The Conservative Right, Ulster Unionism, and the Partition of Ireland

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The partition of Ireland is often laid at the door of an unholy alliance of Ulster Unionists and right-wing Conservatives. This attribution of responsibility is hardly surprising among nationalists, but even the unionist apologist, Hugh Shearman, acknowledged that it is not without foundation. Writing in 1942, he claimed that during the third home rule crisis of 1912–14, 'it was to the more extreme Tories that the Ulstermen looked for the warmest sympathy.' He went further, arguing that because the 'Ulster Unionists were driven through force of circumstances … into a close alliance with purple Tories, the reactionaries, the diehards and the "Blimps," they have ever since become associated with that class in the minds of liberals and people of left-wing sympathies.'[1] Substantiating the last assertion, the Belfast poet, John Hewitt, remarked several years later that Ulster Unionist MPs were 'indistinguishable from the Right Wing of British Conservatism.'[2]

It is undeniable that Conservatives, especially those on the right of the party, were among the shrillest cheerleaders of Ulster Unionist militancy before the First World War. There were echoes of this in 1921, during the negotiations that culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty, when the 'diehards' marshalled opposition in the Conservative party to any attempt to coerce the recently established government of Northern Ireland. And again in 1924, the diehards threatened to lead a revolt at Westminster in solidarity with the Ulster Unionists' refusal to co-operate with the Boundary Commission, further delaying and complicating the establishment of that

[1] Hugh Shearman, *Not an Inch: A Study of Northern Ireland and Lord Craigavon* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 107.
[2] John Hewitt, "Divided Ireland," *New Statesman and Nation*, 19 February 1949, cited in Gillian McIntosh, *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 185.

intergovernmental body. These bonds appear to be enduring, judging by the staunch unionism of the right-wing Monday Club in the 1960s and 1970s, and the partnership of Democratic Unionist and right-wing Conservative MPs that in 2019 successfully thwarted Theresa May's 'Brexit' withdrawal agreement. Throughout, there have been examples of parliamentarians having a foot in both camps, or moving between them, such as Sir Edward Carson, Ronald McNeill and Sir Alfred Knox in the inter-war years, and Knox Cunningham, Enoch Powell and Andrew Hunter in the period since.

These instances of co-operation, intersection and exchange are compelling, but they do not present a complete picture. In recognising the links between the two, Shearman still acknowledged the importance of contingency, albeit in passing. 'The Ulstermen in their emergency had to take their friends where they could find them,' he argued, and if any 'ideological traditions' had been formed these 'could be much more easily altered than some people imagine. The real, dominant ideologies in Ulster are not those which go back for a quarter or half century but those which go back for several centuries.'[3] Shearman substantiated his hypothesis several years later with the claim that the Ulster Unionists had effectively positioned themselves to the left flank of the Conservative party, by calling for the extension of the post-war welfare state to Northern Ireland. It was this tendentious assertion that provoked Hewitt's retort about the indistinguishability of the Ulster Unionists and right-wing Conservatives.[4] His counterclaim, however, also appears simplistic when set against a growing body of scholarship on both Ulster unionism and the Conservative Right. It indicates that neither were monoliths, and that each contained veins of opinion and difference, ideological and tactical, with the result that the relationship between the two was more complex and shifting

[3] Shearman, *Not an Inch*, 107–08.
[4] McIntosh, *Force of Culture*, 185.

than it appears on the surface.[5] An examination of their contrasting and multiple responses to the partition of Ireland brings these features into sharper relief.

I

If an important strand in the outlook of the Conservative Right was its vaunted fidelity to tradition, Ulster unionism had to be considerably more adaptable and flexible. It emerged in its modern form in 1886—in response to the Liberal government's first Home Rule bill—and significantly modified its organisational structures in 1892—in response to the Liberal's second Home Rule bill—and again 1904.[6] The last occasion produced the most significant overhaul of the movement's structures – the creation of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC), which placed the east Ulster bourgeoisie firmly in charge, and that signalled, as Colin Reid observes, Ulster unionism's embrace of the language of 'normative democratic rights.'[7] Moreover, on this occasion the perceived existential crisis that faced Ulster Unionists did not emanate from the Liberals, but the 'Unionist' Chief Secretary at Dublin Castle, George Wyndham, whose dalliance with some form of limited devolved government had the effect of heightening Ulster unionism's paranoia about the reliability of English Conservatives. Wyndham was ultimately driven from office for his 'centrism' in Irish affairs, but this should not obscure the fact that he was on the

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[5] For Ulster unionism, see Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884–1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Feargal Cochrane, *Unionist Politics and the Politics of Unionism Since the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997); Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the Crossroads Ulster Unionism in the O'Neill Years, 1960–69* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Graham Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). For the Conservative Right, see N.C. Fleming, *Britannia's Zealots, Volume I: Tradition, Empire and the Forging of the Conservative Right* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Kevin Hickson, *Britain's Conservative Right since 1945: Traditional Toryism in a Cold Climate* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[6] Peter Gibbon, *The Origins of the Ulster Unionism: The Formation of Popular Protestant Politics and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975); Jackson, *Ulster Party*; James Loughlin, *Ulster Unionism and British Identity since 1885* (London: Pinter, 1995); Ian McBride, "Ulster and the British Problem," in *Unionism in Modern Ireland: New Perspectives on Politics and Culture*, ed. Richard English and Graham Walker (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 1–18; Alan O'Day, "Defending the Union: Parliamentary Opinions, 1869 and 1886," in *Defenders of the Union: A Survey of British and Irish Unionism since 1801*, ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (London: Routledge, 2001), 90–111.

[7] F.S.L. Lyons, "The Irish Unionist Party and the Devolution Crisis of 1904–5," *Irish Historical Studies* 6, no. 21 (1948): 1–22; N.C. Fleming, "Leadership, the Middle Classes and Ulster Unionism since the late-Nineteenth Century," in *Politics, Society and the Middle Classes in Modern Ireland*, ed. Fintan Lane (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 212–229; Colin Reid, "Democracy, Sovereignty and Unionist Political Thought during the Revolutionary Period in Ireland, *c.* 1912–1922," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (2017): 214.

right of British conservatism, and would afterwards be counted as one of the most reactionary figures in the Edwardian party.[8]

Like the successive organisational changes to Ulster unionism, its position on partition also shifted in response to a later succession of political crises, from initially opposing it for the entirety of Ireland, to accepting the exclusion of the northeast in 1913–14 and again in 1916, and to go a step further in 1920 by agreeing to the establishment of a devolved parliament in the excluded area. At each stage, most Conservative Right parliamentarians diverged from the Ulster Unionists by maintaining their opposition to home rule *in toto*. It was not their intention to be at odds with politicians whose acts of defiance towards the Liberal government they more often than not admired, but it was an inevitable consequence of the Conservative Right's active resistance to the shifting priorities and strategies of imperialist intellectuals and front bench Conservatives, as the latter sought to accommodate Irish self-government within a more flexible British Commonwealth.[9] To understand the contrasting trajectories of the Conservative Right and Ulster unionism on the question of partition, it is necessary to address the different historical contexts in which each was forged.

The most significant and revealing difference between the Conservative Right and Ulster unionism is that the former never developed a distinct and permanent political organisation. Integrated fully into the Conservative party, it only adopted an organisational form through *ad hoc* committees and short-lived vehicles that emerged when it was feared that Conservative policy might give ground on a sensitive question. The Conservative Right—defined here as those on

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[8] Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History 1800–2000* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), 93–94; Fleming, *Britannia's Zealots*, 72.

[9] D. George Boyce, "British Conservative Opinion, the Ulster Question, and the Partition of Ireland, 1912–21," *Irish Historical Studies* 17, no. 65 (1970): 89–112; Stephen Evans, "The Conservatives and the Redefinition of Unionism, 1912–21," *Twentieth Century British History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 1–27; Alan O'Day, 'Ireland and the United Kingdom', in *Problems and Perspectives in Irish History since 1800: Essays in Honour of Patrick Buckland*, ed. D. George Boyce and Roger Swift (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 13–31; Jeremy Smith, "'Ever Reliable Friends'? The Conservative Party and Ulster Unionism in the Twentieth Century," *English Historical Review* 121, no. 490 (2006): 70–103; Alvin Jackson, "'Tame Tory Hacks'? The Ulster Party at Westminster, 1922–1972," *Historical Journal* 54, no. 2 (2011): 453–475; Gary K. Peatling, *British Opinion and Irish Self-Government, 1865–1925: From Unionism to Liberal Commonwealth* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001), 111–165.

the right of the party who actively and visibly defied its leaders—included traditionalists, populists, authoritarians, and social imperialists, as well as opportunists and transient supporters. Reflecting its lack of permanent organisation and the relative heterogeneity of its cohort, the Conservative Right's conception of party orthodoxy typically took the form of a set of principles rather than a coherent ideology or agenda. These included an unapologetic belief in traditional hierarchy, the mixed constitution, the established churches, and English or British exceptionalism; the last understood as a nation and state that straddled the British Isles, and which in turn fed their belief in the importance of maintaining Great Britain as a world power. These themes drew on older traditions of Tory thought and reaction, stretching back to the early nineteenth-century, and arguably even earlier. But Conservative Right parliamentarians in the twentieth century tended not to acknowledge such precedents, in part because their number included Liberal Unionists, but mainly because they preferred to see themselves as upholding principles that all Conservatives shared until whatever crisis was at hand that called this into question. The above features reveal the weakness of the Conservative Right, but the potency of its claims to uphold 'tradition' and 'principles' meant that its potential to foment wider unrest among Conservatives could not be underestimated by the party's front bench, especially as these often received a favourable hearing in the Conservative press and the voluntary party that was out of all proportion to the Conservative Right's cohort of 40 or so MPs.[10]

In contrast to the inchoate and essentially reactive nature of the Conservative Right, Ulster unionism developed into a permanently organised movement that was intended to bring together all those committed to the Union. It necessarily had to be organisationally modern and coherent, as well as flexible in adapting to multiple and sometimes conflicting pressures locally as well as the changing political makeup and context at Westminster.[11] There was of course the age-old

[10] For extended discussion of the Conservative Right, see Fleming, *Britannia's Zealots*, 1–34.
[11] David Burnett, "The Modernisation of Unionism, 1892–1914?," in *Unionism in Modern Ireland*, ed. English and Walker, 41–62; N.C. Fleming, "Landlords, Power and Loyalism in late-Victorian Ulster," in *Politics and Power in Victorian Ireland,* ed. Roger Swift and Christine Kinealy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 143–54.

sectarianism that underpinned an important strand of Ulster unionism's outlook and that provided an element of continuity, but it could not unduly favour anachronism or sentimentality when it came to organisation and policy. Ulster unionism was the immediate successor of Irish Conservatism, at least in the north of Ireland, and the product of its sudden and unequal marriage with Ulster Liberalism.[12] More specifically, it was a response to William Gladstone's conversion to home rule. Even so, Ulster unionism's elevation of the Union above traditional 'party' labels was not entirely novel, as it recalled earlier periods of Whig adhesion to the Irish Tory party—and its Conservative successor—in response to the political mobilisation of Ireland's Catholic population.[13] This has led George Boyce to situate Ulster unionism in the centuries-old political activity and practices of the 'English' in Ireland, or Irish loyalism, and to highlight an important continuity in its tradition of political thought that he characterises as the 'Protestant predicament in Ireland.'[14] Dependent on the British connection and yet anxious about the British commitment to their specific interests, Irish loyalism has always had to be flexible and adaptable. The importance of this quickened from the 1860s as Liberal then Conservative governments at Westminster abandoned the project of assimilating Ireland into the United Kingdom in favour of tailoring policies to suit its peculiar requirements.[15] This further inclined Irish loyalism, even in its Conservative guise, to a contractual, or conditional, understanding of its relationship to the British state that in this specific respect was the antithesis

[12] Brian M. Walker, *Ulster Politics: The Formative Years, 1868–86* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation and the Institute of Irish Studies, 1989); Alvin Jackson, "Irish Unionism, 1870–1922," in *Defenders of the Union*, ed. Boyce and O'Day, 115–136; Andrew Shields, *The Irish Conservative Party, 1852–68: Land, Politics and Religion* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).
[13] Robert Eccleshall, "Anglican Political Thought in the Century after the Revolution of 1688," in *Political Thought in Ireland since the Seventeenth Century*, ed. D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (London: Routledge, 1993), 36–72; Alvin Jackson, *Colonel Edward Saunderson: Land and Loyalty in Victorian Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15–23; Jacqueline Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin Civic Politics and Irish Protestant Patriotism, 1660–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Suzanne Kingon, "Ulster Counties in the Age of Emancipation and Reform," in *Politics and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland 1750–1850*, ed. in Allan Blackstock and Eoin Magennis (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2007), 1–23.
[14] D. George Boyce, "Weary Patriots: Ireland the Making of Unionism," *Defenders of the Union*, ed. in Boyce and O'Day, 15–38. See also J.C. Beckett, *The Anglo-Irish Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 87–88.
[15] K. Theodore Hoppen, "Gladstone, Salisbury and the End of Irish Assimilationism," in *Gladstone: Ireland and Beyond*, ed. Mary E. Daly and K. Theodore Hoppen (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 45–63. See K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 285–286.

of traditional Toryism.[16] In a similar vein, it has been argued by Alvin Jackson that the thinking of Ulster unionism in the early twentieth-century 'was close to the logic of [the] Presbyterian United Irishmen of Belfast in the 1790s.'[17] Colin Reid has even compared the Solemn League and Covenant, organised in 1912 by the Ulster Unionists, to the founding document of the radical Chartist movement.[18] Put simply, the organic theory of society that came so easily to English Conservatives was untenable in the shifting political and social context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland.[19] Irish loyalism, according to Boyce, therefore upheld the view 'that loyal men enjoyed a special contract with England which, if once broken, freed them from blind political obedience.'[20] All the same, it is revealing that the most striking example of this, the Ulster Unionists' preparations in 1913 to establish a provisional government in defiance of the third Home Rule bill, was rationalised by them as a temporary measure to hold Ulster in trust for the crown until the legislation could be repealed.[21]

These are, admittedly, subtle distinctions, and inattentive observers—including many British Conservatives—could be forgiven for noticing only features that seemed to be common to both Irish loyalism and reactionary conservatism: the preponderance of landlords, pronounced anti-Catholicism, the habit of authoritarianism, anxiety about the latent power of the masses, and its corollary, the tendency to catastrophise perceived dangers. Likewise, the Whiggish confidence of Irish loyalists that they represented the vanguard of civilisation and progress could just as easily be understood by sympathetic English Conservatives in avowedly Tory terms, that is, as the expression of a colonial identity that represented what David Cannadine has labelled 'Britain's transoceanically extended social order.'[22] It was, after all, only when the state and nation moved

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[16] D.W. Miller, *Queen's Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in Historical Perspective* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978); Frank O'Gorman, *British Conservatism: Conservative Thought from Burke to Thatcher* (London: Longman, 1986), 2.
[17] Alvin Jackson, "Irish Unionism, 1905–21," in *Nationalism and Unionism: Conflict in Ireland, 1885–1921*, ed. Peter Collins (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast, 1996), 39.
[18] Reid, "Democracy, Sovereignty," 218.
[19] J.C. Beckett, *Confrontations: Studies in Irish History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 147–48.
[20] Boyce, "Weary Patriots," 22.
[21] Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism 1912–1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23; Reid, "Democracy, Sovereignty," 226–30.
[22] David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (London: Penguin, 2002), 154.

to the forefront of political debate that the more fundamental differences between Ulster unionism and the Conservative Right came into sharper relief. This happened in a significant way during the third home rule crisis when it became bound up with the question of partitioning Ireland.[23]

II

That outcome was adumbrated in the years immediately preceding the introduction of the third home rule bill. There were of course unproblematic alignments, such as the Ulster Unionists' support for the parliamentary rebellion of the 'ditcher' peers, whose opposition to the 1911 Parliament bill challenged the authority of the Conservative party front bench as well as the Liberal-controlled House of Commons. Tariff reform, that enduring obsession of a large section of the Conservative Right, also had the support of a number of prominent Ulster Unionists.[24] Yet, the most vocal tariff reformers had a testy relationship with Ulster unionism and especially in the 1910s. Tariff reformers were avowed Unionists, to be sure, but their preoccupation with strengthening the bonds of empire disposed them to consider favourably the federation of the United Kingdom as part of a larger scheme of imperial federation.[25] Anxiety about the status of Ulster in such an arrangement meant that this specific element of the Conservative Right's 'empire first' politics had more limited support among the Ulster Unionists. Moreover, having struggled—by fair means and foul—to make tariff reform the Conservative party's fiscal policy, its most advanced advocates were acutely sensitive to any signs of equivocation, hesitation or distraction. They were therefore deeply disappointed in 1912–13 by the decision of the party's

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[23] D. George Boyce, "The State and the Citizen: Unionists, Home Rule, Ulster and the British Constitution, 1886–1920," in *The Ulster Crisis, 1885–1921*, ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 47–63.

[24] Jackson, *Ulster Party*, 291–94.

[25] E.H.H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880–1914* (London: Routledge, 1995), 298; Larry L. Witherell, *Rebel on the Right: Henry Page Croft and the Crisis of British Conservatism, 1903–1914* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 204–05.

leader, Andrew Bonar Law, to prioritise Ulster and dilute his commitment to tariff reform.[26] The tariff reformers' response was so vigorous that it moved Bonar Law to consider resigning, a prospect that was averted following Edward Carson's strenuous efforts to rally the majority of Conservative MPs to an uneasy compromise on the party's fiscal policy.[27]

Carson's motivation had nothing to do with tariff reform. Bonar Law's adherence to what his biographer calls the 'most extreme course' on Ulster was the asset that the Unionist leader prized.[28] It is sometimes suggested that this represented the capture of the Conservative party by its own right-wing or the Ulster Unionists.[29] However, the latter's tensions with Bonar Law over tariff reform have already been noted, and Jeremy Smith has argued persuasively that the leader of the opposition's controversial stance on Ireland had a tactical purpose designed to force a general election on the minority government.[30] The notion that Bonar Law's 'new style'—as Herbert Asquith dubbed it—represented the capture of the Conservative party also overlooks the wider context of contemporary electoral politics, which not only witnessed Liberals and Conservatives employ vulgar populist rhetoric and engage in disorderly and bitterly fought campaigns, but also an increasingly militant tendency among Ireland's constitutional nationalists.[31] What is more striking is the confusion and disunity in Conservative ranks about Bonar Law's strategy. All Conservatives, of course, could readily declare along with the Ulster

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[26] Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 154; Witherell, *Rebel on the Right*, 186, 188, 204.
[27] Sanders, diary, 12, 19, January 1913, in *Real Old Tory Politics: The Political Diaries of Sir Robert Sanders, Lord Bayford 1910–1935*, ed. John Ramsden (London: Historians' Press, 1984), 59.
[28] Robert Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister: The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law 1858–1923* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1955), 130.
[29] P.S. O'Hegarty, *A History of Ireland Under the Union 1801–1922* (London: Methuen, 1952), 658; Nicholas Mansergh, *Ireland in the Age of Reform and Revolution: A Commentary on Anglo-Irish Relations and on Political Forces in Ireland 1840–1921* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1940), 171; Edward Pearce, *Lines of Most Resistance: The Lords, the Tories and Ireland, 1886–1914* (London: Little Brown, 1999), 163–85; Alan Macleod, "The Conservative Party and the Irish Question, *c.* 1885–2010," in *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party*, ed. Richard Carr and Bradley W. Hart (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 84–104.
[30] Jeremy Smith, *The Tories and Ireland: Conservative Party Politics and the Home Rule Crisis, 1910–1914* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), *passim*.
[31] Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71–95; A.C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871–1934* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 90–134. See Alan O'Day, "Introduction," in *The Edwardian Age: Conflict and Stability 1900–1914*, ed. Alan O'Day (London: Macmillan, 1979), 1–12.

Unionists that the government was acting unconstitutionally, by failing to supplement the 1911 Parliament Act or to put home rule to the electorate.[32] Beyond that, however, there was uncertainty and apprehension among the Conservatives about how far they should go in supporting Carson and Bonar Law's use of brinkmanship, and especially about how it might play out in Great Britain.[33] The Conservative Right was not immune from these concerns nor was it united in response.[34] At one end, the MP Lord Hugh Cecil informed Carson about his anxiety that Bonar Law's incendiary speeches on Ulster risked 'incur[ring] the reproach of being irreconcilables.'[35] At the other, Lord Willoughby de Broke relished a dramatic showdown with the government.

In these tense and uncertain circumstances, federalism enjoyed an enhanced appeal among Conservatives interested in a practical solution that could extricate the party from its stand-off with the Liberal government. It is evident that Carson also dabbled with the idea, but those he led were largely focussed on their specific predicament and their own capacity to deal with political uncertainty.[36] As Alvin Jackson has observed, 'throughout the mid- and later Edwardian era, Ulster Unionists were consolidating the local institutions of their movement and were thus becoming more completely ensnared in provincial political passions.'[37] This resulted in the adoption of overtly militant tactics, with drilling and plans to import arms already in place in 1910, two years before the mass signing of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant, the formal creation in 1913 of the Ulster Volunteer Force, and the accompanying preparations to establish a

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[32] Robert Saunders, "Tory Rebels and Tory Democracy: The Ulster Crisis, 1900–14," in *Foundations of the British Conservative Party*, ed. Hart and Carr, 65–83; Reid, "Democracy, Sovereignty," 211–32.
[33] Richard Murphy, "Faction in the Conservative Party and the Home Rule Crisis, 1912–14," *History* 71, no. 232 (1986): 222–34; Thomas C. Kennedy, "Troubled Tories: Dissent and Confusion concerning the Party's Ulster Policy, 1910–1914," *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 3 (2007): 570–593.
[34] Gregory D. Phillips, *The Diehards: Aristocratic Society and Politics in Edwardian England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 149–55.
[35] Cited in Ian Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson, Volume II* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 304.
[36] John Kendle, *Ireland and the Federal Solution: The Debate over the United Kingdom Constitution, 1870−1921* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 117–27; Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*, 299–300; Jeremy Smith, "Sir Edward Carson and the Myth of Partition," in *Politics and Power*, ed. Swift and Kinealy, 178–91.
[37] Jackson, *Home Rule*, 116.

provisional government.[38] Jackson attributes this militant turn, in part, to Ulster unionism's 'deeply flawed relationship with British Conservatism,' which became more pronounced in the wake of the devolution crisis of 1904–5. This chimes with A.T.Q. Stewart's observation that Conservative support for these steps was not a prerequisite.[39] Yet, British public opinion, and Conservative opinion in particular, still mattered to the Ulster Unionists, and at this stage the need to court British opinion coincided with and did not run against local requirements.[40] As Boyce has observed, the need to effectively rein in and control local loyalists through the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force had the additional facility of helping to project the image to outsiders of a responsible citizen army enforcing law and order.[41]

British public opinion also counted when it came to the most controversial examples of the Conservative Right's support for Ulster Unionist militancy, and in a way that signalled that Ulster was held to be a place apart. Willoughby de Broke had been prominent in the 1911 ditcher revolt and was a supporter of tariff reform, national service, and navalism. Like these causes, his attachment to Ulster was a means of awakening and rallying the forces of conservatism in Great Britain.[42] In this vein, he established in March 1913 the British League for the Support of Ulster and the Union to propagandise and raise funds for the Irish Unionists. Chaired by another prominent reactionary, the Duke of Bedford, the British League claimed to have the support of 120 MPs and 100 peers.[43] Willoughby de Broke soon took things further by attempting to raise a volunteer force, and there is evidence that a number of parliamentarians followed his lead,

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[38] Timothy Bowman, *Carson's Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910–22* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 15–23.
[39] Jackson, "Irish Unionism," 128; A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609–1969* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1997), 166.
[40] See Daniel Jackson, *Popular Opposition to Irish Home Rule in Edwardian Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).
[41] D. George Boyce, "Respectable Rebels: Ulster Unionist Resistance to the Third Home Rule Bill, 1912–14," in *Conflicts in the North of Ireland, 1900–2000: Flashpoints and Fracture Zones*, ed. Alan F. Parkinson and Éamon Phoenix (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 28–39.
[42] G.D. Phillips, "Lord Willoughby de Broke and the Politics of Radical Toryism, 1909–1914," *Journal of British Studies* 20, no. 1 (1980): 205–224; N.C. Fleming, "The Imperial Maritime League: British Navalism, Conflict and the Radical Right, *c.* 1907–1920," *War in History* 23, no. 3 (2016): 296–322.
[43] *The Times*, 27 March 1913, 8.

though what that actually meant in practice remains unclear.[44] But his claim to have 7,000 volunteers must be treated with caution; there is no corroborating evidence and the legion of right-wing patriotic leagues that existed at this time habitually exaggerated their size.[45] Similarly, Willoughby de Broke's offer to join the Ulster Volunteer Force, and his later attempt to amend the Army Act to prevent the coercion of the Ulster Unionists, were the actions of a relatively marginal figure in the Conservative party, and not even typical or representative of its right-wing.[46] Willoughby de Broke was not completely unaware of the problem. Struggling even to secure the public support of prominent ditcher peers for his British League, he understood from Lord Milner—the former proconsul of Egypt and South Africa—that this was more likely if the British League for the Support of Ulster and the Union devoted itself to promoting Milner's version of the Ulster covenant. Milner, it must be said, did not rule out some form of resistance, and those in the British League committed to a militant strategy still found an outlet in recruiting former officers to serve in the Ulster Volunteer Force, and in assisting it with the transport of arms and ammunition.[47] But the protracted process of drafting and re-drafting Milner's covenant made it clear that many Conservatives, even on the right of the party, were reluctant to sign up to anything that suggested unconstitutional resistance in Great Britain let alone actively making preparations for armed confrontation.[48] The 1,361,000 signatures purportedly gathered by July 1914 are therefore a testament to the less militant strategy adopted.[49] Yet, that total also indicated that Ulster—like Willoughby de Broke's other pet causes—was not going to awaken and rally the forces of British conservatism in the way that he had hoped.

The fate of the British League underscored the different political contexts in which Ulster unionism and the Conservative Right operated. Whereas a British League organiser could claim

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[44] See Earl Winteron, *Orders of the Day* (London: Cassell, 1953), 38.
[45] Willoughby de Broke to Lord Salisbury, 29 October 1913, cited in Smith, *The Tories and Ireland*, 136–137.
[46] William S. Rodner, "Leaguers, Covenanters, Moderates: British Support for Ulster, 1913–1914," *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 17, no. 3 (1982): 84.
[47] Bowman, *Carson's Army*, 61; Fred Crawford to Hacket Pain, 19 January 1914, in *Irish Unionism 1885–1923: A Documentary History*, ed. Patrick Buckland (Belfast: HMSO, 1973), 243–244.
[48] Rodner, "Leaguers, Covenanters," 68–85.
[49] Walter Long, *Memories* (London: Hutchinson, 1923), 203.

that 'the men of Ulster are not fighting only for their own liberties,' but that 'Ulster will be the field on which the privileges of the whole nation will be lost or won,' the Ulster Unionist leadership treated the Ulster Volunteer Force primarily as a means of maintaining discipline locally and as an element of its extra-parliamentary strategy in treating with the Liberal government.[50] It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find evidence of tension between the two organisations at the highest levels.[51] The purposes of the British League were further tested by its Ulster allies over the winter of 1913–14, when it became clear that leading politicians, including Bonar Law and Carson, were increasingly disposed to frame a compromise on home rule based on the special treatment of Ulster. In January 1914, Bonar Law attempted to reassure Willoughby de Broke that such a compromise was 'quite impossible' given the opposition of the Irish Nationalists.[52] However, in the months that followed, as the British and Irish party leaders moved in that direction, the British League's strident defence of Ulster *and* the Union was compromised by the tension that now existed between these two aims, and by the fact that the very people whose example of defiance it had lauded now appeared to have prioritised Ulster above saving Ireland for the Union. Just before the Buckingham Palace conference that was convened in July 1914 to explore the exclusion compromise, Willoughby de Broke attempted to save face by confiding to an ally that his opposition to 'the partitioning of Ireland' would relent if it 'avert[ed] a civil war.'[53]

III

The temporary shelving of Irish home rule after the outbreak of the First World War initially meant that the prospect of exclusion no longer exposed tensions between the Ulster Unionists

[50] Hugh Ridgway to John Stewart Peter, 29 May 1913, cited in Bowman, *Carson's Army*, 65; Jackson, "Irish Unionism," 129.
[51] Thomas Comyn Platt to Richard Dawson Bates, 6 April 1914, in *Irish Unionism 1885–1923*, ed. Buckland, 286–287.
[52] Bonar Law to Willoughby de Broke, 26 January 1914, Parliamentary Archive, Westminster, Willoughby de Broke Papers 7/13.
[53] Willoughby de Broke to Lord Halsbury, 5 July 1914, British Library, Halsbury papers, vol. 9, ff. 159–160.

and the Conservatives. As expected, Bonar Law and Carson together took leading parts in opposing Asquith's decision to proceed with the home rule bill, accompanied by suspensory bill that delayed it for the duration of the war. Likewise, both men agreed on the patriotic necessity of joining the first wartime coalition government in May 1915.[54] But brewing backbench Conservative unease about the management of the war, and as a consequence, Bonar Law's leadership, soon encouraged them to cast about for an alternative party leader.[55] Carson's resignation as Attorney-General in October 1915, ostensibly over the Gallipoli debacle, made him the obvious candidate. In due course, he came into the orbit of the backbench Unionist War Committee, established in January 1916 by the Ulsterman and MP for Canterbury, Ronald McNeill, and his fellow right-winger, Sir Frederick Banbury. The committee was especially exercised by conscription, and its vigorous efforts to expand the application of the policy resulted in secret sessions of both houses of parliament in April 1916, and legislation soon after extending conscription to married men.[56] Now heralded by the Conservative Right as the man of the hour, Carson was honoured by over a hundred MPs at a special luncheon in May presided over by Milner.[57] Howell Gwynne, the editor of the *Morning Post*, caught the mood by informing Carson that he was 'our fancy, and Lady Carson is, for the purposes of the simile, your trainer.'[58]

This outpouring of enthusiasm for Carson soured within months with the reappearance of exclusion as part of a plan for immediate home rule. Devised in the wake of the Easter Rising by David Lloyd George and the two Irish party leaders, it proposed excluding the six northeast counties, though the duration of this arrangement remained a bone of contention. Carson faced two tense meetings of the UUC, on 2 and 12 June, and secured its approval to abandon fellow covenantors in the three outlying counties of Ulster. Those excluded joined with the southern

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[54] *House of Commons Debates*, 15 September 1914, vo. 66, col. 905.
[55] Nigel Keohane, *The Party of Patriotism: The Conservative Party and the First World War* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 48–53.
[56] *House of Commons Debates*, 4 May 1916, vol. 82, cols 142–267.
[57] *The Times*, 5 May 1916, 5.
[58] Gwynne to Carson, 16 March 1916, Bodleian Library, Oxford, H.A. Gwynne Papers, deposit 17.

Irish Unionists in appealing to right-wing sympathisers at Westminster, in the hope of stymieing the compromise agreement. They did not look in vain, for in contrast to July 1914, the Conservative Right was now in a far stronger position. It not only had several ministers in the wartime government, but Asquith and Bonar Law had to be wary of inflaming backbench disaffection that could destabilize the wartime coalition. The potential for this was demonstrated by the resignation of the president of the Board of Agriculture, Lord Selborne. Never likely on its own to land a fatal blow, the ditcher peer's action nevertheless strengthened the hand of those in the government who shared his opposition to the scheme, and forced ministers to tread carefully in the weeks that followed.[59] In parliament, another ditcher peer, Lord Salisbury, marshalled sympathisers on the backbenches to apply pressure on Bonar Law to distance himself from the agreement, and to this end Salisbury's supporters established the Imperial Unionist Association.[60] It was the government's attempt to appease these critics that alienated the Irish Nationalists and effectively rendered the agreement a dead letter. Salisbury afterwards wrote of the 'beastly job' of stiffening 'the back of our friends,' of 'putting spokes in the wheel of the Gov[ernmen]t.'[61] But his victory on this occasion was not without cost to the Conservative Right, as the episode exposed a deep fissure within the Unionist War Committee, between those like McNeill who generally supported Carson's actions, and those like his co-founder, Banbury, who stood opposed. As a result, the committee never recovered its former influence on the Conservative backbenches.[62]

Carson, meanwhile, was rescued from a similar fate in December 1916 by his central involvement in the press intrigue that substituted Lloyd George for Asquith as prime minister.[63] Thereafter, the wartime coalition's handling of Irish affairs—including the Irish Convention that

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[59] Selborne to Asquith, 16 June 1916, in *The Crisis of British Unionism: Lord Selborne's Domestic Political Papers, 1885–1922*, ed. D. George Boyce (London: Historians Press, 1987), 177–78.
[60] *The Times*, 8 July 1916, p. 9; Walter Guinness, diary, June–July 1914, in *Staff Officer: The Diaries of Walter Guinness (First Lord Moyne) 1914–1918*, ed. Brian Bond and Simon Robbins (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), 99.
[61] Salisbury to Violet Cecil, 1 September 1916, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Violet Milner Papers, 66.
[62] Fleming, *Britannia's Zealots*, 84–85.
[63] Alvin Jackson, *Sir Edward Carson* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1993), 45–47.

met between July 1917 and April 1918—provided the space for Ulster unionism to strengthen its position on exclusion and in a way that neutralised the effectiveness of opposition to this policy among southern Irish Unionists and their sympathisers on the Conservative Right.[64] In its significantly weakened state, the Unionist War Committee could offer the southern Irish Unionists little in the way of support, other than Salisbury's call on the government to enforce law and order and to extend conscription to Ireland.[65] Even this uncompromising rhetoric, however, had the effect of further exposing differences of emphasis among the Conservative Right about the handling of the Irish question.[66] It was further weakened by the secession in 1917 of some of its most active parliamentarians to form the National Party.[67] At the conclusion of the First World War, the disarray of the Conservative Right stood in marked contrast to the growing confidence and strength of resolution exhibited by Ulster unionism.

IV

The 1918 general election returned a Conservative dominated coalition at Westminster; in Dublin, the 73 Sinn Féin MPs elected convened the first Dáil Éireann. The following year the task of framing a new Irish settlement was given to the Conservative MP and former leader of the Irish Unionists, Walter Long.[68] The resulting Government of Ireland bill partitioned the island by establishing two jurisdictions each with its own parliament and government. A Unionist measure in so far as Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom, it was also intended to foster unity through mechanisms for north-south co-operation. Long's preference for nine county exclusion was in the same vein, given the precariousness of Ulster unionism's majority in the

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[64] R.B. McDowell, *The Irish Convention, 1917–18* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1970); N.C. Fleming, "Old and New Unionism: The Seventh Marquess of Londonderry, 1906–21," in *Ireland in Transition, 1867–1921*, ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (London: Routledge, 2004), 223–40.
[65] *The Times*, 4 March 1918, 9.
[66] *The Times*, 18 April 1918, 7; Selborne to Salisbury, 17 June 1918, in *Crisis of British Unionism*, ed. Boyce, 218–21.
[67] Patrick Buckland, *Irish Unionism, I: The Anglo-Irish and the New Ireland 1885–1922* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), 129–32; William D. Rubenstein, 'Henry Page Croft and the National Party 1917–22', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9, no. 1 (1974), 129–48.
[68] Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867–1921* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 290–300.

province, but for this very reason the Ulster Unionists demanded six county exclusion—having secured the approval of the UUC at two acrimonious meetings in March and May 1920, examined in chapter 13 of this volume—and this was the area that was written into the legislation.[69] The Ulster Unionists' acceptance of home rule for 'Northern Ireland' was more straightforward, as Graham Walker has observed, for 'within the context created by the Government of Ireland Act [Ulster Unionism] identified preservation with control of its affairs.'[70] As Charles Craig, the MP for South Antrim, informed the House of Commons, the new parliament would be a bulwark against his party's 'many enemies' in both Ireland and Great Britain.[71] In truth, as Jackson highlights, the legislature would be constitutionally subordinate to the sovereign parliament at Westminster, and that left London firmly in control of the constitutional and cross-border initiatives that would concern Ulster unionism most in the years and decades that lay ahead.[72] In the meantime, John Lonsdale, the MP for Mid-Armagh, followed Craig's defiant candour with the more diplomatic and modest expression of hope that the new parliament could tackle local problems.[73] In spite of these statements, Ulster Unionist MPs affected to disavow any responsibility for the legislation by declining to join the government or the opposition in the division lobbies. In contrast, a significant number of 'diehard' Conservative and National Party MPs—including John Gretton, Charles Oman, Lord Wolmer, Richard Cooper and Henry Page-Croft—displayed no such equivocation and filed into the no lobby to certain defeat, 348 to 94.[74]

What the diehards desired above all at this point was the demise of the post-war coalition and the restoration of an independent Conservative party.[75] The Irish question was one of several

[69] Patrick Buckland, *Irish Unionism, II: Ulster Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland 1886–1922* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), 119–25.
[70] Walker, *Ulster Unionist Party*, 47.
[71] *House of Commons Debates*, 29 March 1920, vol. 127, col. 899.
[72] Jackson, *Home Rule*, 208.
[73] Brian M. Walker, "Actions and Views: John Brownlow Lonsdale, Unionist MP, 1900–19 and Party Leader, 1916–18," *Ulster Crisis*, ed. Boyce and O'Day, 128–45.
[74] *House of Commons Debates*, 31 March 1920, vol. 127, cols 1287–1339.
[75] Fleming, *Britannia's Zealots*, 97–123.

sensitive issues—along with India, aliens, taxation and government spending—that they sought to exploit in encouraging backbench disaffection to this end. At first, the often brutal counterinsurgency waged against the Irish Republican Army left them little room for attack. And like many Ulster Unionists, the diehards could not have anticipated, let alone opposed, the decision of James Craig, recently elected leader of the Ulster Unionists, to secretly meet with the leader of Sinn Féin, Eamon de Valera, on 5 May 1921. In contrast to Craig's openness to a meeting of this kind, Gretton used the truce agreed in July as an opportunity to resign the coalition whip on a matter of principle, and to criticise at will subsequent efforts to bring about a new settlement.[76] The diehards, of course, were motived by their longstanding opposition to home rule, which had only hardened in the wake of the recent insurgency.[77] But their task was far from straightforward given that many Conservatives in the wake of the First World War had resigned themselves to the inevitability of Irish self-government. Still, this shift in attitude was accompanied by what Boyce describes as 'a stoical determination' that Ulster should receive some form of special treatment.[78] At first, the diehards failed to exploit this the full. On 31 October, several weeks into the negotiations that were convened between British ministers and representatives of Sinn Féin, Gretton proposed a censure motion in the House of Commons that made only passing references to 'Ulster.' In his contribution to the debate, Charles Craig addressed the diehards directly, describing them as 'amongst … the best friends that Ulster has in this House … that in the lifetime of this Parliament … have backed us up through thick and thin in all the legitimate demands we have made.' His mawkish and misrepresentative claim, however, was the prelude to informing the diehards that the Ulster Unionists would not join them in the division lobby, as they expected assurances from ministers about the transfer of

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[76] *The Times*, 21 July 1921, 10.

[77] See Gwynne to Austen Chamberlain, 23 July 1921, MS. Gwynne deposit 17; Gwynne to Northumberland, 24 October 1921, MS. Gwynne, deposit 21.

[78] D. George Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish Troubles: British Public Opinion and the Making of Irish Policy 1918–22* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1972), 106.

outstanding powers to the Northern Ireland government. As a result, Gretton's resolution secured the support of only 43 MPs.[79]

The forthcoming Conservative party conference at Liverpool, to take place on 17 November, provided the diehards with a second chance to foreground their criticism of Irish policy as a defence of Northern Ireland and in front of a more favourable audience. They organised meetings ahead of the conference that had the added benefit of healing the rift with the now redundant National Party.[80] At Westminster, the diehards were seen 'intriguing and colloguing' with the Ulster Unionists 'in the smokeroom and lobbies at all hours.'[81] Salisbury confidently predicted that Gretton's conference motion would 'be carried easily even unanimously.'[82] Bonar Law's successor as the party leader, Austen Chamberlain, feared as much and confided that he was 'fighting for my political life.'[83] But when the motion was put to the conference, with its pronounced emphasis on Northern Ireland, it became clear that 'there was general agreement with Gretton' but that 'a large number of the delegates did not vote.'[84] Vigorous party management played its part, ensuring that only 70 delegates out of 1,800 supported Gretton, but what really swung the outcome was the off-stage role of Bonar Law. Weeks before, *The Times* had speculated that the diehards' fortunes might be improved when the former Conservative leader returned to active politics following a period of convalescence.[85] As in 1912–14, however, Bonar Law was more interested in helping the Ulster Unionists than the right flank of his party. He made it clear to Conservative ministers that he would publicly intervene if he felt that Northern Ireland's constitutional position was under threat because of the negotiations with Sinn

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[79] *House of Commons Debates*, 31 October 1921, vol. 147, cols 1367–1484.
[80] *The Times*, 15 November 1921, 10; 22 November 1921, 12.
[81] Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 12 November 1921, in *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, Volume II: The Reform Years, 1921–1927*, ed. Robert C. Self (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 83.
[82] Salisbury to Selborne, 15 November 1921, in *Crisis of British Unionism*, ed. Boyce, 232–33.
[83] Austen Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 13 November 1921, in *The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters: The Correspondence of Sir Austen Chamberlain with his Sisters, Hilda and Ida, 1916–1937*, ed. Robert C. Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 171.
[84] Hewins, diary, 8 December 1921, in W.A.S. Hewins, *The Apologia of an Imperialist: Forty Years of Empire Policy, Volume II* (London: Constable, 1929), 244–45.
[85] *The Times*, 28 October 1921, 10.

Féin.[86] Reassurances were duly given both to Bonar Law and the conference, and with that, a potentially significant opportunity for the diehards to advance their cause was lost.

On 16 December 1921, after two days of debate, the House of Commons divided on the articles of agreement for a treaty between Great Britain and Ireland, 401 to 58.[87] The agreement's provisions for a Boundary Commission, to adjust the border should Northern Ireland opt out of the new Irish Free State, meant that unlike the House of Commons division in October, the Ulster Unionists had little to lose from joining the diehards in the division lobby. In the upper house, the recently ennobled Carson angrily denounced the treaty and the Conservative party for betraying the Irish loyalists. The former leader of the Ulster Unionists also intimated his full translation to the diehards by warning that it was a signal to nationalists in Egypt and India that Westminster lacked the will to stand up for British rule so close to home.[88] Three months later, he visited Gretton's Burton constituency to join publicly with the dissident MP in denouncing the coalition.[89] When the treaty returned to the House of Commons in the spring of 1922, as the Irish Free State (Agreement) bill, the Ulster Unionists again joined with the diehards in the division lobby. But their stance on this occasion lacked the sharp edge of the diehards' anger, especially the latter's animosity for Winston Churchill: the Conservative convert to Liberalism, arch-coalitionist and treaty signatory, and now responsible for piloting the bill through parliament. For on this occasion, Churchill went to considerable lengths to assuage the concerns of the Ulster Unionists. And as Colonial Secretary, his ministry provided continual practical support for Northern Ireland's finances as well as its controversial approach to security and franchise reform.[90] In private, the prime minister of Northern Ireland, James Craig, was well

[86] R.J.Q. Adams, *Bonar Law* (London: John Murray, 1999), 302–04. Bonar Law's predecessor as Conservative leader, Arthur Balfour, played a similar if sometimes overlooked role during this period, see Catherine B. Shannon, *Arthur J. Balfour and Ireland 1874–1922* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 275–80.
[87] *House of Commons Debates*, 16 December 1921, vol. 149, cols 305–63.
[88] *House of Lords Debates*, 14 December 1921, vol. 48, cols 5–56. See D.G. Boyce, "Edward Carson (1845–1935) and Irish Unionism," in *Worsted in the Game: Losers in Irish History*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1989), 155.
[89] *The Times*, 27 March 1922, 7.
[90] Kevin Matthews, "Churchill and the Ulster Unionists: 1918–25," in *The Churchills in Ireland 1660–1965: Connections and Controversies*, ed. Robert McNamara (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), 127–54; Paul Bew, *Churchill and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 113–30.

disposed to Churchill and very grateful for his help.[91] Moreover, Craig continued to demonstrate his willingness to parley with the leaders of the what the diehards called the 'murder gang,' meeting with the new leader of the Irish Free State, Michael Collins, either side of the House of Commons division on the treaty, on 21 January and 29–30 March, for the purpose of dealing with several outstanding issues from the treaty negotiations. In practical terms, therefore, the inevitable defeat of the Irish Free State bill's opponents, 295 to 52, was a setback only for the diehards.[92]

V

The relationship between Ulster unionism and the Conservative Right was again tested in 1924 during the protracted process of establishing the three-man Boundary Commission. The minority Labour government's fulfilment of this element of the Anglo-Irish Treaty was always likely to upset both the Ulster Unionists and the diehards, but it also exposed differences between them and within each group in the constitutional crisis that followed. That crisis was initiated by the refusal of the Northern Ireland government to nominate its commissioner. The prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, then referred the matter to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, which duly ruled that new legislation was required to enable the British government to nominate a commissioner on behalf of Northern Ireland. Attention turned to the House of Lords and its Conservative majority, which could potentially delay the bill in the reasonable expectation that the minority government could not long remain in office. This placed the Conservative party's leader, Stanley Baldwin, in a difficult spot. Committed to liberalising his party, any attempt by the House of Lords to delay the legislation would not only undermine this project but also provide MacDonald with a favourable pretext for going to the

[91] St John Ervine, *Craigavon: Ulsterman* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949), 473.
[92] *House of Commons Debates*, 16 February 1922, vol. 150, cols 1175–1376; 6 March 1922, vol. 151, cols 903–1034; 8 March 1922, vol. 151, cols 1362–1433.

polls.[93] Baldwin had to tread carefully, however, as the territorial integrity of Northern Ireland remained a sensitive issue in sections of his party and in the Conservative press. Moreover, he received regular calls from party members to commit a future Conservative government to repealing the 1911 Parliament Act, as a means of providing a constitutional check on Labour governments.[94] To cap it all, the Conservative leader in the House of Lords was the veteran diehard, Lord Salisbury, and he initially insisted that the Conservative peers would only allow the bill to pass if James Craig publicly expressed his assent.[95]

In public, Baldwin stood with the Ulster Unionists; behind the scenes he liaised with MacDonald and Craig in the hope of finding a compromise. Craig agreed that the issue should not force a United Kingdom general election, but pressure from his party meant that he felt unable to give his public assent to let the bill pass.[96] He was nevertheless able to persuade his cabinet colleagues to urge the Conservative peers to pass amendments in favour of Northern Ireland.[97] There was still a risk, however, that a combined cohort of diehard and Ulster Unionist MPs might embarrass them all by continuing their forthright objection to any compromise reached with the Labour government, and that amendments passed in the House of Lords could be presented by MacDonald as an attempt to usurp the House of Commons.[98] The burden placed on Baldwin led to tensions among the Ulster Unionists, with Craig and Lord Londonderry, the Leader of Northern Ireland's Senate, disposed to some form of compromise that avoided undermining the Conservatives, and others who were resolutely opposed to any surrender of the Northern Ireland government's stated position. The latter's concern about Londonderry's role in representing Belfast in the intergovernmental discussions held in August

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[93] Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 150–53.
[94] Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain 1918–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 224–25; Fleming, *Britannia's Zealots*, 148–49.
[95] Kevin Matthews, *Fatal Influence: The Impact of Ireland on British Politics, 1920–1925* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), 168.
[96] Matthews, *Fatal Influence*, 168, 177.
[97] N.C. Fleming, *The Marquess of Londonderry: Aristocracy, Power and Politics in Britain and Ireland* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2005), 101–04.
[98] *The Times*, 5 August 1924, 10; 8 August 1924, 12; Matthews, *Fatal Influence*, 180.

led the diehard MP, Ronald McNeill, to successfully demand that the peer publicly disavow any intention to reach a compromise.[99] Fortunately for Baldwin, the worst outcome was avoided by Salisbury's decision to change tack. When the bill came before the House of Lords on 8 October, the Conservative's leader in the chamber reluctantly warned that to amend the bill effectively meant its rejection and that the consequence of this was to place the entire matter before an electorate with little interest in or understanding of Irish affairs. He proposed instead a non-binding resolution that the Boundary Commission should propose only the 'readjustment of the boundaries [sic].' Supported in the House of Lords on this occasion by Carson and Londonderry, Salisbury's intervention ensured that opposition to the legislation was limited to thirty-eight peers. Even so, Carson's support for Salisbury was grudging and bitter, and in an echo of his denunciation of the treaty, he suggested that a Conservative government would put forward similar legislation and condemned the sacrifice of Ulster unionism at the altar of the Conservatives' general election campaign.[100] The following day, his frustration seemingly unabated, Carson proposed an amendment that required the bill to be confirmed by Northern Ireland's parliament, only to withdraw it following Salisbury's intervention.[101]

With that, the bill passed the House of Lords and Baldwin was able to secure victory at general election held on 29 October 1924. The task of appointing Northern Ireland's boundary commissioner now fell to a Conservative government, and after a year of deliberations it was this same government that reached an agreement with its Dublin and Belfast counterparts to leave the border unadjusted. The sense of relief felt by Ulster unionism in response to this outcome is evident in the decision of the three main protestant denominations to organise thanksgiving services for 6 December 1925.[102] In stark contrast, Salisbury excused himself at the signing ceremony by claiming that he had another appointment. An eye witness reported that Craig

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[99] *The Times*, 5 August, 8 August 1924.
[100] *House of Lords Debates*, 8 October 1924, vol. 59, cols 591–666.
[101] Ibid., 9 October 1924, vol. 59, cols 668–680.
[102] "Unionists thanksgiving services announcement," in *Irish Political Documents 1916–1939*, ed. Arthur Mitchell and Pádraig Ó Snodaigh (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1985), 170.

responded with 'This fellow can't take his fences!'[103] Salisbury, like many other diehards, was dismayed with an agreement that further legitimated the Irish Free State, and worse still, that provided for the restructuring of its outstanding financial obligations to the United Kingdom.[104] In contrast, Ulster unionism was kept sweet by Churchill at the Treasury through the generous financial provisions that were simultaneously granted to Northern Ireland.[105] This deprived the diehards of any plausible pretext on which to launch an attack on the agreement when it was debated in the House of Commons.[106]

VI

The above episode underscored the need for the diehards to remain vigilant about developments in the Irish Free State. They retained an interest in the loyalist community there, through the diehard-led Southern Irish Loyalists Relief Association and later the Irish Loyalist Imperial Federation.[107] The ostensibly welfare function of these organisations aside, the fate of the minority in southern Ireland was relevant to the diehards' concerns about contemporary measures of imperial constitutional reform. As British policymakers took steps to formally place the self-governing dominions on the same level as the United Kingdom, the possibility that India could achieve dominion status led the diehards to cite developments in Ireland in their campaign to oppose any such move. The formation in 1932 of the first Fianna Fáil government, its subsequent unpicking of the 1921–22 settlement, and its decision to suspend the payment of land annuities to the United Kingdom, were cited by the diehards to underscore the futility of any legislative 'safeguards' that might be included in legislation to establish an Indian dominion. The Ulster Unionists were also deeply anxious about Eamon de Valera's assumption of power

[103] Ervine, *Craigavon*, 503.
[104] Matthews, *Fatal Influence*, 239.
[105] Matthews, "Churchill and Ulster Unionists," 144–46.
[106] *House of Commons Debates*, 8 December 1925, vol. 189, cols 309–363.
[107] *The Times*, 5 February 1929, 11; 10 November 1930, 7; 20 May 1931, 11; "England's Peril Today" (May 1933), Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, Lord Lloyd Papers, 11/2.

and his actions in office, but their concerns were almost entirely local or defined by their uneasy relationship with London; in particular, the disruption to cross-border trade caused by the Irish Free State's 'economic war' with the United Kingdom, and de Valera's insistence that partition be addressed as part of any attempt to reach a resolution.[108]

These contrasting emphases between the Ulster Unionists and the diehards can be observed in their voting patterns on key pieces of legislation at Westminster in 1931 and 1935. Not unexpectedly, there was significant though not universal support among Ulster Unionist MPs for the diehards' attempt to exclude the Irish Free State from the 1931 Statute of Westminster; eight out of eleven joined the diehards on that occasion, with three abstaining or otherwise being absent.[109] Within a fortnight, however, when the diehards put forward a similar amendment to prevent India from achieving dominion status—as defined by the Statute of Westminster—only one Ulster Unionist MP joined them, William Stewart; two voted with the government, Sir Hugh O'Neill and Lord Castlereagh; and the remaining eight abstained or were otherwise absent.[110] Four years later, in the crucial House of Commons division on the India bill held on 11 February 1935, only five Ulster Unionist MPs joined the diehards; another five abstained or were otherwise absent, and one, O'Neill, supported the government.[111] Their varied responses in that division are all the more significant given that it witnessed one of the largest backbench Conservative rebellions in the twentieth century. A possible factor in limiting support for the diehards on this occasion is that Lord Londonderry, the former Leader of Northern Ireland's

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[108] Patrick Buckland, *Factory of Grievances: Devolved Government in Northern Ireland 1921–39* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), 109–15.

[109] Supported the diehards: Sir Joseph McConnell, Sir Hugh O'Neill, Sir William Allen, Thomas Somerset, William Stewart, Alexander Crawford Browne, David Reid and Thomas Sinclair. Abstained or absent: Herbert Dixon, Viscount Castlereagh and Ronald Deane Ross. See *House of Commons Debates*, 24 November 1931, vol. 260, cols 303–355.

[110] Abstained or absent: McConnell, Allen, Dixon, Browne, Somerset, Reid, Ross and Sinclair. See *House of Commons Debates*, 3 December 1931, vol. 2602, cols 1287–1413.

[111] Against the bill: McConnell, Allen, Somerset, Browne and Reid. Abstained or absent: Dixon, Stewart, Castlereagh, Ross and Sinclair. See *House of Commons Debates*, 11 February 1935, vol. 297, cols 1721–1725. O'Neill was in 1939 appointed Under Secretary of State for India. This pattern of support tends to affirm the judgement of Alvin Jackson rather than that of Joe Clearly about the impact of decolonisation on Ulster unionism, see Alvin Jackson, "Ireland, the Union, and the Empire, 1800–1960," in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 149; Joe Cleary, "Postcolonial Ireland," in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kenny, 281.

Senate, was now a cabinet minister in the National Government, and a vocal supporter of the measure; or at least it explains the behaviour of his son, Lord Castlereagh, the MP for Down, who chose to abstain.[112] But a more likely explanation is that the majority of Ulster Unionist MPs were wary of antagonising the Conservative-led coalition. As in October 1921, not only was Northern Ireland still heavily reliant on Treasury support, but the disposal of British ministers to end the economic war meant that it was possible that the constitutional status and territorial integrity of Northern Ireland would be bound up in any negotiations with de Valera. If so, it was a calculation that proved to be sagacious, for when those negotiations did begin in earnest, three years later, it was Sir Samuel Hoare, the 1935 India Act's author, that the Ulster Unionists turned to as their most sympathetic ally within the National Government.[113]

VII

The onetime United States Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, famously remarked, after Lord Palmerston, that his country had no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests.[114] The same might be said about the relationship between the Ulster Unionists and the Conservative Right. At specific moments and on specific issues the political interests of the two could align, but it was also possible that they could be pulled in different directions. They were the products of different contexts and endowed with contrasting organisational forms and political objectives. This is not to subscribe to J.J. Lee's simplistic assertion that Ulster unionism was loyal only to itself, and that if its priorities conflicted with British interests its 'motto might have been "Live Protestant Ulster, perish the empire.'[115] Certainly, this was how moderate Conservatives—politicians, intellectuals and pressmen—regarded the behaviour of the Ulster

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112 Fleming, *Londonderry*, 163.
113 John Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster Question 1917–1973* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 163–64, 172–73.
114 See Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Penguin, 2015).
115 J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14. See Graham Walker, "Old History: Protestant Ulster in Lee's *Ireland*," *Irish Review*, no. 12 (1992), 65–71.

Unionists after 1918; applying Palmerston's idea of permanent interests, the call of 'empire in danger' that had necessitated Conservative support for Ulster unionism before the First World War now favourably disposed moderates in the party to granting Ireland dominion powers and even a unitary state.[116] But the Ulster Unionists' comparatively limited focus on Northern Ireland's 'imperial' connection to Great Britain was not a peculiar result of its parochialism.[117] As Richard Whiting has argued, the positions adopted by British political parties on imperial affairs were significantly influenced by how they wished to project their party identities to the electorate.[118] As such, Ulster unionism's continued adherence to this position had utility in providing an element of continuity to its otherwise narrowing aims, helping to secure the solidarity and survival of the movement during the crisis years examined in this chapter. If anything, the Ulster Unionists' conception of the relevance of the empire further serves to distinguish them from the diehards, for many of the latter camp viewed the Irish question as merely one component in a wider struggle to resist imperial constitutional reform.

These differences aside, it might reasonably be asserted that both the Conservative Right and Ulster unionism shared a sense of alienation from the post-1918 turn in Conservative attitudes to the Irish question. But did this amount to anything politically? The determination of Conservative statesmen to achieve and maintain settled relations with nationalist Ireland undoubtedly created anxiety among the Ulster Unionists, but their reliance on Westminster and need to guard against any unwelcome moves there underscored the continued relevance of the age-old 'Protestant predicament in Ireland.' As such, Ulster unionism could not estrange itself completely from the Conservative front bench by being too closely associated with the diehards. The latter, in contrast, were defined by backbench unease about front bench moderation, and the

[116] Boyce, "British Conservative Opinion," 107.
[117] Jackson, "Ireland, the Union, and the Empire," 145–47.
[118] Richard Whiting, "The Empire and British Politics," in *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Andrew Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 161–210. See also Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4–19.

very expression of diehard politics was through successive acts of defiance at Westminster and beyond.

The contrasting outlook and behaviour of Ulster unionism and the Conservative Right survived this period. There were of course egregious examples of individuals who straddled both, such as the long-serving MP—for West Belfast then South Antrim—Knox Cunningham.[119] But the forthright unionism of the Monday Club in the 1960s and 1970s was just one component of its wider preoccupation with British decline, overseas and at home. During the critical year of 1972, coverage of Northern Ireland in its *Monday News* was modest and focussed on security policy; what scant attention it gave to Ulster unionism was divided equally between the Ulster Unionists and their breakaway rival, the Vanguard Unionists.[120] More recently, the Ulster Unionist Party, which in 2009–10 had formed an electoral alliance with the Conservative party in Northern Ireland, was reduced to spectators after the 2017 general election as the latter agreed a parliamentary alliance with the former's bitter rivals, the Democratic Unionist Party. This arrangement did not prevent the Democratic Unionists from rebelling against the May government's Brexit withdrawal agreement in early 2019. But on the third and final such occasion they failed to carry with them the majority of Conservative 'Brexiteers,' after that largely right-wing cohort concluded that the achievement of parliamentary sovereignty was more important than the Union. Even the continued support given to the Democratic Unionists by the 28 'Spartans' largely melted away in December 2020 in response to the withdrawal agreement agreed by May's successor as prime minister, Boris Johnson. Once again, the sovereignty of Westminster was prioritised over the Union, this time by the agreement to implement what amounted to a customs border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.[121]

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[119] Graham Walker, "Belfast, Boys and Books: The Friendship between Forrest Reid and Knox Cunningham," *Irish Review* no. 35 (2007): 132–43; Marc Mulholland, "'Modernising Conservatism': The Northern Ireland Young Unionist Movement in the 1960s," *Irish Political Studies* 25, no. 1 (2010), 67–94.
[120] *Monday News*, 25 July 1972, 6; 25 November 1972, 4.
[121] *Daily Telegraph*, 30 December 2020, 16.

The outlook, aims, strategies and tactics of the Conservative Right and Ulster unionism are not and never have been coterminous. They could converge, of course, but their differing organisational forms, motivations and frames of reference mean that this has never been straightforward or inevitable. Indeed, they could even be drawn in opposite directions. It is noteworthy therefore that the most striking and sustained example of this was their parallel approaches to the policy of partition as it emerged and evolved between 1914 and 1925.