Documents: Irish Home Rule

Charles S. Parnell election address, Meath by-election (April 1875).

...Upon the great question of Home Rule, I will by all means seek the restoration to Ireland of our Domestic Parliament upon the basis of the resolutions passed at the National Conference, and the principles of the Irish Home Rule League of whose Council I am an active member.... The wishes and feelings of the Irish nation are in favour of religious Education. In these feelings I concur, and I will earnestly endeavour to obtain for Ireland a system of Education in all its branches--Primary, Intermediate, and University--which will deal impartially with all Religious Denominations, by affording to every parent the opportunity of obtaining for his child an Education combined with that religious teaching of which his conscience approves.

I believe security for his tenure and the fruits of his industry to be equally necessary to do justice to the tenant.... I will, therefore, support such an extension of the ancient and historic Tenant Right of Ulster, in all its integrity, to other parts of Ireland, as will secure to the tenants continuous occupation, at fair rents, and upon this subject I adopt the declarations of the Tenant Right Conferences held in Dublin and Belfast.

I think the time has long since come when a complete and unconditional Amnesty ought to be extended to all the prisoners, without distinction, who are suffering for taking part in transactions arising out of political movements in Ireland.

Parnell, Open letter on parliamentary obstruction and cooperation w/English parties (30 Nov 1878).

...I quite agree with you that the Winter session presents a most valuable opportunity for bringing Irish questions before the notice of Parliament, and indeed of the whole world. You will, however, have observed in today's Freeman a letter from Mr Butt, in which he emphatically urges his usual policy of Inactivity. Under these circumstances it is for us to consider whether the crisis is of such supreme importance and the advantage likely to be gained of such magnitude as to render it our duty to disregard Mr Butt's opinions and wishes.... I have, therefore, unwilling come to the conclusion that it is our duty to use every exertion to have the Irish question properly brought forward at this juncture.... For more than a year past I have come to the conclusion that little or nothing more is to be expected from the present Parliamentary party, and that its component parts must be largely renovated if the country desires results from any Parliamentary action....

Home Rule party pledge (1884).

I...pledge myself that in the event of my election to parliament, I will sit, act and vote with the Irish parliamentary party and if at a meeting of the party convened upon due notice specially to consider the question, it be decided by a resolution supported by a majority of the entire parliamentary party that I have not fulfilled the above pledge, I hereby undertake forthwith to resign my seat.
Parnell speech at Cork (21 Jan 1885).

I hold that it is better even to encourage you to do what is beyond your strength, even should you fail sometimes in the attempt, than to teach you to be subservient and unreliant.... We consider that whatever class tries to obstruct the labourer in the possession of those fair and just rights to which he is entitled that class shall be put down--and coerced if you will--into doing justice to the labourer.... We cannot ask for less than the restitution of Grattan's Parliament, with its important privileges, and wide and far-reaching constitution. We cannot, under the British Constitution, ask for more than the restitution of Grattan's Parliament, but no man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation. No man has a right to say 'Thus far shalt thou go, and no further'; and we have never attempted to fix the ne plus ultra to the progress of Ireland's nationhood, and we never shall. But, gentlemen, while we leave these things to time, circumstances, and the future, we must each of us resolve in our own hearts that we shall at all times do everything that within us lies to obtain for Ireland the fullest measure of her rights. In this way we shall avoid difficulties and contentions amongst each other....

Gladstone introducing Home Rule, House of Commons (8 Apr 1886).

...It is felt on both sides of the House...that we have arrived at a stage in our political transactions with Ireland, where two roads part one from the other, not soon probably to meet again. The late [Conservative] government...felt that they had reached the moment for decisive resolution when [they announced on their last day in office that] their duty compelled them to submit...proposals for further repressive criminal legislation. We concur entirely [in the necessity] to come to some decisive resolution [and make clear whether it is] possible to establish good and harmonious relations between Great Britain and Ireland on the footing of those free institutions to which Englishmen, Scotchmen, and Irishmen are alike unalterably attached.

[Not that the law and order question wasn't serious. Agrarian violence wasn't what it has been earlier in the decade, not to mention in the 1830s and 1840s, but it was still there, apparently as permanent as the vain attempts to repress it--and liable to sharp fluctuations.] But the agrarian crime in Ireland is not so much a cause as it is a symptom.... These coercion bills of ours...are stiffly resisted by the members who represent Ireland in parliament. The English mind...is estranged from the Irish people, and the Irish mind is estranged from the people of England and Scotland.... Our ineffectual and spurious coercion is morally worn out.... [Thinking that they had succeeded, the Conservatives had allowed the special powers under the Crimes Act to lapse--whereupon boycotting had promptly increased four-fold.] I can indeed conceive, and in history we may point to circumstances in which [absolute] coercion...stern, resolute, consistent...has been successful. But it requires...two essential conditions, and these are--the autocracy of government and the secrecy of public transactions. With these conditions, that kind of coercion...might possibly succeed. But will it succeed in the light of day, and can it be administered by the people of England and Scotland against the people of Ireland by the two nations which, perhaps, above all the others upon earth--I need hardly except America--best understand and are most fondly attached to the essential principles of liberty?

[Gladstone's remedy was Home Rule.] The case of Ireland, though she is represented here not less fully than England or Scotland, is not the same....
England, by her own strength, and by her vast majority in this House, makes her own laws just as independently as if she were not combined with the other two countries. Scotland--a small country, smaller than Ireland, but a country endowed with a spirit so masculine that never in the long course of history, excepting for two brief periods, each of a few years, was the superior strength of England such as to enable her to put down the national freedom beyond the border--Scotland, wisely recognised by England, has been allowed and encouraged in this House to make her own laws as freely and as effectually as if she had a representation six times as strong. The consequence is that the mainspring of law in England is felt by the people to be English; the mainspring of law in Scotland is felt by the people to be Scotch; but the mainspring of law in Ireland is not felt by the people to be Irish....

We are sensible that we have taken an important decision--our choice has been made. It has not been made without thought; it has been made in the full knowledge that trial and difficulty may confront us on our path. We have no right to say that Ireland, through her constitutionally-chosen representatives, will accept the plan I offer. Whether it will do so I do not know.... I rely on the patriotism and sagacity of this House; I rely on the effects of full and free discussion; and I rely more than all upon the just and generous sentiments of the two British nations. Looking forward, I ask the House to assist us in the work which we have undertaken, and to believe that no trivial motive can have driven us to it.... I ask you to stay that waste of public treasure which is involved in the present system of government and legislation in Ireland, and which...demoralises while it exhausts. I ask you to show to Europe and America that we, too, can face political problems which America twenty years ago faced, and which many countries in Europe have been called upon to face, and have not feared to deal with. I ask that in our own case we should practise...what we have so often preached--the doctrine which we have so often inculcated upon others--namely, that the concession of local self-government is not the way to sap or impair, but the way to strengthen and consolidate unity. I ask that we should learn to rely less upon merely written stipulations, and more upon those better stipulations which are written on the heart and mind of man. I ask that we should apply to Ireland that happy experience which we have gained in England and in Scotland, where the course of generations has now taught us, not as a dream of a theory, but as practice and as life, that the best and surest foundation we can find to build upon is the foundation afforded by the affections, the convictions, and the will of the nation; and it is thus, by the decree of the Almighty, that we may be enabled to secure at once the social peace, the fame, the power, and the permanence of the empire.

Joseph Chamberlain on second reading (1 June 1886). [Chamberlain was a member of the Liberal party, whose revolt was instrumental in defeating Gladstone's bill. When Gladstone proposed it again in the early 1890s, Chamberlain led an exodus and joined the Conservatives--who became known as the Unionists.]

...I have always held the same language on this Irish question that I hold today.... Well, sir, why do we lay so much stress on this point of the representation of Ireland?.... Because we have said that the effect of the bill was that it not only created a parliament in Dublin, but would also destroy the imperial parliament at Westminster.... The retention of the imperial parliament in its present form and authority is necessary for the
unity of the empire, and without the representation of Ireland you cannot have a parliament at Westminster which will exercise anything like an effective or authoritative supremacy.... We do not want the supremacy of the British parliament to descend to the level of the suzerainty of the [Turkish] Porte over Cyprus.... Are we, then, going to reduce Ireland to the position of a self-governing colony? We know that, if we did so, that colony would at once throw off its allegiance. Are we, then, going to reduce Ireland to the position of a self-governing colony, subject to a constitutional supremacy which becomes a sham, and which we dare not exercise? That is the question which lies at the root of our desire that Irish members be retained at Westminster.... [Gladstone's bill proposed that Irish members would be invited to come when important imperial questions were being discussed.] Take the question of Egypt, which occupied a great deal too much of our time during the last parliament. The Irish members frequently took part in our debates. The question of Egypt was always with us; and how could Irish members take their fair share in discussing such a policy unless they were continuously and permanently present? Under these circumstances, how could we preserve the supremacy to which I attach so much importance? The imperial parliament would be a fluctuating body with a large section of its members imperfectly informed on the subjects which they were called upon to decide; and at the same time they would have no adequate authority to deal with the general business of the United Kingdom. The fact is that there are two conditions necessary for maintaining...the supremacy of the imperial parliament. The first is that Irish members shall have their full, complete, and continuous representation in this House. The second is that the local legislative body or bodies to be created shall admittedly be from the first subordinate bodies. If they are coordinate and equal, you cannot have supremacy. Equality denies supremacy by the etymological meaning of the word....

What I am saying now I expressed in public--it is in print--before the general election [1885]...before I had the slightest conception that any idea of this kind was fermenting then--if it was fermenting--in the mind of the Prime Minister. [In September 1885] I referred to the demands of the hon. member for the city of Cork (Mr Parnell), and I said then that if there was any party or any man that was prepared to yield to those demands in order to purchase his support, I would have no part in the competition.... There is not a man here who does not know that every personal and political interest would lead me to cast in my lot with the Prime Minister.... The temptation is no doubt a great one; but after all I am not base enough to serve my personal ambition by betraying my country; and I am convinced that when the heat of this discussion is passed and over Liberals will not judge harshly those who have pursued what they honestly believed to be the path of duty, even though it may lead to the disruption of party ties, and to the loss of influence and power which it is the legitimate ambition of every man to seek among his political friends and associates.

Parnell speech on second reading (7 June 1886).

...We have always known since the introduction of this bill the difference between a coordinate and a subordinate parliament, and we have recognised that the legislature which the Prime Minister proposes to constitute is a subordinate parliament--that is not the same as Grattan's parliament, which was coequal with the imperial parliament, arising out of
the same constitution given to the Irish people by the Crown, just as parliamentary institutions were given to Great Britain by the sovereign. We understand this perfectly well. Undoubtedly I should have preferred—as I have stated in speeches which have been quoted against me as showing that I could not accept this proposed settlement as final—I should have preferred the restitution of Grattan's parliament.... But...there are practical advantages connected with the proposed statutory body, limited and subordinate to this imperial parliament as it undoubtedly will be, which will render it much more useful and advantageous to the Irish people than was Grattan's parliament, and [therefore] more likely to be a final settlement than Grattan's parliament.... We look on the provisions of this bill as a final settlement of this question, and...I believe that the Irish people have accepted it as such a settlement. (Cheers and ironical cheers.)

[It had been charged that Ulster would bear disproportionate taxation—but such disparity existed all over Ireland, the east also being more prosperous than the west.] I come next to the question of the protection of the minority.... One would think from what we hear that the Protestants of Ireland were going to be handed over to the tender mercies of a set of thugs and bandits. (Hear! hear!)... The right hon. member for West Birmingham (Mr Chamberlain) has claimed for Ulster...a separate legislature for the province of Ulster.... There are outside the province of Ulster over 400,000 Protestants [whose position would be made] infinitely less secure. But you would not even protect the Protestants in Ulster, because the Protestants, according to the last census, were in the proportion of 52 to 48 Catholics...[by this time probably equal]

We cannot give up a single Irishman. We want the energy, the patriotism, the talents and the work of every Irishman to insure that this great experiment shall be a successful one.... We want...all creeds and all classes in Ireland.... We do not blame the small proportion of the Protestants of Ireland who feel any real fear.... We have been doing our best to allay that fear.... Theirs is not the same and disgrace of this fear. That shame and disgrace belong to...English political parties, who, for selfish interests, have sought to rekindle the embers--the almost expiring embers--of religious bigotry....

What does it all come to? It comes to two alternatives when everything has been said and everything has been done.... If you reject this bill...you will have to resort to coercion. That is not a threat on my part—I would do much to prevent the necessity for resorting to coercion; but I say it will be inevitable.... [It had been said] that there is no half-way house between separation and the maintenance of law and order in Ireland by imperial authority. I say...there is no half-way house between the concession of legislative autonomy to Ireland and the disfranchisement of the country and her government as a Crown colony. But...I refuse to believe that these evil days must come. I am convinced that there are a sufficient number of wise and just members in this House to cause it to disregard appeals made to passion and to pocket [and accept Gladstone's better way]--the way of founding peace and goodwill among nations; ...it will...be told, for the admiration of all future generations, that England and her parliament, in this nineteenth century, was wise enough, brave enough, and generous enough to close the strife of centuries, and to give peace, prosperity, and happiness to suffering Ireland.