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STANLEY BALDWIN'S 'IRISH QUESTION'*

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ABSTRACT. *The years 1920–5 constituted a pivotal phase in the development of twentieth-century British politics. At the same time, Ireland continued to be a potentially explosive issue despite the signing of the 1921 treaty. This was so because the agreement failed to resolve the dispute at the heart of the Irish question: namely, whether or not Ireland would be a united or a divided nation. This problem was particularly acute for the Conservative party, as it could revive splits between former Coalitionists and die-hards and, further, would hinder efforts aimed at winning over Liberal votes during the crucial 1924 general election. When Labour's first government was unwillingly forced to confront the Irish problem, Stanley Baldwin and his Conservative colleagues worked to contain the quarrel between the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. Only by doing so could they then concentrate on other issues which were more likely to attract support for the tories and, further, to ensure that their party and Labour would dominate British politics to the exclusion of the Liberals.*

Late one morning in April 1924 the assistant secretary to the imperial cabinet was 'startled' to find Britain's ex-prime minister standing in his office doorway. So unexpected a visit was 'very like' Stanley Baldwin. So, too, was the reaction of Tom Jones. Never one to miss an opportunity to advance the cause of the governments he served, Jones decided to tell the Conservative leader about his recent visit to Ireland and 'the coming trouble on the Boundary Commission'. A crisis was just over the horizon, one every bit as serious for Baldwin and the tories as it was for the Labour party then in office for the first time.[1]

Although the treaty of 1921 had brought peace between Britain and its rebellious neighbour, it had failed to settle the outstanding issue of the Irish question. Nearly three years after the document was signed, H. H. Asquith pointed out that the British people were 'confronted with precisely the same problem' which had taken them to the brink of civil war in 1914. The issue at hand was the same as a decade earlier, and as it had been in 1921. Then as now, Asquith warned the House of Commons, the Irish dispute centred 'mainly or exclusively upon the position of the two counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh'.

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[1] Jones diary, 9 Apr. 1924, in T. Jones, *Whitehall diary*, 1: *1916–25* (1), ed. K. Middlemas (London, 1969), pp. 275–6.

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On the fate of these Ulster counties hung Ireland's future as a united or a divided country.[2]

Moreover, the Irish spectre continued to haunt Britain's leaders as they were caught up in 'a revolution in English politics' as profound as any which had been experienced in nearly a hundred years.[3] The climax of this revolution would come at the general election of 1924. This watershed event established the Conservative and Labour parties as the two main players in twentieth-century British politics, while Liberals were relegated to a poor third place. Before that could happen, however, Ireland had to be removed from the political landscape.

The case presented here admittedly runs counter to the view that Ireland disappeared from British politics with the signing of the 1921 treaty and did not re-emerge again for the better part of five decades. As A. J. P. Taylor famously put it, with the treaty David Lloyd George 'conjured' the Irish question 'out of existence' and, another historian has noted, this explains 'the quickly diminishing importance of the Irish question … in British domestic politics' after the agreement was signed.[4] But such a view must account for the following.

Why in May 1924 did the shadow cabinet investigate the ramifications of a boundary commission award – and ways to prevent the award's implementation? Why did Baldwin risk a secret visit to Belfast that summer? Why did Conservative party leaders such as Lord Salisbury go to great lengths to head off parliamentary action on the boundary? Why did the party seriously consider postponing its annual conference in view of the Irish crisis? Not least, why, in 1925, did Winston Churchill remind the House of Commons that 'only a year ago this boundary question very nearly became a disastrous and dominating issue in our political life'?[5]

The leader of the Conservative party, at least, recognized the danger he faced. This is what might have been called Stanley Baldwin's 'Irish question': how to maintain the treaty settlement of 1921 and, at the same time, reunite his party before its push for electoral dominance. It was not an easy nor a straightforward job, particularly when his first government fell at the beginning of 1924. 'I think I see your difficulties', he wrote to Northern Ireland's premier, Sir James Craig,

> but I want you also to see some of mine. If we go into Opposition, as is now most probable, and I am still Leader of the Party, my hands will be full with our own problems over here. I do not want the Irish conflict revived in the House of Commons in any shape or form if it can justly be avoided.[6]

Baldwin would find the task neither that simple nor that easy.

[2] *House of Commons debates* (*HC Deb*), 177, col. 46, 30 Sept. 1924.

[3] *The annual register: a review of public events at home and abroad, 1924* (London, 1925), p. 8.

[4] A. J. P. Taylor, *English history, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 161, 236; S. Lawlor, *Britain and Ireland, 1914–1923* (Dublin, 1983), p. 154.

[5] *HC Deb*, 189, col. 360, 8 Dec. 1925.

[6] Baldwin to Craig, 14 Jan. 1924, London, Public Record Office (PRO), Home Office papers (HO) 144/3915/4.

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I

According to one contemporary journal, when Andrew Bonar Law accepted the premiership after the collapse of the Lloyd George Coalition in October 1922 he was bequeathed 'a heritage of mismanaged problems … the most disquieting' of which was Ireland.[7] In vain, Bonar Law and his Ulster Unionist friends searched through the document's first ten articles for any acknowledgement of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act which had partitioned the country and established two home rule assemblies: one for Ireland's six north-eastern counties, and another for the rest of the country.[8]

Only with Article 11 were the powers of the newly created Irish Free State temporarily suspended in the area governed by Belfast's parliament. There then followed what Bonar Law called his 'serious objection' to the treaty: Article 12.[9] The first half of this clause gave Ulster's government the choice of opting out of the new Irish dominion for good. In that case, however,

> a Commission consisting of three persons, one to be appointed by the Government of the Irish Free State, one to be appointed by the Government of Northern Ireland, and one who shall be Chairman, to be appointed by the British Government, shall determine, in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions, the boundaries between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland.[10]

Although later debate has tended to focus almost exclusively on Article 12, the treaty's handling of the 'northern' question was much more complex than that.[11] Taken as a whole, Articles 11 through 15 of the agreement were in fact a series of interrelated and self-reinforcing clauses which were designed to bring about 'the eventual establishment of a Parliament for the whole of Ireland'.[12] For this reason, the treaty ignited a burning resentment within the Conservative party, and this explains why it served as the catalyst for the Coalition's downfall.[13]

Bonar Law inherited a party badly shaken by the split between pro- and anti-Coalition tories, a split which also marked off those who were proud that they had played a part in ending the Irish conflict from those who 'felt a sort of hurt that so old a sore could be healed'.[14] This rift went straight into the

[7] 'The end of the Coalition', *Quarterly Review*, Jan. 1923, pp. 211–12.

[8] *Cmd 1560: articles of agreement for a treaty between Great Britain and Ireland* [*Cmd 1560*] (London, 1921), sess. II, i, 75. [9] *HC Deb*, 149, col. 203, 15 Dec. 1921. [10] *Cmd 1560*, Article 12.

[11] See, e.g., M. Laffan, *The partition of Ireland, 1911–1925* (Dundalk, 1983), pp. 72–105; J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 52–3.

[12] 'The Council of Ireland', Commonwealth Relations Office memorandum, 19 Apr. 1949, HO 45/23466; also, see Hawtrey memorandum, 12 Nov. 1923, PRO, Treasury papers 160/187/F.7136/1.

[13] See, e.g., Cave to Chamberlain, 15 Oct. 1922, British Library (BL), Cave papers, Add. MSS 62, 464, fo. 68. David Close maintains that the treaty was the die-hards' 'main grievance' against Lloyd George's government. See 'Conservatives and Coalition after the First World War', *Journal of Modern History*, 45 (1973), p. 254. Trevor Wilson, in *The downfall of the Liberal party, 1914–1935* (London, 1966), pp. 221–2, rejects an Irish role in the Coalition's demise.

[14] C. Coote, *A companion of honour: the story of Walter Elliot* (London, 1965), pp. 74–5.

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cabinet. Lords Cave and Salisbury were particularly 'obstinate' about the treaty and were 'unwilling to realise that it had to be swallowed without change'.[15] Others counselled that the 'Free State Government must be given a fair chance'.[16]

Characteristically, Baldwin had a foot in both camps. As president of the board of trade in the Coalition, he had been bound to support the treaty. His backing, however, was conditional on the maintenance of Ulster's 'equal rights' within the United Kingdom. 'Whether in years to come she thinks fit to enter a United Irish Parliament', he wrote, 'is her business and her business alone.'[17] In other words, Baldwin opposed using the treaty to bring about Irish reunification even if that was an underlying goal of the agreement.

However much the die-hard wing of the party – and, probably, Bonar Law himself – would have liked to throw over the treaty's Ulster clauses, this was impossible after the 1922 general election.[18] The Conservatives' victory rested largely on their promise to restore 'tranquillity' – and they could hardly do that by reigniting the Anglo-Irish war. Even some die-hards realised that the party's room for manoeuvre was limited; in the end, the cabinet resigned itself to the fact that it 'had no alternative' but to work the treaty.[19]

Nevertheless, within the party indignation over the Irish treaty continued to fester. That these feelings did not break into the open was thanks largely to Irish republicans. By bringing on Ireland's civil war, the anti-treatyites made it impossible for Dublin's government to tackle the boundary dispute. 'What a ridiculous position we would cut', admitted one Free Stater, 'were we to argue our claim at the Commission for population and territory when at our backs in our own jurisdiction is the perpetual racket of war.'[20] As it happened, Irish Free State President William Cosgrave informed Bonar Law of the 'collapse of armed resistance', and the need to make ready for the boundary commission, only four days before the latter stepped down as prime minister.[21]

When Conservative MPs gathered to confirm Baldwin as their leader a couple of weeks later, the most 'striking feature' of the meeting was the 'appeal for unity within the party'. Baldwin picked up on this theme in his acceptance speech, asking his followers to 'avoid any discussions that may prevent or delay a final and a complete reunion' which, he hinted, might come about 'at no very distant date'.[22] But Baldwin's plans for readmitting the former Coalition tories led by Austen Chamberlain soon hit a snag.

[15] Jones diary, 16 Nov. 1922, I, p. 223.

[16] Griffith-Boscawen to Bonar Law, 25 Oct. 1922, House of Lords Record Office (HLRO), Bonar Law papers (ABL) 110/1/1.

[17] S. Baldwin, 'Why I support the Irish agreement', *Popular View*, 1 (1922), p. 3.

[18] R. Rhodes James, *Memoirs of a Conservative: J.C.C. Davidson's memoirs and papers, 1910–1937* (London, 1969), p. 138.

[19] British cabinet conclusions (C) 68(22), appendix II, 22 Nov. 1922, Cabinet (CAB) 23/32.

[20] O'Shiel to Cosgrave, undated, University College Dublin Archives, Richard Mulcahy papers, p7/B/101.

[21] Cosgrave to Bonar Law, 16 May 1923, National Archives of Ireland (NAI), department of the taoiseach (D/T), S 1801/C.

[22] 'Prime minister as leader', *Times*, 29 May 1923.

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After Bonar Law's resignation, Chamberlain freed his colleagues from 'any obligations arising out of our joint action in the Irish Treaty and last October' (i.e., the Carlton Club meeting) so that they might accept office in Baldwin's new government.[23] As for himself, however, he was under no illusions 'as to my unpopularity with the die-hards who are in the ascendant' within the party.[24]

Chamberlain's erstwhile friends had not forgotten the part that he and Lord Birkenhead had played in the Irish negotiations. Above all, the two stood condemned for the treaty's Ulster clauses – 'as gross a betrayal as it is possible to imagine'.[25] In November 1922, Chamberlain attempted to refute this allegation, telling delegates from the Ulster Unionist Council that the boundary commission was never intended to make more than minor readjustments to the Irish frontier. But he then went on to say that the current border was neither a 'logical [n]or good boundary'. Worse, he admitted that the Coalition 'never affected to believe that the Act of 1920 could be permanent'.[26]

The mistrust aroused by this admission was further aggravated when, the following spring, he involved himself in a very public exchange over allegations that a 'Ministerial undertaking' was given to Irish leaders guaranteeing that the treaty would end Ireland's partition. Although Chamberlain was absolved of responsibility for this pledge, the timing of the incident could not have been worse for his career.[27] When, finally, he and Baldwin met, Chamberlain had little choice but to accept Baldwin's explanation that he had simply 'never thought of' including Austen in his new government.[28] In fact, Baldwin was dissembling.

As told to Neville Chamberlain, after Baldwin assumed the premiership the duke of Devonshire offered to step down as colonial secretary to make way for another appointee if that would help to restore party unity. 'Accordingly', Neville wrote in his diary, 'Baldwin had thought of offering the C.O. to Austen but had reflected that he would be prejudiced by his Irish record (!).'[29] The incident was confirmed by Lord Peel, who said that two issues stood in the way of Austen's return to the party's inner circle. The lesser charge was that 'he had shown little friendliness' toward Bonar Law's government. The graver accusation, the one that his colleagues found unforgivable, was that 'he had been one of the signatories of the Treaty with Ireland'.[30]

Less than three weeks after taking over as prime minister, Baldwin received

[23] Chamberlain to Birkenhead, 31 May 1923, University of Birmingham Library (UBL), Austen Chamberlain papers (AC) 35/2/18.

[24] Chamberlain to Worthington-Evans, 24 May 1923, AC 35/2/6.

[25] 'Mr. Chamberlain and Ulster', *Belfast News-Letter*, 2 Nov. 1922.

[26] Ibid.

[27] 'The Irish Revolution', 'Irish Settlement. Mr. A. Chamberlain on partition', 'Irish partition. The alleged promise', 'Irish boundary. The alleged secret understanding', all in The *Times*, 12, 18, 25 May, 12 Sept. 1923. W. O'Brien, in *The Irish revolution and how it came about* (Dublin, 1923), pp. 441–5, claimed the undertaking was given by Lloyd George and Churchill.

[28] Chamberlain memorandum, 27 May 1923, AC 35/2/11(b).

[29] Chamberlain diary, 1 June 1923, UBL, Neville Chamberlain papers (NC) 2/21.

[30] Peel to Reading, 12 June 1923, BL, India Office papers (IO), MSS Eur. E. 238/6, no. 20.

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a confidential letter from Cosgrave saying that the Irish government would soon be ready to present its case to the boundary commission.[31] The day after, cabinet assistant secretary Tom Jones discussed the problem with Bonar Law, and the two reached a decision as momentous as any made in the entire boundary dispute. Although he felt that his successor was making a good start, Bonar Law worried that 'the real trouble' for Baldwin 'would be over the Boundary Commission – it was a very dangerous topic'. In that case, the two agreed, the safest course would be to persuade Baldwin to play for an 'indefinite postponement' of the entire boundary question.[32]

These two words became the alpha and omega of Irish policy in Baldwin's first government. The issue was quarantined in the colonial office and never discussed in cabinet.[33] Like Bonar Law, Baldwin avoided public discussion of the issue whenever he could and was evasive when he could not.[34]

To immunize the government from responsibility for the Irish problem, officials at the colonial office suggested that Cosgrave and Craig should be invited to settle the issue themselves. Despite the willingness of both Irish leaders to meet, the portents for such a conference were not good. When Cosgrave raised the boundary question at an earlier conference, Craig was so stubbornly 'unreceptive' that the meeting was reduced to a pointless conversation about 'cricket and the weather'. Nonetheless, Craig himself admitted that his Conservative friends would find themselves in a 'great difficulty' unless Baldwin 'stuck to the Treaty'.[35]

Yet, before the colonial office plan could be launched, it was scuttled by Baldwin himself when he linked his party to tariff reform. Writing from London, Eoin MacNeill warned his Free State colleagues that this turn of events made further postponement of the boundary question unavoidable. 'The fact is that a big political fight is coming on in Great Britain over the Protection issue', MacNeill wrote, 'and they are unable to think of anything else.' Amid the increasingly fevered political atmosphere, the colonial office warned its representative in Dublin that there might be 'a general election within the next three months if not the next three weeks'.[36]

The election, when it did come in early December, was a tory disaster which, according to Tom Jones, 'S. B. never foresaw or imagined.' The number of Conservative MPs dropped from 345 to 258, a net loss of 87 seats. Although still the single largest party in the House of Commons, the tories faced a combined

[31] Cosgrave to Baldwin, 9 June 1923, PRO, Colonial Office papers (CO) 739/18/30127.

[32] Jones diary, 10 June 1923, in T. Jones, *Whitehall diary*, III: *Ireland*, *1916–1925* (III), ed. K. Middlemas (London, 1971), p. 221.

[33] Although other matters relative to the Free State were considered, the boundary question was not discussed in cabinet between 30 May 1923 and 22 Jan. 1924. See CAB 23/46.

[34] See, e.g., *HC Deb*, 167, cols. 1699–700, 2 Aug. 1923.

[35] Devonshire to Baldwin, 20 July 1923, CO 739/18/36328; Curtis to Devonshire, 30 July 1923, CO 739/20/42192; cabinet conclusions, 30 July 1923, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), CAB4/84/12.

[36] MacNeill to O'Higgins, 2 Nov. 1923, D/T, S 1801/C. Curtis to Loughnane, 9 Nov. 1923, CO 739/20/54021.

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Liberal–Labour opposition of 159 and 191 members respectively. Baldwin's gamble, far from winning a mandate for tariff reform, reunited the Liberal party, a feat, Austen Chamberlain bitterly remarked, that 'no Liberal could do'. The Liberals, in turn, were ready to place Labour 'in office, but not in power', and Baldwin suddenly faced the very real prospect of losing the leadership of his party as well as that of the nation.[37]

There is a tendency among some historians to judge the outcome of the 1923 election through the prism of the one that followed it less than a year later. Thus, it is said that the 'principal casualty was the Liberal Party', while Baldwin and the Conservatives actually came out of the 1923 debacle 'in a strong position'.[38] That was most certainly not the way it was seen at the time. Only after the dust had cleared did Baldwin realize that he could destroy the Liberals from the right, while Ramsay MacDonald saw that Labour might now stake its claim as the party of the left. Even then, it would not have been safe to wager that the doom of the Liberals was a foregone conclusion.[39]

The task of destroying the Liberal party was one for Baldwin to relish, fuelled by his 'pathological' hatred of Lloyd George.[40] Asquith's decision to allow Labour to take office did much of Baldwin's job for him, for it left 'a painful impression on those members who still hankered after some form of coalition' between Conservatives and Liberals. Austen Chamberlain 'upbraided' Asquith in the House of Commons in mid-January 1924, doing so 'more in sorrow than in anger'. Baldwin, on the other hand, 'prophesied that the future would lie between Conservatism and Labour, to the exclusion of Liberalism'.[41]

MacDonald's antipathy toward Lloyd George was not nearly as obsessive, never mind pathological.[42] Nevertheless, the Labour leadership also believed that their party's position would not be secure until the Liberals were destroyed once and for all. 'The real and significant issue before the country is Liberalism v. Labour', Beatrice Webb wrote at the beginning of the 1923 election. Afterward, her anxieties were greater still. Labour was taking office without a mandate, when it was clear that most voters wanted a tory–Liberal coalition. 'It is only the struggle for power between the leaders and parties that prevents this carrying out of the clearly expressed will of the people.'[43]

These manoeuvrings were watched with keen interest in Dublin. Even after MacDonald accepted the seals of office, Free Staters still had to bear in mind

[37] Jones diary, 22 Dec. 1923, I, p. 261. For the election results, see D. Butler and J. Freeman, *British political facts, 1900–1967* (London, 1968), p. 142. Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 17 Nov. 1923, AC 5/1/298; Taylor, *English history*, p. 210.

[38] R. Rhodes James, *The British revolution, 1880–1939* (New York, 1977), p. 467; J. Ramsden, *A history of the Conservative party: the age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902–1940* (London, 1978), p. 183.

[39] M. Cowling, *The impact of Labour, 1920–1924* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 361, 419–20; D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1977), p. 312.

[40] C. R. Coote, *Editorial: the memoirs of Colin R. Coote* (London, 1965), p. 100; also, see Jones diary, 30 Sept., 25 Nov. 1923, I, pp. 243, 255.

[41] *Annual register*: 1924, p. 7.

[42] J. Campbell, *Lloyd George: the goat in the wilderness* (London, 1977), p. 86.

[43] Webb diary, 19 Nov., 12 Dec. 1923, London School of Economics and Political Science archive (LSE), 37, fos. 3987–8, 3997–4002.

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that negotiations on the boundary would be subject to the unstable condition of British politics and that there was the 'possibility of another strong Conservative government after the next election, which may come at any time'.[44] MacDonald intended to put off that day for as long as possible. Because 'it was essential to be on good terms with the Conservative leaders', he dared not take the initiative on any issue likely to provoke tory MPs.[45] Ireland, MacDonald need not have been told, was one such issue.

Time also figured in Baldwin's calculations. According to John Ramsden, once the soon-to-be-ex-prime minister rode out the storm following the 1923 defeat, 'the next eight months saw very little discord' in Conservative ranks.[46] In fact, Baldwin's position was anything but secure. 'S.B. will remain leader', Neville Chamberlain told one of his sisters, 'but whether he is the next P.M. of our party will depend on how he shapes in opposition.' For months to come the question continued to be asked in the tory heartland: 'What is the Conservative Party going to do about Mr Baldwin?'[47]

Only as 1924 wore on would it become fashionable to renounce Lloyd George and all his works, to view the idea of coalition government as, somehow, ignoble, and for the 'survivors of 1922' to look back with 'embarrassment' on their former associations. Epitomizing this changed mood, Austen Chamberlain told Sam Hoare that 'our business now is to smash the Liberal Party'.[48]

Chamberlain's days as the prodigal son of Conservative politics were at long last drawing to a close. Defeat finally gave Baldwin the opportunity to bring the Coalitionists 'back into the true fold' but, as Chamberlain told one of his sisters, 'the old difficulties' remained. While most party leaders were willing to receive Chamberlain in 'full communion', others continued to hold him 'responsible for two of the worst acts of the Coalition – the Irish Treaty and the Indian policy'.[49]

In such an uncertain political atmosphere, what both Baldwin and MacDonald wanted was a period of calm. Not so, Lloyd George. 'Still dynamic, creative, and ambitious' he 'was eager for combat and did not much care how things worked out so long as there was turmoil.' With so much at stake, an issue like Ireland could be used to create just the sort of uproar that Lloyd George thrived on, and which both Labour and the Conservatives were determined to avoid at all cost.[50]

[44] 'North-eastern boundary bureau', memorandum, 13 Dec. 1923, D/T, S 1801/C.

[45] Cowling, *Impact of labour*, p. 380. [46] Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, p. 190.

[47] Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 9 Feb. 1924, NC 18/1/425; 'Life and politics', *Nation*, 24 May 1924. Also, see, Robert Cecil to Salisbury, 10 Apr. 1924, BL, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 51085, fo. 126.

[48] K. O. Morgan, *Consensus and disunity: the Lloyd George Coalition government, 1918–1922* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 7, 357, 364–5; Chamberlain to Hoare, 28 Jan. 1924, Cambridge University Library (CUL), Templewood papers, V:1 (51).

[49] Salisbury to Baldwin, 26 Jan. 1924, CUL, Stanley Baldwin papers (SB) 159, fos. 258–61; Austen to Hilda Chamberlain, 24 Jan. 1924, AC 5/1/304; Baldwin to Salisbury, 25 Jan. 1924, Hatfield House, Salisbury papers (S(4)) 108/83–4. [50] Taylor, *English history*, p. 218.

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II

Mindful of the need to remain on good terms with the tories, Labour's first government took Devonshire's conference proposal as the starting point for its Irish policy. Predictably, these discussions went nowhere, leaving Cosgrave and his colleagues open to the charge that they had allowed themselves to be caught up in 'a miserable long-drawn-out farce'.[51] For the British, Northern Ireland's continued refusal to appoint its boundary commissioner raised an even thornier dilemma. It was unclear whether the panel could function with only two members and, if not, whether London had the power to name Belfast's representative.

These questions posed a constitutional dilemma which could only be answered by the judicial committee of the privy council. To answer charges that the British were evading the boundary issue, MacDonald also informed parliament that his government had at last selected the boundary commission's chairman: South African Supreme Court Justice Richard Feetham.[52]

Despite these difficulties for the new government, Baldwin and his colleagues said little about Ireland through the early months of 1924. That silence came to a sudden and abrupt end on 30 April. In a spirited defence of the treaty, Lord Birkenhead asserted that Article 12 was written in 'plain language' and that Ulster had nothing to fear from a boundary commission which would make only minor readjustments to the border. The real danger, he warned, was the 'political dynamite' that could be set off by the Unionists' persistent refusal to appoint a commissioner.[53]

Birkenhead's address infuriated Craig. During a stormy meeting with the shadow cabinet, he told the Conservative leaders that he 'got more time and interest from the present Government on the Ulster question than he did from his own associates' in the tory party. To smooth over matters, it was agreed that Birkenhead along with Lord Carson and Sir Douglas Hogg would act as a 'special committee' to co-ordinate strategy between the tories and Ulster Unionists. In return, the Conservatives made it clear that 'it was of vital importance' for Ulster MPs to 'be in constant attendance at Westminster' in case their votes were needed by Baldwin.[54]

At the same time, a separate committee – this one composed of Birkenhead, Viscount Cave, and Hogg – examined the implications arising out of Northern Ireland's refusal to appoint its commissioner. Far from reassuring the shadow cabinet, the committee could not be certain that the boundary commission would confine itself to making minor alterations of the Irish frontier. Nor would it be easy to set aside such an award. Quite the contrary, even a commission

[51] *Dáil Eireann Debates*, 7, col. 2364, 13 June 1924.
[52] *HC Deb*, 174, cols. 1257–61, 1469, 4, 5 June 1924.
[53] 'Ulster and the boundary', *Times*, 1 May 1924.
[54] Cabinet conclusions, 5 May 1924, PRONI, CAB4/112/12; Leaders Conference – shadow cabinet minutes and reports (LC) Min. 1(24), 1 May 1924, Cave papers, Add. MSS 62, 489, fos. 75–7.

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award which transferred the whole of Fermanagh and Tyrone to the Free State 'could not be treated as bad in law or set aside by any Court'.[55]

The upshot of these events was to make the Conservatives more wary than ever of the boundary dispute. Afterward, it was decided that 'as far as possible party leaders should avoid making any public pronouncement on the Irish question'. Instead, Baldwin and his colleagues pinned their hopes on the idea that Labour might somehow solve the boundary dispute, though this would leave the party dangerously unprepared if Ireland again erupted as an issue in British politics.[56]

The eruption, when it came, was over the report of the judicial committee of the privy council, which Tom Jones called 'beastly awkward'.[57] The committee effectively closed off any avenue the government might take to call the boundary commission into being without fresh legislation. For the treaty to work, it, in effect, had to be amended to allow the British to appoint Northern Ireland's commissioner.[58]

Finally heeding advice proffered by Jones several months before, MacDonald invited other party leaders to discuss what had become a matter 'of serious Parliamentary importance'.[59] Even before the invitations were sent, Jones was ordered to sound out Baldwin on his willingness to help solve the boundary dispute. What he got was a 'diehard reaction, more so than I ever remember having before from him'. Jones was shocked by Baldwin's attitude toward the Free Staters, particularly when his once and future master told him that it was 'difficult to forgive assassination and to forget their behaviour in the war'.[60]

Baldwin's reaction is easy to explain. As his shadow cabinet made clear the following day, they would not be a 'party to legislation overriding the decision of the Ulster Government not to appoint a Commissioner'.[61] Yet, here was MacDonald asking him to do precisely that. Labour's colonial secretary, J. H. Thomas, was instructed to tell the other party leaders that, unless they 'had some better suggestion to make', the government intended to pass a one-clause bill allowing it to name Northern Ireland's boundary commissioner. Furthermore, Labour expected all-party support for the legislation.[62]

All of the participants at the 31 July meeting realized that any attempt to bypass Craig's government would be thrown out by the House of Lords. In that case, Jones feared, 'Ireland will be back in our politics.' The cabinet's original

[55] LC 10(24), 5 May 1924, Cave papers, Add. MSS 62,464, fos. 69–72.
[56] Cecil to Salisbury, 9 May 1924, S(4) 109/44–7.
[57] Jones diary, 31 July 1924, III, pp. 233–4.
[58] *Cmd 2214: Report of the judicial committee of the privy council, as approved by order of His Majesty in Council, of the 31st July, 1924, on the questions connected with the Irish boundary commission referred to the said committee* (London, 1924), xi, 351.
[59] Jones diary, 8 May 1924, III, pp. 230–1; Duff to Lloyd George, 30 July 1924, HLRO, Lloyd George papers, G/13/2/1.
[60] Jones diary, 29 July 1924, III, p. 233.
[61] LC Min. 6(24), 30 July 1924, Cave papers, Add. MSS 62,489, fos. 95–6.
[62] C 44(24), 30 July 1924, CAB 23/48.

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idea was to put through the legislation immediately, and Thomas had been instructed to warn the other party leaders that this might mean postponing the adjournment for several days. Baldwin adamantly opposed this idea, having vowed that he would do his 'utmost to stave that off'.[63]

His nemesis, on the other hand, could not have been more pleased with the turn of events. Lloyd George was in his element, pledging Liberal support for the government's bill and urging its immediate passage. 'LlG. is just bursting with new-born hope', Chamberlain told his wife, while 'S.B. sees himself confronted with disaster.' Both men knew perfectly well that with tory peers certain to reject the legislation, Labour and the Liberals could then go to the country on a platform of 'the Lords versus the people'. In any such election, Chamberlain predicted, the Conservatives would suffer a 'smashing defeat'.[64]

In fact, MacDonald was no more anxious to fight an election on Ireland than was Baldwin. Still involved in intensive talks with France and Germany over war reparations, his government was also enmeshed in an effort to stabilize relations with the Soviet Union. When these latter negotiations unexpectedly produced two treaties (a trade agreement and a general treaty promising government-backed loan guarantees), their terms were condemned by the tory press as 'evidence' of communist influence deep within the bowels of MacDonald's administration.[65]

These allegations were seemingly verified by the cabinet's inept handling of the Campbell case. In late July Britain's communist party newspaper, the *Workers' Weekly*, published an article calling on soldiers not to act as strike-breakers. A warrant charging acting editor John Campbell with incitement to mutiny was duly issued only to be suddenly dropped after a confused series of exchanges involving MacDonald, other members of the cabinet, and Labour backbenchers. As with the Soviet treaties, this sudden turnaround simply fuelled charges of a 'red menace' within the government.[66]

From Labour's point of view, then, the atmosphere was hardly propitious for a general election. Besides, some party grandees felt that more time in office was needed for Labour to prove itself, and this alone was reason for postponing an election. 'All depends on whether the P.M. pulls off a satisfactory settlement with France', Beatrice Webb wrote. 'If he does, the Labour Government is in for another nine months – until the next budget.' But, Webb predicted, if 'neither the Russian loan nor Irish boundary business "comes off" we may be turned out in November'.[67]

Any doubts that Ireland still had the power to inflame passions were dispelled when Thomas rose to speak in the Commons on 1 August. His

[63] Jones diary, 31 July 1924, III, p. 234; C 44(24), 30 July 1924, CAB 23/48; Baldwin to Joan Davidson, 30 July 1924, Viscount Davidson papers (private collection).

[64] Austen to Ivy Chamberlain, 31 July 1924, AC 6/1/546. Neville Chamberlain called Lloyd George's reaction 'downright unpatriotic'. See Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 3 Aug. 1924, NC 18/1/446. [65] Marquand, *MacDonald*, pp. 329–51, 361–4. [66] Ibid., pp. 364–70.

[67] Webb diary, 21 July 1924, LSE 38, fos. 4096–102. Some Conservatives agreed. See Gretton to Carson, 16 Sept. 1924, PRONI, CAB9Z/3/2.

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announcement of the proposed boundary bill 'completely overshadowed' all other business.[68] Now that the Irish spectre had reappeared in the House of Commons, its presence confirmed Baldwin's worst fears. 'The old feeling', H. A. L. Fisher wrote, was 'very intense'. It was soon clear that a large body of Conservative MPs were ready to fight the legislation without considering the political damage this might do to them or to their party.[69] 'Disaster is staring you in the face!' one MP cried out at the government – words that might have been better directed at the opposition front bench.[70]

Pressed by Baldwin for a go-slow approach on the one hand, and the Free State's demand that the legislation be enacted immediately, Thomas split the difference. At the bill's first reading on 6 August, he announced that parliament would reconvene at the end of September to complete its passage.[71]

What happened next, MacDonald told George V, 'produced one of the most interesting days of the Session'. Baldwin limited his criticism to the purely technical matters entailed in parliament's early recall. Sir John Simon, speaking for the Liberals, took a decidedly different course. Not only would his party back the boundary bill, Simon announced; it was also willing to extend parliament's current sitting so that the measure could be enacted without delay. MacDonald called the speech a 'thinly disguised' attempt 'to inflame passion and political prejudice'. It did just that, provoking such outrage from tory and Ulster Unionist backbenchers that the Speaker was forced to intervene.[72]

For those who recalled the 1912–14 home rule crisis, the scene was all too familiar. The 'Prince of Darkness', one contemporary journal noted, was again 'active in his old hunting ground'. This was territory many MPs had hoped they would never have to re-visit. Yet they seemed to be set on a course taking them precisely in that direction, with a general election dominated by Ireland at the end of the road.[73]

That evening Baldwin went over to the attack. Speaking at Hemel Hempstead, he claimed that a pledge of honour was implicit in the 1920 Act which was equal to any of the pledges explicitly made in the treaty. His harshest criticism was reserved for the Liberals 'who were prepared, apparently, to throw the whole of this subject back into the political arena' and to 'plunge the country into a crisis of the gravest character imaginable'.[74]

Baldwin's problem was that while the boundary question posed risks for all of Britain's political parties, its potential for causing mayhem was greatest for the tories. As he summed up the problem to Edward Wood: 'The Lords are the

[68] MacDonald to George V, 2 Aug. 1924, PRO, James Ramsay MacDonald papers (PRO 30/69), PRO 30/69/228.
[69] Fisher diary, 2 Aug. 1924, Bodleian Library (Bodl.), MSS Fisher, 19; *Annual register: 1924*, p. 87. [70] *HC Deb*, 176, cols. 2403, 1 Aug. 1924. [71] Ibid., cols. 2930–2, 6 Aug. 1924.
[72] Ibid., cols. 2932–7; MacDonald to George V, 7 Aug. 1924, PRO 30/69/228.
[73] 'The devil and the peace treaties', *Nation*, 9 Aug. 1924.
[74] 'Mr Baldwin on Irish crisis', *Times*, 7 Aug. 1924.

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crux'.[75] Salisbury made it clear that tory members of the upper chamber were unwilling to 'incur the odium of letting the bill through' unless Craig and his colleagues would state publicly that they backed such a move.[76] Otherwise, the Lords would block the Irish legislation, many Conservatives in the Commons would feel bound to support them, and Labour – and Lloyd George and the Liberals – would have a golden opportunity to smash the party.

To be sure, not everyone in the tory leadership felt that they were in such dire straits. Leo Amery admitted that the tories might 'have to face the possibility of the Goat trying to lead a raging campaign against Ulster in the hope of bringing about a Liberal Socialist combination and swamping us'. But, he assured Baldwin: 'It won't come off.' Even if MacDonald could be tempted into such an alliance, most Labour MPs would not stand for it. Nor was Amery convinced that British voters would turn against the tories for backing the Lords. The 'country, sick of Ireland, as it is, is just as likely to be cross with those who force on an election'.[77]

But most Conservative leaders were not nearly so confident. As always, the Irish cross weighed heaviest on the ex-Coalitionists, and on Austen Chamberlain most of all. 'London is much excited over Ireland', he told his wife.

> Ulster and the Morning Post are on the war-path; LlG. feels that 'all's right with the world' again, and I am terribly gloomy. S.B. is either dishonest or absolutely agrees with me, but has he the clearness of conviction and the force of will to impress his views on the Ulstermen? It will be a miracle if we keep our ship off the rocks.[78]

It was because of his determination to avoid such a calamity that Baldwin reluctantly decided to go to Belfast to impress his views on the Northern Ireland cabinet. Certain that MacDonald's government was about to fall, he was determined to avoid an election on Ireland. 'It is difficult to see how they can get over the Soviet treaty in early November', he told Joan Davidson. But before that might happen there could be 'a crash over Ireland'.[79]

Involved in 'protracted discussions' with Craig and his colleagues for the better part of a day, Baldwin made it clear that there was little enthusiasm in the tory leadership to do battle over the Irish boundary. Only two members of the shadow cabinet were inclined to pick a fight on this issue; the consensus, rather, was that 'it would be better to get the matter cleared up by this Government if Ulster would consent'.[80]

Craig wanted his British allies to fight Labour's bill just short of forcing a general election on the issue. '[B]ut I showed him the snag', Baldwin explained. Such a strategy would not work because 'the Lords will never assent' to the bill 'unless they have your assurance of agreement'. Once the

[75] Baldwin to Wood, 6 Sept. 1924, Borthwick Institute, University of York, Halifax papers, A4.410/14/1. [76] Salisbury to Baldwin, 25 Aug., 5 Sept. 1924, SB 99, fos. 122–5, 132–3.
[77] Amery to Baldwin, 3 Aug. 1924, SB 99, fos. 118–19.
[78] Austen to Ivy Chamberlain, 1 Aug. 1924, AC 6/1/548.
[79] Baldwin to Joan Davidson, 14 Aug. 1924, Davidson papers.
[80] Craig to Carson, 18 Aug. 1924, PRONI, CAB9Z/5/1.

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peers rejected the legislation, Labour might immediately call an election and 'we may be in a grave difficulty'.[81]

Despite this warning, Craig would go no further than to say that he might accept the boundary bill 'under duress'. Baldwin, on the other hand, gave the Unionists what amounted to a veto over any future boundary commission award. 'If the Comn. should give away counties', he told Edward Wood, 'then of course Ulster couldn't accept it and we should back her'. Baldwin, however, thought this unlikely. He was sure that Labour would 'nominate a proper representative' to be Northern Ireland's commissioner, and 'he and Feetham will do what is right'.[82]

After his trip to Belfast, Baldwin was 'inclined to think that the election will not be on Ireland', having high hopes that 'the policy I am advocating will prevail'. And, he hinted to Joan Davidson, 'there are strong forces working to that end'. With the boundary dispute out of the way, his course then would be clear. 'If we get over this fence', he told Edward Wood, 'it looks as though the Soviet Treaty would be the next big event: and on that we can join issue gaily'.[83]

There was reason to be optimistic. With Baldwin on holiday, Lords Salisbury and Londonderry, along with Sir Robert Horne, hammered out an agreement which, Salisbury believed, would save the party from disaster. Londonderry assured his two friends that Northern Ireland's government no more wanted the boundary question 'to become a matter of a Party struggle in England' than did the tories. In that case, Salisbury pointed out, it was imperative that Craig's government should say so publicly. 'Anything less', he told Lord Cave, 'would rob us of the last atom of credit which the Irish question has left us'. A draft letter was prepared for publication to be issued when Craig, who was himself on holiday, returned to London.[84]

Privately, Craig seemed to be moving in the same direction. If Labour's bill was thrown out by the Lords, he pointed out to Carson, the election 'would be fought on whether the Commons or the hereditary peers were to prevail', and on that platform Labour and the Liberals would happily join forces. Ulster could expect 'little mercy' from a Lib-Lab government, whereas now, at least, the Unionists had little to fear from MacDonald and Thomas. He was confident that Labour would nominate a 'safe person' to represent Northern Ireland on the commission, who, with Feetham, could be trusted to 'override the Free State representative' if needs be.[85]

Another, even more extraordinary effort aimed at influencing Craig was being mounted by Winston Churchill. In an effort to keep Arthur Balfour in the Lloyd George Coalition in the early months of 1922, Birkenhead drafted a

[81] Baldwin to Wood, 6 Sept. 1924, Halifax papers, A4.410/14/1; Baldwin to Salisbury, 2 Sept. 1924, S(4) 110/25.
[82] Ibid., Baldwin to Wood.
[83] Baldwin to Joan Davidson, 21 Aug. 1924, Davidson papers; Baldwin to Wood, 6 Sept. 1924, Halifax papers, A4.410/14/1.
[84] Salisbury to Baldwin, 25 Aug. 1924, SB 99, fos. 122–7; Salisbury to Cave, 2 Sept. 1924, Cave papers, Add. MSS 62,464, fos. 77–80.
[85] Craig to Carson, 18 Aug. 1924, PRONI, CAB9Z/5/1.

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letter assuring Balfour that the boundary commission, 'not being presided over by a lunatic', would do nothing more than make minor readjustments to the Irish frontier.[86] The letter might have been forgotten had it not been for Churchill's desperation to be re-admitted to the tory party. Having failed to win a parliamentary seat in the last two general elections, he realized that a campaign dominated by Ireland would be 'gravely embarrassing' to himself as it was bound to raise questions about Article 12. 'Do not, I pray you, stress unnecessarily the Irish question in any speeches', he begged another former colleague. 'It would only divide friends and unite enemies. The Russian issue is the one, and with good handling might well be decisive'.[87]

Despite the widespread publicity given to Birkenhead's letter, it failed to impress the one person at whom it was aimed.[88] On his return to London, Craig notified Baldwin that the Unionists felt 'bound to take every possible step to prevent the passage of the Bill' unless it was amended 'to apply merely to an adjustment of the Boundary'. Tory hopes of avoiding a vote on the Irish bill were dashed. Craig made it clear that his first allegiance was not to the British Empire, and certainly not to the Conservatives, as he felt 'entitled to look to any political party' to 'safeguard our rights and privileges under the Act of 1920'. Even so, he shamelessly urged Baldwin to use every means at his disposal as Conservative party leader to amend the bill in Northern Ireland's favour.[89]

None of the warnings given by Baldwin, Salisbury, and other Conservative leaders had made the slightest impression on Craig and his followers. 'Our people are very headstrong', Lord Londonderry was forced to concede, 'and can only think for themselves. They cannot take the long view of British politics which might be that an election on this point would not serve the interests of the Conservative Party'.[90]

The Unionists' decision to fight Labour's boundary bill meant that Baldwin and his fellow tories found themselves in exactly the same position as when the crisis had erupted in August. At a meeting of the party's National Executive in early September, it was suggested that it might be wise to postpone the Conservatives' annual conference 'in view of the Political Situation which had arisen over the Irish Boundary question'. Instead, committee members side-stepped this potentially divisive move by handing the decision to their chairman.[91] There was still every danger that Conservative MPs might be swept up by an emotional impulse to fight Labour's bill and damn the

[86] Birkenhead to Balfour, 3 Mar. 1922, Churchill College, Cambridge, Winston S. Churchill papers (WSC) 2/570/1–5.

[87] Winston to Clementine Churchill, 19 Aug. 1924, Churchill College Cambridge, Clementine Churchill papers 2/17/13–15; Churchill to Horne, 30 Aug. 1924, WSC 2/134/84–5. According to John Ramsden, West Toxteth Conservatives would not consider Churchill's candidacy 'because of his past attitude to Ulster'. See *Balfour and Baldwin*, p. 192.

[88] See, e.g., 'Ulster's right: the proof', *Daily News*; and 'Irish boundary. Lord Birkenhead on Article 12', *Times*, both dated 8 Sept. 1924.

[89] Craig to Baldwin, 17 Sept. 1924, PRONI, CAB9Z/3/1.

[90] Londonderry to Salisbury, 18 Sept. 1924, S(4) 110/43–4.

[91] Executive Minute Book, 9 Sept. 1924, Bodl., MSS National Unionist Association (NUA) 4/1/4, fo. 101.

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consequences. The die-hards, not surprisingly, were doing all they could to push the party in that direction. They believed that the time had come 'to destroy the Socialist Government' in general, and its Irish bill in particular, 'with the utmost determination'. John Gretton accused Baldwin of 'half-hearted' leadership, telling Carson there 'should be no talk of compromise or fear of facing a General Election'.[92]

Yet, however much the Ulster cause could still pluck at the heartstrings of party stalwarts, other Conservatives realized that they would be flirting with disaster if they became associated for a second time with an Ulster revolt. Far from being one of the party's shining moments, Edward Wood suspected that 'the British law-abiding temperament was more shocked than we always recognised by Carson's performance' in 1912–14. In the new, post-war politics 'Ulster will lose sympathy if she appears to be following that line'. And so would the Conservative party.[93]

Fortunately for Baldwin, at about this time Lloyd George lost his enthusiasm for making the Irish boundary an election issue. In mid-August, Edward Grey let it be known that he might lead a breakaway faction of Liberals determined not to serve with the former prime minister. The boundary question provided the perfect excuse for such a split. With the truth about the treaty 'shrouded in the grim vapours of the past', the 'onus' was on Lloyd George to prove that he had not misled anyone during the negotiations.[94] Already condemned as 'one of the damnable legacies of Lloyd Georgeism', the crisis was raising awkward questions. 'I fear', Neville Chamberlain wrote to one of his sisters, 'that Ll.G. did give Michael Collins reason to think he would get Fermanagh and Tyrone and at the same time allowed Craig to believe that no such transfer would take place'.[95]

Another explanation for Lloyd George's shift was given by Churchill. There was every reason to believe that the results of the next general election would be as close as the outcome of the 1923 race. In that case, the Conservatives would need support from Lloyd George and the anti-Labour wing of the Liberal party. The tory leadership 'will have to come to some sort of terms with him', Churchill argued, 'if they are to turn the Socialists out'. That would be a lot less likely to happen if these same Liberals found themselves allied with Labour in a hard-fought battle over Ireland, only to be told that they were to switch sides to support the Conservatives against the Soviet treaties.[96]

Like Churchill, Austen Chamberlain also doubted that the Conservatives

[92] Gretton to Carson, 16 Sept. 1924, PRONI, CAB9Z/3/2.

[93] Wood to Baldwin, 10 Sept. 1924, Halifax papers, A4.410/14/1.

[94] Grey to Maclean, and Gladstone to Maclean, 12, 14 Aug. 1924, Bodl., MSS Maclean, Dep. c.467, fos. 94–5, 96.

[95] 'Ulster boundary crisis', *Daily Herald*, 29 Apr. 1924; Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 3 Aug. 1924, NC 18/1/446.

[96] Churchill to Carson, 18 Sept. 1924, WSC 2/570/118–19. See Churchill to Balfour, 3 Apr. 1924, Scottish Record Office, Arthur Balfour papers (AJB-S), GD 433/2/19, reel 4, for Lloyd George's proposed 'future "Conservative and Liberal Union" Administration'.

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were strong enough to beat Labour on their own. But Neville Chamberlain disagreed. Even with the Irish question looking 'insoluble', he felt that the tories should 'risk a General Election' on the issue, believing the party would still come out of the race 'with a very narrow majority'.[97]

While the younger Chamberlain may have been willing to take such a gamble, Baldwin could not. He had 'wrecked his party once', the *Quarterly Review* reminded its readers. Were he to risk an election on a conflict between the two houses of parliament over Ireland he would 'wreck his party again, and this time more effectively than before'.[98] Running a political party aground once had been a mistake. Doing so a second time would look careless. Almost certainly, it would be fatal to Baldwin's political career. Small wonder, then, that the Conservative leader was still 'anxious' about Ireland when Leo Amery saw him in mid-September.[99]

III

'Not many years ago', MacDonald wrote to the king on 1 October, 'a debate on the Irish question would have provided a ready outlet for the superfluous energy which members had accumulated as a result of the holiday season. But', he continued, 'circumstances have changed'.[100] Provided that the Conservatives could contain their own extremists, it was clear that they meant to bring down the government on the Soviet treaties even if this meant allowing the boundary bill onto the statute book unamended. The difference between the two issues boiled down to a simple case of parliamentary arithmetic. While the government could rely on Liberal support to see through its Irish legislation, no such help could be expected for its Soviet policy.[101]

However, neither the Soviet treaties nor the Irish dispute were uppermost in the minds of MPs when they reconvened on 30 September. The explosion instead occurred over the government's handling of the Campbell case, a prosecution, MacDonald sourly wrote in his diary, that had 'been foolishly entered upon but much more foolishly dropped'. The outburst had one salutary effect. Having wasted so much of that 'superfluous energy' on the Campbell case, MPs had little left to expend on the boundary bill which, MacDonald told the king, was considered 'in a more sober and dispassionate manner' than might otherwise have been the case.[102]

MacDonald's distaste for the Irish legislation was obvious at the outset of his speech.[103] 'I shall be delighted if any hon. Member has got the ingenuity to find

[97] Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 5 Oct. 1924, AC 5/1/334; Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 20 Sept. 1924, NC 18/1/452.

[98] 'Ireland today', *Quarterly Review*, Oct. 1924, p. 371.

[99] Amery diary, 19 Sept. 1924, in L. Amery, *The Leo Amery diaries*, 1: 1896–1929, ed. J. Barnes and D. Nicholson (London, 1980), p. 386.

[100] MacDonald to George V, 1 Oct. 1924, PRO 30/69/228.

[101] 'Comments', *New Statesman*, 20 Sept. 1924.

[102] MacDonald diary, 30 Sept. 1924, PRO 30/69/1753/1; MacDonald to George V, 1 Oct. 1924, PRO 30/69/228.

[103] *HC Deb*, 177, col. 27, 30 Sept. 1924.

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a way out of this difficulty, only it must be an honourable way out', a mere contrivance of words would not do. 'We are bound to make Article 12 work', MacDonald continued. Otherwise, Ireland would again tear apart British politics and all that had been achieved 'will have been destroyed once and for all'.[104]

Baldwin's reply was brief. Conservatives, he announced, would not oppose the boundary bill's second reading. Instead, they would propose amendments during the committee stage, making it clear that the commission was only meant 'to deal with the rectification of the Boundary'. But if these amendments were not accepted, what then? Then, Baldwin warned 'the responsibility for what is in the Bill must rest with the Government and with the Government alone; we can have no part in or responsibility for it, and we shall have to consider then what our action will be at a later stage'.[105]

This veiled threat notwithstanding, MacDonald believed that the boundary bill would 'go all right', thinking its passage as now nothing more than a mere formality.[106] In fact, debate on the legislation was stormy and was marked by a number of bitter exchanges, so that 'the temper of the House remained on edge for the rest of the sitting'.[107]

Although Baldwin implied that the Conservatives would propose a series of amendments, their attempt to alter the bill boiled down to a single proposed change. This would have limited the boundary commission award to one not 'substantially altering the area of Northern Ireland as fixed by the Government of Ireland Act, 1920'. Despite Thomas's warning that the amendment could cost lives, lead to war, and 'shake the foundations of the Empire', it was defeated by the comparatively small majority of fifty votes. From that point, however, the bill's passage through the Commons was assured.[108] Convinced that an election was now unavoidable, Austen Chamberlain believed that even the Unionists wanted to get this issue out of the way. 'If the Lords are wise', he told one of his sisters, 'they won't touch the Bill.'[109]

Ironically, it fell to Lord Salisbury, a man hardly known as a supporter of the treaty, to rescue his tory colleagues from the corner into which they had painted themselves. If the Lords amended the boundary legislation, Salisbury warned, their step 'would amount to the rejection of the bill … and further, it would mean that the consideration of this bill would be transferred from Parliament to the hustings'. That was 'the last thing' any friend of Ulster should want. The average voter had little interest in, and even less understanding of, Irish affairs. To link this dispute with a debate on the powers of parliament's unelected upper chamber was simply reckless.[110]

Instead, Salisbury proposed that a non-binding resolution should be

[104] Ibid., cols. 37–40.
[105] Ibid., cols. 41–5.
[106] MacDonald diary, 30 Sept. 1924, PRO 30/69/1753/1.
[107] *Annual register: 1924*, p. 102.
[108] *HC Deb*, 177, col. 363, 420, 468–74, 2 Oct. 1924.
[109] Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 5 Oct. 1924, AC 5/1/334.
[110] *House of Lords debates* (*HL Deb*), 59, cols. 596–600, 8 Oct. 1924.

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attached to Labour's bill, making it clear that the boundary commission was created simply to facilitate 'a readjustment of the boundaries and that only as such it should be accepted or can be enforced'. His suggestion proved to be decisive. 'By the use of this safety-valve', explained one journal, 'the Lords avoided the risk of bursting their own boiler'.[111]

Even so, it was not certain that the proposal would win through until the house heard from Lord Carson. Although he 'acquiesce[d]' to Salisbury's resolution, Ulster's former leader was bitter. There was no point in opposing the boundary bill, he said, because even if the tories held office they would propose similar legislation. 'And why? Because all the eminent men of the Conservative Party are up to their neck in the original Treaty which … has led to the present situation.'

Most of all, Carson was outraged that the Ulstermen were being sacrificed on the altar of British politics. 'Is not the present debate in this House absolutely unreal?' he asked. 'You are not thinking of the rights or wrongs of this question at all. You are really thinking about the General Election that is going to follow upon another question.' Carson's grudging acceptance ensured the bill's passage, although thirty-eight peers still could not be reconciled.[112]

Salisbury's compromise saved the boundary bill and ensured that Ireland would not be an issue in the general election. Now, however, it was becoming a race against time to get the boundary bill on to the statute book before the government collapsed. For while the House of Lords was busy debating the Irish legislation, MacDonald's handling of the Campbell affair was falling apart.

'I have no inside news to tell you', Sidney Webb wrote to his wife on 2 October, 'but it is generally assumed that "our number is up".' Like most of his ministerial colleagues, Webb expected to survive in office a few more weeks, if only because for both Conservatives and Liberals 'it would be unsatisfactory to defeat the Government before the Irish Bill is disposed of'.[113] Throughout the first week of October, 'the air was full of impending crises' around Westminster. 'Nerves are on edge', MacDonald reported to the king, and 'even a bill which raises such grave issues as the Irish bill occupies only a secondary position in that it does not seem to contain the germs of a domestic crisis.'[114]

Labour's first government was already teetering when on 8 October it confronted a Conservative censure motion on the Campbell case. When the Liberals sought to amend the motion, MacDonald replied that he would consider a vote either for the motion or the amendment as a vote of no confidence in his government. If defeated, he would immediately call a general election.

[111] Ibid., cols. 600–3, 8 Oct. 1924; 'The Irish boundary question', *Round Table*, 57 (1924).
[112] *HL Deb*, 59, cols. 615–16, 650–1, 664, 8 Oct. 1924.
[113] Sidney to Beatrice Webb, 2 Oct. 1924, LSE, Passfield papers, 2/3/1/18/191–3.
[114] MacDonald to George V, 3 Oct. 1924, PRO 30/69/228.

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The debate then took what one contemporary journal called 'a dramatic turn'. It was obvious, Baldwin told the Commons, that MacDonald planned to defeat the Liberal amendment by relying on Conservative votes, only then to appeal to Liberal MPs to defeat the Conservative motion 'and so ride off in triumph'. Before he would let that happen, Baldwin announced that the tories would vote for the Liberal amendment to their own motion, thus ensuring Labour's defeat. MacDonald was left with no choice and, early on the morning of 9 October, he asked George V to dissolve parliament that very afternoon and call the third general election in two years.[115]

MacDonald's 'extreme haste' in dissolving parliament very nearly brought the boundary bill crashing down. Once the House of Lords accepted Salisbury's resolution, no one in the government thought that there would be any more trouble with the bill. They had not counted on Carson, who saw a chance to kill the boundary commission once and for all. At its third reading on 9 October, Carson sought to insert a proviso that the boundary bill would come into operation only after it was confirmed by Northern Ireland's parliament, as well as by Dáil Eireann. Though such a move would have placed Ireland and the House of Lords squarely at the forefront of British politics, one contemporary reporter was certain that if the amendment had been put to a vote it 'would no doubt have been carried'. Once more, Salisbury intervened. Carson withdrew his proposal, and Labour's contribution to settling the Irish question went on to the statute book just hours ahead of parliament's dissolution.[116]

IV

The election of 1924 was brought about because of 'a matter which the public understood but vaguely and in which it was little interested'.[117] But the combination of the Campbell case and the controversy over the Soviet treaties proved to be a potent mixture in the hands of Conservative propagandists. Very quickly the campaign degenerated into one dominated by charges of Bolshevik influence inside the Labour party, while Liberals were held responsible for allowing the 'red menace' ever to take office.[118] Ireland had no place in such a campaign. In fact, it was no longer discernible on Britain's political landscape. 'It was quite evident as soon as I got up to London', Churchill told Arthur Balfour, 'that the Irish question was not going to be any trouble.'[119]

The election, held on 29 October, gave the tories a victory 'beyond their wildest expectations'. With no fewer than 413 members, Baldwin led a Commons majority of 211 against all other parties combined. He had won the greatest single-party victory in twentieth-century British politics, dwarfing all

[115] *Annual register: 1924*, pp. 105–7.
[116] Ibid., p. 108. *HL Deb*, 59, cols. 667–9, 9 Oct. 1924. [117] *Annual register: 1924*, p. 109.
[118] See G. Bennett, *History notes*, '*a most extraordinary and mysterious business': the Zinoviev letter of 1924*, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 14, Feb. 1999, for an inquiry into the most controversial of these charges. [119] Churchill to Balfour, 2 Oct. 1924, AJB-S, GD 433/2/19, reel 4.

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other landslides by any measure.[120] In contrast, MacDonald saw Labour reduced from 191 to 151 members. But it was the Liberals for whom the 1924 election was a catastrophe. Their hold on 159 seats was reduced to a mere 40 and meant the 'practical disappearance ... of the Liberal Party from Parliamentary life'.[121]

With the election of 1924 what Winston Churchill called 'two years of insensate faction' finally came to an end.[122] The country turned a corner or, more precisely, it at last returned to the sureties of the two-party politics it had known before 1910. The Lloyd George Coalition had left in its wake three roughly equal parties vying for a place in a system designed for only two major players. Once Labour's term in office established it as the party of the left, this contest boiled down to a bid over who would lead the country's anti-socialist forces. It was by no means certain that Lloyd George and the Liberals were going to lose in this competition, nor that Baldwin and the Conservatives were going to emerge to dominate British politics. Austen Chamberlain was convinced that years would pass before his party would again hold office, and by then he would 'be too old to take up the burden of leadership'.[123] A number of factors working in the Conservatives' favour – not least, dissension within the Liberal party's top echelon – were beyond their control. What was within Baldwin's power was his decision not to play the 'orange card' but rather, 'the red card of anti-socialism', and this proved to be decisive.[124]

Nevertheless, Baldwin was walking a tightrope when he decided that his party's interests would not be served by picking a fight over Ireland. With so much hanging in the balance, he could ill-afford to alienate tory die-hards; but neither could he ignore the consequences that would accompany their demand of unquestioning support for the Ulster Unionists. '[B]elieve me', J. H. Thomas warned Hugh Cecil, 'I don't believe you could hold one-half your present seats on the question of the boundary'.[125] Even if Thomas was exaggerating, his analysis was probably close to the truth. The point is, this was the sort of risk that Baldwin was unwilling to take even if his die-hards were.

Instead, the Conservatives opted for a less confrontational approach. The party allied with Ulster Unionists to wage a deft campaign, assiduously cultivating the popular press to promote their point of view on Ireland.[126] The result, according to the Ulster Association, was a 'considerable change which has taken place in public opinion regarding Ulster affairs'.[127] Down the road,

[120] *Annual register: 1924*, pp. 116–17; also, see Butler and Freeman, *British political facts*, pp. 140–4; G. Foote, *A chronology of post war British politics* (London, 1988), pp. 4, 84, 123, 243; 'The history man. The fight is over', *Guardian*, 3 May 1997.

[121] *Annual register: 1924*, pp. 116–17.

[122] Rhodes James, *British Revolution*, p. 477.

[123] Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 10 Mar. 1923, AC 5/1/268; also, see Spender to Maclean, 2 Oct. 1924, MSS Maclean, Dep. c.467, fos. 134–5.

[124] Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, p. 199.

[125] Note dated 30 Sept. 1924, Hatfield House, Quickswood papers, 33/12.

[126] See Harmsworth to Baldwin, 28 Aug. 1924, SB 159, fos. 209–10; Churchill to Carson, 8 Sept. 1924, WSC 2/570/115.

[127] Ulster Association to Salisbury, 19 Mar. 1925, S(4) 112/119–20.

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this swing in popular opinion could be used to the Conservatives' advantage if they had to face any trouble from Dublin on the boundary issue. More immediately, it left the tories in the happy position where they appeared to give their utmost support to the Unionists but at no real risk to themselves. Thus, Baldwin was able to contain his die-hards while, at the same time, sidelining the Irish threat. Once this was accomplished, the Conservatives were able to concentrate on the anti-communist scare, and they were the ones who rode off in triumph.

Still, it might easily have been otherwise. On 3 October MacDonald remarked to George V that because the Conservatives had decided to direct all of their fire at the Campbell case, the Irish bill 'received an easier passage through its remaining stages than might have been anticipated in normal circumstances'.[128] His letter raises two intriguing, if ultimately unanswerable, questions. If there had been no Campbell case, if there had been no Soviet treaties, what then would have happened to Labour's boundary bill? More broadly, what would have been the course of British politics if Ireland and the power of the House of Lords had been the main issues of the 1924 election?

It is surely more than mere speculation to say that without the diversion of the communist scare used so effectively by Baldwin's lieutenants, it would have been impossible, as Edward Wood put it, to 'extricate us from the cul-de-sac' of Ireland.[129] The boundary bill almost certainly would have met furious Conservative resistance in the Commons and would have been shot down in flames in the Lords. That would have brought on the general election so feared by Baldwin, a campaign whose focus would have been on the power of the peers versus the power of the people, the very campaign in which Lloyd George would have thrived.

While it is impossible to know how such an election would have turned out, is unlikely that the Conservatives would have emerged with the greatest landslide of the century. Defeat would have cast Baldwin into outer darkness, his career one of the shortest and most curious of those who have reached the pinnacle of British politics. There would have been no 'Baldwin–MacDonald Regime' to govern, or misgovern, Britain during the interwar years.[130] Under Lloyd George, the Liberals might have been revitalized, and MacDonald's Labour party might have won an outright parliamentary majority, a goal that eluded him for the rest of his political life. Instead, Baldwin was established as the dominant figure in British politics.

When it came to Ireland, the new British government took a very narrow view of what was to be achieved by the boundary commission. Just as Baldwin had earlier predicted to Wood, the commission's chairman and the Ulster representative did 'what is right' and proposed only minor changes to the Irish frontier. When Free Staters complained that the treaty never would have been

[128] MacDonald to George V, 3 Oct. 1924, PRO 30/69/228.
[129] Wood to Baldwin, 10 Sept. 1924, Halifax papers, A4.410/14/1.
[130] W. S. Churchill, *The gathering storm* (Boston, 1948), p. 21.

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signed had their leaders known that this would be the outcome, their protests fell on deaf ears.[131] The final chapter of the Irish question was written by men who had opposed Article 12 from the beginning or, if they had been responsible for the treaty, had long since learnt the price they would pay for going against Conservative opinion on this issue. They would not make that same mistake again.[132]

[131] See, e.g., Cosgrave's exchange with Chamberlain in I.A. (25)-3rd minutes, 26 Nov. 1925, CAB 27/295.

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