

The Irish Question under William GLADSTONE (1868-1885): The Great Challenge

مسألة إيرلندا في عهد وليام قلاستون (1868-1885): التحدي الكبير

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Abstract:

The Irish question resolved around three main factors: political, economic and social. The only British politician, who was so obsessed by the Irish question making it an issue in British politics during his four ministries, was William Ewart Gladstone. He was the man who had both experience and courage to undertake such a great challenge despite the opposition of his colleagues and the split of the Liberal party.

The objective of this paper is to examine the evolution of the Irish question under Gladstone's first two governments. Though he undertook many measures, Gladstone failed to solve the Irish problems but was considered as the politician, who set up the first steps towards Irish independence.

Keywords: Political factors, William Gladstone, challenge, Liberal party, Irish problems.

ملخص:

فصل مسألة إيرلندا كان قائما حول ثلاثة عوامل : سياسية، اقتصادية واجتماعية. السياسي البريطاني الوحيد الذي كان مهوسا بمسألة إيرلندا وجعلها قضية في سياسة بريطانيا أثناء حكوماته الأربع هو وليام قلاستون. كان رجلا ذو خبرة وشجاعة للقيام بهذا التحدي الكبير رغم معارضة زملائه وإنقسام الحزب الليبرالي.

الهدف من هذا المقال هو دراسة مسألة إيرلندا تحت الحكومتين الأولىين لوليام قلاستون. بالرغم من أخذ تدابير عديدة، قلاستون فشل في حل مشاكل الإيرلنديين ولكن كان السياسي الذي وضع الخطوات الأولى نحو إستقلال إيرلندا.

كلمات مفتاحية: عوامل سياسية، وليام قلاستون، التحدي، الحزب الليبرالي، مشاكل الإيرلنديين

Introduction:

Ireland was always regarded by the British as a problem to be solved. The conflict between the Irish and the British was old. It dated back to the seventeenth century when James I' policy of land expropriation in Ulster initiated in 1608 (Trevelyan, 1987, p. 290) and subsequently supported by his son Charles I and then Cromwell during his republican rule could but forced Irish Catholics to attack the advantaged minority of Protestants. By then, relationship between the Irish and the British was not comfortable because nothing really threatened the Irish as the loss of their lands.

The Irish had their own parliament in Dublin but under the Act of Union of 1801 they had to join the English Parliament at Westminster as a minority. Forced to surrender their legislative powers to the English on one hand and to face famine problems during the 1840's on the other, the Irish had to rebel in front of British officials' indifference and apathy towards their conditions. However, this situation pressed Gladstone to seriously consider the distressing relationship between London and Ireland. He was the politician who fought the general election of 1868 with his slogan 'Justice for Ireland'. In his book "The Life of William Ewart Gladstone", Morley regarded Gladstone's behaviour "as part of a heroic struggle for justice". Many studies have been conducted on this issue but this article tends to focus on the difficulties Gladstone faced to solve the Irish problems. Did he succeed to deal with them? This paper examines the evolution of the Irish question under Gladstone's first two governments with reference to background to the Irish issue, Gladstone's first measures for Ireland and his land reform.

1. Background to the Irish Issue:

Ireland was one of the most densely populated areas in Europe. Nearly half the population depended on the potato for its survival. In 1845, Ireland witnessed the Great Famine. The latter's direct cause was the potato blight which attacked the crop and spread rapidly all over the country. The consequences of the Great Famine were dramatic. Between 1845 and 1847, one million and half Irish died from starvation (McDowall, 2015, p. 149). The most noticeable was the great flow of emigration, mainly to the United States and Australia. It was estimated that between 1845 and 1855, about two million Irish

had emigrated to America and Australia, and 750.000 (Ranelagh, 1983, p. 117) to Britain.

Such a decrease in the Irish population due partly to emigration and the 1840's famine and yellow fever affected considerably the predominant farming community and Irish agriculture. As many labourers died or emigrated, they left their small holdings and drove small farmers to extend their plots. In 1845 for example, the number of holdings which was 630.000 of up to fifteen acres decreased to 318.000 in 1851. (Ranelagh, 1983, p. 118)

Felt strongly concerned with the Irish depressing social and economic situation, Robert Peel, the Tory PM (1841-1846) managed, despite Tory landowning interests, to have the Corn Laws repealed thanks to the support of the Whigs, and to import maize from America. Corn Laws were first introduced in 1815 as a protective measure under which parliament prohibited the import of foreign wheat until the domestic price reached 80 shillings a quarter.

Peel ordered the purchase of £100.000 of maize from America to be distributed in Ireland. (Ranelagh, 1983, p. 114) He also encouraged voluntary relief committees, supplied Ireland with special food deposits in open markets and controlled prices. His policies brought better results.

However when Peel was out of office, Lord John Russell (1846-1852) succeeded him in June 1846 as leader of the Whig Party. Unlike Peel, who had stressed to ensure food for the starved Irish, Russell was an exponent to laissez-faire. In October 1846 he declared:

"It must be thoroughly understood that we cannot feed the people...

We can at best keep down prices where there is no regular

market and prevent established dealers from raising prices much

beyond the fair price with ordinary profits". (Ranelagh, 1983, p 114)

Russell's policy regarding Ireland was very clear. He stressed on employment and showed the Irish that it was not the duty of the government to feed the starving people. From the end of the Ministry of Peel till the year 1867, nothing was introduced for the welfare of the Irish by the British Government. Facing both depressing social and economic conditions on one hand and apathy

from the British Government on the other, the Irish had to resort to found secret political groups.

1.1. The Fenians:

Britain was always blamed for the Great Famine and for the isolation of a great number of Irishmen. Many young Irishmen, who fled during the famine, determined to organize revolts in Ireland. For example James Stephens (1824-1901), who escaped to France in 1848 and returned to Ireland ten years later, founded an Irish secret society which believed in revolution to gain independence. Stephens succeeded to gain a large support over all Ireland and on 17 March 1858 (Ranelagh, 1983, p. 120) he established the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood which became known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B). Within a short period of time, a great number of Irishmen in the rural areas took Stephens' membership oath:

"I...do solemnly swear in the presence of Almighty God that I will do my utmost at every risk while life lasts, to make Ireland an independent democratic republic; that I will yield implicit obedience in all things not contrary to the law of God to the commands of my superior officers, and that I shall preserve inviolable secrecy regarding all the transactions of this secret society that may be confided in me. So help me God. Amen."

(Ranelagh, 1983: p 120)

By September 1858, Stephens went to New York where he met two young Irishmen, John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny who supported his society. Both men founded an Irish-American secret society and called it the Fenian Brotherhood. Under the leadership of these three men, the "Fenians"-the Fenian Brotherhood and the IRB gained large support. Two years later, Stephens returned to Ireland, but on 11 November 1865 he was arrested and imprisoned in Richmond goal (Dublin). However, he managed to flee to France with the help of some Fenian warders in goal. Consequently, Thomas J. Kelly (1833-1908), who succeeded Stephens (as head of the IRB), planned an Irish rising on 11 February 1867 but was prevented by the British troops. Thus, Kelly and many

leading Fenians were arrested and the rising was postponed. On 13 December 1867, an explosion was made by another Fenian rescue to free the prisoners of Clerkenwell goal in London. Consequently, the British police undertook positive measures against the Fenians.

Despite the failure of the Fenians to reach their objectives, they were effective bodies since they could convince Gladstone that a change should be introduced to help the Irish who had many grievances.

1.2. The Irish Grievances :

The Irish had political, economic and religious grievances:

- a) British officials' indifference and apathy towards Irish hardships led to the growth of a feeling of separateness among the Irish who regarded the English as aliens. The Irish believed that their country could not prosper unless they were allowed to rule their own affairs.
- b) Most of the Irish lived in poverty due to the lack of industry and the land situation. Before 1800 Ireland possessed a developed linen industry. However a change occurred when the Act of Union was passed in 1801. The Act which established free trade between England and Ireland resulted in a hard competition and unemployment increase, and consequently the disappearance of the industry. This drove the Irish to rely on agriculture for their survival. In fact, most of the land was owned by Protestant landlords who lived in England and left agents to be in charge of their lands in Ireland. As the population of Ireland grew during the nineteenth century, the demand for land increased and resulted in the division of lands into small holdings. The Irish tenants then were obliged to rely on potato for their survival. They had also to pay an annual rent to the landlords for the use of land. In fact, rents were very high and many tenants suffered from eviction for non-payment. Hence between 1860 and 1870, many peasants joined secret societies.
- c) The official church in Ireland was the Protestant Church of England (Anglican). Nine out of every ten Irishmen were Roman Catholics (Speck, 1993, p 50). The latter felt it unfair to have to pay tithe (a tax amounting to one tenth of the annual farm income) to the Protestant Church which did not look after their spiritual well being. Besides this, Roman Catholics had also to support their own church. It was not until the year 1868 that

the British authorities were forced to consider the Irish issue, and notably from Gladstone's first government (1868-1874).

2. Gladstone's First Measures for Ireland :

Gladstone's strong interest in the Irish question drove him to undertake many measures to solve the Irish problems namely: the Irish Church Bill, the Irish Land Act and the Irish Universities Bill.

2.1. The Irish Church Bill:

The first measure that was undertaken by William Gladstone was the Irish Church Bill. Gladstone's concern with the Irish church 'sprang from his religious belief that all people had some rights of liberty and fair treatment'. (Lowe, 1989, p. 235). According to him, these rights were not granted to the Irish. Morley said that Gladstone 'cared as much for the church as he cared for the state'. (Morley, 1903, p. 3) In January 1869, Gladstone sent a memorandum to Queen Victoria (1837-1901) explaining the principle on which he based his measure:

" Only now, by a long, slow and painful process, have we arrived at the conclusion that Ireland is to be dealt with in all respects as a free country, and is to be governed like every other free country according to the sentiments of its majority and not of its minority; in subordination only to the general laws necessary for the three kingdoms as a whole." (Beckett, 1981, p. 369)

On 1 March 1869, Gladstone introduced the Irish Church Bill (Pearce & Stewart, 1996) in the Commons. The Protestant Irish church was made independent of the State and the Roman Catholics stopped to pay tithe to it. The result was that the Protestant church lost half of its revenue amounting to £16 million (Pearce & Stewart, 1996, p. 116)

Enjoying a majority in Parliament, Gladstone succeeded to pass its third reading on 31 May despite opposition from the House of Lords. The struggle

did not end only after the intervention of the Queen who made all her efforts for a settlement. In July 1869, the Lords were compelled to accept the Bill.

The provisions of such a Bill included disestablishment, disendowment, compensation and landed property. Tenants who used church lands were allowed to buy their holdings and had to leave three quarters of the purchase price on mortgage at four per cent. It was the beginning of the land purchase policy. In fact, though the Bill weakened the position of the Protestant ascendancy, it failed because it did not remedy the grievances of the Roman Catholics. Disendowment of the Protestant church did not mean abolition of tithe, but its payment was for its transfer to the state.

2.2. The First Irish Land Act:

Before the electorate of 1868, land reform was included in the Gladstonian policy regarding Ireland. Land in Ireland was controlled by Protestant landlords, who used to impose heavy rents on their tenants and evicted them in case of non-payment of the annual rent.

In order to solve this problem, Gladstone had to regulate relations between landlords and tenants through an Irish Land Act. Therefore, he spent time collecting information and trying to understand clearly the relationship between the landlord and tenant. But, Gladstone received no help from members of the Cabinet because most of them were hostile to such a reform. The only man, who agreed with Gladstone was the Irish Secretary Fortescue Chichester .S.P (1868-1871). The latter made a double proposal in November 1869: 'that the Ulster Custom should be protected by law, and that a tenant not enjoying the benefit of custom should be entitled, if evicted to compensation from the landlord for disturbance'. (Becket, 1981, p. 370)

Three months later, Gladstone who brought some modifications to Fortescue's scheme passed the First Irish Land Act on 15 February 1870 (Becket, 1981, p. 370) through the House Commons. The Act had two objectives: to guarantee the 'Ulster Custom' and give compensation to evicted tenants elsewhere in Ireland for the improvement made to land. Second, if evicted, a tenant was to receive a compensation from his landlords for 'disturbance'. The amount of compensation depended on the value of the holding and was calculated between one to seven years' rent and could reach £250. (Becket, 1981, p. 371) The tenant who was evicted for non-payment of rent was not entitled to

receive the compensation for disturbance. However in case the annual value of his holding did not exceed £25, the court might pay him. Besides this, the Act excluded leaseholders for a term of 31 years or more from compensation for disturbance or improvements unless the lease was renewed. With regard to land purchase, a tenant could ask a loan from the commissioners of public works amounting to two-thirds of the price of his holding to be repaid with an interest over thirty- five years at an annual rate of £5 (Becket, 1981, p 371).

Despite Gladstone's high hopes to remedy the grievances of the tenants, the land Act failed for a number of reasons. The tenant who claimed the benefit of the Ulster Custom had to prove that his holding was subject to custom. After passing the Act, the Ulster landlords were making efforts to enforce the custom only on their own estates and used to monopolize the established courts. In addition to this, landlords continued to increase rents and consequently tenants were not protected against arrears and eviction. As to the land purchase, since landlords strongly opposed the idea of selling their lands, few tenants could buy their holdings under this Act.

Thus, the Act aggravated the situation and created violence in the countryside. What tenants most wanted was security of tenure i.e. to be safe from eviction. In a memorandum, sent to Gladstone in March 1870, the Irish bishops declared that 'nothing would satisfy the country safe perpetuity of tenure'. (Becket, 1981, p. 374) Under such a situation, Gladstone was obliged to adopt the old policy of repression by passing the Coercion Act (1871) which gave the police extra power to arrest trouble makers.

2.3. The Irish Universities Bill:

The third measure that was introduced by Gladstone during his first ministry was the Irish Universities Bill of 1873 which aimed at providing Roman Catholics with a university. He aimed to convert Trinity College, Dublin and the Queen's Colleges into one Irish institution. (Speck, 1993, p 94) However, the bill was bitterly opposed because the Protestants would not accept an Irish university supported by the state and the Roman Catholics could not accept secular institutions. The bill was lost because 35 Liberals (Pearce & Stewart, 1996, p 35) voted against it. Gladstone made all his efforts to remedy the Irish grievances but it was in vain. Instead of restoring order, the three measures intensified the Irish protest and resulted in the birth of the Home Rule

Movement. In 1874 Gladstone fell from power and the government was led by the Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli (1874-1880).

3. Disraeli and Ireland:

During the general election of April 1874, the Liberals lost a great number of seats as a result of the new home rule party (Steele, 1970, p.74). The Conservatives won 350 seats to 245 Liberals and 57 Irish Nationalists. (Lowe, 1989) The Irish reached this number of seats for the first time because the Irish tenants were able to vote freely without fear of their landlords under the 1872 Ballot Act. The Conservatives who had been out of power since the defeat of Peel's ministry in 1846 were now united under their Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli.

Unlike Gladstone, Disraeli saw Ireland as "a troublesome possession" and was "at heart wholly out of sympathy with the Irish". (Lowe, 1989, p. 254) During his rule, evictions from land continued to reach 2.110 in 1880 and cheap American corn kept local prices beyond their level and consequently the Irish tenants suffered from poverty. (Ranelagh, 1983, p. 135)

Under these circumstances, on 21 October 1879, Michael Davitt (1846-1906), a Fenian who was arrested in 1870 and freed in 1877, founded the Irish National Land League in Dublin and Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-91) became its president.

While Parnell was in America in 1879-80, he declared in a speech at Cincinnati that his aim was to cut 'the last link which keeps Ireland bound to England'. (Ranelagh, 1983 p.134) The Land League gained a large support throughout Ireland and its leaders fought a campaign against evictions in the Land War of 1879-82. The League worked with the Home Rule Movement which called for the three concessions for the Irish tenants known as the 'three Fs' namely: 'fair rent, to be assessed by arbitration; fixity of tenure, to be safe from eviction; freedom for the tenant to sell his land'. (Lowe, 1989, p.285)

By the year 1880, Disraeli whose energy was absorbed in foreign affairs failed to deal with the Irish problems. A general election was held in April resulting in the victory of the Liberals under William Gladstone for the second time. So how could Gladstone deal with the demands of the Land League?

4. Gladstone and the Land Reform:

Gladstone formed his second government in April 1880 and land reform represented the major element in his programme. This time he believed that his first task was to pass a law that would protect the Irish tenants from eviction.

4.1. The Second Land Act of 1881:

When Gladstone took office in 1880, the Royal Commission which was appointed under Disraeli was already in operation for the sake of examining the relations between landlord and tenant in Ireland. Under Gladstone's new government, a second Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the operation of the Land Act of 1870.

In order to bring a measure to protect tenants who were in arrears, Gladstone had to rely on the report of the Royal Commissions. But under the pressure of the Irish members, he was obliged to introduce an urgent bill in 1880 designed to give compensation to evicted tenants. Such a bill was rejected by the Lords since the majority of them owned lands in Ireland. During the same year, it was estimated that over 10.000 Irish tenants were evicted. (Lowe, 1989, p 286) These circumstances intensified the anger of the Irish tenants and led to an increase in agrarian violence. As to the Land League, it boycotted 'any tenant who took over a land from which the previous tenant had been evicted' (Lowe, 1989, p 286) and Gladstone responded by the Coercion Act of February 1881 to pacify Ireland.

Following the recommendations of the Royal Commissions' report, the Second Land Act was introduced in April 1881. It gave the Irish tenants what the Land League demanded the 'three Fs'. The Act set up also land courts empowered to fix 'a judicial rent' which was to last a period of fifteen years and was to be agreed between landlords and tenants. While paying his rent, the tenant would benefit from security of tenure and could also sell his right of occupancy if he wanted (Pearce & Stewart, 1996, p 116). The Act established a dual ownership and rendered the landlord a receiver of rent. This long rent guarantee drove many landlords to sell parts of their lands.

Under such an Act, tenants were to receive low-cost loans amounting between two thirds and three quarters of the purchase price which would be repaid over thirty- five years, but the financial assistance offered by the

government was not enough to attract tenants and consequently the number of properties purchased was very low. Thus, the Second Land Act of 1881 failed to restore order and the Land League boycotted the newly established land courts.

Gladstone was very disappointed because he had hoped that the Second Land Act would bring satisfactory results. Instead, it was welcomed only in Ulster where the majority of the population was Protestant and there was not a strong hostility against the government. Elsewhere in Ireland, the grievances of the tenants were intensified by the policy of coercion which was enforced upon the trouble makers.

For the Irish of Ulster, the Act succeeded to secure their customary rights. Hence they were ready to use the new procedure to adjust rents. In the other areas of Ireland, the situation was not calm because the success of the Act depended on the support of Parnell and the Land League. Parnell who was deeply attached to home rule found himself in a dilemma. He could neither accept completely the act nor reject it. He therefore claimed that the Act did not satisfy the Irish tenants and excluded lease- holders from any advantage.

As evictions and violence continued, Gladstone was compelled to imprison the leaders of the League among whom Parnell who wrote the 'No Rent Manifesto' which rendered the League illegal. (Ranelagh, 1983, p. 137)

Realizing that no one but Parnell could stop violence, Gladstone decided to make an agreement with him known as the Kilmainham Treaty in April 1882 under which Parnell accepted to 'co-operate cordially with the Liberal Party' in return for "an Arrears Bill to let tenants off their rent arrears that were accumulated during the campaign". (Pearce & Stewart, 1996, p.117) However a few days after releasing Parnell, a group of Irish founded an organization known as the "Invincibles" who murdered Lord Frederick Cavendish, the new Chief Secretary for Ireland and his Under- Secretary, Thomas Burke in Phoenix Park, Dublin. This was followed by other murders.

This situation forced Gladstone to pass an urgent Coercion Act to arrest the Invincibles. One year later, peace was restored when the Invincibles were brought to trial.

Gladstone realized that the Second Land Act of 1881 had not solved the tenants' problems. It was said that when he engaged himself in the Irish

question, and until his second ministry of 1880-85, 'there is no evidence that Gladstone was aware that the problem might go deeper than it might lie in the existence of an Irish nationality...' (Steele, 1970, p. 79). In 1884, he passed the Franchise Act which included Ireland. It was for the first time that an Act covered the whole UK. Under this Act, the franchise was extended to householders and lodgers who paid an annual rent of £10 (Speck, 1993, p. 100) or more. The occupiers of lands worth £10 a year were also enfranchised provided they had been resident for twelve months.

With the extension of the franchise, both the Conservatives and the Liberals had hoped to gain the support of Parnell. However, Parnell noticed that Salisbury, the leader of the Conservative Party was not ready to pass Home Rule for Ireland. Hence, he supported the Liberals during the election of November 1885. Gladstone formed his third ministry in January 1886 and the Irish question remained his major concern.

Conclusion :

The Irish question dominated British politics during the first two ministries of William Gladstone. Felt strongly concerned with the Irish sufferings, Gladstone, who started his first ministry with his famous sentence "my mission is to pacify Ireland", adopted many measures. During his first ministry, many measures were adopted to remedy the Irish grievances. By passing the First Irish Land Act of 1870, Gladstone intensified the anger of the Irish tenants. The situation became serious and compelled him to adopt the old policy of repression through the Coercion Act of 1871. The first measures were less successful than Gladstone had hoped because they resulted in the birth of the Home Rule Movement.

His second ministry carried the Second Land Act of 1881 through which Gladstone had expected that agitation would be reduced but it resulted in the spread of violence and an increasing pressure by the Land League on the government. In order to meet the crisis, Gladstone had to adopt the policies of coercion and concession.

The Irish demands became so extreme and Gladstone had to undertake drastic measures. Each time he attempted to make a concession, Gladstone had to face a strong opposition from members of the British Parliament mainly Anglican bishops and Anglo-Irish landlords- whose interests were threatened.

Though he failed to remedy the Irish grievances, Gladstone's deep conversion in home rule drove him to fight his colleagues and show them that the only way to solve the Irish problems was to allow the Irish to govern themselves. Gladstone's Irish policy after 1885 can be the object of another paper.

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