Talk by Gordon Lucy November 2025 at Reform Club

On 26 September 1871 Prime Minister William Gladstone received the Freedom of Aberdeen and took the opportunity to deliver a speech reviewing the Irish policy of his first administration.

As a result of his Church Act of 1869, the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland had come into force on 1 January 1871 and he had passed a Land Act in February 1870, giving the force of law to customary tenant right (the 'Ulster Custom') where it existed and creating broadly similar rights elsewhere in Ireland where it did not. He readily acknowledged the existence of the remaining 'single grievance' of university education (the Roman Catholic hierarchy's demand for an explicitly Roman Catholic university) and this he sought to address with the Irish Universities Bill of February 1873 (but not to the Roman Catholic hierarchy's satisfaction).

Based on his legislative programme to date, Gladstone contended: 'There is nothing that Ireland has asked and which this country and this parliament have refused'. Rejecting demands for Home Rule, he declared: 'I have looked in vain for the setting forth of any practical scheme of policy, which the Imperial Parliament is not equal to deal with, or which it refuses to deal with, and which is to be brought about by Home Rule.'

Most Ulster Liberals, especially Presbyterian Liberals, wholeheartedly shared Gladstone's evaluation of his Irish policy and were delighted with the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of Ireland and Gladstone's first Land Act. (Gladstone's second Land Act would follow in 1881.)

At some point before the formation of his third administration in February 1886 Gladstone had abandoned his opposition to Home Rule for reasons which are still a matter of debate among historians and had embraced the policy he had rejected in 1871.

J. J. Shaw, a Presbyterian barrister, future Recorder of Belfast and a former academic at Magee College in Londonderry, produced a publication entitled Mr. Gladstone's Two Irish Policies: A Letter to an Ulster Liberal Elector.

W. E. Gladstone's first policy is set out in a a speech he delivered in Aberdeen in 1871. In that speech Gladstone said: 'I have looked in vain for the setting forth of

any practical scheme of [Irish] policy which the Imperial Parliament is not equal to deal with'. Thus, Mr Gladstone's first Irish policy was reform.

As a reformer, Gladstone became the hero of many (perhaps even a majority) of Ulster Presbyterians as he pursued the theme of equal treatment for all under the Union. Presbyterians and Roman Catholics enthusiastically co-operated in pursuit of religious equality and land reform between 1868 and 1886. In his publication Shaw observed: 'the policy seemed to us statesmanlike and liberal … It was to be carried out by bringing Irish law and Irish institutions into harmony with the interests and feelings of the great bulk of the Irish people'.

W. E. Gladstone's second policy was, of course, Home Rule, his conversion to which was disclosed to an unsuspecting world, possibly prematurely, by Herbert Gladstone, Gladstone's youngest son, in interviews published in the London Standard and the Leeds Mercury on 17 December 1885. At this juncture Shaw was still hostile to Home Rule but by the General Election of 1892 Shaw had changed his mind, abandoning Liberal Unionism for Gladstonian Liberalism and support for Home Rule. However, in 1888 as a Liberal Unionist, Shaw addressed his 'Ulster Liberal Elector' in the following terms:

You are not, nor am I, ashamed of the fact that our ancestors were United Irishmen [Shaw was born and grew up in Kircubbin, County Down]. We do not fear to speak of '98. Had we lived in '98 we should probably have been rebels ourselves, just as our rebellious forefathers, were they now alive, would be contented and loyal subjects of the empire.

The 'declared and real objects of the United Irishmen' were "Catholic emancipation, a reformed parliament, a responsible executive, and equal laws for the whole Irish people'. The United Irishmen only 'took up arms' because 'they saw no hope of attaining these objects through an Irish parliament'. However, these benefits, Shaw explained, everyone enjoyed as citizens of the United Kingdom as the result of the Act of Union. However, Shaw feared that might not be so under a Home Rule parliament dominated by one faction of the Irish people.

Presbyterians and Roman Catholics alike had been excluded from political power and influence by the Protestant (i.e. Church of Ireland) Ascendancy in the old Irish parliament that had existed prior to 1800. Shaw, as an Ulster Presbyterian, could not view with equanimity the prospect of a return to ascendancy government, which is what Presbyterians believed Home Rule would herald. Presbyterians feared renewed exclusion from power and influence, this time at the hands of a Roman Catholic ascendancy. 'If our descendants rebelled against Grattan's Parliament', asked Shaw, 'will their descendants be happy and contented under Mr Parnell's?'

On 4 June 1886 the Ulster Liberal Unionist Committee was formally established.

Thomas Sinclair repudiated the proposition that those liberals who opposed home rule were 'antediluvian politicians:

'We claim that it our distinctive honour that we have ever been in line with the great acts of remedial legislation .... since catholic emancipation. In that path we mean to continue. But we claim to be an integral part of the United Kingdom. There must be no home rule plank in the ulster liberal platform'.

**Who was Thomas Sinclair?**

Thomas Sinclair was the most eminent Presbyterian layman of his generation; he was a man of strong and reforming social commitment; he was a businessman by profession; in politics, he was a Liberal before 1886 and thereafter a Liberal Unionist.

He was a political strategist and organizer. He was responsible for the organisation of the Ulster Unionist Convention of 1892.

He was also a significant wordsmith, being the man who framed the Ulster Covenant of September 1912.

Sinclair was born in Belfast on 23 September 1838. Presbyterianism was central to Sinclair's family background. Much of the family's wealth was donated to the Church and to Presbyterian causes.

Sinclair had been educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and then at the Queen's College, Belfast, now Queen's University. Sinclair was a distinguished student, graduating with a first-class honours degree in mathematics, and with a gold medal, in 1856 and with a Master's degree, and another gold medal, in 1859. Queen's conferred an honorary doctorate on him in 1882. Despite his distinguished academic record, which opened up the prospect of a career in the professions or in academia itself, Sinclair chose to enter the family business – J. & T. Sinclair, Provision Merchants and Pork Curers – which had been founded by his father and his uncle. He became head of the firm on his father's death, a position which he was to occupy for the rest of his life.

One of Sinclair's teachers at Queen's was James McCosh, the Presbyterian and Scottish-born Professor of Logic and Metaphysics who would go on to be President of Princeton in the United States. McCosh had a profound influence on Sinclair. It was with McCosh that Sinclair began his work among the poor. McCosh had himself been influenced in his social outlook by the great Scottish divine, Thomas Chalmers. Chalmers saw the Church's role as being among the poor and the unchurched; and took the view that morally reformed and educated citizens were the basis of godly communities. Like Chalmers, he resisted the encroachment of the state, considering that the church should care for its own: no Presbyterian child, he argued, should be found in a workhouse or in receipt of parish relief; and he saw that much of the answer lay in education; and he was committed to a national, non-denominational system of primary and intermediate education.

There was a strong Christian imperative to his zeal for reform.

Let us now turn to Thomas Andrews.

Like J J Shaw, the Andrews family was proud of its association with the United Irishmen.

Dr William Drennan, the inspirer and founder of the United Irishmen, had been a member of the family. One of Thomas's brothers gloried in the name William Drennan Andrews. The reason they were proud of their links with the organisation was because the true aim of the united Irishmen had been realised under the union – namely parliamentary reform, religious equality and free trade.

Thomas Andrews of comber entered the family's linen concern, and like Thomas Sinclair, demonstrated himself to be an astute businessman and moderniser with a zeal for reform. He was the third president of the ulster liberal unionist association.

Although active in public life, like Sinclair, he never sought to be an MP.

In 1916 the northern whig noted: 'Had he chosen he might have obtained the honours that fall to political leaders in parliament but he preferred to shoulder a musket in the ranks'.

In his biography of James Craig, St John Ervine referred to the Carson- Craig partnership in these terms

‘Each had what the other lacked. Pooling their resources they became a third and undeniable person. Effective apart, they were irresistible together.’

Sinclair and Andrews constituted a formidable team.

Horace Plunkett’s judicious assessment of the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association is a tribute to their joint endeavours:

‘The only expression of real political thought which I have observed in Ireland since I have been in touch with Irish life has emanated from the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association, whose weighty pronouncements, published from time to time, are worthy of deep consideration by all interested in the welfare of Ireland’.

It is worth pointing out that Sinclair and Andrews and other Liberal Unionists still had a profound sense of their Irishness.

Sinclair was responsible for organising the Ulster Unionist Convention of June 1892. One of the slogans prominently on display in the specially constructed meeting place was ‘Erin go bragh’ – Ireland for ever.

**Horace Plunkett**

Horace Plunkett was the third son of the 16th Lord Dunsany and was educated at Eton and Oxford (where he studied History).

On account of his delicate health (and the fear of contracting tuberculosis - his mother, two brothers and a sister died of consumption) between 1879 and 1889 he was ranching in the drier and healthier climate of Wyoming. There he acquired an extensive knowledge of modern farming practice.

He returned to Ireland on the death of his father with a firm conviction that the advent of the railways in the American West and American competitiveness would pose stern challenges to the survival of small farmers in Ireland. To ensure the survival of Irish agriculture he sought to promote cooperative farming, allied to quality agricultural education and scientific innovation. His mantra was ‘Better farming, better business, better living’.

**Harold Adrian Milne Barbour**

Harold Barbour, grandson of the founder of the linen manufacturing firm of William Barbour of Lisburn.

Barbour was born in Lisburn, the son of John Dougherty Barbour and Elizabeth Milne. Sir Milne Barbour was his elder brother. He studied at Harrow School and Brasenose College, Oxford before assuming the directorship of a linen company in Glasgow at some time before 1911. He was elected as an Antrim Unionist county councillor and a Lisburn urban councillor and then served in the Senate of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1929.

He was an advocate of cooperatives even before Plunkett, The Barbours had opened of a cooperative store at Lisburn as early as 1882.

Lisburn boasted one of the largest and best run cooperatives in Ireland. Barbour became President of the Lisburn Society in 1900.

For ten years Harold Barbour was chairman of the IAOS. When a separate Ulster society came into existence in 1922, he became its first president.

Harold Barbour died on 24 December 1938 on a visit to Switzerland; he was cremated at Zürich and his ashes were interred at Lambeg, Co. Antrim. He married his cousin Anna, daughter of Robert Barbour of Paterson, New Jersey. They lived at Strathearne, Dunmurry, and at Belsize Road, Lisburn, Co. Antrim, and had three sons (John D., James, and Patrick) and one daughter (Elise Smith). Harold Barbour was a brother-in-law of Thomas Andrews, the shipbuilder.

CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT

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Plunkett set up a cooperative store at Doneraile in County Cork in 1891. Cooperative stores did not prove a great success but cooperative creameries were. He established his first cooperative creamery at Ballyhahill in County Limerick two years later.

On 18 April 1894 Plunkett set up the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society as an umbrella organisation to co-ordinate the activities of the various cooperative societies throughout the island.

Despite opposition, Plunket made considerable progress. The most intense opposition came from graziers and shopkeepers. Farmers preferred grazing (which Plunkett scathingly referred to as 'their lotus-eating occupation of opening and shutting gates') to dairying.

In Mallow, County Cork, a shopkeeper posed the question: 'Who are the largest subscribers [to the Nationalist parliamentary fund]?'' He then proceeded to answer his own question: 'Why the shopkeepers of course, who as you know have always been the backbone of nationality in Ireland.'

R A Anderson, Plunket's right-hand man, was to address a meeting in County Limerick on the advantages of cooperation when a local solicitor discovered that the proposed cooperative was to be apolitical and non-denominational.

He pompously announced: 'Rathkeal is a nationalist town- nationalist to the backbone – and *every* pound of *butter made* in this creamery must be *made* on nationalist *principles*, or it shan't be *made* at *all*'.

This frankly bizarre sentiment was loudly cheered and Anderson was prevented from speaking.

Nevertheless by 1898 there were 243 cooperative societies affiliated to the lAOS with a turnover of £675,000. The following year there were 477 affiliated societies with a turnover of £1 million and by 1904 there were 778 societies with a turnover of £1.5 million.

RECESS COMMITTEE

One of Plunkett's great strengths was his ability to surround himself with able and talented people. Among these were R A Anderson (whom we have already encountered), a petty sessions clerk at Doneraile and sub-agent to Lord Castletown; Professor Tom Finlay, a Cavan man, a Jesuit, academic and social reformer; George Russell (AE), a writer, poet, painter and mystic from Lurgan; and  of course Harold Barbour.

The Recess Committee is another example of Plunkett's ability to work with people from divergent backgrounds.

The Recess Committee was organised by Plunkett during the parliamentary recess of 1895-6 to discuss the future economic development of Ireland.

It brought together Parnellite nationalists, unionists, southern landlords, farmers and businessmen (including Sinclair and Andrews).

The Anti-Parnellites, led by John Dillon, were hostile to the initiative. Dillon regarded the Recess Committee as the greatest danger home rule had to face.

The Committee's report was submitted in August 1896 and recommended the creation of an Irish department of agriculture and industries.

THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE & TECHNICAL INSTRUCTION

Came into existence in 1899  with Plunkett serving as its first Vice-President. (The Chief Secretary for Ireland was the organisation's president.)

It had various branches, including those for agriculture, technical instruction, and veterinary services.

and was, in practice, a ministry of agriculture. Its remit was wide ranging from the inspection and promotion of fisheries and collection of agricultural statistics to training national schoolteachers in rural Ireland and improving the quality of livestock and plants.

Apart from agricultural education, the department took charge of technical (vocational) education and, on account of the primitive nature of Irish educational administration.

Agriculture was very much the priority for the south whereas technical education was the priority in the north.

Plunkett found himself in charge of scientific education everywhere but in the universities.

He attached great importance to education:

'Whenever I set out on a mental excursion into Irish political, sociological, or economic questions', he wrote, 'no matter where I start, I always come back to education as precedent of all progress in Ireland.'

Ulster Liberal Unionists exerted significant influence on Joseph Chamberlain and successive chief secretaries, notably Gerald Balfour. Sinclair and Andrews had easy access to the chief secretary's office and dined in chief secretary's lodge in the Phoenix Park

and through them and the policy of 'Constructive Unionism' helped to transform Ireland beyond recognition.

These reforms included:

**Land reform:** Redistributing land from landlords to tenants.

**Housing improvements:** Efforts to provide better homes for the rural poor.

**Economic development:** Establishing the Congested Districts Board for Ireland to stimulate economic activity in the poorest areas.

**The introduction of democratic local government:** The Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 replaced grand juries with elected county and district councils.

**A J Balfour**

Arthur Balfour 'entered Dublin Castle as an untried politician, and left it as a potential prime minister'.

Regarding him as dilettante, Nationalists greeted the appointment with a mixture of incredulity and glee.

They had no appreciation of his willpower, debating power, ability in attack and his capacity to disregard criticism.

He took office stating that 'I shall be as relentless as Cromwell in enforcing obedience to the law but . . . as radical as any reformer in redressing grievances'.

From 25 October to 8 November 1890 he visited Mayo, Connemara, and Donegal to observe the distress at first hand.

He seems to have been genuinely moved by what he saw. Although Balfour was a man who usually kept his emotions very firmly under control, on his return he delivered an emotional speech in Liverpool, expressing 'an intense desire to relieve the distress of the Irish people'.

A stern critic of irresponsible or absentee landlords, he regarded the Irish land system as 'essentially and radically rotten'. Believing that the system of dual ownership introduced by Gladstone made conflict between landlord and tenant inevitable, he favoured instead the establishment of peasant proprietorship to introduce order and stability into the Irish

countryside. He believed that once agrarian grievances were remedied, agitation for home rule would dissolve.

He passed two land purchase acts (1887 and 1891), and a Light Railway Act (1889) established the Congested Districts Board (1891)

Balfour was particularly proud of the board's achievements, claiming that it had done more good for Ireland than a hundred domestic parliaments would ever do.

**Gerald Balfour**

Gerald Balfour was appointed chief secretary for Ireland (4 July 1895).

Although Gerald lacked intellectual depth, quick tongue, and political ruthlessness of his brother, he was liked for his genial personality and respected for his hard work. Tim Healy described him as ‘an unselfish and learned statesman’.

He oversaw an increase in the income of the Congested Districts Board (CDB) and its powers to acquire, improve and redistribute land.

He inaugurated a programme of relief works to cope with the potato failure of 1897–8, including light railways and drainage schemes.

he established in 1899 of a Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI)

Local Government (Ireland) Act (1898), which he skilfully piloted through parliament. The act replaced the old grand juries with county and district councils, elected triennially on a broad franchise which included women.

**George Wyndham**

Having been private secretary to Arthur Balfour when Balfour was Chief Secretary for Ireland, Wyndham was appointed Chief Secretary in 1900 and was admitted to the Cabinet in 1902.

He was ambitious: ‘I shall pass a land bill, reconstruct the Agriculture Department and the Congested Districts Board, stimulate fishing and horse breeding; and revolutionise education.’

Wyndham was responsible for the Land Act which bears his name. It ushered in the most radical change in history in Ireland's land ownership. Before it, Ireland's land was largely owned by landlords; within years of the Acts, most of the land was owned by their former tenants, who had been supported in their purchases by government subsidies.

Wyndham was briefly the political star of the hour; his triumph was symbolised by the high-profile visit of Edward VII to Dublin in July 1903.

Wyndham was also associated with the devolution scheme promoted by Lord Dunraven and by his permanent under-secretary Sir Antony MacDonnell, a former member of the Indian civil service and the brother of a nationalist MP.

Although T. P. O'Connor reportedly claimed that 'Devolution' was 'Latin for Home Rule', the policy fell between two stools because it failed to command the support of nationalists, especially John Dillon, but alarmed and antagonised unionists and resulted in the formation of the Ulster unionist Council in 1904/5.

The fallout controversy resulted in Wyndham being driven in ignominy from office.

Constructive Unionism/ "killing Home Rule with kindness"

Was the plan to introduce generous social and economic reforms in Ireland to improve conditions and make the Irish people feel so content and prosperous within the United Kingdom that they would no longer demand Home Rule?.

Was "killing Home Rule with kindness" a policy or a throw-a-way remark?

In a speech to his constituents in Leeds Central Gerald Balfour he announced that the government 'should be glad enough, no doubt, to kill home rule with kindness if we could, but whatever may be the result of our efforts, our intention is to do our utmost to introduce and pass such measures as will really promote the interests of the material prosperity of Ireland' (*Times*, 17 Oct. 1895).

Prior to the general election of 1900 Gerald Balfour claimed responsibility for a diminution of the demand for home rule.

His tenure of office coincided with a relatively quiet period:

there was no Parnell, no serious land agitation, no

active home rule movement in the country and no

united Irish Parliamentary Party Parliament.

These factors lent a certain credibility to Gerald Balfour's claim.

However, the extension of democratic local government demonstrated that the demand for Home Rule had not been blunted.

In Ireland as a whole Nationalist took almost 75 of county council seats.

Outside Ulster, unionists won only 39 seats out of a possible 495.

Unionists were deprived of influence throughout most of the Ireland at local level.

So if these policies were simply about killing Home Rule with kindness, they were clearly a failure.

But, if they were designed to 'promote the interests of the material prosperity of Ireland', a project to which Liberal Unionists were genuinely committed, we can come up with a different answer.

In *Donegal in Transition*, Sean Beatie examines the operation of the CDB in County Donegal and has produced a very interesting book by doing so. Killybegs was one of the CDB's great success stories. In 1892 total sales of fish in Killybegs amounted to approximately £1,000 but by 1902 exports of fish by rail totalled 61 tons to markets in Ireland and England, with an estimated value of £6,250. In 1890 Killybegs had 23 boats, providing work for 56 fishermen. As a result of CDB initiatives, boat ownership increased to 211, providing employment for 1,140 males, thanks to a contribution from the CDB of £3,000 for a pier and the establishment of a cooperage, boat-building yard and curing station nearby.

Workers in the lace, knitting, embroidery, shirt-making, carpet manufacture and woollen sectors of the Donegal textile industry experienced a three-fold increase in earnings.

The CDB enjoyed a major success in the county in promoting spraying and the eradication of disease in sheep and poultry. Despite the introduction of programmes to enhance livestock quality, between 1901 and 1919 numbers of cattle, sheep and pigs dropped significantly but breeding improved.

Between 1891 and 1909 the railway network in the county grew. The Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway built a 50-mile rail connection to Burtonport. When Michael MacGowan, the author of *The Hard Road to the Klondike*, returned to his native county - with money in his pocket - he was delighted to find a railway from Letterkenny to Burtonport, fishermen in receipt of grants, greatly improved roads and bridges - and all thanks to a 'man named Balfour'.

Although Arthur and Gerald Balfour (and George Wyndham) succeeded in making many Nationalist politicians (notably John Dillon) extremely nervous, they did not succeed in 'Killing Home Rule with Kindness'. Nevertheless the American historian David C. Hudson believes they very nearly succeeded. What they did succeed in doing was improving the lives of ordinary people.

In 1928 answering the query of his niece and biographer, Blanche Dugdale, as to what remained of his Irish policy, Arthur Balfour replied: 'Everything, everything. What was the Ireland that the Free State took over? It was the Ireland we made.'