League. Andrew Kettle, a key agrarian activist, described Butt's desire to 'lead all the inhabitants of Ireland', including the landlords, as 'unique and herculean'.[69] In a revised form, the attempt to coax landlords into their 'natural' leadership position was also a component of Charles Stewart Parnell's political thought during the Land War.[70] William Shaw, the Protestant Liberal MP for Bandon and a notable convert to the Home Rule cause, expressed his belief to Butt in April 1870 that while 'the great body of the people' will support a Home Rule organisation because of nationalist sentiment, 'it will be essential to get the better class well with it'.[71]

This desire to win over the 'better class' was a cornerstone of the emerging language of federal Home Rule. This was often rooted in conservatism. At the meeting of the Home Government Association in September 1870, Shaw affirmed the movement's non-revolutionary

[68] Ibid., pp. 54–6, quote on p. 56.
[69] Andrew J. Kettle, *The Material for Victory*, ed. Laurence J. Kettle (Galway: Open Press at the University of Galway, 2023; first published 1958), p. 23.
[70] Paul Bew, *Enigma: A New Life of Charles Stewart Parnell* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2011), pp. 68–9.
[71] William Shaw to Butt, 23 April 1870, Isaac Butt Papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS 8692(6).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

objectives.[72] Those most able advocates of federalism within the Home Government Association, Thaddeus O'Malley and John George MacCarthy, both highlighted the need to blend new ideas with old traditions. They supported the concept of a bicameral Irish parliament, with a strong hereditary element in the upper house: for O'Malley, this would ensure that as much as possible from the past constitution was kept running 'in the old grooves'; for MacCarthy, federalism would 'conserve ancient rights and local institutions', while constructing 'a bulwark against revolution'.[73] This, of course, referred to the potential of federalism to dampen the spirit of Fenianism through the patriotic appeal of a local parliament. Butt also saw the new constitution as a buffer to resist the spread of *English* socialism into Ireland, protecting the Irish from the excesses of increasing democratic fervour in other areas of the United Kingdom. Federalism, as articulated by Butt and his supporters, was a radical yet conservative idea – a framework to create representative government across the two islands, while enhancing aristocratic political power and offering protection against democratic despotism. It was one of the boldest political proposals to emerge from Ireland during the nineteenth century.

The Turn against Federalism

The problem with Home Rule as a political idea that combined self-government and unionism with an anti-democratic tinge was that it appeared too cautious from an Irish nationalist perspective, and too radical from a conservative vantage point. Butt also failed to connect his constitutional plan to wider ambitions for imperial federation which, given the contemporary British interest in such thinking, was a significant omission.[74] The success that the Home Rule movement enjoyed under Butt's command as the 1870s progressed also cannot be read as popular advocacy of federalism. For all of Butt's careful formulations in connecting Irish self-government with the wider scheme of a federal United Kingdom, many enemies – and, even more damagingly, friends – of Home Rule saw it merely as the return of 'old fashioned' Repeal.

Misunderstandings of federalism were amplified by political incoherence within the Home Rule movement. One of its more senior figures was

[72] *Freeman's Journal*, 2 September 1870.
[73] O'Malley, *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism*, p. 48; MacCarthy, *Plea for the Home Government of Ireland*, pp. 160–1.
[74] For emerging ideas of imperial federation, see Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

the Repeal activist William O'Neill Daunt, who in private correspondence pressed that members should not raise any issues other than Home Rule in formal discussions. 'If dissension is to be avoided we must as an Association look to Home Rule and it alone as our business', he told an English supporter. 'On nearly every other subject the members utterly disagree'.[75] But even the very definition of Home Rule was far from certain. The Home Government Association attracted former Repealers and Young Irelanders, including the 1848 rebel John Martin, who won a by-election in Meath in 1871. At his victory banquet, Martin declared that he was elected on the principles of 'simple Repeal, and restoration of the national constitution suppressed by the Act of Union'. The only difference between his Young Ireland roots and the new politics of Home Rule, Martin implied, was merely the latter's absolute commitment to non-violent means.[76]

Home Rule as nationalist Repeal, rather than the unionist federalism articulated by Butt, surfaced repeatedly within political circles and printed works connected to the Home Government Association. This trend is most starkly highlighted in the short-lived weekly newspaper founded in September 1870, the *Federalist*. The *Federalist* was not the official organ of the Home Government Association, but an independent advocate of the federal movement. This is, however, not to say that the newspaper consistently championed the political idea of the newspaper's title. Addressing the question 'what is federalism?' in February 1871, the *Federalist* replied that it was 'the Repeal of the Legislative Union between Great Britain and Ireland'. A subsequent question, 'what is meant by Federal Repeal?' was answered by 'Simple Repeal accompanied by such securities against Ministerial craft and English usurpation, base and treacherous representatives, and political subserviency'.[77] Throughout the *Federalist's* six-month existence, there was not one discussion of the form of United Kingdom-wide federalism that Butt advocated; similarly, there was a profound lack of imperially minded discourse that harmonised with the sentiment of the federalist ideal. The *Federalist* insisted that 'our programme is the same as O'Connell's – simple Repeal', thus flattening out the nuances of Butt's articulation of federalism.[78] The stark difference between the rhetoric of Repeal and the imperial concerns of Irish Tories such as W. Foster Vesey-

[75] William O'Neill Daunt to J. Gleeson, 19 June 1873, Home Rule League Letter Book, PRONI, D213/9.
[76] *Freeman's Journal*, 7 February 1871.
[77] *Federalist*, 18 February 1871.
[78] *Federalist*, 25 February 1871.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Fitzgerald, who stressed above all else that 'there is no safety for the empire except in well-arranged federation', was obvious to contemporary observers.[79] The *Times* took an accurate snapshot of the confused nature of political culture in Ireland in 1871: 'Home Rule is in danger of being pulled in pieces between the advocates of Federalism, Separation, and simple Repeal.'[80]

This confusion was the price that Home Rule paid for rapid electoral success as a protest movement. On founding the Home Rule movement, Butt's working hypothesis was that it would assume the form of a small but significant pressure group, inspired by, and drawing energy from, national ideals, but ostensibly led by 'respectable' figures from Irish society. He warned Irish readers of his federalist pamphlet that patience was required, as the 'time may be far distant' when the ambition of constitutional reform would be realised. Indeed, in the first edition of *Irish Federalism*, he implied that he did not want to take Home Rule into the formal political arena.[81] The success of a number of individuals who adopted the banner of Home Rule to win by-elections from 1871 to 1873, coinciding with the collapse of Gladstone's constructive Irish policy, however, dramatically accelerated the timeline, forcibly shifting the new self-governing idea from the drawing rooms into parliament. This process occurred much quicker than Butt would have hoped, given (as he was aware) the lack of support for his scheme in Britain and the sense of confusion regarding the definition of Home Rule. Although he won a seat at a by-election in 1871, Butt was careful not to identify himself as a formal candidate sponsored by the Home Government Association; instead, he stood as an independent Home Ruler. During 1871, when other candidates preaching Irish self-government were winning parliamentary seats, Butt insisted to A. M. Sullivan that 'the Home Rule organisation as a body ought not to interfere at present in any election'.[82] His instinct was to demarcate the work of the Home Rule organisation and the parliamentarians – to separate the national movement from the political movement.

This cautious approach, however, quickly broke down as the idea of Irish self-government, if not of federalism, gained in popularity during the 1870s. After a handful of by-election victories in 1871 and 1872, the impatient John Martin pressured Butt to press for a Home Rule debate in parliament, a course of action the leader wished to avoid, as he was aware it

[79] *Freeman's Journal*, 24 January 1873. [80] *Times*, 19 October 1871.
[81] Butt, *Irish Federalism*, pp. iv, vi, 65.
[82] Butt to A. M. Sullivan, [1871], Butt Papers, NLI, MS 831.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

would result in a demoralising defeat.[83] Thus, when he found himself leading a group of (nominally) fifty-nine Home Rule MPs after the 1874 general election, Butt was caught between Irish expectation for change and British hostility to it, which culminated in the heavy defeat of his self-government motion in the House of Commons. The failure to secure substantial concessions for Ireland in terms of land and education reform – still less federalism or any form of administrative devolution – left Butt's long-term conception of political change dangerously open to criticism from the more impatient activists in Ireland.

This was the context for the rise of obstructionism as a parliamentary weapon by an increasingly vocal wing of the Irish party. The obstructionists represented a grave threat not only to Butt's leadership of the movement, but also to his desire to articulate a constructive and 'loyal' political vocabulary in relation to Home Rule. The filibustering actions of Charles Stewart Parnell and Joseph Biggar from 1875 captured the Irish imagination in a way that Butt could not, and ultimately split the party.[84] The theatrical performances of Parnell and Biggar in the House of Commons also fatally undermined Butt's proselytising mission by raising the hackles of the British political classes. By 1878, the damage was such, in the context of Parnell's ascent, that the Irish Protestant historian Richard Bagwell proclaimed that 'Mr Butt's once notorious pamphlet is ancient history now'.[85] Parnell abandoned the last vestiges of federalism in favour of a 'simpler' Home Rule scheme on assuming the leadership of the Irish party in 1880. It is not a coincidence that this was a demand made by John Devoy, a leading figure in Clan na Gael, now the leading militant Irish-American association, as part of the 'New Departure' programme of combining constitutional and revolutionary strategies into a single national movement.[86]

These developments indicate the limited impact which Butt's 'notorious pamphlet' of 1870 achieved. His proposal for federalism was read widely throughout Britain, provoking comment pieces in many leading contemporary journals. Opinion was, however, staunchly against the profound constitutional change advocated by Butt. Reviews typically dwelt on the

[83] John Martin to Butt, 12 April 1872, Butt Papers, NLI, MS 8694(4).
[84] *Nation*, 8 and 15 July 1876.
[85] Richard Bagwell, 'Home Rulers at home', *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 2 (February 1878), p. 212.
[86] Michael Keyes, 'Parnellism: the role of funding in the journey from the semi-revolutionary to the purely constitutional', in Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid and Colin W. Reid (eds.), *From Parnell to Paisley: Constitutional and Revolutionary Politics in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), p. 16.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

conjunctional and ideological obstacles to federalism: the alliance between Irish Tories and Repealers was believed to be temporary, meaning that the demand for Home Rule would collapse when Orange and Green would (inevitably) revert to form; moreover, the constitutional traditions that had evolved in the United Kingdom rendered federal schemes impossible to implement. Another important theme was the perception that there existed an incompatibility between the vices of Irish civil society and the responsibility of government, with the inherent danger of a clergy-driven oligarchy masquerading as democratic will in Ireland.[87] The Irish problem, from the vantage point of British observers, lay in the barbarous and utterly discordant political culture. Anthony Trollope hysterically dismissed the political lineage between O'Connell and Butt as 'the natural declension of a political disease'.[88] With its 'monster meetings', successive rebellions, and the lure of Fenianism, Ireland was, from an English perspective, an alien political place. British commentators spoke time and time again of the need for a more 'complete', 'equal', and 'real' Union between Great Britain and Ireland, but without any concrete ideas on how to achieve this aim.[89] The *unionist* underpinnings of Butt's proposal, and the potential benefits of institutionalising Irish sentiment within a redesigned Union, were largely overlooked by British reviewers, who maintained that federalism was an inappropriate framework for the United Kingdom.

Much to Butt's chagrin, his proposal was also rejected by the two foremost theorists of federalism in Britain, John Stuart Mill and Edward A. Freeman. As the politico-philosophical weight of these two thinkers was considerable, this posed an immense intellectual challenge to Butt's ambitious federal scheme, indirectly fuelling the rise of more 'simpler' notions of Irish self-government during the 1870s. Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) contained a detailed discussion of the practicability of federalism, but he stopped far short of advocating such a scheme for the United Kingdom. There was, however, a marked change in his tone on Irish matters before and after the Fenian rebellion. While *Considerations* claimed that 'there is next to nothing', bar the 'memory of the past' and the outrageous position of the established church in Ireland to divide the British and Irish, his pamphlet from 1868, *England and*

[87] 'A review of Isaac Butt's *Irish Federalism*', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 133 (April 1871), pp. 523, 525.
[88] Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. Charles Morgan (London: Williams and Norgate Ltd., 1946; first published 1883), p. 79.
[89] 'Irish federalism', *Spectator*, 3 September 1870, p. 1057; 'The past and future relations of Ireland to Great Britain', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. 24 (May 1871), p. 43; 'The Irish temper', *Examiner*, 18 November 1871, p. 1134.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

Ireland, was a tour de force in righteous anger directed at British policy in Ireland.[90] Despite this shift, Mill's hostility to federalism within the United Kingdom was unshakeable. For all of *England and Ireland's* rage against the injustice of the 'foreign' Irish land system, Mill refused to consider any tinkering with the structures of the Union. 'Separation would be disastrous', he argued: 'an attempt at federal union would be unsatisfactory while it lasted, and would end either in reconquest or in complete separation'.[91]

Such a rejection did not stop John George MacCarthy from drawing on Mill's oeuvre to make the point that Home Rule was not an unprecedented measure within the context of the empire. Mill's outline of the varieties of colonial self-governments in *Considerations* was utilised by MacCarthy to counter the British argument that federalism was a step into the unknown.[92] MacCarthy also exploited a perceived inconsistency in Mill's application of federalism. Mill's theory of representative government rested on the ideal of the nation-state: 'Where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force', he argued in *Considerations*, 'there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government'. Later, in the same work, Mill describes the Irish as being 'sufficiently numerous to be capable of constituting a respectable nationality by themselves'.[93] MacCarthy struggled to square these assertions with Mill's refusal to consider granting Ireland a form of self-government within a larger federal framework.[94] MacCarthy failed to note, however, that Mill had several exceptions to the rule:

> Experience proves, that it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another: and when it was originally an inferior and more backward portion of the human race, the absorption is greatly to its advantage. Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilised and cultivated people – to be a member of the French nationality . . . The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander, as members of the British nation.[95]

Mill included the Irish in this category, too, believing that Ireland's political imagination had become diseased through decades of British misrule. The English-Scottish Union worked well, according to Mill,

[90] Mill, *Considerations*, p. 296.
[91] John Stuart Mill, *England and Ireland* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1868), p. 36.
[92] MacCarthy, *Plea for the Home Government of Ireland*, p. 46.
[93] Mill, *Considerations*, pp. 289, 295.
[94] MacCarthy, *Plea for the Home Government of Ireland*, pp. 173–5.
[95] Mill, *Considerations*, p. 293.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

because it enshrined Scottish cultural distinctiveness while promoting legislative unity of purpose.[96] What was needed was to address Irish grievances in a similar way: Irish ideas should play a prominent role in decision-making, but within the parameters of the existing United Kingdom. Mill believed that Ireland was not politically or culturally mature enough for any form of self-government, ensuring that the Union state must be proactive in tackling Irish problems before they became serious grievances. 'The difficulty of governing Ireland lies entirely in our own minds', Mill asserted in *England and Ireland*, 'it is an incapability of understanding'.[97] While Butt saluted Mill's regenerative economic ideas in relation to Ireland,[98] there was no common ground on the question of Home Rule.

While Mill found his work cited – and distorted – by Home Rulers, he did not actively participate in debate with the Irish constitutional reformers. In contrast, the other leading expert on federalism in Britain, the historian Edward A. Freeman, publicly condemned Butt's scheme. Freeman, who later presided over the Oxford University Home Rule League in the 1880s when Parnell was at his pomp,[99] delivered a series of devastating blows against federal Home Rule in 1873 and 1874. In an article in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1873 that reflected on developments in contemporary European federalist thought, Freeman concluded that a 'Federal union may be looked on as the half-way house between total separation and perfect union'. He added, however, a significant caveat to this potentially creative constitutional arrangement: 'it is the nature of a half-way house that people should meet at it whose faces are turned different ways. And it often makes all the difference in the world as to success or failure in which way a man's face is turned'.[100] Freeman did not address the notion of Irish and British federalism in the article, but it was clear that he believed that Ireland and Britain were facing different ways. The following year, after Butt had unsuccessfully moved a motion in the House of Commons to create a committee to investigate the 'present parliamentary relations between Great Britain and Ireland',[101] Freeman launched an assault on Irish ideas of federalism, dismissing Butt's plan as 'wild and impracticable'. What greatly animated Freeman, however, was MacCarthy's selective use of his work on federalism to buttress the Irish

[96] Ibid., p. 310. [97] Mill, *England and Ireland*, p. 42. [98] Butt, *Irish Deep Sea Fisheries*, p. 10.
[99] *Oxford University Home Rule League: List of Members, 1891* (Oxford: Alden and Co., [1891]), p. 3.
[100] E. A. Freeman, 'The growth of commonwealths', *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 14, no. 82 (October 1873), p. 455.
[101] *Hansard*, 30 June 1874, vol. 220, cols. 700–17.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

case. As with his treatment of Mill, MacCarthy ignored Freeman's negative views on the utility of federalism in a British and Irish context, focusing instead on lines written by the historian that could be interpreted to philosophically support the Home Rule case. MacCarthy was returned to Westminster as the Member of Parliament for Mallow in 1874. In a parliamentary speech advocating Home Rule in July of that year, he cited a passage from Freeman's *History of Federal Government*: 'Federalism is the true solvent. It gives as much union as the members need, and not more than they need.' MacCarthy argued that this sanctioned the Home Rule case, more so when the present structure of centralised government – one that 'forces a system suitable only for one homogeneous community on two communities which are clearly not homogeneous' – was considered.[102]

Freeman rejected this reading of his work, referring MacCarthy to his theory that federalism only thrived in cases where the desired outcome was further unity, not a deeper sense of detachment. This was the besetting flaw in the Irish scheme when applied to the unified British state, and one that made references to the US model by Home Rulers intellectually redundant. 'I have always held that a Federal system is the right thing when it is a step in advance', Freeman asserted, 'but that it is a wrong thing when it is a step backwards'.[103] British and Irish understandings of how federalism might be applied to the United Kingdom were, in essence, fundamentally different: Home Rulers desired to split a unitary state to create a federal structure, a constitutional pattern that Mill, Freeman, and, later, A. V. Dicey viewed as destructive. For these thinkers, federalism only had utility as a unifier of small states, not a divider of a single polity, and was therefore not applicable to the United Kingdom. But this rebuttal did not stop MacCarthy, who drew on Freeman's own writings to advance the case that federalism was the only viable bridge to harmonise Ireland's relations with the wider Kingdom. He deployed a quote from Freeman's work that suggested that Ireland 'is too far off for the same perfect incorporation which unites the three parts of Great Britain', which MacCarthy read as an argument for a federal union.[104] The *Spectator*, which was sympathetic to the Irish cause during the 1870s, was impressed by MacCarthy's adroit use of Freeman's ideas to support an idea that the historian opposed, but delivered a grim judgement on the chances of

[102] Ibid., 2 July 1874, vol. 220, col. 878.
[103] E. A. Freeman, 'Federalism and Home Rule', *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 16, no. 92 (August 1874), p. 212.
[104] *Nation*, 12 September 1874.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

bringing the federal project to fruition: 'The truth is, that unhappy as the relations between the two countries are, they are far too close to admit of the kind of separation implied in Federalism . . . History has gone beyond the point where federalism is possible'.[105] That Freeman ended his life as an advocate for Gladstonian Home Rule, a very different concept to the first definition articulated by Butt and his circle, appeared to bear out the *Spectator's* gloomy forecast for federalism.

Federalism slipped off the Irish political agenda after Butt's failure to move a Home Rule motion in the House of Commons in 1874. By that year, P. J. Smyth, an influential old Repealer and Home Rule MP, was delivering blistering attacks on federalism, condemning the idea as a national heresy. He escalated this campaign from 1876 as the more radical Parnellite wing of the Irish party stepped up its campaign of parliamentary obstruction – a tactic that was strongly opposed by Butt.[106] The defeat of federal Home Rule, and its replacement with a simpler, more Irish-focused notion of self-government, marked an important demarcation in the evolution of political life in Ireland. By defining Home Rule as federalism rather than parliamentary devolution (as the scheme later became in British legislation during the 1880s), Butt's conception of the political nation lay within a United Kingdom greater than, but still representative of, its component parts. Home Rule as devolution undermined this cosmopolitan ideal, emphasising instead Ireland's uniqueness within the Union and its historical sense of grievance. Butt's abhorrence of this provincialism manifested itself in his firm opposition to 'simple' Repeal throughout the 1870s, a point that split the Home Rule movement before Parnell formally dropped the federalist baggage on assuming the leadership of the Irish party in 1880. The early 1870s represented something of a turning point, when ideas of federalism – and thus of cementing Ireland's place within the Union – were mainstream within Irish political culture; from 1880, this was resolutely not the case, as the rhetoric of self-government assumed a more exclusive and Ireland-centred form.

The exchanges between federal Home Rulers such as Butt, John George MacCarthy, and Thaddeus O'Malley, and the opponents of a federal United Kingdom, reveal much about contemporary ideas about the state, unitary sovereignty, and Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. The impossibility of federalising the United Kingdom was stressed by Mill and Freeman, and, later, Dicey, on the grounds that federalism was a tool to

[105] *Spectator*, 12 September 1874. MacCarthy's letter to the *Nation* also appeared in this issue.
[106] *Nation*, 6 June 1874; *Spectator*, 16 September 1876.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

permit diverse states to achieve a sense of structured unity, rather than to allow a unified state to divide sovereignty and potentially follow the path of separatism. Reflecting on Butt's *Irish Federalism* pamphlet in 1882, Dicey believed the scheme to be the most revolutionary ever submitted to the British parliament.[107] Federalism, for Dicey, could only be successful when the component regions were driven by the need for unity, not the separatism which he believed underpinned the Irish demand. 'If there be no desire to unite', Dicey argued, 'there is clearly no basis for federalism'.[108] Even so, it is striking how unionist political thinkers from a variety of backgrounds returned to what was, in essence, Butt's federalist vision during the Home Rule crises in 1886 and 1912–14.[109] Moreover, Butt's influence stretched beyond his death in 1879. While the Parnellite strand of John Redmond's political leanings has received attention, his overlooked Buttite inheritance was equally a prominent aspect of his political personality, shaping his conciliatory rhetoric, imperial sensibilities, and openness to a federalist solution.[110]

Butt's federal ideal struggled to capture the hearts and minds of Irish nationalists for several reasons. There were considerable misunderstandings over the definition of Home Rule, with the unionism of Butt's political ideas undermined by the assumption that the new project of the 1870s was a resurrection of O'Connellism. Time and again, supposed advocates of federalism championed a 'return' to an old form of Irish government (such as Repeal of the Union), rather than a genuinely federal constitutional structure. This internal contradiction shaped the evolution of Irish nationalist discourse and actions from the mid 1870s through to the introduction of the first Home Rule Bill in 1886; the reaction against the conservative Buttite conception of the Irish future, which was born from frustration with its limited progress, subsequently radicalised the Parnellite agenda. By the early 1880s, the political landscape had changed, with federalism scrapped in favour of a version of Home Rule that was more imbued with a separatist sentiment. The Irish Tories, whom Butt had hoped to inspire to assume the leadership of the nation, fled the Home Rule movement,

[107] A. V. Dicey, 'Home Rule from an English point of view', *Contemporary Review*, vol. 42 (July 1882), p. 75.

[108] A. V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), p. 132.

[109] See, for example, John Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).

[110] Colin W. Reid, 'Isaac Butt's legacy: the Irish Parliamentary Party, 1879–1918', in Martin O'Donoghue and Emer Purcell (eds.), *John Redmond and Irish Parliamentary Traditions* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2024), pp. 20–31.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

frightened by the spectre of a new nationalism that fused liberalism, Catholic democracy, and land agitation. Indeed, politics took a rather different turn after 1880, becoming increasingly bitter and polarised; the ideologies that shaped Ireland into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries became more unconditional and uncompromising.

The Centrality of Constitutionalism

One of the great ironies about Isaac Butt's political career was that he pioneered some of the more 'muscular' stances subsequently adopted with much aplomb by his successor, Charles Stewart Parnell. Butt's remarkable success in courting the IRB – which led to the Brotherhood acquiescing in a three-year trial of the parliamentary campaign – was a precursor of the 'New Departure', signalling the willingness of elements of the post-1867 Fenian leadership to explore the use of constitutional means. By the 1860s, Butt had established himself as one of the most prominent – and radical – writers urging a reform of the structures of land ownership, foreshadowing the rise of the Land League.[111] While Butt was firmly wedded to a federal solution to resolve the problems created by an overly centralised executive in the United Kingdom, the rhetorical concept of 'Home Rule', explicitly as a form of Irish self-government, dominated the political imagination across Ireland and Britain for almost forty years after his death.

For all of Butt's energetic and ground-breaking political activism, however, it was Parnell who reaped the successes. While Butt was eager to avoid combining the struggles for land reform and Home Rule for fear of merging the 'national' question with a class issue (and thus alienating landlords), Parnell had no such inhibition. Under Parnell's leadership of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Land League during the early 1880s, the campaigns for Home Rule and radical land reform were fused, granting the otherwise abstract idea of self-government a distinctly material underpinning.[112] While Butt was proactive in seeking the tacit support of the IRB to demonstrate the potential of constitutional means to address the grievances represented by Fenianism, Parnell exploited militant sentiment to (occasionally) instil the unflinching rhetoric of separatism into the vocabulary of Home Rule.[113] In what would have been an astonishing

[111] For Butt's contributions to the debate on Irish land, see Reid, 'A voice for Ireland', pp. 55–74.
[112] Philip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), pp. 97–8.
[113] Kelly, *Fenian Ideal*, p. 3.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

act for the undisputed leader of constitutional nationalism, Parnell may have taken the IRB oath in 1882, days before the Phoenix Park murders, in which a Fenian splinter group assassinated two British officials.[114] Parnell played a dangerous game, but in many ways he was merely expanding on the rules sketched out by Butt during the 1860s and 1870s.

While Butt and Parnell were both unable to secure any form of Home Rule during their lifetimes, the posthumous reputation of the latter leader unquestionably eclipsed that of the former. Parnell was the romanticised, independent-minded national leader, revered even by many who favoured militant separatism such as Patrick Pearse.[115] Butt, in contrast, lingered in historical obscurity. An insightful coda to Butt's life, however, was made by Michael Davitt in his classic *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, published in 1904. Davitt was a former member of the IRB and founder of the Land League. He was also a disciple of the influential American political economist Henry George, who advocated the nationalisation of land, which became a powerful undercurrent within the radical fringes of the Land League.[116] Davitt dedicated a chapter to Butt's career as a skilled polemicist on the land question in *The Fall of Feudalism*, recalling his importance in articulating the idea of fixity of tenure, which became vital Land League doctrine. 'If James Fintan Lalor was the prophet of Irish revolutionary land reform', opined Davitt, 'Isaac Butt was its immediate if more moderate precursor'. He was, in Davitt's reading, the 'reforming link' between the Tenant League of the 1850s and the Land League.[117] While Davitt emphasised the centrality of Fenianism in explaining the origins and organisational development of the Land League, his veneration for Butt as an intellectual father of the movement in *The Fall of Feudalism* was genuine.[118]

Despite his admiration for Butt, Davitt's own thinking on the land question greatly eclipsed the reputation of the old Home Rule chief. Indeed, Davitt is widely regarded as one of the most important social

[114] Patrick Maume, 'Parnell and the IRB Oath', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 115 (1995), pp. 363–70.

[115] Pádraic H. Pearse, 'Ghosts', *in Collected Works of Pádraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Phoenix Publishing Co., Ltd., 1924), pp. 244–5.

[116] For George's influence in Ireland, see Andrew Phemister, *Land and Liberalism: Henry George and the Irish Land War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[117] Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland: Or the Story of the Land League Revolution* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1904), p. 79.

[118] Ibid., p. 83. Owen McGee, *The IRB: The Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Féin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 66–102, details the Fenian influence on the Land League.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

thinkers in late nineteenth-century Ireland, a leading light of progressive agrarian and labourist causes who enjoyed a global status.[119] As Davitt's social radicalism was such a prominent component of his political identity, it is possible to overlook the centrality of constitutionalism – a belief in the inherent importance of the design of the polity – within his wider thought. In 1881, while incarcerated at Portland Prison in Dorset following a state crackdown of the Land League, Davitt penned a lengthy essay entitled 'Ireland's share of the British constitution: as seen in its government and parliamentary franchise'. It was a striking piece of work. Davitt argued that landlordism deprived the people across the United Kingdom of their 'natural rights' to the land, resulting in incredible privilege for a small group and poverty and hardship for the masses. The triumph of the landlord 'Monopoly' was, for Davitt, the 'one grand defect of English civilization and the principal flaw in the British Constitution'.[120] Davitt was well aware of the connections between land and political power; he explicitly argued several years later that a 'more equitable distribution of wealth' would result in a 'more real and just distribution of political power'.[121] But an understated premise of Davitt's reflections was a belief that the British constitution was, in abstract, an admirable construct. The House of Commons acted as an authentic British national convention, and Davitt believed that despite the propertied character of the representatives, 'its functions are probably as democratic and its powers as great as that of any assembly of any republic in the world'.[122] It did not, however, operate equitably for all its representatives.

One of Davitt's central aims in 'Ireland's share of the British constitution' was to demonstrate the constitutional inequalities in the design of the United Kingdom. The typical Englishman, according to Davitt, was able to enjoy substantial political freedoms, such as an extended franchise, equality before the law, unfettered movement throughout the Kingdom, the ability to possess a firearm, and stable government regardless of the party in power.[123] The liberties of the Englishman's Irish counterpart were, on the other hand, according to Davitt, drastically curtailed by a quasi-colonial form of governance that perceived the population as unfit for British rights. 'The Castle' – meaning Dublin Castle, the seat of

[119] Vikram Visana, *Uncivil Liberalism: Labour, Capital and Commercial Society in Dadabhai Naoroji's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 123.
[120] Michael Davitt, *Jottings in Solitary*, ed. Carla King (Dublin: UCD Press, 2003), p. 41.
[121] Michael Davitt, *Leaves from a Prison Diary; or, Lectures to a 'Solitary' Audience* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1885), p. 277.
[122] Davitt, *Jottings in Solitary*, p. 38. [123] Ibid., pp. 35–6.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

government in Ireland – symbolised the institutionalisation of conquest. This 'singular institution', for Davitt, was 'a Depot of centralised despotism without parallel in the government of any other civilized country'. 'The Castle', in other words, tarnished the British constitutional tradition. It resembled an authority 'situated at the mouth of the Yang-tse Kiang river' that 'was identified with the rule of the Celestial Empire, instead of standing on the banks of the Liffey and the representative of the British Constitution'.[124] Ireland's government was not accountable to Irish opinion: the legislative, executive, and judiciary elements of the polity were hostile to the political claims of the majority of people on the island.[125] An oddity of the British constitution, for Davitt, was the widespread assumption that its liberal form was found everywhere in the British world.[126] 'English opinion', Matthew Arnold recorded in 1882, 'attributes Irish misery to the faults of the Irish themselves', and not to the manifestation of poor government.[127] Much Irish political writing, Davitt included, can be interpreted as a plea to an *English* readership to engage with the problems inherent in the structures of Irish governance. Davitt imagined something like Dublin Castle in operation in England and concluded that the English people would overthrow such a tyrannical form of authority, as it represented the antithesis of the British constitution.[128] If the Union was a genuine partnership, why did such an imbalance in the structure of government continue indefinitely in Ireland?

Davitt's argument was that despite sending representatives to Westminster, the Irish were unrepresented in the upper echelons of public life. They were excluded from the levers of power and hostage to the agenda of others. While the United Kingdom resembled a liberal multinational polity, Davitt depicted Irish governance as tyrannical. He warned of the dangerous consequences if the Irish were denied control of their own political destiny:

> There never *can* be anything like peace or regard for the administration of Law in Ireland, while the sensitive people of that country see their fatherland in the clutches of such a gang and themselves and their rights as civilized men maligned, insulted and trampled upon by those who flaunt the stigmas of official, race, class, and religious ascendancy before their face in almost every transaction of Irish government.[129]

Davitt believed that when British statesmen learned 'to do full justice to Ireland, then and not till then will our people be contended or satisfied'.

[124] Ibid., p. 52. [125] Ibid., pp. 66–9. [126] Ibid., p. 51.
[127] Matthew Arnold, *Irish Essays and Others* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1882), p. 12.
[128] Davitt, *Jottings in Solitary*, p. 66. [129] Ibid. Emphasis in original.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007

But this was not an O'Connellite choice between justice *or* the Repeal of the Act of Union; Davitt defined 'justice' explicitly *as* Repeal. The colonial structure of government – which Davitt likened to India in another essay – could not continue indefinitely for Ireland.[130] The Irish agitated for a parliament in Dublin not because of an unfulfilled national aspiration, Davitt concluded, but because Home Rule offered the only path to meaningful representative government.[131] Irish discontent with the British connection may have drawn from the well of nationalism, but it was, firmly and consistently, political at heart. It is telling that the first line of the introduction to Davitt's *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* centred on this theme: 'The genius of misgovernment has never been more wilfully blind in its methods or more persistent in the folly of political unwisdom than in the ways and means of England's rule in Ireland'.[132] The impulse for responsive, accountable, and fundamentally good government was a prominent component of Irish political thought, even in the mind of the agrarian agitator *par excellence* of the early 1880s.

[130] Davitt, *Leaves from a Prison Diary*, p. 282.
[131] Davitt, *Jottings in Solitary*, pp. 81–2.
[132] Davitt, *Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, p. xv.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:02:40, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.007