

THE TORIES AND IRELAND: ANDREW BONAR LAW
AND CONSERVATIVE STRATEGY TOWARDS THE THIRD
HOME RULE BILL 1911-1914.

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
Ph.D 1994
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ABSTRACT.

Bonar Law was a much more capable and tenacious leader than most previous accounts have suggested. He had inherited a very unfavourable position with the party badly demoralised and frustrated: few members had greeted his selection as leader with enthusiasm, and both Long and Chamberlain were hopeful of replacing him in the near future. Bonar Law's response was to try and regroup the party, and his own position, around a tough campaign to resist Home Rule. A campaign which he hoped would force an election, principally on the issue of whether Ulster should be forced under a Dublin Parliament. This line he pursued with great determination: though he remained sensitive to party tensions and differences, and always concerned with the public perception of party tactics. Yet it was a perilous course to follow; threatening the Government with support for civil war in Ireland if it did not hold an election before implementing the bill: an approach to opposition rarely contemplated by the party both before and since. Though one we are denied seeing the full consequences of with the sudden outbreak of war in Europe and Britain's entry into it on August 4th 1914.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.C.P.	Austen Chamberlain Papers
B.P.	Balfour Papers
B.L.P.	Bonar Law Papers
L.L.P.	Lady Londonderry Papers
M.P.	Milner Papers
O.P.	F.S.Oliver Papers
Selb.P	Selborne Papers
W.L.P.	Walter Long Papers
W de B.P.	Willoughby de Broke Papers
U.U.C.	Ulster Unionist Council
U.J.C.	Ulster Joint Committee
I.U.A.	Irish Unionist Alliance
U.A.I.	Unionist Associations of Ireland
U.D.L.	Union Defence League
U.C.C.	Unionist Clubs Council
U.V.F.	Ulster Volunteer Force
H of L	House of Lords Record Office
B.M.	British Museum
Bod	Bodleian Library
I.W.M.	Imperial War Museum
P.R.O.N.I.	Public Record office of Northern Ireland
P.R.O.	Public Record office (Kew)

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INTRODUCTION.

This thesis is a study of the Conservative leadership and its responses and resistance to the third Home Rule bill. It focuses upon the dozen or so Tory leaders, influential observers and pressmen (such as F.S.Oliver and J.St Loe Strachey) and powerful above-party enthusiasts like Earl Grey or Lord Milner, for it is amongst these circles, with their inter-play of competing ambitions, personalities and anxieties, that those responses evolved. It is not a study of Government policy, but a study of the reactions to that policy within the Tory leadership. It is not concerned with public opinion or the opinion of Conservative organisations in the country, but they have relevance and importance whenever they impinge upon or determine the responses of Tory leaders. Nor is it concerned with the militarisation and development of Ulster's resistance, except where it figures in the calculations (as it frequently does) of the leaders. And it is not concerned with backbench Tory opinion, unless that opinion shapes actions at the top. What it does seek to do is threefold. First to re-examine the leadership of Bonar Law over these years, rescuing him from the shadows of the brighter lights of Carson, Balfour, F.E.Smith

and Austen Chamberlain and to reveal the steps by which he successfully consolidated his leadership. Second, to chart the significant party divisions on Home Rule and Bonar Law's ability to keep the various strains together, preventing independent action along the lines of 1911. Third, to emphasise that the struggle over Home Rule was not a struggle over Ireland or even over Ulster, but a struggle to force the Government to a General Election. Though not directly concerned with the debate on the so-called "crisis of Conservatism", it does come to a more positive conclusion than many other accounts, if only on the grounds that the Liberals were far worse off by 1914 than the Tories. And, though largely ignoring international comparisons, the sense here is that the Conservative party was not heading the same way as other European parties of the right, and was in fact displaying democratic qualities and appeal, amongst many leaders with the hope of future electoral success.

Three points of method also need mention. The first point concerns structure. Most Chapters will start with a brief survey of events before moving on to analyse political affairs. The purpose of this is to aid clarity and set the analysis upon a firm chronological bed. Second terminology. Labels never capture exactly the variety of political shades which make up a

party. Yet for narrative and analytical reasons a degree of artificial coherence must be imposed. A basic three-way division has therefore been used which in broad terms correlate to the consistent responses towards Home Rule from within the party leadership. First Diehards or rightwing elements; secondly Federalist or Devolutionary sympathisers; and last the solid majority who tended to follow the official leader: the moderates or centrists. Yet it needs to be reiterated that these labels are artificial: Carson for instance, clearly found support from the Diehard wing, yet was recognised as a devolutionist by many of its supporters and even, after his advocacy of Ulster exclusion as a viable compromise, won some sympathy amongst moderate sections of the party who saw partition as the best means of settling the issue. Labels are not then fixed but fluid; individuals may float from one to another. Equally, within themselves, such terms produce various definitions. A Federalist is something slightly different to a devolutionist, as the differences between Chamberlain and Lansdowne show; yet enough common ground existed for them actively to cooperate with each other.

The second point concerns methodology. The approach consciously adopted here is a 'High-Political' one: a scepticism of political rhetoric; an assumption that leaders do matter, and

are basically tactically orientated; that Parliament is the focus of events; and the primacy of private papers, diaries, recollections etc since they are the closest we have to the politician himself: if the "bare-bones" are anywhere revealed then it would be here. Though largely absorbed into mainstream historiography, high politics still suffers criticism. This stems largely from a misunderstanding of the approach. Sceptics berate it for diminishing the potency of ideas, values and private character in the public art of politics. But high-politics is not so exclusionist. There is no denial that political motivation can have any number of sources:- public opinion, backbench unease, friendship, personal dislike, "felt" rules or guidelines, beliefs and aspirations or even genuine concerns. Political D.N.A. is infinite and all are fair game in the search for causation as long as they can be empirically supported. To move away from the empirical to the a priori in determining political action is to inject teleology into explanation, to sanitize with hindsight instead of rooting the politician in his own world of timing, slant, emphasis, audience-reaction, persuasion and ambition. Only high-politics reveals the full complexity of historical events. A second criticism limits the relevance of the high-political approach to specific periods of unusually fluid party relations: 1866-8; 1884-6; 1915-24; 1939-45. Party is a brake upon high-political

assumptions, certainly outside "fluid" periods the accumulated baggage of party values, instincts and prejudices is a drag upon tactical option, to the extent that the audience is less persuadable. Yet this assumes a degree of conformity within parties which simply does not exist. The work of Sykes, Ball and Williamson suggests that even in traditionally polarised periods, party is much more a Broad Church than a Baptist sect. Even in periods of the most homogenous party sentiment, actions and responses are a continuous process of internal debate, compromise and bargaining which a high-political study can illuminate. A third criticism is that high-political activity does not occur during quiet periods (since there's nothing to play for) nor during periods of intense crisis (when there's too much to play for). The four years before the Great war were a period of dramatic and bitter political crisis, more akin to politics of 1689 or 1760 or 1830-2 than twentieth century forms. But to assume that political behaviour therefore disappears seems foolhardy, as the studies by C.Hazelhurst and, more recently J.Turner show. To continue to 'play the game' under such conditions is clearly not for the faint-hearted; only those politicians with steel in their veins would excel, which explains the pre-war emergence of characters such as Bonar Law, Carson, Lord Milner, F.E.Smith and (amongst the Liberals) Lloyd George and Churchill. Therefore high-political assumptions are relevant to this period and to this crisis.

CHAPTER ONE

I

It was rejection of the Peoples budget, prompting the general election of January 1910 which brought Ireland back to the centre of politics. Ireland was already becoming central to political debate during the struggle over the budget in three particular ways. First, an important consideration for Unionists in deciding to reject the budget was that if the party did not win outright (and many Tory strategists reckoned on two elections to remove the Liberals from office) they could reduce them to reliance on the Nationalists so returning the Liberals to the state of siege of 1885 and 1892. Second, the Peoples' budget of April 1909 included duties on whisky which the Nationalists greatly disliked. This served to bring out the essential conservatism of the Nationalists. They were already protectionist to a man and disliked the general "socialist" direction in which Lloyd George seemed to be taking the government. For some, notably Garvin, the Unionist editor of The Observer, this suggested common ground between them and Tories and even the possibility of future cooperation. Lastly, the settlement in South Africa in 1909 acted as a great stimulus and example of what could be achieved if practical minds were applied to problems of Empire. Milner's kindergarten (Amery, Kerr, Grigg, Brand, Robinson, Hitchens) who had played an important part in the early formulation of the South Africa Union Act of 1910, were at the forefront of this enthusiasm. Once back in England the group looked to continue the

constructive enthusiasm by founding the Round Table Movement in September 1909¹. This attracted many influential people: F.S.Oliver, Garvin, Lord Brassey, Lord Dunraven, young Tory M.P.s like Bob Cecil and Steel-Maitland, and a smattering of ex-colonial men, Lords Howick, Hythe, Lovat and Grey. Their aim was to draw the British Empire closer together by reorganising it on a more stable basis. The rise of this constructive Imperial debate fed strongly into the long-running sore of Irish Home Rule, particularly in suggesting the idea of a federal scheme for Ireland. Ireland, then, was increasingly on the political agenda before the general election of January 1910.

The result left the Nationalists strategically dominant. The Liberal majority was wiped out, falling to 275, just two seats more than the Unionist party. Labour improved to 40 seats thus leaving the balance of the House once again dependent on the 82 strong Irish Nationalists. Using the budget as a bargaining counter, they forced Asquith into a resolution on April 16th that he would suspend the Lords power of veto (the so-called corrupt bargain of Unionist demonology) so opening the door for the future passage of Home Rule. Unionists were themselves far from comfortable at their political prospects. Divided over Tariff Reform and with an increasingly assertive right-wing preventing agreement over an alternative reform package to the veto resolutions, Balfour, as did Asquith, seized upon the sudden death of Edward V11 in May, to move into conference with each other. The chance to settle the Lords issue through cooperation, allowed both leaders to escape from their extremists as well as delay a second election, given the House of Lords rejections of

Asquiths' veto resolutions. The conference held twenty meetings through-out the summer and autumn and lasted until October but failed to reach agreement: Ireland, amongst other things, proving the rock to break the attempt, although not before Lloyd George had tried to broaden the political moratorium with the idea of a coalition Government². It came to nothing and with the conference failure so a second election became inevitable to break the constitutional deadlock. December 1910 the country went again to the polls.

The result of the January 1910 election encouraged enthusiasm for federal or devolutionary solutions to the Irish Question. The dominance of the Irish Nationalists raised the prospect of a hard, drawn-out Parliamentary struggle, and the balance of the two parties was interpreted as a popular rejection of extremes and a desire for compromise. Moreover, the Unionist party's apparent hesitancy to agree a constitutional package of reform for the Lords, during the early months of 1910, made a federal alternative attractive.

Pressure on the Unionist leadership to move in this direction came from several quarters. Earl Grey wrote to Balfour on February 23rd calling for the 'federalisation of the U.K' as a way of cutting down Irish representation, settling the House of Lords question and securing better relations with Canada and the U.S. 'A policy worth working for and to be required in the interests not only of the U.K. but of the Empire'³. Grey

established contact with the Round Table movement; under his influence the Round Tablers increasingly came to argue that federation of the Empire ought to be preceded by federation at home, thus trying to focus on Ireland⁴. The group looked to initiate a Royal Commission on Parliamentary congestion and the devolution of power in an effort to place their federation-at-home approach above party politics. Yet no Royal Commission came. Grey himself was abroad until 1911. And the Round Tablers were still very much backstage workers, Bob Cecil and Steel-Maitland being the closest to power but not keen supporters of Grey's federation-at-home views.

Two other sources were more influential than Grey and the Round Tablers. First, Garvin, who had The Observer to guide opinion but who was also in close and regular contact with J.S.Sandars, Balfour's private secretary. In January 1910 Garvin began to recommend to Sandars the advantages of cooperation with the Nationalists, based around the adoption of federalism⁵. Garvin argued forcefully that both parties were opposed to the budget and supported Tariff Reform. Federalism would save the Lords veto and bring the Tories back to office to carry out other more critical reforms. It might also lead to improved relations with the U.S.A., a factor Balfour had long taken seriously. And the breakaway O'Brienites seemed to disprove the notion of the Nationalists necessarily relying on the Liberals, advocating a return to Parnellite tactics of the early 1880s. Garvin sensed the opportunities which the Liberal-Nationalist struggle over the budget offered: 'The House of Commons containing a majority in principle agreeing with Unionist views on education, licensing,

Tariff Reform and above all food tax, it would be our plain and most imperative duty to exchange views with Mr Redmond.. to make.. a real working majority in practise⁶. On February 14th, April 9th and April 21st he again pushed these ideas⁷. Nor were these the isolated speculations of an unusually fertile mind. Lord Cromer expressed fears to Salisbury of just such a manoeuvre being effected⁸. Walter Long hoped that the rumours of such alliances were unfounded⁹, and Sandars told of similar movements in the party towards such an alliance, especially amongst the more ardent Tariff Reformers, in which Garvin could be counted. 'It is taking us back to the famous Carnarvon interview of 1885 and that kind of Randolphian scheming which did us as a party so much damage'¹⁰.

Second, pressure for a devolutionary scheme came from Milner and Oliver. Oliver was a prolific publicist and close to leading constructive Unionist politicians, notably Chamberlain. Under his pseudonym "Pacificus" he began to write letters to The Times through May and June 1910 suggesting settlement of the Irish question through United Kingdom devolution¹¹. Milner was more influential through-out Unionist circles. On April 17th he approached Balfour: 'I don't suppose the Unionist party can go in for H.R. in any form, but if it comes in spite of us not much harm would be done by provincial Home Rule'¹².

Yet none of the Unionist leaders, least of all Balfour, publicly moved in this direction during the early months of 1910. Garvin's tactical advice, though ingenious, was unlikely to be heeded. Balfour thought the proposal was 'eating dirt'. He was more concerned with bolstering the cabinet moderates (Sir Edward

Grey, Crewe, Haldane, Loreburn) through Francis Hopwood, the under-secretary at the Colonies, than with making overtures towards the Nationalists¹³. Also political attention was too fixed on Second Chamber reform and at the end of February when Lloyd George promised that veto resolutions would be brought before the House backed up by guarantees insuring their passage. This indicated that a deal with the Nationalists had been done. 'The government have surrendered. Asquith has eaten his words again', wrote Chamberlain¹⁴.

However, with the convening of the Constitutional conference in June 1910 federalists saw their cause advance. Garvin and Oliver had been openly calling for a conference of party leaders to solve the constitutional problems facing Britain; a 'truce of God' was how Garvin described it¹⁵. The meetings began on June 17th and totalled thirteen in all before they rose for the summer on the 28th of July. They reconvened on October 11th for a further seven meetings¹⁶. It was during the intervening period that devolutionary/federalist sympathies began to spread out from the editorial bridgehead into the centres of political power.

By late July there was an increasing fear that the conference was beginning to break down over Ireland. Sandars informed Garvin of this at the start of October who, to keep party cooperation going, used The Observer to argue strongly in favour of federalism as a scheme to cure the Irish problem on which both Unionists and Liberals could agree¹⁷. Under the same fear Lloyd George, during the summer recess, devised a memorandum arguing that the conference should reconstitute itself as a coalition government to solve the constitutional deadlock,

disentangle the Irish problem and remedy many other pressing issues: 'An ad hoc super cabinet to guide the passage of an agreed plan of legislation'.¹⁸

Both Lloyd George and Garvin began to exert pressure within Unionist circles during October 1910. Garvin (who knew of Lloyd George's offer) spearheaded a broad press campaign of support. His article of the 9th was extended on the 16th into one entitled "The Case of A Larger Settlement", calling for a convention to settle the outstanding issues of the day in a non-partisan spirit¹⁹. Oliver resumed 'Pacificus', writing a series of letters to The Times between October 20th and early November. Editorials in The Daily Mail and The Times became more sympathetic to The Observer's views²⁰. And the Round Table movement turned their monthly journal towards a strong advocacy of non-party government to unify the Empire.

By early October moves towards a federal alternative were also coming from within high-political circles. On the 10th or 11th of October, before the conference was reconvened, Lloyd George, having told selected cabinet colleagues, informed Balfour of his plan. Balfour did not dismiss the plan (nor did he immediately reject the devolutionary solution for Ireland which the Chancellor made) but clearly wanted time to think and confer with colleagues. At the same time (the 11th) Balfour received a long memorandum from Oliver on "The Conference and its Consequences", arguing for the formalisation of the discussions into a wider Convention to deal, principally, with Ireland in a devolutionary manner²¹. Balfour also received letters on the 17th and 18th from Garvin urging a similar course²². It is hard

not to detect a coordinated plan behind these moves to win over Balfour; Lloyd George was, after all, in close and regular contact with Garvin, who in turn was corresponding with Oliver.

Alfred Lyttleton and Sandars, who both came out strongly for the federal alternative at this time, had more influence with Balfour. Lyttleton, moved by Garvin's article of the 16th, informed Balfour the next day that his own enquiries had found, 'a very great sympathy with local federation among our younger intellectuals'²³. Also, 'two of our most important pro-consuls Grey and Milner..(and).. some of our best young men... lean that way'. He ended by warning Balfour of the consequences of breakdown: 'I dread the submission to the electorate of the H of L's question - never an advantageous one for us'²⁴. Sandars employed similar arguments. 'We shall hug a delusion if we imagine that Home Rule will alarm the average voter of 1911 as it did in 1886 and 1895'²⁵. Federalism was a far better election platform than the Lords question or a traditional defence of the Union. Like Lyttleton, Sandars emphasised the attraction federalism had for the 'young men' of the party. 'He (Amery) thinks a scheme of that kind may well be considered - he would do much to avoid an election now, consequently upon the naked failure of the conference. He says many of the young men of the party are of this opinion'²⁶.

Both Sandars and Lyttleton were sources in whom Balfour trusted and whose opinion he respected. Nor was Balfour initially hostile. To Lyttleton he replied on the 20th, 'on the question of devolution or provincialism or Home Rule all round.. I say nothing at the moment. I doubt whether most of those who talk

about it have thought it out. Certainly I am not prepared to dogmatise on the subject²⁷. And Balfour's letter to Chamberlain on the 22nd, though sceptical, did not reject the step. 'I did not take up a non-possimus attitude upon any of them. I think it quite possible though perhaps improbable, that a modus vivendi might be arrived at on the substance of a common policy, if the enormous initial difficulties of a coalition could be overcome'²⁸. Balfour's concern was that the "move" was not yet practical politics rather than that the "substance" of the offer was inherently unthinkable. He was more concerned with how the coalition would come into existence than with the nature of the compromise over Ireland. Balfour even, in a highly prescient letter to Chamberlain on the 24th of October, showed a willingness to cooperate in a solution for Ireland. 'In many respects it would be far easier to promise our support to the Government if they were prepared to defy the Irish and their own extremists than to offer to form a coalition': the same course he would advocate in October 1913 and March 1914²⁹. Balfour was not rejecting the suggestions outright. He was simply waiting on events and sounding opinions and advice.

By the middle of October there was still life in the initiative. Garvin on the 20th, the 22nd and the 25th tried to recruit Chamberlain³⁰. From the beginning, the latter was inclined to a devolutionary solution for Ireland. 'There is indeed little' Chamberlain assured Garvin on the 21st, 'with which I disagree in what you have written'³¹. But, like Balfour, he was hesitant to take the first step towards it. Showing that innate conservatism which was to be such a feature of his

political outlook, he told Balfour on the 25th that 'all this is very dangerous and we must walk warily'³². F.E.Smith was more enthusiastic. He acted as Lloyd George's mouthpiece in Unionist circles, having, along with Winston Churchill, been among the first to learn of the Chancellor's plan. As with Churchill, it was 'a religious conversion', a golden opportunity to solve all the problems and deficiencies of state, and for them to jump over many heads (the "duffers" as Smith described them) into high office. One of the first he sought out was Bonar Law whom he found sympathetic³³. He also pressed Chamberlain, writing on the 20th that 'to refuse this offer at this crisis would almost be a crime against the Empire'³⁴. Smith argued strongly that to give way on Ireland (to grant federal Home Rule) would enable the party to gain much:- National Service, big Navy, Fiscal reform, closer Colonial ties, cooperation on social reform and Poor Law reform. Nor was Chamberlain unreceptive, writing back: 'I have never been averse in principle to very considerable changes in Irish government and I see that it would be safe and wise to go further as part of a National settlement'³⁵. Smith also wrote to Balfour on the 30th: 'I do not think in the history of England such terms have ever been offered to a beaten party and I am confident that in accepting them you would carry with you the country and the party'³⁶. This he sweetened with a more partisan thought: 'if you agreed tomorrow to the terms offered in conference it would smash the Liberal party. The extremists of Labour will never give us concern'³⁷. Smith was clearly eager to move his leaders towards Lloyd George's plan. But of particular interest is his attitude to the Irish problem at this stage,

defining it as 'a dead quarrel for which neither the country nor the party cares a damn, outside of Ulster and Liverpool'³⁸. The claims of Ulster could be sacrificed for 'what he saw as a greater gain for the United Kingdom', not something he would be declaring a year hence³⁹.

Smith was active elsewhere in Unionist circles. It seems probable that as the unacknowledged leader of the "young men" in the party, he was instrumental in extending sympathies in this quarter⁴⁰. Sandars also reported him as trying to win over Carson⁴¹. Carson was a natural target for such overtures, not only as a leading Tariff Reformer but, since February 1910, leader of the Irish Unionists. 'F.E. said' wrote Sandars, 'that Carson frankly admitted that there was much to be said in favour of the policy (federalism) and he quite realised the changed conditions in Ireland; but that he.. considered in his position in Ireland he was not free to entertain the question, at all events, at the present time'⁴². Carson's attitude appears close to that of Balfour. He by no means (pace Gollin) 'disagreed with the very idea of federalism'⁴³.

By mid-October a definite pro-devolution movement had built up within Unionist circles. The movement had backing from sections of the press. It attracted many of the "young men", as well as various intellectuals and Round Tablers. Most important, it had won converts at the top of the Unionist party: Milner, Chamberlain (hesitantly), Bonar Law, Smith, Lyttleton, Goulding and other highly placed individuals such as Garvin, Amery, Earl Grey, Sandars, Oliver and Dunraven. But for all the frenzied activity, the federalist initiative was smoke without fire.

Balfour had not dismissed the coalition plan nor the idea of devolution immediately. He waited to see what prevailing opinion was, consulting close colleagues; and by late October the opinions coming back were unfavourable. On the 31st Sandars informed Garvin that 'he's gone back a bit. He shrinks from the federal issue'; (Sandars clearly thought that he had earlier gone forward a little)⁴⁴. On the 4th of November he was more emphatic that Balfour would not advance towards federalism or the 'larger' settlement. By the 8th, according to Gollin, 'the game was up' and the last meeting of the conference on the 10th simply recognised this⁴⁵.

In fact, such an outcome was likely from the beginning. Not all the press had fallen in behind Garvin and Northcliffe. The Telegraph, The Morning Post, The Spectator and The Express had no truck with federalism, and welcomed the end of the conference. Irish Unionists were alarmed at the sudden lapse by many Tories in their Unionism. Balcarres noted 'Ulster members are firing blank cartridges about devolution, banging the orange drum and denouncing in future those of us who may concede something to Nationalism'⁴⁶. Balfour, ever sensitive to their anxieties, noted the publication of several letters in the papers written by two Irish Unionists, describing them as 'the first drops in the storm which will assuredly break over us if any new departure be admitted'⁴⁷. At a meeting of the shadow cabinet on the 8th of November Midleton, Londonderry, Salisbury, Curzon, Selborne (rather surprisingly) Long and Carson ('the Sanhedrin') all came out strongly against Lloyd George's offer to settle the Irish question on federal lines⁴⁸. Amongst the leadership there was

nothing like as much support for federalism as there was opposition to it, particularly among the 'Unionist four', as Garvin called them: Chamberlain, Lansdowne, Akers-Douglas and Acland-Hood, the Chief Whip⁴⁹. This was enough to sway Balfour.

More important, the initiative failed because Balfour and Chamberlain mistrusted Lloyd George. He had misled Smith on how the conference was breaking up on the issue of devolution: as Balfour, Chamberlain and Cawdor all admitted, the issue had never been before them. Nor was there any indication of how Asquith felt on these matters; could they trust Lloyd George actually to deliver a coalition as he promised?⁵⁰ Balfour and Chamberlain slowly gained the impression that it was simply a trap to make them show their hand on Ireland before the inevitable election. As Chamberlain warily told Balfour: 'all this is rather dangerous.. for there is trouble in the statement from which they start, that there has been a real change in the Irish situation which it would be safe and even wise for us to recognise if the Liberal party recognise it also'.⁵¹ Gwynne put it more succinctly: 'it is either the most astonishingly generous offer ever made by one political party to another or it means an astute and cunning move towards some gigantic fraud'.⁵².

In many respects the supporters of a coalition Government had been speculating well beyond the conference remit. 'What we have been considering there', Chamberlain told Smith, 'is not what changes in our system of government should be made but how such changes should be effected. This is a wholly different though perhaps a not unrelated question'.⁵³ And as yet there was no solution agreed on how such changes should be effected. Hence

Balfour's concern, 'I saw no object in a detailed discussion about the pattern of the wall-papers which are to adorn this new political structure when the foundations have not been laid'⁵⁴. The likes of Smith, Garvin, and Milner had been carried away by the "idea" rather than the "practicality". They had swallowed Lloyd George's bait. 'The whole situation is too obscure', Chamberlain wrote to Balfour on the 25th, 'and I deplore the earnestness with which our friends speak and write before they know what the government intend'⁵⁵.

The federalist movement which reached something of apogee by the autumn of 1910 slowly melted away over the course of 1911, though leaving tracks in the snow which would reappear in the autumn of 1913.

III

In response to the rise of devolutionary sympathy, those forces devoted to a staunch defence of the Union were initially slow to mobilise. The dominance of the Lords reform issue over the first five months of 1910 occupied the time of such traditional exponents of the Union as Salisbury, Curzon, Midleton and Hugh Cecil. This was an understandable diversion. It was by no means clear that the government were willing or even able to cripple the Lords. The January 1910 election was not a resounding victory for the radicals. This prompted a rearguard action by Grey, Haldane, Loreburn, Crewe and Morley for reform of the upper chamber rather than abolition of its powers. The Lords issue stood a chance of breaking up the Liberal Government and so

naturally monopolised political concern. And, after all, if the second chamber could be reformed, leaving most its powers in place, then the most effective source of resistance to Home Rule had been preserved.

The establishment of the constitutional conference in June raised their anxiety. Balcarres greeted it with ill-disguised foreboding: 'while the party is ready enough to enter into a conference, few are prepared to effect any large compromise'⁵⁶. As it continued into the summer these anxieties grew. 'But what can they be doing', he wrote on July the 6th, 'for the life of me I cannot hazard an opinion, for the whole thing is so paradoxical and one might say so absurd that none of us can guess why this talk of compromise is so seriously accepted'⁵⁷. At the root of this anxiety was a suspicion about what their leaders might agree. Willoughby de Broke believed that 'a minority on both sides eyed the locked door of the conference room with very grave misgivings. A real quintessential Diehard.. never entirely trusts his leaders not to sell the pass behind his back'⁵⁸. And Salisbury, writing to Selborne, echoed this mistrust. 'The most alarming feature however in the situation.. is that our representatives do not seem to have any clear limits in their minds. They are in search of formulae but without much view as to what they want'⁵⁹. These doubts were shared by Maxse, the extreme right wing editor of The National Review. 'Great parties can't play fast and loose with their principles as many Unionists are now doing' he told Goulding⁶⁰. But such anxieties were more instinctive than empirical; they were also unrepresentative. Members reposed on their estates and political comment in the

clubs was muted⁶¹. 'How dull everything is at present', Carson wrote to Lady Londonderry, 'I wish the conference was over or the king would fall in love or Arthur Balfour would get into the divorce court'⁶². And when by late July the conference was widely rumoured to be at an impasse over Home Rule, this proved heartening to many of the sceptics. With the reconvening of the conference in early October new anxieties arose.

The federalist surge of October intensified the Right's suspicions of the conference with strong calls from elements in the press for a constructive settlement and increasing mention of the federal alternative. Letters from F.E. Smith, O'Brien, Grey and Oliver suggested a devolutionary settlement; the loose talk in the clubs of "arrangements" and "compromises", and the continued silence of Balfour and Lansdowne, served to increase apprehension. Salisbury, Long, Hugh Cecil, Curzon and Midleton all reacted strongly against such tinkering with the Union, agreeing with Arthur Elliot's view that 'federalism for the U.K.; it is absolute downright Tom foolery'⁶³. Long's response was predictably hostile, seeing any such dramatic shift of policy as likely to split the party. Along with Carson and Willoughby de Broke he signed a letter to The Times on November 10th supporting a single Parliament at Westminster⁶⁴. Chamberlain in his letter to Balfour of the 25th of October mentioned that such constructive changes would 'shock the older ones'⁶⁵. Similarly, Gwynne warned Balfour that the 'mass of the party' would not be displeased to see the conference ended and devolution dropped⁶⁶, sentiments echoed by Balcarres and Sandars: 'I quite agree that federalism will not be popular with the more Conservative section

of the party'⁶⁷. The creation of the Reveille group towards the end of October suggested to the leadership that this discontent was taking an institutional form. The group was designed to spur the leadership but was interpreted as a means of thwarting any concession over the Union.

It was from the Irish Unionists, and more particularly from the Ulstermen, that the most hostile reaction came. Their belligerence developed early in 1910, as a result of the renewed tactical power of the Nationalists at Westminster. This in turn led to developments in Ulster. Arms began to trickle into the province; a new, vigorous Orangeism began to revive; and within the Unionist clubs a determined Unionist spirit revived⁶⁸. With the onset of the conference, the Ulstermen were amongst the most vociferous of those opposed to it. But it was the brief flirtation by some Unionists with federalism which served really to galvanise the Ulstermen. William Moore, M.P. for North Armagh, wrote a bitter letter to Goulding on October 28th. 'It is monstrous that we who have borne the fight for the Unionist party for years should be thrown to the wolves because your friends wish to pander to disloyalty', clearly a reference to Smith⁶⁹. Carson complained to Lady Londonderry: 'I am sick to death of this Home Rule tragedy.. It (federalism) will split the party to pieces and should it turn out to be true I earnestly hope the Conservatives will never again be in office during my lifetime'⁷⁰. Although, as we have already seen, Carson was not necessarily as dogmatic against federalism as he appears here. The events of October led to several ominous developments inside Ulster Unionism. The trickle of arms since early 1910 was, in

November 1910, placed under the supervision of a secret committee established to procure arms on a larger scale. And it was from this committee that F.H.Crawford worked over the summer to buy in Germany some 2,000 weapons, laying what Jackson argues was 'the groundwork for civil war'⁷¹. Late 1910 was an important stage in the rise of militant Ulster Unionism.

Clearly, then, Balfour's shift from a wary hesitation at Lloyd George's proposal and the idea of federalism, towards a more forceful rejection, occurred against a background of growing agitation amongst more traditional and right wing elements in the party. It probably served to reinforce his own inclinations. Certainly Carson had few doubts. 'There is no fear', he told Lady Londonderry, 'of A.J.B. being likely to concede anything on Home Rule'⁷². By early November, with the final rejection of federalism and coalition, the conference was quickly wound up and a general election became inevitable.

IV

The party now began to prepare for their third election in five years. The circumstances were not propitious. No policy on reform of the Lords had been agreed. Tariff Reform remained the only initiative the party was committed to, but for many even this was tarnished by food taxes. Few organisational improvements had been implemented, and a general apprehension was evident at all levels of the party. 'The outlook is bad', confided Sandars to Lady Londonderry, who earlier had received similar views from Carson: 'I gather it (election) would probably be disastrous'⁷³. It was

in this atmosphere of foreboding that the leadership sought to put their policies in order.

An agreed plan of reform for the Lords was rapidly brought forward. Lansdowne's resolutions for joint sittings for contested bills, a referendum for special 'constitutional' bills and removal of the Lord's power to alter budgets, were introduced into the Lords on the 22nd and 23rd of November. As a by-product the idea of a referendum recommended itself to some Tory peers as a means to emasculate food taxes. Lord St Aldwyn was amongst the first openly to call for it to be applied to food taxes, but it quickly drew support from other free-fooders: Cromer, the Cecils, Strachey of The Spectator and (surprisingly) Garvin. When therefore Bonar Law, a leading Tariff Reformer, wrote to Balfour just three days before his Albert Hall speech, recommending the referendum on food taxes as a means to sweep Lancashire, Balfour seized the opportunity to remove the incubus⁷⁴. On the 29th of November he announced his willingness to submit food taxes to the verdict of the people if the Liberals would do the same with Home Rule.

The majority of Unionists supported the decision, as did most of the press, although the internal effects of this were submerged for the time being beneath a pre-election need to present a united front. Yet Balfour had done more than simply to remove food taxes. He now challenged the Liberals to show equal trust in the people by putting Home Rule to the popular verdict. This placed the government in a difficult position. Most Liberal candidates ignored the challenge. But by ignoring Balfour's offer and avoiding mention of Home Rule during the contest, the

Government gave Tories the powerful argument for the future that the issue of Home Rule had never been before the electorate and thus had no popular mandate. Despite the ambiguous constitutional status of a popular mandate, it subsequently became the cornerstone of Bonar Law's whole strategy against Home Rule after 1912: Home Rule first had to receive the electorate's approval, and failure to secure this would justify support for civil war in Ulster.

Ireland was prominent during the election in other ways. With the Lords veto now clearly threatened, the spectre of Home Rule behind it became more visible. Tories sought to raise this fear by firmly tying the Lords issue to Home Rule. Also over the summer Redmond had been in America fund-raising, and this exposed the Government to attack for being reliant on American dollars. The image of the "Dollar-Dictator" was employed widely from Unionist platforms, and proved an effective cry. Whatever the Tories later claimed, Home Rule was more of an issue in the second 1910 election. Yet despite its prominence the results of the election were disastrous.

The party gained just two seats, although registering a definite swing towards them in Lancashire. London, the Celtic fringes and Yorkshire all proved disappointing. Unionist fortunes now reached an all-time low with three election defeats in succession and the Government more confident and better positioned. As a result the party collapsed into bickering. Many questioned party organisation, deficiencies in which Selborne found 'too amazing for words'⁷⁵. Others criticised the leaders or the lack of clear direction⁷⁶. Walter Long was outraged at

moves to assimilate Liberal Unionists into the party⁷⁷. Some thought that the referendum proposal had come too late. Chamberlain, Lord Ridley and 'the Morning Post gang' criticised it for coming at all⁷⁸.

Ireland temporarily faded from direct political debate at the start of 1911. The most pressing issue for the party now was to agree a coherent reform scheme for the Lords as an alternative to the Government's bill. But as the experience of 1910 suggested, agreement over the Lords was a difficult catch to bag. And even when a weak reform package (along the lines of Lansdowne's resolutions of November 22nd) was finally agreed and introduced into the Lords on May 8th, so far had events moved on that it created little more than a ripple. Sanders thought the proposal 'has fallen very flat'⁷⁹. The momentum now lay firmly with the Government's bill to abolish the Lords veto.

The realisation, made painfully clear by the poor reception of Lansdowne's scheme, that the Government would not be steered into the calmer waters of reform, led to a gradual division in party opinion from May onwards. On one side stood those who would "hedge"; they would fight as hard as they could, but in the end would pass the bill on third reading in the Lords. On the other side were those who were 'very keen for fighting every inch' as the only way to preserve the unity and fighting image of the party; they would reject the bill and force the Government, if it dared, to create Peers⁸⁰.

The roots of this cleavage lay less in ideology than in tactics and in how to respond to the Government steam-rollering the bill through Parliament. This schism did not fall along

orthodox fault-lines in the party: traditional Unionists versus more constructive ones (a label variously encompassing Chamberlainites, Whole-hoggers, federalists, Liberal Unionists and Social Imperialists). Instead, the division saw sections of these two groups cooperating around the diehard stance of rejecting the bill, against a majority of party moderates and followers of the official line who saw the inevitability of passing it. Balfour of Burleigh, from the traditional wing, in recommending Diehard tactics to Robert Cecil, noted that, 'curiously enough I find that to be the opinion of the advanced Tariff Reformers, rather than of the moderate men with whom I have greater pleasure in acting'⁸¹. The so-called Diehard revolt of 1911 was the product of a rare collaboration between traditional and Constructive Unionists.

v

One side of this collaboration, the traditional right, had emerged during the course of 1910, as a result of, amongst other things, threats to the Union. Their suspicions of the constitutional conference had been realised by the outburst of federal sympathy in the autumn. In reply Long, Carson, Salisbury, Curzon, Hugh and Robert Cecil, Balfour of Burleigh and the Ulstermen had rallied the party back to the pure milk of Unionism, making its defence a central theme of their election campaign.

After January 1911 these sections became more aggressive. Three electoral defeats in a row, concern at the directionless

quality of Balfour and Lansdowne's leadership, combined with the sense of frustration at the normal inter-play of politics and heightened by the party's seeming inability to halt the remorseless progress of the Parliament bill, all helped generate an increasingly martial tone. Though arguably it was the growing threat to the Union, which the opening of the Parliamentary session in 1911 brought with it, which did most to agitate the Right. Asquith, debating the address on the 16th of February, brought this threat clearly into view when he declared that Home Rule would be 'the first business after the veto'⁸².

By May, with Lansdowne's reform plans falling flat, fear grew on the right that the leadership were now moving towards accepting the bill's inevitable passage. Sanders recorded a conversation with Acland-Hood just days after Lansdowne's bill was introduced. 'Hood says the Lords' tactics will be to move one or two important amendments and try and get every concession possible, but to eventually cave in'⁸³. Without a clear sign from Balfour to the contrary, the Right freely canvassed opinion, argued for strong action and whispered revolt if their leaders sold out. July confirmed their worst suspicions, when Asquith announced to the Commons on the 20th that he had the King's pledge to create Peers. Lansdowne urged submission by abstaining. Salisbury, Halsbury and Willoughby de Broke moved quickly to rally opinion in the Lords for rejection and against their own leaders, organising the Halsbury dinner for July the 26th which raised the standard of revolt.

This stance was not simply a reaction by a few medievalists in the upper House. It was a line with which many in the party,

both in Parliament and outside it, sympathised. Sanders calculated an 'overwhelming backbench majority for holding out'⁸⁴, a view Bridgeman endorsed: 'there seems to be a majority in favour of the creation of a considerable number of Peers'⁸⁵. Without such a show of fight and a little red blood on the floor, Conservative morale would slump. Many on the Right were convinced that the Government threat to use the King's prerogative was bluff, which if called would result in another election rather than 'making their filthy Peers'⁸⁶. Rejecting the Parliament bill and forcing another constitutional impasse, as with rejection of the budget, was designed to prompt another election, but this time with Home Rule the dominant issue. 'If beaten in December', Dicey wrote just before the election, 'we shall assuredly triumph when in April or May the Parliament bill or the Home Rule bill is referred by the Lords to the nation'⁸⁷. This was essentially the approach Bonar Law was to take with Home Rule after 1912: creating a constitutional impasse to prompt an election on a favourable platform. And yet for Salisbury and others, even if Peers were created this would only entail a 'creation of sufficient Peers to force the Parliament bill through', not a wholesale swamping of the Lords⁸⁸. 'It is impossible to conceive that the King will consent to create more Peers than are necessary to pass his Parlt bill'⁸⁹. If swamping was not a likely consequence, so the immediate passage of Home Rule, after the veto bill, was an illusion. Their Lordships therefore had nothing to lose, but much to gain, by rejecting the bill.

The other side in the collaboration against the Parliament

bill came from constructive sections of the party. This nebulous group looked warily to Chamberlain for leadership, and included ex pro-consuls (Milner and Selborne); ardent Tariff Reformers (Carson, Smith, Wyndham, Goulding, Amery, Page-Croft and Winterton); and influential pressmen (Garvin, Oliver, Blumfield and Ware). 1910 had been a successful year for them. The budget united the party behind Tariff Reform for the first time and the election had been subsequently fought on its full programme. In the summer came the constitutional conference, which seemed to herald what many constructively minded politicians from both parties had long wanted, a "ministry of all the talents". By autumn this spirit of national efficiency had materialised into a formal offer of coalition from Lloyd George, and greeted by Smith, Garvin, Milner and (initially) Chamberlain with enthusiasm. Central to this cooperation was the solution to the Irish problem by federating the United Kingdom. But the heady atmosphere was not to last. In an effort to reassert traditional Unionism, Balfour swung decisively against a federal solution. This ended any dallying with ideas of coalition. And on November the 29th Balfour introduced the referendum, as perhaps the final part of a wider move to shift the party back to a more traditional style of Unionism.

Balfour's decision to adopt a referendum created a great deal of anger among Tariff Reformers. Chamberlain, feeling betrayed, countered the pledge by claiming, at Buxton on December 16th, that it was only on offer at the current election. But to no avail: the pledge would remain party policy as long as Balfour remained leader. The logic of this situation became increasingly

clear over 1911: either Balfour had to be moved to embrace a new policy or he had to be removed. The seeds of the later revolt against his leadership were sown during the December election campaign. From January onwards Chamberlain, annoyed and disgruntled, waited his chance to attack Balfour. The growing split over the Parliament bill was the type of situation he could exploit.

Chamberlain, along with Smith, Carson and Selborne, began over the spring and summer of 1911 to work with those forces dedicated to defending the Lords. 'I and other strong Tariff Reformers', Chamberlain wrote with some surprise, 'found ourselves now in hearty agreement and close cooperation with Lord Salisbury and his two brothers'⁹⁰. At the fateful shadow cabinet on the 21st of July when the decision to abstain was taken, Chamberlain, Wyndham, Carson, Selborne and Smith voted with Salisbury and Halsbury 'for driving the government to create Peers'⁹¹. The Halsbury dinner - in honour of the ancient focus of the no-surrender revolt - was arranged by these individuals working together. The Cecil scene of July 24th had been 'an organised outcry' of Hugh Cecil and Smith⁹². And it was with the support of the Chamberlainites in the Commons that Halsbury led 114 Peers in opposition to the express wishes of Lansdowne. It is hard not to detect behind Chamberlain, Smith and Carson's cooperation with Salisbury and his brothers an attack on Balfour's leadership. They were defending aristocratic privilege where they had earlier called for radical reform of the second chamber. Nor could they argue that resisting the Parliament bill was in the best interests of the Union, since just months earlier

Smith and Chamberlain (but not Carson) had been quite willing to barter it away for a coalition. And if the leadership was the target for Chamberlain, then alliance with the likes of Salisbury, Bob and Hugh Cecil and Halsbury would improve his chances. It brought him greater influence throughout the upper and older echelons of the party, indicated perhaps by the growing hostility of Walter Long to him. 'Balcarres tells me', wrote Chamberlain, 'he (Long) is furiously jealous of you and hates you like poison'⁹³. Long's antipathy to Chamberlain was the clearest gauge of the latter's rising authority within the leadership and with many backbenchers. But Chamberlain, Smith and indeed Carson might have supported rejection for other reasons. As with the traditional Unionists, driving the constitution once again to an impasse would bring the benefit, not of another election but of the reconvening of the 1910 conference to settle the constitution.

The alliance between the Chamberlainites and the Cecils (between the constructive and traditional wings of the party) was a marriage of convenience, united in tactics but differing in ultimate intentions. The union dramatically came together on August 9th in the crucial division on whether to insist on amending the bill along the lines of Lansdowne's May reform proposals or abstain and let the bill be passed as it stood. 114 Peers voted against the official line of abstention, and would have carried the day if 10 Bishops and 31 Unionists, led by Curzon and Midleton, had not voted in the bill's favour. Balfour was heavily criticised, not least for his decision to leave for Bad Gastein before the result of the division was known. The

summer recess, it was hoped, would defuse passions and restore loyalty to the official leadership.

The danger for Balfour was that the alliance might prove both enduring and popular in the party. The Halsbury dinner of July 26th and subsequent formation of the Halsbury club suggested that the alliance would have a more permanent basis. The club strove to find a common policy programme of a diehard flavour and then to agitate inside the party for it, to act as a "ginger" group along the lines of the Fourth Party of the 1880s. This was a clear sign of mistrust in Balfour's ability to defend what they saw as vital institutions of state. And it was as part of the Halsbury Club's attempt to invigorate and rouse the party that Ulster and the threat of Home Rule became an increasingly live issue from the early summer of 1911 onwards, largely as a result of two of the leading Halsburyites, Carson and Hugh Cecil.

VII

In Ulster plans for self-defence were already well under way. The election defeat of December 1910 gave these plans an added momentum. The Ulster Unionist Clubs were reorganised in January 1911 by the president of their organisation, Lord Templetown. By April the new organisation was preparing to launch a propaganda offensive in Britain, and by May over 125 new clubs had been formed, with 5 twinned with English clubs⁹⁴. Along similar lines, the Unionist Associations of Ireland (UAI) sketched out in January plans for a major campaign in Britain, creating 4 sub-agents to coordinate 9 local groups over the distribution of

literature, the direction of speakers and the control of funds. Also in January, an executive committee of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) was created to coordinate activity between the Ulster clubs, the Orange lodges and the U.U.C.⁹⁵. But it was the smuggling of arms into Ulster which increasingly became the most pressing concern for the Ulstermen. Craig, writing to Crawford, the U.U.C.'s procurement officer, confided in April: 'I am strongly of the opinion that the fishing rods should be got in at once as secretly as possible... My great fear is that the game will be up before anything is done. It is a mere matter of time'⁹⁶. With the threat of a mass creation of Peers, Home Rule could be a matter of just months away. Craig and the entire Ulster Unionist machine was galvanising itself into a state of preparation to meet this eventuality. By the summer of 1911 Ulster was increasingly looking to her own for protection.

Carson's prominence in the no-surrender movement had much to do with Ireland. Elected leader of the Ulster Unionists in February 1910, he had been of all the Chamberlainites the most lukewarm towards federalism when it arose in October, though had admitted its value under certain circumstances. With defeat at the second election Ireland was now exposed much more visibly to the threat of Home Rule. From early January 1911 he began to think of the significance of the new political situation. 'I have a lot of plans as to what might be done', he wrote to Lady Londonderry, 'I only wish I was younger and stronger for the fight'⁹⁷. Realising that Home Rule was the clear intent of the Government once the Parliament bill was passed, he was dismayed at the course Lansdowne and Balfour were taking from June

onwards. Recognising that a House of Lords with no veto was of no value in resisting Home Rule, he was drawn into the no-surrender movement. He believed the Government were bluffing and would only create enough Peers to pass the Parliament bill, still leaving a huge anti-Home Rule majority. He also believed that a show of force and backbone would rally the party and country firmly behind the coming campaign against Home Rule. Balfour's tactics on the Lords issue suggested serious consequences for future resistance to Home Rule. If they gave way on the House of Lords what was to stop them giving way over the Union? This mistrust led him by the summer to see that Ulster had to look to her own. 'If anything is to be done the Ulstermen must do it themselves'.⁹⁸.

Carson tried to raise the threat of Home Rule and the profile of Ulster over the spring and early summer of 1911. Yet his attempts fell rather flat. On June 3rd he complained to Lady Londonderry, 'I feel so despondent about the Home Rule campaign'.⁹⁹ And later in the same month, 'I am so depressed about the Home Rule question.. I am also concerned as to whether we can raise sufficient money for a really big effort and I do not see much sign of the younger men taking up the work'.¹⁰⁰ However, by July these early forebodings were beginning to give way to a much more positive attitude to Ulster and Home Rule. After Asquith's revelations that he had royal guarantees and Lansdowne's finally recommending a policy of abstention, things began to change. Central to this change was an active cooperation between Carson and Craig.

This was to be a pivotal relationship throughout the next

three years. Carson was already in contact with Craig, but it is unclear whether he had inside knowledge of Ulster developments or how far he himself was willing to take events. From July onwards, under Craig's influence and with circumstances changing in regard to the Parliament bill, Carson became much more involved with the brewing Ulster revolt, learning of preparations on the ground and replying to the growing militancy of Ulster in kind. 'What I am very anxious about', he told Craig, 'is to satisfy myself that the people over there mean to resist. I am not for a mere game of bluff... We will.. be confronted by many weaklings in our own camp, who talk very loud and mean nothing and will be the first to criticise us when the moment of action comes. For this we must be prepared'¹⁰¹. Craig saw the immense benefits which the close alliance with Carson, a powerful and influential figure within the Tory party, would have for the cause of Ulster. If Carson was willing to fight tooth and nail for them, as his letter of July 29th suggests, Craig was quick to draw him into affairs. He informed him of the steps already underway in Ulster, strengthening loyalty through complicity. Craig also flattered Carson, arranging a massive demonstration in September at Craigavon as much for winning over Carson as for convincing the outside world of Ulster's determination. Craig described the meeting as one 'to.. tender you (Carson) personally as leader in the forthcoming struggle a hearty and generous welcome to the North but also prove in the most emphatic way that we could conceive, that you had at your back in a solid phalanx the very best of all Ulster'¹⁰². Thus by the time the Parliament bill passed into law, Carson was closely linked with Ulster's

plan of resistance.

Support for a vigorous Ulster campaign also came from Hugh Cecil. Cecil was another leading advocate of the Halsbury group in which circles he had made contact with Carson. His attacks on the Parliament Bill as a breach of the constitution and a suspension of any referral mechanism moved him to justify rebellion in Ulster in defence of their rights. 'The contest about Home rule', he informed the Commons on August 9th, 'will not be decided in the city of Westminster at all. It will rather be decided in the city of Belfast'¹⁰³. Cecil saw that Ulster could also provide the means to drive the Parliament bill into the sand; to show it as an unworkable and dangerous innovation by sparking a grave constitutional impasse. He therefore urged Ulster to prepare. Early in September he sent Craig a memorandum concerning the raising in Ulster of a plan of campaign. Craig told Carson that 'Lord Hugh's letter and Memorandum.. admirable and practically follows a course of action which some of us have had mapped out'¹⁰⁴. Carson agreed with many of Lord Hugh's ideas and was keen to involve him in affairs: 'what our people fear however is that there may be no opportunity of showing the validity of their opposition.. by resistance until a bill is passed.. But some organised way must be found.. I am so glad you are interested'¹⁰⁵.

By September 1911 Carson and Cecil, respective representatives of the traditional and constructive wings of the party, were working to encourage Ulster to 'make a big effort.. to stir up some life over this Home Rule fight'¹⁰⁶. Both were motivated by a suspicion of the existing leadership. As Carson

wrote to Lady Londonderry towards the end of August, 'I feel very doubtful about the way our leaders intend to fight Home Rule, but in any event I will lead for myself this time'¹⁰⁷. Both realised that if Home Rule could be defeated, then the Parliament Act would have been dealt a mortal blow. And both saw the advantage of channelling the sense of outrage and anger at events of the summer into a new, tough, energetic movement of resistance. 'The country is calling out for a strong man', Carson wrote on August 29th. And again on September 16th: 'I am sure the whole party in the country is crying out for something more than the "gentlemanly party"',¹⁰⁸.

VIII

Balfour therefore faced a serious situation by the autumn of 1911. His leadership over the Parliament Act had been severely questioned by many in the party. The "Frondeurs" had founded a club to institutionalise their revolt and keep the spirit of defiance alive inside the party. And now a diehard stand was brewing up over the expected introduction of Home Rule. All leaders at some time face such factionalism and Balfour was no stranger to it; but the events of the summer were a more serious threat for several reasons. First, because it was a combination of constructive Unionists as well as more traditional Tories, who ought to have been amongst Balfour's natural supporters. Second, the Halsbury club was looking to agree a set of policies which it would then promote within the party. Implicit here was a mistrust of Balfour's leadership and judgement, hence the desire

to limit his freedom to exercise both. The clearest example of this was the emerging Ulster campaign by the summer of 1911. Carson, Craig and Cecil viewed Balfour's leadership with scepticism: 'milk and water' was how Carson described it to Lady Londonderry¹⁰⁹. He lacked the backbone with which to make a firm stand against the coming Home Rule bill, and would, if not checked by a solid, immovable force, follow the same tactics as over the Parliament bill. Historians have been little surprised that, after such disputes and the reservations felt about his direction of the party, Balfour resigned the leadership early in November.

However, Balfour's resignation may not have been the simple and inevitable consequence of grave party tensions that many have assumed. As we have seen, the Halsbury club was badly divided by September 1911, and new issues were rising to replace the Lords question. Home Rule, in particular, was such an issue, and one where Balfour could be a force for inspiration rather than division. The timing of his resignation was peculiarly well-placed to injure the prospects of the leading contender for his post (and organiser of the Diehard revolt)- Chamberlain- and so provoke a damaging leadership contest. This might have been Balfourian pique, or may have involved the even more Machiavellian ideas of throwing the party into a state of turmoil from which he would reemerge as solely capable of reunifying the squabbling Tory factions. Odd snippets and comments lend an element of plausibility to this latter interpretation¹¹⁰. And though this may be to push tactical calculation a little too far, it serves as a corrective to the idea that Balfour necessarily

glided effortlessly and without rancour from the leadership. A similar distortion shapes our impression of Bonar Law and his replacement of Balfour as leader of the Tory party. He is portrayed as the compromise choice, who reached the top through fortuitous circumstances. Like Baldwin, who acquired the leadership after a "slice off the top", Bonar Law is seen as having replaced Balfour because Chamberlain and Long cancelled each other out.

Yet in many respects he was the obvious successor. Of all the candidates, only Bonar Law had support from all wings of the Tory spectrum. His wobbliness on Tariff Reform, in supporting the Referendum, recommended him to more traditional Conservatives. And his support for Lansdowne over the Lords question, in a forceful letter to The Times, endeared him to the official leadership¹¹¹. He avoided involvement in the Halsbury club and, alongside Walter Long, helped with the Devonshire House group, which sought to rally the leadership behind Balfour in July and August 1911. For the constructive right, Bonar Law was still a senior Tariff Reform leader, with a tough debating manner, in the mould of Joseph Chamberlain. He had been active in the Confederate movement and closely associated with the Chamberlainites until the breach over the Referendum. Despite this he retained much sympathy amongst the forward elements in the party; as Maxse said, 'you are the only one who the diehards would have accepted'¹¹². Bonar Law had the ability to straddle the various party cliques. It was a balancing act of great importance for his leadership prospects. He also possessed a powerful and recognised platform and Commons style. This appeared

all the more impressive in a Parliamentary atmosphere which, from 1909 onwards, was increasingly tense and bitter. He had none of the brash self-confidence of Smith and was more liked as a consequence; and, though a symbol of new money, he declined the ostentation of the nouveau riche. Bonar Law occupied a prominent niche in the Tory Pantheon.

History, of course, is littered with great men who never reached the very top. How did Bonar Law utilise his undoubted qualities? In the shifting events which immediately proceeded Balfour's retirement, Bonar Law played a shrewd hand. Sensing the hostility against Chamberlain from inside the party and aware that, as a consequence, another candidate would stand in opposition, he recognised the strength of a "unity" contestant. Meeting him towards the end of October 1911, Chamberlain noted, 'Law here gave the conversation a personal touch by saying that I personally..ought not to wish that Balfour should not retire now as the Halsbury Club militated against me it had thrown some men into Long's arms and Long would just now collect too many discontented men to admit of my being chosen if a vacancy occurred...I think that B.L.(Law) does feel that if Balfour retired and I (Austen) were too unpopular with a section of the party to be chosen to succeed, the leadership must fall to himself and I have no doubt he would like it in exactly the same sense as I should'.¹¹³ Clearly Bonar Law was sensitive to the opportunities which lay before him.

It was not an easy hand to play. There was nothing to stop the two main candidates carrying on to the very end. It assumed a substantial anti-Chamberlain sentiment. It also could have

turned many in the party against him, dismayed at this sudden display of ambition, though he covered his tracks well by claiming to simply be 'establish(ing) a qualification for the future'¹¹⁴. More seriously, the strength of third place stemmed from an evenly divided party. Bonar Law was reliant on a credible alternative stepping forward, who could mount a serious challenge to Chamberlain.

In this he was fortunate: Walter Long entered the leadership fray. Long's candidacy was widely predicted by most party observers. Few doubted the weight he carried in party circles; his influence amongst the landowning and Tory sections of the Unionist party amounted to a solid block of support. He was fierce in his condemnation of Chamberlain, and by raising the Tory standard against allegedly disloyal Liberal-Unionists (a move to blame Selborne and Chamberlain for Balfour's resignation), he sought to rally the traditional Tories. Long was the ideal candidate from Bonar Law's point of view. Unpredictable, cantankerous with a love for political intrigue, Long ensured that the contest would be bitter, schismatic and without the prospect of later being healed.

A contest between Long and Chamberlain was the perfect scenario for Law to play the 'third person..; in such circumstances the tertium quid will probably be the right solution and the tertium quid can only be Bonar Law'¹¹⁵. Not only did they divide the party fairly evenly but along a much deeper and dangerous rift; Liberal Unionist versus Tory. More ominously, whoever won the leadership could expect little cooperation from the loser. As early as October 11th, Chamberlain

had admitted, 'I could not yield opinions to Long as I had yielded them more than once to Balfour; nor would he yield to me'.¹¹⁶ The Tories faced the prospect of a bloody crisis of succession, more suited to a fourteenth century Italian court than a modern Conservative party.

Bonar Law's role as a unity candidate was not passive. Certainly, the strength of his position relied on a sequence of events occurring; but instead of assuming the leadership, we should talk of Law taking it. His great source of strength was that his candidacy fatally wounded Chamberlain's chances. Though shrouded in disloyalty, Chamberlain was still a powerful contender and for many the obvious replacement. He drew support from Tariff Reform and forward sections, and from party wirepullers such as Steel-Maitland, Balcarres and the Whips room. He even captured some moderate and centrist Tories, who, though angered at the Halsbury Club business, were fearful of their party being led by Long. The result of a straight fight between Chamberlain and Long would have been exceedingly close. With little concrete evidence, beyond vague partisan exaggeration, both candidates stood an "evens" chance of winning. Bonar Law's intervention, however, tipped the scale decisively in Long's favour, by drawing off Chamberlainite support. Law's opportunity was Chamberlain's difficulty.

As a leading Tariff Reformer, Bonar Law secured a small but influential body of sympathy from this wing. Goulding, Alfred Lyttleton, Beaverbrook, Worthington-Evans, Griffith-Boscawen and Harry Chaplin all indicated support for him. Those moderates who had been moving towards Chamberlain through sheer disbelief in

Long as leader now saw Bonar Law as an attractive alternative. And with The Daily Express vigorously plumping for him, he had the nearest equivalent to a leadership campaign.

Chamberlain and his friends saw the damage Bonar Law was doing. 'I am furious with him', Balcarres told Chamberlain, 'of course it injures your chance'¹¹⁷. Chamberlain replied in a classic example of understatement: 'I confess I feel a little grieved'¹¹⁸. Nor did the protestations, made to him, to retire in Chamberlain's favour, make any difference. He was determined to stand and so ruin Chamberlain's opportunity. It is hard to see this as simply staking a claim for the future. He had his eyes fixed rigidly on the present. By doggedly remaining in the leadership contest, Bonar Law was working to limit Chamberlain's support, by forcing him to choose between allowing Long to take the leadership or retiring in his favour. At this crucial time in the careers of both men, Law showed the greater political ruthlessness and so reaped the larger political prize: a difference Chamberlain was well aware of. 'I don't think that if our positions had been reversed I could have acted as he did'¹¹⁹.

Chamberlain then faced two options: first, to retire in favour of Long. This had much to recommend it. If he had carried on regardless, with Law's implacable candidacy, it seems he would have lost. Yet by handing his main opponent the crown, which in any case he could no longer win, Chamberlain would gain several advantages. He would re-establish his own credibility amongst the more traditional elements of the party. Such an act of selfless sacrifice, in the name of party loyalty, would bring him the

cross-party sympathy he had always lacked. So when Long quickly undermined himself as leader- a widely predicted and far from an unrealistic assumption- Chamberlain stood to take the leadership unopposed and at the head of a united party. Long was also in poor health, so that even if he had overcome his own limitations, illness might have removed him from the stage. It was a tantalising possibility, which both Balcarres and Sandars recommended. Chamberlain also considered it, but rejected it as 'satan's suggestion'¹²⁰. Whatever demonic influence there was in the strategem, three temporal speculations might explain Chamberlain's refusal.

First, could Chamberlain swallow the bitter pill of defeat, to serve under Long, however brief the experience? Second, Could Chamberlain trust the unpredictable Long to be predictably incompetent- especially with Home Rule casting its shadow over British politics? As an ex-Chief Secretary, ex-leader of the Ulster Unionists and Chairman of the Ulster Defence League, Long could use the issue to consolidate his leadership. Home Rule was perhaps the one topic on which Long had a degree of credibility and so his leadership might not have been the bungling affair so widely forecast. Third, with Balfour still hovering in the wings, it was far from certain that Austen would be the natural successor. Long would certainly have been more inclined to see Balfour replace him than Chamberlain. Also, Balfour's immense pedigree over Home Rule and the strong support he still controlled in the party, perhaps made him the more likely choice to succeed Long.

The second option, which Chamberlain decided to follow on

November 10th, was to force Long into a joint-retirement in favour of Bonar Law. The only doubt was whether Long would co-operate. There was little real substance to this qualm. Chamberlain had earlier sensed that Long would prefer Law to become leader if Long himself could not succeed. Since Long was invoking loyalty as a weapon against Chamberlain, a refusal on his part to support the unity candidate might well have thrown support behind Chamberlain and revived his prospects. And with Bonar Law at the helm, the party had, Chamberlain assumed, a more committed Tariff Reformer. Inexperienced and ignorant in many areas of policy, Bonar Law would be heavily reliant on advice. 'Without being leader', his brother Neville told Chamberlain, 'a man can have the predominant position within his party, as we know'¹²¹. Austen might play his father's role; and Bonar Law, like Long in the alternative strategy, might be regarded as a stop-gap.

Chamberlain's great act of generosity, in suggesting a dual retirement, was a considered tactical move, forced upon him by Bonar Law's determined candidacy. Law's standing for the leadership meant that Chamberlain could not win. His only option was how to lose. A quarter of a century later Chamberlain's bitterness was still evident. 'He (Law) was not mildly ambitious but intensely ambitious- I sometimes think he was the most ambitious man whom I have ever known in politics'¹²².

Towards Walter Long, Bonar Law revealed a similar determination. After all, he had the power not just to diminish Chamberlain's chances but also to enhance them. If he retired from the contest, as Carson had done, most of his support would

have moved over to Chamberlain. This was certainly how the Chief Whip saw it. Worse still, he might publicly recommend his supporters to transfer to Chamberlain, gravely impairing Long's prospects. In regard to Long, Bonar Law had an equally strong bargaining position.

This strength was magnified by Long's own attitude to the leadership. His overriding concern was to prevent Chamberlain replacing Balfour, rather than his own acquisition of the post. In fact, there is some substance to the view that Long did not actually desire the leadership. 'I suspect that if you peep into all our houses today (Nov 12th) you would find Walter Long not a little relieved that he is not to be put to the test'¹²³. This would account for the rumours suggesting that after a first ballot for the leadership, if neither candidate held an outright majority, Long would retire from the contest, recommending that his supporters now support Law. Balcarres noted that, 'Austen says that Walter Long has abandoned claims for the leadership and has settled to put forward Bonar Law as his nominee when a vacancy occurs'¹²⁴.

One must be careful here not to adopt the Chamberlainite version of events too readily. He was more interested in relaying a "conspiracy" theory than a balanced assessment. Yet the idea of some form of arrangement between Long and Law can be pieced together from other shreds of evidence. Chamberlain, writing to his wife, a neutral player, mentioned that 'he (Long) will throw all his weight into the scale against me and might get Bonar Law chosen'¹²⁵. After a meeting between Law and Long, on August 14th 1911, Goulding wrote to Law: 'I hope your interview confirmed the

resignation talk, if so there is much for serious consideration¹²⁶. On November 10th Long, having decided to retire in Law's favour, shows none of the brooding frustration of Chamberlain over the decision. 'As far as I am concerned I can assure you that you will have my wholehearted and loyal support..you are the only man who can unite the party'¹²⁷. In the same letter, Long seems to let the cat momentarily out of the bag. 'Remember it is not a fight between individuals, it is really a case of Conservatives versus Liberal Unionists...neither side will give way now and after an election much mischief would prevail'¹²⁸.

The notion of some form of arrangement fits in with the wider interpretation of events. From Long's point of view it provided insurance against Law retiring from the contest. For Bonar Law, it insured two things. First, that Long would readily withdraw in Law's favour. Second, that even if the leadership struggle went to a first ballot, he stood a good chance of winning on the second. Law took the leadership not only because of his unique qualities but because he had executed a manoeuvre of great nerve. As a determined third candidate, on the centre-right of the party, he prevented Chamberlain from becoming leader. The possibility that he might reverse this decision assured him of Long's support. The idea that he was simply a compromise candidate ignores the complex manoeuvring which surrounded the transfer of power in November, and underrates Law as a politician.

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CHAPTER TWO

I

To the outside world, Bonar Law's election as leader of the Conservative party in the Commons was sudden and unexpected. High Society positively shivered at the thought of an iron-merchant replacing the urbane Arthur Balfour. Lady Londonderry scarcely hid her disdain: 'I should have thought England and the Tory party might have produced an Englishman to lead the latter'¹. A close friend informed Winterton, 'I am concerned at dear Bonar's apparent ignorance of country life now that he is leader of the country gentleman's party'². Arthur Lee, who had entered Parliament at the same time as Bonar Law, and was clearly jealous, commented that 'after the aristocratic elegance and courtly bearing of A.J.B., Bonar's commonplace and commercial appearance, his apparently ready-made clothing and almost aggressive lack of distinction made them (blue-blooded Tories) feel vaguely uncomfortable'³. Bonar Law was a Presbyterian by religion and held no land, in a party strongly Anglican and still politically dominated by the landed classes. 'No Tory less resembled a Cavalier'⁴. Chamberlain summed up the position well: 'He had no connection with the great Tory families; he was unknown outside political circles...To the ideas of the landed gentry, so influential and still so numerous in the Tory ranks, he was a stranger'⁵. Yet he did little to improve his position. He neither patronised the ancestral homes of the aristocracy nor concerned himself with the social calendar. This might appear a

noble disregard for aristocratic pretension, but in the world of Tory politics it was a weakness, if not a mistake.

In addition Bonar Law had to tread carefully amidst the bruised egos on the opposition front bench: Chamberlain, Carson, Long, Lyttleton and Wyndham. He had first entered Parliament in 1900 and had held no Cabinet post. Now, eleven years later, to be "leap-frogging" over men of greater ministerial experience did little to cement his leadership. This was made more difficult by his obvious deficiency in many areas of policy. 'How Bonar Law can help us without any knowledge of Foreign Affairs, Navy, Church questions or Home Rule, the Lord alone knows'⁶. Foreign Affairs were a particular worry, with Balfour out of the House and with the recent death of Lord Percy, previously an under-secretary at the Foreign Office. Bonar Law was not, it should be noted, known for his association with the cause of Union. The Irish Times commented on November 11th that 'Irish Unionists would no doubt have preferred that the choice should fall upon Mr Long' and could only vaguely reassure their readers that, 'he is held to be a sound Unionist'⁷. Ronald McNeil referred to Balfour's retirement as a 'calamity' and greeted the new leader with reticence: 'Mr Bonar Law whose great qualities as Parliamentarian and Statesman had not yet been revealed'⁸. John Lonsdale was less cautious. To Balcarres he admitted that he was 'furious' at the outcome. 'In my opinion', he wrote, 'he is wanting in knowledge of statecraft...he has never been a cabinet minister and is nothing like as able a Parliamentarian as Mr Long and Mr Chamberlain'⁹. Irish Unionists had wanted Carson and in his absence Long. What they got was Bonar Law, who was associated

with the Tariff Reform wing of the party and had flirted with federalism in 1910.

Backbench Conservative reactions to his accession is harder to gauge. There was a great sense of bonhomie at the manner in which the new leader had emerged. Yet signs of anxiety can also be observed. Sanders reported that the Liberal Unionist section was far from happy at the arrangement¹⁰. Bridgeman, recently appointed to the whips office, detected similar murmurings. Writing on November 10th, when the compromise had been agreed, he noted that 'there is now a greater feeling of discontent about than at any previous time, and many of the supporters of each protagonist think their man has been jockeyed out. I fear that Mondays meeting may now be a stormy one'¹¹. The same day Balcarres noted in his diary talks with various Long supporters. Their 'last and chief objection; that B.L. would not be the free selection of the party, that his choice is arranged, undemocratic etc'¹². And just two days before the meeting at which Bonar Law was formally adopted he informed him that 'there was undoubted discontent amongst those who think they are baulked of their prey'¹³.

Balcarres, disturbed at the prospect of open criticism, exerted the full weight of his office to stifle discussion from the floor. 'Up till the last moment there was a real risk that one indiscreet comment or one pointed question might have given rise to debate which, once started, could not readily have been controlled. The result of any discussion whatever would have been wounding...I put every man on his honour, whatever may have been his motives or desires'¹⁴. He also canvassed the help of George

Cave to 'pour oil on troubled waters if necessary' and Chaplin to silence Lady Londonderry¹⁵. At Monday's meeting the unifying speeches of Chamberlain, Chaplin, Carson and Walter Long were vital to ensure Bonar Law's formal selection was carried smoothly. Long's speech, in particular, was of rare quality, 'a masterpiece of plain speaking and noble devotion to the best interests of the party and country'¹⁶. He was clearly aware of the dangers that faced Bonar Law. Any protest or criticism from members would have impaired his position and kept the question of the leadership open. This would have worked to Chamberlain's advantage, with the Halsbury episode forgotten after his initial retirement in Bonar Law's favour. In the end, with the party machine behind him, Bonar Law was unanimously selected. But it was a far from contented party that left the meeting. 'On breaking up', Balcarres noted in his diary, 'men consented to sink their differences and to work harmoniously under the new leader'; hardly a glowing endorsement of the new leader¹⁷.

In such circumstances apprehension and suspicion of Bonar Law amongst the party leadership was inevitable. Balcarres, a Chamberlainite, felt some bitterness towards him for having pressed his candidature so hard and refusing to retire in Chamberlain's favour. F.E. Smith, another supporter of Chamberlain, remained on frosty terms with Bonar Law; 'he thinks Smith has most to fear from him'¹⁸. In response, the new leader quickly moved to appease Smith by inviting him on to the frontbench. Lansdowne was always correct in his relations with Bonar Law, but scarcely friendly or particularly helpful in this early period. Carson was suspicious of the new leader, unsure of

his stance on Home Rule. Austen Chamberlain remained aggrieved, although his position was far from hopeless. He had time, and could wait for Bonar Law to trip - a not unrealistic expectation - while gradually increasing his influence over policy and his standing within the party. And if Balfour had been entertaining thoughts of a return to the leadership in the future, then the selection of Bonar Law as leader could hardly have deterred him. Other, less significant, leaders were no more supportive. Curzon was condescending. Arthur Lee was dismissive and jealous, and Salisbury and his two brothers were far from impressed. 'One cannot say', Lord Hugh Cecil wrote to Lord Robert, 'that it is a good plan to select your third candidate; but on cool reflection I am inclined to think it will suit you and me'¹⁹.

Bonar Law's position was also complicated by the leadership being shared with Lansdowne. It was by no means clear that a Unionist ministry formed at any time before the 1914, would have been led by Bonar Law. Certainly it was more than possible that the King would have sent for Lansdowne, given his ministerial experience, or even have sent for Balfour - still held in very high regard by the king. This weakened Bonar Law's standing. If he was not the automatic or even the likely choice as Prime-Minister, his position in the Commons had a temporary quality about it. Both his main rivals had admitted they did not regard the November 1911 solution as permanent, and saw him as a stop-gap²⁰. His leadership was more than normally on trial, so was forced by the weakness of his position to "cut a dash", to win his spurs and throw restraint to the winds in order to consolidate his hold over the party. This situation gave his

capable colleagues room to advance their own prospects at his expense. It seems clear that by early 1912 the leadership question was still not settled inside the Conservative party. 'It must however be remembered', warned The Irish Times, 'that Mr Law will not step into the place occupied by Mr Balfour. He will become simply the leader of the party in the Commons... The question of the general leadership of the party, however, may be expected to remain for some time in abeyance'²¹.

On assuming the leadership, Bonar Law faced severe difficulties. He lacked overall control over the direction of the party, and he inherited Balfour's shadow cabinet where his personal influence was nil and Chamberlain's quite strong. He had few close colleagues to rely on. His one supporter within the shadow cabinet had been Alfred Lyttelton, whose influence was limited. Nor could he quickly bring forward his own supporters (Goulding, Aitken, Gilbert Parker, Worthington-Evans)²². And without a power base within the shadow cabinet Bonar Law was at the mercy of this unofficial body over tactics or policy, at risk of being pushed into the background and with little chance of earning respect for his ability to guide the party. 'Bonar Law will not I think really lead,' thought Hugh Cecil, 'it will be done by a committee'²³. It was important, then, that Bonar Law strengthened his position against these constraints. This he did by calling shadow cabinets as infrequently as he could, and then only when it would rubber-stamp his views (as with the Tariff issue and Ireland) or on topics of which he had little knowledge or interest (India, Foreign affairs). He also tended to allow a particular position to emerge from the leadership or party on its

own accord and then give it his authority, taking no fixed initial line but allowing the party to decide where it wanted to go. This can be seen over the payment of M.P.s, National Insurance and, most dramatically, in his pirouette over the dropping of food taxes late in 1912. In this way he established much closer contact with backbenchers who felt, after many years of Balfour's distant rule, that their opinions now mattered. His leadership (except over Ireland) might thus seem essentially pragmatic, even Baldwinite, adjusting to the shifts and gusts of party opinion rather than moulding it to his own outlook. Yet this had the danger of making him appear indecisive when that opinion either did not formulate itself or could not be perceived. 'B.Law shrinks from facing the difficult problems ahead on which difficult pronouncements will ere long be demanded- referendum, food taxes etc'²⁴.

In these circumstances, Bonar Law became the focus of various personal ambitions. These required delicate handling: frustration of political ambitions could easily create enemies, as Balfour had found to his cost. Aitken might have coveted the post of Parliamentary secretary to Bonar Law, but this was swiftly resisted by Balcarres. Goulding pressed F.E.Smith's claims on Bonar Law, which the new leader accepted, recognising the opportunity of converting a dangerous challenger. Bonar Law also invited Robert Cecil onto the front bench, after the latter's victory at Hitchin on November 23rd. This was a shrewd move, shifting the balance in the shadow cabinet away from Chamberlain and absorbing a dangerous critic of Conservative fiscal policy. Others, too, had to be treated with care. Curzon

pressed his claims on the new leader, envisaging a kind of Junta: 'I hope Lansdowne, you and I may have a confidential talk before long on some aspects of the political situation'²⁵. Arthur Lee, recognising a lack of specialist knowledge on Army matters on the opposition front-bench, hoped to fill such a role²⁶. And perhaps Milner, a little angered at Balfour's neglect of him, also hoped to play a larger part in Tory affairs²⁷.

Leadership did not come naturally to Bonar Law. Shyness often made him appear distant to the less informed Parliamentary member. His visits to London clubs were irregular, preferring as he did to return home to his family. He remained an infrequent patron of the Commons tea and smoking rooms. Such reticence gave the impression that he was indifferent and lazy: 'the Viscount... says B.L. is a slacker, well I have often thought the same, but his domestic affliction must explain much of his indolence'²⁸. Nerves were also a problem: he felt keenly the responsibility of his new position. At the Carlton Club meeting 'his (Bonar Law's) speech was the feeblest of the day. He was evidently moved and nervous'²⁹. Chamberlain criticised his Albert Hall speech of January 1912 as being too undisciplined in its accusations of political corruption by the Liberals. And during the debate on the address, in February 1912, Bonar Law made a serious mistake over National Insurance which 'caused much trouble'³⁰. These early nerves were not helped by the ridicule he received from Asquith: 'His scorn about the "new style", his patronising airs, and a provocative attitude of supercilious superiority - all these were small and mean'³¹. Such belittlements did not assist Bonar Law's quest for approval and standing. Nor did it endear

him to other Tory leaders, many of whom may have shared Asquith's disdain.

Over-compensating for his early nerves and his isolation from the leadership, Bonar Law was too deferential towards his colleagues. Hugh Cecil wrote of the new leader that he 'was the nicest and most amiable of men and also unfortunately very modest'; not qualities which inspired authority and obedience³². These features were exacerbated when Balfour returned to the Commons. 'His presence I am afraid a little overwhelms and oppresses B.L....consequently the presence of Arthur makes him feel his immeasurable inferiority'³³. With Lansdowne he was also careful, deferential in tone, ensuring that any decision was taken jointly. He also leaned heavily on Balcarres for guidance, information, organisation and advice, and he assiduously kept up a regular correspondence with other Tory leaders, asking for views and comments. It was all very different from Balfour.

His leadership might have been even more precarious were it not for several favourable circumstances. The whole episode of having chosen a new leader was itself enough to raise morale, a sort of cathartic experience from which the party had now emerged. Second, a string of by-election victories greeted the new Tory chief. The Tories gained seats from the Liberals in South Somerset and North Ayrshire, and Oldham and Hitchin were retained with enlarged majorities. The Government also appeared to be in serious difficulties during the first months of Bonar Law's leadership. National Insurance was proving a grave political liability; the suffrage question openly split the cabinet, with Asquith pitched against most of his colleagues; and

there were problems over the formulation of the Home Rule bill³⁴. All of these helped to improve Tory party spirits. Steel-Maitland could tell the Birmingham Conservative club of the 'extraordinary improvements in the prospects of the Unionist party.. in the last month or six weeks'³⁵.

II

Nevertheless, Bonar Law's early position was not helped by the series of policy decisions which needed to be taken. Most pressing was the question of the referendum pledge given by Balfour at the December 1910 election. Austen Chamberlain immediately began pressing for its removal and for the introduction of the full Tariff policy. On November 11th 1911 he informed Bonar Law that 'we start afresh. The party will not and ought not to go back to its old position...I could not.. join a government which proposed to handle Tariff Reform in that way'³⁶. The alacrity with which Chamberlain exerted such pressure was good tactics. Bonar Law was "bound" to him after his retirement from the leadership contest, and forced to lean on other close colleagues for support in the shadow cabinet. He was in no position to counter sustained pressure from Tariff Reformers. Equally, Chamberlain must have seen the benefit of someone else's bringing in the full Tariff Reform programme, allowing Bonar Law to become the focus of much free-food and wider party antipathy, so weakening his leadership. Chamberlain would gain the policy, so enhancing his own position, but without incurring the hostility of sections of the party.

Chamberlain was challenged by elements on the traditional Right and from the Unionist free-fooders. Led by Long, the Cecils, Curzon and St Aldwyn, it was a determined movement to remove the food tax incubus once and for all. Despite Bonar Law's long association with Tariff Reform, this group was confident of success. He was seen as a pragmatist who had initiated Balfour's referendum pledge; he was also at that time weak. And, more significantly, the free-fooders believed that if the food tax was to be removed without splitting the party, only a Tariff Reformer could carry out the process. Like the Tariff Reformers, the free-fooders saw the first months of Bonar Law's leadership as the most suitable moment for effecting such a change. 'He will be accessible', wrote Lord Hugh to his brother Robert, 'and not unreasonable and sitting as he does for Lancashire he will as the election approaches at any rate understand the difficulties of Tariff Reform'.³⁷

Bonar Law met these pressures by patching together a compromise. At the first Shadow cabinet meeting under his leadership on February 22nd 1912, with Lansdowne's support he agreed to drop the Referendum without dropping the food tax. At first sight this was a victory for Chamberlain: the referendum was gone, and full Tariff Reform was once more party policy. However, to keep the loyalty of the free-fooders, the alteration was not to be made public and a future removal of the food taxes was not ruled out by Bonar Law. If anything, without the referendum as a screen the move was bound to harden opinion against the taxes. It was, then, a fragile compromise, but one which held for the next nine months. It was also a shrewd one.

Bonar Law had managed to extract both an agreement as well as to delay any final decision. This was vital. He could not impose a settlement so early in his new office, when his position was weak and before opinion had properly formed on the subject. Through delay, he hoped that a clear line of policy would emerge from the backbenches to which he could then give a lead. His handling of this problem emphasised the pragmatic nature of his leadership, although the issue was to have near-disastrous consequences later in the year.

The problem of the House of Lords exercised many in the party but little agreement was possible. Since 1910, the issue had divided those who wanted to preserve from those who would boldly reconstruct. Bonar Law and others avoided concrete reform plans and focused attention on the Government's undermining of the Constitution, and the methods used to implement the Parliament Act. This was a position around which the party could unite, evading the need to think constructively about the Upper chamber. And emphasising the Government's abuse of power was an effective platform for attack: in fact, so powerful was Tory discontent over the treatment of the Second Chamber that much of the anger towards Home Rule later can only be understood in the light of the constitutional methods employed by the Government to enact Home Rule.

More problematical for Bonar Law was National Insurance. When first introduced into the Commons in May 1911, it had evoked a fairly warm response from the Conservative benches. However, the decline in party relations following the Parliament Act, and the resistance from certain vested interests and working-class

communities, prompted many Tories to move against it. As a consequence, Bonar Law inherited a difficult situation. On the one side stood the supporters of the bill, centred around F.E. Smith and the U.S.R.C. They argued its importance for Welfare provision and for portraying the Tories as a party with a social conscience. On the other side, a growing number of Tories opposed it, observing its effect on the Insurance companies, the higher taxation needed to cover it, the system of patronage and appointments established by the scheme, and the coercive nature of the proposals. This division lay behind Bonar Law's embarrassing slip in the Commons, when Asquith extracted from him a rash pledge to repeal the bill; a pledge he was pressured to withdraw, in The Times, by Smith and Chamberlain.

Nonetheless, he managed to salvage the situation with some skill. While accepting the principle of National Insurance, he rejected this particular scheme as over-hasty and unworkable. Also, the manner in which the bill had been steam-rollered through Parliament, via the guillotine and closure, became an excuse to reject the bill. Furthermore, when the bill went to the Lords, Bonar Law and Lansdowne decided to allow it through instead of delaying it through rejection. This had two benefits. Constructive Tories were appeased, with the bill now on the statute book; at the same time, the popular backlash against it worked to the Opposition's electoral advantage. It gave the Tories an effective campaigning issue, rallying to the party those grumbling working-class voters who already had insurance cover, together with many aggrieved middle-class interests, Doctors, Insurance clerks and officials, worried at the drift in

Liberal social policy. Judging by Central Office publications, anti-Insurance feeling was seen as the biggest vote-winner for the Tory party over 1912 and 1913³⁸.

Bonar Law, then, handled potentially dangerous policy decisions well. His leadership was a combination of pragmatism, delay and a focus on topics sure to unify colleagues and raise morale. His relative surefootedness added to the general improvement in party spirit. 'The confidence of the party has greatly risen during the last month. Men who distrusted B.L. have revised their views. They like his demeanour and find him far more attractive as a speaker than was anticipated'³⁹.

But it was, as Balcarres suggests, Bonar Law's attraction as a speaker which was the single most important factor in the consolidation of his position. Reputations were still made and unmade on the floor of the Commons, and here he had a great advantage over Chamberlain, Long and even Balfour. He was already renowned as a very able Parliamentary speaker with a tough debating style: Amery compared it to a 'steel-riveter'⁴⁰, Simon to 'having handfuls of fine, stinging gravel thrown in one's face'⁴¹, while for Garvin he was 'brilliant in opposition'⁴². These qualities were now put to good use. He attacked the government with little reservation or regard, often employing language that was blunt, rude and extreme: 'A leader who, whatever his private misgivings, was prepared to sally forth and deliver hard, and if need be low, blows at the government'⁴³. He introduced a note of bitterness and animosity, evident in his first public speech since becoming leader, at Bootle, where he informed his audience that Nationalists 'are just now the mildest

mannered men that ever cut a throat or scuttled a ship'.⁴⁴

This "new style" of Bonar Law's achieved a number of purposes. It appealed over the heads of the Tory leadership to the rank and file members in Parliament, to the young men on the backbenches keen for a fight, and even to the local associations and the mass of party activists, agents, canvassers and supporters outside Parliament. He thus built up his influence and support within important sections of the party, acting perhaps as a counter-weight to his relative weakness within the leadership. It also brought him closer to party opinion. By 1911 party sentiment was changing under a variety stimulants: three election defeats, the loss of the Lords' veto power, a constitution in suspense, innovative Liberal financial legislation and a general belief that the Government had broken many of the 'dominant British values of fair play, free speech and toleration'.⁴⁵ As a result the Parliamentary party was angry and frustrated. There appeared to be from 1909 onwards a qualitative change in the nature of Conservative responses to such developments; a general shift to the right by all Tories. Something of the diehard spirit of 1911 had entered mainstream party sentiment. In this situation, Bonar Law's strong language found a receptive audience. 'The party, in its subconscious way, likes Bonar Law's attitude precisely because it lacks those very qualities which in a Gladstone or a Balfour would conform to high Parliamentary tradition...our friends in the country like Bonar Law because his attitude is uncompromising'.⁴⁶

His tough new style also distinguished him from Balfour. This was of no small importance, especially after the latter re-

entered Parliament in the spring of 1912. Balfour still attracted the sympathies of many within the party and had the 'old gang', as Balcarres and Lee noted, agitating against Bonar Law for his return to the leadership⁴⁷. Balfour was also aided, unconsciously, by Asquith, who belittled the new leader. In portraying Bonar Law as an inexperienced upstart, Asquith exacerbated Tory leadership problems by commanding moderate and implicitly Balfourian virtues. Assuming a new style enabled Bonar Law to meet this threat, and align a sizeable number of the backbenchers behind him: accordingly the returning Balfour appeared out of tune with the party. By the middle of December Balcarres could note that 'A.J.B.'s absence passes unnoticed'⁴⁸. A bold approach also united the party. Many on the traditional Right slowly welcomed Bonar Law's defiant tone, recalling the days of the great Lord Salisbury, whilst Milner, Selborne and Smith began to see Bonar Law as a leader they could follow: as, perhaps, the real heir to Joseph Chamberlain, a view which implicitly weakened Austen. It also drew Carson and Ulster Unionists towards him, no small consideration with Home Rule soon to be introduced.

It was, then, his pugnacious style which enabled Bonar Law gradually to cement his position. He slowly earned the party's loyalty. The effectiveness of his response to the more polished Liberal performances served to raise morale and his own standing, and a determined lead gave the party a sense of unity.

However, the revival of Conservative fortunes over this period had much to do with by-election victories, Government splits and National Insurance: Tory high spirits had a temporary quality about them. The Government, on the other hand, with four years before the next required election, would soon regain its momentum, with such radical reforms as Home Rule, Disestablishment and Land Reform on the horizon. By contrast, Tories faced the prospect of four years in opposition. They were divided over Tariff policy, and they had little new to offer to counter Liberal social radicalism. What was new, such as the various proposals of the U.S.R.C.⁴⁹, were likely to provoke as much party resistance as support. Most demoralising of all was their inability to stem the course of Liberal legislation in the circumstances created by the Parliament Act. This latter constraint was of critical importance to the party over these last years of peace; it was the source of much antipathy towards the Government, and was the origin of notions widespread within Tory circles that they were in the midst of a silent revolution. Balfour, speaking at Haddington on October 8th, said that the nation was experiencing a 'ministerialist revolution'⁵⁰. Such feelings helped to weaken obligations to conform to normal Parliamentary behaviour, to enhance the attractiveness of extreme methods, and even to question the basis of constitutional rule itself. The party was in danger of spiralling out of control or even becoming unleadable.

Under these circumstances, Bonar Law considered several strategic decisions as necessary to ensure his survival as leader. First, the need to locate a single, all-embracing cause

with which to "stump" the country and rally support among large sections of the electorate. The policy needed to be high-profile yet unlikely to divide the party. Second, to aim to return the Conservative party to power as quickly as possible. Only office could enable them to set about repairing the constitution, heal their internal wounds and allow Bonar Law to build up his own prestige and authority within Tory ruling circles.

National Insurance might constitute such a cause; widely unpopular amongst key social groups which the Tories would need to win over, it was an effective issue on public platforms. However, it divided the party, especially when alternatives to the Liberal scheme were required; Bonar Law had slipped badly on this issue in February. And, given the complexity of the measure, it was difficult to establish a clear line of attack. By 1912 it had passed into law, and its electoral value was therefore a diminishing return. He turned instead to the issue of Government corruption. This was more effective, since it avoided the detail of legislation but made for a clear theme of attack. It could draw on a range of topics: the Government's broken promise on the preamble to the Parliament bill; their bargain with the Irish over Home Rule and the fact, so Tories argued, that that issue had never been before the electorate in December 1910; the patronage system established by National Insurance; and the payment of M.P.s. At Bootle on December 7th, Bonar Law referred to the payment of M.P.s as a 'back pay grab.. as narrow an approach to personal corruption as has been seen in the House of Common's for a hundred years'. The coming Home Rule bill was 'a skeleton in the cupboard.. one of the most dishonest things which

has ever been done by any political party'⁵¹. On January 26th, at the Albert Hall, he noted the Government's skill in 'electioneering and the small trickery of politics.. the methods of the Artful dodger may succeed in small things they will never succeed in big issues'⁵². They were a 'revolutionary committee.. (and)...revolutionary governments are always corrupt. They have succeeded in six years in creating a political spoils system which already rivals that of the United States... they are not only gamblers but gamblers who load the dice. They must at all costs pack the jury, for the one thing they dare not do is to face the electors whom they have deluded'⁵³.

The issue of Government corruption was a good choice. It gave latitude to Bonar Law to engage his debating style of 'biting phrases and.. incisive exposure'⁵⁴; it avoided statements on policy, and thus potential divisions; and it satisfied Tory frustrations. As The Morning Post commented, 'the harder Mr Bonar Law hits the better his followers will be pleased'⁵⁵. It won him increasing sympathy from the backbenches, although it upset some of the more staid elements within the party, particularly the 'old gang' who looked to Balfour⁵⁶. More importantly, the attacks on Government corruption during the winter of 1911 fed automatically into his attacks on Home Rule. In some respects his stance on corruption was never dropped, but instead absorbed into the growing debate over Home Rule, and it was Home Rule which offered Bonar Law the best relief from all the problems he faced. It was an issue which drew on deep veins of sentiment within Conservative circles, one with which he could unify the party. It was a cause to take to the country and rally

popular opinion, and it offered a possible means, as we will see, of returning the Conservatives to power before 1915, the latest date for the next election. Home Rule presented Bonar Law with an issue of enormous advantage, both for the Tory party and for his own position as leader.

IV

The campaign against Home Rule predated his accession to the leadership. Since 1910, Ireland had intermittently been at the centre of Westminster politics. With the passing of the Parliament Act, attention now focused much more clearly on Ireland. Diehard sections which were angry and frustrated after August 1911 eagerly needed a new crusade; Carson, sensing this frustration, lamented to Lady Londonderry of the 'depth of despair and dissatisfaction' within the party. He therefore sought to give 'something more than a gentlemanly lead'⁵⁷. At Craigavon on September 28th he launched a fresh attempt to remuster the diehards and so propel the party in a more vigorous direction. He channelled the spirit of resistance into a new struggle against Home Rule, and into the defence of Ulster: Ulster was to be the new last ditch. This reorientation of the Tory Right towards a firm line on Ulster can be detected in the Halsbury Club's announcements on October 12th and 18th of its decision to continue, 'To become a fighting body for the furtherance of Unionist policy' and 'in particular stress is laid upon the necessity of the position in Ulster being made clear to the electorate'⁵⁸.

Ulster had much to recommend it to diehard elements. It was an area fiercely loyal to Britain, displaying all those martial qualities many thought had been extinguished by soft, liberal measures: grim determination, industriousness, loyalty to the crown, and a willingness to fight to stay within the British state. Ulster was also the achilles heel of any Home Rule bill. Without the industry or finance of the northern counties a self-governing Ireland was thought to be inoperable⁵⁹. As Carson told a Dublin audience on October 10th, 'if Ulster succeeded Home Rule is dead. Home Rule for Ireland was impossible without Belfast'⁶⁰. The central question was how to ensure that Ulster was excluded. Here, Craig and his orchestration of Ulster's resistance to Home Rule was crucial. Such preparations would force the Government to back down or to offer a compromise which would, in practice, destroy the bill. Alternatively, it would force the Government to coerce Ulster into the bill, a course which would destroy the Government's liberal credentials and involve the certainty of popular outcry. 'Which horn of the dilemma', Strachey wrote in The Spectator, 'they will impale themselves upon it is not for us to say positively but that they must be impaled on one is clear'⁶¹.

If Home Rule could be stopped in its tracks, as Carson and other leading diehards like Cecil, Wyndham, Willoughby de Broke and McNeill believed, then the Parliament Act would be shown as unworkable, prompting its repeal and the restoration of a more powerful second chamber. This factor strongly appealed to many diehards. Writing to his brother Robert, Hugh Cecil felt that 'political action in all directions should be subservient to the

chief object of restoring an effective second chamber.. never must the constitutional question be allowed to be forgotten⁶². Also by making Home Rule and Ulster central to a new diehard initiative Carson was bidding for the leadership of the Tory Right. Chamberlain, the unacknowledged leader of these sections after his actions over the summer, was imprisoned and increasingly isolated in Tariff Reform. As that issue lost much of its appeal with prosperous conditions by 1912, and was eclipsed by Home Rule, Carson's star replaced Chamberlain's amongst the forward elements. Evidence of this came from F.E. Smith, who had previously rarely left Chamberlain's side but was now recruited as Carson's lieutenant at the start of the Ulster campaign.

The campaign worked in two directions. First, it aimed to awaken English and Scottish constituencies, as Willoughby de Broke said at Morecombe, to 'find some means of dragging this radical government before the bar of public opinion'⁶³. Craig readily admitted the difficulties that this involved; 'living as they do over here (GB) the people are accustomed to the cry "wolf, wolf" (ie) no Home Rule and no-surrender. It has been cried so often that it takes a bit of doing to persuade them'⁶⁴. Ulster was the means to persuade them that 'they are up against the real thing'⁶⁵. To this end, activity amongst the various Unionist associations was increased. The Joint Committee of the U.A.I. continued their saturation campaign in mainland Britain. By December 1911 481 meetings had been held at various locations and 734,850 leaflets handed out, at a monthly cost of over £2000⁶⁶. They were aided in this by the Women's Ulster Unionist

Association, under the guidance of Lady Londonderry, which sent women platform speakers to various constituencies⁶⁷. At the same time, the U.U.C. executive called for an increase in the number of Unionist clubs linked with ones on the mainland under the guidance of the U.C.I. (Unionist Clubs of Ireland), which by February 1912 claimed to have 68 such links⁶⁸. The U.U.C. also encouraged clubs to send Nationalist newspapers to prominent individuals in Britain, to reveal the true face of Irish Nationalism beneath the moderate, law-abiding one Redmond revealed on English platforms. Ulster was not just relying on itself, as it claimed, but was actively trying to influence the British electorate.

More dramatically, Unionist leaders such as Carson, Long, Smith, McNeill and James Campbell launched upon a series of public speeches. Carson toured Scotland in early December, and spoke almost continuously through the end of 1911 and into 1912 at various locations in England and Ireland. Long spoke at Manchester on October 4th, at Stockport on the 19th, and at the Leeds party Conference on November 17th where he moved the resolution against Home Rule. Long's star, like Carson's, was rising at this time, largely as a result of his actions over the leadership but also through his solid Irish connection. Balcarres noted that he 'seems to have established much popularity'⁶⁹. Smith too rose in public (though not party) esteem, sharing the platform with Long at Manchester, speaking at Glasgow on the 11th and at Bedford on January 9th⁷⁰, and even engaging with Redmond in a controversy in the pages of The Times.

This series of high-profile speeches against Home rule

culminated on January 22nd and 23rd in a massive Unionist campaign throughout Lancashire and Cheshire. Most of the Tory leadership took part: Carson, Chamberlain, Smith, Wyndham, Long, McNeill, Willoughby de Broke, Campbell, Middleton, and Hugh and Robert Cecil. This northern campaign was timed as a lead-up to Bonar Law's Albert Hall speech on January 26th, and as a warning to the Government before the reopening of Parliament. Yet even at this early stage their speeches reveal a range of different opinions: differences which would become marked later in the struggle. Long and Middleton studiously focused on opposing Home Rule for the whole of Ireland rather than concentrating solely on Ulster. Chamberlain seemed to favour a devolutionary scheme, while Carson stuck firmly to Ulster grievances, as did Smith in words strangely prescient of Bonar Law's later Blenheim palace pledge: 'there is no length to which Ulster will not be entitled to go, however desperate or unconstitutional in carrying on the quarrel.. in any resistance to which Ulster might be driven.. she would command your support and she would command my support'⁷¹.

The second direction taken by the campaign was that in addition to an interest in electioneering in England and Scotland, Ulster continued to organise its own defences. In January the various Ulster associations were centralised when the Belfast Corporation agreed to let the old town hall as a central H.Q⁷². A new Unionist Defence Fund committee was set up in January 1912 under Lord Dunleath⁷³. This would not only raise extra finance from Belfast and the surrounding areas, but would also coordinate spending throughout the various branches of Unionist activity⁷⁴. Most importantly, concrete plans for a

provisional government began to be drawn up by a select group, the 'commission of five'⁷⁵. At Omagh on January 5th Carson admitted that if Home Rule were forced on them, they would 'take matters into their own hands and keep it in their own hands until they were admitted back to what was their birthright'⁷⁶. Craig, on the same day, repeated that 'there remained nothing now to be done but calmly and steadily make preparations'⁷⁷. The commission of five was also to coordinate all the preparations in Ulster and to keep Carson informed of developments. 'Broadly speaking', Craig informed Carson, 'we are making it an Ulster Question'⁷⁸. To this end, arms continued to enter the province. Craig admitted to Carson in mid-September 1911 that 'our efforts at importing arms have at last been crowned with success'⁷⁹. The extent of this should not be over-emphasised at this stage: the imports were still small, and seizures frequent. In September, arms were stopped by customs, and it was decided to halt importations for a while⁸⁰.

Making it an Ulster, rather than an Irish, question created uneasiness amongst Southern Unionists. It was significant that when Carson spoke to a Dublin audience on the 10th of October, he explained Ulster's role as simply the best weapon to defeat the bill and the establishment of a Provisional Government as a last resort⁸¹. Carson was leader of the Irish Unionist party and a sitting member for Dublin University, not an Ulsterman. His campaign had therefore to be against Home Rule for all of Ireland not just in favour of the exclusion of the Northern province. Yet Southern Unionism remained suspicious. The idea of a Provisional Government smacked of an independent Ulster allowing the other

three provinces to go their own way. The Times correspondent in Dublin noted in October that 'Ulster and the South attach different values to different parts of the Irish Unionist policy'⁸². The Irish Times noted that 'the programme of the U.U.C. may not have the approval of all Unionists even in Ireland... (some) may think he (Carson) has said too much and gone too far...it will be time enough to talk about the last ditch when the last ditch is in sight'⁸³. Carson was worried about such divisions within Irish Unionism, confiding to Hugh Cecil that 'the difficulties have been that the older leaders such as Sinclair fear it may look like an abandonment of the rest of Ireland'⁸⁴. From the autumn onwards, Carson was increasingly associated with Ulster as opposed to Irish Unionism; which explains why distinct defenders of Southern Unionism arose a little later in the shape of Midleton, Long and Lansdowne.

The autumn and winter of 1911/1912 saw the escalation of the Ulster revolt. Craig and Carson had committed the province to resisting government legislation when it was implemented, and to preparing for armed insurrection. They drew overt support from some backbench Tories, and the private sympathies of many more. Any leader of the Conservative party (when the revolt was initiated it was still Balfour) would thus be severely constrained in determining Home Rule policy. This constraint had been the objective of Carson and Craig: the former telling Lady Londonderry towards the end of August that 'I feel very doubtful about the way our leaders intend to fight Home Rule but in any event I will lead for myself this time'⁸⁵, and (early in October), still with Balfour in mind, that 'milk and water won't

satisfy the thirst of the party'.⁸⁶

The accession of Bonar Law did not seem seriously to prejudice Carson's campaign. Carson thought him inexperienced on Irish affairs and therefore likely to defer to his judgement. Bonar Law was seen as weak, and unable to challenge the drive towards a diehard stance. He faced then a difficult situation, with a surge to the right by sections of the party, led by an increasingly powerful Carson trying to dictate policy. It was the situation Balfour had faced after 1906 with Tariff Reform, and, more explosively, with the diehards over the summer of 1911.

V

The re-emergence of the Home Rule issue in late 1911 also involved the Tory federalists. October 1910 had been the high-point of their initiative; the general election defeat and the inexorable progress of the Parliament bill shifted Tory sympathies to the right, and away from federalism. By late 1911, however, events made for a more favourable political climate. The Parliament Act left a constitution in suspense and a second chamber in need of repair. November brought the removal of Balfour, with his traditional views of the Union, and the arrival of a leader known for his support of Tariff Reform, his previous attendance at several Round Table moots, and his close acquaintance with such federal sympathisers as Chamberlain, Goulding, Beaverbrook and Garvin. W.B. Johnston, writing to Milner, reflected that 'the advent of a new leader of the Unionist party appears to be an opportune time for calmly and

fearlessly reviving our programme and strengthening the weak places⁸⁷. And the rise in Ulster of an extreme sectarian campaign against Home Rule provoked support for a moderate cross-party agreement.

Support came from a variety of sources. Late in 1911 Dunraven published The Legacy of Past Years, in which he argued that a federal solution was essential for Ireland⁸⁸. Moreton Frewen, a keen federalist with strong contacts with Unionist leaders, wrote to Long inviting him to meet with himself, Dunraven and Healy. Although this offer does not appear to have been taken up, it suggests a perception of Long as more flexible and constructive than his later reputation suggests⁸⁹. Earl Grey wrote to Bonar Law, urging him 'not to take up a non-possumus against all forms of Home Rule': 'we can now consider, without any reproof from our consciences, the expediency of granting to the people of Ireland powers of local self-govt, somewhat similar to those enjoyed by the people of Quebec'⁹⁰. Milner's acolyte Amery, having recently returned from a fact-finding visit to Ireland, flooded The Morning Post with seventeen articles attacking Gladstonian- style Home Rule as incompatible with federal Home Rule⁹¹. And Horace Plunkett, the veteran Irish civil servant, through the good offices of Robinson, editor of The Times, requested a meeting to impress on Bonar Law the merits of positive proposals⁹².

It was the activities of Milner and Oliver which were most significant. Oliver was keen to prevent a federal solution for Ireland being swamped by a revived diehard campaign led by Carson. He contacted Bonar Law and Chamberlain, urging the latter

to avoid 'trumpeting all over the country against a Home Rule bill' and to steer a different course to Carson⁹³. He also urged Garvin and Robinson to take up a devolutionary line in their papers . 'Ulster shouting and drumbeating and treasonable Tom Foolery', Oliver declared to Robinson. 'I am pleased to see the Irish Times has been pole-axing Carson and co'⁹⁴. He was evidently not successful, since he wrote to Robinson two weeks later regretting the support The Times was giving to Carson: 'But, but, but, but you must, must, must make up your blooming mind where you intend to go to'⁹⁵. This off-the-cuff comment by Oliver reveals much about the federalist mind: that Carson's strategy was a hopeless one which would end in civil war whether Home Rule was implemented or not, whereas federalism provided a more coherent and safer approach. Selborne, in a letter to Lady Londonderry, concurred: 'a year's fighting with a vengeance will knock them about tremendously but we shall not beat them in the House of Commons nor force them to a dissolution'⁹⁶.

Milner, however, thought more strategically about federalism. He wrote to Oliver on October 13th: 'you are right to abstain from immediate, direct advocacy of federal Home Rule'⁹⁷. The time was not as favourable as many had thought. What was needed, Milner explained, was a sense of crisis such as had existed late in 1910. 'It may be that an intransigent attitude on the part of Ulster, if it takes a responsible and not its present untenable form, is a necessary element in the working out of a settlement on our lines'⁹⁸. In this way, Milner drew Oliver away from his hostile stance to Carson's "plan of campaign", and made him and others think about the long term

prospects of their mission. Carson's campaign was useful to prove that Gladstonian Home Rule was unworkable. Garvin thought along similar lines: 'It is no good offering terms which Ulster [?] would certainly reject [?] So they (events) will get worse before they will get better and we shall come nearer chaos though I hope not into it'⁹⁹. George Wyndham wrote to Chamberlain in support of 'ultimately... a federal U.K... meanwhile for a line of vigorous criticism and attack'¹⁰⁰.

What had emerged by early 1912 was a consensus amongst certain influential federalists about Carson's campaign in Ulster and an ultimate federal solution to the various constitutional problems. They were not incompatible, as Earl Grey, Dunraven, Frewen and the Round Tablers thought, but complementary: Carson would build up a crisis to which a federal alternative would become a viable and attractive alternative. Oliver, convinced by Milner, urged on Chamberlain 'silence on federalism'¹⁰¹, and to Steel-Maitland, himself a sympathiser, put the strategic case for federalism most clearly. 'I am against preaching or even hinting at federalism at the present time.. This is not so much for the sake of the Unionist party as for federalism. If you go spouting at everybody the Government will be forced to go one better.. The time for federalism is not now but later when you have got yourself locked in a constitutional impasse'¹⁰².

Other federal supporters disagreed with the strategic federalism of Milner and (later) Oliver. The extremism exhibited by Carson would alienate public opinion: 'Carson has done more harm to Irishmen...than Redmond has. The British elector has a nose for rotten arguments'¹⁰³. It would also throw moderate

Liberals or even Nationalists back into an extreme position, lessening the chance of a compromise. As Earl Grey warned: 'the refusal of the Unionist party to even consider H.R. made it necessary for Redmond.. contrary to his own inclinations to fall back upon the extreme party'¹⁰⁴. If the Tory party signalled a moderate and pragmatic attitude to some form of Irish self-government, it might strengthen the hands of Churchill and Grey, as Balfour had tried to do early in 1910 over Lords reform.

But opinion was moving firmly in the opposite direction. For strategic federalists, the opening of the new session in 1912 brought little positive response. Carson ridiculed the idea of Home Rule all Round, referring to it as 'an old false and ridiculous argument.. when dug out of the grave.. it smelled badly'¹⁰⁵. The Government were not likely to move at this early stage. Nationalists remained highly suspicious, seeing in Federalism the negation of their ideal of an independent Ireland. Nor did Labour sympathise. The Parliament Act held the opportunity for remedial legislation to be passed quickly, and they had little incentive to support a reformed, and more conservative, second chamber. Nonetheless, Milner, Oliver, Amery, Wyndham, Garvin and possibly Chamberlain were all thinking federally but thinking about the longer term. In the meantime they supported the violent lurch to the right precipitated by Carson, since it made the spectre of civil war loom a little closer and promised conditions where federalism might become popular.

Bonar Law worked out his stance on Home Rule against the background of Carson's Ulster revolt and the sympathy by many for a tough, militant campaign. In the months leading up to the bill's introduction on April 11th 1912, he took a number of decisions about how to oppose it. He decided to resist Home Rule on the constitutional ground that the issue had never been put to the British electorate, and that until the people were consulted it had no Parliamentary mandate. This stance allowed him firmly to support Ulster and the position of resistance she was taking up: if Home Rule was unconstitutional, Ulster was entitled, even obliged, to oppose it. Bonar Law's line was therefore simple: either the Government held an election, or Ulster resisted Home Rule and provoked civil war in Ireland, supported by himself and a Tory party which he committed to that policy in July 1912. It was power-politics in its purest form, stripped of its Parliamentary veil. Ulster would be the means to force the Government to an election and to return the Tories to office.

Bonar Law's tough ideas on Ireland had been evident before he became leader. In a letter to The Times on July 26th 1911 he suggested that the Home Rule bill could be countered by 'delay.. the Expiring Laws Continuance bill or the Army Annual bill..(to).. make the continuance of the Government impossible and compel an election'¹⁰⁶. On August the 8th, in the Commons, he stated that: 'I say this with absolute deliberation if the people of this country decide that they will make the experiment of Home Rule then... I should say to the loyalists of Ireland

"you have got to submit". On the other hand, I say equally deliberately if this or any other Government try to force through a measure on which there is good reason to believe that the people of this country are not agreed.. I would never, if I were one of those Irish loyalists consent to have such a system forced upon me as part of a corrupt Parliamentary bargain. I believe if this or any other Government attempts it they will find they have broken up the foundations of society in this country and they will not carry their bill¹⁰⁷. Bonar Law was committed, early on, to an extreme line over Ireland and saw in the issue the possibility of bringing the government down.

He was not won over to the cause of Ulster by Carson and the Ulstermen. He certainly received a flood of letters from leading Ulster Unionists; Carson, Nicholson of The Times, Cope-Cornford of the U.D.L., Sir John Lonsdale, and Tom Sinclair had all written before the end of November urging a lead on Ulster and Home Rule. This does not prove that Bonar Law was moved by their pressure, although it shows how worried the Ulster Unionists were about his leadership. In any case, Bonar Law was also the focus of federalist pressure: Oliver, Milner and Earl Grey all wrote to or dined with the new leader to cultivate a "constructive" alternative.

Two influences in particular shaped Bonar Law's approach to resist Home Rule. First was his early stand against Government methods and corruption, particularly their departure from constitutional methods, extending into bringing forward major, controversial bills. His speeches at Bootle on December the 7th and the Albert Hall on January the 26th were especially zealous

on these themes. His approach to Home Rule therefore grew out of his attacks on the Government's unscrupulous handling of the constitutional issue. Second was Bonar Law's contact with Strachey of The Spectator. Four days after he was elected leader Strachey sent him a long letter¹⁰⁸; in it, he urged Bonar Law 'to concentrate upon a demand that any county in Ulster shall have the right to refuse to go under a Dublin Parliament' since this tactic 'will wreck Home Rule' and 'drive them either to dropping the bill or to having a dissolution to get them out of their difficulties'¹⁰⁹. Strachey outlined the clear tactical benefits of concentrating on Ulster: 'if this demand (exclusion) is pressed in season and out.. one of two things must happen. Either the Government must yield in which case the Home Rule bill will be killed - Mr Redmond and his friends would never accept it with the contracting-out clause - or the Government must refuse to pass that clause.. In that case the moral right of Ulster to resort to passive resistance will be enormously strengthened'¹¹⁰. Ulster, then, would put Asquith in an intolerable position (what Strachey referred to as a 'reductio ad absurdum argument') from which the only escape would be an election. Bonar Law was clearly moved by such arguments. The next day he sent a copy to Carson, though receiving a frosty reply¹¹¹; and he invited Strachey to Pembroke Lodge for a private talk¹¹².

Whatever the role and importance of Ulster in defeating Home Rule, Bonar Law had to be cautious in associating himself too closely or too quickly with any one section of Unionism. Within Unionism there were powerful and vested interests other than

Ulster. Thus, at his speech in Bootle on December 7th, he avoided any direct reference to Ulster: 'There will be no shrinking from strong action... from any action which we think necessary to defeat one of the most ignoble conspiracies which has ever been formed against the liberties of free-born men'¹¹³. At the Albert Hall on January 26th, he said: 'we who represent the Unionist party in England and Scotland have supported and we mean to support to the end the loyal minority'¹¹⁴. These were relatively ambiguous words, designed to veil his concentration on Ulster.

His speeches in Belfast on April 9th 1912 and on the first reading debate on the 16th were more explicit. But not until July 1912 did the Ulster question come to dominate his attack on Home Rule. To the Duke of Sutherland he confided by July the 2nd: 'as you know the real key to the position is Ulster and the hostility of Ulster to Home Rule'¹¹⁵. At Blenheim Palace he went further, and gave an unequivocal pledge to defend the rights of Ulster. His open-ended declaration of support, so criticised by contemporaries and historians alike, had come slowly and after much consideration of tactics and party opinion; it was not forced upon him by influential leaders. Nor was it a rash decision made out of inexperience; it was a strategic decision taken with a full understanding of the consequences.

How would playing the Ulster card achieve a general election before 1915? This, Bonar Law believed, would arise from the inherent contradictions of Gladstonian Home Rule proposals. At one level the contradiction was one of principle. If Ireland was to be granted self-rule on account of its cultural and religious distinctiveness, then the same arguments could just as easily be

applied to Ulster. The Government chose to ignore this incongruity in their justification of Home Rule for Ireland, an omission all the more glaring, as Tories were quick to point out, given their support for oppressed minorities across the world.

Ulster also involved practical contradictions. If Ulster was determined to stay outside any Home Rule arrangement, then realistically there was little the Government could do. This was made more obvious after 1910 by the increased militarisation of the province. Forcibly to include Ulster would provoke civil war in Ireland, grave political instability at Westminster, and destroy the cabinet's pretensions to a Liberal conscience together with any popular support they might have had. 'How are you going to overcome that resistance?' Bonar Law taunted Asquith during first reading debate¹¹⁶. But excluding Ulster was equally hazardous: without Ulster's wealth, self-government for Ireland was thought to be unworkable. Popular sentiment in Ireland would never accept such an outcome, especially given the growth of a more radical republican sentiment during this period. Nor would opinion in the USA, from whence Redmond obtained much finance, take kindly to this change. Any attempt permanently to exclude Ulster or a sizable segment of it would drive Nationalists to oppose the bill.

The Ulster problem would, one way or another, destroy the attempt to give self-rule to Ireland, and by destroying Home Rule force the Government to an election, either as a way of escaping from a politically impossible situation or as a means of re-establishing public support for their bill. To this Ulster difficulty Bonar Law directed his attack: 'The thing is

impossible. All your talk about details, the union of hearts and the rest of it is a sham. This is a reality. It is a rock and on that rock this bill or any bill like it will make shipwreck¹¹⁷. This was the crux of his whole approach to Home Rule and the Ulster question: that it could secure an election. For, only if he achieved this objective could he keep the party together. The Tories, by 1912, were not just 'sick with office hunger', but were beginning to question the value of their party and the political system when they could no longer defend them from Lloyd George and could keep such a government in power¹¹⁸. There were dangerous centripetal forces brewing both in the party and within wider Conservative opinion. The desire to keep the Halsbury Club going, the seemingly open dissatisfaction with the Parliamentary system from Milner, Willoughby de Broke, Page-Croft and Winterton, and the popularity of Carson and his campaign, all illustrated such fissiparous tendencies. An electoral victory was vital to weld back together these disparate and disaffected sections of the party. Herein lay the problem: Home Rule might well secure an election; but what was the likelihood of their then winning it?

This has been established as the major problem facing the Edwardian Conservative party¹¹⁹. The two solutions which had recommended themselves to the party under such circumstances in the past seemed obsolete. One was to fall back on the Balfourian method of awaiting the swing of the political pendulum. In ordinary times this would be a sensible, long term strategy. But Liberal Governments of the Edwardian period were seen as a grave danger to the class interests which many in the Tory party

represented. There was a very real sense of desperation by 1911/1912 about removing the Liberals from office. Many Tories felt that they simply could not wait for the pendulum to return - if it ever would. A second possibility was the injection of new ideas: Peel's Tamworth Manifesto, Disraeli's Imperialism and Social Reform, Randolph Churchill's Tory Democracy and (later) Baldwin's New Conservatism, all demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. But Bonar Law's party was barren of new ideas and policies. Tariff Reform, their main constructive policy, caused division and was of declining value as prosperity returned. Liberals were outdistancing them upon social policy, in spite of the attempts by the U.S.R.C. to project a uniquely Tory social programme. In any case, the Tories were faced with the problem of how to pay for social reforms, given their reluctance to increase taxes (the Liberal way) and the practical flaws in Tariff Reform as a source of revenue. More ominously, Lloyd George was preparing a radical Land Campaign to sweep the countryside out of the control of Tory squires.

Neither of the above options were relevant for Bonar Law in 1911. Instead, he adopted a third course to shift the party from its electoral trough, one which took it sharply to the right, embracing a tough stand against Home Rule founded on the Ulster question, and away from the moderate, centrist path along which most other revivals had occurred (Peel in the 1830s, Disraeli in the 1850s, Baldwin in the 1920s). This was essentially a negative approach to winning public support, appealing to what people did not want rather than providing what they did. It sprang from the absence of anything else as effective and as impressive; it hid

the vacuum of positive ideas and constructive planning.

But championing Ulster and a tough line against Home Rule did evoke a number of traditional and popular images and concerns, making it an effective campaigning issue. It incorporated Imperial sentiment, the democratic rights of minorities, opposition to political deceit, anti-Popery and the defence of religious toleration, employment and economic prosperity, British citizenship, the protection of property, National defence and resistance to lawlessness. It was a classic Conservative appeal to traditional group sentiments over sectional and un-English changes. It was able to attract support to the party on account of the variety of concerns it raised on a broad social and regional basis; it was an issue on which the Tories could sweep through a variety of different constituencies and rally support in strategically important areas: Lancashire, Scotland and, perhaps, London. Ulster touched the Non-Conformist conscience. There was little chance of converting many of these sections permanently to Conservatism, but by arousing the Ulster nerve they might be persuaded to abstain from supporting the Government at the election. Abstention was a 'potent weapon of protest in a plurality system' as the favourable results of 1874 and 1895 testified¹²⁰. 'I am sure you are aware', Tom Sinclair reminded Bonar Law, 'that the great obstacle in our way in defeating H.R. lies in the attitude of English Non-Conformists.. nevertheless.. now that the H of L's question has been dealt with they may now be more willing to listen to appeals from their non-episcopal brethren'¹²¹. Here, then, was a line which responded to the party's Edwardian dilemma

by offering a means to force an election and the ability to win it.

This approach to Home Rule, however, entailed considerable risks. First, what if the threat from Ulster was mere bluff? Everything hinged on Ulster convincing Asquith that he could not proceed with Home Rule because of fear of civil war. Yet parading with wooden pikes, frequent outbreaks of sectarian unrest and even, perhaps, 'the frothings of Sir Edward Carson' did little to convince opinion that Ulster meant business¹²². This might explain why it was not until his Blenheim Palace speech in July 1912 that Bonar Law felt confident enough to hitch the Tory party to the Ulster wagon. However, once he was committed, the prestige of having the leader of the Conservative party backing the Ulster cause was of great importance, inspiring activity, raising morale and encouraging Ulster actually to 'go to any length'. Bonar Law's unconditional pledge at Blenheim did much to make the Ulster threat a real one: at the very least, it dramatically raised the stakes if Asquith thought Ulster was still bluffing.

Second was the danger that the Ulster campaign and its sympathisers inside the Tory party could not be controlled. With regard to Ulster itself, Bonar Law could do little beyond reiterating in speeches the need for order and "cool heads", and maintaining regular contact with Craig and Carson. With elements inside the Tory party, Bonar Law exerted control by placing himself at the head of their shift to the right, adopting a tough stance to assimilate the diehard movement to the official leadership and avoiding being marginalised by Carson and his campaign. These political considerations are often ignored by

historians, who feel that his 'public recklessness in 1912 cannot be justified'¹²³. As Balcarres shrewdly noted, 'had Bonar Law confined himself to polite expressions of sympathy and regret, the responsibility resting on his shoulders would be increased tenfold by the ultimate catastrophe'¹²⁴.

However, assimilating, by championing, the threat from the Right was dangerous. There was no certainty that Bonar Law could divert or regulate passions to keep them within constitutional boundaries. Nor could he be sure he would not become a prisoner of those forces. Most serious was the question of how public opinion would react to such a growth of extremism led, apparently, by him. Party spirits might well be revived, but that would be of little comfort if the party lost support in the process. These problems were to be met by the clear limits he placed on his extreme language and pledges of support to Ulster: everything was conditional on a general election. An election was his basic aim, but it was also a constitutional sheet-anchor designed to allay public anxieties about Tory extremism, to lock the Right into a constitutional trajectory while simultaneously giving him the rhetorical scope to appeal to their martial instincts. 'A Revolution', he told his audience at Bootle, 'can only be carried out in one of two ways: it could be carried with difficulty by armed forces: it could be carried if the clear and the decisive views of the people of the U.K. were given for betrayal of their fellow subjects in Ireland. It could be carried in one of these ways; but believe me it cannot and never will be carried by fraud'¹²⁵. Harnessing everything to an election is the clearest evidence that Bonar Law was following a subtly

different course to Carson and the Ulster Unionists, and was not their captive: the Ulstermen were not constrained by such irrelevancies as an election. This point was made by Bonar Law on April the 16th: 'If this bill were openly submitted to the people of this country there would be a difference between the Unionists in England and the Unionists in Ireland. Now there is none. We can imagine nothing which the Unionists in Ireland can do which will not be justified against a trick of this kind. And you will not succeed'¹²⁶. Unconstitutional behaviour had become, for Bonar Law, a defensible response to the Liberals' own departures from probity.

By stressing the Ulster difficulty, he risked creating a third problem: that Asquith might introduce an amendment for some form of separate treatment for Ulster. This would be difficult to oppose: Ulster would have been saved, and a moral victory won against the implementation of full Home rule. But such a compromise would conflict with Bonar Law's concealed purpose of exploiting the Ulster problem to provoke an election. The likelihood of Asquith actually being able to reach such a compromise was uncertain; it depended upon Nationalist agreement to the exclusion of Ulster. This was something that Bonar Law came to believe was not possible, especially since his tough and extreme language would help provoke the Nationalists into an equally tough and uncompromising stance, restricting Asquith's ability to win them over to exclusion. Earl Grey touched the essence of this when he warned Bonar Law that 'the refusal of the Unionist party to even consider Home Rule made it necessary for Redmond.. contrary to his own inclinations to fall back upon the

extreme party'.¹²⁷ Bonar Law's determined stance actually helped limit Asquith's line of retreat over a compromise offer.

Asquith had another potential line of retreat: a coalition of Liberals and Tories to force a solution on Ireland against both Irish parties. The conference of 1910 had left lingering support for this method: the second chamber was still unreformed, and federalist sympathy was prominent in political circles, a clear basis of cooperation existed. With the Government also facing industrial action and Suffragette protest, a pro-order coalition seemed an attractive possibility. One historian has even gone so far as to stress the centrifugal tendencies within both parties over these years, leading inexorably to the coalition of 1916: 'In the climactic crises which followed over Ireland.. the coalition was consistently the first resort of both the distraught and insurgent politicians'.¹²⁸ But such collusion would have split the Tory party, driving Carson and the Right into open revolt (as happened in 1915/16) and weakening Bonar Law's own position. Amidst the more brilliant lights of Churchill, Smith, Lloyd George, and Balfour, and marginalised by a hostile Asquith angered at the pretensions of 'the wee Glasgow Bailie', Bonar Law's power would have been severely circumscribed. Coalition would also allow the Government to escape from their Irish imbroglio without the need to call a general election, thus negating Bonar Law's point in following a tough Ulster line in the first place. Here again, his bitter language and uncompromising stance worked to his advantage, convincing Asquith that such a pro-order alliance was not possible. Adversarial politics over Home rule, as with Lord

Salisbury in 1886, polarised the two parties, thus precluding any centrist or collusionist inclinations. It kept Asquith impaled on his acute dilemma of civil war or an election, a dilemma with which Bonar Law enjoyed taunting the Prime Minister. 'I say to the Government and I say to the Hon Member for Waterford you will not carry this bill without submitting it to the people of this country, and, if you make an attempt, you will succeed only in breaking our Parliamentary machine'¹²⁹.

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CHAPTER THREE

I

The third Home Rule bill was introduced on April 11th 1912, and first reading lasted for three days. Second reading started on April 30th, and finished on May 9th (seven days) before moving into committee at the beginning of June. Progress on the bill was slow, though this was due as much to the Government's over-loading the timetable as to Tory delaying tactics. Important sections of the bill (finance) remained undebated when Parliament rose on August 2nd. The Committee stage was therefore carried over into the autumn session, and a closure resolution was passed when Parliament reassembled in October to expedite the process, in spite of Asquith's pledge to allow the bill 'free and unfettered debate'. Progress of the bill thereafter became mechanical, even punctual. This inculcated lethargy on both sides, though only after several interesting incidents. The first was an amendment by Agar-Robartes, a Liberal, which sought to exclude the four Protestant counties of Armagh, Antrim, Londonderry and Down from the workings of the bill; it was defeated by a reduced Government majority of 69. More spectacularly, on November 11th, the Government were defeated by 21 on a major financial resolution, provoking uproar and resulting in Parliament being suspended for a week. On New Year's day 1913 Carson, on behalf of the Ulster members, introduced another exclusion amendment, this time for all nine counties of Ulster. Again the Government chose to see Ireland as a "seamless

garment", and rejected it. With the rejection of Carson's amendment, apathy returned to the proceedings. The report stage finished on January 13th 1913, and third reading wound up two days later. The bill went up to the Lords on the 27th. On January 30th the upper house unsurprisingly rejected it, on second reading, by a majority of 257.

The Parliamentary struggle against the bill was paralleled by a campaign of protest outside. This campaign over the spring and summer of 1912 climaxed in September with a series of mass demonstrations across N.E.Ulster, ending on the 28th with the signing of the Covenant in Belfast. The renewed activism against Home Rule of the Tory leadership served to invigorate the party at all levels, and to dilute (or at least paper over) the strains of the previous two years.

For Bonar Law, the first circuit of 1912 was perhaps the high-point of his pre-war leadership. By-elections were running the Tories' way, the Government were visibly in trouble for most of the time, the party was enthused, his style was universally praised in Unionist circles and loathed in Radical ones, concentration on Tariff Reform was receding, and Home Rule held out the opportunity for removing the Government.

However by December 1912 the Government was still in office and Tory strains over Irish policy were slowly beginning to emerge. The Land issue was rising as a new panacea to win back lost Liberal supporters. Most dramatically Bonar Law, by indicating, rather vaguely, that the referendum would no longer apply to Tariff Reform, threw his party into internal strife and his own carefully nurtured leadership into question.

Tory opposition to Home Rule operated on two levels: inside Parliament and outside it, the latter well under way since the Craigavon rally back in September 1911. The fight inside had to wait until Asquith finally introduced the bill on April 11th. The Home Rule bill was similar to those introduced by Gladstone in 1886 and 1893. It called for the establishment of an Irish Parliament and an Irish senate. These would have power over certain local affairs including, unlike the 1886 and 1893 bills, the Post Office, and Customs and Excise and Judicial appointments. Reserved to the Imperial Parliament were: control of the Army and Navy, Foreign policy, temporary control of the Irish constabulary, taxation (though the Irish were to have some powers to raise taxes), Land Purchase, and pensions and National Insurance. In addition, the Imperial Exchequer would grant to Ireland, through the Transferred Sum, monies which it could spend as it saw fit (although an Exchequer board was constituted to oversee financial relations). Also, Parliament was to have an absolute veto, exercised through the Lord Lieutenant, over all Irish legislation (a "right" Parliament had over all colonial Governments, but one rarely used). A residue of 42 Irish representatives were to remain at Westminster, thus avoiding the confusion of the famous "in/out" clause in the 1893 act. As with its two predecessors, no special treatment was offered in this Act to Ulster or to the northern Protestant areas: 'we cannot admit', Asquith announced, 'the right of a minority of the

people... to veto the verdict of the vast body of their countrymen¹. The 1912 bill was to be, however, so Asquith professed when introducing it, 'the first step and only the first step in a larger and more comprehensive policy'². In other words, it was the first step towards a federated United Kingdom.

The 1912 bill was following Gladstonian precedents. What was markedly different in 1912 were the circumstances in which the bill was introduced. Ireland was now relatively prosperous. Ownership of land was more widely spread. Social discontent had waned since the days of the Land League and the Plan of Campaign. Outrages, boycotts, maiming etc were still reported (notably by the Unionist press), but few could deny the decline in their occurrence. In Ireland a moderate body of opinion had developed, looking for a gradual and consensual remedy to Ireland's problems, and typified by such agencies as the All-Ireland League and the Irish Landowners Convention of the early 1900s. In Britain too the situation had changed. Irish affairs tended to weary rather than to excite the electorate³. Much the same might have been said of the Unionist party. A new generation of Tories sat on the green benches, without first-hand knowledge of the events of the 1880s and 1890s, and more sympathetic to constructive solutions than the preservation of the status-quo. Most important was the fact that the Tories were now operating in a post-Parliament Act landscape, where the House of Lords no longer controlled the ultimate destinies of the Empire. Instead, the Government (and, for Tories, the Nationalists) were firmly in control.

Several parts of the bill were particularly vulnerable to

Tory attack. The first of these was the Government's claim that the bill was to be a stepping stone to full federation of the U.K. This could be exposed as a sop to the more anxious Liberal members. 'It is put forward', Carson declared, 'simply for the purpose of pretending that you are only giving to Ireland something which you would also give to England and Scotland... you are only pretending'⁴. And, if the Government's plan really was Home Rule all round, 'was there a mandate for this at the last election?' Carson asked the House on the 11th. 'Was there a mandate for Home Rule for England?'⁵. Equally, giving Ireland power over the Post Office, and her own Customs and Excise, was incompatible with Home Rule all round and, according to Balfour, 'depart(ed) from all English speaking federal practice. Why when the federal scheme is completed and we have before us a systematic edifice of a separate England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (should) one of these should have its own patronage and its own post office'...⁶? It was, as Balfour put it, 'introducing diversity into unity'⁷. It was also bizarre to deal solely with Ireland and to ignore the rest of the U.K. 'What would have been thought of the founders of the American Constitution', he asked the Commons, 'if they decided first on the powers of Massachusetts and left the powers of New York undecided for some remote future'⁸. Most damning was that few true federalists believed the bill to be anything more than a grant of self-rule to Ireland. Lord Dunraven wrote to Carson: 'I differ from you about Home Rule in the abstract: but I agree to a great extent with your views on the present bill'⁹. Attacking the bill's federal pretensions proved a successful line for the

Tories. It embarrassed the ministry, and showed them to be clearly under the Nationalist thumb. And if it could be shown that there was little real federal substance to it, then Liberal federalists might be moved to oppose the bill, if not to line up behind the Unionist forces.

A second aspect of the bill which provoked much Tory criticism were the financial arrangements. The Spectator commented that, apart from Ulster, 'finance is the most important of all the questions raised by the Home Rule bill'¹⁰. The reserved services, such as National Insurance and Pensions, aroused most antipathy on the Tory side: they would cost the British taxpayer £5 million, and could not be fully covered by Irish tax revenues. The threshold of the latter was £3 million (Irish tax was paid into the Imperial Exchequer, and thus not under the control of a Dublin Parliament). This 'bounty' of £2 million did not include such invisible expenses as the cost of Naval and Military expenditure, and contributions towards the National Debt and Foreign representation which, according to The Spectator cost an extra £4 million, and brought the total bill for granting Home Rule to Ireland to £6 million. This allegedly unmasked bogus Government claims to Colonial precedents or national self-determination for Ireland, and contravened the fundamental principle of no taxation without representation: the Imperial Parliament was to grant money to Ireland over which it had no control. Chamberlain seized on this: 'I do raise the strongest objection to voting British money for an Irish Parliament in Dublin to spend, not as we direct, but as they choose and as they direct'¹¹.

Other aspects of the financial arrangements provided opportunities for undermining the bill. Hayes-Fisher ably demonstrated, on first reading, the danger which Home Rule presented to future Irish prosperity. 'Breakup the Parliamentary Union between Great Britain and Ireland', he warned the Commons, 'and you will destroy the credit of Ireland'¹². Amery, on second reading, explored the complicated tax relations between Britain and Ireland. These (he argued) amounted to the Irish Exchequer having the power to raise taxes and customs, but not to lower the Imperial ones which were already operating. This was a would be potential hornets-nest in dealings between the Irish and Imperial Chancellors of the Exchequer. 'In a domain of finance', Amery declared, 'this bill is not going to lead either to economy, co-operation or finality'¹³. Nor were the financial plans of the Government made easier when, on the 19th of April, it rejected its own advisory committee on Irish finance (the Primrose committee), which recommended that the Irish Government should control its own taxation. Few would have questioned The Spectator's analysis that 'if the bill is bad from a constitutional point of view it can only be described as mad from a financial one'¹⁴.

Tory opposition also managed to rise above detailed clause-by- clause criticism of the bill. Two approaches in particular came to dominate many of their speeches, both of which drew inspiration from the lead given by Bonar Law. The first focused on Ulster: the Lords' veto had gone, and changed conditions in the south of Ireland made self-rule a more realistic prospect and, consequently, made Southern Unionism less effective. Ulster

was more central to Tory opposition in 1912 than it had been in 1886 or 1893. Forceful outlines of the Ulster problem came from Bonar Law, Carson, Balfour, Smith and Craig at various stages of the bill's progress. But the most effective intervention came from Hugh Cecil on April 15th: 'I am astonished that the Government really believe it to be possible to force the people of N.E.Ulster to come under the control of a Nationalist Parliament. I think their resistance would be a righteous one'¹⁵. Others also stressed the impossibility of including Ulster: Harry Lawson posed the unanswerable question 'how are you in these days, these democratic days in this democratic age and in this democratic country to force a million men into a system which they refuse to join'¹⁶?

The second approach was peculiar to the struggle of 1912: concentration on the method by which the Government was introducing the bill. Carson touched on the heart of this criticism; 'You are bringing it (Home Rule) in, while the Constitution of the country is in suspense... while the lying preamble remains unrepealed'¹⁷; while the constitution was in suspension, the Government had no right to bring forward major legislation which would further alter it. In addition, the Liberal party had avoided all mention of Home Rule at the 1910 elections, and so the people had never given their considered opinion on the issue. Worse still, Asquith had once said that he would never bring in Home Rule when reliant on Nationalist support. Finally, there was the speed and manner with which the bill was being forced through Parliament, via the guillotine and closure resolutions and with, so Tories thought, no attempt by

the Government and their supporters to meet their arguments. In short, the passage of the Home Rule bill highlighted how far the Government were abusing the Constitution. In this lay the Tory justification for their support of Ulster and their willingness to go to any lengths to secure a general election: the only acceptable constitutional course before the bill became law. Austen Chamberlain, in his first speech on Home Rule during second reading, asked: 'what moral right has the Government to claim obedience to legislation of this character passed in this way? What were the preliminary steps which they paved their way? A conspiracy hatched in secret, nurtured in fraud and trickery by which you snatched support from the electors'¹⁸- words he had only a few months earlier criticised Bonar Law for using. In Glasgow, at St Andrews Hall, Bonar Law was more explicit: 'There is a determination in certain eventualities to resist the Government, a determination the seriousness of which no one recognises more fully than I do... They (the Government) are responsible not because of their policy but because of their methods, not on account of what they propose to do but in the way in which they propose to do it'¹⁹. This sentiment again draws attention to a distinction between Ulster Unionists and Conservatives: the former would be extreme in their resistance whatever the Government's constitutional methods.

III

First and second readings thus saw a variety of not unsuccessful arguments against the bill. As Parliament was breaking for

Whitsuntide (23rd May to 4th June) The Times wrote of 'the remarkable change in the position of the Government over the last six months'²⁰. Since the new year, by-election results had shown a steep fall in support for the Government, and at South Manchester the Liberal candidate was defeated by a Unionist. Signs that ministerial ranks were unsettled appeared. Both Churchill and Grey, during second reading, had acknowledged Ulster as a serious obstacle, and had implied a willingness to grant some form of separate treatment, remarks which greatly agitated the Nationalists. And some Liberals - Sir George Kemp, Captain Pirie and Agar-Robartes - had abstained on both readings, while Sir Clifford Cory had voted with the opposition²¹. The Tory party clearly had the upper hand during the early stages of the bill's first circuit: 'I am at this moment', Bonar Law exclaimed, reflecting on the strong position, 'at a loss to understand what the professed object of the Government is and I think many Hon. gentlemen opposite would like to know'²².

Yet the bill continued unaffected on its journey, entering Committee on June 11th where detailed examination would, so The Times felt, reveal the bill's 'weakness and absurdity'²³. A problem that was looming on the horizon for the Government was the tightness of the Parliamentary timetable, with three major bills (Home Rule, Welsh Disestablishment and Franchise Reform) needing to pass through the Commons before the end of the session. They were constrained, however, by the number of days left in the session and by their previous announcement that debate on Home Rule would not be restricted. The Times drew two conclusions from this situation. Either one of the bills must be

dropped (but this would be 'fatal to the solidarity of the coalition')²⁴; or 'we may thus before long expect to renew our acquaintance with "guillotine" and "Kangaroo".'²⁵ Before the summer recess the Government continued valiantly (if rather foolhardily) without recourse to closure. But this entailed carrying over the committee stage into the autumn, by which time the pressure on the legislative progress was such that Asquith was forced to pass a closure resolution.

Tories did their best to upset this cramped timetable. Many amendments were tabled, although one demand was persistent: the need for an appeal to the people before the bill was passed. McNeill, Tullibardine and James Hope moved amendments to postpone implementation of the bill until after a referendum. The inevitable rejection of these amendments served to advertise the Government's lack of trust in the electorate and to validate Tory claims that the Government were passing Home Rule behind the backs of the people. Captain Sandys moved a useful amendment on the fourth day of committee (June 19th), calling for the bill to be split into two: the first part to deal with Irish constitutional arrangements, the second with changes to the U.K. Parliament. If refused (as it was), the amendment would reveal the hollowness of the Government's claim that its bill was a stepping-stone to a federated U.K.²⁶.

However, the most interesting amendments on the bill came from the Government side. On June 11th Agar-Robartes moved his amendment to exclude Down, Armagh, Antrim and Londonderry from the bill. It was a move reflecting a growing wariness within certain Liberal quarters at the lack of recognition of the Ulster

problem. The move also came at a time when by-elections were going steadily against the Government, and when the Tories had the upper hand in debates. The amendment thus fitted into a pattern of Government disappointment, but it also posed several problems for the Tory leadership. The Times initially saw it as a measure designed to wrong-foot the Tories, and draw from them an embarrassing admittance or denial: 'nothing more than a tactical move without substance or serious import'²⁷. Having played the Ulster card so vigorously, to refuse it would expose the Tories to charges of expediency. It would have given the Government an excellent excuse to continue with their bill as it stood, and to deny the Tory party any sort of legitimacy when supporting future resistance by Ulster. It would also have made the party appear uncooperative and unreasonable. This concern about public perception (vital if Bonar Law was using the issue to secure an election) was a major worry for the Tory leader, and would return in the autumn of 1913. On the other hand to accept the amendment, however good for public image, would signify that Home Rule for the rest of Ireland was acceptable, a suggestion abhorrent to many Tories and Southern Unionists and liable to split the party if implemented.

Bonar Law decided to support it. Replying to Birrell's refusal on the 11th, he claimed, somewhat tortuously, that 'I am going to vote in favour of this amendment. I am going to vote in its favour not for a moment that it would take away my opposition to Home Rule... But while we oppose this bill root and branch... we will support any amendment which, bad as the bill seems to us to be, would make it less bad than it was before the

amendment was introduced.²⁸ It was a negative endorsement of the lesser evil. Balfour and Hugh Cecil followed Bonar Law's line. And on the 13th Carson, after consultation with Irish Unionist colleagues, similarly accepted the amendment in a speech full of qualifications. In fact the only section in which he actually recorded his support followed the Speaker's interruption, asking him to be more relevant: 'I can only say', Carson replied, 'with great respect that I am surprised if I am not entitled to show why these counties in Ulster cannot trust the majority and give that as a reason why they should be excluded from this bill'.²⁹ Carson was acutely aware of his position as leader of the Irish Unionist party, and of the reaction which his acceptance of the amendment would create in Southern Unionist circles.

Acceptance of the amendment was not, however, 'the significant point at which the British Unionists tacitly conceded the principle of Home Rule, by concentrating on Ulster'.³⁰ Unionists had already been concentrating hard on Ulster. As already shown, the tactical considerations were heavily weighted in favour of acceptance. Certainly, internal problems were created by accepting the amendment, but a broad sense of unity was maintained, by stressing the wrecking nature of their support. Few Tory leaders doubted that the Nationalists would refuse it, and Bonar Law went some way to ensuring this. By quickly declaring his support for the amendment as leader of the opposition, rather than offering a free vote, he ensured a division on party lines, with consequently little chance of the amendment succeeding.

The consequences of the amendment were beneficial to the Tory party. It had clearly revealed the strength of Nationalist power over the Government, and the latter's determined refusal to contemplate partition of Ireland. 'Mr Redmond would never accept Home Rule without the inclusion of Ulster', said The Times. 'He claimed Ulster and therefore he must either get it or the Government must go'³¹. The day after the amendment was rejected by an embarrassingly low Government majority of 69, Bonar Law pinpointed this reliance upon the Nationalists. 'I am not going to say anything about the subserviency of the Government. There is no need to tell the country about that. Everybody has seen it... they are carrying Home Rule at the dictation of the Nationalist party'³². On the one hand, they were being increasingly threatened by Ulster if they continued with their bill as it stood. On the other, the Nationalists were eager to prevent any retreat from the original bill. The Irish strait-jacket seemed to be tightening around the Government. It certainly reinforced Bonar Law's confidence, with his strategic approach to Home Rule.

But Agar-Robartes had done even more. It laid bare the dissatisfaction on the Government side. The drop from a normal 110 majority to 69 was a clear sign of disgruntlement; The Times spoke of 'considerable disquietude' amongst ministerialists³³. The amendment had commanded much support from Scottish Liberals, as well as from the abstainers on first and second reading- with the significant addition of both Churchill and Lloyd George. At the other end of the spectrum, the Nationalists, though relieved at the outcome, can hardly have gained much faith in their

Liberal partners. The episode, then, revealed clear fault-lines within the parliamentary coalition. And that favoured Bonar Law's strategy of intimidating Asquith into an election. At St Dunston's Lodge on June 28th, he spoke of recent events: 'so far things are going well with us. I am convinced they are going to be much better for it seems to me that every day shows more clearly that the Government are getting tied up into a knot which cannot be severed by any method except suicide'³⁴. In addition, the Government's rejection of the amendment was interpreted, by Carson among others, as 'a declaration of war against Ulster'³⁵. It allowed Ulster Unionists to 'take a step forward in their campaign' and gave moral justification to their preparations for resistance³⁶. It also opened the way for them to introduce an exclusionary amendment of their own, which Carson presented to the House on January the 1st 1913, calling for all nine Ulster counties to be excluded. Such a motion coming from the Unionist benches gave added public sympathy and justification for Ulster's cause.

Liberal disillusionment continued through the remainder of the summer session, and manifested itself in falling Liberal attendance. On June 25th, just six days after the rejection of the Agar-Robartes amendment, the Government majority fell to 22 on a budget resolution. A month later, on July 25th, their majority fell to just 3 on supplementary estimates. 'If our men had played the game better', Sanders lamented, 'we should have beaten them easily'³⁷. The incident showed what The Times noted as 'the curious dependence of the Government on the Nationalist vote'³⁸. Nationalists regularly turned out in the Government

lobby, clearly worried about its survival in an atmosphere of general Liberal disaffection. Yet for all the waning interest and dwindling Government majorities the bill continued mechanically on through the committee stage. By the summer adjournment on August 2nd, committee remained unfinished and so was carried over into the autumn session which began on October 4th. The recess, however, did little to raise Liberal spirits. The opposition dominated the holiday period. First, there was Bonar Law's dramatic pronouncement at Blenheim on July the 29th, then the Ulster campaign at the end of September, ending in the signing of the covenant on the 28th. The momentum which the Unionist forces built up over the recess was in stark contrast to the relative quiet of the Government; there was no triumphal campaign across Britain to whip up support for Home Rule; and the only prominent ministerial speech, from Churchill at Dundee on September 12th, advocated a federal system for Britain in place of the present Home Rule bill. When the House reassembled, the Government faced a difficult Parliamentary situation. Time was now very tight, particularly since the Trade Union bill had been added to the legislative programme as 'a sop to the Labour party'³⁹. This made for four major bills requiring passage through the Commons, with time still needed for debate in the Lords. There was much truth in The Times editorial at the start of October: 'The Government enter upon a difficult and overcrowded session with no very great political capital and no very great driving force behind them'⁴⁰.

The Government opened the new session with two changes. First, the present sitting was to continue into the next year,

making March 1913 the end of the 1912 session and thus giving the Government an extra couple of months: an 'extraordinary expedient' which showed to 'what straits the Government are reduced and with what cynical contempt of constitutional practise... some people are prepared to act'⁴¹. This development increased the bitterness between the parties, already running high after the fireworks of the summer. But it was as nothing compared to the Government's implementation of the closure resolution on the Home Rule bill in contradiction to previous statements. The closure resolution now speeded up the progress of the bill through committee, but drew a very hostile response from Bonar Law. 'This is the first fruits of your Parliament Act and the fact that this resolution is proposed at all is the clearest evidence that that Act can never work unless the majority are willing to make this house cease altogether to be a legislative assembly and to become instead a machine for registering the decrees of the Government'⁴². The Times also saw it as 'totally destructive of the powers of the House of Commons', but hoped that the Unionist party would confine their protest to 'Parliamentary protest'⁴³. But there was little that the opposition could do; powerlessness bred frustration, which in turn fuelled more animosity. 'Quiet staid men', Sanders wrote in the second week of the autumn session, 'like Bigland got absolutely wild. Monsell very nearly came to blows with Eustace Fiennes as they went out'⁴⁴.

But all was not lost from the opposition armoury; several tactical lines presented themselves to the Tory leadership. The first was to continue an approach which had been building since

April. The tight legislative timetable and the general weariness of Liberal backbenchers had enabled the Tory whips to engage in Parliamentary trench-warfare. Constant scrutiny of attendance, refusal to pair, well-planned "rushes" to London, secret passwords, members hiding in the Commons toilet or lingering expectantly at St Stephens tavern for the "snap" division, all fatigued the government forces and (it was hoped) would tire them of the interminable pressure and lead them to "throw in the sponge". In June and July the Tories had run the Government close on two divisions which might have gone the other way 'if our men had not been late'⁴⁵. 'In the House of Commons', another whip wrote in his diary, 'they are thoroughly uncomfortable. They never know when we are going to turn up'⁴⁶. By the autumn, with a new and inexperienced Liberal Chief Whip (Percy Illingworth), and with Liberal members already flagging, conditions seemed ripe to spring just such a snap. On November 11th, as committee wound on, a surprise amendment by Sir Fredrick Banbury on one of the financial resolutions of the Home Rule bill caught the government short in the division lobbies by 22 votes. It marked the successful climax to six months' hard work by Balcarres and his whips. But it also brought to a head another approach, which had gained increasing support inside the party.

The idea of some type of direct action in the House, in the form of a walk-out, unruly behaviour or even a replay of the "Cecil" scene of August 1911, had been mooted in Diehard circles since the beginning of 1912. The increase in party bitterness during the summer fanned the attraction of such a course. But it was Asquith's closure resolution at the start of the autumn

session which prompted these ideas to surface again. The Times, on October 10th, reported rumours of 'violent measures or violent action'⁴⁷. On October the 8th, Lord Balcarres wrote in his diary: 'many of them especially Irish Unionists are anxious to do so on the ground that nothing short of suspension following turbulent scenes will impress England with the depth of their conviction'⁴⁸. Bonar Law revealed the prospect of party disorder to an audience at the Hotel Metropole on the 25th of October: 'It is intolerable to many of our supporters who, I know, are not satisfied either with the position or with our action. They want something dramatic. They hold and there is something to be said for their views, that a revolutionary committee... can only be overthrown by a counter-revolution'⁴⁹. Elements within the party were bent on continuing the summer excesses into the Parliamentary arena, a prospect which Balcarres saw as 'most prejudicial'⁵⁰. Bonar Law, however, fearing public reaction to such methods or the use the Government might make of it, managed with the help of the whips' office to control his party. His tough, bitter, reply to Asquith's closure motion on October 10th (Balcarres wrote of many 'angry passages') was enough temporarily to assuage the martial temper of the diehards⁵¹. However, on the day after their snap victory of the 11th, when the Government moved to rescind the defeat 'contrary to all precedent and practice', the reserve and control of many Tories broke⁵².

Asquith was heard by the House, but ministers trying to follow him, such as Harcourt, were shouted down. Sir William Bull was told to withdraw after calling the Prime Minister a traitor, and 'the tumult became so continuous that the House was

adjourned.⁵³ The sitting resumed an hour later, but tempers had not cooled. Sir Rufus Isaacs was howled down, and the sitting was suspended for the rest of the day. As the chamber emptied, Ronald McNeill threw a copy of the standing orders at Churchill, hitting the First Lord on the head. Such was the atmosphere 'that it would have taken very little to make a general fight' along the lines of 1893⁵⁴. The following day, in a calmer House, Asquith agreed to follow Parliamentary precedent and to 'negative his own financial resolution and then introduce another'.⁵⁵ Parliament was then adjourned for the rest of the week. Comment on the Tories' action was generally supportive. Most felt that, as a single incident, the fray was reasonable, given the Government's provocative measures; but repetition was another matter. 'I hope', Bonar Law confided to Stamfordham, 'the proceedings in the House of Commons will now go on in the ordinary way'.⁵⁶ Bridgeman, by no means a Diehard, felt that it was 'amply justifiable on the ground that now the rules of 300 years were to be broken there was no other form of protest left to us'.⁵⁷ Balcarres concurred: 'it will be found that our conduct... will have saved the House of Commons from being prostituted to the cabinet of the day'.⁵⁸ Not all, however, rejoiced at such methods. Dicey, Vinerian Professor of Law at Oxford, constitutional expert and fanatical Unionist, complained in The Times that 'the cause of Unionism may be ruined' by such action⁵⁹. The Times also 'regretted that the opposition allowed themselves to be goaded into the unseemly demonstrations... and it was probably an error in tactics as well',⁶⁰ although five days later their tune had changed: 'the opposition have good

reason to be proud of the success with which they have upheld the practice and the customs of the House'.⁶¹.

Despite the fireworks and the war of attrition inside the House, the Home Rule bill had progressed fairly smoothly along its path. By December 12th the committee stage was completed. It had taken 36 days, during which 202 lines of the bill and 76 amendments had been discussed, and 935 lines and 988 amendments had passed undiscussed. A further seven days were given over to report (which was completed on January 13th) and third reading (on the 15th and 16th) before the bill moved upstairs to the Lords at the end of January.

IV

'The battles at Westminster', said The Times in May, 'are seldom of decisive importance... An opposition must therefore not only oppose in the House of Commons but must devote its best efforts to rallying public opinion in the country'.⁶² The arguments used to rally public opinion had to be clear, plain and hard-hitting. Ulster figured large in all attacks on Home Rule, and here a particularly promising line was to pose the question of what were the Government going to do if Ulster did, as she threatened, resist the bill. 'They (Ulster) say they will not submit to Home Rule. How are they to be made to submit to it?' Bonar Law asked an audience in St Andrews Hall, Glasgow. 'If left to herself there is no power which by any possibility could overcome the resistance of Belfast. Is that resistance to be overcome by using British soldiers to shoot down men whose only crime is that they

refused to be driven out of the Union. To attempt to do that would be to exercise a tyranny as unjustifiable and cruel as has ever been seen in the world⁶³. Smith, writing in The Times on October 30th, developed this question. 'Is this Government prepared to take this step (coercion) now? Will it be prepared to do so in two year's time? Will it ever sanction the use of artillery? Will it order volleys of ball cartridge and bayonet charges to be directed at citizens marshalled under the national flag and singing the national anthem? Is the reconciliation of the Democracies to be founded upon a Belfast shambles..?'⁶⁴.

Raising the idea of Ulster being coerced into the bill promised to tie the ministry into tactical knots. Publicly to admit a willingness to coerce Ulster (which they never did), or even to say nothing on the subject (silence was labelled by Tories as affirmation), might lose them popular sympathy and provoke a backlash. 'England will not permit Ulster to be coerced', Bonar Law confidently exclaimed⁶⁵. On the other hand, a Liberal denial that they would ever coerce Ulster would have effectively sealed the fate of the bill, revealing a weak Government unwilling to carry out the basic function of upholding its authority. And such weakness would have thrown them into conflict with the Nationalists and with large numbers of their own Liberal supporters.

Another clear, accessible and hard-hitting argument used on the public platform was the unconstitutionality of Government methods, to which an appeal to the people was now the only appropriate response. At Blenheim Palace on July 27th Bonar Law affirmed that 'we do not acknowledge their right to carry such

a revolution by such means. We do not recognise that any such action is the constitutional Government of a free people. We regard them as a revolutionary committee which has seized by fraud upon despotic power... We shall use any means whatever means seem to us likely to be most effective⁶⁶. Demands to trust the people and to hold an election gave the Unionist cause a populist image and a strong platform position.

The main campaign outside Parliament by leaders did not get under way until July, before the summer recess. Carson and Smith dominated this campaign, well-supported by a motivated group of Tory Diehards: Hugh Cecil, McNeill, Lords Londonderry, Abercorn and Beresford, James Campbell and the Ulster Unionists. Bonar Law spoke less often, but when he did he usually created a great stir by his extremism. Carson, particularly, caught the public attention, his air of dogged determination complemented by his hard, chiselled features: 'Carson, with his face, was bound to be Christian martyr; he would not have been born like that otherwise'⁶⁷. As the Tory leaders' public stature (and notoriety) rose, so did their influence within party circles. Carson, especially, was building a dominant position for himself on the Tory Right: J.S. Sandars felt that Carson had 'advanced' while 'Bonar Law (is) looking on and... Austen resting'⁶⁸.

Yet to concentrate on these big set-piece speeches is to ignore the extent of activity which was already taking place in British constituencies. The I.U.A., in conjunction with the U.D.L., had been ceaselessly active since late 1911, distributing literature, canvassing electors and arranging speakers at the local level. By-elections had seen concentrated efforts, with

organisers and canvassers arriving in advance to swamp the locality with anti-Home Rule propaganda. The St. Rollox by-election of late February 1912 saw ten canvassers and two agents descend on the constituency⁶⁹. With the holiday season approaching, plans were laid to focus on popular resorts, to raise the profile of the issue and to keep the political struggle "live" during the recess⁷⁰. By September 1912, after a full year's work and six months into the bill's life, over 91 constituencies had been worked, 2178 meetings addressed, and 517,119 doubting voters canvassed⁷¹. As leading politicians engaged in national pyrotechnics, the slow, hum-drum war against the bill was being waged.

The first three months of the bill's progress had seen leading Unionists make some sorties into the country, whenever the rigors of Westminster allowed. On April 9th Bonar Law had been received in Belfast at an enormous anti-Home Rule rally. Nervous, and perhaps overwhelmed by the numbers and the intensity of feeling encountered, he delivered a rather disappointing speech. Carson, more attuned to Belfast audiences, gave a rousing and bellicose oration, indicating what was to come in the months ahead. The end of the second reading in May provided another opportunity to move out from Westminster to address the people. On May 10th Bonar Law spoke to the Primrose League at the Albert Hall, assuring his listeners that 'they (Ulster) shall not trust us in vain and we shall take any steps - whatever steps seem to us likely to be effective - to put an end to the conspiracy which is directed against them'⁷². On the same evening Carson spoke to the 1900 club in equally determined language, though introducing

a new element into the rather well-worn arguments. After dismissing the idea that people in England would allow the coercion of their 'kith and kin' in Ulster he asked the audience: 'what would be the effect on the Army? Many officers would resign; no Army could stand such a strain'⁷³. Carson was raising the political stakes for Asquith, if the latter continued with the bill. The Irish Unionist leader relished controversy, seen again at the beginning of May when he engaged in a public exchange of letters with Will Thorne in The Times about Carson's extreme language (which Thorne believed justified his removal from the Privy Council)⁷⁴.

However, despite the pugnacious - even seditious - speeches of Carson, Smith and Bonar Law, the country had stirred little against Home Rule. Sanders noted on the day that both Carson and Bonar Law spoke that 'there is no sign of any considerable feeling against the bill in the country'⁷⁵. Amery lamented in mid-June that 'we must get steam up quickly if we are ever to get the country interested and the Government out before 1914'⁷⁶. The Times noted that 'the general public are apparently looking on in mere bewilderment - if not in mere boredom'⁷⁷. The five by-elections between April and June had shown a general decline in the government's support, but it was National Insurance and, for Sanders, Welsh Disestablishment, more than Home Rule, which had affected the Government's standing⁷⁸. On top of this dismal outlook came news of violence in Belfast. Tensions had been running high since Churchill's visit in February: by the time the Home Rule bill was introduced in April, 'feeling there (was) hotter than it (had) ever been before'⁷⁹. Late in June violence

erupted in the Belfast shipyards, causing sporadic assaults in Nationalist parts of the city. The temper was made worse by the approach of Orange Day on the 12th.

Sectarian outrages in Belfast were a serious concern to Carson and Bonar Law. They undermined the image of Ulster as the aggrieved party and gave the Government a 'law and order' justification to clamp down on the various demonstrations and plans in the province. On July 11th Carson wrote a letter to The Times calling for 'self control and discipline'⁸⁰. Smith, speaking on the 12th in Belfast, in the course of denying that the government had the nerve to deploy the Army against Ulster, urged Ulster to 'maintain that impression of self-restraint and reserve force'⁸¹.

It was with the problems of lack of popular outrage and unrest in Belfast in mind, as well as to reply to Asquith's speech in Dublin on July 19th, that Bonar Law made his famous Blenheim speech on July 27th. It was a dramatic statement of support for Ulster to awake public opinion on the mainland and to reassure Belfast that their struggle was being waged with determination by the Tory party. Buoyed up by news of a Unionist victory at the Crewe by-election on July the 26th, Bonar Law made a pledge unique in British political history. He unreservedly committed the Conservative party to disobedience of the law, even to civil war, if the Government did not hold an election before imposing Home Rule on the loyalists of the North. 'In my opinion if an attempt were made without the clearly expressed will of the people of this country... to deprive these men of their birthright they would be justified in resisting by all means in

their power, including force.. and I say now, with a full sense of the responsibility which attaches to my position, that if the attempt be made under present conditions I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster will go in which I shall not be ready to support them and in which they will not be supported by the overwhelming majority of the British people'⁸². It was the language of 1642 emanating from a quiet Glasgow iron merchant. 'I never hoped for such a strong statement from Bonar Law', Lady Craigavon wrote in her diary; 'it really does put heart into one'⁸³. A shocked Asquith denounced it as 'reckless rodomontade'⁸⁴. Churchill, worried at the long term consequences, wrote a denunciatory letter to The Times accusing Bonar Law of a 'frantic manner' which '(is) foreign to the instincts of the party which he leads'⁸⁵. In analysing the speech, however, we must be careful to avoid embracing Asquithian moral indignation. Most of what he said had been taken from previous speeches, and had been spoken from a written sheet (unusual for him), indicating the care with which he chose his words⁸⁶. He firmly anchored his pledge to a constitutional remedy. His tactics were to intimidate the Government into an election by showing the impossibility of implementing the bill. The reaction of Churchill and other ministers suggests that this wasn't an altogether foolish line to adopt. Furthermore, as Lady Craigavon's diary extract implies, it helped to tie Ulster closer to the Tory party, so aiding control and discipline in the province. It provoked reaction in the press, not all of it favourable but at least forcing the issue into greater prominence, even if it meant risking popular resentment at his

immoderation. It also helped the Right stay behind the official party line: that line was now sufficiently extreme.

Blenheim injected an extremism and bitterness into political affairs. Asquith and Bonar Law clashed in the Commons over the speech, the latter refusing to retract any part of it, indeed repeating the pledge inside the House to the accompaniment of loud cheers from his own side. When Parliament rose on August 2nd, the Government hoped that the two months recess would mute passions. But as The Times ominously commented on the 3rd, the situation in Ulster 'will not remain stationary during the coming recess' and events in the province will soon 'compel the attention of the Government'⁸⁷. On August 17th details about the planned demonstration in September were published in the press, listing dates, venues and speakers⁸⁸. On the 22nd, there was a rumour that the coming demonstration would see the announcement of plans for a Provisional Government⁸⁹. A good omen in the build up to the Ulster campaign came in news of the overturning of two key Liberal seats: N.W. Manchester on the 8th of August, and Midlothian on September 10th. 'When a Liberal Government is beaten in Midlothian', Bonar Law exulted, 'the end of that Government must be at hand'⁹⁰. When Carson, accompanied by McNeill, arrived in Belfast on September 16th spirits were therefore already high. For the next two weeks Carson led a team of Unionist leaders in a speaking campaign across Ulster. It opened at Enniskillen on the 18th, moving onto Lisburn on the 19th, Derry on the 20th, Coleraine on the 22nd, the Botanic gardens in Belfast on the 23rd, Portadown on the 25th and Ballyroney on the 26th. The finale came on Saturday the 28th with

the signing of the Covenant at the City Hall, Belfast, in front of the world's press. Carson, followed by Lord Londonderry, signed his name to the Covenant on a table draped in a Union Jack as thousands of Ulster men and women followed suit across the province. The dramatic events of the Ulster campaign were not over, for on Carson's return journey he was met at Liverpool docks by a crowd of 150,000, singing hymns. On the same day he spoke at Shiel park, described by The Times as 'Belfast all over again' and, in the evening, to the Liverpool Conservative club⁹¹. Later that night he travelled north to the other centre of Orange sentiment on the mainland, Glasgow, where on the 1st of October he addressed another mass meeting.

The press made much of September's political bonanza. The Times wrote of the depth of feeling expressed against Home Rule: 'we believe that these Northern gatherings have brought that conviction home to many thousands of Englishmen'⁹². On October the 4th it was still banging the Orange drum, describing the signing of the Covenant as 'a definite and irretrievable step in the opposition to the Home Rule bill'⁹³. Carson had similar feelings; 'our action has made a profound impression through-out the U.K.'⁹⁴. Even the pessimistic Sandars noted that 'the Ulster Covenant business has certainly had a good deal of effect'⁹⁵. The campaign appeared to achieve several of its objectives. Massive press attention had been focused on the problem of Ulster; Carson had won national recognition, and a degree of control had been extended over Belfast by the act of signing a Solemn League and Covenant. This was particularly important following the shipyard riots of July and the Celtic football

ground riot of September 14th, where 100 people were injured. This amelioration did not, however, extend to the Parliamentary sphere where Carson's "jihad" in Ulster raised to a new pitch the bitterness between the parties.

Yet despite all the theatraclals and fireworks, the bill progressed along its well-defined trajectory. The country appeared not to have been roused. On October the 24th Lord St Aldwyn, considering the campaign against Home Rule, felt that 'there must be a very different state of feeling on the subject if it is ultimately to be prevented from becoming law'⁹⁶. Sanders also believed that Home Rule had not rallied the English constituencies in the way that National Insurance had⁹⁷. By-election results confirmed his view that Insurance was the dominant issue where Tory majorities rose steeply: 'The Insurance Act has been the most important factor against them (Government) in the country, and though it may be true that the country has now no great repugnance either for Home Rule or Welsh Disestablishment, certainly there are no votes to be won by either measure'⁹⁸. Inside the House, Conservative tactics had certainly worn the Government down, achieving a notable triumph on November the 11th. But the bill had not been dropped or radically amended, nor had the Government been forced to resign. In any case much of the problem with falling Liberal attendance had less to do with dissatisfaction with the Government's programme than the tightly packed legislative timetable for 1912 and the loss of so skilled an operator as Elibank as Chief Whip in August. And recourse to such Parliamentary trench-warfare suggests a degree of frustration within Unionist circles and

their powerlessness at the political centre, which the campaign outside had done much to mollify but little to alter. More ominous still, the party's relative unity began to dissipate.

V

Differences of opinion over how to resist Home Rule became more defined and prominent by early 1913. Some elements in the party were unhappy with their leaders' resort to extreme language and unlimited pledges of support for Ulster. Some disliked the bitterness Bonar Law had injected into his speeches; F.S.Oliver told Bonar Law, a week after Blenheim, that 'public opinion... is very perturbed by and opposed to certain things which have been said in regard to Ulster not only by Carson, Smith and others but also by yourself'⁹⁹. On November 12th, Balcarres noted a group 'of straight-laced and ill-informed purists' who were upset by Tory actions¹⁰⁰. And Bridgeman spoke of 'a small body of the old brigade' who criticised their leader 'for being too outspoken... and who belittle Law in order to try and get Balfour back'¹⁰¹. The Times, often a barometer of elements on the Tory backbenches, at various times criticised the party for its extremism. Bonar Law's challenge to the government at Blenheim was described as 'grave and explicit; perhaps in view of its gravity more explicit than was altogether desirable or necessary'¹⁰². It was certainly with an eye to agitating Tory moderates that Churchill attacked the tone and style of Bonar Law's leadership, in a letter to The Times on August the 15th. 'Surely these are strange tactics for the leader of a great

party. Surely they are peculiarly inappropriate tactics for the leader of the conservative and constitutional party... Why not win honourably? Why not win patiently?.. Why squander the estate in disputing the inheritance? Why capsize the boat in jostling for the tiller?¹⁰³ It was an emotive appeal to deep Tory convictions, and one which must have twinged a few consciences, although it was ironic for Churchill to play the role of defender of the true Conservative faith. But it does show that Churchill was keen, even at this early stage, to build bridges to moderate sections of the Tory party, followed up a month later with his appeal at Dundee for a federal solution for the U.K.

Other moderates attacked the sectarian nature of their leader's opposition. Oliver, again, asked Steel-Maitland to 'urge your Tom fool followers to keep off two things- religious intolerance and treason. Carson has done more harm to Irishmen in the last months than Redmond has. The British elector has a nose for rotten arguments'.¹⁰⁴ Aubrey Herbert, newly elected at the December 1910 election, was 'saddened' by the 'strong and abusive line with regard to Irishmen and Catholics'.¹⁰⁵ And (a more surprising source) a letter appeared in The Times from a Presbyterian minister in Ulster. 'We deeply deplore', he wrote, 'the sectarian bitterness and strife that are being engendered by Sir Edward Carson'.¹⁰⁶ Ulster was not, then, as rock-solid against Home Rule as Carson suggested. In October, Bonar Law received another complaint from Lady Ninan Crichton Stuart, criticising the attacks made on Catholics¹⁰⁷. Signs of unhappiness with the sectarian tone the leadership was using thus sprang from various quarters; perhaps to meet them, Bonar Law

invited the Duke of Norfolk, the leading Anglo-Catholic, onto the platform at Blenheim.

Other Tory moderates argued in favour of an immediate settlement over Home Rule, particularly along the lines of exclusion for Ulster. The Duke of Sutherland and the Earl of Mar both wrote to Bonar Law urging such a solution¹⁰⁸. Strachey had also offered similar advice, although he sweetened the pill by stressing the tactical advantages of such a manoeuvre¹⁰⁹, and he championed exclusion from the pages of The Spectator. 'The cabinet could get rid of the Ulster problem by introducing a clause into their bill allowing any county which so desires to stand outside the Home Rule bill'¹¹⁰. This approach was reinforced by the Agar-Robartes amendment in June and from the sympathy which Churchill and Grey showed towards the Ulster problem.

But these various strains of moderate opinion never crystallised into a strong movement. This nebulous group lacked political weight, and a recognizable focus, within the leadership. Balfour was perhaps their most obvious potential ally; he still had great influence in the party, and in committee had appeared to endorse the idea of excluding Ulster: everything you gave to Ireland 'could be applied with double force to the case of Ulster'¹¹¹. He declined, however, to play such a role at that moment, aware that so early in the bill's life was the wrong time for such manoeuvres, and relishing during 1912 his freedom from responsibility. It was not, then, practical politics to espouse moderation in 1912, especially when the party was enjoying its first taste of unity and success for nearly three

years. First circuits were not the time for compromise, and Churchill was not the man, for Tories, to suggest one from the Government benches. In any case, many Tories may have thought that a tough campaign made for a more equitable settlement later on, or that (as Bonar Law argued) the bill was unenforceable, so that a tough campaign to destroy it could open the door to a more realistic cross-party compromise in the future. Extremism was thus not necessarily incompatible, in the short term, with an eventual compromise- although some members and not a few historians despaired at the apparently unlimited nature of their leader's pledges¹¹². These considerations might explain why there was not more moderate sentiment in the party during a period when the leadership adopted unusually immoderate political methods.

Overlapping with these moderates were the federal sympathisers, who, from their peak of influence between 1910 and 1911, had by 1912 dwindled in both supporters and importance. The start of 1912 found federalists desperately trying to shape the forthcoming Home Rule bill in a devolutionary direction; but to no avail. The shift by the Liberal Government towards a Gladstonian type of self-rule marked something of a defeat for them, much to the annoyance of Scottish and Welsh Home Rulers in their own party. Their fortunes were not helped by the increased polarisation of politics and injection of a sour tone into public affairs. Moreover, many Tory federalists had already decided that the best tactical approach was for a tough campaign to drive the system to an impasse.

Much of the federalists' activity during the early months

of the bill's life was of a more limited character: to disprove Asquith's claim that Home Rule was the first instalment of a wider devolutionary scheme. On April 30th, May 8th and May 9th Oliver published articles in The Times under his pseudonym 'Pacificus', showing the bill to be a contradiction of federal beliefs. Likewise, Garvin, in The Observer on April 28th showed the incompatibility of Home Rule with federalism¹¹³. Gilbert Parker mounted a series of attacks under the title of 'Home Rule the Colonial analogy' in The Morning Post¹¹⁴, and, in the House Chamberlain, Mackinder and Amery sought to prove, on second reading, that the bill had little true federal basis. This essentially negative approach was vital to tactical federalists like Amery and Oliver. They believed that the bill had to shown to be unworkable before a constructive substitute became practical politics, otherwise the Bill might well gull Tory or Liberal federalists into believing it was a genuine attempt at a federal solution. By May this tactic appeared to have worked; few on either side saw it as a federal bill. Scottish Liberals such as Pirie, Macdonald and Ferguson grew increasingly dissatisfied with the legislation, especially after the refusal of the Agar-Robartes amendment in June. Pirie even went so far as to introduce a similar motion to exclude all nine Ulster counties¹¹⁵. Asquith himself might have unwittingly encouraged this trend by his statement on May 9th that 'no cast iron pattern would be appropriate', which implied that his scheme was specific rather than generic¹¹⁶. The Times, by May 10th, could comment that the belief that it was a stepping stone to federalism 'has ludicrously broken down'¹¹⁷.

Nonetheless, a few indications of more positive devolutionary sentiment can be detected during the early stages of the bill. Both Churchill and Grey put out feelers during the second reading. Significantly for later developments, Austen Chamberlain, speaking in the Commons on May 7th, appeared to support local government for Ireland, and stressed the impossibility of a real federal system when the Post Office and Customs were not operating on a central basis. Also, a federalist channel remained open to Bonar Law through Moreton Frewen. Frewen acted as a go-between with Lord Dunraven, keeping the Tory leader abreast of ideas and opinion from that moderate Unionist quarter in Ireland¹¹⁸. Frewen was also a means of drawing the O'Brienites closer to the party. Both Dunraven and Frewen were thinking in terms of a coalition of Tory federalists, moderate Liberal devolutionists and O'Brienites, who could introduce a devolutionary plan as an alternative to the more radical Home Rule scheme on offer¹¹⁹. Bonar Law never moved towards or encouraged such plans, though Frewen remained a useful conduit of information. But in spite of these hopeful signs there was no orchestrated campaign to rouse federalists in the early months of the Bill. Not until the events of the summer did interest rekindle itself, as Bonar Law's speech at Blenheim shocked many into searching for a federal solution sooner rather than later. It was Churchill who set this new initiative in motion.

Churchill had long been seen as ripe for federalist conversion. Close to Smith and many of the Round Tablers, he had been one of the enthusiasts for the late 1910 flirtation with coalitionism. He recognised the Ulster problem as a major

handicap, but with only the support of Lloyd George, Grey and Birrell in cabinet, those fears were not translated into a legislative compromise. Blenheim moved Churchill to renew his efforts. 'I am shocked at the threats of Ulster violence', he wrote to Garvin on August 10th 'which are made by Conservative leaders. Have they no policy for Ireland except to make it ungovernable'..?¹²⁰. Five days later, in The Times, he attacked Bonar Law's leadership. That summer, he was in contact with the Round Tablers Edward Grigg and Lionel Curtis, spending a weekend at Cliveden and then meeting them on board The Enchantress. With the dismal by-election news from N.W. Manchester and, more dramatically, Midlothian on September the 10th, Churchill decided to act. At Dundee on the 12th he launched his 'heptarchy kite' which, according to Kindle, created 'furore in both parties and thrust federalism to forefront of political debate'.¹²¹.

Blenheim had also upset some Unionists circles. Oliver warned Bonar Law on August 20th against upsetting public opinion with extremism: 'I don't think the country will stand unconstitutional methods... until the constitutional weapons which appear to it to be so powerful have been used and have failed'.¹²² Only the return of a Tory Government would be able to legislate for a truly federated U.K.; nothing should therefore endanger its return to office. Moreton Frewen, similarly unsettled by Blenheim, was again active, calling on the 24th of August and September 3rd for cooperation with the O'Brienites and a coalition of moderate forces in Ireland: 'the Dunraven influence and the attitude of our newspaper has got this small party fairly in revolt against the Home Rule bill'.¹²³ On the

8th of September Dunraven pursued a similar theme, trying to draw Bonar Law away from 'the violence of Carsonism' and towards 'a conference of some kind on the whole constitutional question'¹²⁴. 'Moderate opinion is in Ireland desperately shy and in the face of the violence of the Molly Maguires on the one side and Carsonism on the other the most that can be expected of it is silence'¹²⁵. Bonar Law was little moved by such entreaties, remaining firm to the Ulster line. More serious for him was a letter to The Times by a Mr Hawkins. Referring to the Constitutional Conference of 1910, when both parties had nearly come to a devolutionary solution over Ireland, it claimed (not unreasonably) that Lansdowne and Chamberlain were opposed to the hard line Bonar Law (who was not at the 1910 meetings) was now taking towards Ulster¹²⁶. Who was behind this revaluation is unclear, but it was highly important in publicising that Tory sympathisers of devolution or a moderate solution ad a focus to look to within the leadership.

Churchill's 'kite' at Dundee therefore addressed federalist sensibilities, already anxious at the extremeness of Blenheim. The Ulster campaign of September, and the intense party political bitterness at the start of the autumn session, did much to enhance this federalist anxiety. A close confidant of Dunraven's, Lord Hythe, complained to Bonar Law in October: 'the party of which you are the leader are sacrificing the party, the interests of England and the Empire to the Ulstermen.. Settle the H.R. problem on Canadian or federal lines'¹²⁷. He followed up with a letter to The Times on the 17th, reiterating that the problem would only be solved along Canadian lines¹²⁸. On October 21st

The Times published a letter signed by 24 Dublin businessmen, including Dunraven, calling for a conference of all views to reach a constructive settlement, 'deeply deplo(ing) the distortion and embitterment of the whole question by a revival of sectarian prejudices and animosities'¹²⁹. The Times editorial of October 26th supported this declaration: 'Lord Dunraven has already played a mediatory and public-spirited part in Irish politics and he may yet be able to play this part again'¹³⁰, and Lord Macdonnell and Horace Plunkett lent their weight to the demands of the Dublin businessmen. By October, support for an immediate solution to the Irish question in the face of rising sectarian bitterness seemed to be more vocal

Yet behind all this federalist pressure there was little real likelihood of their solutions being adopted. The initiative and mood of the party was being set by Bonar Law and Carson on an opposite course, which appeared successful. And with such apparent success, few Tory members were going publicly to oppose their leader's line, however much sympathy they might have privately felt for federation. Just as first circuits were not the place for compromises to be hatched, so they were not the place to change onto a federalist track. And those who advocated such a move during this period (Dunraven, Frewen, Earl Grey, Hythe) viewed the issue as an administrative problem rather than an intense political struggle for power. It was this difference of practical politics which separated them from the likes of Oliver, Milner, Selborne, Smith, Amery and Chamberlain. In any case, a strong attack on the bill over the Ulster question did not necessarily negate the federalist cause; as a means to

destroy the bill it would clear the way for a truly federal one. Finally, for most of 1912 many of these federal sympathisers were more concerned with the question of Tariff Reform. This would explain Chamberlain's reluctance to play the federal/devolutionist card and even to reciprocate Churchill's overtures (as he was to do in 1913). With the Tariff issue tipped in his favour, as he saw it after the February shadow cabinet agreement, he was not going to rock the boat on Ireland only sink Tariff Reform.

Another group ill at ease with the leadership's concentration on the Ulster issue were Southern Unionists, many of whom sympathised with the moderate or even federal supporters in the party. They were in a difficult position. On the one hand, Ulster was the best, if not the only, means of destroying the bill outright. 'Without Ulster's agreement', James Mackay-Wilson, elder brother of Sir Henry Wilson, told the crowds at Balmoral on April 9th, 'Home Rule is impossible. We look to you to make it so'¹³¹. And The Times wrote, during the September campaign in Ulster, that 'they (Southern Unionists) admit the truth of Sir Edward Carson's claim that Ulster, in fighting her own battle, has fought also for Dublin and the South'¹³². But allowing Ulster to dominate resistance gave rise to the suspicion that there was little real opposition in the South, and this pointed to a possible basis for settling the Irish problem by excluding Ulster. Southern Unionists were therefore at pains to show the strength of their hostility to Home Rule. Various demonstrations were held across the South. One at Cork in April, according to The Morning Post, 'dispel(led) the fiction that opposition to

Home Rule is confined to Ulster'¹³³. Later that month J.B.Powell, secretary of the I.U.A., referred to Unionists outside Ulster as a force which 'had to be reckoned with'¹³⁴. And Lord Middleton, who was emerging in Unionist circles as a fierce defender of the South, claimed after demonstrations in Cork, Waterford, Sligo and Limerick that although 'Ulster holds the field... Unionists outside Ulster have rallied as they have never done before'¹³⁵.

It was this precarious balance between the tactical advantages of supporting Ulster's resistance, and fears of being sidelined, which was to dominate Southern Unionist opinion during 1912, and to foster at certain times a fear of desertion. Acceptance of the Agar-Robartes amendment was one such occasion, endorsing, so it seemed, the passage of the bill as long as parts of Ulster were excluded. 'I could not betray my friends in the south', Walter Long informed Bonar Law on June the 4th¹³⁶. Three days later, he argued that 'by clever tactics we shall disgust our friends in the rest of Ireland and seriously weaken our position in Great Britain'¹³⁷. Long, as an ex-chief secretary and staunch defender of Southern Unionism, was ready to make a stand against accepting the amendment. Speaking at the Albert Hall on June 14th, he assured the audience, though it was clearly aimed at Bonar Law, that 'no bribe would buy them, no temptation would seduce them'¹³⁸. Yet Long was a lone dissident. Most of the leadership, including Lansdowne, saw the tactical value of supporting the amendment. Carson was careful, when speaking on the Agar-Robartes amendment, to point out that 'we do not accept this... as a compromise of the question. There is no compromise

possible.. because he offers what would be merely a simple act of justice to a portion of Ulster, why should we on that ground abandon our position in regard to a policy which we believe harmful to Ireland'..¹³⁹? Long quickly fell into line, seeing that his stand drew no support; in a letter to Mackay-Wilson he now felt that by supporting the exclusion of the Ulstermen 'they would be in a stronger position to stand up for their brethren in the south and west if they were outside an Irish Parliament'.¹⁴⁰.

But apart from Long's brief protest in June, and some rumblings by southern Unionists in the autumn, there was no organised movement to defend their position, such as was to emerge in 1913. Both Bonar Law and Carson stressed, privately, the tactical value of Ulster as regards the bill as a whole. Responding to Mackay-Wilson's concern that Unionists in the South were being neglected, Bonar Law neatly captured the substance of this tactical use of Ulster: 'I can assure you that the point of view which you put before me is always present to my mind. When however one is engaged in a great conflict it is necessary to use the means which are most effective; and after all it is not Ireland which we hope to influence but England and Scotland... There is no difference, I am sure, of view on this question between yourself and me; it is simply a question of the best way in which to win the fight'.¹⁴¹ And while things seemed to be going against the Government, there was always the chance that the decision to fight the bill on the Ulster issue would succeed.

For the Right of the party, enlarged and broody since 1911, the campaign against Home Rule, both inside and outside the

House, was everything they hoped from their leadership: partisan and aggressive assaults on the Government, seemingly unlimited pledges of support for Ulster, reminiscent of the no-surrender movement of July and August 1911, and leaders able to capture the public imagination. It was the activism and enthusiasm which the party exuded, in all spheres, particularly the performance of their leader at Blenheim, which locked even the most recalcitrant member of the Right into loyalty to the official leadership. But using unconventional and perhaps even un-Parliamentary methods to channel and direct extremely discontented Tories and Ulster Unionists into constitutional directions was a precarious feat for Bonar Law to execute. The speedy launch into second reading, only two weeks after completion of first reading, and again when Asquith moved the closure resolution in October, saw Bonar Law, and Balcarres strain to keep control of their party. When the Prime Minister tried to reverse the defeat of his Government in November, control was only maintained by orchestrating grave disorder in the House and having the sitting suspended for the week. Overall, however, with the cooperation of Carson who handled the Ulstermen and the able Balcarres as chief whip, Bonar Law kept a fairly tight rein on the various right wing groupings in his party.

V1

The first circuit of the Home Rule bill had been a successful period for Bonar Law. His performance as leader had strengthened his position. Tough, incisive in debate and popular on the

platform, he had carved respect and influence for himself in the party, as gauged by the fact that few wished for Balfour's return or even noticed his re-appearance in Parliament in March. Under Bonar Law's generalship the Government had done badly at most by-elections throughout the year. Demoralised, rattled and at times divided, it had been for the Liberals perhaps the most unsuccessful and difficult year since 1908. Moreover, Bonar Law had helped to forge party unity; divisive issues were put aside, and a sense of loyalty established through the struggle against Home Rule.

Tough resistance to Home Rule had also shown Bonar Law several important things. First, the need to maintain the public appearance of rectitude. His extreme warnings and threats were always neatly circumscribed by a strong populist appeal for a general election. He had also been concerned to limit and control rows and scenes in the House, so avoiding an adverse affect on public opinion. Second, he had observed the strength of Nationalist influence with the Government, recognising them as a force against compromise and especially against the exclusion of all or part of Ulster from the bill. On both the Agar-Robartes amendment and the Carson amendment, Redmond had refused to see Ireland as anything but a seamless garment. This was important knowledge, and would prove useful in the future.

However, by the end of the opening circuit three problems presented themselves to Bonar Law. First, despite all the pressure and threats, the Government's position on Home Rule had not changed. The bill was still on its rigid Parliamentary timetable in essentially the same form, and the Government was

still firmly in power. This raised the problem of how to force the Government to an election if intimidation and dire warnings of civil unrest had not worked. In addition, the Parliament Act dictated that the first circuit would be the easiest stage to revise the bill. After 1913, changes in the bill, or even its withdrawal, would be more difficult for the Government. This situation seemed to presage troubles for Bonar Law: splits in the Tory party might widen, and protest against his line on Home Rule might increase, given that certain groups were only committed to it as long as it held out the possibility of success.

A second problem was the position of Ulster. By late 1912, the threat of Ulster, so important to the campaign, was far from assured. The sectarian violence of the summer and autumn suggested that Ulster might simply 'collap(se) in some opera bouffe fiasco, police court proceedings, cabbage garden rebellion or so forth' well before the time came to defend their province against Home Rule¹⁴². Moreover, the threat might dissolve (and the Government was clearly hoping for this) through 'the difficulty of keeping Ulster at the boil for this period (two years)'¹⁴³. How was Ulster to be kept simmering, without going cold or bubbling over? This was to be mainly the task of Carson, Craig and the Ulster Unionists, who channelled enthusiasm into the Solemn League and Covenant and who, early in 1913, would set about the detailed planning for arming Ulster and constructing a Provisional Government. But they were also tasks for Bonar Law, who had tied his colours firmly to Ulster's mast. Would Ulster really contain itself? Would it avoid lawlessness and the justification of martial law being imposed? Would it really be

a threat? How would English and Scottish public opinion react to the increased militarisation of Ulster? All these would concern Bonar Law over the coming session.

Finally, and most dramatically, the problem of Tariff Reform reared its fractious head, much of this problem of Bonar Law's own making. In carrying out the resolution of the February shadow cabinet, Bonar Law and Lansdowne decided publicly to drop the referendum pledge at two speeches in the middle of November. The decision threw the majority of the party into open rebellion. With its basis in Lancashire, the forces opposed to dropping the referendum and in favour of dropping food taxes instead, could count on the support of Derby, Long, Salisbury, Hugh and Robert Cecil, Curzon and Balfour. With their concern to keep attention fixed on Ulster, Carson and Smith also stood with them. Bonar Law had boxed himself into an impossible corner where, over December 1912 he sat, at odds with his own party and with most of his leadership, his credibility and influence impaired and his position as leader in serious doubt. He had little choice but to offer his resignation if the party would not follow his policy. Yet this proved his salvation, for a deputation led by Carson and McNeill drew a distinction between policy and leadership. Whilst rejecting his policy on food taxes, Bonar Law was urged, in a memorial signed by most of the party, to remain as leader. It was the escape clause he had been searching for. By early January, out had gone the policy of food taxes (they would now be put to a meeting of colonial Prime Ministers) and Bonar Law and Lansdowne remained leaders of the party, bruised and diminished but still in place.

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CHAPTER FOUR

I

The Home Rule bill ended its first circuit on January the 16th when it passed the Commons by a majority of 109 only to be rejected in the Lords after just three days' debate. The first session drew to a weary close on February 14th, before the shorter 1913 session was launched on March 10th. The Tories began on a low ebb. Once the dust had settled, the session of 1912 was seen to have altered little. The country had hardly stirred: 'We made little progress', wrote Chamberlain, 'there was no marked revulsion of feeling to our side'¹. The truth that only a few Tories would contemplate was that Home Rule, divorced of its more blood-curdling associations, aroused little passion. The popular interest of 1886 would only return with the mutinies, plots and gun-running episodes of 1914. The loss of Londonderry city on January 30th seemed to underline this fact. The bill itself remained firmly on course. Despite numerous amendments being tabled, it stood unmolested, as Bonar Law noted bitterly: 'comparison of the bill as it leaves the House of Commons with the draft originally laid before the House shows very clearly how little the measure represents the mind and will of the legislature'². And most disappointing of all for the party, no general election had been called. In fact Government support had held firm, though their majority had diminished slightly from by-election losses. If anyone's position was looking precarious by early 1913, it was Bonar Law's. More ominously, several issues

arose to distract attention from Home Rule. Tariff Reform became once again a contentious issue. Lloyd George's Land campaign, continued to exercise many in the Tory party, and the Marconi scandal was, for one of the whips 'the chief, in fact the only excitement'³. Home Rule, it seemed, had lost its glow.

Much of this lost enthusiasm was caused, so Tories argued, by the Parliament Act, which dictated an altered battle-ground for the second Parliamentary session. A bill now had to begin the remaining two sessions as it had left the Commons after the first circuit (effectively dispensing with the committee and report stages) so making the second and third circuits duplicate runs. The Times neatly captured the absurdity of the new situation: 'It certainly looks as ingeniously silly as putting a bill which may not be amended, through stages intended for its amendment'⁴. Unable to alter the bill, a sense of despair built up within the party. It also bred lethargy and a feeling that the Commons no longer really counted in affairs; with the increased preparations of Ulster this was to a large extent true. 'We are like Strasbourg geese which are fed to make pate de foie gras' Chamberlain noted drily⁵. Of course, as Dicey pointed out in a series of articles in The Times towards the end of March, the bill could still be amended by suggestions put forward by Asquith at any point during the bill's progress, but would require the agreement of the upper House to pass⁶. A compromise, in other words, could still be hatched. In addition, and as again outlined by Dicey, the Parliament Act rendered the alternative of a dissolution far more difficult once the third circuit had begun, estimated to be the start of 1914. The Government stood to lose

the entire bill by dissolving during the third circuit, whereas dissolving before the final round meant that the bill could simply continue on its path. For some this served to underline that passage of the bill was inevitable. It was with such an awareness of these changing circumstances that on January 1st Carson moved his amendment for the exclusion of all nine Ulster counties. But for those like Dicey it meant that the second session had to see an all-out campaign for a dissolution.

With the failure of 1912, the new Parliamentary conditions, and the increasing retreat of the Ulstermen behind their own ramparts, the relative party unity of the first circuit began to crumble. Divisions of opinion centred on the way forward. Traditional and Southern Unionists, were increasingly fearful at what appeared to be Ulster's narrowing vision for resisting Home Rule. These sections pressed for greater resolution by the party in demanding a dissolution, and a broadening of the attack of Home Rule to encompass Unionists in the South and West. 'To show the Government', as one of their leaders put it, 'that they are not only against Ulster but against every Unionist in Great Britain... we are as much in earnest as the Ulstermen and intend to stand by them until at least we have had an opportunity of voting against the repeal of the Union'. On the other hand, the new situation of 1913 served to encourage the assorted moderate and federalist groups and individuals keen for a settlement.

Bonar Law had to steer his party through this changing environment, always focusing on the need to bring the Government to an election. In fact, his calls for a general election became more determined during 1913, given Dicey's warning that a

dissolution during the third circuit would be almost impossible for the government to grant. With this knowledge in mind, and the seemingly inevitable and lifeless Parliamentary situation, Bonar Law began to look towards other ways of inducing an election, particularly the use which could be made of the King. In private discussions with various leaders, the viability of the manoeuvre was widely debated. It came to a head in July when a joint memorandum, by Lansdowne and Bonar Law, was sent to the king, arguing that his power to change ministers with the sole object of requesting a dissolution was simply 'reserved' and by no means 'abolished'⁸. For many, this was a dangerous precedent for the Tory leader to dabble with, though one he justified by the failure of the Government to hold an election and return to Constitutional paths. Amid the extremism, then, there was a constitutional rationale. But this did not stop sections from rallying against the initiative.

II

The moderate and federalist elements in the party enjoyed far more favourable conditions after January 1913 than they had during the 1912 session, when extremism had carried all before it. Now, with the apparent failure of extremism, the path forward for the party was either greater extremism, which few could relish, or of a search for a compromise. The logic of this conclusion was reinforced by the political stalemate engendered through the Parliament Act, the general apathy on the backbenches, and the amendment moved by Carson in favour of

exclusion at the start of January. The idea of a settlement was more visibly in the air at this time.

It was also reinforced, towards the end of January, by the closing debate in the Lords before the bill entered its second circuit. Calls for settlement came from Lords Dunraven, McDonnell and Brassey. Earl Grey, in his first public speech on the issue since returning from Canada, gave a forceful plea for a federal system of rule⁹. Mild speeches also came from by Curzon, St Aldwyn and Devonshire, who seemed intent on reducing the partisan temper between the parties. 'Do you think' Curzon declared, 'that we equally with you would not like to clear the decks of all the troubled questions of Irish administration, finance, Land and education which so often have taken up the time of the House of Commons? Of course we would. The interests of our country as well as our party demand it'¹⁰. Aberconway, noticing the moderate tone, commented: 'the question of Home Rule today has, I am glad to say, been approached entirely from the point of view of detail'; divisions of principle apparently no longer existed¹¹. This angered the Southern Unionist Peers and some of the diehards of 1911, especially given Curzon's prominence in the debates. Willoughby de Broke seemed all too aware of the 1911 precedent: 'you have found yourselves up against a thing (Ulster) that no promises of Peerages or presents of money can possibly dissipate or do away with'¹².

During the brief recess in February and early March the forces for settlement continued to agitate. Strachey informed Lord Stamfordham that he was getting up a movement of moderate, non-partisan men, led by the Archbishop of York, to press Asquith

into a more consensual path¹³. Of more substance was the All-Irish League, of Dunraven and O'Brien, which met in Cork in March and passed a resolution in favour of a convention to settle the issue by consent- a method which privately would have attracted much support right across the political divide¹⁴. O'Brien tried to facilitate this by several letters to The Times. In particular, he referred to a recent speech by Long as a 'call for peace and conference' and to a letter he had received from Bonar Law as a 'marked encouragement from that quarter without whose assent a conference there cannot be'¹⁵. And it may have found an echo within Tory circles. Lyttleton, in early June, delivered a speech in Cork praising the work of Horace Plunkett, who was particularly close to Dunraven, and shared many of his constructive ideas for Ireland¹⁶.

The problem for moderates and federalists was that most of the pressure for a settlement came from outside the party leadership, and was addressed to two front-benches which had moved apart from each other, since the bitterness of the autumn session and the personal recriminations over the Marconi issue. These difficulties were compounded by more familiar problems of the federalists. Debate in the Lords, when Dunraven, Grey, Brassey and Selborne had all spoken of federal solutions, revealed how great were the varieties of federalism on offer. For all the positive signs, then, in early 1913 conditions were still not opportune for settlement. Yet behind the glare of public attention, opinions were beginning to alter and discreet hints, even overtures, were being made. Though febrile and hesitant, it was upon these currents that more substantial moves towards a

settlement would develop in the autumn.

Early in February, Churchill again attacked Bonar Law in a speech at the Hotel Cecil, this time over references he had made on the position of the sovereign with regard to the Home Rule crisis¹⁷. As with his earlier attacks, particularly after the Blenheim speech, Churchill was using Bonar Law to drive a constitutional wedge between sections of the Tory party, and so move sufficient opinion towards a compromise. His concerns found an echo in several Tory circles. One was the Strachey-Cromer group, who in the pages of The Spectator warned against tinkering with the King's prerogative. Churchill still enjoyed informal contacts with the Round Tablers, who in April were joined by Chamberlain in their regular moots. The Churchill-Chamberlain axis was to be of prime importance in later attempts at compromise. Both were keen to reconstruct the U.K. along some type of federal lines, and had been enthusiasts for the 1910 attempt. Both were alarmed at the tone Bonar Law was employing: in August 1912, Chamberlain had privately criticised Bonar Law's speech at Blenheim to Lansdowne: 'like you I should have expressed myself differently, but I hope that Ulster will offer a stubborn, passive resistance'¹⁸. In February Churchill, through Gwynne of The Morning Post, had sought some form of cooperation with Chamberlain over military affairs, but it seemed that more might be in the air. 'G(Gwynne) thinks that they (George and Churchill) both would like a coalition; but of this I gave no encouragement, saying that I did not think anything of the kind was possible whilst they stood committed to the Home Rule bill. If they were ready to come down to three or four

Provincial councils... it would be a different thing'¹⁹. Of interest here is the closeness between Chamberlain's conception of a settlement and the terms offered in Churchill's Dundee speech of September. Yet Chamberlain was at that time, perhaps, too conservative for the step Churchill had planned for him and was still sulking over Tariff Reform. Such reservations did not apply to F.E. Smith.

After his displays of 1912 Smith melted somewhat into the background during 1913, a position from which he began to look towards the centre-ground. He was close to Lloyd George, Churchill and, significantly if a solution was to be reached, to Carson. Churchill recognised that Smith (and indeed Carson) were forces working for a settlement, as can be implied from his disproportionate concentration upon Bonar Law as the wild, intemperate actor, despite both Carson's and Smith's equal extremeness. What served to build bridges between these two leaders and Liberal ministers was not, however, Churchill's favour but the Marconi episode.

The decision by Smith and Carson to defend Isaacs and Lloyd George in their libel action against Le Matin angered many Tories. 'There is a good deal of feeling', Sanders noted, 'about Carson and F.E. appearing for Godfrey Isaacs in the Chesterton case'²⁰; Sir George Younger also felt that 'this feeling is very strong among our men'²¹. During his campaign in Scotland in the middle of June Carson was publicly criticised by the chairman of the Edinburgh Conservative Association, Sir John Stirling-Maxwell²², and Smith felt it necessary to justify his action in a long letter to The Times on June 17th²³. In spite of this,

both men accepted the briefs. Although their belief in the independence of the bar was perhaps genuine, it was also a useful excuse. For by absenting themselves from the bitter censure debates, they undoubtedly sent the right people the "right" signals. To Garvin, Lloyd-George spoke of 'his higher conception... of his (Smith's) character' as a result of Marconi²⁴. Marconi now moved Smith closer to Lloyd George. Late in May, no longer waving the Ulster flag, Smith spoke to the Primrose League on the need for cooperation over Land reform, welcoming Lloyd George's earlier appeal for a cross-party solution to this problem²⁵.

But it was Carson who was most important to this bridge-building exercise. By 1913 he may well have been feeling the pressure of his position, committed as he was to armed rebellion in the last resort, a scenario which loomed far larger than it had a year previously. Nor did Carson have the luxury of the retreat, as did Bonar Law and the Tory leaders, into a general election. He would have to defend Ulster whether or not there was an election. Yet he was the leader of the Irish Unionist party, at a moment when Southern Unionism was beginning to become more assertive. Pulled in several different directions, it is little wonder that the idea of settlement might have grown in Carson during 1913. The amendment he moved in January, though strategic and relating to Ulster's military preparations, had indicated that exclusion would be one such line of compromise²⁶. Nor was Carson averse to a federal system (indeed, this was perhaps the best solution to his predicament) as long as, within the federal structure, Ulster remained under the Westminster parliament and

had nothing to do with a Nationalist assembly. Others at this stage saw him as open to suggestion, and not some rigid diehard. Edward Campbell, an ex-Irish Nationalist, urged him in April 1913 to see federalism as a possible compromise²⁷, and Dunraven wrote to Walter Long asking him to try to move Carson towards a constructive solution to the Irish problem²⁸. Both evidently thought Carson persuadable, within certain limits. Marconi, then, advertised his good intentions without saying anything concrete or compromising his position as leader of the Irish Unionists. It was a difficulty he would again encounter: looking to advance the compromise process while remaining publicly aloof from such "grubbing".

By the early summer of 1913, then, the elements from which a settlement might be made were evolving. A dialogue, of sorts, was tentatively in motion between selected Tory leaders and certain members of the government. Attempts in the autumn to reach a compromise (especially Loreburn's public appeal for a conference) did not, of course, come out of the blue. They fell on fertile ground. But not all was leading inevitably in the direction of a compromise; the deaths of Wyndham and Lyttleton during 1913, both keen federalists, was a blow to any move at this stage. Milner and Oliver still thought it tactically the wrong time to advance federal alternatives. While Milner and many of the younger, constructive Tories were concentrating on the Land issue.

III

With the amendment for full nine county exclusion rejected by the

Government, Ulster began fully to mobilise her resources. She began to look decisively to her own interests regardless, by implication, of events at Westminster or in the south and west of Ireland. But Carson, as leader of the Unionists of all Ireland, was committed by the Covenant to 'using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland'²⁹. The direction Ulster was intent upon going was thus inappropriate to Carson's abilities and importance. The closer Ulster came to actual civil insurrection, the more Carson risked becoming a figurehead.

The preparations pushed through by Ulster in this period were of critical importance to the crisis. At the end of January, the U.U.C. formally accepted the report of the special commission appointed to devise a Provisional Government structure³⁰. Organisation could now go forward based on a concrete scheme; as Carson declared at Willowfield Unionist Club in May, 'we have never stopped day or night making such possible preparations as will enable us firmly, determinedly and with success to carry out the Covenant into which we have entered'³¹. But the most important development was the formation of the U.V.F. and their centralisation under one commander, Sir George Richardson, appointed in July 1913³². The force was limited to 100,000 men and organised on a local basis into regiments, divisions and battalions, with medical, signalling, and dispatch rider corps. Money to pay for this came from an extension of the Sir Edward Carson Fund which appointed a five man committee to examine where fresh sources could be tapped³³. But cash also flowed into Ulster via the U.D.L., following a deputation from the joint

committee of the I.U.A. at the start of February.

Guns had been entering the province in relatively small numbers since 1910. The start of 1913 saw an escalation of these shipments. Craig, speaking in Antrim on March 25th, declared that the time had 'now arrived when £10,000 would be a thousand times better spent on rifles than education'³⁴. On June 3rd twelve cases, amounting to nearly 1,000 rifles, were seized at Belfast docks³⁵. Three weeks later four large cases of arms were seized at Drogheda, addressed to people in the north³⁶, and at the beginning of July Lord Leitrim's steamer was intercepted, following intelligence from Glasgow where it had reputedly left with 2,000 rifles on board. The inspection found nothing, but it was suspected that the arms had already been landed³⁷.

This activism and organisation was reflected on the Right of the Tory party with the formation in March of the British League for the Support of Ulster and the Union³⁸. The League was a means of giving active help to Ulster, as Basil Peto, the vice-president, explained. 'There were in this country many men who did not desire to see Ulster fight her battle alone if the Government carry the Home Rule conspiracy to the bitter end'³⁹. Military support, and not just financial assistance, was therefore contemplated. The League was led by many who had taken a prominent role in the Halsbury Club; Bedford was chairman, Willoughby de Broke the secretary and amongst its leaders were Northumberland, Comyn-Platt, F.E. Smith and Peto. Within the party they claimed the allegiance of 120 M.P.'s and nearly 100 Peers. The League quickly established local agents to enlist members, who were then drilled and equipped. It was also a fund-raising

association, drawing upon the extensive and well-placed contacts in British society enjoyed by many of its leaders.

The formation of the B.L.S.U.U. had its roots in the changed political conditions at the beginning of 1913. Many on the Right thought they were seeing the beginnings of another betrayal. Carson's amendment, the moderate tone of the Lords debate on the bill, and the widespread rumour that a compromise was being hatched, all fuelled this suspicion. Willoughby de Broke wrote to Bonar Law early in January recommending the formation of such a group to reassure the party: 'people think.. negotiations are succeeding between you and the government'⁴⁰. But as 1913 rolled on, apprehension grew at the apathy and the sense of resignation amongst Tory members; the party was clearly not doing enough to defeat Home Rule, and its growing interest in Marconi and the Land issue, forcing Ireland into the background, compounded these fears. The only response was even greater effort and sacrifice, as Dicey urged constantly in the columns of The Times: to meet Government stubbornness with equal determination.

Therefore the League was a warning against compromise to their leaders. Organising active help for Ulster outside official party channels was intended to reduce the leaderships' power to control affairs. Yet it was not necessarily a threat to Bonar Law; there is no reason to think he would have been hostile to the formation of the League. Willoughby de Broke's letter in January, recommending its formation, obviously encountered little resistance: two months later it was launched. His letter to The Times on May 27th, stating that the League 'intend(ed) to stand by them (Ulster) until at least we have had an opportunity of

voting against the repeal of the Union', brought the aims of the group within the pale of Bonar Law's justification of 'unconstitutional' behaviour⁴¹. The League was following the same policy as Bonar Law: violent threats to intimidate the Government into an election. In July, Willoughby de Broke informed the House of Lords that most people 'would sooner see it (the crisis) fought to a finish at a general election, but if that means of settlement is denied us, then we must fall back on the only other means at our disposal'⁴². Later in September he informed a worried Robert Cecil that 'those who are acting with me think that the stronger the forces arrayed against Home Rule the more likely the Government are to avoid the extreme touch and to appeal to the constituencies'⁴³. It is possible that the movement had Bonar Law's unofficial backing; the rejection of Carson's amendment and constraints of the Parliament Act justified, for Bonar Law, raising the stakes and further intimidation of the Government. It reinforced his constant insistence that forcing Home Rule onto Ulster would result in civil war. And by allowing the League to form he was channelling the growing frustration on the Right into a permanent structure, with an eye to containing the more extreme and independent spirits: what the Covenant did on the ground in Ulster.

In addition to threats and intimidation, the Tory right actively involved itself with the militarisation of Ulster. The U.D.L. was already a conduit to Ulster for Unionist money and expertise. The B.L.S.U.U. involved itself in recruitment, and in drilling supporting forces. Much active work was also done by prominent individuals. Ronald McNeill, Conservative M.P. for St.

Augustine, was an influential mover on the backbenches, rallying support to the cause and encouraging friends and colleagues to make financial commitments. Colonel Hickman, Tory M.P. for Wolverhampton South, was instrumental in securing the services of Sir George Richardson as Commander-in-Chief, and arousing sympathy for Ulster in military circles⁴⁴. He also served on the Provisional Government, and was to act as recruiting officer for the U.V.F. Sir William Bull, Tory M.P. for Westminster, helped, with safe houses, transport and the passage of arms through Britain to Ulster⁴⁵. Bull's connection is of interest because of his closeness to Walter Long and his active involvement with the U.D.L., showing again the overlapping of groups and of individuals. He also enjoyed much influence amongst more traditional Tory sections.

But the Right was not concerned solely with the military aspects of Ulster. If their aim was to intimidate the Government into an election, then additional tactical courses presented themselves; two in particular gained popularity from March 1913 onwards. First was the idea of embroiling the King in the political crisis. With the constitution suspended, the Royal prerogative, many argued, was reactivated. In this situation it was the King's duty either to veto the bill or to replace his ministers with ones who would recommend a dissolution. Behind this was, perhaps, a feeling that the King had neglected his duty in 1911 in promising Asquith that he would create more Peers. Second was the idea of suspending the Army Annual Act in the House of Lords, so prompting an immediate dissolution of Parliament. This idea had first surfaced in July 1911 in the

fertile minds of Goulding and Garvin, as a means of frustrating the Parliament bill. By 1913, Lord Hugh Cecil began to look with favour upon the tactic. In June he wrote a memorandum arguing the case for suspending the Act, which he distributed amongst the Unionist leadership⁴⁶. Cecil was aware that it was a dangerous and radical step: he argued that the Act could only be suspended as long as public opinion was carefully prepared, and a series of prior moves effected. In particular, the King should first be petitioned to withhold his assent until an election, and only then should they consider suspending the Act. No action was taken upon Cecil's suggestion, largely because moves to involve the King were already underway, and because the likes of Salisbury, Bob Cecil and Lansdowne had been concerned about what reaction such a tactic would provoke in the public and the party. But the idea was to revive more strongly during the first months of 1914.

Interest in the Army Act also fed into the Unionist attack upon the question of how the bill was to be implemented, if Ulster refused it: would the Army be used to coerce Ulster under Dublin? Tories taunted the Government with the likelihood of mass resignations, in the process helping to blur the sanctity of obeying orders. We can only speculate on the social pressure applied to officers not to coerce Ulstermen. If nothing else, the constant references to and public debate on such hypothetical situations made simple obedience far more difficult and uncertain. Birrell and Asquith tried to counter by rejecting the likelihood of ever coercing any part of Ireland into the bill⁴⁷, but this seemed less plausible when Carson announced that taxes would not be paid to the Irish Government (which would still be

under Imperial collection) but to the Ulster Provisional Government: 'Then if the Government did not intend to use force, let them try to collect the taxes without force'⁴⁸. Could any Government stand passively by once Imperial revenue was being withheld? Was this not the way the thirteen colonies had been lost?

IV

The new environment of 1913 created some anxiety among Southern Unionists. Lords Midleton, Templetown and Barrymore, along with other more traditional sections of the party such as Long and Salisbury, shared a concern that Ulster was looming far too large in the Unionist armoury against Home Rule. The tough campaigns throughout Ulster during the autumn of 1912, the signing of the Covenant in September and Carson's amendment on January the 1st, clearly suggested this. By the start of the second circuit the impression was widely felt, especially since Liberal ministers were playing upon it, that no credible resistance to the bill existed in the south and west of Ireland. Midleton complained to The Times that 'the Prime Minister, admitting the animus against the bill in Ulster, has assumed that the Unionist population in the other three provinces views the bill with composure'⁴⁹. To reverse this perception, Southern Unionists tried to raise their own profile. Midleton arranged loyalist meetings throughout the South of Ireland and, with Devonshire, tried to organise them locally into a strong political movement; however, as he admitted, his efforts '(had) hitherto been very feeble'⁵⁰. G. Stewart, chairman of the I.U.A, wrote to Carson at the

beginning of March for support: 'we Southern Unionists are badly in need of encouragement'⁵¹. To James Campbell he was less delicate in his demands for recognition of the South: 'things have never been in so critical a condition as they are now. If Mr Bonar Law does not hold us together it is hard to say what might happen'⁵². At the same time he led a deputation of Southern Irish Unionists to Bonar Law to register their fears: 'A great feeling of uneasiness exists amongst the Unionists of the south and west of Ireland at the present crisis. We believe that this feeling is due to a very large extent to the attitude of the leaders towards Ulster and the feeling which is stated to exist in England, that there is no opposition to Home Rule except the opposition of Ulster'⁵³. Southern Unionists were keen to convince Tory leaders that there was more to the Irish question than Ulster.

The situation was not helped by Ulster increasingly turning away from the Westminster arena and looking to her own defence. 'Those who are behind the scenes in Ulster', Midleton reminded Bonar Law, 'believe that such terrible events are impending that nothing very much matters here (London). This may prove to be so, but is it not just as much our duty as a party to exhaust all constitutional means of opposition before a rupture...?'⁵⁴. The Carson amendment, as a prerequisite of the "forward move" in Ulster, had dismayed and shocked many Southern Unionists to such an extent that on February 19th the U.U.C. felt it necessary to pass a resolution 'that the position of Unionists in the south and west of Ireland has not been lost sight of and when the time comes, have the support and sympathy of Ulster brethren'⁵⁵.

Despite such assurances, Southern Unionists believed that over-concentration on Ulster would bring about a settlement based upon exclusion. Dicey warned Long that Asquith might be 'meditating some unexpected trick with a view to divide the Unionist opposition. Is he thinking of some concessions to Ulster? We must certainly be prepared for this'⁵⁶. A worried Midleton reminded Hugh Cecil, one of the champions of the Ulster line, that 'if it were possible to exempt Ulster from the Home Rule bill we should be guilty of a most outrageous crime against the loyalists through-out the south'⁵⁷. Lord Templetown, at the Council of Unionist clubs, tried to squash all such rumours: 'He repeated as he had said in the lords, that of compromise, of devolution or of a separate Ulster, they would have none.. that while it was for their leader Sir Edward Carson to state the policy of Ulster, he ventured to think that what he had stated was unquestionably the views of the Unionist clubs of Ireland'⁵⁸. This marked a difference between Carson (who was apparently making policy only for Ulster) and the rest of the Unionist movement; Carson himself was increasingly aware of such southern anxieties. 'I think they are disturbed over the question of compromise', he told Bonar Law⁵⁹. This fear was strengthened by the general air of apathy in the party; passage of the bill was inevitable and little could stop it. Ulster had responded to this listlessness by preparing to stop it unilaterally; the rest of Ireland, to fight its battles, was reliant upon a Tory party which, by early 1913, was far from encouraging. This explains the calls for renewed activism. Dicey, writing to Walter Long in early April, reminded him that 'nothing but great energy both in leaders and followers

will avert this calamity'⁶⁰. And again on the 30th: 'What I deprecate is the saying... that somehow the passing of the Home Rule bill would be prevented; such feats we all know are not achieved somehow but by energy and concerted effort'⁶¹.

This concern for greater energy surfaced in May over tactics towards the second reading (9th and 10th of June). Bonar Law and Carson had planned to walk out of the chamber without registering their votes in the lobby, to make an unusual protest. Both Long and Midleton objected to this passive resistance. 'I suggested', the latter wrote, 'that it would not be understood in the country if no vote were given by those chiefly affected on the second reading'⁶²; Long felt that 'if we abstain our policy will be misunderstood'⁶³. The policy gave the appearance of resignation and 'the electors will surely think that our opposition to the bill is played out'⁶⁴. In the event, the second reading passed off in normal fashion, outstanding only for the very bitter speech delivered by Carson on the 10th.

Closely aligned to calls for renewed activity were intensified demands for a dissolution. This was not a new demand, but by 1913 the request had greater resonance. Dicey was a leading force behind this, concerned that once the third session began a dissolution would be far more difficult to win. Writing in The Times under the title 'Facts for Unionists', he harangued them constantly to demand a dissolution⁶⁵. In private Dicey worked to convince the leaders of this necessity, pestering Bonar Law on March 25th: 'to my mind we have one course open to us and one only; that is openly and avowedly to agitate for a dissolution and raise the perfectly legitimate cry of an appeal

to the people'.⁶⁶ Bonar Law took the advice, and during his major speeches of 1913 continually challenged Asquith to such a remedy for the crisis. In the atmosphere of 1913, with so much going against the Government, not least the humiliating defeats at Newcastle and Altrincham and the revelations over Marconi, he must have been confident of success. Other Tory leaders followed his line, Curzon declaring to the Primrose League in May: 'our demand is that the matter should be put to the test'.⁶⁷ Long went so far as to prepare a manifesto of policy initiatives (land, housing, Insurance), obviously with an eye on an election campaign in the near future.⁶⁸.

Giving the demand for an election, a higher profile served to soothe many Southern and traditional Unionist worries. It avoided direct reference to the Ulster problem, treating Home Rule in general as the point at issue. This shifted the focus away from notions of settlement and, crucially for these elements in the Unionist coalition, lessened the prominence of exclusion. In any case, Southern Unionists had little alternative to a dissolution and the return of a Tory government as a means of securing the Union.

Putting the call for an election more squarely to the fore helped cushion and appease those traditional Unionists unhappy with Bonar Law's strong support for Ulster resistance. Midleton spoke of the need to exhaust all constitutional means before adopting novel tactics for resisting the bill.⁶⁹ Salisbury was even more forthright: 'I strongly disapprove of Home Rule for Ireland but I cannot support political lawlessness and I shall either disenfranchise myself or vote Liberal at the next

election, rather than encourage armed resistance in Ulster.⁷⁰ For leaders such as Salisbury and Midleton an election would defuse the whole political crisis, removing much of the bitterness and, whether they won or lost, at least saving the Parliamentary system from irreparable and irreversible harm. An election was vital not just to try and save the Union but to save the political and social order itself, before the Ulster blunderbuss destroyed everything.

However, demanding an election exposed the differences within the Unionist forces, in particular by dividing the Ulstermen from other parts of the Unionist coalition. Sanders had perceptively remarked on this distinction towards the end of 1912: 'Lloyd George tried to draw Bonar Law as to whether he would approve of resistance if at a general election the country decided for Home Rule. Law refused to be drawn. But as a matter of fact he has said both publicly and privately that in that case he would not support resistance. There he differs from Carson'.⁷¹ As Ulster increasingly looked to its own preservation, an election became less pressing; the election, after all, might be lost, and such a result would not change Ulster's decision to defend her interests. But for other Unionists, as Ulster began to organise and arm, an election became even more central. 1913 these distinctions became more apparent. Carson, speaking during second reading on June 10th, recognised these differences: 'he preferred to fight this battle out with the whole of the Unionist party behind him, rather than, as they might have to fight it out eventually, alone in Ireland'.⁷² Bonar Law, replying to Asquith's question as to the

value of an election when Ulster was determined to resist in any case, also admitted this divergence of intent. 'I cannot say what the attitude of Ulster will be but I can at once say what my attitude will be if I am leader of the Unionist party...if that is done we shall not in any way, shape or form encourage the resistance of Ulster. I say that without hesitation...if you put it before the people of this country as a clear issue, then it is a problem for Ulster and not for me'⁷³. And Lansdowne, who along with a growing band of Unionists was worried at the implications of an Ulster rebellion, assured the House of Lords that 'if the country wants the bill we are ready to let them have it. We ask you to put the question to the test and we are prepared to abide by the result'⁷⁴. It was Lord Londonderry, however, who gave the clearest indication of differences of interest. To his threat that 'if Home Rule is granted it is absolutely certain there will be civil war in Ulster', Lord Morley responded: 'even after a general election?'. 'In any circumstances' came the blunt reply⁷⁵. Inconveniences like elections were not going to stop the mighty Ulster military machine from defending its interests. It was on this issue that Ulster and the Tory party were shown to stand apart.

Of interest here was the position Lansdowne seemed to be adopting. By the summer of 1913 he was at last moving away from the land issue and, perhaps for the first time, towards the Irish question. He moved to defend traditional and Southern Unionist concerns, aligning himself with Midleton, Long and Salisbury against what all three saw as the dominating, and increasingly dangerous, influence of Ulster. His clear and

forceful acceptance of the bill, if the Tories lost an election, was meant as a gesture to those alarmed at the ramifications the party was contriving for itself. It also suggested a weakening of support for Ulster, a hint that even if there were no election, assistance for their rebellion would not be forthcoming; unlike Bonar Law, he never claimed that Tory backing was contingent on an election, nor did he reinforce his analysis with blood-curdling threats of civil catastrophe. Lansdowne thus rose as a counter-weight to Carson within leadership circles, with Bonar Law the fulcrum between them: a tension which would become more focused and important during the autumn.

It was this combination of a strong move from traditional and Southern Unionist circles for an election and a growing anxiety about the consequences of a revolt in Ulster which led some to advocate a greater role for the King in the crisis. Ideas about the King's role had continued to circulate in Unionist circles since the Parliament Act, especially on how his constitutional position had been changed by the new Parliamentary landscape. The summer recess of the first session, a time to reflect on the looming political crisis, saw these comments begin to surface. Carson told Lady Londonderry in August 1912 that, when faced with giving his assent to Home Rule, the King could no longer exercise his veto but was fully entitled 'to call on his P.M. to relieve him of an impossible situation'⁷⁶. Three days before, Edward Saunderson had also broached the subject of the King with Lady Londonderry. Knowing she was to see him soon, he wrote: 'if you put your mind to it to make the little man put his foot down. He has a great opportunity. He will either be a

man or a mouse. Let us hope he will be the power'.⁷⁷ And Lord St Aldwyn, in an article in The Times, 'doubted if ministers dare advise the king to give the Royal assent to the measures and thought that if they did they might be told to consult the country'.⁷⁸ But it was Bonar Law who first brought the topic into wider and more influential councils.

On November 16th, following the snap victory against the Liberals, Bonar Law wrote to the King's secretary, Stamfordham. Designed to intimidate the monarch into re-assessing his position, it was a blunt and alarmist letter. 'Sooner or later... we shall have to decide between breaking the Parliamentary machine and allowing these terrible results to happen. When faced with a choice of such evils as these we shall not hesitate in considering that the injury of the House of Commons is not so great an evil as the other'.⁷⁹ He then delivered the punchline: 'the Speaker felt he had to intervene and there is always the risk that the time will come when the nation will expect His Majesty to take, in regard to the whole nation, the same attitude which has been taken by the speaker'.⁸⁰ The tense political atmosphere at that time might explain the more excessive aspects of this extraordinary letter; but it reveals how early Bonar Law saw the King as a possible means of securing a dissolution.

Not until his speech on January 24th at the Queens Hall, Edinburgh, did he express such views publicly. Hypothesising on the situation when the bill was presented for Royal assent, he asked his audience: 'what would then be the position of the sovereign of this country? Whatever he did half of his people would think he had failed in his duty... that any loyal servant

should put his sovereign in such a position would have been, till a year ago, incredible... but... can we be sure that the present Government will not commit that crime?⁸¹ Reaction to Bonar Law's speech was swift. Lord Esher saw it as 'a new departure' and not one he particularly liked⁸². Dicey echoed these sentiments, seeing it as 'a dangerous mistake'⁸³. Bonar Law also received more fulminations from Churchill, who referred to his comments as 'criminal advice'⁸⁴. For Strachey it was 'a mad movement', got up by 'Garvin and the other hotheads' who were simply 'gambl(ing) with the Monarchy'⁸⁵. In the pages of The Spectator he rallied against the idea of involving the king in party political controversy. He also compiled an eight page memorandum criticising the scheme, which he disseminated to certain Unionist leaders, notably Lansdowne, whom he obviously saw as a force working against extremism in the party⁸⁶.

But the discussion in the party which Bonar Law's speech had initiated showed clearly that opinion was moving in favour of some type of action by the King. Nor was this movement of opinion limited to a few extremists, as an anxious Stamfordham noted: 'I fear the feeling that he (the King) should take some action will not be confined to the Diehards and Garvin'⁸⁷. Carson, aware of the Sovereign's position, applied similar pressure on him from the public platform. At Willowfield drill Hall on May 16th he concluded that 'every monarch rests upon certain ground so long as he makes his maxim "the will of the people shall prevail"'. But no monarch rests upon certain ground who says the will of a coalition Government must prevail⁸⁸. Lansdowne, Salisbury, Hugh and Robert Cecil and Long all gave private support to the idea.

Thomas Bowles even sent Bonar Law a closely argued memorandum, early in July, on the tactical advantages of involving the King⁸⁹. In fact, differences within the party over the King's role were not about whether but about how it ought to be used.

Some thought that the King could veto the bill and so force Asquith to dissolve. 'His Majesty', wrote Long, an early advocate of this line, 'might decide to tell the Government that he would not assent to the bill without a dissolution'⁹⁰. In May, Steel-Maitland informed Bonar Law of a petition which Carson, Chamberlain, McNeill and Locker-Lampson were planning to get up and present to the King in the autumn, asking 'that your Majesty may withhold your Royal assent to that measure until the Parliamentary electors of the U.K. shall have had an opportunity... of making known their wishes'⁹¹. And even Salisbury recommended use of the veto in a letter to Sir George Younger: 'Does not the king's coronation oath.. not give Unionists the right to ask his majesty under the circumstances to withhold his signature when the H.R. for Ireland.. Act (is) presented to him'...⁹²? But for others, use of the Royal veto was a dangerous step, one not taken even in the politically charged atmospheres of 1783 and 1831. It might also be tactically fatal, 'suiting Asquith's game uncommonly well', by allowing him to play the King versus the People card and so 'throw the crown after the coronet' while for the party it 'would utterly destroy us at the polls'⁹³.

Dicey worked hard to steer ideas about the Royal prerogative into less constitutionally sensitive waters. Instead of the veto, the King might ask his ministers to dissolve to

alleviate the political tension. If they refused, it would be a 'perfectly constitutional manner' then to dismiss those ministers and call fresh ones (ie Tory ones) with 'wholly and solely' the aim of immediately dissolving Parliament⁹⁴. However, he deprecated overt pressure on the King by Tory leaders to achieve such an end. Rather they should 'let it be known that they are prepared at any moment if called to office to carry through a dissolution even though this measure may meet with Parliamentary opposition'⁹⁵. Bonar Law concurred with this use of the prerogative. 'I do not think that it is a question really of using the veto, but in my view the one constitutional right which the sovereign undoubtedly still possesses is that if ministers have given him advice of which he does not approve, he should then see whether he cannot get other ministers who would give him different advice'⁹⁶. Yet this concurrence with Dicey's approach did not deter him from applying pressure on the King, like Carson, from the public platform. Lansdowne was also a supporter of Dicey's views. Replying to entreaties from Strachey to mobilise against the movement, he admitted that the veto would 'be a great mistake', but saw little problem with the King changing ministers to procure a dissolution⁹⁷. With Bonar Law and Lansdowne aware of the dangers of the veto, they were able to shift debate on the prerogative towards the safer line of changing ministers to induce a dissolution.

Despite the widespread discussion within the Tory leadership on this matter and the strength of opinion in favour of some type of royal initiative, it was not until after third reading and the end of the second circuit was anything tangible done. On the 31st

of July Lansdowne and Bonar Law presented a joint memorandum to the King on his constitutional position with regard to the Home Rule bill and in the light of the Parliament Act. It put clearly the points: that the veto 'has no doubt fallen into desuetude'; and that 'as a constitutional monarch he can only act upon the advice of a minister, but it has never been questioned by any constitutional writer that if the king is not sure that in the advice which they have given him his ministers have the support of his people, he has the right to change his advisers, to give his new ministers the power to dissolve Parliament and so to ascertain whether or not they have the support of the country'⁹⁸. The memorandum was a shrewd attempt to move the King towards exerting his prerogative, more subtle than Bonar Law's and Carson's platform intimidation, clearly revealing the hand of Lansdowne, but no less powerful. It came after several months of pressure on the King to act, not just from the platform but from the press, from informal talks with Tory leaders, from 'rumours of probable agitation in the country; of monster petitions; addresses from the House of Lords; from Privy Councillors; urging me to use my influence to avert the catastrophe'⁹⁹. These pressures left the King increasingly anxious at his own predicament. Birrell, meeting the King on July 24th, was forced to discuss the Irish problem for nearly an hour during which the king referred to Government policy as 'drifting'¹⁰⁰. On August the 11th, clearly moved by the memorandum from Lansdowne and Bonar Law, the King wrote to Asquith urging that a way out of the present situation be found, and indicating his support for an election¹⁰¹.

Involving the King was not as extreme or even as unjustifiable a course, in the circumstances of 1913, as many contemporaries and historians have thought. The constitution was, according to the preamble to the Parliament Act, in suspension; and as Lansdowne argued, 'under a suspended constitution the old customs cannot have the same force'.¹⁰² Also, the Parliament Act was only to be used on bills 'which had during two years been supported by a majority of the House of Commons and had also received the stable support of the constituencies'.¹⁰³ This second point greatly concerned the Tory leadership; 'the question whether the last condition has been fulfilled can hardly be left entirely for decision by the Government of the day, and it will certainly be argued that some responsibility must also rest upon the crown'.¹⁰⁴ Whether or not it was tactically wise or secure constitutional ground, their attempts to persuade the King were largely based on the wording of the Parliament Act and the manner in which the Government had used it. And the King was seen, by many traditional Unionists, as a safety-valve in a situation which was spiralling out of control. 'No one wishes to drag the king's name into party-politics', wrote Salisbury, 'but vital national and Imperial interests are involved which justify our laying our case before his majesty'.¹⁰⁵ With the social, political and even military order in jeopardy, urging the king to play a more active part seemed a small danger by comparison.

Attempts to embroil the king reveal several things about the Tory leadership. First, the general drift to the right by many who, under different circumstances, would have been alarmed at any prospect of tampering with the royal prerogative. Lansdowne,

Salisbury, Long, Chamberlain and Midleton were all keen supporters of what at other times they would surely have resisted. They may all have wanted an election as the best way out of the crisis, but support for an initiative by the crown might also be an indication of their willingness to see a conference on the issue. The king could, after all, recommend a convention along the lines of 1910 just as easily as a dissolution. Such an outcome appealed to Midleton and other Southern Unionists, not least because, short of a Tory Government, it was the only way of keeping Ulster in a united Ireland and yet moderating the grant of self-rule.

Second, there is the problem of explaining Carson's behaviour in supporting initiatives towards the King's withholding his assent. This keenness to force an election was at odds with his clearly stated position that it would not necessarily end Ulster's resistance. An election held the risk of losing, so removing Unionist support for Ulster; and an election had too many pitfalls to be the ideal solution for Ulstermen. Nor was persuading the King to effect a dissolution the perfect basis to appeal to the country: it threatened a Unionist election campaign vulnerable to a Liberal 'king versus the people' cry. Several reasons for Carson's position can be suggested. Forcing an election at that stage was clearly less of a risk than at other times. With the Marconi scandal so prominent and National Insurance still unpopular, they stood to gain from a strong anti-Liberal sentiment in the country. Carson might also have been feeling the difficulty of his position, made worse by the death of his wife in April. The rejection of his amendment,

Ulster's military preparations, and the rigid parliamentary situation during the second session, created a desperate need to block or divert the seemingly inevitable progress towards Home Rule. Perhaps Carson was beginning to think longer-term about the position of Ulster and Ireland which would require, in the end, some form of settlement. Drawing the King into party politics might initiate a future conference or negotiations; this was consistent with his actions over Marconi. It does not, of course, explain his apparent willingness to see the King use his veto, unless he believed that by threatening George V with this more extreme option he made the safer course of calling a conference more attractive to the King.

v

The second session opened badly for Bonar Law. His leadership was weakened after the food tax crisis, the lack of success in the first session and a staid Parliamentary atmosphere at the start of the second. There was apathy throughout the party, many being resigned to the bill's passage; and divisions over Ireland were beginning to surface. As Marconi and the land campaign moved to prominence, he even had trouble in retaining attention on Home Rule.

He stuck tenaciously to his line on the bill. Winding up third reading on January 16th he declared: 'The reality of this situation does not consist in discussions in this house. It does not consist in your majorities.. It consists in the resistance of Ulster. That is the reality of the situation'¹⁰⁶. And to

Dicey in June: 'In my deliberate opinion.. the best chance of avoiding civil war.. is to convince the ministers that we are in earnest and that if they attempt to carry this through under present conditions they will find themselves face to face with resistance of more than half the nation. I think they are now beginning to believe it, then I think it is impossible for them to persevere'¹⁰⁷. This continued the language of 1912. With his support for Royal intervention, his informal backing for the creation of the B.L.S.U.U. and the general hard-hitting nature of his speeches and threats, Bonar Law encountered few problems from the Diehards. His handling of the Right was based on leadership from the front, controlling the pace of escalation and slowing the drift towards unconstitutional methods. This could be seen when he directed interest in the King away from the veto and towards the dismissal of ministers. He did not simply 'canalize the enthusiasm of the diehards into party channels, to articulate their views' but shaped opinion on the Right¹⁰⁸. His role was not passive but assertive, guiding and encouraging.

If he faced problems of unity from any direction, it was from the more traditional and moderate sections of the party. Worried at the rise in militancy and the threat to civil order by Ulster, they had come out strongly for a dissolution. This demand was easily absorbed by Bonar Law, whose speeches had continually appealed for an election, but as a dissolution became more central to the Tory position, several tactical difficulties were raised. First, he was forced to announce that he would stand by its result. This injected a healthy dose of constitutionalism back into the party, but it also exposed a serious difference

with the Ulstermen. Bonar Law could not risk alienating the Ulstermen, since that increased the danger of their coming independently to a compromise with Asquith on exclusion. Dicey greatly feared this, realising that the Government could still make suggestions to amend the bill¹⁰⁹. Yet there was little Bonar Law could do to offset this danger, except to ensure that his promises to Ulster were unqualified if no election came, to maintain a tough and bloodcurdling tone and to keep close to Carson and to developments in the province.

Second, out of the Tory demand for a dissolution had emerged the idea of using the King to procure it. Though Bonar Law quickly supported such a move, it was not necessarily compatible with his tactical line. His was a game of patience, of the "ticking-bomb" scenario: in the end, the horror of Ulster resistance would move Asquith to an election. Why then upset this scheme with risky manoeuvres? Although it would prompt an election, it would do so on uncertain terms; raising the issue of the royal prerogative stood to eclipse Home Rule and place the Tories on a less hopeful, because less threatening, platform. Several reasons might explain why Bonar Law felt obliged to involve the King. It reflected traditional and Southern Unionist pressure to act before the entire, Ulster-dominated situation, erupted. The movement of Long, Salisbury, Midleton, Balfour, and (more warily) Lansdowne behind the idea showed a strength of opinion within the leadership to which Bonar Law could not fail to respond. And, like Carson, he may have felt that to have election in 1913, with the government so unpopular, would outweigh the means by which it came about. The plan also had a

good chance of succeeding; intimidating the King could, and eventually did, force him to act, although in the end not in the way Bonar Law wanted. In any case, by raising the position of the King, further pressure was brought on the Government as to the consequences of continuing with the bill. In addition, the 'ticking-bomb' approach could only succeed if all other constitutional avenues had been explored beforehand. Bonar Law realised that eventual support for Ulster resistance had to be preceded by less extreme solutions for achieving an election if it was to justify their backing for armed rebellion and place them in a stronger tactical position. Imploring the King to act was Bonar Law traversing semi-constitutional paths before unconstitutional ones.

Bonar Law also speculated about whether Asquith's was merely a drifting, rudderless government with no settled Irish policy. At the Free Trade Hall in March he had thought that 'the Government by the methods by which they proposed to carry out their Home Rule policy were drifting without compass straight on the rocks'¹¹⁰. If this was so (and it was what many thought to be Asquith's frame of mind) then there was a genuine fear that Ulster would simply drift into civil war or, worse still, that she would erupt before any election. Threatening civil war worked only if Asquith actually feared it; if he thought it impossible or containable, and was determined simply to wait and see what turned up, then drawing in the King to act decisively might alarm him. It might prevent Ulster from a premature explosion which would place Tories in a difficult position regarding their pledge of support. This point again touched the basic problem faced by

Bonar Law: what were Asquith's tactics and aims? He was never really sure how the Prime Minister might relieve the pressure of Ulster; all he could do was to manoeuvre so as to ensure that he avoided a compromise, kept public opinion on his side, and maintained unity in his party.

The 1913 Parliamentary session revealed many characteristics of Bonar Law's style of leadership. One particular method he used effectively was to allow issues to be freely debated within the ruling counsels, hoping that a clear line of policy would emerge. He had tried to do this with Tariff Reform during 1912, but had unfortunately plumped for the wrong opinion - though once in trouble, he had extricated himself from it by precisely this method of 'leaving the onus on the party of defining its position'¹¹¹. To some extent he did this with land policy, refraining from making any definite policy statements - to the annoyance of Steel-Maitland. However, no consensus emerged over land, opinion being seriously divided between innovators and traditionalists. On the position and role of the King he also employed this method. But this sensitive technique and regard for party opinion was apt to be misinterpreted as weakness. Dicey, writing to Strachey, enquired: 'why are our leaders always too late? Is it not because the leadership is practically in commission? Surely.. the old system must be restored; we must have one leader of the opposition'¹¹². And Salisbury, writing to his brother Robert, commented that 'the respective attitudes of Balfour and Bonar Law are gratifying to ones sense of humour. It seems to be easier to be definite when you are not responsible'¹¹³.

By the end of the second session Bonar Law was in a far stronger position than at the start, even though no election had been called. The party remained united, and with their upper hand in politics reflected in the drift of by-elections in their direction. The Government were increasingly uncertain, coming close to breaking up over Marconi and feeling the tension from radical and Labour supporters at the lack of constructive reform, particularly the still-expected Land campaign. In the country the Government were unpopular as a result of National Insurance, Naval matters, Marconi, the suffrage question and Home Rule. Most important, Tory excesses did not appear to have alienated public opinion.

However, there were problems on the horizon. By the summer of 1913 a considerable movement in favour of action by the King had built up. But this did not mean that he would act under Tory prescription; in fact the more common precedent was for the monarch to arrange a conference¹¹⁴. This was the more worrying since the time - the end of the second session - seemed most suitable for a compromise attempt. The period between second and third circuit was recognised as the last moment to dissolve Parliament on anything like equal terms. The parties also now had a long six-month recess to ponder these and other problems, ideal terrain for flexible politicians to manoeuvre without the glare of party or public opinion. In fact, fragile links across the party divide had already been built during 1913, and forces within both parties were beginning to press for a settlement. It was against this background that the secret meetings between Bonar Law, Asquith and Carson took place.

ENDNOTES CHAPTER 4.

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- 5.. Ibid April 11th 1913: Hull speech
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51. B.L.P. 29/2/10 G.Stewart to Law March 6th 1913

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54. B.L.P. 29/4/2 Midleton to Law May 2nd 1913

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CHAPTER FIVE

I

By September 1913 Bonar Law and Lansdowne's policy of manoeuvring the King into decisive action had met with little obvious success. Their insistence that the choice lay between civil war and a general election had unnerved the King but he had not been pressured into dangerous constitutional remedies. Instead, Tory pressure had moved him towards the safer exercise of Royal influence by calling for a conference of party leaders. Over July and August the King had sounded out many leading politicians to this end, gaining a variety of opinion, much of it both moderate and sympathetic. Events within high-political circles appeared to be moving in the direction of a conference.

The established view is that the publication by Lord Loreburn, a Liberal Home Ruler, of a letter in The Times on September 11th calling for a "settlement by consent", set the idea of a conference of party leaders on track¹. However, two other factors were already pushing the conference idea into the foreground. Firstly Ulster had taken a further step forward during 1913, with the consolidation of the U.V.F. and establishment of a centralised political structure ready to assume control of all branches of civil and military government in the province. This was formally initiated on September 24th when the U.U.C. reconstituted itself as a Provisional Government. Alongside this came the traditional September campaigns in Ulster in the run up to Ulster Day on the 28th. It made Liberal

depreciation of Ulster's claims seem blinkered and dangerous. A conference was now, for many, the best way out of a deteriorating situation.

Second, the procedural ground had been well prepared. The Parliament Act, by turning the first two legislative circuits into dummy-runs, made the interregnum before the third an obvious moment when a compromise could be hatched. Further, any amendment of the bill not incorporated before early 1913 had to have, thereafter, the agreement of the Lords. This pointed to the long delay between the second and third circuits as an ideal time to search for agreement. Loreburn's letter therefore fell upon fertile ground.

The letter immediately put Bonar Law on the defensive by raising an alternative to the equation he had propounded since early 1912: a general election or civil war. A conference appeared more in tune with the lethargic public and the pro-compromise stance of many leading papers. It stood to preserve the party balance and the Liberal Government, by removing pressure on the Liberals to retire or hold an election. It was also an attractive proposition to the King. He greeted Loreburn's suggestion with great enthusiasm. as a way of avoiding partisan interference in political affairs. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that Loreburn's public announcement had the King's prior sanction, if it was not actually the product of his indirect pressure to bring the party leaders together. And Loreburn was an acknowledged Home Ruler, who had resisted exclusion during the formulation of policy towards Ireland early in 1912. If he was trimming, how many other moderates might be

nestling on the Liberal backbenches? Rumours even circulated that Loreburn was acting under orders from Asquith, to open up an avenue the Government desperately wanted but could not publicly initiate without undermining their own credibility².

This perception of Asquith encouraged some Tories to pressure their leadership for a Conference, taking the exclusion of Ulster from the bill as a basis upon which negotiation could progress. Loreburn's letter swelled their ranks, gaining in particular the hesitant support of Balfour, who was fearful of the threat posed to the social fabric of the Nation and convinced that if such an attempt at conference failed then the justification for exercising the Royal prerogative would be greatly enhanced. Also, members close to the Army and Navy saw exclusion as an amicable way out, recognising the damage the present struggle was doing to morale, and conscious of the German military threat. Earl Roberts and Lord Beresford both thought along these lines³. Such military sympathy for a compromise might be explained by the growing connections between sections of the Army and the Ulster Unionists, who, despite their sabre-rattling, were keen for such a solution. Exclusion had long been the Ulster Unionists' bench-mark for an acceptable compromise, given their previous endorsement of Agar-Robartes' and Carson's amendments. To pull back now from such a suggestion would have been tactically disastrous, enabling Asquith more easily to justify continuing with his bill or even forcing it onto Ulster. Despite the bitterness and extremism of their campaign so far, Carson and F.E.Smith realised this. The former recognised the logic of his established hardline tactics, which depended on

securing a political solution. Carson was also, as Bonar Law told Lansdowne, 'feeling more and more the responsibility of his position', so strengthening his resolve to find a solution⁴.

What ran through these diverse sections of Unionism was a realisation that a conference was now the safest course of action in light of the increasing radicalisation of the crisis, and that exclusion for Ulster was the quickest method of securing an agreement. For the Ulster Unionists, exclusion was the only agenda on which they would negotiate. They were fearful of a federalism which could well leave Dublin with some power over Ulster, and sceptical of the outcome of a general election, given the failure of Unionist campaigning to rouse the country against Home Rule.

Many others in the party were horrified at the prospect of a conference, and even more so at the idea of exclusion. Diehards opposed to the idea, recognising the damage this would do to their present strong tactical position as regards Ulster and the Home Rule bill. Why throw away a year and a half's gruelling campaigning and the rousing of popular indignation against the Government at the first hint of Liberal weakening? The situation for the Diehards dictated renewed determination, not running after Liberal "hares". Willoughby de Broke, speaking in Liverpool early in September, harangued the Government and any thought of a compromise over Home Rule⁵. Nothing but the removal of the entire bill and the collapse of the Liberal Government would satisfy the B.L.S.U.U.

It was Walter Long and Lansdowne who emerged as the leading voices from this section, Long drawing his support (as he always

had) from the English squirearchy on the Tory backbenches who had been ruffled by the support for exclusion in early 1913 but held in check by Bonar Law's advocacy of a general election. Lansdowne looked towards the entrenched Southern Irish Landowners within the Lords, and remembered the events of 1911 when his authority had been severely tested by a revolt in the upper house. This consideration was particularly acute, since Lords Midleton and Barrymore were already straining to give a lead to Southern Unionist discontent and Willoughby de Broke to the Diehards of 1911. Lansdowne's anti-conference and anti-exclusion stance reflected the tenuous nature of his own authority in the upper house. By, then, the middle of September the fragile coalition of Tory opinion, which Bonar Law had established, disintegrated. A split began to take shape within leadership circles over the conference idea, a split which reflected earlier strains over Irish policy.

II

Following Loreburn's intervention, it was King George who continued to force the pace on the idea of a Conference. His first initiatives were towards Lansdowne, who reacted coolly, especially to the idea of excluding Ulster, and urged a general election instead. Undeterred, the King took advantage of Bonar Law's scheduled visit to Balmoral on September 15th, several days after Lansdowne, to sound out the Tory leader. On his way north Bonar Law visited Meikleour, and so was well acquainted with the King's thinking before he arrived. In Scotland the King, using

his power to influence the Government as bait, urged him to take-up Loreburn's request; 'H.M. informed me...that he intended to write a personal letter to his ministers which he would reserve the right to make public after the event as a justification of his own action⁶. George was clearly willing to follow Tory advice as long as they supported a conference. In reply, Bonar Law did not reject the King's idea of a conference nor plans for exclusion, although he carefully outlined all the problems with these schemes and, like Lansdowne plumped for an election as the best solution: 'I reminded him also that the Unionist leaders had equally pledged themselves if there were an election and the people decided in favour of Home Rule, not to encourage or support the resistance of Ulster⁷. Bonar Law's was a shrewder response than Lansdowne's; a moderate, open-minded attitude rather than an obstructive one to ensure that the Tories did not lose the King's goodwill or deter him from the future use of his prerogative powers.

Bonar Law treated Churchill, also present at Balmoral as minister in attendance, with similar open-mindedness, as the King had obviously expected by facilitating such a meeting in the first place. The Tory leader adopted plain speaking with Churchill, talking candidly through various policy options available to both sides, and learning that Churchill's overtures had originated with Asquith⁸. Bonar Law pointed out the grave dangers the country faced if the Government continued along present lines: Army mutinies, (with "active" support from the Tory party), and mass public outrage at any attempt to coerce Ulster. Yet he did not rule out either a Federal solution or the

exclusion of Ulster from the bill, although he pointed out the serious obstacles involved. He left Churchill with the impression that he would not, if certain conditions were met, oppose a settlement. Again Bonar Law trod a middle path, between sympathy and resistance.

Support for a conference on exclusion was propelled from two other sources. One was Balfour, who went to Balmoral immediately after Bonar Law: the King assumed that to encourage a conference, someone of great influence was needed to galvanise support within the Tory leadership. Given Lansdowne's opposition and Bonar Law's lack of political weight, Balfour was the obvious choice. He retained authority within the party but, equally, had close working connections with the Government. Through Lords Esher and Stamfordham, discreet overtures were made to gauge his opinion. Balfour was not unreceptive when he arrived at Balmoral on the 18th of September, where Churchill still lingered. He quickly saw that support for the King now stood to gain the Tories much future influence, especially if a conference was attempted and failed. He also recognised a new role for himself, as caretaker Prime Minister, if the King induced a new ministry.

Balfour's support for exclusion had a great effect on the King, who found Balfour 'serious and very sympathetic'. This positive reaction Balfour encouraged further by writing to him on September 23rd in support of exclusion⁹. On Churchill, it had the effect of raising hopes of a dialogue beginning, which he eagerly transmitted to Asquith. It also spurred him on in his efforts with like-minded cabinet members (Lloyd George, Grey, Morley). Balfour's sympathy might also have raised Churchill's

and others' hopes for a fresh attempt at coalition to settle the whole constitutional question. However, Balfour's apparent liking for exclusion drew a more considered response from Bonar Law. Balfour was a leader who held great sway with the moderate forces on the Tory backbenches, who still sat in the Commons and who enjoyed immense influence over the Crown, a leader whose views Bonar Law could not ignore if his position was not to be weakened or undermined. Nor was Bonar Law entirely clear how the party would react to such an idea, especially if the King and Balfour supported it. He had, therefore, to appear receptive to Balfour's support of exclusion.

The second and more important source of pressure for a conference on exclusion came from Carson. Replying on September 20th to Bonar Law's account of his interview with the King and Churchill, Carson wrote: 'I am of the opinion that on the whole things are shaping towards a desire to settle on the terms of leaving Ulster...my own view is that the whole of Ulster should be excluded but the minimum would be the six plantation counties and for that a good case could be made. The South and West would present a difficulty and it might be that I could not agree to their abandonment, although I feel it would be the best settlement if Home Rule is inevitable'¹⁰. Towards the end of the letter he was more forthright: 'I am fully conscious of the duty there is to try and come to some terms'¹¹. Carson was impressed by Bonar Law's exchanges with the King and Churchill. Things were finally moving towards a compromise, and the moment had to be seized. His strong-arm tactics had brought the first glimmers of a political settlement.

Yet the letter also reveals the delicacy of his position. He could not publicly come out in favour of a settlement, since that would destroy his Southern Unionist support as well as impair the credibility of Ulster resistance. In much the same manner as the Government, Carson had to be seen to come to the conference table in a position of strength rather than desperation if the best terms were to be extracted and his campaign kept together. This meant two things. First, he needed a well-connected spokesman to make overtures, put out feelers and manoeuvre on his behalf but without a direct connection with him, allowing Carson the freedom to campaign and preserve his image of granite determination while having the groundwork to a political settlement constructed around him. Second, as Balfour realised, the initiative for a conference had to come from the King. To both of these concerns F.E.Smith was invaluable.

Smith was a transmitter to Churchill, informing him of Carson's private moderation and willingness to reach a settlement on the exclusion of Ulster; Smith and Churchill worked to construct a basis upon which a conference could begin. Both were in favour of a long-term Federal structure for the U.K., but saw exclusion as only a short-term answer; both sought to rally support for such ideas within their respective political circles. They also had their eyes on a wider reconstruction of Government; Smith even wrote of such an idea to Lloyd George on September 26th¹², although talk of coalition at this stage might simply have been designed to loosen tongues and ease sensibilities in considering the exclusion plan itself. What was important was that both Smith and Churchill played a substantial role in

establishing cross-party cooperation to facilitate a conference and a settlement. The fact that the cooperators were the same as in 1910 is clearly interesting and indicative.

Smith also worked hard on the King. At Army manoeuvres towards the end of September (Churchill was also present) he informed the King of the willingness of many Tory leaders to settle Home Rule along the lines of Ulster exclusion. In particular, 'F.E.Smith informed the King that Carson is all in favour of such an arrangement and thinks a solution on these lines could be arrived at which would be acceptable to his (Carson's) friends'; and promised to inform the King of Carson's 'precise views...as to contracting out Ulster'¹³. But Smith had no doubt that 'Carson would be quite ready to agree to leaving Ulster out and was sure a satisfactory solution could thus be arrived at'¹⁴. More important than simply convincing the King of everyone's good intentions, was Smith's attempt to push him towards convening a conference. 'He (Smith) said that the Unionists would not accept an invitation to conference from the Government; the King was the only person who could initiate such a meeting'. The effect of such disclosures upon the King was heartening, leading Stamfordham to write to Bonar Law, cultivating the idea of a conference¹⁵.

From his willingness to express what Carson actually felt, Smith's activities would appear to have had Carson's private support. Carson and Smith had spent the first three weeks of September campaigning together in Ulster, before the latter returned to England. They remained in regular contact and shared much of Bonar Law's correspondence, in spite of its being

addressed to Carson; and they cooperated in attempts to win over Bonar Law to the idea of a conference based on exclusion.

Along with Carson's very positive reply to Bonar Law on the 20th, a five page memorandum in Smith's hand was included, outlining the tactical options open at the present¹⁶. The intentions of the memo was clear: to reassure Bonar Law that a conference held concrete tactical advantages for the party (suggesting that tactical arguments, not appeals to loyalty, would move Bonar Law) and to enhance the idea of exclusion as a practical basis for settlement. Three main arguments were employed to achieve this. First: a refusal to negotiate at this stage would mean 'great injury to the cause would follow'; Tory leaders had to enter a conference if one was offered if they were not to alienate public opinion¹⁷. Second, a main obstacle to exclusion, Southern Unionist opinion, was played down. This was important, since Bonar Law had used the fear of a Southern Unionist revolt to counter the arguments in favour of Ulster exclusion, as Carson and Smith had observed from the letter Bonar Law wrote on the 18th¹⁸. Finally, Smith recommended as a long-term solution a devolutionary settlement, although the scanty treatment he gave the plan suggests that its inclusion here was simply an added sweetener.

Smith therefore played a major role early on: facilitating dialogue, establishing contact with like-minded leaders, laying the groundwork for a conference and focusing on the exclusion of all or part of Ulster. With support for this approach coming from Balfour, the King, various younger Tories (such as Steel-Maitland and Beaverbrook), the press (The Times, The Daily Mail and The

Express), by late September Bonar Law was increasingly feeling the pressure of pro-exclusion forces. With Parliament in recess he had no way to gauge if such sentiment was felt throughout the party, especially given the support Carson had built up on the backbenches over 1912 and 1913.

In response, those opposed to exclusion and the convening of a conference began to organise. Central to this opposition was Lansdowne. His objections were three-fold. First, he was aware that if exclusion were agreed he would have the unenviable job of piloting the bill, now amended, through the upper chamber. Nothing could have been more ridiculous or dangerous to his position than that he, a Southern Unionist landowner and Unionist leader, should smooth the way for Home Rule for Southern Ireland: the problems of 1911 would be as nothing compared to such a retreat. Second, he still had faith that a general election could be forced; a conference would simply allow the Liberals to escape this responsibility. And even if a compromise was eventually agreed then, with the third circuit to run, better terms could be extracted later when the Government would be under far more pressure. Finally, the basis of agreement was wrong. Lansdowne, sensitive to Southern Unionism, had less fear of an all-Ireland settlement on the lines of devolution or an emasculated form of Home Rule than he did of Ulster exclusion, which meant effective separation for Southern Ireland. By the autumn 1913, circumstances were likely to result in a quick-fix exclusion scheme than a wider settlement whereby Southern Unionists remained in some form of Union with Britain. An all-Irish solution required more time, and more pressure to build up on

both sides.

His apprehension about exclusion had emerged at the time of the Agar-Robartes and Carson amendments and was fuelled by the militarisation of Ulster. Ulster increasingly looked less like a hatchet to break Home Rule than an end in itself. Then, at Balmoral, he was alarmed at the direction in which the King was moving; the King, in turn, had found Lansdowne 'not very satisfactory' in his response to Loreburn's suggestion¹⁹. Bonar Law's report on his Royal audience, on the 18th, and his conversations with Churchill, did nothing to lessen Lansdowne's alarm. For Lansdowne, by September 1913 the Home Rule crisis appeared to be shifting towards a conference based on the exclusion of Ulster.

As a consequence, when replying to Bonar Law's letter on the 20th, Lansdowne sought to emphasise the problems of exclusion and to steer the Tory leader away from such an idea. 'I am inclined to think that the practical difficulty of an arrangement.. (exclusion) ..would be even greater than you suppose. I doubt whether it would be possible to obtain for it the requisite measure of approval from Unionists of the South and West of Ireland'²⁰. His desire to fortify Bonar Law was reinforced after talks with Balfour and Curzon on the 21st and 22nd, where he was 'perturbed by finding that, in his conversations at Balmoral, Balfour had apparently given a considerable amount of encouragement to this idea (exclusion)'²¹. Nor could he be sure of Bonar Law's own views on exclusion, especially given the latter's closeness to Carson. Lansdowne became more determined to act against what he suspected was a pro-exclusion movement

within the Tory leadership.

On the 23rd Lansdowne sent the Tory leader a four-page letter, explicitly warning him against exclusion. 'The idea of a conference on these lines fills me with alarm and I gladly call to mind that you made it clear that we could not entertain the project unless it were consented to by loyalists of the South and West. Nor ..could we do so without some kind of authorisation from our own party, many of whom would..regard us of guilty of betrayal'²². The party should stick to the same tactical line it had been pursuing. 'I told him (Balfour) that I thought it would never do to assume at this stage that a general election was out of the question and I regarded the idea of a restricted conference with the utmost alarm'²³. Lansdowne was not only cautioning Bonar Law against haste, but also hinting at an alternative path to follow if a conference was unavoidable: reject exclusion and move towards an all-Irish solution. In other words, a conference on Devolution or with no fixed agenda (unrestricted) were not as forcefully ruled out by Lansdowne as was exclusion. In his own guarded words: '(these) would also probably come to nothing, but again I do not think we could refuse to take part in such a discussion'²⁴.

Lansdowne remained far from happy and was clearly worried that Bonar Law was moving along the path laid by Carson, Balfour, Smith and Churchill rather than responding to his own promptings for a wider conference. He sought to redouble his efforts. On the 26th he reiterated that the timing was wrong to begin a conference: the passage of the bill was by no means inevitable nor was their higher-risk policy obsolete²⁵. He also employed

two other methods to steer Bonar Law away from a conference on exclusion. First, he tried to separate Bonar Law from Carson. 'I have always felt that we have to be extremely careful in our relations with Carson and his friends. They are "running their own show" and there is some advantage in our being able to say...that we are in no sense responsible for their proceedings.....The fight which they are putting up in Ulster is, from a party point of view, much the most important factor in our calculations'²⁶. The objective here was subtle but clear: to point out that the aims of Ulster were not necessarily the same as those of the Tory party. For Tories, Ulster remained a means of defeating Home Rule and removing the Government, nothing else; their overall intent was preservation of the Union. Devolution or watered- down Home Rule was compatible with Tory designs but Carson's idea of exclusion was not.

Second, Lansdowne was severely critical of F.E.Smith's activities, particularly his violent speeches on behalf of the party and his gossiping with the King, which had drawn him into a 'fools paradise' over the chances of a compromise²⁷. Between Lansdowne and Smith there was little love. Generational and ideological differences separated them, and memories of 1911 embittered their relations. Yet here, in the criticism of Smith, it is hard not to detect a deeper motive of criticism of Carson. Carson's speeches were of equal violence, and Smith's manoeuvrings were not seen as autonomous. In a letter on the 27th Lansdowne clearly tried to widen the blame for the recent drift in affairs: whatever 'the actual language used by Carson to F.E. or by F.E. to the King, it is interesting to collate them with

the language of Carson's letter to you'²⁸. And criticising Smith's (and implicitly Carson's) activities was designed to move Bonar Law closer to his position and against the drift towards an exclusion-based conference.

Lansdowne also worked hard within the leadership. He was quick to gain support from Curzon, whom he sounded out on the 21st, and Salisbury. More important, Lansdowne made contact with Walter Long. Long's support was crucial, given his influence in the Commons. On the 3rd of October he warned Long that present events were not leading not to a workable solution but to a trap: 'what I am most afraid of is an attempt to manoeuvre us into a position in which we might be made to appear obstructive and unreasonable - we might find ourselves in such a position if we were to be offered the exclusion of Ulster, subject to our acceptance of the bill as it stands'²⁹. Long agreed and wrote to Bonar Law on the 5th of October: 'personally I do not believe in a conference except after an election or on condition that the bill is withdrawn'³⁰. Yet this was an isolated lament to placate Lansdowne, not part of a concerted effort to galvanise pro-Union forces in the leadership. Long had been (and remained) silent over most of September, partly because he was recovering slowly from illness. However, he was in a precarious position as regards Lansdowne. Many of his closest colleagues (Samuel, Bull) were keen supporters of Carson, and Carson enjoyed by 1913 a greatly enhanced prestige on the Tory backbenches, rivalling Long's. The latter had to be very careful in deciding which way to jump if he was to preserve his traditional influence behind the front-bench. Long had to be sure of where others around him stood on

the issues of conference and exclusion before he committed himself.

Other forces were also beginning to mobilise by late September, as rumours of a conference quickly spread. Willoughby de Broke began to agitate Diehard supporters in the Lords. Midleton told Salisbury that now was not the time to confer, and even showed sympathy with the idea amending the Army Annual Act³¹. This scheme was most vigorously championed by Hugh Cecil, who again advocated it to both Lansdowne and Bonar Law³². Such plans reflected the depth of fear at this time that a conference with an agreed agenda was being negotiated behind their backs. By the start of October a clear division of forces had taken shape within the Tory leadership. One movement, led by Carson, Smith and Balfour was sympathetic to the King's desire for a conference, and saw exclusion as the best, or the only, basis on which to enter. The other, led by Lansdowne, Curzon and Salisbury, sought to avoid a conference at this time and rejected exclusion as a basis for negotiation.

III

Loreburn's letter of the 11th, Lansdowne's interview with the King on the 13th and then his own meeting with the King and Churchill on the 16th, convinced Bonar Law that a conference of party leaders was likely to be offered and that the Government was eager for one to be held³³. Such an offer could not be refused by the Tories: it would undermine their public support and give the Liberals a fighting chance at an election, by

enabling the latter to contrast their moderate, reasonable credentials with the Tories' extremism and irreconcilability. Bonar Law had no option but to follow the course the King and Churchill (with, perhaps, Asquith and Lloyd George) seemed to be following. It was also the course which Carson and the Ulster Unionists were following. If he refused to seek a political settlement, Bonar Law faced desertion by Ulster Unionists. Fellow-travelling towards a political solution was tactically necessary as regards the Liberals, but equally important in keeping Carson and his friends attached to the Tory party. On the other hand, acceptance of such an offer stood to undermine his entire policy, by offering a way out of the 'civil war or election' equation he had espoused. And it stood to provoke grave party opposition to what looked like a withdrawal from a strong tactical position.

Although he could not prevent or refuse an invitation to confer, he had a degree of control over the basis of negotiation. In this respect, Bonar Law perceived that exclusion offered tactical opportunities. In November 1911 he had been attracted by Strachey's view of Ulster exclusion not as a basis of agreement but as a method of forcing an election by dividing Liberals from their Irish Nationalist supporters³⁴. Carson and Smith had reaffirmed these advantages on the 20th. If a conference was likely, then exclusion might be the perfect basis. It negated the whole idea of Home Rule and thus had little chance of actual agreement with Irish Nationalists (although in the early stages Churchill and Asquith were saying otherwise). Support for exclusion could be a means not to settle, but to

ensure that no agreement was reached. Also, exclusion as a negotiating basis would avoid the wider entanglements of the unrestricted conference which Lansdowne seemed to favour. This latter course offered a real hope of settlement, even the chance of a coalition, which Bonar Law did not want.

And exclusion enabled Bonar Law to appear sympathetic to the powerful pro-settlement forces developing from mid-September: the King, Liberals such as Churchill, and moderate Tories such as Balfour. It was important to ensure that Balfour did not become the leader of the vocal pro-compromise section in the party, who might look to him to repeat his 1911 role as the saviour of moderation. More particularly it kept Bonar Law in close cooperation with Carson and the Ulster Unionists. 'You know that I have not only so strong a personal friendship for you', he wrote to Carson, 'but so much belief in your judgement that I do not think in any case I would go on with the proposal to which you were strongly opposed'³⁵. It was important to know exactly where Carson stood on the recent overtures by the King and Churchill, and to keep in close association with him. From another tack, through Beaverbrook, Bonar Law tried arrange a meeting with Smith on the 17th at Margate, obviously keen to know the state of Carson's mind from his trusty lieutenant³⁶. Telegraphing Beaverbrook, Smith informed him that he was not back from Ulster until the 20th, but suggested a meeting in London that evening.

Sensing that Carson accepted the principle of exclusion, and was keen for a political solution, a sympathetic approach to exclusion was useful in keeping the Ulster leader "on-side", and

preventing any difference of policy between them from emerging. 'As you know I have long thought that if it were possible to leave Ulster as she is... that is on the whole the only way out'³⁷. Exclusion, after all, had the potential not only to divide Liberal from Irish Nationalist, but also Tory from Ulster Unionist.

At the same time, Bonar Law reaffirmed the problems with exclusion which he had imparted to the King and Churchill: 'the whole question as to the exclusion of Ulster really turns upon this - whether or not it would be regarded as a betrayal by the solid body of Unionists in the South'³⁸. His position was then a strange mixture of sympathy and pessimism, perhaps designed to slow the drift to a conference, and to raise problems in the way of the keener spirits and delay their advance while not alienating them from his leadership. After all, the best outcome, for Bonar Law, was still that no conference should take place. But if it had to come, then it would be on the basis of exclusion.

However, Bonar Law's response to the changed atmosphere of September encountered resistance from Lansdowne, who continued to react with deep pessimism and a preference for a wider, unrestricted all-Ireland conference. One method of retaining Lansdowne's support was to reassure him that the Unionists in the South and West were a vital consideration in any shift in policy. 'I pointed out to him (Churchill)', Bonar Law wrote to Lansdowne, 'even more clearly than to the King the impossibility of our considering leaving Ulster out unless there should be a large measure of consent to it among the loyalists in the South and

West,³⁹ And on the 27th he maintained that 'agreement from the South and West would be essential'⁴⁰. Emphasis on the Southern Unionist obstacle tied Lansdowne to him. and was of critical importance to his continuing authority. It was a hostage to fortune which Bonar Law had to make.

The tone of Bonar Law's correspondence reveals the subtle form of the alignment with Lansdowne. On the 24th he commented: 'I have received from him (Carson) a reply...and I am rather surprised to find that, on the whole, he takes pretty much the same view of the position that we do. There is nothing now for us to do except to wait'⁴¹. This linkage was almost imperceptible, reflecting Lansdowne's earlier attempt to draw a wedge between Carson and Bonar Law. The latter was now invoking this tension to keep Lansdowne with him. At the same time Bonar Law played upon personal loyalty, in much the same way as he did with Carson: 'there is nothing I am more anxious about than that I should make no move of any kind without your approval'⁴². Both were shrewd methods of preserving Lansdowne's loyalty and support when the actual direction of policy was beginning to divide them.

This subtle association with Lansdowne can again be seen in Bonar Law's attack on Smith. According to Stamfordham, Smith had encouraged the King to believe that a compromise could be agreed and set to work to draw the leaders together: 'I am afraid F.E. Smith had not been discreet,' Lansdowne wrote to Bonar Law⁴³. Bonar Law was quick to show sympathy for Lansdowne's concerns; 'F.E.'s talk with the King seemed to me just about as unwise as anything could be'⁴⁴. He went even further in his misgivings: 'Stamfordham's letter makes me feel that I made a mistake in

sending the copy of the talk at Balmoral to Carson'.⁴⁵

Cooperation against Smith drew Bonar Law and Lansdowne into a combined effort to scale down the raised expectations of the King. On the 26th Stamfordham had informed Bonar Law that 'the King is ready to help in any way possible to arrive at a satisfactory solution'.⁴⁶ And, more explicitly, on October 1st: 'the King is everyday more anxious to bring about a conference especially in view of the trend in Ulster'.⁴⁷ Stamfordham even invited Bonar Law to initiate an exchange between party leaders, assuring him of the Liberals readiness to negotiate. Lansdowne now wrote to Stamfordham to dispel any misunderstanding about the difficulties of exclusion without the agreement of Southern Unionists or the backing of a large section of the Tory party.⁴⁸ And Bonar Law similarly warned the King, after conferring with Lansdowne. He rejected the view that it was the opposition's role to initiate a conference, though, anxious not to annoy the King he added that 'we should be quite ready to consider any proposal made to us by His Majesty'.⁴⁹ He also tempered the idea that Carson was keen for a compromise: 'he (Carson) did not regard as impossible the proposal for a conference even with the idea of having some form Home Rule provided Ulster was excluded; but he was very far from being sanguine as to the possibility of such an arrangement'.⁵⁰ It was a delicate move by Bonar Law, slowing the drift to a conference and restraining Stamfordham, keeping Lansdowne "on board", but not appearing so obstructive as to alienate the King and so close off all future attempts to push him into using his prerogative powers.

Over September divisions had certainly emerged within the

Tory leadership, but containment had been achieved. Bonar Law had steered the party well, alienating neither Carson or Lansdowne, both of whom were capable of posing a major threat to his position and to party unity.

IV

The situation quickly changed at the start of October. A variety of circumstances served to convince Bonar Law that an offer to confer on the basis of exclusion was imminent. On the 30th of September Harcourt-Kitcher, editor of The Glasgow Herald, informed him of an interview with Lloyd George⁵¹. In it, George had supported a settlement based on exclusion, and was willing to help force it through against the Nationalists. It also appeared that strong forces within cabinet were moving in a similar direction: 'he (L.George) seemed to think that his colleagues would be willing on this matter'⁵². Lansdowne certainly interpreted the interview in this light: 'it is another indication that events are moving in the direction of a proposal for the exclusion of Ulster pure and simple'⁵³.

The day before, Stamfordham's letter to Bonar Law had suggested a similar trend. 'There is good reason to believe that it would be satisfactory to H.M.G. if the Opposition should intimate..that they would undertake to put down an amendment to the H.R.bill excluding Ulster but giving her a right to come in after a term of years and invite a conference on that understanding'⁵⁴. This was more direct in tone than his earlier correspondence, specifying exclusion as the preferred basis for

negotiation. It also reads as if he spoke with greater inside knowledge: 'on the other hand ministers seem to be prepared for a conference if it is proposed to them in some form by the Opposition'. On the 7th Stamfordham wrote a second, highly prescient, letter. 'The King as you know will do everything he can to help and the P.M. who arrived yesterday is evidently ready and anxious to arrive at a satisfactory settlement'⁵⁵. It appeared that a meeting between party leaders would be called or, even worse, that the Government would make a snap compromise offer to the Tories.

These fears were reinforced by similar manoeuvrings within Unionist ranks. On the 7th Ian Malcolm, secretary to the U.D.L., argued strongly for exclusion: 'I cannot for the life of me see any inherent difficulty... or any serious violation of principle on the part of all the high contracting parties in accepting such a scheme as this'⁵⁶. And on the 3rd, Bonar Law received a telegram from Carson that he was returning to London on the 4th⁵⁷. Up till then he had been campaigning in Ulster, if not exactly out of harm's way, then at least out of Westminster political circles. The prospect of Carson's return would strengthen the pro-exclusion forces. On the 5th, as arranged, he met Carson in London and found him eager for a settlement: 'he (Carson) naturally is feeling more and more the responsibility of his position as it comes nearer the time when there is a likelihood of bloodshed'⁵⁸. The Ulster leader presented a forceful case for accepting exclusion. First, because 'the leading men in Ulster..desire a settlement on the lines of leaving Ulster out'⁵⁹. Also, and of more importance to Bonar

Law, Carson argued, having spoken to a group of Dublin businessmen, that the Southern Unionist position was no longer tenable. 'He (Carson) then said to them why is it that there has been nothing this time of the organised opposition to Home Rule which was shown by the Unionists in the South on the two previous occasions? There has been no resolution by the Dublin chamber of commerce; and he said further, can you undertake now, that when you go back to Dublin such organisation will be organised and come into the open. They had to reply to him that they could not give such an undertaking, for the Unionists dreaded the effect of it on their businesses'⁶⁰. The implication was clear: it was time to cast the Southern Unionists adrift, and salvage what they could: Ulster. It was also a coded message to Bonar Law that Ulster would be willing to go it alone if the Tories stood out for more than exclusion, or blocked the attempt at a solution which seemed to be materialising. 'He (Carson) said to them, "tell me exactly what you want me to do, and as far as possible I shall do it. Do you want us in Ulster to say that we will resist Home Rule by force of arms even though the Government offer to exclude Ulster"...They, of course, replied that they could not expect the Ulster people to do..these things'⁶¹.

Carson's return provoked great press speculation about a conference and about moves to settle the crisis by exclusion. The Spectator, Times, Daily Express and Mail all promoted this solution. Bonar Law attributed the speculation to leaks from Smith, who was still working hard to draw both parties into negotiations⁶²). Indeed, Smith had been active since returning with Carson on the 4th. On the 5th he wrote to Churchill,

encouraging him to show greater public support for exclusion in his speech at Dundee on the 8th. And he tried to open direct negotiations between Carson and Churchill: 'Carson is most reasonable. I think he would be glad to meet you'⁶³. His scheming was given a boost on the 6th, when he received a letter from Lloyd George supporting his ideas for a settlement on exclusion⁶⁴. Smith was trying to establish contact with sympathetic ministers, outside traditional party channels, circumventing his own party leadership. By early October, it seemed, forces within both parties were moving much more purposefully towards an agreed settlement on exclusion.

Such developments presented Bonar Law with several problems. With Carson pushing for exclusion and for informal contacts between ministers and opposition leaders, his own position was coming under threat. Carson and Smith were forcing the pace over a settlement by laying the basis for an agreement, before any formal negotiations and without Bonar Law. To maintain his authority and preserve their support, Bonar Law had to show sympathy for the direction in which they were moving; he had to go beyond the sympathetic, but rather dilatory, stance he had taken during September. Otherwise, he stood to have a settlement hatched behind his back. Yet this might alienate Lansdowne and divide the leadership even further.

These considerations dictated two courses of action by early October. The first was to move the leadership more decisively towards exclusion as the best tactical response to any offer of negotiations, and to ensure the continued confidence of Carson and the pro-settlement forces. The second was to appease

Lansdowne and carry him along in any conference on exclusion, or at least to neutralise him as a potential focus of revolt.

Moving the leadership (Lansdowne apart) towards a settlement on exclusion was less difficult at this stage: Bonar Law was helped by the apparent moderation of many other Tory leaders. Along with the opinions of Carson, Balfour and Smith (which he already knew) Bonar Law took soundings from others between the 5th and the 8th of October. What emerged was, if not a willingness to accept a settlement, then at least a resignation that they might not be able to avoid one. 'Since I have come to London I have seen Curzon, Bob Cecil and Walter Long (who is very much better) and all of them (including Walter) I think would welcome a settlement much as in other conditions they would have objected to it'⁶⁵. Clearly, a groundswell of opinion within the Tory leadership was moving towards a settlement. As Long informed Bonar Law on the 5th, 'it is a very difficult time for you and Lansdowne and the only thing your colleagues can do is to assure you of our cordial support whatever you decide to do'⁶⁶. The attitude of Curzon and Long was particularly significant. Both tended to reflect opinion in the party rather than to shape it; if they were now softening, then so was opinion within the party. Moreover, both were highly influential figures carrying great weight on the backbenches, and both might have been expected to be on the obstructionist wing. Their rather unlikely support at this time was critical for Bonar Law's security; it meant that there was as yet little coordinated resistance within the leadership to his desire to concentrate on exclusion. Yet it did not remove the potential threat of revolt from Lansdowne.

Writing to Lansdowne on the 4th, Bonar Law looked to draw him closer to his position, and lessen the gulf between the latter and Carson, Balfour and Smith⁶⁷. He now showed his hand more clearly, fixing his colours firmly to the exclusionist mast. 'Probably I have looked upon the solution of leaving Ulster out much more favourably than you have'⁶⁸. He also sounded a more pessimistic tone about an election (up to this time the centrepiece of their strategy): 'We must not forget, however, that even if we can force an election (and I think we can) difficulties are not removed. It is not certain that we should win it'⁶⁹. It was more direct than previous letters, even, perhaps a challenge to Lansdowne to choose between outright support and opposition, although it was qualified by: 'I quite agree with you that such a solution is a last resort and nothing would seem to be more foolish than to give the enemy the idea that we were not only ready but anxious for a settlement'⁷⁰.

Bonar Law increased his pressure on Lansdowne, sending him on the 8th a four-page letter plus an eight-page memorandum⁷¹. Carson's evidence of the lack of resolve of Southern Unionists was put to good use; after all, this had been central to his method of reassuring Lansdowne. If he was going to soften his obstructionist stance, this point had to be answered: 'If this really represents the position it seems to me obvious that we are not justified in risking civil war for the sake of people who will take no risks even of a financial kind for themselves, and I do think it shows clearly that they have become more or less reconciled to the idea of Home Rule'⁷². His memorandum ran along similar lines. It began by considering all the alternatives to

a settlement, and dismissing each in turn. Continuation of the Government's present policy would be 'utterly impossible' whereas coercion of Ulster into the bill would be the 'worst possible condition'. Alternatively, if the Tories forced an election and lost it, 'the position would be desperate'. Yet even if they won it with a small majority (the most likely outcome) 'our position would be impossible'. 'These considerations ...make me feel that if it is possible to secure a settlement by consent we ought to secure it even if it should be a settlement which we dislike'.⁷³ Having arrived at this point, he continued 'there are only two possible bases of settlement; first, a general system of devolution; and second, a form of Home Rule for Ireland from which Ulster, or part of Ulster, should be excluded. The first of these alternatives is not in my opinion possible, and it is only the second which can be seriously considered'.⁷⁴ These sentences, following the careful appraisal of their tactical situation, represent something of a fait accompli. They certainly show the urgency of Bonar Law's wish to convert Lansdowne to his way of thinking.

As a closely reasoned analysis of the situation, its purpose was to persuade and cajole, and was not a reflection of what Bonar Law actually felt. Something of his deeper thinking can be gauged from a passage towards the end of the memorandum, initially crossed out then re-inserted later on (he was obviously concerned that it should have the right effect). 'There are of course many difficulties. What would the Government mean by Ulster? Sir Edward Carson believes that his supporters in Ulster would accept nothing short of the whole province... It may be

that if there were to be a division, the Nationalists themselves would prefer that it should apply to the whole province, but if we found that the Government would only consider the exclusion of the 4 or possibly six counties... we ought not to enter a conference, for nothing could be worse for us than that we should be put in the position of having to refuse an offer which the people of this country would regard as fair and reasonable⁷⁵. Two things are revealed here. First, an awareness that defining Ulster might cause differences between the Nationalists and Government; the "geographical" puzzle might undermine any agreed exclusion formula ever being hatched. Second is that the sense, towards the end of the passage, is an almost fatalistic one: they had little real choice in the matter and to obstruct such an offer would impair their public standing. Public (electoral) concerns were paramount in Bonar Law's mind. His guiding motive, more subterranean now, was still that of keeping the party in line with popular sentiment in expectation of a general election. Subtly, then, while we can see a shift in approach, style and emphasis in Bonar Law's position by early October, a continuity in his long term aims can also be detected.

v

Pressure on Lansdowne from Bonar Law on the 4th and 8th coincided with a sudden lurch forward in events. The situation by October 9th had come to a head. That day, Bonar Law received an offer from Asquith to meet secretly; after months of speculation, at last a definite response⁷⁶. On the same

day, Churchill's speech at Dundee, highly favourable to a solution through exclusion, was reported in the national press⁷⁷. Smith and Curzon greeted the speech with enthusiasm: 'a definite offer has been made by W.C., incomplete, obscure nor wholly satisfactory, perhaps perilous. But it cannot be refused nor can it be passed over'⁷⁸. And on the 11th Carson wrote to Lansdowne, strongly supporting a compromise on exclusion if one emerged from the talks between Bonar Law and Asquith. 'It is hard to see, if separate treatment was given to Ulster, how I could be justified in asking men to go on preparing for resistance where their only object could be to obtain that which was offered to them'⁷⁹. Even a softening by Lansdowne can perhaps be sensed in the new situation. On the 10th he wrote to Bonar Law, showing sympathy for the tactical use of exclusion: 'it would however be worth risking a good deal to obtain a settlement by consent and if Redmond shipwrecks such a settlement we shall find ourselves in a much better tactical position'⁸⁰. And later that day, on hearing of Asquith's offer, he observed: 'it is obvious that you cannot refuse Asquith's invitation to meet him. It would in any circumstances be a reasonable proposal on his part and all that we have said to the King went to show that we were quite prepared for an informal conversation'⁸¹.

Asquith's offer, and the groundswell of support it received inside the leadership, served to galvanise opposition into greater action. Lansdowne, despite the altered tone he had shown to Bonar Law, still lay at the heart of this movement against a settlement on exclusion. On the 3rd and 7th

of October he had tried to persuade Long into a tougher stance but without direct success⁸². Long was lying low during this period, showing sympathy to both sides but little active support for either. Lansdowne had more luck with Salisbury. Writing on the 8th, he complained of the 'loose talking' which had done so much to bring about the present state of affairs⁸³. Cooperation with Salisbury was important. He was an influential leader, whose unhappiness Lansdowne used to good effect, informing Bonar Law on the 10th that 'I had a few lines from Salisbury two days ago which show that he and probably others are getting a little restless'⁸⁴. Contact with Salisbury also indicates that Lansdowne was looking ahead to rally opinion in the Lords against the automatic passage of Home Rule for the rest of Ireland which a compromise on exclusion might seem to entail. Southern Unionists and Diehards themselves were beginning to rouse for similar ends. Lord Arran wrote to Willoughby de Broke that 'this idea of a compromise on the H.R.Bill on the basis of the exclusion of Ulster.. cannot be accepted by Covenanters except by breaking their oath which they have taken before God'⁸⁵. Lord Barrymore, chairman of the I.U.A., wrote to The Times on October 10th greatly worried at the drift of events and sounding a note 'of warning which we cannot disregard'⁸⁶. On the 11th, Midleton showed equal anxiety to Bonar Law: 'Some of my friends in Ireland, outside Ulster, are a good deal concerned at the turn matters are taking and the concentration of men's minds on the exclusion of the 4 Ulster counties... It should certainly be made very clear that... our appeal to the

constituencies is against H.R. for any part of Ireland'.⁸⁷

James Campbell, Carson's colleague at Dublin University, echoed these sentiments: 'our policy is to declare that on this question we will... sink or swim together'.⁸⁸

In private, Lansdowne remained adamant. While agreeing to an informal 'tete-a-tete discussion' between Asquith and Bonar Law, he was quick to stress that 'a conference is quite another matter' and would present Bonar Law with 'an extremely difficult hand of cards to play'.⁸⁹ Recent overtures were simply a trap to 'throw upon us the odium of having obstructed a settlement'.⁹⁰ He also continued to drive a wedge between Bonar Law and Carson, and, at the same time, to hint at party rebellion. 'He (Carson) evidently means to fight on his "inner-lines" and it looks as if he does not anticipate much articulate objection from his brother Unionists outside Ulster...These Unionist "outsiders" would find their voices if they were to discover suddenly that they had been left in the lurch and their cry would find a vociferous response amongst our own Diehards'.⁹¹ On the 13th he continued: 'It will be impossible for us to agree to any course which would involve a betrayal of our friends, whether in the South and West of Ireland or in "larger" Ulster. Quite apart from the party disadvantage of such a betrayal, it would I am sure be, on its merits, odious to most of us'.⁹² Lansdowne was applying great pressure to fortify Bonar Law against exclusion. As much as Carson, he was trying to move Bonar Law towards his way of thinking.

Bonar Law faced an unenviable situation as he entered talks with Asquith. On the one hand Carson, Smith, Balfour, Curzon, Selborne, Londonderry, Bob Cecil, Steel-Maitland and (more hesitantly) Long and Derby, all pressured for (or accepted) a political solution now, if a reasonable one could be agreed. On the other hand, Lansdowne, Salisbury, Midleton, various Southern Unionists such as Campbell and Barrymore, and several Diehards (Willoughby de Broke and Hugh Cecil) resisted attempts to negotiate at the present moment or to agree a compromise on the basis of exclusion. The latter group, though united by hostility to exclusion, were far from united over alternatives: some preferred an attempt at a wider, all-Irish settlement, others a simple obstruction, whilst still others argued for more extreme solutions such as amending the Army Annual Act. The leadership was badly split along roughly "Commons versus Lords" lines. Southern Unionism was centred in the Lords, and it was the Lords, after all, who faced the humiliating task of actually ratifying Home Rule for the rest of Ireland, if Ulster was excluded.

In spite of the balance of advantage which Bonar Law enjoyed in the Commons, it was vital for him to keep Lansdowne's support during his meeting with Asquith. Not only did he have the ability to raise grave party difficulties, but Lansdowne's dogmatic obstruction served to weaken Bonar Law's negotiating position. If Lansdowne could be relied upon to resist a compromise in the Lords, Bonar Law's ability to

appear reasonable was gravely undermined. It provided the Liberals (who would surely have known of Lansdowne's position from contacts between Smith and Churchill) with room and security to do exactly what Lansdowne so feared: 'to offer us terms which they know we cannot accept and then throw upon us the odium of having obstructed a settlement'⁹³. Bonar Law thus worked hard to moderate Lansdowne and to keep him relatively quiet before his meeting with Asquith.

In a letter of the 11th, he outlined 'the line I should take when speaking to him (Asquith)', giving a detailed account of what he would say in an attempt to assuage Lansdowne's anxieties⁹⁴. And to this end, Bonar Law returned to the "sheet-anchor" he had used with Lansdowne over September and early October: 'Even, however, if all these conditions were fulfilled and though we did enter into conference, we would not be under any obligation before to agree to a settlement; and we might find it impossible to agree to it if we found that the Unionists in the south and west were vehement in their hostility to it'⁹⁵. Once again, Bonar Law was giving hostage to fortune by tying his whole policy to Southern Unionist reactions; such firm commitments suggest that he had little hope (or desire) of anything concrete emerging from his talk with Asquith.

When Bonar Law met Asquith on the 15th he had many factors to bear in mind. He was aware that public opinion was increasingly weary of the Irish crisis; it would not react well to the party which obstructed a settlement. He was aware that many in his party were deeply worried at the turn of

events, and poised to raise revolt if anything in the nature of a compromise took place. He also realised that his meeting with Asquith would not remain secret for long. He could not afford to have extended discussions with Asquith, since it would simply exacerbate party feeling, and his view of the Liberal position was equally problematical. He had a clear idea that Liberals would find it difficult to settle with the Nationalists on exclusion: recent speeches from Redmond and Devlin had done little to convince Bonar Law that exclusion was now possible. 'I understand', Balfour informed Bonar Law, 'that Redmond has quite explicitly rejected any suggestion of excluding Ulster from the operations of the bill. If he means all he says - and presumably he does - Asquith will find himself in a very delicate situation'⁹⁶. But he was never totally sure that Asquith might not pluck the rabbit from the hat, that he might be able to square the Nationalists to a compromise formula which, if 'the people of this country regard as fair and reasonable', he would be unable to refuse⁹⁷; Churchill had told him in September that they could get Redmond to agree to exclusion. Also, the strength of forces (on both sides) now lined up in favour of a reasonable settlement made its chances of success more likely.

Nor was Bonar Law a natural negotiator; his strength came from plain-speaking and platform addresses. Many viewed this as a serious problem, coming up, as he would, against a highly experienced and crafty Asquith. Yet he had great foresight. He also had a coherent bargaining strategy: he realised that exclusion would be difficult for the Government on three

counts. First was the definition of the area to be excluded; second was what was meant by exclusion, particularly whether it was to be temporary or permanent; and third was whether alterations to the original Home Rule bill would render it a different bill, and thus void. In other words, there were three areas where Liberals and Nationalists could conflict with each other and cause the negotiations to collapse. With this reasoning behind support for exclusion, his strategy on meeting Asquith stood a good chance of forcing the Government back into its dilemma of civil war or a general election.

Bonar Law travelled to Cherkely to meet Asquith on the 15th. The conversation between the two was exploratory, although historians have criticised Bonar Law for his openness at these talks, putting it down to 'nervousness and inexperience'.⁹⁸ Yet Bonar Law clearly followed the line he had pursued since 1912. On the one hand, he advocated a general election as 'the real way out', even sweetening the pill by saying that all Tory support for Ulster was conditional upon this: 'while we pledged ourselves to support Ulster to the utmost if there were no election, that pledge was contingent, and if an election took place and the Government won, our support would be withdrawn'.⁹⁹ On the other hand, he threatened disorder in the Commons, mutiny in the army and civil unrest in Ulster, if no election was called. 'We should have to try by all means to force an election and to be successful we should have to take means which would be distasteful to all us'.¹⁰⁰ It remained the policy of the carrot and the stick.

Bonar Law was also eager to focus their discussion of possible compromise formulas onto ideas of exclusion. Accordingly, he went beyond expressions of sympathy to actually recommending it. At the very start of their meeting he quickly steered the talks onto this area: 'On my part the conversation then took the form of my pointing out how difficult such an arrangement (exclusion) would be for us, and I called his attention to these difficulties'.¹⁰¹ It is true that he was conveying the negative aspects of such a solution, but the important point is that they were talking about exclusion and not a "larger" or "wider" type of political settlement. Bonar Law had narrowed the debate, and Asquith clearly left the meeting under the impression that exclusion was the avenue down which Bonar Law might travel towards a successful settlement. He (Asquith) 'repeated his declaration of our position.. "subject to the agreement of your (B.L.'s) colleagues whose concurrence is essential to you, if there were not a general outcry against you in the South and West of Ireland, if Ulster (which we can at present call X) were left out of the bill, then you would not feel bound to prevent the granting of Home Rule to the rest of Ireland". I accepted that statement as correct and that is where the interview ended'.¹⁰²

For Lansdowne, as for later historians, Bonar Law had gone too far in showing his hand to Asquith. 'The most important paragraph in the memorandum is that with which it concludes. Read literally, it rather suggests to my mind the idea that we are ready to ask our colleagues, if Ulster is

left out of the bill, to agree to a proposal for "the granting of Home Rule to the rest of Ireland" ... I do not think I could bring myself to concur in such a proposal¹⁰³. Yet given his objectives, Bonar Law's first meeting with Asquith appears more of a success. He reinforced the Tory party's strong desire for an election, and gave a balanced, even enticing, argument why one was necessary. Lansdowne was forced to admit that 'the case which you made for a general election was really unanswerable'¹⁰⁴. He also avoided the discussion moving onto an all-Irish basis and, most importantly, exclusion was identified, at the very beginning, as the only area from which a settlement by consent might come.

In doing this, Bonar Law achieved two crucial objectives. First, he placed exclusion firmly at the centre of any discussion of a political solution: he had focused on a project which (he assumed) stood little chance of being successful. He thus preserved his ultimate ambition of forcing a general election. Second, he had shown a willingness to negotiate and even a willingness to reach a solution. Asquith thus had no room to outmanoeuvre Bonar Law with a "dummy" compromise offer, designed to make Liberals appear reasonable, to keep Nationalist support for the Government (since it would be a dummy not a real offer) while provoking a rejection from the Tories which would label them, in the public mind, as obstructive. As Bonar Law explained in the letter to Lansdowne accompanying his notes of the meeting, 'Even if we did decline to enter a conference .. when they (the government) had made up their minds with the consent of the Nationalists to exclude

Ulster, they could then definitely make that proposal public and appeal to the country with this new proposal and I should have very little hope of winning an election under such conditions¹⁰⁵. Instead, a show of agreeableness removed this weapon from Asquith's armoury; and in removing it, he forced Asquith actually to formulate a scheme. The onus of finding a solution was thrown decisively back upon the Government's shoulders by Bonar Law's appearance of moderation.

However, his moderation was qualified. He did not move the discussion on to defining what was meant by exclusion or to what each side meant by Ulster; he even tried to steer their talk away from definitions. 'In the course of conversation he spoke of the "North East counties". I was afraid of that line of discussion and said that I had not seriously considered what was meant by Ulster. He showed that he had carefully considered that, for he had figures for the different counties and I passed from that subject without going into it at all, for it is quite evident to me that he had in his mind only the four counties'¹⁰⁶. In addition, he threw powerful obstacles in the way of any smooth agreement on exclusion: the need for the agreement of his colleagues; opinion in the South and West of Ireland; and the problem that with Home Rule solved, Welsh Disestablishment would pass quickly through under the Parliament Act, which would alienate many members of the Tory party. Nor can we seriously level against Bonar Law the charge, which is implicit in Lansdowne's reaction, that he was manoeuvred into admitting the principle of exclusion while receiving nothing in return from Asquith.

Support for Agar-Robartes' and Carson's amendments had already conceded the principle. And from Asquith, Bonar Law wanted little: his strategy was based on the assumption that the Liberals and Nationalists would split over exclusion, and this required patience and nerve on his part, not information.

Despite what appears to have been a successful meeting, Bonar Law showed immediately afterwards signs of momentary doubt. In a very pessimistic covering letter to Lansdowne, he said: 'I do not like the position and I'm sure that the next move will be for Asquith to sound out the Nationalists. There is therefore a very great danger that we shall be invited into a conference in which they have made up their minds to exclude Ulster. They would, I am sure, be reasonable in their definition of Ulster ... that the four counties remain in the Union and as regards the two counties a plebiscite should be taken .. I don't think Carson could possibly accept this solution; and yet it would be so reasonable that I think we should be in a hopeless position if we had to refuse it'¹⁰⁷. Perhaps Bonar Law still feared that Asquith would secure Nationalist agreement to a compromise. After all, at their meeting Asquith had stressed Liberal freedom of action. 'If he (Asquith) or the Government decided on any course which commanded the support of their own party the Nationalists would have no choice but to accept it'¹⁰⁸.

Yet such fears do not really reflect how Bonar Law thought that events would run: they represent lingering and momentary doubts. In a letter to J.P.Croal, a close friend and editor of The Scotsman, he confided: 'my view is that it is

all to the good that we should seem to be open to compromise and that irreconcilableness should come from the Radicals as a result of their connection with the Nationalists¹⁰⁹. And more positively still: 'my own impression however is that Redmond cannot agree to the solution of excluding Ulster; and if so everything in the nature of moderation on our part will be an advantage'¹¹⁰. Written three days after his interview with Asquith, Bonar Law appears confident and surefooted. Clearly, he believed that the attempt to find a political solution would come to nothing and that his task was to avoid the party being labelled obstructive, thus alienating public opinion. In addition, on the 19th Bonar Law heard from his Chief-Whip, Edmund Talbot, that the speaker 'has said that the exclusion of Ulster would entail a new bill'¹¹¹, while from Croal he received the confident reply that 'if the Government were to act on the lines of the (Churchill's) Dundee speech there would be open feud between them and the Nationalists'¹¹². Both reinforced his approach that exclusion, whichever way it was applied, was unworkable.

Bonar Law's handling of his first meeting with Asquith was much more sophisticated than many have perceived. Previous accounts of him as amateurish have rested on the belief that his support for exclusion represented a keen desire to escape from the increasingly exposed position which he had taken up over Home Rule. Yet exclusion was simply the best means in the changed circumstances of the autumn of 1913 of keeping his original strategy on course. It was a wrecking mechanism, not a solution.

ENDNOTES CHAPTER 5.

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CHAPTER SIX

I

The period after Bonar Law's meeting with Asquith on the 15th of October and before their second meeting on the 7th of November was something of a hiatus. The intervening three weeks were rich in speculation. In this suspended political atmosphere, many believed that a settlement was being constructed behind their backs: but there was no tangible base for these suspicions¹. Tories eagerly awaited Asquith's next scheduled speech, at Ladybank on the 26th of October, and Bonar Law's reply at Newcastle on the 29th, for glimmers of light onto the situation.

Asquith's speech (one of 'delphic obscurity') drew a variety of responses from within the Tory leadership². Balfour saw the seeds of an anti-Irish alliance; Lansdowne and Chamberlain detected a devolutionary basis for settlement; and Milner saw it as 'merely playing with the question'³. Bonar Law, after much discussion, replied at Newcastle three days later. It was a neat, measured but decisive response, appearing open-minded towards compromise yet repulsing any definite move.

The leaders met for a second time on November 7th and a third on December 10th, with no obvious success, but provoking a great deal of debate. After this third futile meeting (and one between Asquith and Carson five days later) the initiative towards compromise was widely seen as dead; Bonar Law asked Asquith in late December for permission publicly to announce this

fact in his Bristol speech on January 15th.

Perhaps the most important development over this period was the emergence of a wide movement against a compromise on exclusion. This grew steadily from late October onwards, turning the leadership away from its hesitant, non-committal attitude of September. The movement had several different foci. One was the unshakeable Lansdowne, looking towards devolution; a second was the returning Chamberlain who allied, somewhat hesitantly, with Lansdowne in a common anti-exclusion stance, although the former was keener to move the Tory leadership closer towards a constructive 'federalist' alternative. Another was Long who, sensing the hardening of opinion on the Tory Right, tirelessly informed Bonar Law that the party would be smashed if he compromised over Home Rule. And Lord Milner looked to stiffen the leadership and to galvanise the Tory Establishment. Milner also had contact with a vague assortment of extremists such as Willoughby de Broke and Hugh Cecil, dedicated to ventures such as amending the Army Annual Act and mobilising commando bands to defend the Union. For Bonar Law this shift in opinion was particularly dangerous. Although made up of both federalists and diehards, they were able to unify against exclusion; yet for Bonar Law to appear reasonable he had to pursue exclusion as his response to Asquith's overtures. A serious gulf was widening between party feeling and his own tactical necessities. Yet Bonar Law grew in confidence that his tactical line was correct. Any scheme to exclude Ulster would, he increasingly realised, meet with immovable Nationalist resistance, made obvious by Asquith's failure to go any distance towards a compromise plan: 'He is

quite at sea and does not in the least know what he can do', Bonar Law could declare to Selborne on December the 22nd⁴. But many in the leadership did not share his optimism. Some began to doubt that Asquith was as weak as everyone expected him to be, suggesting that he was shrewdly wasting time to avoid an election, or in the hope that the Tories might split- following the course, so some believed, of 1910. A general mistrust of the Prime Minister grew over this period, hardening opinion against any contact with him.

II

Opposition to a compromise on exclusion emerged on the Right of the party. Bonar Law had long been acutely aware of this danger. It had periodically surfaced during progress of the bill. Walter Long had agitated against accepting the Agar-Robartes amendment, and the Southern Unionists, in January 1913, against Carson's exclusion scheme. By the autumn, another diehard revival seemed likely. Public overtures from Loreburn and Churchill, and then rumoured secret meetings with Asquith, did much to raise alarm. Bonar Law had expected such problems. At his first meeting with Asquith he admitted that a 'strong survival ... of the Diehard movement' existed within the party⁵. And to Croal on the 18th of October he had spoken of a 'violent echo in England' if they were forced to accept exclusion⁶.

On October 24th Milner, previously heavily involved with the Land Commission, wrote Bonar Law an eighteen-side letter on the Irish situation. Milner's concerns were threefold. He was worried

that other issues stood to divert attention from the Ulster question. 'Ulster holds the field and if only Unionists can succeed in keeping public attention concentrated on that subject as our supreme injury, they must win the game'⁷. He was also worried that recent overtures to search for a settlement, by the government, were being taken seriously: 'all these vague expressions of sympathy are merely playing with the question'⁸. Lastly, and as a consequence of these two, the Tory party had to re-double its efforts towards Ulster. 'That is the weak spot in the enemy's line, where they are already beginning to run, and against that point all the attacking forces should be directed'⁹.

To closer friends he was less guarded in his call for a revitalised campaign. On October 25th he despaired to Colonel Denison: 'we are, of course, extinguished as a political force. We were perhaps bound to be extinguished any way. The choice was between a painless, gradual but inglorious extinction and a sharp fierce struggle, in which there was just a chance of victory and in any case an honourable death'¹⁰. Salvation lay with Ulster: 'It seems to me very probable that the Ulstermen, if they are real Diehards and not sham ones, like our noble selves, will bring about an impasse. And a deadlock is just now, in my opinion, the one thing that can save us. The party game is for the moment played out - its old rules are all broken to pieces and if we are to have constitutional Govt at all, we simply must put our heads together and agree to some rules that everybody will respect. Of course if Ulster collapses, this log-rolling business may go on for a while longer. But I don't think Ulster

will collapse'¹¹. The message was clear: Ulster was the means to repair the constitution by driving it to a halt, and from the stalemate some form of coalition would rebuild the political system. Everything hinged on the Ulster campaign succeeding. As he informed a sympathetic Oliver on the 23rd, 'there is only one word of salvation for Unionists just now and it is to shout "Ulster, Ulster" all the time'¹².

Within this mixture of fear and bravado, Milner was beginning to think more practically towards Ulster. 'If the Govt do ultimately go through with their scheme un-modified, and war results, I for one, shall not feel satisfied to wave my arms importantly in the air and cry "how dreadful", and I fancy there are a great many people on this side of the water in like case if anything effective is to be done six months hence it will have to be thought-out beforehand. You may hope the worst will not happen but if it does happen it ought not to find us unprepared'¹³.

Nothing definite emerged until the new year, when moves to institutionalise preparations began with the Covenanter movement. But he began to sound opinion and draw around him like-thinking men, in particular men of influence and specific skills, useful in any future Ulster campaign. Lord Roberts, with whom he worked in the National Service League, was a leading target for recruitment. He had great influence within the British Army and was in a position to undermine the resolve of Army officers if ever they were ordered to coerce Ulster. On the 30th of October Milner wrote to Roberts of the consequences of militarily imposing Home Rule on Ulster: 'If they tried to do so, I really

don't know what we over here, who think the Ulstermen are perfectly right, would do. One thing is evident to me and that is that we could not allow them to be coerced without doing something to help them more than talking¹⁴. Roberts replied favourably to Milner's subtle enlistment: 'you are quite right, we could not allow the Ulstermen to be coerced without doing something to help them, more than talking'¹⁵. To which Milner responded the next day by inviting him to lunch; 'by that time I hope I may have consulted some other serious people and found out what they are prepared to do, if the Government pushes things to extremes'¹⁶. Milner also became a beacon to young Tories and activists (Amery, Comyn-Platt, Winterton) frustrated at the Government's dogged hold on office and what now appeared to be their own leaders' willingness to compromise.

From other directions the right began to mobilise itself against the threat of a compromise. Willoughby de Broke had, since the creation of his B.L.S.U.U. in March, by October rallied over 7,000 volunteers to his movement, and they were continuing to recruit men from all over the UK¹⁷. But the movement lacked influence inside leadership circles. Accordingly Willoughby de Broke invited Lord Salisbury on the 29th of October to 'join our committee? A little help from men like you would be invaluable'¹⁸. Appealing for Salisbury's help was particularly significant. It revealed a desire to rally opinion within the Lords in much the same manner as he had done in 1911. And a more general desire to muster feeling within the Tory leadership against any form of compromise on Home Rule. This was a particular concern after Asquith's Ladybank speech, which hinted

at a willingness to compromise.

Lord Arran informed Willoughby de Broke early in October that 'this idea of compromise on the Home Rule bill on the basis of exclusion of Ulster .. cannot be accepted by Covenanters except by breaking their oath'¹⁹. He also wrote to Carson, Craig and Londonderry along these lines ('Carson has not replied and I do not expect him to do so either')²⁰. And Midleton, similarly unnerved, pressured Bonar Law to establish a body made up of the three Southern Irish Provinces to coordinate with Carson²¹. Interestingly, both Arran and Midleton showed an increasing disapproval with Carson's apparent willingness to compromise over exclusion, emphasising the extent to which Southern Irish Unionists were unhappy with their leader. And Salisbury, though ignoring Carson's role, threw in a word of warning about the 'abandonment of our friends in the West and South' of Ireland after Bonar Law's Newcastle speech²². 'I do not think we must ever use language implying that we believe that any solution on these lines (exclusion) can in fact be found and I am inclined to think that we should not promise even if it can be found, to abandon our Parliamentary opposition to the bill'²³.

III

Other forces opposed to exclusion were quick to mobilise from mid-October onwards. In particular, federalists mounted a determined effort to push their ideas into the centre of political debate. They were encouraged from several quarters. Churchill's Dundee speech had appeared the first crack in all the

partisan manoeuvring: 'Very courageous', thought Oliver, 'and I should say not only that he means to stick to it but that he has the P.M. behind him'²⁴. But it was Carson's letter to Earl Grey on the 26th of September ('which shows that he is prepared (provided the present bill is withdrawn) to accept federalism') which ignited the enthusiasm of the federalist troop (Oliver, Grey, Craik, Robinson and Dunraven)²⁵. It implied that Carson was not after all just fighting for Ulster; that he was not, as Lansdowne had alleged, fighting on "his inner-lines"²⁶. His attitude was not surprising. Federalism was a means to satisfy Ulster as well as the Southern Unionists. It offered Carson a solution to many problems.

With such good omens, Oliver set to work agitating in high political circles. Robinson was an obvious target, the one person who might create the right atmosphere, leak suggestions and generally advocate a constructive solution. As Oliver told Craik, 'it is very important that there should be agreement between us and that great organ of public opinion which Robinson controls'²⁷. On October 10th he sent a copy of Carson's letter to Robinson, and urged strong support from The Times for the initiative taken by Churchill²⁸. Robinson also received letters from Grey and Dunraven, for publication on the 11th, which advocated a federal solution²⁹. Earl Grey was particularly active during early October; in cooperation with Oliver he utilised his extensive cross-party contacts. Late September he urged Haldane to begin to think 'federally' about the problem³⁰. And on October 15th he asked Page-Croft, of the United Empire Club, to 'build up an interesting programme (of speeches) for the

winter in the hope of focusing the attention of Unionists upon the federal principle³¹. However, by the 17th of October their impact was slight, as Oliver lamented to Grey: 'things have not gone particularly well so far (and) is not at the present time very hopeful and unless some push is given from the outside (things) are likely to drift into a deplorable impasse'³².

Oliver was despondent for several reasons. The first was tactics: federalists were still by no means in agreement about federalism. This was made clear when both Dunraven and Grey had letters published in The Times on the 25th advocating fundamentally different schemes. Another tactical problem, for Oliver especially, was that Unionist leaders might commit themselves to the federal alternative too early. 'At this juncture would be fatal..(because) if the Unionist party proclaim in advance their willingness to accept federalism then of course federalism will become their maximum demand and they will have to be content with something less'³³. Federalism had to be embraced, but held back until the optimal moment; timing was crucial, as the experience of 1910 had shown. Federalism also faced the danger of the Government preferring to dissolve. Previously, Oliver had seen this as good, since from electoral stalemate would come a fresh initiative for a conference. By the autumn 1913 he thought differently: 'one can hardly hope that the temper of politicians and the conditions generally will be favourable for success after a bitter electoral struggle, as they are at the present time'³⁴. Grey, Craik, Grigg, Milner and implicitly Carson all agreed with this line that a settlement had to precede an election. It placed pressure on federalists to

seize the moment since 'never was there such a chance'³⁵.

Yet the federal initiative still required someone to set the ball rolling. As Oliver bemoaned to Grey 'the difficulty.. (is) of getting the thing begun'³⁶. He urged Grey to take the lead as 'someone whom they all trust to go between them, to bring them together and to give them ideas'³⁷. But Grey, although a respected and influential pro-consul, was not a party politician. What was needed was inspiration and strong leadership from the Tory side, to respond purposefully to Liberal intimations. Smith's speeches had shown courage, but he was trusted even less by his own side than by the other. Balfour was an exclusionist; Carson was too closely associated with Ulster and thus not an obvious force for compromise; Lansdowne, though keen to change the policy approach, was neither a federalist nor a charismatic leader. The obvious choice was Chamberlain, but he was abroad until October 20th and, in their first contact for over a month on the 21st, thought the present moment inauspicious for a conference upon a federal basis³⁸.

This situation quickly changed towards the end of October. Asquith's speech at Ladybank reinvigorated belief that a conference on federalism could be arranged. On the 27th Moreton Frewen urged Bonar Law to support a federal scheme, claiming that it had the active sympathy of Tim Healy³⁹: fear of exclusion seemed to have drawn the independent Nationalists away from Redmondite Home Rule. The next day, Oliver kept up pressure on Robinson⁴⁰. He urged The Times to interpret Asquith's speech in a favourable light and to reject an election as worthless at the present time (again forcing the spotlight onto a political

settlement). On the same day, Oliver worked for cross-party support by writing to his friend Murray Macdonald⁴¹. The objective was to establish some common ground for moderate men; 'that the lunatics on both sides of politics may be blessed by providence with a lucid interval somewhere between now and next summer'⁴². In this vein he assured Macdonald that Carson's activities had moved the more extreme Liberals to a compromise; his true intention 'is a serious attempt to settle the whole thing'⁴³. Interestingly, Oliver again made use of the Grey-Carson letter of the 26th, to convince sceptics of a settlement that the rock of Ulster was actually a marshmallow.

More significantly, Oliver worked harder on friends near the centre of power. He wrote to Churchill at the end of October, receiving an encouraging reply. 'I think', wrote Churchill, 'that there is a strong undercurrent setting in a good direction; and that many of the obsolete Victorian quarrels are passing altogether from men's minds'⁴⁴. Oliver also contrived to bring Chamberlain round. On the 22nd he invited him to dinner⁴⁵; next day he enclosed a copy of the Grey-Carson letter. This, Chamberlain found 'highly important', mentioning it in his letter to Lansdowne on the same day⁴⁶. Coming on top of these preliminaries, Asquith's speech at Ladybank had a good effect. Oliver told Chamberlain that a meeting between him and 'the aged Squiff' could be arranged and 'might do good'⁴⁷. Chamberlain was far more responsive: 'don't do anything unless you hear from me again. At present I am trying (to get) what support I could get among my own friends'⁴⁸. Although not keen to meet Asquith (he knew of Bonar Law's meeting with him whereas Oliver clearly did

not), Chamberlain had been moved by his speech and was ready to play a role, perhaps even the role that Oliver had in mind. By the end of October Oliver had done much, tending cross-party roots, stimulating a groundswell of pro-federal opinion, and easing Chamberlain out of a self-imposed wilderness towards leading a constructive movement within the Unionist party.

Pressure on Chamberlain to take such a lead also came from Lansdowne. He had been alarmed by Bonar Law's meeting with Asquith on the 15th, with its implication (incorrect in Lansdowne's view) that the Tories were keen on exclusion. Writing to Bonar Law the day after, Lansdowne was less reserved. On the proposals talked over at the meeting he felt that: 'I do not think I could bring myself to concur in such a proposal'⁴⁹. He pressed instead for a devolutionary approach, admitting that 'if we are still to be asked to treat Ireland as a separate nation no local exclusions would remove my objection'⁵⁰. Lansdowne was employing the same combination of threatening revolt and advocacy of an all-Irish scheme. He was also worried by the emergence of the Land issue after a speech by Lloyd George at Swindon on the 21st of October, which he referred to as 'the most unscrupulous proclamation that I have ever encountered'⁵¹. The Liberals, he thought, were preparing a platform for an election. Yet this suggested that Home Rule had to be neutralised if it was not to lose them votes, which in turn pointed firmly in the direction of a compromise on exclusion as the quickest means. By late October Lansdowne's stand against exclusion was in grave need of support. A consensus existed within the Tory leadership for a solution based on the partition of Ireland. The return of

Chamberlain gave Lansdowne the opportunity to undermine this consensus and to construct a pro-Devolutionary alliance within the Tory leadership.

This cooperation had many motivations. Chamberlain was a Liberal Unionist (as was Lansdowne) and a federalist. Without Tariff Reform, since early 1913, he had been drifting and disillusioned with politics, a leader in search of a policy. A federal solution to the Irish question was his new policy; it would allow him to play "peacemaker" and at the same time undermine Bonar Law's authority. This was particularly relevant, given that he was still vexed by Bonar Law's dropping of taxes on food.

Lansdowne, though not a fully-fledged federalist, sufficiently recognised its compatibility with devolution to see it as a bridge to political cooperation with Chamberlain. And this was useful: what he feared was that Bonar Law, backed, as Lansdowne supposed he was, by Balfour, Carson and F.E. Smith, might quickly push through an exclusion plan behind the backs of the leadership to prevent any resistance from building up. His repeated requests (on the 16th & 23rd) for a meeting of the Tory leadership (a request which Midleton and Salisbury also made to Bonar Law), arose from the urge to check any independent action⁵². To this end the support of Chamberlain was important; the latter was a powerful colleague who would support Lansdowne if such a party meeting took place. Lansdowne also felt that Chamberlain had a greater degree of influence over Bonar Law (if only through fear) than anyone else except, perhaps, Carson. With Chamberlain alongside him Lansdowne stood a better chance of

moving the Tory leadership away from exclusion; Chamberlain enjoyed better relations with Carson, Smith and Churchill, again important if the pro-exclusion drift was to be switched to another tack.

The Lansdowne-Chamberlain alliance was created to shift Bonar Law away from exclusion⁵³. Their first meeting on the 23rd of October, though tentative and probing, established a degree of cooperation. The next day, when Chamberlain met Bonar Law for the first time since returning from holiday, he could write: 'in my first conversation with Bonar Law last Friday morning (24th) he and I went over the ground which you (Lansdowne) had covered the evening before, with the amplifications which you invited me to seek from him⁵⁴. Asquith's speech at Ladybank encouraged their cooperation even further. Writing to Lansdowne afterwards, Chamberlain detected in the speech seeds of a new basis of agreement with the Government. 'If there are to be conversations and if those conversations are to have any chance of a successful result, the best plan for both parties is to try to reach a new solution or in other words so to change the issue that each will be able to claim that they have substantially got not indeed all they desire but the essentials of their claim'. The way to achieve this would be to 'draw Asquith onto the lines of general devolution'⁵⁵. Only devolution 'can fairly be represented to Asquith as the most advantageous to him', since exclusion would be 'the most difficult course for him' (Asquith) and although a 'victory for us (it would be) a hollow victory'. Clearly, Chamberlain thought that a settlement with Asquith upon devolution rather than exclusion was both preferable and

achievable. Interestingly, he rounded off this appeal by revealing the Grey-Carson letter on the feasibility of such an approach. 'Carson clearly indicates that he thinks that this (Home Rule all round) is the right solution and expresses the hope that if there is a conference it may proceed on these broad lines'.⁵⁶

Asquith's speech at Ladybank inspired Lansdowne. He 'detect(ed) a gleam of daylight ... indicated by the third of Asquith's "governing considerations" ... that he recognised the importance of the extension of the principle of devolution in appropriate forms to other parts of the U.K.'.⁵⁷ It was a basis upon which a conference might safely be convened since it avoided exclusion; as he asked Chamberlain, 'might we not fasten on this and say that we are prepared to allow Ireland to be served first but only upon condition that whatever system of self-government is granted to her must be applicable to other parts of the U.K....?'.⁵⁸ Like Chamberlain he sought to change the ground on which the party had been arguing- the Ulster 'faultline'- and open discussions on a devolutionary settlement.

On the 27th Lansdowne sent Bonar Law a careful appraisal of Asquith's speech, knowing that the former was to reply at Newcastle on the 29th.⁵⁹ Unravelling the speech, he inferred that hidden beneath the Prime Minister's rhetoric were seeds for a devolutionary settlement: 'I do not think that Asquith is altogether unreasonable in stipulating that, if there is to be devolution, Ireland should be served first'.⁶⁰ He also tried to persuade Bonar Law in another way. 'As Carson (I think) said to me the other day, it might be possible to set up some kind of an

Irish Administration the existence of which would placate moderate Home Rulers without doing much harm⁶¹. Two things are important here. First, like Chamberlain at his meeting with Bonar Law on the 24th, Lansdowne was actively trying cultivate a new basis for settlement, one which Asquith himself appeared to desire and which, for Lansdowne, would be less difficult for Tories to accept. Second, Lansdowne, like Chamberlain, mentioned Carson's willingness to agree to a solution of devolved power rather than exclusion for Ulster. Both realised the influence (or threat) which Carson had over the Tory leader; dangling his preference for devolution in front of Bonar Law was a means of shifting the Tory leader onto the latter track.

But whereas Asquith's speech raised their hopes that a new direction might be engineered, Bonar Law's reply at Newcastle dashed them. Chamberlain was angry that the speech had included no coded devolutionary language, especially, as he informed Lansdowne, since he, Bob Cecil and Selborne had implored Bonar Law to 'stress the Imperial danger quite apart from the Ulster opposition'⁶². Accordingly, he 'very much regret(ed) that B.L. after all said nothing of this side of the question and confined himself entirely to Ulster. I wonder whether it was accident or design⁶³?' To Oliver, Chamberlain seems to have felt that the omission was almost a personal slur. 'What B.L. said was well said but after all he omitted practically all reference to the Imperial question. He may have reverted deliberately to his original purpose after I saw him or having got his first sketch firmly in his mind.. felt unable to bring it in later'⁶⁴. It certainly did little to placate Chamberlain, and spurred him on,

in a fit of pique, clearly to outline a constructive alternative to the scenario offered by Bonar Law at Newcastle, in two speeches he delivered in Wales during the first week of November⁶⁵. On his return, he boasted to Oliver : 'look at my Newport speech..I have said nothing I do not believe or mean, but if anyone is inclined to consider a federal solution, I have said enough to provide him with a text'⁶⁶. The Newcastle speech also pushed Chamberlain into opening contact with like-thinking moderate Liberals. Knowing Oliver's line of communication with Churchill, and of his subsequent invitation by Churchill on the 12th to dine on The Enchantress, the postscript to his letter of November the 6th to Oliver seems pregnant with meaning: 'As things stand I shall go no further.. It is now for others to act'⁶⁷.

Despite this early cooperation, several differences existed between Lansdowne and Chamberlain. Lansdowne favoured a general election, and only in response to the threat of a conference had he promoted devolution. Chamberlain saw a constructive federal policy as a solution in itself, not simply as a response to the danger of a conference. Such differences were obscured by a common dislike of exclusion and a common fear that a settlement along those lines was being hatched. Nor did Chamberlain see his position as being solely in tandem with Lansdowne. The latter was useful support, but it was to the more overtly constructive elements that Chamberlain was also looking, especially his old friends from 1911: Smith, Selborne and Carson. Chamberlain certainly saw Carson less as an Ulster bigot than a constructive politician. And yet by late October and early November 'things',

as Oliver said, 'are beginning to move'⁶⁸.

IV

Several things emerged from his meeting with Asquith on October 15th. First, he perceived that Asquith would try to reach a settlement on 'the four counties remain(ing) in the Union and as regards the two counties a plebiscite should be taken'⁶⁹. This he believed was Asquith's maximum compromise stance, and was a basis which, if genuinely offered, he would have to accept. As he said to Croal, such a formula 'would be so reasonable that we would be in a very bad position if we had to refuse it'⁷⁰. Yet he also observed that this minimum was impossible, given 'that Redmond cannot agree to the solution of excluding Ulster'⁷¹. It was, then, immaterial whether Asquith played with nine, six or even four county exclusion when the Nationalists appeared to reject the "principle" of exclusion itself.

This impression was reinforced by colleagues. Some saw the Nationalist stance against exclusion as an inviolable principle. Balfour on the 17th of October exclaimed, 'Mr Short tells me that the Westminister declares, in emphatic terms, against the exclusion of any fraction of Ireland, from the home rule bill. If Redmond says this as representing the Nationalists and the Westminister says it as representing the ordinary moderate Liberal, I presume the last chance of the Govt making a proposal even about the four counties has vanished'⁷². Others expanded on this Nationalist obstruction. 'This assumes he (Redmond) wants Home Rule', wrote Croal, 'about that I have always been

sceptical. He is a big figure just now, he has a large salary from the Nationalist fund; in Dublin he would be eclipsed by Devlin and very soon driven into retirement. If this belief is right a continued feud over Home Rule will suit his purpose⁷³. Strachey also doubted the Nationalist desire actually to see Home Rule enacted, arguing that exclusion offered them a means to 'avoid H.R. and keep the sentimental grievance and what more could they want - especially as when you go in you will have to find them a handsome pecuniary solution'⁷⁴.

Alongside these doubts was a more general disbelief that the bill as it stood could accept an exclusionary amendment. Edmund Talbot heard that 'the speaker has said that the exclusion of Ulster would entail a new bill'⁷⁵. For Strachey also 'it (exclusion) will.. I am convinced, act as a measure which will wreck both the bill and the Govt if they can be got to adopt it... Do nail the Government to exclusion and so smash them'⁷⁶. Both seemed to presage that, one way or another, exclusion was not a realistic basis for compromise. This strengthened Bonar Law's conviction that exclusion was a tactical "loophole" which displayed his reasonableness but stood no chance of forming a basis for settlement.

Another feature to arise from the meeting was his altering perception of Asquith, less the weak old Whig, and a far stronger politician, willing (or forced) to take events to their catastrophic conclusion. 'If he (Asquith) is compelled to have an election before the bill becomes law and if he were beaten in that election, then his position will be the most humiliating it is possible to conceive. He and his party have staked everything

on the Parliament Act and in that case their whole action in the last three years would have been simply futile. He must realise this, and therefore nothing but compulsion of the most extreme kind would make him to submit to an election before his bills are carried; and there is a great danger that rather than face that risk he will go straight on and land the country in something like disaster⁷⁷. It began to seem that Asquith might be playing the same high-risk game as himself⁷⁸. Was Asquith willing to take the crisis as far as it could go, to push the Tories into submission? If so, it was becoming a battle of nerves.

Yet despite such anxieties Bonar Law held a strong tactical position. This was a waiting game; even if exclusion was impossible, he still had to go through the motions of appearing to work towards it. And if Asquith's present overtures were not genuine (a smokescreen to hide his more determined course), then he still had to respond to them. There were dangers; would his party be satisfied with a waiting game? The mobilisation of forces against a compromise along exclusionary lines suggested that they would not. Also, a waiting game was based on assumptions all liable to prove unfounded or wrong: might Asquith square the Nationalists? Would Ulster remain calm and give no excuse for imposing martial law? Could the Tory party's nerve hold, especially with their leader seemingly working for a compromise? This last point was of particular concern. Appearing moderate had led many to assume that he was "selling-out". The increased activity of many on the Right was a sign of distrust in Bonar Law's leadership, and Lansdowne, Salisbury, Midleton and Willoughby de Broke remained suspicious. By early November,

dissatisfaction was beginning to grow steadily. Bonar Law was keen to check this growth of a bellicose right wing, yet was impeded by the continuing need to appear both moderate (for the public and Asquith) and sympathetic to exclusion (for Ulster Unionists).

His position was eased by Parliament being in recess and by building up informal contacts. He was in regular touch with Carson (speaking from the same platform at Newcastle). This sympathy for Ulster Unionism brought him the benefit of their influential connections on the Tory Right (McNeill, Bull, Page-Croft), and from Milner's diary we know that Bonar Law was regularly in contact during November and December. Perhaps, then, the forces of the Right were not as serious a threat to Bonar Law as those, like Chamberlain and Lansdowne, who were keen to shift policy from exclusion to devolution. Since exclusion was defended as a wrecking tactic, there was fear and anxiety rather than simmering party rebellion on the Right.

Of much concern as well was the sudden rise of the Land Question, following a speech by Lloyd George at Swindon on the 21st of October. On the one hand, this suggested that the Government were preparing for a snap election, with the Irish problem temporarily obscured or even about to be settled. On the other, it distracted public attention from Home Rule. Pretyman considered 'the Governments Land Campaign dangerous. Their exaggerations and misstatements.. are swallowed by thousands who know nothing of the facts'⁷⁹. More worryingly, it served to divide the Tories: 'I am afraid', Pretyman observed, 'there are great differences in the party about Land policy'⁸⁰. Differences

over land were inevitable, with the landowning section still so strongly represented⁸¹. Speaking for this section, Walter Long warned Bonar Law of 'the danger of estranging or even alarming the Landowners and Farmers who are the backbone of our party'⁸², especially at a time when an election was not far off. Long's position implied safe, conservative reform with no attempt to out-radicalise Lloyd George. Others, however, were less reverential to the traditional landed basis of the party. A radical programme of land reform was an issue to revamp the Tory image and portray them as a modern, progressive, industrial party. Joynson-Hicks, Steel-Maitland, Woods, Astor, Bentick and Baldwin (members of the U.S.R.C. Land committee) all looked to a fresh initiative to meet the challenge thrown down by Lloyd George; and in not a few of their minds was the desire to be rid of the futile struggle over Ireland: land reform was where the next election would be won or lost.

On top of these various currents came Asquith's Ladybank speech of the 26th. Certainly it contained much of what Stamfordham called 'high pitch music'⁸³. Asquith talked of 'a complete Constitutional case for proceeding.. in regard to the Irish Government bill' and scotched (what Loreburn had suggested a month before) any idea of a formal conference between leaders⁸⁴. Yet towards the end he appeared to throw out something of an offer: 'if there is a genuine disposition in all quarters, by an interchange of views and suggestions, free, frank, and without prejudice ... I invite that interchange and both I and my colleagues are perfectly ready to take part in it'⁸⁵. This was an offer to which Bonar Law had to reply, in

favourable terms, if he was not to alienate public opinion. It drew a variety of responses from within the leadership. Salisbury, deeply suspicious, rejected any idea of a compromise on exclusion⁸⁶. Lansdowne and Chamberlain both saw it as 'conciliatory', and it encouraged them to think that Asquith could be converted to a devolutionary measure⁸⁷. Chamberlain, along with Selborne and Bob Cecil, urged Bonar Law in his reply at Newcastle to emphasise the 'all-Irish' rather than the solely 'Ulster' nature of their opposition, and give a clear signal to Asquith that only a devolutionary plan would remove their objections⁸⁸. Along different lines, Steel-Maitland and Oliver saw an opportunity to wrong-foot Asquith by 'making an assumption on the statement' that he refused exclusion, then wait for him to challenge this⁸⁹. If he did, then Bonar Law would look moderate; if he did not, then he ran the risk of alienating the Nationalists; for Oliver, 'another peg driven in for us to climb by'⁹⁰. And from higher quarters came more moderate advice: 'The King.. feels certain that you will continue to try and cultivate the ground which has already been broken'⁹¹.

Bonar Law sought to balance all these pressures with his speech at Newcastle, his first since meeting Asquith. In tone it was vintage Bonar Law, aggressive and at times venomous ('he (Asquith) can always be trusted to speak like a statesman; but to act like a statesman - well, that is different')⁹². As previously, he stuck firmly to the Ulster problem, ignoring Chamberlain's advice about dropping devolutionary hints. He warned Asquith that exclusion, not devolution, was the desired path, and ensured Ulster Unionist loyalty to the Tory party at

a delicate moment: 'I happened to read a few weeks ago.. the first duty of the Unionist party was to express its disapproval of "Carsonism" in Ulster. This meeting at which Sir Edward Carson and I speak from the same platform, is the best answer I can give to that suggestion'.⁹³

Bonar Law also reaffirmed that a general election was still the best way to prevent civil war: 'He says the people are behind him. Why not test them?'. Such a call for an election was a well-used popular and populist cry; sympathy and trust for the people were good qualities to emphasise with an election possibly close at hand. More controversially, he backed up his call for an election with a watertight promise to Ulster. 'The pledge which I made at Blenheim still holds good.. If the Government try to drive the people of Ulster out of the Union.. before they obtain the sanction of the electors.. the whole Unionist party will support her in her resistance'.⁹⁴ It was the tactical line he had used since April 1912: civil war or a general election. Now, however, with the bill's implementation only months away and Ulster seemingly well prepared to resist it, it marked a dramatic raising of the stakes. It shows Bonar Law as a very tough-minded politician, confident that he had a tactical formula from which Asquith might wriggle and writhe but could not escape.

A similar tough-mindedness was apparent in his treatment of Asquith's offer. Careful not to repulse it and yet not to be seen to be endorsing it, he threw the initiative for settling the issue decisively back onto the Government. 'If he does mean to extend to us an invitation.. then we shall not decline to respond to it and we shall carefully consider any proposals he may make

to us and consider them with a real desire to find a solution, if a solution be possible⁹⁵. His reasonableness had been demonstrated, but no conditional acceptances or promises had been given. And by decisively putting the burden of responsibility back onto the Liberals, Bonar Law had reassured the waiting game: to watch the government struggle with its allies, to agree a solution, free of obligation. When unable to agree, the Government would again be facing the alternative of an election or civil war. In addition, he threw scorn and ridicule on recent Liberal references to the land question. 'What is the meaning of their wonderful Land campaign? What is the meaning of springing it on the country now, just when the Home Rule question is becoming critical⁹⁶?' He warned colleagues and potential supporters alike not to chase Lloyd George's 'hares' at this precarious moment.

The reception of his speech was generally good. George Younger spoke for many: 'your speech last night has given the greatest possible satisfaction .. it is most certainly up to them and not to us to formulate proposals for a settlement'⁹⁷. Lansdowne was pleased that he had decisively called for a general election. Even Salisbury, rarely supportive of anything Bonar Law did, was forced to admit that he 'admired' his speech.⁹⁸. Newcastle went far to restore the shaken nerves of the Right.

Others, however, remained unconvinced. Lord Ashtown was angry that the speech had said nothing for the Southern Irish Unionists: 'there is a very bitter feeling amongst the Unionists here'⁹⁹. Lansdowne remained worried that Bonar Law's concentration on Ulster would simply ensnare them in a conference

on exclusion. To a sympathetic Chamberlain, he lamented two days later that 'we shall make nothing of this plan (devolution) so long as the Ulster red-herring is being trailed backwards and forwards across the track'¹⁰⁰, a point of view Chamberlain fully reciprocated. But their disapproval was a nuisance rather than a threat, given the support Bonar Law had from Carson, Balfour (who appeared to endorse what Bonar Law said in a speech several days later) and, more hesitantly, from Walter Long. With the initiative firmly back on the Government's shoulders, there was little room or excuse for Lansdowne or Chamberlain to agitate hard against Bonar Law. Nor had Asquith's speech contained enough substance for any sort of pro-devolution bridge to be built to him; forced to wait upon the Government's next move, their ambitions of changing track from an Ulster line to an all-Ireland approach seemed inopportune.

Bonar Law did not have to wait long for the next move. On the 30th of October Asquith suggested another meeting¹⁰¹. After luncheon on the 6th of November, both leaders again motored out to Cherkley Court. The meeting was friendly and specific¹⁰². At first glance, Bonar Law appears to have been unusually frank and open (a not unimportant image to project). He indicated that Carson would probably accept a six-county exclusion scheme, with a plebiscite at the end of ten years. He even implied that Home Rule for the rest of Ireland would be acceptable if the Post Office and Customs duties were left out of the bill and a Land Conference, along the lines of 1903, convened immediately; to all of which Asquith agreed. Yet Bonar Law's stance must be placed in the context of his own tactical position.

He already realised (from his first meeting) that the four-county exclusion scheme with a plebiscite in two others was Asquith's maximum. His proposal of six counties therefore suggests an element of "out-bidding" a known position: pitching a plan just outside what he thought Asquith could accept. In any case, his offer never moved away from a permanent exclusion. 'The further conversation was on the assumption that the exclusion is only to be terminable by a plebiscite by the people of Ulster in favour of joining the Irish Parliament'¹⁰³. And permanent exclusion he surmised to be beyond what the Nationalists would ever agree. Thus he could advertise moderation to Asquith, fully convinced that there would be little chance of a settlement. In addition, he avoided an arrangement on the third reading of the bill. Asquith was keen for cross-bench support to ensure the passage of any amended bill against Irish resistance (be it Unionist or (more likely) Nationalist). This Bonar Law rejected. 'In the House of Commons the position was different, that we might think it was possible the bill would be defeated.. and that therefore we should like to be free to vote against the third reading. As I expected he did not agree to this'¹⁰⁴. Bonar Law was not going to implicate himself in a "pro-order", anti-Irish understanding, or even coalition to help the Government out of a sticky situation: they would have to face the Nationalists alone. He even went further. 'It is obvious that any settlement of this kind is out of the question if the Nationalists are determined not to have it; for the Unionists do not wish it and you cannot impose a settlement which nobody wants'¹⁰⁵. Asquith had to agree a reasonable scheme with the Nationalists first

(which Bonar Law thought to be impossible) before the Tories would consider it. The initiative for a compromise plan was again thrust decisively back onto the Government; as a result, no 'conditional acceptance' of a settlement plan was requested by Asquith (something Bonar Law had feared would be asked). As he celebrated to Long, two days after the meeting, 'so far we are committed to nothing'¹⁰⁶.

Appearing reasonable remained vital for Bonar Law. No leeway could be given to allow Asquith to present the Tories to public opinion as intransigent. Strachey pointed out the danger of this: 'What Asquith would probably like best of all would be to be able to say that he had made the most frank and free offer to exclude Protestant Ulster but that the Ulster people and English Unionists would not accept it and that therefore he had no option but to go on with the bill, the whole bill and nothing but the bill. I am afraid that if he could get apparently good ground for saying this a good many "wobblers" would go with him'¹⁰⁷. Therefore, discussing (positively) various exclusion plans, showing sympathy for a settlement and implicitly blaming those 'elements of a Diehard movement' for being unable to go further, all helped to reduce the likelihood of Asquith being able to do this¹⁰⁸. If Asquith was relying on a Tory rejection, the semblance of moderation and even encouragement, on Bonar Law's part, undermined Asquith's certainty that a compromise plan would actually be rejected. It gave no room to paint the Tories as unbending, and thus the only way for Asquith to ensure rejection would be to make the proposal so unreasonable that it would fail to be seen, as a genuine compromise initiative. In a similar

vein, Bonar Law's approval of exclusion gave Asquith the impression that there was no difference in objectives between Tories and Ulster Unionists. This dissuaded him from trying to reach an agreement with the latter (which was by no means inconceivable) to leave the former high and dry.

Secondary accounts of the meeting have tended to concentrate on Bonar Law's assumption, towards the end of the meeting, that Asquith would put the scheme of six- county exclusion to his Cabinet¹⁰⁹, then, if no agreement was reached, go to an election. 'And he (Asquith) replied.. "I shall definitely make this proposal to my Cabinet on Tuesday and I think I can carry my Cabinet with me.. As soon as I have got the agreement of my Cabinet Birrell will approach the Nationalists".. my impression is, that he has definitely made up his mind that a settlement on these lines is the only alternative to a general election'¹¹⁰. Jalland is right to suggest that it was incredibly naive of Bonar Law to accept this¹¹¹; and yet with no obvious reason to suppose that Asquith would purposely deceive Bonar Law (apart from simple disinformation), historians have fallen back on the explanation that it was due to Bonar Law's inexperience and lack of negotiating skill. But it might be that Bonar Law deliberately gave a distorted account, knowing that what he wrote of the meeting was not solely for his eyes but would be seen by others, and disseminated to a wider Tory audience.

As he assumed that no settlement would come after consultation with Nationalists, emphasising Asquith's readiness to go to an election would do him little harm. If Asquith subsequently did so, then his prime objective had been achieved.

If he did not, then the Prime Minister was made to seem duplicitous, which might have reinforced support for Bonar Law. He had, seemingly, extracted something tangible from Asquith, thus enhancing his own credibility; and he could not be blamed if an election did not eventuate, since Asquith would have broken his promise. More dangerous, from Asquith's point of view, was that the fact that he had apparently put a formal compromise offer to Cabinet and then promised the leader of the Opposition an election if it was rejected might become known in high political circles. 'Of course we could never make any use of the knowledge of his intentions communicated to me', Bonar Law assured Balfour, 'yet if the proposal is definitely made to the Cabinet it really cannot be secret; and they would be in a hopeless position if they fight an election on proposals which they themselves tried to alter'.¹¹² Hardline Liberals (McKenna, Runciman, Harcourt and Samuel) would have been incensed that he had made such a promise to Bonar Law. Nationalists might have stiffened in their resolve to have the full Home Rule bill, ever more suspicious that Asquith was concocting a compromise behind their backs. And moderate or centrist Liberals might have been demoralised that Asquith had appeared to wilt in the face of Ulster threats, and, in the process, had also broken his word. As a means of destabilising the position of Asquith and his Government, it might well have been a shrewd piece of distortion.

From his second meeting with Asquith, Bonar Law's basic objectives were secured. The initiative lay firmly with the Government to formulate a plan. By throwing them back onto their Nationalist allies the chance of a reasonable compromise

diminished, and Asquith would find himself back where he had been all along: facing the choice of an election or civil war. All seemed to rest on the Nationalists behaving like Nationalists, an ironic twist of history. As he wrote to Walter Long, 'from a party point of view I hope the Nationalists will not agree, for if they do our best card for an election will have been lost'.¹¹³.

V

Despite the relatively strong tactical position into which Bonar Law had manoeuvred the party, opposition grew more vocal after his second meeting. The unrest which had manifested itself after the first meeting now hardened into full blown resistance by November. It was fuelled from several sources. First, the speculation and rumour surrounding the meetings which, unanswered, continued to nourish fears of a sell-out. Second, there was a growing feeling that Asquith might be manipulating Bonar Law, wasting time, or even drawing from him an acceptance of the principle of Home Rule rather than actually attempting to solve the crisis.

More important was the impact of two by-elections, Linlithgow and Reading on the 7th and 8th of November respectively. At Linlithgow there was an 8.3% swing to the Tories; at Reading, Liberal- held in 1910, a Unionist was returned with an 11% swing¹¹⁴. Together they were interpreted as the country might be waking up to the Irish situation; Reading in particular was interpreted as a popular rejection of Liberal

Home Rule¹¹⁵. Signs of Government difficulty merely served to stiffen resolve against a settlement and for an election; as Balfour anxiously pointed out, 'if the bye-elections continue to bring unpleasant results to the Government it will of course make it yet more difficult for the Unionist leaders to assent to the Ulster compromise'¹¹⁶. And this persuaded some that Asquith would soon call an election and pass the poisoned chalice. If an election was looming, the time was not right for a settlement.

Sanders, on the 13th of November, wrote that 'most of the men I speak to on our side think there will be no compromise but a great many expect a January election'¹¹⁷. Lansdowne relayed similar information: 'Long, who reflects the "grip" of the Carlton, tells me that a lot of our people are ready to become diehards and to send us, if we entertain any proposals for a settlement based on the exclusion of Ulster'¹¹⁸. Leslie Wilson, on the 9th, interpreted the two by-elections as proof 'that the country will not have this Home Rule bill'¹¹⁹. From a different angle, John Gretton attacked the prevailing pro-compromise leaning of the Unionist press, and Raymond-Greene was 'convinced that any compromise made at the expense of the Union.. will completely take the heart out of the Unionist party in the constituencies'¹²⁰. Lord Weymss informed Bonar Law on the 28th that a friend of his had raised '30,000 fully armed men' in support of Ulster¹²¹. Bonar Law recognised the drift in sentiment, confiding to Balfour that in response to a compromise 'there might easily be an active movement against it'¹²².

On the same day, the 18th, came more serious evidence of backbench ferment. The Morning Post published a "Call for

Service", on behalf of the B.L.S.U.U. 'We call on our able-bodied fellow countrymen who think that the Ulstermen are arming in a righteous cause to enrol themselves'¹²³. It continued, pointedly, 'those who rely on the belief that the crisis can be relieved by a process of bargaining.. are building on a very slender chance and indeed are helping the fatal policy of drift'¹²⁴. It was a serious warning to Bonar Law, rejecting his willingness to meet Asquith and what appeared to be his desire to reach a compromise. It was also an attempt to promote a tough line as much as an attempt to recruit 'able-bodied men'. More dangerously, it suggested that Bonar Law was unable to control his own troops and to keep the conflict within Parliamentary boundaries.

Yet all this, as Willoughby de Broke told Salisbury, was simply giving "flesh" to the Blenheim speech¹²⁵. There was a large element of bluff: 'some of us are convinced that the best way to prevent a civil war is to back Ulster in deed as in word'¹²⁶. Oliver also noted the dramatic side of things, with Willoughby de Broke asking his friends 'to get their horses ready and practise with firearms.. I rather suspect that nothing serious is really being done at all'¹²⁷. It was intimidation rather than insurrection, the tactic Bonar Law had been pursuing with both the Government and the Crown. They were still playing the Parliamentary game, looking to alter things at the centre not the periphery. 'The enroling of men in Ulster has brought the Radicals to their senses'¹²⁸. Willoughby de Broke also claimed that he had spoken to Bonar Law in March, gaining his unofficial blessing for the movement. No evidence survives, but there is no

reason to doubt de Broke's statement, especially as Bonar Law was giving unofficial encouragement to Milner. They were not antagonistic to Bonar Law's "deeper" tactics; if anything, they reinforced his case that Asquith only had two options, civil war or an election.

These backbench sentiments were reflected in the Tory leadership. Hugh Cecil, showing the distance that had grown recently between Ulster Unionists and the Tory Right, offered his 'very earnest hope that you will not and that Carson will not be tempted into making any positive proposal for a settlement. I am sorry Carson went as far as he did'¹²⁹. But the clearest sign of this shift to the Right came from Walter Long. Previously, Long had been rather non-committal in the face of moves towards a compromise on exclusion. As late as October 31st he was more concerned with Land policy and Lloyd George's campaign, barely mentioning the Home Rule crisis¹³⁰. By November 7th his tone had altered. 'I have seen a great many of our most reliable men' (a familiar manner in which Long challenged the opinions of his leader), 'and their unanimous opinion is that if Asquith makes any overtures and we accept them the result would be absolutely fatal to our party'¹³¹. Two days later he reiterated his concern 'that if we come to any arrangement with the Government we shall run grave risks of splitting even smashing our party'¹³². What moved Long was, first, Bonar Law's tactics. During his second meeting with Asquith he had appeared willing to talk about exclusion schemes, ignoring the obvious signs of Nationalist hostility to any form of exclusion. Such an approach was foolhardy, because 'if Asquith offers exclusion of Ulster and we

accept, of course Redmond will turn him out and the consequences will be that both English parties will be irretrievably dammed as intriguers'¹³³. The irony here was that Bonar Law's understanding of the situation was remarkably similar to Long's. A second influence was the impact of Linlithgow and Reading on the party. 'I think these two elections will show them the feeling against any agreement. The general view seems to be "give them no quarter and drive them out"'¹³⁴.

Long looked to stiffen Bonar Law away from compromise. On the 14th of November Long pestered him publicly to announce that he had met Asquith, realising the likely uproar in party feeling this would provoke¹³⁵. On the 20th he sent Bonar Law a strongly worded memorandum¹³⁶. If Bonar Law agreed an accommodation with the Liberals, Long was now willing to threaten rebellion. 'In all probability any attempted compromise will be followed by a schism, even greater and more deep seated than that which occurred at the time of the passing of the Parliament Act'¹³⁷. It was clearly a direct warning against exclusion: 'How then can we possibly agree to force Home Rule upon the other three provinces, more especially as we believe that this bill is the very worst and most unworkable form of devolution.. The great object we all have now is to get the Government out, is it not'¹³⁸. The last sentence reveals the extent to which Long had, by early November, shifted from his traditional centrist position; the Home Rule issue was represented not as a danger to Ireland but as a means of removing the Government itself.

Long was now more sympathetic to Southern Unionist concerns. This reflected the pressure on him from prominent Southern

Unionists and leading diehard Tories. The Earl of Arran wrote a stinging letter to him, saying that exclusion was a betrayal of the Covenanter oath¹³⁹. Also, Long now extended a hand to Lansdowne, an alignment of traditional Unionist beliefs against any "clever" tinkering with the Union, whether through exclusion or (it is hard not to see an anti-Chamberlain motive in Long's calculations here) full federal experiments¹⁴⁰. 'I am alarmed at the prospect of some compromise being arrived at. The language used by Lord Lansdowne at Brighton exactly expresses my feeling in regard to the exclusion of Ulster. The proposal has no attractions for me; it is a clumsy expedient at best'¹⁴¹. Their cooperation began to consolidate after the second meeting. The basis of this is unclear, although if Lansdowne was a devolutionist rather than a federalist, and preferred an election to a settlement, Long could have found little fault with these objectives.

VI

After the second meeting between Asquith and Bonar Law, sympathy for a settlement increased. Balfour replied on November the 8th in highly favourable terms: 'Asquith seems to me to be showing both courage and statesmanship'¹⁴². He still saw an election as the best option, but maintained that a compromise based on exclusion was possible; as he informed Bonar Law, in his own ambiguous way, 'if however compromise be really the proper course, the thing could, I think, be done'¹⁴³. Even a sympathy for coalition can, perhaps, be

detected. He agreed with Asquith that cooperation in Parliament would be necessary to push through 'the Home Rule measure, mutilated as it will be' against 'the representatives of Ireland', and speculated that 'if Home Rule and the Welsh church were out of the way the differences between the two parties (putting T.R. aside) would seem to be mainly as to the methods by (which) Social reform.. and Constitutional revision.. were carried out'¹⁴⁴. Balfour, close to the crown, in regular contact with moderate Liberal ministers, and increasingly fearful of the dangers of the present situation, looked favourably to a pro-order, anti-Irish alliance. His dislike of party, a feature of his later career, had apparently set in early.

The danger of a pro-coalition sentiment gaining support within the leadership was something Bonar Law could not ignore, especially as the likes of Smith, Chamberlain - and perhaps even Carson - would have supported such an initiative. Balfour would have been a highly influential focus for such an alliance, securing much moderate party support behind him and alienating it from Bonar Law, probably forcing him from the leadership. The likelihood of a moderate backlash within the party, something Bonar Law had worked to reduce by appearing fairly open to discussion, was greatly enhanced by Balfour showing himself ready to accept a move towards a compromise or coalition. But the threat never materialised. Balfour was perhaps too much of a lone actor and a convinced exclusionist, which meant that (with Bonar Law at that time talking along such lines to Asquith) there was little room for a distinct

Balfourian focus. More important still, the initiative for a settlement was coming more strongly from federal sympathisers.

The political impasse and the danger of civil strife gave federalism a new relevance by late November 1913; yet for all the sympathy, nothing seemed to be happening. Tactics, timing and definitions of what federalism meant divided the supporters, and prevented anything but sympathy being given. Lansdowne's laconic comment touched the root of federal weakness: 'we are, I suppose, in the abstract, all of us supporters of devolution.. but I hesitate to talk glibly about the adoption of the federal principle until I really know what I mean by the words'¹⁴⁵. Oliver shared these doubts. 'What strikes me rather with wonderment about them all is that they don't seem to have thought much.. of the actual way out. They don't seem to have realised or visualised what federalism or anything else means. Consequently things are in a very fluid and uncomfortable condition'¹⁴⁶.

But where Lansdowne was content to watch, Oliver was active. Chamberlain was the main focus for his efforts, and he manoeuvred hard to ease the latter into a more vigorous role. 'The great advantage of Austen is that when once he grips an idea and accepts it he doesn't wobble. I regard him as the greatest standby at the present juncture'¹⁴⁷. Oliver urged him to contact the opposition: 'Among people who count, upon the opposite side, you and the Ancient one (Asquith) are the two who have the strongest respect for one another'¹⁴⁸. He even suggested an informal dinner at Aubrey Herbert's, (a close friend of Asquith's), where they might talk alone. 'Let me

know if you object to this attempt being made¹⁴⁹. Chamberlain shied away from such direct contact with Asquith, knowing of his meetings with Bonar Law. Instead, in two speeches in Wales during the first week of November, he sent clear signals to the other side of his interest in a constructive settlement. Churchill (who had been in recent contact with Oliver) took the bait. On the 12th of November he invited Chamberlain to dinner on board The Enchantress on the 27th, hoping for 'one of those frank, free and unfettered conversations which are so much in fashion now'¹⁵⁰.

This contact marked an important stage in the crisis. For Chamberlain, it was an attempt to shift the basis of negotiation between leaders onto a devolutionary path. He had already tried to do this with Bonar Law, on the 9th of November, having read the latter's memorandum of the second meeting. In urging Bonar Law to take up the offers by Asquith to give way on Customs and the Post Office, Chamberlain was arguing for a change of tack, away from exclusion, yet to little avail. Contact with Churchill (and thus indirectly with Asquith) was a similar attempt to shift the basis towards devolution; as he and Lansdowne had agreed, to 'begin again on different lines'¹⁵¹.

Before the meeting on the 27th, Oliver remained active in creating the right atmosphere, telling Grey on the 24th that 'there will be work to do early next week. Things have moved a good deal'¹⁵². To Robinson he urged better reporting of Chamberlain's speeches, while he flattered Northcliffe that 'your legions have lent powerful aid'¹⁵³. He also arranged a

private dinner for Chamberlain, Milner and Grey in order to 'discuss things over claret'¹⁵⁴. But it was the publication of his pamphlet "The Alternative to Civil War", a passionate appeal for a Convention on the present crisis rather than a general election, which did much to keep the federal cause moving. The pamphlet attracted a great deal of support, not all of it Unionist: 'Generally I agree' wrote Macdonald, sentiments which were shared by his fellow Liberal Munro-Ferguson¹⁵⁵. It also helped, given its timing, to prime both Chamberlain and Churchill before their meeting. To reinforce this, he wrote to Churchill on the 24th (enclosing a copy of the pamphlet): 'I imagine that in your mind, as in mine, the two things which loom the largest are (a) the need for securing our defences.. and (b) the disastrous consequences of threats of lawlessness.. upon the authority of executive Government.. I am only an advocate of putting heads together in a convention.. If men could take responsibility and agree, it would be much better'¹⁵⁶.

Lansdowne also threw his weight behind the initiative, showing the extent of his cooperation with Chamberlain. At Brighton, on the 18th of November, he delivered a powerful pro-devolution speech¹⁵⁷. 'Lansdowne has committed the Unionists to the consideration of the federal plan', rejoiced Grey on the 22nd, '(he) has waved the federal flag, the next step is for Asquith to act'¹⁵⁸. Lansdowne's blessing gave the talks greater significance by publicly stating an alternative Unionist position in advance. On the 20th he also, "by accident", met Asquith at Windsor, a comfortable atmosphere in

which to talk relatively freely. Chamberlain also prepared the ground before he met Churchill, with a speech at Bromsgrove.

'I have been scolded for the speech by my friends and praised by my enemies, so I ought to be ashamed of it, but I'm not'.¹⁵⁹ But his speech did win praise from friends: Lansdowne agreed with much of it, showing how closely they were working together at this time. And Avery 'particularly liked the notion that what is to be done for Ireland should only be what can presently.. for the other divisions of the U.K.'.¹⁶⁰ In addition, Bromsgrove brought Chamberlain firmly back into the public limelight as a force for moderation and compromise. But by keener spirits on the Right (with whom Chamberlain had been close in 1911) he was increasingly seen as a trimmer. 'If the party are now going to be asked to ground their arms', Willoughby de Broke asked, 'and consider a new instrument of Government for the whole of the U.K., I believe many of us will be bewildered and demoralised'.¹⁶¹

By the time Chamberlain and Churchill met, much preliminary work had been done. Churchill even mentioned that both the Bromsgrove and Brighton speeches, which he thought 'very important', had been considered in cabinet.¹⁶² The conversation was more constructive than the Bonar Law/Asquith talks. Chamberlain argued forcefully against any exclusion of Ulster; it 'was the worst and most humiliating solution for them and it did not satisfy us. The bill without Ulster was only one degree worse than the bill with Ulster. So we must change the issue'.¹⁶³ His proposed change was towards a form of Home Rule all round, 'the old Liberal Unionist policy'.¹⁶⁴

If Asquith offered a 'federal settlement' where powers were reserved to the Imperial Parliament over customs, the Post Office, the Judiciary and 'all powers not specifically delegated', then 'I believe B.L. who doubtless would be in consultation with his colleagues could not refuse such an offer'¹⁶⁵. A clear offer of settlement was thus laid on the table by Chamberlain; also important was his belief that the initiative would have to start with Asquith (he knew Bonar Law to be hostile) and that Bonar Law could not resist pressure from other leaders if the offer was made. Churchill was receptive to such plans, but was unsure of their timing: 'leaders might be prepared but parties were not.. "a little red blood had got to flow" and then public opinion would wake up and then-'¹⁶⁶. Chamberlain, sensing the growing unease within the Tory party, rejected any delay: 'if the House once meets the opportunity for peace will be gone. You will break the H of C in the process'¹⁶⁷. The interview ended with agreement on the need for cooperation and both clearly implied that a more formal type of cooperation was not uncongenial. 'The idea of fusion with an extreme wing left out on either side is obviously constantly in his mind and would be greatly liked by him'¹⁶⁸.

The meeting was important in several respects. First, a basis for settlement, which did not include exclusion, was made to Churchill and, through him, to the Government. Chamberlain implied that it had support from inside the Tory leadership, and gave the impression that Bonar Law could be forced away from exclusion and into agreement on the scheme.

However, given Bonar Law's unqualified stand on Ulster and exclusion this was by not a possible course of action for him; as with the food tax, he had boxed himself in over Ulster (though the latter issue he felt better placed to defend). It is hard not to see Chamberlain, here, challenging Bonar Law's authority by undermining his tactical line over Home Rule. Was a federal scheme a means for Chamberlain to reassert his authority and contest the leadership?

The hopes raised by the Churchill-Chamberlain meeting received an early disappointment. That same day Asquith spoke at Leeds in an aggressive, uncompromising tone. 'Asquith's speech has blown conciliation sky high', Austen bemoaned to Oliver¹⁶⁹. To Churchill he revealed more bitterness: 'he has slammed the door in our faces'¹⁷⁰. It appeared as a contradiction to the signals Liberals had sent since October, especially when compared with Asquith's Ladybank speech. However, much of this was overreaction: Chamberlain was, after all, politically exposed by meeting Churchill. Yet Lansdowne reassured him that the initiative still had momentum behind it: 'I am inclined to think that Asquith probably believed himself to be doing exactly what Winston apparently thinks the leaders of both parties ought to do, viz: "to make speeches full of party claptrap and No surrender with a few sentences at the end for wise and discerning people to see and ponder"'¹⁷¹. Chamberlain accordingly replied in a speech on the 1st of December, attacking Asquith's Leeds outburst but maintaining that a federal solution was desirable and possible¹⁷².

Despite Leeds, the initiative did not grind to a halt. Lord Grey contacted Chamberlain on the 4th of December, having met Haldane who contradicted the interpretation given of the Leeds speech: 'he told me that Asquith had not withdrawn.. from the Ladybank position'¹⁷³. Spotting a sympathetic ear close to Asquith, Grey proceeded to encourage Haldane. Writing the next day, he informed him that Unionists 'are prepared to swallow the federal plan in order to avert civil war', information he had clearly received from Chamberlain¹⁷⁴. Churchill was also eager to convince Chamberlain that 'the P.M. has not withdrawn in the slightest degree from the Ladybank position', and even conveyed confirmation of this from Asquith¹⁷⁵. He also invited Chamberlain to dinner at the Admiralty on the 8th of December, along with Morley (also sympathetic to a solution) and Smith.

Oliver contrived to keep events moving; he kept up pressure on Austen to work for a constructive settlement. On the 2nd he told him of the serious state of the Army, faced with the possibility of coercing Ulster (this was particularly relevant, since Bonar Law had clearly hinted at disobedience to orders in a speech in Dublin on the 28th)¹⁷⁶. On the 4th, Oliver informed Chamberlain of Milner's latest ideas about amending the Army Annual bill, a scheme of which he already knew a little from other Tory sources¹⁷⁷. Oliver's aim was to convince Chamberlain of the urgency of the present situation, pushing him towards a more public declaration of federal intent. Oliver also tried to build bridges between Carson and Chamberlain. The former had already shown sympathy for a

federal solution in his letter to Grey, and in hints given out in recent speeches¹⁷⁸. On the 3rd of December Oliver received a highly positive response to his pamphlet from Carson: 'I do not know that I genuinely differ - so long as we Ulstermen are treated in the same way as other citizens of the U.K.'¹⁷⁹. Carson would have realised that Oliver was a transmitter to Chamberlain, and sure enough the former passed on the favourable sentiments: 'he is very cordial and amplifies your point.. about the difference it would make to Ulster's feelings - all the difference in the world - if Wales, Scotland etc were being treated as an equal party with Ireland'.¹⁸⁰.

By early December, the federal initiative was still moving forward. Haldane, Morley, Churchill, Lloyd George and perhaps Edward Grey appeared enthusiastic, and all had either direct or indirect contact with Chamberlain. Asquith reaffirmed his good intentions at Manchester on the 5th of December. On the Tory side Lansdowne, Selborne, Carson and Smith were also sympathetic to a constructive settlement. Kindle even claims that Long 'was beginning to think there might be something attractive in federalism'¹⁸¹, although this seems unlikely. Yet it does reflect the fluidity of ideas and positions at this critical time; moreover, a clear basis of agreement had been outlined at the meeting of the 27th, with a large measure of support from both sides. Much of the press supported such a move, and with Parliament still in recess there was more chance of containing the uproar within both parties: if a federal settlement was to be constructed from

the ashes of the Home Rule bill, now was the time. As Oliver observed to Chamberlain on the 4th: 'If they (the Government) are anxious for a settlement there is enough material to make a settlement.. Things must be set a going forthwith (ie) certainly a going before Christmas'.¹⁸²

The dinner of Chamberlain, Churchill, Morley and Smith on the 8th carried high hopes, as Garvin speculated; 'perhaps Monday night's dinner is the foundation of it'.¹⁸³ Morley and Churchill were hostile to coercing Ulster into the bill, and believed that if a settlement was agreed both Dillon and Redmond 'might sulk a bit but would not oppose'.¹⁸⁴ There was some division over what constituted federalism, Morley being against any notion of it, though he supported a solution along devolutionary lines, and both he and Churchill were increasingly alarmed at Asquith's willingness to delay. Churchill followed this up with another dinner on the 11th, to which Chamberlain and Robinson were invited.¹⁸⁵

During the first weeks of December, Lord Grey sounded out Stamfordham, in particular about whether the King could at this critical moment formally invite both leaders (or leaderships) to a conference, to be what Oliver called 'the flea.. to jog things'.¹⁸⁶ Oliver relayed these manoeuvrings to Chamberlain together with two letters written by Spender of The Westminister Gazette to Oliver's close friend Grigg, in which the Liberal editor showed his moderation.¹⁸⁷ 'I thought and think the federal line as opened up by Oliver, Austen Chamberlain, Lansdowne and Carson, quite hopeful. It seemed to offer a basis for discussion which saved us all from coming

straight up to an aye or no on the Ulster Question - total exclusion or total inclusion, on which at this stage we should certainly break¹⁸⁸. These were intended to push Chamberlain towards more definite public statements on the federal alternative, but oddly received a chilly response: 'I have said all I have to say either publicly or privately'¹⁸⁹.

Chamberlain's uncooperative reply on the 10th of December was evidence of how ephemeral the federal enthusiasm of late-November/early December had been. The various meetings were not the start of closer cooperation, but the climax. From this point onwards, contact between leaders dwindled and the initiative lost direction. Chamberlain tried to keep the movement going; he entered into a correspondence with Morley after December 9th, urging greater haste in matters¹⁹⁰.

'Asquith has met Law three times I believe. This isn't business. If our leaders proceed in that leisurely way events will take the reins out of their hands'¹⁹¹. He also tried another approach, looking to Morley to help draw Carson and Asquith into direct conversation, by-passing the implacable Bonar Law. 'He (Carson) has proved himself most moderate and deeply sensible of his heavy responsibility.. Make no mistake about Carson's object. He wants peace-on terms of course, but on terms which I believe the Government could accept'¹⁹². He laid out the basis upon which Carson might agree, namely 'the principle that Ulster was to be treated like the other parts of the U.K'¹⁹³. Morley, though sceptical of the "Carson principle", conveyed this message to Asquith who subsequently invited Carson for an interview¹⁹⁴. They met on the 16th of

December, but seem to have progressed along lines not envisaged by Chamberlain; Carson argued for exclusion, Asquith for a form of veiled Home Rule within Home Rule, which he sent on to Carson several days later in the form of suggestions: the wider federal basis to the negotiations did not materialise. Carson, after consulting with Bonar Law, sent back Asquith's suggestions with little encouragement. 'Mr Bonar Law is also of opinion that for the same reason he does not think any useful purpose would be served in calling his colleagues together to consider them'¹⁹⁵. In the collapse of the Carson-Asquith meeting (never very auspicious in any case) the moves within the leaderships to find a federal solution dried up.

Several fundamental problems had not been solved. The first was the definition of federalism. Some, like Chamberlain, Milner, Carson, Oliver, Churchill and Selborne thought in terms of a fully federated U.K., with provincial parliaments and an Imperial parliament at Westminster to guide the fortunes of the Empire. Others such as Lansdowne, Morley, Derby, and possibly Asquith himself preferred a more devolutionary solution, a form of watered-down Home Rule. Similar debate centred on whether Ulster was to be included in the new structure (Dunraven) or excluded from it (Grey)¹⁹⁶. Timing also divided sympathisers, Churchill calling for patience, Chamberlain and Oliver calling for no delay. And tactics proved a block to effective action. Selborne thought a 'settlement of the Irish Question before the general election will be no benefit to the Conservative party'¹⁹⁷; Oliver and

many others viewed an election as pointless and believed a settlement could only come by consent and not from electoral stalemate. Because these problems were never overcome, neither side would move beyond endorsing or discussing general principles or rough "frameworks" of a federal scheme. There was, then, a hollowness about the effort to bring both sides together around a federal settlement. Thus Lansdowne could write, 'I have always myself felt that no one has yet worked out a scheme for the establishment of such local legislatures'. This found an echo on the other side:

'Haldane.. insists and not without reason that none of the Unionist leaders have yet produced anything intelligible in the shape of a federal plan'¹⁹⁸.

More fundamental was the attitude of the two leaders. Bonar Law remained hostile, as Lansdowne told Chamberlain: 'I do not think B.L. likes "these devilments of local parliaments"¹⁹⁹'. Asquith's attitude was more complex. He had shown enthusiasm at certain points, such as Ladybank and Manchester, and appeared close to Churchill (it was easy for Chamberlain to believe that Churchill spoke with Asquith's knowledge, even sympathy). Yet Asquith never committed himself, and was increasingly seen as dragging his feet. Leeds had thrown doubt on the whole process, and at his third meeting with Bonar Law on the 9th of December, where little progress was made, Asquith's attitude was less forthcoming. 'My reading of the situation', Chamberlain wrote on the 10th, 'is that some members of the Govt are fully alive to the danger of delay and are doing their best to see that no time

is wasted, but that the P.M. himself has been, and still is, inclined to take the "wait and see" line²⁰⁰. Oliver was less reserved: 'The aged one (Asquith), if not yet hibernating will do so by nature'. His 'habit is that of the vampire, he sucks the blood out of his opponents by.. blandishments, and then curls up like a dormouse and goes to sleep'²⁰¹.

The federal initiative quickly ebbed from Tory minds after Bonar Law's third meeting with Asquith. Lansdowne was perceptive enough to see that Asquith might be stringing the Tories along; on the 10th he admitted that he could 'see nothing ahead but rocks-reefs upon reefs of them'²⁰². On the 16th he sent Bonar Law and the other leaders a ten-page memorandum on the recent talks²⁰³. It was a very pessimistic view, different to the optimistic sentiments he had shared earlier with Chamberlain. Little 'light' could be detected in Asquith's approach, which he now described as 'procrastination on our party.. Whenever the P.M. has spoken with any attempt at precision his suggestions are of a kind that fill me with alarm.. One of the few things which Mr Asquith has said distinctly is that he means to press forward with the Home Rule bill under the Parliament Act'²⁰⁴. Asquith should now be challenged on what changes in the bill he would contemplate, and if these proved unsatisfactory, as was likely, then 'negotiations should not be continued'²⁰⁵.

Lansdowne's much harder line corresponded to a growing scepticism within the Tory leadership as a whole. 'Asquith is simply playing with us', wrote Selborne on the 21st²⁰⁶. Balfour, on the 18th, found that 'it is tolerably clear now..

that the Govt think they will get into the least trouble by letting things slide'²⁰⁷, but it was Chamberlain who gave the clearest indication of this reaction: 'I am doing no politics at present.. I suspect Asquith has missed his mark and lost all chance of a settlement by consent'²⁰⁸. By the middle of December the initiative had clearly dried up.

VII

With the end of any realistic chance of a federal settlement, opinion swung back to the Right and against a compromise. Central to this rightward drift by the leadership was the cooperation between Long and Lansdowne. By early December Lansdowne had effectively achieved one of his objectives since September: the consolidation of the leadership against exclusion and even against Bonar Law's meeting Asquith at all. Others gravitated towards this firmer line, notably Selborne, Curzon, Balfour and Bob Cecil, all previously favourable to some kind of settlement. This change within the leadership owed much to the altered political environment following Bonar Law's third meeting with Asquith.

Discussions on the 9th shattered the impression of Asquith as sympathetic to a devolutionary settlement. 'He must have known', Lansdowne despaired to Bonar Law after their meeting, 'when he proposed to you that Ulster should come in automatically after a certain number of years, that his proposal would not be looked at'²⁰⁹. Curzon expressed similar sentiments: 'it is going back from what Asquith had previously

led you to think'.²¹⁰ Lansdowne felt particularly bitter, and his memorandum of the 16th captured this. Asquith's statements had been little more than 'desultory and tentative' (compare this with his reception of the Ladybank speech);²¹¹ equally, he doubted whether a meeting would have occurred at all 'had it not been for the feeling of consternation with which the Prime Minister's Leeds speech had.. been received'.²¹²

Lansdowne, Long and Curzon now came to see Asquith's line as designed not to reach a solution but to delay. 'All the evidence goes to show that the latter means to sit tight and do nothing for some time to come'.²¹³ As Selborne said, he 'is simply playing with us'.²¹⁴

But this movement was more than just an irritation with Asquithian procrastinations; grave tactical questions were raised. If the Prime Minister was not looking for a settlement, what was he trying to do? Clues to this could be sensed from Chamberlain's dinner with Churchill and Morley. 'There is a real danger', wrote Chamberlain to Lansdowne the next day, 'of the Government trying to solve the difficulty by the mere excision of Ulster and attempting to cast on the House of Lords the onus of rejecting this by not accepting the Second Reading of the bill. This idea smiles on Winston more than it does on Morley'.²¹⁵ A similar tactical assessment was apparent from Bonar Law's memorandum of the third meeting. Asquith appeared willing to offer an exclusion plan 'which probably would not satisfy Ulster.. (but) which people in England will consider reasonable.. (and thus) if they were rejected there would be less sympathy in England with Ulster'

resistance'.²¹⁶ Selborne, in a letter to Bonar Law, explained this new course: 'It looks as if he means to allow his communications with you to drag on indefinitely.. Then when the session is in full swing he will make suggestions for alterations in the Govt of Ireland bill, for the acceptance of the Lords but which will be quite unacceptable to our Ulster friends and to us. He will then try and turn the National disappointment that there has been no settlement by consent against us'.²¹⁷ In effect, Asquith would be presenting a fait accompli to the Lords, daring them to reject it (which was likely) and thus suffer the onerous responsibility having done so. Such a sequence of events would, as Bonar Law observed, 'give them a greater chance of winning the election'.²¹⁸

Two things made this assessment of Liberal tactics plausible. First was the realisation that under the Parliament Act, any amendment to a Government bill not made in the first Parliamentary circuit had to be made in agreement with the House of Lords, was placing the Lords in a highly dangerous position. If they rejected Asquith's compromise proposal over Home Rule (whatever it was), they stood to be dubbed by the Liberals as extremist and lose public sympathy. If they accepted it, Lansdowne would encounter a mutiny in the Lords of far greater proportions than in 1911, probably splitting the Tory party in the process. Lansdowne faced an acute dilemma: 'I have grave misgivings as to the attitude of the House of Lords. We should be offered a measure which is fundamentally wrong in principle and which is tolerated by Mr Asquith's Irish supporters only because it is from our point

of view fundamentally wrong.. If.. it is found impossible to obtain the acquiescence of Irish Unionists outside Ulster, our difficulties will be immensely increased²¹⁹.

The second was the example of the 1910 Conference. For Lansdowne and Long, Asquith had prepared the ground well in 1910 for the passage of the Parliament Act in 1911. By dragging out negotiations he delayed the inevitable general election. He had also improved his standing with the electorate, appearing conciliatory and willing to find a solution to the crisis. And he had managed to label the Tories as unreasonable when the talks broke up (the rumour spreading that Tory hostility to any Irish reform had caused the conference to end). When the election came in December 1910 the Liberals were in a better position and reaped the benefits by returning to Government. It was the possible replay of this scenario which loomed large for Lansdowne, Long, Cecil and Selborne: 'It looks rather like an attempt to repeat the tactics of the Constitutional Conference'²²⁰. Lansdowne warned Bonar Law to keep a detailed record of his conversations with the Prime Minister; 'you will remember the unscrupulous manner in which our opponents took advantage of the absence of records in the case of the Conference of 1910'²²¹. The vulnerability of the Lords and the experience of 1910 convinced some that Asquith was trying to wrong-foot them.

These concerns led Long and Lansdowne to press Bonar Law to demand a statement of intent from Asquith and, if none was forthcoming, break off talks. 'Invite (Asquith), if he still desires a settlement by consent, to state definitely in

writing what changes in the bill he has in contemplation. If as I anticipate the changes which he would be in a position to offer prove to be.. wholly inadmissible, we shall have to decide whether negotiations should not be discontinued.²²².

Long also saw little point in meeting Asquith again 'unless there was evidence to show that they could be continued with some prospect of success'.²²³ Selborne even requested that 'he ought to make proposals to you in writing on which you can consult your friends'. Such was the increased mistrust of Asquith.²²⁴

Asking Asquith to declare his intentions was a means to bring talks to a speedy end (they had little faith he would grant their wish), and on an issue which could not reflect badly upon the Tories. After all, requesting a compromise proposal could not be represented as unreasonable. Ending the talks would also reduce party disaffection, which both Lansdowne and Long emphasised in their correspondence, hoping to use it to move Bonar Law. 'W. Long is here', wrote Lansdowne on the 11th, 'and tells me that he learns from many sources that any settlement based on the acceptance of H.R. with special treatment for Ulster, would be bitterly resented by our supporters'.²²⁵ Bob Cecil warned that 'some of your colleagues on the front benches are getting a little anxious to know what exactly is going on.. this makes an additional reason why Asquith must say something definite without undue delay so that we shall all know where we are and what line we should take on the platform'.²²⁶

Breaking off the talks, on a basis favourable to the Tory

party, would undermine the reassuring image which the Government had cultivated in the press. Selborne observed on the 21st: 'I think the other side are running the press very carefully over the matter'²²⁷. He urged that the Tory papers 'should be taken more into our confidence over these negotiations and be given a definite line'²²⁸. Bob Cecil noticed a similar conspiracy: 'The Ministers who have always managed the press very skilfully are spreading abroad the impression that all is peace - a compromise in the air'²²⁹. By hinting to the press that a compromise was close, Asquith hoped to create strong public expectation of a settlement. A Tory rejection of his compromise scheme in these conditions, whatever its the nature, would prove difficult and risk the loss of public support. Therefore, forcing a break over what would appear to be Asquith's refusal to advance a proposal, would pre-empt such a confident atmosphere.

Calls to end discussions were also, in part, rooted in a mistrust of Bonar Law, a fear that he would agree a settlement on exclusion and even enter a coalition with Asquith. The Cecil brothers rounded on Bonar Law; Hugh saw it as 'for Home rulers to make Home Rule workable not for us'²³⁰, and Robert agreed that 'he (Asquith) should not be allowed to forget that on the Govt of the day the responsibility rests of governing the country and we must clear ourselves, before the country, of all share in a policy of drift'²³¹. Forcing Asquith to take the initiative made good tactical sense; it threw on him the impossible burden of agreeing a compromise scheme with his coalition partners, which in turn ensured that any scheme

agreed would be very limited in scope and easily rejected by the Tories on grounds of unreasonableness.

The pressure on Bonar Law to force a definite proposal and end the meetings had an epilogue in the meetings between Asquith and Carson. Bonar Law answered such appeals with a call for patience. Asquith on December 10th wrote to Carson suggesting a meeting, a switch of negotiators which Bonar Law found 'a little strange'; but given his close contact with Carson he can hardly have been seriously alarmed²³². But it kept party apprehension high, and was for Lansdowne and Long simply another delaying manoeuvre by Asquith. Carson and Asquith met on the 16th of December. Carson offered very similar terms to those Bonar Law had suggested to Asquith at their second meeting: that "specified" Ulster counties be permanently excluded until they decide otherwise. Asquith made no attempt to negotiate, but instead promised to send to Carson his own speculations ('a few rough suggestions'), which arrived on the 23rd²³³. As with Bonar Law's third meeting, Asquith did not advance anything more serious than a form of Home Rule within Home Rule which both Bonar Law and Carson had already firmly rejected. This "phoney war" situation has led Jalland to conclude that Asquith's intentions here were disinformation, a "smokescreen" for a longer term strategy which by this stage the Tory leadership had guessed²³⁴.

After consultation with Bonar Law, Carson refused Asquith's terms on the 27th, hardly a surprise to the Prime Minister²³⁵. This refusal he used, at a second meeting on January 2nd 1914, in much the same way that he had used Bonar

Law's rejection of Home Rule within Home Rule. He tried to place the responsibility for the present situation onto the Tories (since they had refused his scheme), raising the threat of public hostility. Yet he also invited Carson to 'present in black and white' his own proposals. This Carson again refused to do, mistrusting the use which then might be made of such a commitment. Instead, he followed the line Bonar Law had taken and requested that the principle of exclusion be accepted before any proposal came from him, effectively putting on Asquith the onus of agreeing a compromise formula with the Nationalists. There the talks ended, inconclusive and more to do with the manoeuvrings by both sides than with any serious attempt to find a settlement by consent. Bonar Law now acted formally to end them (feeling the weight of the pressure behind him) by asking Asquith if he could announce their termination during his speech at Bristol on the 15th of January. Asquith agreed.

VIII

Following his second meeting with Asquith, Bonar Law's confidence that his tactical approach of the last few months was working, grew. His reasonableness had been well advertised. Public sympathy had not been lost; from recent by-elections it even appeared particularly strong. No compromise plan had been agreed; Asquith, he thought, would wrestle with Redmond but would never reach agreement. An election looked likely, and Steel-Maitland had begun sending out circulars

asking for speaking dates. This confidence can be detected in his letter to Balfour of the 18th of November: 'It looks now as if the Nationalists would not have the exclusion of Ulster at any price, and if so that will greatly simplify our position'²³⁶. And to Walter Long three days later: 'it seems to me as if there were no chance of the Nationalists even considering the exclusion of Ulster; and if so our course is plain and indeed I think there must be an early election'²³⁷. This attitude was reinforced by his third meeting with Asquith. 'I really do not understand why he took the trouble of seeing me at all. The only explanation I can give is that he is in a funk about the whole position and thought that a meeting might keep the thing open at least'²³⁸. Bonar Law now saw little chance of a compromise, and that Asquith was thus back to facing the choice of civil war or an election. Despite earlier speculations that he might prefer civil war, on December 1st Bonar Law could declare that 'there is so much likelihood of an early election'²³⁹.

His main problem, however, was party opinion. Knowledge of his secret meetings with Asquith was, by mid-November, widely known and resented. The idea of a compromise, especially on exclusion, was greatly disliked. Linlithgow and Reading added to this pressure, realising what Bonar Law had been arguing since early 1912 - that Home Rule was an issue which would rouse the country and win them an election. But this realisation came at a stage when Bonar Law was having to exhibit moderation and statesmanship. It was this dichotomy between party opinion and his necessary public stance which

taxed him, not that his tactics were in danger of being externally undermined. Another concern was that some in the leadership were pressing him to change course. Lansdowne, Selborne and Chamberlain were calling for a devolutionary solution, Balfour for a pro-order alliance, and others for a shift away from exclusion. Steel-Maitland and Hills sought to drop Home Rule altogether, and focus on Tariff Reform and Land policy. Bonar Law faced the problem of minimising or negating these competing claims.

Bonar Law's speech at Norwich on the 13th of November had tried to impose a via media on the competing factions over land policy, which had divided the party after Lloyd George's Swindon speech. It called for an inquiry into wages in those areas where they were notoriously low. On November 29th Hills wrote to Bonar Law asking him to clarify the position of the inquiry and its remit to investigate wages boards, worried that Bonar Law's move would be a shelving and not an initiating device²⁴⁰. Bathurst followed this up with a grave warning that if nothing constructive was done the party's position in the countryside would be destroyed²⁴¹. Clearly, Norwich had not given a clear 'pronouncement on the matter' and many in the party remained determined to agitate for a coherent policy²⁴². Bonar Law's solution was to show sympathy, and to demand concentration on Home Rule: 'What we have to do is show a real interest and appreciation of the problem while at the same time doing our best to prevent its being used to obscure the main issue which ought to be Home Rule'²⁴³. He exerted pressure on Central Office (home of many of the more

radical Tory land reformers) to push the Home Rule issue in the constituencies and to ignore others; 'Talbot and Steel-Maitland sent out a circular to Unionist candidates asking them to ridicule or pass over George.. and concentrate on Home Rule'²⁴⁴. Disagreements over land were to bubble on into 1914 and beyond, so damage-limitation was perhaps the best course. A precarious consensus had been arrived at, which Sanders described as 'local inquiries in each district and if conditions are very bad.. to go for some compulsory means of improving them'²⁴⁵. Bonar Law succeeded in concentrating attention upon Home Rule, albeit at the expense of storing up problems for the morrow.

The threat from Lansdowne and Chamberlain grew intense towards the end of November. They had established contact with leading ministers, and attracted into their circle much influential support (Balfour, Long, Selborne, Lord Grey). They had the informal support of Carson in exploring the possibility of a devolutionary solution, and sections of the press were sympathetic, notably The Times, Observer and Daily Mail. Bonar Law reacted in two ways. First, he appeared to give great scope to Lansdowne's and Chamberlain's activities. He allowed them freedom to agitate, remaining uncritical of their speeches at Bromsgrove and Brighton, despite the different line they took. He was content to watch the Chamberlain-Churchill conversations take place, even commenting, rather curiously, 'I agree with every word of it', after reading the transcript²⁴⁶. Yet Bonar Law had the feel of the party. He knew that federalism or devolution was

unacceptable to them at this juncture, when they had the Government in such a difficulties; the party wanted an election not a settlement. Freedom to Lansdowne and Chamberlain gave them the rope to hang themselves. Moreover, to have come down with a heavy hand would have been self-defeating; it might have forced them into a more independent line and a more direct attack upon his leadership, signalling to Asquith that the Tory leadership was hopelessly divided, thus allowing him the opportunity to play one off against the other.

Second, Bonar Law showed determination. He remained fixed to the line he had followed since 1912, offering Asquith the choice of civil war or an election. His Newcastle speech on October 29th, though replying to Asquith's hopeful overtures at Ladybank, stuck firmly to this basic option, much to the annoyance of Chamberlain and Selborne. Nor, in private, did Bonar Law move away from Ulster as his negotiating base. At his second meeting with Asquith exclusion remained as firmly at the centre as it had in their previous conversation on December 9th. 'The end of our interview was a statement by him (Asquith) that he understood that nothing could be considered by us except the exclusion of Ulster and he would carefully consider whether a settlement on that basis was possible'²⁴⁷. To Balfour, he sent clear warnings against any form of cooperation: 'It remains to be seen whether he (Asquith) will show the courage and statesmanship which were indicated in the previous conversation with him.. for undoubtedly anything in the nature of a compromise - whatever the nature of it - would

be very distasteful to a large number of our supporters and there might easily be an active movement against it'²⁴⁸.

Bonar Law's resolve to cling to his own tactical line was a severe obstacle to a "pro-order" or federal agreement between the front-benches, especially since by the middle of December Asquith was appearing less compromising than before. Without the active support of at least one party leader, the federal initiative was not well placed to succeed. Carson, sympathetic, even eager for a settlement along these lines, could not publicly descend the Ulster battlements to talk compromise. Nor could Balfour, Lansdowne or Chamberlain hope to rally the party against its leader. On this cause Bonar Law was in line with party sentiment. His position was far stronger than others realised, and this strength flowed from his understanding of where backbenchers stood. It was an awareness which would be demonstrated many times throughout his leadership (often against Chamberlain), and it meant that he could confidently resist pressure from the devolutionary movement.

Pressure from the Right was also a serious consideration for Bonar Law. Long warned Bonar Law that any agreement on exclusion would foster a party rebellion, likely as not with him at its head. Around him he grouped like-thinking Tories worried about Southern Unionists, Imperial disintegration or the electoral consequences of a sell-out: Salisbury, Bob and Hugh Cecil, Curzon, Midleton and Willoughby de Broke. Yet resistance to exclusion also brought within Long's circle Lansdowne, Selborne and Chamberlain. Therefore, while the

enactment of a devolutionary or federal solution was a highly unlikely threat to Bonar Law, his willingness to discuss exclusion united much of the Tory leadership against him.

Yet, although much closer tactically to Long than the latter believed, Bonar Law had no choice but to keep meeting Asquith and to keep appearing moderate. This dilemma he was at pains to spell out to Long: 'They (the party) probably do not realise, however, that by refusing to negotiate with the Government we should only make our position worse; for undoubtedly if Asquith can square Redmond and we refuse to assist him in making arrangements with the exclusion of Ulster, they would do it on their own account and go to the country on that issue. In that case we should equally lose our best card for the election and worse than that we should seem, at least I think so, to the majority of people unreasonable in the attitude we take'²⁴⁹. Two things are evident from this passage. First, it reveals Bonar Law as still wedded to Constitutional methods; present tactics were to secure power through electoral means, not alternatives to them. There was a point beyond which he would not go in resisting Home Rule: if Asquith squared the Nationalists and Ulstermen over exclusion, the same benchmark he had explained to J.P.Croal after his first meeting²⁵⁰. Second, it was a clear outline of the "waiting game", a reliance on Nationalists and Liberals falling out with each other and on preserving public sympathy in the meantime. It was a level-headed and shrewd tactical line which required patience and nerve, though one beyond the grasp of Long. He replied to Bonar Law with a memorandum: 'one

of our best, ablest.. supporters told me yesterday, that he realised the difficulty of offering a simple negative to any reasonable offer but he added, "the great mass of the people will not understand it, they will think our leaders have sold the pass and our party will be smashed for twenty years" ²⁵¹.

In reply to the latter's memorandum, Bonar Law was forced to disclose his hand, showing frustration at Long's constant harrying. Yet it provides a rare and valuable insight into his thinking. 'I really do not think I differ in any way from the views you express and as far as I can judge the situation is developing quite satisfactorily for us. I think so because it seems to me as if there were no chance of the Nationalists even considering the exclusion of Ulster; and if so our course is plain and indeed I think there must be an early election' ²⁵². Implicit in Bonar Law's admission was an appeal to Long for trust and restraint; no settlement was coming, but it was better to wait on events.

Long still maintained his pressure, now demanding that Bonar Law's meetings with Asquith be made public ²⁵³. This was a clear rejection of a waiting game, and designed to rally party opinion strongly behind himself. Such requests were echoed by Lansdowne in his memorandum of the 16th and his letter of the 21st ²⁵⁴. Again Bonar Law sought to appease with delay. To this end, Asquith's further conversations with Carson provided a ready excuse: 'I think we must wait therefore and see what comes of this' ²⁵⁵. From Long he asked for patience and understanding: 'As regards making the meeting public I do not think that that would be wise. If I saw any

chance of a settlement then there would be no harm.. but I see none; and my impression is, to have it known that I was meeting Asquith would only tend to diminish the fighting spirit among our people, which would be very undesirable²⁵⁶. This seemed to placate Long, for in reply he admitted to be 'delighted to hear what you tell me of the prospect. This quite alters the case'²⁵⁷. Yet by the 31st he was still pestering Bonar Law with memoranda and threats.²⁵⁸.

The threat from the Right did not persuade Bonar Law into a tougher, less consensual approach. He continued to appear moderate, willing to meet Asquith, negotiate on exclusion and avoid declaring publicly his conversations with the Prime Minister. The line he took was very much of his own making, suggesting that the threat was more apparent than real; after all, Long, Lansdowne and Selborne had been calling for a public declaration since early December. Bonar Law managed to string them along until the talks had effectively driven into the sand, following Asquith's second meeting with Carson. Only then did he seek Asquith's approval to announce that the meetings were at an end. Accusations that Bonar Law was weak and mesmerised by Asquith appear unfounded; he simply realised how vital it was to present an image of reasonableness to the public and to Asquith. Arguably, he showed much the most perceptive grasp of the situation from a party standpoint. His determination stemmed from an awareness that agreement over exclusion was not possible, of which he was increasingly confident from mid November. His only concern was to keep party unity while he was posturing, hence his willingness to

take Long into his confidence and to colour public speeches with tough rhetoric. Dublin on the 28th of November was an 'uncompromising' and 'impassioned outburst', though made in reply to Asquith's hostile Leeds speech the day before²⁵⁹.

Bonar Law also enjoyed close, even secretive, relations with key figures on the Right. He was in regular contact with Carson. Great sympathy existed between them, based largely on Bonar Law's unshakable advocacy of Ulster's position; with Carson behind him, he had a cushion against right-wing attacks. With Lord Milner also Bonar Law had kept in contact, either directly or through others, notably Carson. In addition, the possibility that an election was imminent served to dampen potential party unrest; Bonar Law made it seem that his stance had actually achieved what they had been arguing for from the start. Steel-Maitland began to stir Central Office into activity, which gave Bonar Law's confidence some substance²⁶⁰. The Right would champ at the bit, and foam at the mouth, but would not bolt from the stable.

It was a delicate balance between party animosity and political (public) necessity, a balance at which he was successful. The meetings formally ended after Bonar Law's Bristol speech on the 15th of January, on favourable terms for the Tories: they could not be sneered as unreasonable and as a force against compromise (as in 1910). Party unity was strained but not broken; Liberal splits became more perceptible, and Asquith's difficulties in squaring the Nationalists more apparent. Nonetheless, Bonar Law faced dangers in the future. The leadership had shifted, markedly,

to the Right, as the result of mistrust for Asquith and an awareness of the subtle tactical line he was following.

ENDNOTES CHAPTER 6.

- 1.. B.L.P. 33/6/81 Law to Balfour October 15th 1913
- 2.. R.Blake The Unknown... pg 163-4
- 3.. B.L.P. 30/3/50 Milner to Law October 24th 1913
- 4.. B.L.P. 33/6/116 Law to Selborne December 22nd 1913
- 5.. R.Blake The Unknown... pg 161: B.L.P. 33/6/80 "Notes on the Conversation with the Prime Minister" October 15th 1913
- 6.. B.L.P. 33/6/84 Law to Croal October 18th 1913
- 7.. B.L.P. 30/3/50 Milner to Law October 24th 1913
- 8.. Ibid
- 9.. Ibid
10. M.P. Ms Dep 40 Milner to Denison October 25th 1913 (160-3)
11. Ibid
12. M.P. Ms Dep 13 Milner to Oliver October 23rd 1913 (42-3)
13. Ibid
14. M.P. Ms Dep 16 Milner to Roberts October 30th 1913 (211)
15. M.P. Ms Dep 16 Roberts to Milner November 2nd 1913 (212-13)
16. M.P. Ms Dep 16 Roberts to Milner November 4th 1913 (214)
17. Salisbury Papers 73/187-189 Willoughby de Broke to Salisbury October 29th 1913
18. Ibid
19. W de B.P. WB/6/5 Lord Arran to de Broke October 4th 1913
20. Ibid
21. B.L.P. 30/3/61 Midleton to Law October 28th 1913
22. B.L.P. 30/3/80 Salisbury to Law October 31st 1913
23. Ibid
24. O.P. 7726/86 Oliver to Robinson October 10th 1913 (19)
25. O.P. 7726/86 Earl grey to Oliver October 3rd 1913 (34)
26. B.L.P. 30/3/16 Lansdowne to Law October 10th 1913
27. O.P. 7726/86 Oliver to Craik October 10th 1913 (90)
28. O.P. 7726/86 Oliver to Robinson October 10th 1913 (19)
29. J.Kendle Ireland and the Federal... pg 163
30. Ibid
31. O.P. 7726/86 Earl Grey to Oliver October 15th 1913 (36)
32. A.C.P. 60/114 Oliver to Chamberlain October 17th 1913
33. O.P. 7726/86 Oliver to Craik October 26th 1913 (99)
34. O.P. 7726/86 Oliver to Craik October 27th 1913 (104)
35. O.P. 7726/86 Earl Grey to Oliver October 15th 1913 (36)
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CHAPTER SEVEN

I

When Curzon forecast, on January 14th, that the coming session would be 'one of the most eventful and momentous in British history' few could have predicted just how momentous¹. Yet it was the Irish Question, not the prospect of war, which dominated political attention until July 1914. By early January the secret conversations between Asquith, Bonar Law and Carson had ended with a renewal of bitterness within each party. Yet Tory concern focused more intently upon the question of how Asquith would escape this looming catastrophe. With the start of the new Parliamentary session on February the 9th, the Prime Minister's intentions became clearer when he announced that he would bring forward 'suggestions' for a settlement. This created a great deal of panic within Unionist ranks. Supporters of a constructive solution still believed that Asquith could be pushed in a federal direction. Others thought that he could still be pressured into an election, if only all talk of a compromise was avoided. For Bonar Law there was much danger. What if Asquith, against all expectations, had actually squared the Nationalists to permanent exclusion of six Ulster counties? Or, if Asquith presented a plan far short of this basic minimum, what would be the public reaction when Bonar Law rejected it? Would Asquith go to the country on this plan as a compromise to the Irish problem, as he had threatened both Carson and Bonar Law in the autumn? Speculations such as these stirred many to toy during February

and March with amending the Army Annual Act to force an immediate dissolution.

Asquith finally introduced a compromise scheme on March 9th, though details of what was on offer had been leaked to The Daily News five days earlier. It called for a plebiscite on any Ulster county contracting out for six years (effectively four- county exclusion along the lines of the Agar-Robartes amendment), but with the proviso that the excluded areas would automatically come in after six years. It amounted to what Asquith suggested at his second meeting with Bonar Law and was met with derisory treatment from Unionists: 'We do not want a sentence of death with a stay of execution' was Carson's telling phrase². Bonar Law met the scheme with a demand for a referendum on the entire bill, thus firmly rejecting Asquith's overture but preserving public sympathy. Liberals, however, were incensed at his rebuttal of what for them was a genuine and far-reaching compromise offer, so much so that Churchill was moved to bloodthirsty threats in a speech several days later at Bradford. In this Liberal exasperation lay the seeds of the bungled attempt to reinforce troop emplacements around Belfast, sparking the Curragh mutiny on March 19th.

II

The federal initiative had received a set-back with the collapse of talks at the start of January. Asquith's procrastination had annoyed Chamberlain, Lansdowne and Selborne, who now saw his intentions as less to reach a constructive solution than to delay

or to place them in a false position. Bonar Law's Bristol speech, which formally announced the end of talks, also helped to scotch ideas of an agreement, with its open threat to support armed insurrection in Ulster. Spender complained to Oliver at the start of January that 'the opposition front-bench has no intention of coming to terms and that any further overtures beyond what the P.M. will make.. will simply be used to trip them up. This they infer from Bonar Law's speeches and the tone and temper of the opposition generally'³. Thus it appeared that the initiative had ended, as Garvin told Oliver: 'I fear our business is making little progress and more grave warnings are required'⁴. Asquith left for Cannes, accompanied by Churchill, during the second week of January. Chamberlain went off to sulk in Folkestone, where he 'did not want to talk politics'⁵.

Yet for all these ill-omens, the political environment was maturing into one well-suited to another attempt at constructive compromise. After all, talks had taken place and, once the ice was broken, renewed conversation was easier to begin a second time. The breakdown of talks underlined that a stalemate had been reached, a situation which many federalists (such as Oliver) had always seen as a pre-requisite to agreement, and more politicians on both sides now had a genuine fear of civil war in Ireland⁶. Bridgeman noted the changed atmosphere on the Government benches: 'it was clear that they had realised at last the gravity of the situation. Instead of laughing... they listened with extraordinary attention'⁷.

Round Table members continued to advocate a federal solution, and 'busily carried on with their conferences and

consultations and conversations' and in the pages of The Times and Observer⁸. O'Brien and Dunraven continued their well-worn practice of letters to the press calling for a conference, and Oliver carried on whispering encouragement to Chamberlain. Writing to him on January the 7th, he looked to restore Chamberlain's faith in the negotiating process. 'If you want agreement you must employ "agrees"... No good employing "disagrees" for the job'⁹. It is interesting to note whom Oliver saw as an agreeer: 'Without you and the dam little fool of a goat... they were bound to fail'. Lloyd George was now more clearly recognised as someone who might work for a constructive solution, a possibility Garvin had suggested to Oliver on New Year's day; 'he is worth any other three in politics for courage, imagination, seizure and zeal'¹⁰. However it was not the lure of cooperation with Lloyd George that focused minds at the start of the 1914 session, but anticipation of what the Government would do next.

From mid-January it was widely believed that, when Parliament met, Asquith would announce terms for a settlement: 'an offer more or less on the lines already indicated' during his private conversations with Bonar Law and Carson, namely Home Rule within Home Rule, or what Asquith termed "veiled exclusion"¹¹. Bonar Law and Carson had already denounced this as inadequate, and would have little choice but to reject it if it was brought forward. Yet that would place them in a poor tactical position; Asquith might then go to the country and fight an election not on the bill itself but on his compromise proposals, a far more favourable platform and more likely to win support from a bored

public. A speech by Birrell in North Bristol on January 26th, where he hinted at generous terms already made to the Ulstermen, suggested that such a tactic was being contemplated¹². As The Times wrote on the 27th, 'the Government and their supporters are assiduously disseminating impressions which are intended to depict their own attitude in a singularly favourable light'¹³, creating the public appearance of great concessions (despite the limited nature of Home Rule within Home Rule) to win support for the Government in any election contest and to make rejection by the Tories far more difficult.

This worried the Tory leadership. At the shadow cabinet meeting on February the 5th, Salisbury sensed 'a feeling of considerable uneasiness'¹⁴. It was particularly worrying for those, such as Chamberlain, Selborne and Lansdowne inclined to a devolutionary solution; they saw the terms as unworkable, yet realised that many federalists could well be taken in by such a scheme. Moreover, moderate sections of the party, increasingly anxious, might support the scheme as a way out. After all, the plan avoided the partition of Ireland and could be adapted in practice once in place. It gave Ulster extra safeguards, and to public opinion would seem a reasonable solution. Hythe, writing to Oliver, reflected just this attitude; he criticised the Unionist leaders for their hostile attitude, and recounted a lunch he had recently had with Sir Edward Grey (the originator of the Home Rule within Home Rule plan). 'I know the government are reasonable' whereas the Unionist party 'go(ing) the whole hog on the Ulster ticket is unreasonable'¹⁵. Oliver riposted that such changes would not advance a federal system and that Grey

'had done more mischief than anyone'¹⁶.

To meet this threat they had to convince federalists that Asquith's proposal of Home Rule within Home Rule was inadequate, and would not solve the crisis; that it tinkered with the original bill, leaving financial relations untouched, and provided no federal template to be extended to the rest of the U.K. More importantly, it would not satisfy Ulster; and unless her threat of resistance could be bought off no compromise, whether federal or not, would succeed. They therefore supported real exclusion for the short term (quite a step towards Carson's position) combined with a federal recasting of the entire bill, as a workable solution for the longer term. Exclusion, so Chamberlain and Selborne began to argue, could safely be introduced under the guise of the wider scheme of Home Rule all round.

Early in February Selborne wrote to Lord Charnwood, a Liberal federalist and Round Table member who was working with a group of "experts" to frame a federal blueprint, arguing against Home Rule within Home Rule. Instead he insisted that 'civil war in Ireland can quite certainly be averted by taking Ulster out of the Government of Ireland bill.. by leaving it attached for all purposes to G.B., or, by giving it the machinery of a subordinate Government in Belfast'¹⁷. Only through such changes would a constructive solution 'by national consent' be achieved. He was trying to shape federal opinion in advance of Asquith's expected plan.

More surprisingly Carson, acutely worried by what Asquith might do when Parliament re-opened, began to reveal federal

sympathies. He could never accept Home Rule within Home Rule, since it left Ulster subordinate to Dublin and would appear, as he told Garvin, a 'surrender of principle in the mind of Ulster'¹⁸. Yet if Asquith brought it forward as a compromise, sections in the Unionist party might well support it; or if Asquith went to the country on it, as already noted, it would place Carson in a dangerous tactical position. He sought, therefore, to persuade Tory waverers and federalists that only a package incorporating real exclusion would avert civil war and so allow reconstruction. Early in the new year Carson met Garvin, looking to use the editor's extensive contacts to spread these ideas¹⁹. Garvin wrote to Oliver soliciting support for Carson's view: 'exclusion pending federation.. If he seemed to take anything less than..(this).. his people would sling him aside'²⁰. That same day, January the 19th, in a speech at Belfast Hall, Carson sought to endear himself to the federal cause. It was no use, he declared, talking unless 'they give us, as a basis, the preservation under an Imperial Parliament of those rights which our ancestors won for us'²¹. This was a signal to Liberals and Tories that settlement could only be achieved if Ulster's integrity remained unimpaired, perhaps through Home Rule all round, not through Home Rule within Home Rule. This line was consistent with his earlier private admission to Earl Grey and Oliver that he saw Ulster's future lying within a general scheme of devolution. Still, his more public stance on Home Rule all round at this point was a useful counter-proposal to what was expected from Asquith.

Parliament opened on February the 9th in an atmosphere of

great excitement and with much manoeuvring on both sides. The next day, during debate on the address, the Prime Minister rose to speak. 'We were all convinced that Asquith would announce the proposals for dealing with the Ulster difficulty on which the Government had decided. He did nothing of the kind'²². Instead, he declared that he would bring forward new "suggestions" which he would soon submit to the House. These, he hoped, would provide for a peaceful settlement. The move threw the opposition forces into confusion. Bonar Law, having prepared an assault on veiled exclusion, declined to speak. Carson also refrained, pleading illness, leaving Chamberlain to deliver an impromptu reply. Asquith's cryptic announcement led to a great deal of speculation as to the substance of his suggestions; 'The general impression is that the Government will be forced to adopt exclusion... and that the bill cannot pass in its present form'²³. This impression was reinforced by several rumours. The first was that the Government would not contemplate coercing Ulster, the logical conclusion from which was that they had decided to exclude instead²⁴. A second was the rumour that the Nationalists 'were very sick', again suggestive of far-reaching compromise by the Government²⁵. Chamberlain felt that 'the impression is universal that they cannot now attempt the coercion of Ulster and that they must propose its exclusion'²⁶. It appeared that Asquith might after all go further than his scheme of the autumn.

Federal sympathisers, encouraged by the political outlook, tried to whip up support. Dunraven published eulogies to federalism in The Nineteenth Century and in letters to The Times²⁷. Both The Times and The Observer ran sympathetic

articles, and even the strongly pro-Government Westminister Gazette expressed sympathy. Spender wrote to Oliver admitting that although there were obstacles to federalism, 'there are so many people well-disposed in high quarters on both sides' that a solution was possible²⁸. Lord Charnwood and Murray Macdonald issued a pamphlet in the middle of February called "The Federal Solution", and Oliver made a forceful attack on veiled exclusion in a pamphlet "What Federalism is not"²⁹. From higher quarters, Stamfordham wrote supporting the current initiative, reflecting a growing anxiety about the King's position: 'I have never swerved from the total exclusion of Ulster as the sole expedient in the difficulty; but better still if she could be left out until the federal system has been applied to Ireland'³⁰. As in 1910 and, to some extent, the autumn of 1913 a moment of possible political compromise by the front benches was accompanied and even encouraged by intellectuals, press men and influential observers.

Similar anticipation was evident within the Unionist leadership. Carson, hopeful that the Government were contemplating exclusion, saw the need to encourage them. His reply to Asquith, on February 12th, whilst confirming 'that nothing short of exclusion of Ulster would induce her to lay aside her purpose', was distinctly moderate in tone and interpreted as such by ministers: 'they professed to find in the debate and especially in Carson's speech, a new situation which offered a prospect of a friendly solution'³¹, an interpretation shared by Stamfordham³². Carson also wrote to Oliver reiterating his support for a type of Home Rule all round; 'If we were being

treated similarly to all other elements of the U.K. we could hardly assert the right to resist by force something which was equally being given to all members of the community in which we live'³³. Carson was preparing elements in the party; he was surely aware that they would find exclusion easier to accept if it came in a devolutionary guise, or if he himself was committed to devolution in the long term. It would certainly have helped appease Chamberlain, Lansdowne, and Southern Unionists who were hostile to the simple exclusion of Ulster from the bill.

Chamberlain also saw developments as hopeful. He realised that "actual" rather than veiled exclusion had to form the core of any agreement if it was to procure Carson; as he told Oliver: 'I regard the present exclusion of Ulster as absolutely essential'³⁴. Yet he recognised that if the Government were going to exclude Ulster, then they could well be persuaded to present it within a structure of devolved government, as argued by Selborne and, more pragmatically, by Carson. After all, 'by itself it (exclusion) was a most humiliating surrender for the Government'³⁵, whereas 'federalism makes the exclusion of Ulster easy'³⁶. He therefore sought to encourage Government thinking towards Home Rule all round. 'Lansdowne, Selborne and I have given in our public speeches some favour to the idea, for it would be absolutely destructive of the separatist features of the present bill, would fulfil Carson's conditions and, indeed, has been privately favoured by him'³⁷. Yet Chamberlain remained concerned. Would the government offer only four- county exclusion, which Carson would find very difficult to agree? And how would alterations to the bill be carried? Simply to absorb

them into the original bill would necessitate the Lords' helping to pass it, an impossible task for Lansdowne, even if he had desired it. Better, then, to incorporate alterations into an amending bill to be passed at the same time as the original bill. The Lords could then pass the amending while rejecting the Home Rule bill, though with the knowledge that the latter would pass under the Parliament Act. The importance of this was outlined by Chamberlain: 'thus they would take no responsibility for the passage of Home Rule but would provide the means by which... an amending bill embodying the concessions would take effect'³⁸. It would save the party's face by abnegating liability for passing Home Rule, and would allow repeal if the Tories were returned to Government.

More seriously, Chamberlain feared that the Government might simply exclude Ulster alone, in the hope of splitting Carson and the Ulstermen from the Tory party. 'I agree.. as to the exclusion of Ulster being no settlement', he wrote to his stepmother, 'provincial councils... would be infinitely preferable to this bill with or without Ulster exclusion... as Balfour says, there is a United Kingdom question as well as an Ulster question'³⁹. Long, writing to Bob Cecil, reflected similar concerns; 'For some time we have been put in rather a false position because first the whole Home Rule controversy has lately centred around Ulster and second... the press have argued that if Ulster be excluded we are bound to accept Home Rule'⁴⁰. There was a danger of federalist pressure ending not in reconstruction but in partition and thus the splitting of the Unionist coalition. Whereas if Asquith went for Home Rule all round, there was a growing

consensus of opinion in its favour inside the Tory leadership . The combined forces of Chamberlain, Carson, Lansdowne, Balfour, Selborne and moderates like Curzon and Derby would have been more than enough to convince Bonar Law of the need to accept it. But if Asquith offered exclusion (six counties with no time limit), leaving the rest of the bill intact, Carson would surely have deserted, regardless of his earlier support for Home Rule all round, in consequence splitting the leadership. Certainly Chamberlain, Lansdowne and Long, from their private statements, would have been in a very difficult position and unlikely, as Jalland suggests, 'to end their resistance to Home Rule for the rest of Ireland, if Ulster was excluded'⁴¹. The situation was one of great possibilities and great danger. As Oliver described it to Chamberlain: 'this strange situation... the most anxious and at the same time in some ways the most hopeful I have ever known'⁴².

Others, such as Oliver, Garvin, Astor and the Round Table movement, saw bigger prospects in the situation. Oliver was greatly encouraged by Carson's letter of the 10th, seeing in him a powerful addition to the group of known federalists⁴³. On the 21st he urged Chamberlain once again to move more boldly towards a federal solution⁴⁴, and on March 3rd he enclosed a thirty eight- page memorandum pleading that Tories should take up the federal cause and not wait on the government or rely on an election⁴⁵. The memorandum had several aims. First, it reflected a suspicion that Asquith might not move towards a federal scheme and that the initiative could therefore only come from the opposition; Chamberlain, Oliver felt, had far too much

faith in Asquith's doing the 'federal thing'⁴⁶. Second, the memorandum pin-pointed those who were a force working for a constructive settlement: Chamberlain, Lansdowne, Selborne, and Carson along with Lloyd George and Churchill. Oliver was visualising a broad-bottomed coalition, a theme which he pursued in his covering letter: 'I see no way out of national danger except a Government which omits Squiff, W.Long, Haldane, Curzon, Grey, Lord Halsbury, Runciman etc, etc and Leo Maxse etc and which contains yourself, Lloyd George, Carson, Winston and possibly one or two more, Milner.. Crewe, Jameson, Bob Cecil'⁴⁷. Such speculations of national government were fuelled by a lunch in the middle of February between Oliver, Astor and Lloyd George. The Chancellor voiced great enthusiasm for a federal scheme, 'but unless we agreed to this in principle beforehand Asquith could not possibly put it forward as it would wreck the Govt if we refused his offer if made publicly'⁴⁸. This episode showed Oliver that the right people were thinking along the right lines; if only they could be persuaded to work with each other.

By March, speculation on what Asquith would do was causing much apprehension within the opposition. 'Our party will lose', warned Lord Charles Beresford, 'if we allow Mr Asquith to go on as he is doing frivolling, humbugging and using the most dishonest methods'⁴⁹. However, the impression slowly grew that Asquith might not after all go so far in his suggestions; both Sanders and Bridgeman noted a hardening in the Prime Minister's attitude⁵⁰. On the 25th of February, Chamberlain noted that 'from secret information we gather that the present intention.. is to propose a very wide scheme of safeguards giving to Ulster

Home Rule within Home Rule⁵¹, and more tangible intelligence came on March 4th when Asquith's scheme was leaked to the lobby correspondent of The Daily News. It consisted of temporary exclusion, which amounted to four counties, based on county plebiscites⁵². An angry Chamberlain wrote to Oliver on the 6th: 'the Government have finally and deliberately shut the door on any federal solution.. If Asquith had acted on the hints thrown out by Lansdowne, Carson and myself and had confronted us with a definite proposal to cooperate in that solution, I think it might have been carried⁵³. If the leak was indeed Asquith's offer, then the outlook for a devolutionary compromise was grim. It appeared that Asquith was trying to place the Tories in a weak tactical position by drawing them into rejecting his compromise suggestions.

When his announcement came on March the 9th it was disappointing to federalists: temporary exclusion for six years for those counties which, following a plebiscite, demanded it; the rest of the bill remained intact. The limited nature of the offer, and Asquith's reluctance to elucidate details, quickly pushed the front benches apart once again. Carson dramatically flung the offer back at the Government (with words that even F.E.Smith felt went too far)⁵⁴, though he added that if permanent exclusion was inserted and county option altered to nine counties he would take it to the Ulster convention for consideration, thus retreating from Home Rule all round to simple exclusion. Bonar Law was more cautious, aware of the battle for public opinion in which Asquith was engaged. Hence, instead of outright rejection, he demanded more details about the plan and

a referendum on the proposals. From the Government side both Lloyd George and Churchill were outraged at the Tory response to the exclusion scheme. Churchill was particularly bitter, given all his pressure on Asquith inside cabinet, and lashed out at Bradford on the 14th in a speech which Lloyd George had encouraged him to make. If the opposition could only refuse any concession made, then 'let us go forward together and put these grave matters to the proof'⁵⁵. It was a speech full of the spleen for which he had rebuked Bonar Law, and one destined to haunt him over the next few weeks. It also bred acrimony on the other side, Chamberlain writing several days later that 'conciliation vanishes and the forces are once more drawn up in battle array'⁵⁶. The federal initiative was lost beneath the growing political bitterness. Yet there was a sense of inevitability beginning to surround all attempts at compromise; an "unbridgeable gulf" was increasingly coming into sharper focus. The Nationalists were not going to agree to the real exclusion of Ulster, while the Ulstermen would never accept anything less. As Sanders lamented three days after Asquith presented his proposals: 'the fact is neither the Nationalists nor the Ulstermen want to compromise.. the feeling in our party now is stronger against compromise than it was'⁵⁷.

III

Early 1914 saw the expansion and organisation of a militant section within the party. The secret meetings, finally admitted by Bonar Law on January the 15th, had led many on the Right to

fear that a compromise was being hatched. Asquith's statement of February 9th, announcing his suggestions, served to reinforce this mistrust. Some backbenchers thought that Bonar Law's and Carson's refusals to reply to him suggested collusion between the front-benches.⁵⁸. Less charitably, Lord Arran felt 'sure the pass had been sold'.⁵⁹ Such conjecture was enhanced by increased federal activity in the press, and among the Round Tablers and some of their leaders. Carson and Chamberlain both effected a softer tone after February the 9th, significant to the suggestive Tory benches. And these suspicions drew upon a deeper sense of mistrust of their leaders amongst the Right that, when events became critical, they would surrender. Crawford (the former Balcarres) sensed 'a feeling that our leaders will go too far',⁶⁰ and Lord Leconfield felt that 'we must not give way but I do not trust our leaders a yard and they will do so for certain, unless we can stop them'.⁶¹.

Suspicion as to what Asquith was about also provoked the Right into greater activity. The idea that he was simply vacillating, using delay in the hope of Ulster exploding or of the Unionists splitting apart was widely felt. Alternatively, he might be delaying with the intention of introducing an amending bill of limited scope at the last moment, so placing onto the Lords the decision (and thus the odium) of rejection or acceptance: civil war or peace.⁶². Only nerve and the refusal of all attempts at compromise would call Asquith's bluff and destroy the bill.

To avoid the Lords becoming once again the arena of Tory capitulation, from the beginning of January Diehards began to

organise themselves. 'Yes I think it worth while to tout our brother Peers', Lord Stanhope replied to suggestions from Willoughby de Broke; 'I think it is necessary to dot the i's and cross the t's as to the possible move of the Government in again trying to corner us'⁶³. He recommended Lord Crawford as one to rally the Peers to a diehard line. Throughout January, discreet soundings were taken as to the strength of numbers of those who would back them. Receiving a favourable response from various quarters, the four ringleaders of this new Diehard revolt-Stanhope, Ampthill, Arran and Willoughby de Broke- issued a "Letter to Peers" on February the 4th⁶⁴. The circular asked for support for their plan to move an amendment on the Address in the Lords, calling for an election. This represented a new procedure in the upper House, designed largely to advertise the intense feeling on the issue⁶⁵. It was also aimed to forewarn the Government that settlement in their House would only come after an appeal to the people. Yet the letter did more: it sought to galvanise the Lords against a compromise on the exclusion. 'It is hardly necessary to point out to your Lordship that to vote for the exclusion of Ulster from a Dublin Parliament is to accept the principle of Home Rule for Ireland.. It is impossible so to alter the present bill as to make it acceptable to all parties in Ireland as well as to the Unionist party as a whole. We submit that if Unionist Peers abandon the Union by passing a Home Rule bill before a general election is held it would be an act of betrayal'⁶⁶.

In response, Lansdowne gave notice on February 5th that a meeting of front-benchers had decided to move just such an Irish

amendment on the address⁶⁷: 'The same idea has occurred to our leaders', Selborne wrote to Willoughby de Broke⁶⁸. The same day Lansdowne sent a similarly curt letter: 'I should have thought you might have held your hand, say for twenty-four hours, until you had ascertained the intentions of the party leaders.. we should have avoided an appearance of disunion, which, at such a moment as this is surely to be regretted'⁶⁹. Thus when Long moved the opposition's amendment to the address in the Commons, Lansdowne moved one in the Lords. This pressure on the official Tory leadership in the Lords reflected several things. First, it was the beginning of a revived diehard campaign. Second, the aims of the movement showed an overlap of interest with Southern Unionists, who were growing in assertiveness early in 1914 and heavily represented in the Lords. Midleton, writing to Willoughby de Broke on the 7th, stressed such contact: 'I look as you do to a general election as the only solution'⁷⁰. This overlap came from a suspicion that the Ulstermen were fighting the cause of Ulster not the Union. 'The Ulster party will never agree to the paragraph in our whip explaining that to accept Ulster exclusion is also to accept the principle of Home Rule'⁷¹. Such a growing concentration of opinion in the Lords goes far to explain Lansdowne's consistent refusal to agree to the simple excision of Ulster as a compromise, and his refusal to accept responsibility for passing the bill as a part of a deal over exclusion.

The Tory Right was also active outside Parliament. The B.L.S.U.U. reputedly had by the start of 1914 over 400 agents nationwide and up to 10,000 men organised and prepared to

fight⁷². In February, according to an advert in The Morning Post it had 15,000 volunteers, drilled, armed and ready to fight in Ulster⁷³. Relatively speaking it was a small scale operation. Yet the network of agents were a useful channel of information and an important structure on which the Covenanter movement would build. It also gained sympathy at the very top of the party; Bonar Law met a delegation in January and extended clear support in his speech at Bristol on the 15th⁷⁴. Willoughby de Broke looked to expand it still further. On January 6th he wrote to Milner inviting him onto the League's council⁷⁵. Milner was already involved with the U.D.L., which brought him into regular contact with Long, its chairman, but he agreed to attend as an observer and immediately saw the potential for a big, nationwide movement.

By January such ideas were beginning seriously to occupy Milner. The plan was for a mass movement based on the signing of a British Covenant. Two days later he met Bonar Law 'in connection with the movement for the support of Ulster'⁷⁶, and by the 16th Amery was already writing to Bob Cecil, Chamberlain and Lord Crawford with plans for a British Covenant⁷⁷. Milner left for a holiday on January the 16th, but immediately upon his return in February met Long and Bonar Law. On the 5th of February he informed Sir Henry Wilson and Lord Roberts of the idea for a covenant, persuading the latter to involve himself⁷⁸. By the beginning of February, then, things were already moving. At a meeting of the U.D.L. on February 19th Milner was formally given their services and organisation to run the British Covenant.

The initial response to the idea of a covenant was mixed.

Crawford declined because he did not trust Amery's or Milner's judgement⁷⁹; Chamberlain saw little purpose to petitions, informing Amery that 'they count for little or nothing'⁸⁰. Bob Cecil refused, declaring that 'the English hate illegality' and that he himself had too many 'scruples' to sign such a document⁸¹. Even Selborne was far from favourable. Milner complained to Carson that it was hard to persuade many people to sign such a pledge; 'the thing must go on without them'⁸². Ian Malcolm of the U.D.L. noted a disturbing trend; 'territorial objections to signing.. are even more widespread than I thought among the officers.. I need hardly say they are all ready to be persuaded by a good argument'⁸³. The good argument came in the form of Lord Roberts, whom Milner targeted as friend of the soldiers. His signature to the appeal in the press on March the 3rd was designed to win over the doubts of the officer class. On the other hand, Bonar Law was more positive. His speech at Bristol had been an encouragement to the scheme; for Amery, it 'practically appeals to the Unionist party to strengthen the hands of its leaders'⁸⁴, and he told Bob Cecil that Bonar Law was even willing to give it his official blessing and the financial and organising help of Central Office⁸⁵. On the 17th of January, Bonar Law argued to Lansdowne that such a development if 'started by the right people and on the right scale... would be decisive'⁸⁶; but he added, showing his acute sensitivity to public opinion, that 'it would be worse than useless unless it received an overwhelming response'⁸⁷. Lansdowne remained distinctly lukewarm. 'I agree with you in thinking that such a movement could only succeed if started by the right people.. and

I am inclined to add at the right moment -I do not think the right moment has arrived yet⁸⁸.

Nevertheless, it was launched on March the 3rd in the press, calling upon young men to sign a declaration against Home Rule and their willingness to use 'any action which may be effective to prevent it being put into operation'⁸⁹. The Covenant was intended by Milner to 'frighten the Government and its supporters' in order, as he told Oliver, 'to make them realise that persistence in their present policy.. would meet with inflexible resistance'⁹⁰. It was also 'bound to be a factor in the kings judgement of the situation', helping to move him towards resisting the bill if it was presented to him- though little thus far had so influenced him⁹¹. 'Lastly they will help to keep Ulster confident and steady and prevent the danger of precipitate action', revealing an anxiety that Ulster could still break out into sporadic violence and spoil her case⁹².

Gauging its success in raising signatories is difficult. There is little evidence about numbers, and what there is is highly subjective. Walter Long, in his Memories, suggests a figure of two million signatories by July, but this seems a wildly exaggerated claim by the person who had overall charge of collecting signatories⁹³. Milner informed Selborne that the movement was 'assuming enormous proportions' and 'the response to our appeal has been so strong that I think it only needs a little more support to become decisive'⁹⁴; yet in the same letter he complained of an 'absence of certain leading names'⁹⁵. The May edition of The Covenanter referred to 'an enormous number who are prepared to make real sacrifices'⁹⁶; yet the day before,

Milner complained to Oliver about 'those blessed Unionists what a crowd and the Times and everybody and everything have gone absolutely limp'.⁹⁷

More ambitious was Milner's project of organising a mass movement to defend the Union. The signing of the covenant was to be the stepping stone to an organisation 'analogous to the signing of the Ulster Covenant which was the first step in the organisation of Ulster for resistance'.⁹⁸ Milner hoped to build on the framework established by the B.L.S.U.U., but to extend and centralise its organisation under him, and work more closely with the U.D.L.⁹⁹. His plan was to 'strengthen and transform' the British League's committee 'by the accession of a number of influential people'.¹⁰⁰ This meant, in addition to F.E.Smith, Peto, McNeill and Bedford, who were already members of the committee, the incorporation of himself, Long, Hugh Cecil, Amery, Lord Lovat, and Mark Sykes and, most importantly, Lord Roberts as president. Given this roll-call, it is hard not to sense that Milner was drawing around him the old band of 1911, providing them with a degree of unity and a power-base to influence the party leadership. 'I want the stalwarts', he told Selborne, 'to begin to have some sort of rudimentary organisation, not to leave everything to the last moment':¹⁰¹ they would not be caught napping as in July 1911. There was also an overlap with the National Service League and strong contacts with the Army, not only through Roberts but also Sir Charles Hunter, a member of the executive and his go-between at the War Office, and Sir Henry Wilson.

On April the 3rd, a month after the Covenant had appeared,

the League of British Covenanters was finally launched at a meeting in Caxton hall. The movement was to be a propaganda vehicle, and it organised the very next day the huge demonstration at Hyde Park where members of the shadow cabinet spoke to an estimated crowd of nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ a million. It was active in by-elections, particularly at Ipswich where the Liberal was ousted by a Unionist at the end of May. The organisation was also designed to raise money, of which, it appears, the Ulstermen were running increasingly short. Given its connections the League was able to appeal to society. On February the 25th a huge list of possible contributors was drawn up¹⁰²; a balance sheet in the Milner papers (unsigned) reads like a seating plan at a society ball: £30,000 from Astor, £25,000 from Sam McCaughly, £10,000 from Lords Rothschild, Bedford and Iveagh, £5,000 from Lord Portland and a mere £4,500 from E.Cassell¹⁰³. A great deal of money was therefore flowing from society and various Tory sources into Ulster, via the Covenanter movement, the U.D.L. and the B.L.S.U.U.

Behind the financial and propaganda role lay a far more sinister function for the movement: the raising of a military force to be used to aid Ulster if an attempt were made to coerce her. The movement might even have been planning to export civil war to mainland Britain should hostilities in Ulster occur, though this would ensue in any case if troops were shipped to the province. A memorandum in the Milner papers contains some highly provocative suggestions on the role of such a movement: 'In the last resort the same organisation which has been created for the purpose of demonstration could be used to furnish a really

effective resistance to the action of the Government.. (and).. an organised and immediately successful national uprising¹⁰⁴. Milner, of course, like Willoughby de Broke before him, was quick to point out that 'the main object of the whole movement is to avert civil war if it can possibly be averted'¹⁰⁵.

IV

Bonar Law greeted the New Year with a mixture of satisfaction and growing unease. Tactically, the situation held some advantages. His negotiations with Asquith had revealed that real exclusion was beyond Asquith's scope. Permanent six-county exclusion was the absolute minimum concession to the Ulstermen, yet the Nationalists it seemed would never accept this. Bonar Law also believed that the Prime Minister would never coerce Ulster under a Dublin Parliament; as he pointed out to Du Pre the South Bucks. Tory candidate: 'they are hesitating between the dread of armed resistance and the fear of losing the Irish vote'¹⁰⁶. If both assumptions were true, then there was a very good chance that Asquith would opt for an election, although he would not move easily to this alternative. Against this optimism stood the rumblings of the Right and the Southern Unionists. And more worrying, the fear of what Asquith might be doing to extricate his Government from its difficulties. He conveyed these worries to Balfour on January the 7th: 'What probably he has already made up his mind is to happen is that at the right time they will make public some proposals, such as those suggested to Carson, which they think will improve their position in G.B. by giving the

impression that under such an arrangement Ulster will have no real grievance and then they will have an election¹⁰⁷. What he feared was a "dummy" compromise offer by Asquith, unacceptable to Unionists but likely to buy off party and public hostility sufficiently to go to an election.

It would be a shrewd move. Bonar Law could not accept the compromise, since it would be unsatisfactory to Ulster, would shatter party unity and possibly overturn him. But to reject it would brand the Tories as extremist, undermine public sympathy and render their support for Ulster's continued resistance unpopular: 'He (Asquith) wants to advertise his own reasonableness and the bigotry of the Unionist party in general and Ulster in particular'¹⁰⁸. The move played upon a common perception that the public were bored by Ireland, and that anything which appeared reasonable and likely to remove the issue would attract support. It also suggested to Bonar Law a more malign tactic, one he explained to his audience at Bristol. 'The Government.. are looking forward to the possibility of the seething passions of Ulster boiling over, of their doing something which will put them in the wrong and that then they may be able without alienating the sympathy of this country, to put them down by force'¹⁰⁹. An inadequate compromise formula might be the spark to set Belfast's fragile sectarian tempers ablaze.

Events early in January seemed to support these fears. The Times editorial of January the 27th noticed that 'the government are assiduously disseminating impressions which are intended to depict their own attitude in a singularly favourable light'¹¹⁰. And two days later: 'they hint, nod and whisper that they alone

are righteous.. The way is being deftly prepared¹¹¹. Balfour, Selborne, Lansdowne and Bob Cecil all sensed that Asquith was up to some such trick.

To meet this threat Bonar Law sought to squash the plan in advance, before any scheme was introduced publicly, by a blunt statement of the probable consequences. In his tough speech at Bristol (clearly intended for Asquith) he declared that whilst dummy compromise schemes would improve the Prime Minister's tactical position, he would still be left with the reality of Ulster, supported by the Tory party, threatening civil war¹¹². This might well strengthen Asquith's immediate political situation, but only at the expense of the collapse of everything in the future. The struggle went well beyond mere Parliamentary tactics. 'We shall not be beaten in that kind of game for this reason that we shall play no game.. In my belief we are drifting rapidly to civil war which will shatter to its foundation the whole fabric of our National existence'¹¹³. To Asquith he gave a blunt warning, 'we must now assume that it is their present intention to carry out their policy to the bitter end and on that assumption it becomes our duty.. by every means in our power to prevent them from committing what.. we believe would be a great crime'¹¹⁴. The speech rejuvenated his image on the Right. Amery interpreted it as 'marching orders' for the party¹¹⁵; it provided the impetus for the British Covenant and its para-military arm the League; and Willoughby de Broke thought it 'was the best, the very best you have ever made'¹¹⁶. At the same time it was a warning to moderates, like Chamberlain, who sought a compromise with the Government; and any hopes that

Asquith might have had of cooperation with the Tory leader were quickly dashed. Its extremism sits alongside his 1912 Blenheim speech, and was similarly justified by the absolute necessity of holding an election. Government supporters ignored this constitutional safeguard and construed it instead as an assault on Parliamentary government. This was no bad thing, as Bonar Law realised, since it hardened Liberal "forward" elements and Nationalists against giving concessions: after such threats, concession would appear as surrender to aggression. 'A more strident note finds an echo', lessening Asquith's ability to secure any form of compromise package, let alone one which public opinion would see as reasonable¹¹⁷.

And yet Bonar Law was not satisfied solely with tough speaking. He had been doing that since 1912, without obvious success. He now came to believe that Asquith's "expected" tactics could only be countered by amending the Army Annual Act. This was no impulsive response, plucked from the pages of The Observer. He had suggested such a course in 1911 in a letter to The Times, during the Parliament bill struggle¹¹⁸. His allusion at Bristol to 'every means in our power' indicates that he was already, by the beginning of January, thinking seriously of such ideas¹¹⁹. On the 30th he more formally advocated it to Lansdowne and Balfour¹²⁰.

This decision has been seen by most historians as a desperate step, one that stood to lose the Tories public support and provide the Government with just the sort of diversionary issue they so desired. These considerations were outweighed, for Bonar Law, by the prospect of preventing Asquith from forcing an

election on his own compromise proposals. He explained his thinking to Lansdowne: 'The Government will have an election selected at their own time, after they have made in the most elaborate way the proposals for the protection of Ulster which were suggested to Carson. Such an election would seem to me to be as bad for us as anything could be under present circumstances, for I am afraid that a great many people would think that these proposals were so reasonable that Ulster would not be justified in resisting and that it would settle the Irish Question'¹²¹. The party therefore had a choice: 'an election more or less forced by us on what we will try to represent as the plain issue; shall the army be used to coerce Ulster without the consent of the electors or on proposals for Home Rule which to moderate men will not appear unreasonable'¹²². It was not merely a method of forcing an election, but also a means of fighting that election on a basis favourable to the Tories. His decision over the army act was dictated by the need for public observance of constitutional limits. 'Here is a method', he told Craik, 'which is strictly constitutional, for nothing is clearer than that the method in which the army is maintained has been adhered to for the express purpose of putting a check on the executive government and preventing it from using their army against the will of the people'¹²³.

Many in his own party increasingly doubted that these subtleties would sway the ordinary voter; after February the 5th, resistance to his plan increased. But no immediate action was taken. In fact he might well have welcomed a debate on the scheme, given his technique (used during the food tax crisis and

over the King's veto), of standing back to allow a clear party line to materialise.

Asquith's intimations of February the 10th, that he would shortly bring forward suggestions, confirmed what Bonar Law had feared. The announcement raised hopes of a compromise. Many Tories looked to a satisfactory settlement between the parties; large sections of the press were hopeful for a solution; and the King pressed both sides to look for a middle way. Despite his private intentions over the army act, Bonar law could not afford to alienate this opinion or those in the party who sought a settlement, such as Chamberlain, Selborne, Lansdowne and, more hesitantly, Carson and Smith. He was forced, as in the autumn, to appear reasonable and conciliatory. Replying to Asquith in the Commons on the 10th, he reiterated his demand for an election and warned against dummy compromise plans; he also confirmed that exclusion was the only way of avoiding civil war. In fact, so conciliatory was he that some in his party thought that he had concocted a secret deal with the Prime Minister¹²⁴. Thus, through February and early March Bonar Law was following a dual tactical line. In public he presented a reasonable face, willing to seek a realistic settlement. In private there was a willingness to amend the army act, and to force an election not on Asquith's compromise formula but on the issue of the coercion of Ulster.

It was little surprise to Bonar Law that when Asquith finally announced his scheme in the Commons, the terms were, as Dicey argued, 'from his merely party point of view clever. He apparently has squared the Nationalists. He has a fair chance of

dividing the Unionists.¹²⁵ Bonar Law could not reject them outright through fear of losing public and Tory party support. Some might welcome it as a basis for negotiation, as Dicey implied; the moderates were a particular worry in this respect, but so too were the Ulstermen, who, feeling the vulnerability of their position, might well welcome it as a first step. There was also the problem of the Liberal moderates. Rebuff to Asquith's apparent hand of friendship would send them firmly back into his fold, whereas a more conciliatory reception could draw them out of hiding and annoy the radicals and Nationalists enough to undermine the Government's stability. On the other hand county opt-out for six years would be repugnant to the majority of the party, and would split it if accepted. The dilemma Bonar Law faced was the same as in the autumn: how to defeat a compromise offer whilst preserving a public face of reasonableness, and not alienating those Tories keen on a compromise.

In reply to Asquith, he ridiculed the time limit on the scheme but did not rule out exclusion as a solution, knowing full well that real exclusion was an obstacle, not a basis for settlement. He then demanded that Asquith flesh out the details of his plan. This line of attack had two advantages. First, it would reveal the hollowness of the proposals behind Asquith's hyperbole, or, by clarifying details, destabilise the Government coalition: either by showing Liberal doubters that there was little real concession to Ulster or revealing to the Nationalists that they were conceding more than was acceptable. Asquith refused to be drawn on the details. But this enabled Bonar Law to depict him as unreasonable and insincere in his attempt to

reach a settlement. To advertise this, they called for a censure motion on the 19th, where Bonar Law declared his willingness to stand by the verdict of the people, challenging Asquith to put his proposals to a referendum. Inevitably, Asquith refused, reinforcing Bonar Law's populist credentials.

It was a shrewd counter-attack by Bonar Law, preserving public sympathy and party unity yet blocking the advance of the concessions. As Asquith refused all his requests, so he could safely become more vigorous and outspoken: his attack on the 17th was especially bitter. We can also detect Bonar Law laying the groundwork for amending the army act, particularly in his call for a referendum. He wanted public opinion to focus on the basic Tory position that there must be an appeal to the people, and in so doing ignore the method used to secure it. This suggests that despite his success in repulsing the March the 9th compromise, Bonar Law was still committed to amending the act. However, opinion on this within the leadership had begun to change. The shadow cabinet on March the 12th took a more forceful line against the manoeuvre¹²⁶. By the 14th Craik told Bonar Law that 'the rumours are creating disquietude amongst many and I confess I share it.. Mutiny and rebellion may at times be justified.. but if we begin to impose limitations on discipline by law where are we to end'¹²⁷. Bonar Law himself recognised that there was much resistance to plan; 'I think there is a sufficient amount of that feeling at the present to make it impossible to do it'¹²⁸. By the time of the Curragh mutiny, with the force of party opinion against it, he recognised that the plan was no longer practical politics.

ENDNOTES CHAPTER 7.

- 1.. The Times January 15th 1913: Curzon at the Free Trade Hall
- 2.. Parl Debates vol XLIX col 933 March 9th 1914
- 3.. O.P. 7726/87 Spender to Oliver January 6th 1914 (11-12)
- 4.. O.P. 7726/87 Garvin to Oliver December 31st 1913 (243-4)
- 5.. O.P. 7726/87 Chamberlain to Oliver January 24th 1914 (42)
- 6.. Steel-Maitland Papers: 154/5/5 Oliver to Steel-Maitland October 15th 1911
- 7.. Williamson The Modernisation... pg 73
- 8.. A.Gollin The Observer... pg 416
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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Curragh mutiny, with its subsequent claims and counter-claims, had a radicalising effect on the whole situation, pushing the parties further apart and injecting a great deal of bitterness into politics. With the gun-running exploits of the Ulstermen coming just a month later, events appeared to be escalating out of the control of the politicians at Westminster. In this tense atmosphere a demoralised Asquith sought to impose a settlement on the political parties by introducing an amending bill to be passed alongside the Home Rule bill. The amending bill was introduced into the House of Lords, as required by the Parliament Act, on June 23rd. The fact that proposals were the same as those of March 9th, lent a certain inevitability to the Lords' repudiation of them; but instead of outright rejection, they amended the amending bill permanently to exclude of all nine Ulster counties, terms which they knew were well beyond what Asquith or the Nationalists would ever agree. In a last desperate effort to avert the impasse, with the mauled amending bill scheduled to re-enter the Commons for consideration on July the 20th (presumably to be rejected by the Government and its supporters) Asquith, under pressure from the King, agreed to meet the other political leaders. The Buckingham Palace conference of July 21st to the 24th brought together Asquith, Lloyd George, Bonar Law, Lansdowne, Redmond, Dillon, Carson and Craig for a last-ditch effort. But it never had a chance of success; positions by this eleventh hour were well dug in: Nationalists

had the unmolested bill almost in port, and many Unionists were convinced that Asquith would retreat to an election when the crunch came. The vast majority of politicians were bewildered and dumbfounded, perhaps fatalistically resigned to civil war in Ireland. But when war came it was, to everyone's surprise, European and not civil. The Great War broke out to the accompaniment of a huge sigh of relief from all political quarters. The unexpected cabinet unity on entering the war on August the 3rd represents above all this collective relief that a way out of the quandary had after all been found.

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The party leaderships were already drifting apart before news of the Curragh mutiny, which broke in London on March the 20th, injected renewed bitterness into politics. These events shocked those who sought a compromise. Curtis was so annoyed at Churchill that he threatened to sign the British Covenant, then being organised¹. Ironically, however, it was as a consequence of the Curragh mutiny that another last surge of federal opinion began to emerge. Events worked to scare the Round Tablers into re-doubling their efforts. On March the 23rd Craik, Curtis and Grigg wrote a 'biggish document damning both parties and saying that it is time to quit the present mess and start making a new one of the Constitution'². On April 3rd and 4th Grigg and Curtis were invited onto The Enchantress to discuss their proposals with the First Lord : a plan for six- county exclusion, to last until Parliament decided otherwise, and the striking of the Customs and Post office clauses from the bill. Then, an all-Irish assembly

to be convened 'to consider the terms on which Ireland might be constituted a single self-governing unit in a scheme of devolution embracing the whole U.K.'³. In essence, it was a form of exclusion pending federation. Grigg and Curtis, following the meeting with Churchill, posted copies of their scheme to other leaders and to Bonham-Carter, Asquith's private secretary. These efforts were reflected in a renewal of relations between the front benches. On April the 1st Sanders noted that 'everyone is talking again about conciliation'⁴. Less graciously, Dicey sensed that 'the air is full of cant about compromise'⁵. On April the 2nd, Smith (who had been uncharacteristically quiet for the last few months) and Churchill drafted an appeal to M.P.s suggesting that 'a solution of a federal character for the U.K. offers the best prospect of a settlement'⁶. Aware of the plan by Grigg and Curtis, they were trying to re-create a favourable political atmosphere, if not to show their leaders the extent of federal sympathy which existed in the House. The appeal had the support of 78 Liberals, including Lloyd George, and 56 Unionists, including Chamberlain who saw here the seeds of a renewed agitation. 'There is a growing feeling of sympathy with this idea (federalism) in our party and among the Liberals, say something like eighty men on each side of the House who openly avow their wish for it besides many who would accept it or any other course advised by their leaders and there is a large body of opinion outside Parliament which is increasingly favourable to it'⁷.

Chamberlain sent Carson a copy of the Grigg/Curtis memorandum. 'They have suggestions to make which are worth consideration at any rate and on some points.. your opinion would be decisive'⁸. Carson also came under pressure from Selborne,

who had played a role in devising the plan. 'I believe you and I think much alike on the question of devolution'; and he reassured Carson that there 'really would be very little difficulty in setting the proper division of functions between a Parliament for the U.K. and an English Parliament or council'⁹. Carson reacted positively to these ideas and dining soon after with Selborne, he assured him that if such ideas were brought forward he 'would bring them before his friends'¹⁰. Carson also sent the plan on to Bonar Law, and recommended that he meet Grigg, Brand and Curtis¹¹. Thus by the middle of April, opinion within the Tory leadership seemed once again to be moving in a constructive direction. Even Walter Long advised against a censure vote for the end of April, perhaps keen not to fuel partisanship at a moment when tentative moves were in progress. Not all the Tory leaders were in favour, as Chamberlain pointed out: 'Balfour, Law, Lansdowne and Curzon all dislike it in varying degrees'¹². We can speculate that Lansdowne's dislike was of a smaller degree: he had preferred a devolutionary, watered-down version of Home Rule to federalism.

The initiative received an added, if surprising, boost towards the end of April from the gun-running episode in Ulster. It was peculiarly ill-timed, occurring just days before a censure motion against the Government on April 28th and 29th. Nonetheless the events at Larne focused minds on the realities of the situation; 'It has given an immense momentum to the pacifists', wrote Sir Almeric Fitzroy¹³, and Chamberlain noted hopefully that 'once again the more responsible people seem overwhelmed by the imminence and the greatness of the danger which confronts us'¹⁴. Such pressure it was hoped might move Asquith to alter

his terms. It also helped to balance the moral indignation on both sides; and by drawing the sting from the opposition's censure motion, it took 'all the edge off the attempt to prove the existence of the plot', so providing the opportunity for conciliatory overtures¹⁵. Knowing that Chamberlain was to move the censure, Oliver urged him to build bridges rather than to rake over the past: 'It is one of those occasions on which the life of the country.. is literally hanging in the balance'¹⁶. The next day he openly denied that it was a plot, hoping that Chamberlain would, if not follow suit, at least be measured and limited in his criticism¹⁷.

It was however not Chamberlain, but Churchill, who broke ground. Speaking during the censure debate, he asked directly whether Carson would be willing to accept a federal solution: 'Winston has taken the first step towards re-opening the paths of peace'¹⁸. Carson would respond favourably if six Ulster counties were excluded, as (he already knew) had been proposed in the Grigg/Curtis plan. Sanders felt that Carson 'went very far towards conciliation', and for Chamberlain it 'was hardly less remarkable. Its frankness and its obvious sincerity made a great appeal to the House'¹⁹. That same evening Chamberlain spoke at Wolverhampton, where he gave strong encouragement to a federal solution²⁰. There was much truth in Chamberlain's observation that 'there is now in all quarters an impression that a settlement must somehow be made'²¹; the forces for compromise were once again in the ascendant. Pressure now mounted on Asquith and Bonar Law. As a consequence, on May 5th a meeting took place between Asquith, Bonar Law and Carson at Edwin Montagu's house.

Yet Chamberlain feared, as he had before Asquith's

announcement of March the 9th, that the present sympathy for a constructive settlement would be diverted into 'some form of compromise (exclusion) which we shall be unable effectively to resist and which will be hardly less bad than the original bill'²². And he despaired that although 'there is much loose talk of federalism, nobody attempts to concentrate opinion on the changes which must be made in the Home Rule bill'²³. This threat of exclusion was greater by April. The Curragh mutiny had rendered the coercion of Ulster impossible, and without this alternative, exclusion seemed an inevitable consequence. A reference by Chamberlain hints at a change in Carson's tone, with the latter becoming more attracted to simple exclusion. 'He (Carson) feels.. that we have been on the very brink of civil war and there is no time to be lost if the danger is to be averted. He is perhaps not less impressed with the impossibility.. of simply reverting to the old Unionist policy in the South and West, and, though opinions differ.. as to what would be the results in Nationalist Ireland of the rejection of the bill at this stage, he himself takes a very gloomy view of the consequences'²⁴. Such nuances might explain Midleton's renewed concern. Writing on behalf of Southern Unionists, he rejected the idea of simple exclusion, and informed Bonar Law that he and Lord Barrymore had established a committee of about 30 Peers to protect their interests²⁵; he also sent a letter to The Times on April 15th headed "The Duty of Unionists"²⁶. Lansdowne feared that Southern Unionism might be on the march, and even that another Diehard campaign was beginning²⁷.

At the shadow cabinet convened on the 5th of May, just before Bonar Law was to meet Asquith, Chamberlain and Lansdowne

raised these fears about 'acceptance of the bill as a condition of the exclusion of Ulster'²⁸. Carson retorted that he could never accept the rest of the bill even if Ulster was excluded. But seemed willing to concede the inevitability of the rest of it passing under the Parliament Act. Lansdowne pressed instead for 'some scheme of devolution', for a settlement, to prevent the automatic passage of the bill under the Parliament Act, so saving the Unionists of the South and West²⁹. Echoing him, Chamberlain urged both Bonar Law and Carson to come out, at the meeting, for the exclusion of Ulster and cooperation in a federal recasting the bill. 'I ask whether it would not be right for Law and Carson to play what I call the "great game" and to make that suggestion themselves to Asquith'³⁰. Bonar Law and Carson refused to consider this option. Carson in particular had shifted from his earlier devolutionary sympathies; much difference of opinion therefore existed within the Tory leadership before the meeting.

In the end, the talks were a damp squib. Though inspired by growing federal support, the meeting brought together three who were essentially opposed to federalism. Only Carson claimed to sympathise, and that was more a product of tactics than of principle: 'Asquith by temperament is unfitted for agreement. Equally so is Bonar Law. And obviously each makes the other worse the more they come into contact'³¹. There was therefore little chance of constructing a federal solution and the meeting limited itself to discussion of Ulster exclusion. Yet here, too, as Bonar Law and Carson realised, there was little chance of agreement: Asquith was prevented from going any distance on that basis by the Nationalists. As Bonar Law told Henry Lygon before the meeting, 'It does not seem to me probable that the Nationalists

will agree to the real exclusion of Ulster'.³² With Asquith intransigent and Bonar Law and Carson holding firm to exclusion, the initiative collapsed. Little future prospect for the federalist cause could be seen at this stage, although there was an epilogue in the shape of the Buckingham Palace conference of July 21st to the 24th. But this did not originate from the federal movement, and busied itself with finding a makeshift formula for exclusion in which few of the participants had any faith. The talks of early May therefore represented the end of an extended attempt to reach an agreed settlement of the Irish and constitutional questions along federal lines, begun in 1910.

We can speculate on the failure of the federal panacea. Differences over what federalism actually meant separated all its sympathisers. Over the last few months Chamberlain and Lansdowne had spoken with dissimilar voices. If the two had been closer in their aims, perhaps Bonar Law might have been forced to play what Chamberlain called 'the great game'. This, of course, relates to another fundamental failing: the inability to convince either of the two leaders. Both Asquith and Bonar Law remained unconvinced by federalism. Their scepticism was a product of tactical considerations; both thought that they could gain more by not moving towards a federal solution. Federalism was also weakened, particularly during 1914, by the increasing drift to the Right by sections in the party under the stimulus of the Curragh mutiny, the prevarication of Asquith, and gun-running into Ulster. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this was the attitude of Milner and Amery, both to be counted amongst the keen enthusiasts of federation for the U.K. By 1914 they saw federalism as a dead end, and were committed instead to

organising the British Covenant. At the root of the problem, however, was the incompatibility of Ulstermen and Nationalists. A federal settlement would therefore have to come at the expense of one or both of these groups, most likely in the form of party cooperation or even coalition. Yet too little trust to effect this existed between the front benches, despite the varied contacts and speculations.

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The Curragh episode at the end of March, and then the later gunrunning into Ulster had a galvanising effect on the Right. In particular the episode added a sharpness to the League of British Covenanters' activities, and gave real force to their resolutions to protect Ulster. Those who had been faint-hearted in February now saw ample reason to lend support, if not to sign the Covenant. Selborne became more involved, accompanying Milner on a tour of various northern cities. Demonstrations and speaking tours attracted the likes of Bob Cecil, Worthington-Evans, Bridgeman, James Campbell, Ormsby-Gore, Sir William Bull and Sir Harry Samuel³³. Constituencies badgered the League for literature, speakers and finance. And all the while, behind-the-scenes preparations to aid Ulster continued: code-names were established³⁴, and questions of food supply and fodder for animals for Ulster, financial and currency arrangements and the timing for the establishment of the Provisional government were all subjects debated by the committee³⁵.

Two points, however, need emphasising. First, the "playing at soldiers" by martial elements in the Tory party was an

effective outlet for their frustrated energies and exclusion from office for nearly ten years. Organisation meant that those energies were now channelled and controlled. Second, a problem of definition (or what Gollin neatly describes as 'the moral frontier') vexed all the various groups and individuals on the Right³⁶: over what would they fight or offer practical resistance? Was it a fight for the Union in toto or just a fight for Ulster? If Ulster was excluded on a basis accepted by the Ulstermen, would they resist Home Rule for the rest of Ireland by force or by passive means? These questions were never satisfactorily answered, largely because there was little agreement across the broad spectrum of the Right; and with the outbreak of war, they never had to answer them. Some, such as Willoughby de Broke, Milner, Bedford, Stanhope, Arran and other Southern Unionists, undoubtedly wanted to fight for the whole Union. With others, including Bonar Law and Carson, Smith, Hugh Cecil, Selborne, Amery and Middleton - all supporters of the League and all politicians rather than ideologues - would not fight over the rest of Ireland if Ulster was saved. They would, instead, promise repeal, or drastic reform when the party came in, and hide behind the argument that exclusion would wreck the entire bill. These basic divisions suggest that the extreme Right was more fragile and splintered than the image they projected through the press, and were a group of individuals more reliant on bluff than a united movement of devoted volunteers.

Another focus for right wing interest was the Army. The question of relations with the Army had arisen at several points during the struggle; Tory speakers - Bonar Law, Carson, Smith and Hugh Cecil in particular - had posed the question of

whether troops would obey orders if commanded to act against Ulster. However, the Army was an ambivalent card for Unionists to pursue; it exposed them to the cry of "tampering", which many on the Radical and Labour benches were only too keen to exploit. It also upset the ingrained sensitivities of many Tories, what Bonar Law described to Craik as 'the instinctive feeling that nothing ought to be done to bring the Army into party politics'³⁷. In spite of such dangers, connections between the Tory leadership and the Army, if somewhat shadowy, grew ever closer during 1913. Bonar Law, Carson, Milner and Amery were in regular touch with Lord Roberts and Sir Henry Wilson, D.M.O. at the War Office. Through Roberts and Colonel Hickman, General Richardson had been recruited to lead the U.V.F. Roberts was president of the N.S.L. and so in close touch with Milner and others, and along with Admiral Seymour, a signatory to the covenant. The King, who regularly met and spoke with officers, had full knowledge of Tory opinions concerning the army. Thus many channels existed down which information concerning army affairs could flow (and vice versa), and the anxieties of officers and men relayed to the very highest political levels.

With the growing suspicion, by January 1914, of Asquith's intentions, interest revived in what role the army might play in events. The role in question was amending the Army Annual Act when it came before the Lords, which was to be not later than May 1st. This possibility had first circulated in 1911 from Garvin and Goulding³⁸; it had resurfaced in June 1913 and again in October, when Hugh Cecil had advocated its use, and by 1914 it arose yet again, as a method of forcing an

immediate dissolution. On the 30th Bonar Law wrote to Lansdowne and Balfour in support: 'it is indeed a very serious step; but after all it is not so serious as allowing the Government to drift into a position where force is used in Ulster'; he receiving grudging agreement from both³⁹. On February 2nd he claimed the (reluctant) backing of Curzon; 'the three Cecils, Selborne, Austen Chamberlain and Carson' were, he told Lansdowne, in favour⁴⁰. He also asked Finlay to prepare a memorandum on the feasibility of such a tactic⁴¹. Nor was he unsuccessful in moving the shadow cabinet towards it. At the meeting, Long was in general agreement, though concerned at when and how it was to be introduced; and Finlay's memo supported it provided that great care was taken in its wording. The scheme was then accepted in principle by the shadow cabinet, on February 5th, although the doubters, led by Curzon, Derby and possibly Lansdowne, managed to avoid an immediate decision by establishing a small committee of lawyers (Cave, Cecil, Carson, Finlay and Halsbury) 'to go into the whole subject and after they have done we shall have another meeting and decide upon our action'⁴².

The plan drew support from the Right of the party; Milner saw it as a practical measure, as did Smith, Garvin, Amery and members of the B.L.S.U.U. The amendment was a means of securing an immediate election, something the Right had long been pressing for as a way of avoiding any type of compromise. The Tory right was determined to regain power, and were willing, by 1914, to use any instrument to achieve it. Already some were again talking of the King refusing his assent to the bill. Amending the army bill was a method to be tried before

the more dangerous one of a royal veto.

Most historians have considered it a dangerous manoeuvre. But a careful look at what was being contemplated suggests that it was not such a wild and hazardous course. It was, after all, a plan to "amend" the Act, not to repeal it, and to amend it specifically to prevent the army coercing Ulster. It was not intended to paralyse the entire British Army, and the change allowed for the absolute freedom to respond to any foreign threat. The plan might have restored army morale, given the anxiety felt within all ranks, particularly the officer corps, about their possible role in Ireland. 'It seems to me', Bonar Law informed Craik, 'that this is the best and perhaps the only chance of saving the Army'⁴³. And what was the purpose of the Act in the first place? Chamberlain, a surprising advocate of this course, neatly explained his actions according to its primary purpose: 'the Army Act is an annual bill which was voted originally.. as an annual bill in order that Parliament might have the opportunity of preventing the crown or executive of the day using the standing army to the injury of the liberties of the subject. As a matter of constitutional law.. no case could be clearer than ours'⁴⁴.

Of course, it was perceptions which counted and, as the rumour of what was being considered spread, so resistance to the plan mounted. Strachey of The Spectator rallied against it, spurred on by Curzon who, as in 1911, saw himself as the guardian of moderate Toryism. In this, according to Sanders, they drew much support from the backbenches⁴⁵. And other editors, notably Croal of The Scotsman and Robinson of The Times, were also not in sympathy with amendment. Oliver

pleaded with Milner and Chamberlain to drop the scheme⁴⁶, as did Dicey: 'I am certain that the English public will never tolerate the dictation of the army. I think the public are in this right'⁴⁷. Rumours were picked up by the Liberal press and used to good effect; Spender, writing to Oliver, assured him that 'the threats of violent action by your Diehards are heartily welcomed by those who call themselves "fighting politicians" on our side and that they see many advantages in another election forced by the House of Lords'⁴⁸. By the start of March such anxieties were widespread, and were reflected at the shadow cabinet meeting of the 12th. Here, Curzon, Derby, Selborne, Acland-Hood, Midleton and Devonshire all expressed dissent, and Carson some concern⁴⁹; opinion was clearly beginning to turn. Yet Bonar Law remained determined to keep the option open, and again carried the day: 'Decision: provisionally to agree to amendment of army act but to leave details and decision as to moment of acting to Lansdowne and B.L. (This I fancy was against the general desire of those present)'⁵⁰.

More serious for Bonar Law was the news that Ian Malcolm had told Robinson that if the party touched the army act, 'he (Malcolm) would leave the Unionist party'⁵¹. Such action would have gravely damaged the Unionist cause, which perhaps explains why Carson became less convinced, writing to Milner on the 18th, expressing doubts that the party would tolerate⁵². In the end, the decision was overtaken by events at the Curragh, which at a stroke rendered useless any plans the Government might have had to use the army in Ulster. 'It has had a magical effect', Colonel Repington wrote to Lady

Craigavon, 'for whereas a good part of the army might have marched before, I do not believe that wild horses will drag the army into Ulster now. The feeling against the Government is intense in the army'⁵³. It gave a wonderful propaganda weapon with which to attack the Government, but it brought one major disadvantage for Bonar Law: it removed a means of forcing an election.

The so-called Ulster plot or Curragh mutiny has had many historians. Jalland has effectively dealt with the Liberal side, Beckett with actions within the army and Stewart with the responses in Ulster itself⁵⁴. Less attention has been focused on the role of the Tory party, particularly in provoking or encouraging the actions of Brigadier-General Gough, who on March the 20th, along with 53 of his officers, refused to reinforce positions in Ulster.

The Government's action to secure depots in March 1914 was not a surprise to Unionists. As an obvious target for the Ulstermen whenever they set up their Provisional Government, their reinforcement was to have been expected. Since the beginning of the year troop movements had received wide coverage in the press; on January 3rd The Times noted detachments of the 1st Dorsets moving into Carrickfergus Castle, on the outskirts of Belfast, which provoked 'much comment in Belfast'⁵⁵. Intelligence from B.L.S.U.U. agents during February detailed unusual army manoeuvrings; Hugh Ridgeway wrote to Milner on the 2nd: 'reports are reaching this office from honorary agents to the effect that the Government is beginning to take steps as regards the Ulster movement'. He confirmed that notices had been sent out and

that 'military concentration is to take place at Glasgow'⁵⁶. Churchill's belligerent speech at Bradford indicated that something might be afoot. Craig certainly thought so, returning immediately to Ulster⁵⁷, and Milner's contacts, Sir Henry Wilson, Lord Roberts and Sir Charles Hunter always passed any relevant information on. By the middle of March rumours were circulating about the imminent arrest of Carson and Craig, and about the army being sent to Ulster; sufficient for Carson to declare in the Commons during the censure debate on the 19th, with great prescience: 'your army is welcome there (Ulster) as is your fleet'⁵⁸. Before March the 20th and 21st there were enough straws in the wind to indicate that something was going to happen.

Against this expectant background, Tories helped condition the actions of the army; or as Gollin writes, 'to make certain that the officers did not make up their minds in a political vacuum, isolated from the opinions of those who were anxious for them to disobey the orders of the Liberal Government'⁵⁹. The frequent assertion by Tory speakers that any attempt to coerce Ulster would see the army refuse, became prophecies of a self-fulfilling nature. But more concrete evidence of undermining army loyalty can be adduced. Towards the end of January, Bonar Law wrote to Lord Roberts suggesting that he might sign a letter to The Times, which Bonar Law composed, defending an officer's right to disobey orders under certain conditions: namely when ordered to move against Ulster⁶⁰. Then, if the Lords did amend the army act, Roberts would publish his letter as support. The letter was never published, but Roberts' ideas would have been known within the

officer corps, especially given the close social and political contacts between the army and party. It provides 'vivid evidence of the lines upon which the leading Unionists were thinking in the early months of 1914', prepared to challenge the sanctity of army obedience for their own ends⁶¹.

Such a willingness can be detected in a memorandum in the Milner papers written in January 1914. Concerned with the aims of the Covenanter movement, it noted at one point: 'there should be no attempt to do anything at this stage which could in anyway impair its (army) efficiency or that of the territorial force'⁶², the inference being that at a later stage it might be necessary. It certainly reveals that such plans were being discussed. In addition, the idea of a guarantee fund to support officers who resigned rather than move against Ulster had been mentioned to Sir Henry Wilson in November⁶³; Carson passed the idea to Milner in March⁶⁴. The reinstatement of officers who resigned over Ulster was also discussed at this time. These were not new ideas; Long reminded Bonar Law that they talked of this 'some months ago... and you approved the policy'⁶⁵. Guarantee funds and reinstatement made the resigning of commissions far less hazardous for doubtful officers. Claims that the opposition were tampering with the army had some foundation, however subtly and indirectly it was done. And although much of the blame for the Curragh mutiny falls on the incompetent shoulders of Sir Arthur Paget, it was Tory speeches, initiatives and promises that provided the climate and "mind-frames" for the officers who decided to hand in their commissions.

Events moved to London on Saturday the 21st, as news of the resignations at the Curragh filtered into the press, and the Tory party now looked to expose if not to fuel the crisis. Gough was summoned to the War Office for interviews on the 22nd and 23rd. There, Paget's actions were countermanded by Ewart (Adjutant General), French (C.I.G.S.) and Seely, who told Gough and his men that they would be reinstated and should quietly return to their regiments. Gough, understandably mistrustful, demanded a written pledge that the army would not be used to coerce Ulster; an extraordinary request for an officer to place before his commanders and the Government. Greatly worried at the state of the army, Seely and Ewart agreed, drawing up a fairly vague memorandum to that effect on the 23rd. This Gough rejected until, without cabinet approval and with only Morley's recommendation, Seely added two extra sentences declaring in crystal-clear words what Gough had wanted: that the army would not be used to crush political opposition to Home Rule.

Gough's actions after the 21st are open to much doubt. Resignation at the Curragh was the result of a choice offered by Paget, but his actions at meetings on the 22nd and 23rd in pressing for a written pledge are more difficult to explain. Perhaps it was a genuine concern for the state of the army. Yet equally plausible is the possibility that Gough was influenced by the hot-house atmosphere he encountered when in London and the recognition that he could dictate terms to the Government. In these respects, Tory leaders and press were an important ingredient in fostering crisis.

The fierce press reports on the 22nd and 23rd hardened

Gough in his line at the Curragh. But he was also in contact with Wilson, at the War Office, who pointed out the political possibilities of the situation. Wilson was already in daily contact with Tory leaders; on the 19th he dined with Milner, Carson and Lovat, informing them of the orders to reinforce points around Belfast. On the night of the 20th Wilson learnt of the resignations from General John Gough, Hugh's brother stationed at Aldershot, who had received telegrams that evening from the Curragh (in fact it was through John Gough that the news broke in London)⁶⁶. On the 21st Wilson met Tory leaders at Lansdowne House, and briefed them on the situation; the next day he was present at the War Office when Gough was interviewed⁶⁷. It was also on the 22nd, well before the memorandum capitulating to Gough's anxieties, that Wilson had spoken to Seely in reply to the latter's enquiries about the means of restoring army unity: 'General Wilson had replied "the reinstatement of the dismissed officers and a declaration that the army would not be asked to coerce Ulster to submit to Home Rule"'⁶⁸.

Gough was not alone in pressing Seely and the War Office for a clear statement ruling out the coercion of Ulster. It also seems clear that Wilson was strengthening Gough and pushing for the same type of pledge. Carson, writing to Bonar Law on the March the 26th, recounted : 'they (Gough) refused to go until they got it in writing... General Wilson at the W.O. kept whispering to them "get it in writing"... at last Sir J. French and Col Seely drew up a declaration full of words and some flattery'⁶⁹. Wilson was also (along with John Gough) fanning the flames of sympathy-resignations, which quickly

spread to Aldershot. These developments placed Seely under greater pressure, and so more vulnerable to extracting promises of non-coercion. Wilson was, then, a key player in the crisis and was in close and regular contact with Tory leaders throughout. He was not their puppet, but he was clearly not acting impartially.

Nor was it just through Wilson that Gough's attitude was hardened on the 22nd and 23rd: his brother John was also in close contact with Tory leaders. On the evening of the 20th, the night he received his brothers' telegrams, John Gough called at Salisbury's house, informing Chamberlain of events⁷⁰. The next day (the 21st) Chamberlain again met John Gough, advising him to see Lord Roberts, another far from impartial source⁷¹. On the 22nd, Chamberlain was visited twice by Mrs Gough, Hugh's mother, and informed of the War Office meetings with her son⁷². Here then was a direct line to Hugh Gough, through which the situation could be explained, and the political benefits of squeezing from the Government a declaration never to coerce Ulster, pointed out. Jalland writes that 'the Curragh officers did not mutiny or refuse to obey orders. However, their own behaviour also became questionable once they took advantage of the situation to demand pledges limiting the Government's policy'⁷³. In pressing for such pledges the influence of Tory leaders and partisans in suggesting, hinting and priming Gough was of great importance.

If some Tory leaders had helped to foster the crisis, how well did they take advantage of it when news of the Curragh broke in London? We now know it was a bungled affair designed

to reinforce certain military installations. But to all appearances, the Government were attempting to place Ulster under martial law. It was a propaganda scoop for the Unionists, and there was even the possibility of the Government falling if the Tory onslaught was sufficiently accurate and effective. The opposition was helped by the mass of information that flooded into their leaders from officers and their parents.

Scenting blood, Unionists planned an all-out attack on the Government in the Commons. Bonar Law informed Asquith on the 22nd that 'it will not be possible.. business can proceed tomorrow in the ordinary way and I propose to ask you.. that a statement can be made by the government upon the serious position which has arisen in the army and that this statement can at once be discussed'⁷⁴. Asquith tried pass the episode off as a 'misunderstanding', and to bluff his way through by delay and equivocation, which simply made things worse⁷⁵. When the Commons met on Monday the 23rd the Tories launched themselves into a bitter assault on ministers, particularly Churchill, who quickly emerged, for them, as the ringleader. Events during the debates of the 23rd through to the 27th went disastrously for the Government. Seely assured the House on the 23rd that all was now well and that the officers would be reinstated (having secretly promised never to use the army against Ulster). On the 25th Asquith published a hopelessly inadequate white-paper contradicting much of what had already been said, and providing great ammunition for the Tories. The same day, he repudiated Seely's promise to Gough, prompting the Minister of War's resignation along with Ewart and French

(but not Morley). Dismay spread amongst Liberal backbenchers at what looked like submission to the army (on Seely's part) and then at the Government's floundering performance to extricate itself from the mess: 'the radicals are furious at Asquith' noted Bridgeman on the 24th⁷⁶. The cumulative effect of all these contradictions, inconsistencies, resignations- and, even, Haldane's alteration of speeches in Hansard- threw the coalition forces into a state of confusion. In addition, there were fierce attacks in The Morning Post and Daily Mail- even the more sober Times reached new levels of bitterness. It seemed to some that by Friday the 27th the Government was on the verge of collapse.

The Tories, however, did not capitalise on the situation, and ministers slowly regained their confidence. On March the 30th Churchill delivered a tough exoneration of the government's position, denying absolutely the existence of any plot, and defending the right of any Government to restore law and order through force if necessary⁷⁷. This raised the morale of Liberal backbenchers. The same day, Asquith declared that he himself would take over the running of the War Office, a shrewd move to restore the confidence of the army and the Liberal party. In addition, the Tories themselves came under fire, especially from Labour members John Ward and Will Crooks, for their tampering with army loyalty. Indeed, Bonar Law himself might have given them the opportunity to play the mutiny card when, during his attack on the 23rd, 'he had made a reference to the right of soldiers under certain circumstances to disobey, which was not approved by our side and gave the other side an opening'. The speeches of Carson,

Bonar Law and Smith now came back to haunt them, as Sanders lamented the following week: 'Winston certainly got hold of a number of quotations rather damaging to our side'⁷⁸. The fear of their army connections being used worried many on the opposition benches, suggesting that they were far from innocent of the charges.

The consequences of the Curragh mutiny for the Tories were therefore more mixed. It gave good propaganda value, but what moral ascendency they won from the incident dissipated after the gun-running at Larne and with the growing suspicion of the party's relations with the army. The army issue pushed Liberals and Labour back together, after nearly two years of continued wrangling, holding out the prospect of renewed cooperation when the election came. Nor had the Government fallen during this bizarre and embarrassing episode. Instead of undermining the ministry, mistakes like Bonar Law's on the 23rd allowed them to escape. Asquith's decision to take over the War Office gave the appearance of a confident man in full command, which did much to revive the nerve of the ministry.

These conclusions should not, however, be pressed too far: the Government was not left untarnished. Moreover, Carson emerged with his reputation enhanced. He had left for Belfast on the 18th, as rumours of his arrest spread round Westminster. The self-restraint which the province maintained throughout the crisis was attributed to his presence, advancing his image as a strong leader in full control of the situation. The Curragh episode also widened the breach between the parties, to the satisfaction of the Tory right: ideas of a compromise appeared to have received a set-back. And the

Nationalists became more intractable as a result of what they saw as a Tory-army plot. This latter result served Bonar Law's purpose, making it difficult for Asquith to move them to a reasonable compromise. In addition, the army could not now be used to coerce Ulster into Home Rule. With Asquith no longer able forcefully to put Ulster under Dublin, and with the chances of exclusion lessened by increasingly obdurate Nationalists, the one course of action left was an election. In this vital respect events at the Curragh worked to Bonar Law's benefit: the tactical strait-jacket was tightening around the Prime Minister.

The Curragh mutiny was a great test for Ulster. The fact that she remained calm raised her standing within Tory circles, and with the army threat neutralised the pressures on Ulster were considerably eased. This was a great relief, since her previous position had been precarious. Yet the situation remained tense. Since January Ulster had faced a severe shortage of cash and arms. While Belfast was becoming nervous as the bill entered its last circuit, with the Government appearing to be delaying and manoeuvring for position. In the context of these frustrations, the idea of a League of British Covenanters was developed to raise finance for the Ulstermen, to rally support and, if need be, to ship over volunteers. And it was these same frustrations which moved the central committee of the U.U.C. to endorse Richardson's and Crawford's plan for one huge shipment of arms into Belfast.

The smuggling of arms on April 24th, like the Curragh incident, reinforced Ulster's position and made her more intractable: unwilling to accept anything short of the "clean-

cut" now that they could realistically look to their own. On the Tory right this was well received: it pressured Asquith, making the Government's position difficult if not untenable. By making Ulster less tractable the Right's tactical position was strengthened; all the party had to do was to hang on and wait for Asquith to surrender. This made the further attempts at compromise, in April/May and again at the end of July, seem foolhardy. The Right were not going to give up the impregnable position gained from the Curragh and from the gun-running at Larne. In this they resembled the Nationalists, growing more not less intractable after March. Both saw their ship close to port, if only nerves would hold. They believed that Bonar Law, whom the Right trusted, would not sell-out at the last moment. Yet it was just as some thought that they could sniff the first sweet smells of office that the European situation erupted. It quickly absorbed the Tory Right in a struggle they had long predicted, even hoped for, but which caught them by surprise when it came.

1V

The Curragh incident brought many advantages for Bonar Law and the party. It removed the possibility of the army coercing Ulster into the bill; without this the Government had no means of implementing Home Rule in the north (although Bonar Law had long rejected the idea that Asquith was capable of such a move). The episode was, nonetheless, a great propaganda coup, depriving Asquith of any hope of appearing to the public as the reasonable conciliator. Tories played this up in the press

and from the platform: a Government which talked of compromise but plotted coercion. The Government's bungling attempts to explain and justify simply added to the suspicion which many observers now entertained; it would not easily be erased and was serious for Asquith. It implied that his attempts at compromise were tactical after all, as Bonar Law had suggested on March 9th, rather than a serious effort to reach a settlement. The incident also allowed Bonar Law to talk tough, to soothe diehard nerves and keep in step with the appreciable rightward drift by many in the party. Derby is a good example of this, moving from scepticism on supporting rebellion in Ulster to a willingness to send men from Liverpool to help them⁷⁹. As Commander in Chief, the King was also greatly alarmed and annoyed at events, moving him closer to the Tory position. This was important if, as some clearly hoped, he was a last resort to be persuaded to refuse assent to the bill before an election.

But the Curragh also brought serious problems. There was the problem of public opinion: would the mutiny backfire against the Tory party? In addition, it removed a means of provoking an immediate election on a basis Bonar Law thought favourable. More seriously, denying Asquith the ability to fall back on coercion made room for alternative and (to Bonar Law) menacing courses of action; Curragh brought politics back to where it had stood at the start of March, with compromise once again in many people's minds.

Many thought along such lines: from mid-April onwards, Tory moderates and federalists began to organise, scenting a panic-stricken Government at last thinking seriously of a way

out.. Carson's conciliatory tone at this stage suggested that the Ulstermen were also keen for a way out, and that if Asquith took the leap towards "real" exclusion they would accept it. Bonar Law admitted to Selborne at the start of April that he was '..inclined to think that some further offer will be made and very likely the exclusion of the six counties'⁸⁰. But arrayed against a compromise stood the swelled ranks of the Right and the Southern Unionists. The latter had become increasingly active since Asquith's offer of March the 9th, returning to their vocal fears of the autumn; these sections would accept nothing but an election. The aftermath of Curragh was a difficult time for Bonar Law. It created grave problems of unity, as Sanders noted on the 30th of April: 'there is serious discontent among a section of our party'⁸¹.

Yet Bonar Law had faced these problems before, in the autumn and at the start of March. It was the same dilemma: how to avoid a settlement and maintain the party's unity and nerve during these the final stages of the bill, while appearing reasonable and open to a compromise for public opinion. Once again, he employed the formula of demanding an election (or a referendum) as the only way to solve the issue while admitting that the real exclusion of Ulster would avoid civil war. It was a statement of the obvious: if Ulster agreed to exclusion there was little he could do. Yet the repetition kept the Ulstermen close to the Tory party, and provided Asquith no gap between them to exploit. It kept the Tory moderate sections with him. And it indicated to the Government the direction in which a compromise could be forged, a direction which Bonar

Law knew full well there was little chance of the Nationalists taking. As he told Hugh Montgomery at the beginning of May: 'it does not seem to be probable that the Nationalists can be brought to agree to the real exclusion of Ulster; and if they do not then there can be no question of compromise'⁸².

The efforts of those seeking a settlement crystallised in the meeting between Asquith, Bonar Law and Carson on the 5th of May. By the time of the meeting the chance of a settlement on exclusion had receded even further; both the Ulstermen and the Nationalists were becoming more rather than less intransigent. After the Curragh and the gun-running, Ulster felt that she could stand out for her maximum demands (all nine counties); the Nationalists, with the bill about to pass the Commons for the last time on May the 25th and the Volunteers organising in Southern Ireland, would hold out for the whole bill. The two sides were farther apart than in the autumn. Bonar Law realised that the Prime Minister could not move closer to real exclusion, and with the Government unable to impose the bill on Ulster, the implications were clear: 'We said also to Mr Asquith is not the position really this. That you have only three possible alternatives, first to coerce Ulster, second to exclude Ulster and third to have a general election'⁸³. The latter option was looming larger than at any previous time, and Bonar Law's major problem in this context was to hold his party together into the election.

The meeting on May 5th was not entirely a waste of time. Bonar Law and Carson learnt that Asquith was going to continue with the Home Rule bill and then introduce a separate amending bill in the Lords. This was subsequently announced to the

Commons on May the 12th; both bills, Asquith assured the House, would then be presented together for royal assent. It was a subtle last effort by Asquith to place the Tories in a difficult position. Incorporating the compromise measures into a separate amending bill threw onto the Lords the burden of rejection; yet any acceptance would cause grave party unrest. The result was very serious. Southern Unionist and right wing forces feared that the leadership would agree to the compromise if it satisfied Ulster, so allowing the other three provinces to "go to the wolves". Accordingly, they began to organise the Lords to reject the amending bill. By the middle of May, the Committee of Peers, 'connected with the three provinces outside Ulster'⁸⁴, established by Midleton and Barrymore, passed a resolution recommending that the amending bill could only be accepted if it included a clause for an immediate election⁸⁵. Midleton assured Bonar Law 'that the view expressed herein is supported by a strong mass of opinion' and that 'we are in danger of a serious split in the party, if by any manoeuvring we shall find ourselves forced to support the amending bill without the promise of a G.E.'⁸⁶. He also, on behalf of the committee, published their resolutions in the press on May the 25th⁸⁷. Midleton's canvassing of Peers converged with various right wing suspicions of the amending bill. Amery attacked the idea of helping the Government out of their hole⁸⁸; Gwynne of The Morning Post rallied opinion opposed to any compromise or clever tactics over the amending bill⁸⁹.

Midleton's activities in the upper House also overlapped with Willoughby de Broke's earlier attempts at rousing the

Peers on the amendment to the address. Both now sought to make an election the centre-piece of their stand, regardless of what the amending bill conceded. On May 13th, Willoughby de Broke wrote to Lansdowne, declaring that 'we do not think it right to agree to repeal of the Union in any shape or form or to the promotion in Parliament of any new scheme which has not been submitted to the electorate'⁹⁰. It was a replay of 1911, with the "wild men" trying to stiffen the Lords against a sell-out and against the official leadership. Lansdowne certainly interpreted events in this light: 'he (Midleton) and others have been actively organising a "diehard" movement which might become formidable'⁹¹.

Bonar Law saw these developments as a threat; the diehard project of rejecting the amending bill was simply playing into Asquith's hands. It would blame the Lords for civil war, and 'enable the Government to turn election cry against the Lords: "Lords have forced civil war"... it would pay in some constituencies and might seriously injure our majority'⁹². The party's image of reasonableness would be destroyed, so undermining public support and consequently their ability to win an election. And such a manoeuvre was all the more pointless, since Bonar Law was convinced after May the 5th that Asquith could never agree to real exclusion. His amending bill would not therefore be a settlement but a decoy, designed to provoke rejection. 'The House of Lords must not fall into the trap and enable the coalition to say they have killed conciliation'⁹³. Nor would inserting a referendum clause help much, since Asquith would represent it as a wrecking tactic not a solution, given that the Ulstermen would not stand by

the result. The diehard revival of May and June 1914 placed Bonar Law's entire strategy of the last two years in jeopardy. Worse still, his ability to control events had diminished after May 25th, when the Home Rule bill finally passed the Commons. This left him reliant upon Lansdowne's ability to control the upper house; by no means certain if experience or current developments were any indication.

Lansdowne agreed with Bonar Law's understanding of the situation: 'Midleton and co fail to see that we desire not only to have a general election but to win it and that we shall probably lose it if we allow Asquith and his friends to out-maneuvre us'⁹⁴. Both saw the need to play a waiting game, to see what Asquith's amending bill had to offer, then act accordingly. But this might suggest passivity towards the regrouping diehards, causing them to redouble their efforts. Lansdowne thus had to work hard behind the scenes to extend and impose his authority in the Lords.

In this he was fortunate to have Royal opinion behind him. The possibility of the Lords rejecting the amending bill filled the King with horror. It faced him with the awful choice between assent to Home Rule, provoking civil war in Ireland, and the veto, provoking a constitutional crisis which would see a "people versus the king" response from the Government. Through Stamfordham, the King was adamant that the amending bill should not be rejected⁹⁵. Salisbury spoke to the King at the end of May, relaying the latter's anxieties to Lansdowne: 'It was he (the King) said everyone's duty to do their utmost to prevent civil war. Moreover it would help him very much - "it will save me"'⁹⁶. Protecting the King was an

effective plea with which Lansdowne could rally the Lords against rejection. It also would keep the King on their side for any future eventuality, as Salisbury clearly implied in his letter. Oddly, Milner seems to have concurred in this argument, writing to Willoughby de Broke on June the 3rd: 'what to do on the amending bill and on which both bills depends the possibility of our being able to ultimately appeal to him (the King) with effect. Tactics are very important at this juncture'⁹⁷.

Lansdowne did not rely solely on the King's position to rally the peers to his side. He sought to galvanise more general support in advance. He contacted Salisbury, a prime mover in the 1911 episode, to draw him closer and to help 'rope in Milner.. he may not know much about procedure but his mind is acute and the more we can associate him with ourselves the better'⁹⁸. Milner had been another force behind the 1911 crisis; drawing his sting early on was vital. Lansdowne moved quickly to bring Curzon, Balcarres, Derby and Devonshire behind him: all leaders with great influence in the Lords. These met at Curzon's house on June the 8th and again on June the 11th to talk tactics⁹⁹.

Overall, the leadership's position in 1914 remained far stronger than in 1911. They were not hopelessly split, and in the Commons they had the active support of the main spokesmen. But all was not well within the party; the last few weeks before the amending bill was presented to the Lords on June the 23rd saw intense manoeuvring. As in 1911, the main difference was tactical. Bonar Law and Lansdowne argued that they should wait to see what was offered on the 23rd before

deciding their course of action, especially since they expected it to fall far short of anything they or Ulster could agree. If this transpired (which it did), it was tactically better to amend the amending bill to one which Ulster might accept (nine- county permanent exclusion). This course would prevent Asquith from branding the Lords' action as provoking civil war. Yet such a basis (real exclusion) would never be accepted by the Nationalists when the bill went back for re-consideration by the Commons. As Long argued: 'if you stick to "Ulster as a whole and no time limit" I think we are safe as I feel sure that Asquith will never consent to this or rather he won't be let'¹⁰⁰. The onus for rejection would be thrown firmly back upon the Government and their supporters. These were essentially the same tactics that Bonar Law had used during his secret meetings with Asquith: to outbid him on terms which he could never accept, but which would preserve the Tory image of reasonableness. If, on the other hand, Asquith did the unthinkable and satisfied Ulster (either before or after his own amendment), then they had little choice but to accept it. 'I have no doubt that a general election would result in our favour; but so far as I can judge the alteration in public opinion has been brought about simply by the position of Ulster and if we .. were to take up an attitude which the country thought unreasonable on that question then I am by no means sure that the result of an election might not be quite different'¹⁰¹. The Diehard line viewed tinkering with definitions of exclusion as playing with fire; Asquith and Redmond might well agree to the revisions the Lords made. Unionists in the country would lose heart at

the Lords' amending rather than rejecting a compromise package at this stage. The only straightforward and clear-cut approach was to insist upon an election.

It was a small but vital gulf between two points of view. Long, a known supporter of Southern Unionism, worked hard to convince the diehards of the safety and sense of the line taken by the leadership. On May the 29th he wrote to Midleton, pleading with him not to split the party¹⁰², and tried again on June the 10th: 'in this matter I think the principle of our policy is perfectly plain and that there is no difference of opinion about it amongst us'¹⁰³. Lansdowne also called a meeting of leaders in the upper House to try to bridge the differences. When the amending bill was finally introduced on the 23rd, the problem eased slightly. Asquith had not moved beyond his March 9th position, confirming all of Bonar Law's assumptions about his constraints, and showing doubting diehards just how far Asquith was bridled by the Nationalists. At a shadow cabinet on the 24th, it was agreed to read the amending bill a second time and then to amend it on third reading to nine-country permanent exclusion, provoking angry dissension from Midleton¹⁰⁴. Southern Unionists were greatly alarmed, and Carson, in particular, was bitterly attacked. Midleton and Barrymore sent Bonar Law a memorandum critical of the decision, and published in the press a resolution by their committee of Peers that the amending bill should be rejected¹⁰⁵.

Lansdowne's authority, however, held, and July 14th the amending bill was duly mangled and sent back to the Commons for consideration on July the 20th. There was little chance of

the new terms being accepted by the Nationalists, or by many on the Liberal backbenches: Asquith's last real chance was to patch an agreement on the amending bill before the Commons debated it on the 20th. He therefore accepted a Royal invitation to convene a conference of party leaders at Buckingham Palace on July 21st. But there was no basis for agreement. All sides had drifted further apart since March; The Ulstermen felt that they could hold out for all nine counties (though they would probably have accepted six); Redmond could not realistically accept permanent exclusion, and would have faced immense difficulties in giving anything more than four counties. It was not simply a difference of the 'muddy highways and by-ways of Tyrone and Fermanagh'¹⁰⁶; there were unbridgeable gulfs between them. If Asquith could not secure a compromise, without the ability to coerce Ulster and without Unionist support for the imposition of a settlement onto Ireland (as Churchill had suggested on July the 22nd) he had nothing to fall back on but a general election.

Precisely when and how he would have dissolved is unclear. He still needed the King's assent, which would be by no means automatic, especially if he did not simultaneously submit the amending bill for him to sign; there was a strong possibility that the King might have insisted on a dissolution before he put his signature to the bill, particularly as he was coming under increasing pressure from Unionist sympathisers to do so. Asquith might have gone to the country on his original amending bill of June the 23rd, though little advantage can be seen in this course. He might even, supposing the King gave his assent, have carried on with Home Rule

without the amended bill, allowing Ulster to set up its provisional Government and hoping it would, in time, collapse. But to fight the election due by 1915 at the latest, after having allowed a Provisional Government to establish itself within the British Isles, would have alienated many Liberal supporters from such irresolute leadership and given the Tories an electoral advantage, able to contrast the state of harmony and prosperity in Ireland in 1906 compared to the present. It also presupposed that he could keep the south in order, and prevent conflict between Ulster Volunteers and National Volunteers. Perhaps the most likely course would have been to carry the bill onto the statute books, and then to dissolve immediately on a platform of removing the Irish Question from British politics. Yet the Tories would still have campaigned hard on the issue that Ulster should not be coerced, and they had probably done enough by that stage to remove the Liberals from Government. From any point of view, by July 1914 the Liberal Government was in a hopeless position¹⁰⁷. War provided them with a two-year stay of execution.

ENDNOTES CHAPTER 8.

1. O.P. 7726/87 Craik to Oliver March 23rd 1914 (102-3)
2. Ibid
3. J.Kendle Ireland and the Federal... pg 173
4. J.Ramsden Real Old... pg 75
5. B.L.P. 32/2/1 Dicey to Law April 1st 1914
6. J.Kendle Ireland and the Federal... pg 174
7. A.Chamberlain Politics from... pg 636-7
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CONCLUSION.

Bonar Law assumed the leadership at a critical time in the party's history. With three election defeats and the loss of the Lords power of veto, grave internal divisions had erupted. More than this the party had few, if any, fresh policy ideas and faced a Government poised to launch an all-out attack on landownership and sustained in power by an effective electoral coalition of Liberals, Labour and Nationalists. However by July 1914 Tories were assertive, confident and unified behind a leader who drew support from all wings of the party. The Liberals, on the otherhand, were unsettled and divided, not just from their partners, the Nationalists and Labour, but within their own ranks and seen by the attacks on Lloyd George's budget of April 1914 and the great unease at what Asquith might do to escape from the Irish imbroglio. An election was widely predicted; 'most of our people expect it', Sanders wrote on July 25th, 'and one of the lobby correspondents tells me the Liberals (also) expect an early election'. Under these circumstances the outcome (though impossible to predict) should not be viewed as automatically unfavourable to the Conservatives; on the contrary, despite the notion of a 'crisis' of Conservatism over these years, the Tories appear better placed to win an election late in 1914,

than the Liberals.

That Bonar Law had helped bring the Conservative party to this position was itself an achievement. Yet the route had not been straight-forward; playing the Home Rule issue to restore the party to power had been the best option but by no means an easy or clear-cut path. He had been forced to counter-balance the competing claims of diehards, federalists, Southern Unionists, Ulstermen and party moderates whilst keeping the most important consideration, perceptions of public opinion, firmly at the forefront of any move. These tensions had been skilfully balanced and seen in particular during the crucial autumn 1913 phase of the struggle. Bonar Law had also locked the party's resistance to Home Rule into a broader struggle over the Constitution. This yielded several advantages. It enabled him to make a general election the centre-piece of his campaign, rather than Ireland or even Ulster, and so providing vital justification for endorsing extreme methods. He could then push Asquith to the very limit of Parliamentary practise (some both then and now would say well beyond that limit) aware that he was fighting according to a constitutional rational. And by making a general election his *raison d'etre*, so his attack on Home Rule can clearly be seen as a means to an end; the best method of removing the Government from power. This consideration was, by 1912, paramount for many Tories, given

Liberal taxation and welfare plans, the perceived state of the armed services, concern for the unity of the Empire and threats to the Established Church and Constitution. The destines of the British state simply could not be left for a moment longer in the irresponsible hands of Asquith and Lloyd George. Extreme resistance to Home Rule was to unseat the Liberal Government.

Such an interpretation therefore views Bonar Law as a very tough-minded politician; a leader firmly in the counter-Revolutionary tradition of Lord Salisbury. 1911 marks a major break in styles of leadership; where Balfour looked for cooperation between front-benches and a bulstering of the moderates, across the parties, Bonar Law sought to polarise party politics and attack vigorously. It made him a superb leader in opposition but a less effective leader when in Government. Unlike Balfour, for whom a directly opposite reading could be made, Bonar Law's unique qualities were appropriate to fierce political conflict and not the administrative hum-drum of office.

Yet the story of the Tory resistance to Home Rule was more than just a reflection of Bonar Law's views. Party policy is rarely the sole dictation of one person. In this respect Lord Lansdowne was a far more important player in events than he is often credited with, especially as a counter-weight to Carson

and staunch defender of Southern Unionist interests. Carson himself, though massively influential, emerges in a slightly different light; less a diehard or Ulster bigot and more flexible and concerned with finding a political settlement, particularly along federal lines. Smith and Churchill also appear politicians of great importance during this struggle, clearly presaging their more famous efforts to reach an Irish settlement from 1919 to 1922. And Balfour's sympathy with coalitions or above-party ministries of National salvation appears well set during this period. Lastly the rise and consolidation of the Ulstermen, was a major factor in both party's tactical planning. For Tories, Ulster was the crow-bar to de-rail Home Rule, as Carson lamented to the Lords in 1921, 'I was only a puppet and so was Ulster and so was Ireland, in the political game that was to get the Conservative party into power'. Though having summoned the Ulster genie up, it proved impossible, between 1918 and 1922, (and to some extent ever since) to put it back into the bottle.

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