Conclusion

In 1879, Archibald Dobbs promoted the idea of proportional representation (PR) in Irish elections as 'the best method of ascertaining the depth and breadth of political opinion'. Dobbs was a barrister from a prominent Protestant family in Co. Antrim that claimed a rich heritage in national and local politics stretching back centuries.[1] Part of his advocacy of PR was connected to an effort to stymie 'agitators' gaining electoral success. '[Charles Stewart] Parnell and the Obstructionists are the worst foes of the men who could be responsible statesmen, of the able members of the Home Rule party', proclaimed Dobbs. He continued:

> I cannot take the point of view and attitude of the Home Rulers, so far as I know it, nor can I take the English point of view. But my present task is to endeavour to obtain a full and free and real representation for Ireland, believing as I do in the great fund of good stored up in the hearts of her people.[2]

Dobbs's plea for PR laid bare the central crisis of the Union: even its defenders desired to reform a system that had failed to represent Ireland's political realities.

When Dobbs wrote these words, straddling the middle ground between the Home Rulers and the 'English point of view' was becoming increasingly untenable. The 'agitators' in Westminster became a disciplined parliamentary party under the leadership of Parnell, which in turn inspired pro-union representatives to organise on a more professional basis.[3] This

[1] Samuel McSkimin, *The History and Antiquities of the County of the Town of Carrickfergus. From the Earliest Records till 1839*, new ed., with notes by E. J. McCrum (Belfast: Mullan & Son, James Cleeland, Davidson & McCormack, 1909), p. 487.

[2] Archibald E. Dobbs, *Representative Reform for Ireland* (London: Spottiswoode & Co., 1879), pp. 3, 55, 60, 68.

[3] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Parnell and His Party, 1880–1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957). Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884–1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

renewed parliamentary activism mirrored the increasing antagonism within Irish (and British) political culture more generally into the 1880s. The principle of Irish self-government gained a radical agrarian edge through the Land War of the early 1880s; the introduction of Home Rule legislation in 1886 drove liberal unionists into the ranks of the Conservatives; and support for the Union in the north of Ireland manifested itself in militant forms. Politics in Ireland adopted an air of intractability. As Dobbs feared, the first-past-the-post electoral system exaggerated the strength of regionalised majority interests, contributing to the geographical (north-south) and confessional (Protestant-Catholic) polarisation that increasingly defined Irish politics from the 1880s.

The question of Home Rule dominated Irish and British politics from the 1880s to the First World War. For many people in Ireland, the scheme was the expected future of Irish governance.[4] Home Rulers won the majority of the Irish seats in Westminster in every election from 1874 to 1910, before being replaced by the separatist Sinn Féin party in 1918. The nature of representative politics within the multi-union polity that was the United Kingdom frayed from the late nineteenth century: if representative government required the consent of a parliamentary majority for legitimacy, how were competing national majorities – Irish and British – to be reconciled?[5] There was no constitutional mechanism recognising the status of Home Rule as the majority opinion within Ireland, rendering representative politics a frustrating pastime for champions of Irish self-government.

An important criticism of the British parliamentary model made by the Repealers in the 1830s and 1840s was that the numerical imbalance of seats across the four countries of the United Kingdom effectively locked Irish MPs out of government. For John O'Connell, this constitutional truth ensured that the parliamentary representation of Ireland was 'indisputably defective'.[6] Given the additional problem of the colonial dimensions of the Irish administration, it proved difficult to make a case that the Union provided Ireland with a representative government. Erskine Childers developed this argument in 1911, likening the Irish government to 'a British Crown Colony where the Executive is outside popular control, and the Legislature is only partially within it'.[7] The structure of

[4] James McConnel, *The Irish Parliamentary Party and the Third Home Rule Crisis* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), p. 222.
[5] Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 190.
[6] John O'Connell, *An Argument for Ireland* (Dublin: John Browne, 1844), pp. 3–4.
[7] Erskine Childers, *The Framework of Home Rule* (London: Edward Arnold, 1911), p. 188.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

government and the nature of representation thus continued to be potent issues animating the Home Rule debates. The context from the 1880s was, however, different from the pre-Parnell age: land became more explicitly connected to the campaign for self-government, and Irish political communities became more rigidly defined and guided by majoritarianism in their arguments, culminating with the Ulster unionists claiming a democratic right to self-determination outside any Home Rule settlement.[8]

The revolution in Irish nationalist and unionist party politics from the 1880s – more professional parliamentary movements and a focus on building grassroots organisations – was underpinned by attempts to create rival monolithic blocs, unified through the adoption of a pro- or anti-Home Rule stance. This is not to say there were singular unionist and nationalist ideological visions for the Irish constitution – on the contrary, there remained considerable dissension within these blocs[9] – but 'party' became the dominant paradigm for the articulation of political ideas. This process was also occurring in Britain and elsewhere: the independently minded representative in Westminster was becoming obsolete, replaced by party men.[10] A trickle-down effect was the weakening of the non-party-aligned pamphleteer, as printed material assumed a more partisan identity. Both the Home Rule movement and their Irish unionist rivals created press agencies for the dissemination of political ideas: party-sponsored pamphlets, leaflets, and tracts were produced in vast amounts throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.[11] These remain a vibrant set of political works, but the core messages were heavily refracted through the prism of the organised parties. Much of the published material examined in this book displayed a more independent streak, reflecting the lack of stable parliamentary blocs. While the history of Irish politics is typically one of crisis and drama involving two seemingly binary perspectives, the

[8] Margaret O'Callaghan, *British High Politics and a Nationalist Ireland: Criminality, Land and the Law under Forster and Balfour* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994), p. 4; Colin W. Reid, 'Democracy, sovereignty and unionist political thought during the revolutionary period in Ireland, c.1912–1922', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 27 (2017), pp. 211–32.

[9] Richard Bourke, 'Introduction', in Richard Bourke and Niamh Gallagher (eds.), *The Political Thought of the Irish Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. xxx.

[10] William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 196.

[11] Patrick Maume, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life, 1891–1918* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), p. 9; Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Franchise reform, "first past the post", and the strange case of unionist Ireland', *Parliamentary History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1997), p. 97; Colin W. Reid, *The Lost Ireland of Stephen Gwynn: Irish Constitutional Nationalism and Cultural Politics, 1864–1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 79.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

fluidity of thought and range of rhetorical influences evident in the published arena before 1880 is striking. O'Connellites such as Thomas Wyse found space to articulate a desire for closer union with Britain, while Tories such as Samuel Ferguson critiqued the British connection and called for the restoration of Irish self-government.[12]

Returning to Archibald Dobbs: the merits or otherwise of PR was an issue that was debated in Britain during the nineteenth century, and Dobbs offers a distinctly Irish perspective.[13] His proposal for PR was a wish to see a *different* kind of Irish representative returned to Westminster, weakening the influence of what he termed the 'caucus' element that had gained an electoral stronghold.[14] Electoral reform was a path, according to Dobbs, to secure the representation of the 'fullness and variety in political life' in Ireland, which would indirectly imbue the Union with a stronger sense of legitimacy.[15] But while Dobbs believed in the potential transformative impact of a different electoral system, this would not, in itself, alter the structures of representative government as understood by several generations of writers who favoured the restoration of a parliament in Ireland. Even with PR, the ability of Irish MPs, as *Irish* MPs, to effect change in Westminster would remain as elusive as ever. What Dobbs did not record was that part of the rationale for ongoing parliamentary obstructionism was the hopelessness felt on the Home Rule benches in realising their primary political goal, despite representing a majority of Irish constituencies.

While the recklessness of obstructionism frustrated and alienated many observers in Ireland – not least Isaac Butt, the leader of the Home Rule League – the tactic highlighted the limitations of parliamentarianism in Ireland by the late 1870s. Three to four generations of Irish representatives had gone to Westminster since the Union became operational, and the powerlessness of these parliamentarians had become internalised. The period of the Union is often depicted in historiography as the era of 'British rule in Ireland'.[16] For late nineteenth-century critics, this was

[12] Thomas Wyse, *Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1829), ii, pp. 120–1; Mary Catherine Ferguson, *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of his Day*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1896), i, p. 246.

[13] The debates over PR form a major part of Gregory Conti's *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[14] Dobbs, *Representative Reform*, pp. 3, 10. [15] Ibid., p. 11.

[16] The term is ubiquitous. See, for example, Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 90; D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 197. Also see Ciaran O'Neill, *Power and Powerless in Union Ireland: Life in a Palliative State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 9, for a discussion of similar phrasings.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

precisely the problem: it was British rule *in* Ireland, with little scope for Irish political influence over decision-makers. This rationalisation aided a shift in political language, away from the 'justice, or Repeal' mantra of the O'Connellites from the 1830s. One of the most prominent obstructionists, Frank Hugh O'Donnell, recorded that 'it was not the misgovernment of Ireland which troubled us, but its government, good, bad, or indifferent, by anyone but the Irish nation'.[17] O'Connell had emphasised 'good' government above 'Irish' government; O'Donnell represented the changed national zeitgeist that reversed the formula in the later nineteenth century.

While O'Donnell increasingly became an erratic presence in political and cultural life following his stint in parliament – his colleague, Tim Healy, christened him 'Crank' Hugh O'Donnell – he personified a palpable shift in Irish thinking regarding the constitutional connection between Ireland and Britain.[18] Home Rule – and later, the political independence desired by Sinn Féin – stressed the primacy of *Irish* government over all other concerns in imagining the ideal constitutional framework for Ireland. The language of national right and the illegitimacy of a more imperially framed model of government had become enshrined in Irish political culture. 'Even if a country were prospering under foreign rule', stressed Stephen Gwynn in a pro-Home Rule pamphlet in 1911, 'its honour and its dignity should force it to demand the privilege of freedom, which is the right to manage its own affairs'.[19] In some ways, the logic was closer to the mid-Victorian IRB than Daniel O'Connell's Repeal movement, despite the latter's apparent constitutional nationalist kinship with the Home Rulers. The evolution of constitutional thinking in Ireland was not as linear as it appears on the surface.

Irish thinkers, whether radical, Tory, or republican, grappled with one of the Enlightenment's unanswered questions: how the political freedom of a small country can survive within a multinational state. The answers varied dramatically. O'Connell's restorative Repeal movement invoked an Irish 'ancient constitution' of sorts, while Young Ireland embraced popular sovereignty. Federalists attempted to reconcile Irish autonomy with imperial unity, and Fenians rejected both in favour of revolutionary democracy. What united these visions was a shared insistence that a legitimate

[17] F. Hugh O'Donnell, *A History of the Irish Parliamentary Party*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910), i, p. 175.
[18] Paul A. Townend, *The Road to Home Rule: Anti-Imperialism and the Irish Nationalist Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), p. 183.
[19] Stephen Gwynn, *The Case for Home Rule: With an Introduction by John E. Redmond* (Dublin: Maunsel and Co., [1911]), p. 5.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

government required mechanisms to translate Irish voices into power. The structures of incorporating Union ultimately proved unable to meet this challenge.

While the Union and the perceived problems of governing Ireland framed Irish political thinking, this was never static. Ideological perspectives changed over time, meaning that the arguments of, say, the 1840s were not the same as those of the 1870s. While the neatness of a singular 'Irish Question' is appealing, it assumes an unchanging ideological context. Concepts changed, even if words did not. 'Self-government', for example, could imply a restoration of the pre-1800 Irish parliament, a new federal constitution for the United Kingdom, or an independent Irish republic. A parliament in Dublin could, therefore, be imagined as a nationalist, unionist, and republican aspiration; we cannot assume that advocates of 'self-government' shared the same rationale for their respective positions. The Union acutely shaped Irish political debate, but the responses it generated were not necessarily rooted in zero-sum identity politics. The variety and richness of constitutional ideas articulated in Ireland across the nineteenth century go some way to liberating Irish history from the expectation that the political cultures on the island were rooted in stationary, binary blocs.

While religion was unquestionably a central component of Irish political thought, this again should not be reduced to preconceived and rigid assumptions. The Union was passed in 1800 despite significant opposition from the Anglican elite in Ireland; and while Catholic exclusion politicised denominational identity, a number of Protestants rallied to the banner of equal civic rights in Ireland. Political goals associated with Irish Catholics – the Repeal of the Union and Home Rule, for example – attracted the support of Protestants at various points. While it made sense for William McComb to polemically assert that Repeal 'is essentially a Roman Catholic interest' in 1841, the emergence of the religiously diverse Young Ireland the following year, and the Protestant Repeal Association during the Famine, complicates such a denominationally predetermined reading of Irish politics.[20]

There was another, more subtle dynamic at play within religious politics in Ireland. Irish Tory political arguments during the era of O'Connell often drew on a reading of history that equated liberty with Protestantism, with the counter-image of Catholicism as despotism.[21] These arguments

[20] William McComb, *The Repealer Repulsed! A Correct Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Repeal Invasion of Ulster*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin: UCD Press, 2003; first published 1841), p. 4.

[21] See, for example, T. D. Gregg, *Free Thoughts on Protestant Matters*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: W. Curry, Jr., & Co., 1847), p. 43; *Dublin University Magazine*, October 1844, p. 443.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

were not, of course, uniquely Irish – Linda Colley cited Protestantism and the othering of Catholicism as forms of political glue that held together British constitutional identity in the eighteenth century – but they persisted longer and with more intensity in Ireland.[22] That Protestants were a minority in Ireland explains this phenomenon. If Protestantism was equated with liberty, then schemes that potentially empowered Catholics in Ireland – Emancipation, Repeal, Home Rule – represented a grave existential threat to that liberty. The clericalism of the O'Connellite movement, the first mass democratic movement in Ireland, only confirmed the fears of its enemies – Irish Tories and, later, the Fenians – that its ambition was to create a new Catholic political ascendancy. But while nineteenth-century Irish Protestant politics retained its seventeenth-century fear of Jacobitism, the state moved on. The idea of a 'Protestant constitution' came under increasing stress as the United Kingdom liberalised its civic restrictions on non-Anglican denominations during the 1820s, which contributed to the palpable sense of abandonment and the renewed call for self-reliance within Irish Tory ranks in the 1830s and 1840s.

The connection between Protestantism and liberty was also challenged from another source, as the Catholic Association and later Repeal associations increasingly embraced progressive languages to confront the injustice of political exclusion. In contrast to its European counterparts, the Catholic Church in Ireland gained a radical political image through its association with the O'Connellite movements.[23] Daniel O'Connell explicitly fused Catholicism with the language of political liberty, in a direct rebuff to his Irish Protestant critics. In denouncing the Corn Laws in 1842, for example, O'Connell recorded that the taxes were 'unchristian and uncatholic, because they are unjust and oppressive'.[24] This rhetorical dynamic helps to explain some of O'Connell's apparently crass statements relating to religion, such as the Irish people being 'morally superior' to the English on account of their Catholicism. While this can be read as an unsavoury form of bigotry, O'Connell was rather clumsily depicting Catholicism as a political identity imbued with the virtues of dignity,

[22] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

[23] K. Theodore Hoppen, 'Riding a tiger: Daniel O'Connell, reform, and popular politics in Ireland, 1800–1847', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 100 (1999), p. 122.

[24] Daniel O'Connell, *Observations on Corn Laws, on Political Pravity and Ingratitude, and on Clerical and Personal Slander, in the Shape of a Meek and Modest Reply to the Second Letter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, Waterford, and Wexford* (Dublin: Samuel J. Machen, 1842), p. 15.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

patriotism, and justice.[25] Denominational differences were, therefore, an essential component of nineteenth-century Irish life but not in a narrow sectarian manner: religious ideas informed political thought in more profound ways.

The Irish political imagination of the nineteenth century was, then, a contested arena where unionists, anti-unionists, republicans, and federalists grappled with the question of how a people (however defined) could achieve meaningful representative government. Rather than settling Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, the theory and practice of the Acts of Union ignited an unending crisis of representation, one that British policy exacerbated through indifference, coercion, and legislative half-measures. Catholic Emancipation conceded rights without the ability to influence power; conciliatory government ventures ignored the rationale for self-rule; and federalism, the most creative attempt to reconcile Irish autonomy with imperial unity, was dismissed out of hand within British opinion. The limitations of these responses contributed to the slow decline of the legitimacy of the Union within Ireland. The rupture, when it came in the twentieth century, was not a complete surprise.

The tragedy of Irish political thought is that its richest debates briefly flourished precisely when the future seemed most open. Many of the more ideologically fluid positions investigated in this book – Repealers seeking the importation of British liberties into Ireland, Tory federalists making the case for Irish self-government – found their positions increasingly untenable by the later nineteenth century. With the Land War, the rise of Parnell, and the hardening of nationalist and unionist orthodoxies during the Home Rule crisis of the 1880s, the grey zone within Irish political thought was profoundly reduced, but not eliminated altogether. New political ambitions emerged, but the questions raised between 1798 and 1879 did not completely vanish. Many nineteenth-century insights – the possibility of multiple parliaments within a polity, the appropriate constituent power(s), and the language of self-government – resurfaced in later constitutional crises over Home Rule, partition, and independence. The Good Friday Agreement's revision of the Union, its fragile balancing of sovereignty, and recognition of the legitimacy of competing ideological platforms also drew from the well of nineteenth-century Irish political thinking.

The ideological perspectives examined in this book left powerful legacies. The appeal of repealing the Union lay not in nostalgia for Grattan's

[25] *First Letter of Daniel O'Connell, Esq., on the Repeal of the Union* (Dublin: T. O'Flanagan, 1830), pp. 1, 3.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008

Parliament, but in the stark reality that Ireland's voice went unheard in Westminster: this informed the later Home Rule struggle. Republicanism gained force in the twentieth century not because the Irish were 'destined' for separation, but because the Union, as practised, offered neither dignity nor democracy. Federalism remains an attractive proposition to observers eager to provide a regulatory framework for the United Kingdom's devolved administrations in the twenty-first century. If there were few British adherents of the idea during the era of Isaac Butt, the contemporary constitutional challenges of devolution, secessionist nationalism, and Brexit have focused minds on ways and means to keep the United Kingdom together. As David Armitage has mischievously quipped, '[w]e are all federalists now'.[26]

The development of representative government in Ireland was never a linear progression, but a contested and contingent process, shaped as much by ideological creativity as by the constraints of sectarianism and national conflict. These debates transcend their time and place, offering important insights into the complexities of sovereignty within multinational states.[27] At their core, Irish political thinkers reimagined several fundamental relationships, such as between people and their representatives, and between local autonomy and centralised power.

Irish grievance in the period covered in this book was articulated powerfully through the language of exclusion: a Protestant political nation that denied Catholic participation; the disenfranchisement of the forty-shilling freeholder and restrictions on Irish suffrage; Irish MPs rendered powerless in the face of the British majority in Westminster; policymaking detached from local accountability; and, ultimately, the denial of the dignity of self-government, a classical trait that was recast in the age of nationalism. Each exclusion slowly eroded the Union's legitimacy while enabling constitutional innovation, as the marginalised in each of these scenarios developed new ways to imagine political inclusion. Ideas of representative government in Ireland sheds light on how political exclusion was experienced and how the excluded redefined power.

[26] David Armitage, 'Conclusion: we have always been federal', in Robert Schütze and Stephen Tierney (eds.), *The United Kingdom and the Federal Idea* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2018), p. 277.

[27] Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 2. Also see Alvin Jackson, *United Kingdoms: Multinational Union States in Europe and Beyond, 1800–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 16:44:11, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009630191.008