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The First Step to a Nation? The Irish postal service and the Home Rule Crisis.

In early 1911, a year before the introduction of the third Home Rule Bill, an article appeared in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the journal of the Irish cultural-nationalist language movement, the Gaelic League, demanding the inclusion in the bill of Irish control of the Post Office. It detailed how the Post Office had become part of the life of Ireland with 'branches in every town and every village almost of the land....Its officials translate our most private business, and its messengers come daily to the doors of all.'¹ Claiming that an English Post Office was an 'insuperable obstacle to the use of the Irish language in public business, with its examinations being an obstacle to educational reform', it demanded that any legislation must include control of this very important institution.²

On 24 April 1916, separatist rebels seized the General Post Office to proclaim the establishment of an Irish Republic. The Home Rule Bill had been subverted. While it has been argued that the GPO is central to all accounts of the Easter Rising of 1916,³ questions remain about the role of the Post Office in the Irish revolution. It has been suggested that 'we have no idea what appeal [the GPO] possessed' and although it was 'an impressive stage for the political

¹ 'A Foreign Post Office and Home Rule', *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 25 March 1911.

² Ibid.

³ K. Jeffery, *The GPO and the Easter Rising* (Dublin, 2006) p. 1.

drama'⁴ this had no strategic significance.⁵ Conversely, this article argues that the symbolism of choosing the GPO was profound. The 'richly symbolic significance' of storming the GPO in 1916 is unmistakeable.⁶ The Post Office in Ireland had entrenched the British state in the lives of ordinary Irish people and the GPO represented the physical manifestation of this. Nationalists fully understood the importance of gaining control of such an institution. This paper reassesses the proposition contained in the original Third Home Bill of 1912 to grant control of the Post Office to the Irish government. A reading of the debates on this aspect of the bill, at a parliamentary and popular level, and the ultimate fate of the provision, reveals wider concerns about the nature of the Home Rule settlement; threats to imperial authority, status, security and financial interests and the question of Ulster. It also illuminates whether anyone genuinely believed a significant Home Rule would be granted. The hopes of many nationalists for the ill-fated third Home Rule bill were high, but the chances of the bill ever passing in its original form were exiguous. Home Rule, which involved the granting of some form of devolved government to Ireland, had been on the agenda since 1885. Although given Royal assent in 1914, the Act was suspended for the duration of the war, and was surpassed eventually

⁴ C. Townshend, *Easter 1916* (London, 2005) p. 159.

⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

⁶ A. Jackson, in J. Cleary and C. Connolly (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, (Cambridge, 2005) p. 37.

by the Government of Ireland Act 1920. While the historiography of Home Rule is extensive, it has focused primarily on the Ulster question and the role of the Liberals. Few scholars have touched on the Post Office and then primarily in relation to the financial aspects of the bill and the appointment of personnel.⁷ Yet the ideal of establishing a separate Irish Post Office reveals much about the debate concerning the future of the government of Ireland.

The fate of the Post Office in Ireland reflected the fate of the country. That the Home Rule Act of 1914 never came into operation opened up possibilities for alternative action, and that rebels chose the GPO as the site to announce the establishment of an Irish republic was highly significant. Following the partition of Ireland by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, the Post Office was split.⁸ The newly formed states both used the Post Office to project their ideals. While Alvin Jackson and Patrick Joyce touch on the Post Office during the Victorian period, the subject has largely been ignored by historians.⁹ A recent reviewer of the work of Patrick Joyce wondered why he

⁷ See L. McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle: The transformation of Bureaucratic and Judicial Personnel in Ireland, 1892-1922* (Washington D.C., 1991); and M. Maguire, *The Civil Service and the revolution in Ireland, 1912-38* (Manchester, 2006).

⁸ See C. Fitzpatrick, 'Partition, postal services and Ulster Unionist politics 1921-27', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, Vol 11, no 1 (2016), 31-50.

⁹ A. Jackson, *The Two Unions* (Oxford, 2012), P. Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013); S. Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland* (Dublin, 2016);

did not conclude his book on post offices and freedom with the nationalists' taking of the GPO in 1916.¹⁰ This paper rectifies this omission.

II

As Patrick Joyce and Martin Daunton have shown, the Post Office was a powerful institution and business, engaged in a wide range of activities on a political, cultural and economic level.¹¹ Joyce has argued that the true life of the state was to be found in administration and that the Post Office was one of the main 'places and spaces' of power which demonstrated the tools, practices and rationales of governance.¹²

C. Dulin, *Ireland's Transition: The Postal History of the Transitional Period* (Dublin, 1991); M. Reynolds, *A History of the Irish Post Office* (1993). The role of the GPO and the 1916 Rising is covered by K. Jeffery, *The GPO and the Easter Rising*; S. Ferguson, *Self Respect and a Little Extra Leave: GPO Staff and the Easter Rising* (Dublin, 2011).

¹⁰ R. Colls, 'Post-modern Pat: The work of Patrick Joyce', *Cultural and Social History*, 13/2 (2016), pp.135-48, at p. 144.

¹¹ Joyce, *The State of Freedom* and Martin Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840* (London, 1985).

¹² Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p. 29.

The Post Office in Ireland in 1912 was a symbol of British power. The expansion of Victorian bureaucracy meant that there were more Irish people in public employment and the physical expression of the state was of increasing importance within everyday life.¹³ As Alvin Jackson has noted, the Post Office exemplified this state intrusion into the Irish landscape.¹⁴ Between 1800 and 1920, the Post Office became a universal communications system.¹⁵ It was the main channel of communications across the Empire and employed thousands of civil servants who obtained their positions through a political patronage system.¹⁶ In 1911 of the 23,000 civil servants in Ireland, 20,000 were in the Post Office.¹⁷

As an instrument of British policy the government was able to provide 'support for factions and classes it wished to foster and denied it to those it wished to weaken or render invisible'.¹⁸ The physical presence of the post offices in villages and towns, with post boxes bearing the royal insignia bought

¹³ 'A Foreign Post Office and Home Rule', *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 25 March 1911.

¹⁴ Jackson, *The Two Unions*, pp. 207-8.

¹⁵ Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p. 83.

¹⁶ For reasons of space there is no room to explain this complex process see J.E. and G.W.

Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde: A Maker of Modern Ireland* (Berkeley, 1991) pp. 229-30.

¹⁷ E. O'Halpin, *The Decline of the Union: British Government in Ireland 1892-1920* (Dublin, 1987) p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

people into contact with the British state in more ways. The trappings of Empire were reinforced by the paraphernalia of the Post Office (the colour red, insignia, stamps bearing the monarch's head) and so it entered people's lives in many ways.¹⁹ The Post Office administered old age pensions and the savings bank. Indeed it was argued that the Post Office had become a great carrying agent for British merchants and dealers in cheap goods 'helping them in their competition with retail traders of Ireland, giving every facility for business transacted in English'.²⁰ Ireland generated little revenue for the Post Office but was considered a vital strategic priority.²¹ There were repeated attempts to secure and maximise the speed and security of the postal connections between Britain and Ireland.²²

On the eve of the introduction of the third Home Rule bill, there was a growing concern in Ireland that the impending bill would not mention the Post Office. Rumours abounded that while the government was prepared to concede control of the Post Office, nationalist leaders were unwilling to accept it because it was running at a considerable loss. Writing in March 1912 before the publication of the terms of the bill, Lord Anthony MacDonnell, the former

¹⁹ K. Jeffery, 'Crown, communication and the colonial post: Stamps, the monarchy and the British empire', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34/1 (2006) pp.45-70.

²⁰ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 25 March 1911.

²¹ Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p. 68.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Under Secretary for Ireland from 1902 to 1908,²³ argued against transferring the Postal Department to the new Government. Although Ireland had an 'indefeasible claim', to the great bulk of the patronage within her shores, he did not think there was sufficient justification for an Irish post office which would incur 'the risk of dislocating the working of a great Imperial Department'.²⁴

Supporters of the transfer of the Post Office to the Irish government argued that if control of it was omitted from the bill, then it was a sham home rule. An editorial of the *Irish Independent*, in October 1911, declared that the fate of the 'mainly nationalist' 20,000 fellow employees, was 'in the hands of a small group of Englishmen and "loyalist" Irishmen at the head of the GPO, whose rule is so unpopular the whole of the Irish Post Office service is in a state of smouldering discontent'.²⁵ There was widespread condemnation of the perceived increasing centralising control and exclusion of competent Irishmen from positions within the Post Office. The Nationalist press was concerned about what they termed the 'dumping' process, which involved filling vacancies with men from England. That this was being done while a Home Rule bill was imminent should 'bring home to the Irish people the importance

²³ Jackson, *The Two Unions*, pp. 210-11.

²⁴ Lord MacDonnell of Swinford, Irish Admin Under Home Rule in J. H. Morgan (ed), *The New Irish Constitution*, (London, 1912) p 57.

²⁵ *Irish Independent*, 11 October 1911.

of having the Post Office under Irish control.’²⁶ In response to a rumour that the Post Office would be omitted from the bill, the staunchly Republican paper, the *Enniscorthy Echo*, argued omission implied that the Irish were unfit to be trusted with their post but ‘be at liberty to bear all the cost, provide the salaries but not have a voice in the appointment of a single official’.²⁷

The relationship between nationalist Ireland and the Post Office was antagonistic. Control over the Post Office had long been a nationalist ambition. The Gaelic League, ‘the nursery for the revolutionary generation of 1916’,²⁸ resented the ruling of the GPO in London that all mail in Ireland be addressed in English and saw the Post Office as a powerful Anglicising agency in Ireland. It has been argued that the extension of the postal system into the west of Ireland corresponded with the development of education and English.²⁹ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, lamented that as ‘the social influence of the village postmaster was tremendous ... against him the voice of the league was often lost like a voice in the wilderness.’³⁰ The League also wanted Irish to be an optional subject for the Post Office examinations and demanded the appointment of

²⁶ *Irish Independent* 8 January 1912.

²⁷ *Enniscorthy Echo*, November 14 1911.

²⁸ A.C. Hepburn, ‘Language, Religion and national identity in Ireland since 1880’, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 2/2(2001) pp.197-220, p. 197.

²⁹ Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p. 71.

³⁰ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 20 April 1912.

Irish-speaking postmasters in Irish-speaking areas. A bitter campaign to allow mail in Irish had started in 1900, which, if successful, threatened to undermine authority in the postal system.³¹ As bilingualism was not recognised in Ireland this would violate government policy.³² The *Freeman's Journal* suggested Dublin Castle's attitude was that any recognition of anything relating to Gaelicism would compromise its position.³³ Nationalist MPs took up the cause and raised matters in parliament.³⁴ The MP for Leitrim South warned the Postmaster General Austen Chamberlain that the Irish language movement was 'a great and growing one and not to be trifled with'.³⁵ Douglas Hyde, President of the Gaelic League, argued that the 'GPO made Irish penal' in the Post Office and that the battle for the mail-in-Irish campaign was part of a battle of 'Irish manhood and self-respect'.³⁶ By 1905, the Dublin GPO was receiving more than 1200 letters addressed in Irish each day, and the Dublin postmaster had reassigned some clerks and telegraphists with knowledge of Irish to translate the addresses. Just prior to the League's Language Week, a week-long festival

³¹ For a detailed account of this, see J.E and G.W. Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, pp. 228-243.

³² *Ibid.*, p.230.

³³ *Freemans Journal*, 4 March 1905.

³⁴ *House of Commons (HC) Debates*, 12 November 1902, vol. 114, cols 756-7; 6 March 1905, vol. 142, cols 423-5.

³⁵ *HC Debates*, 6 November 1902, vol. 114, col. 273.

³⁶ *Irish Examiner*, 13 March 1905.

which celebrated the Irish language, it was receiving hundreds of packages which contained the announcements and paraphernalia for the event. The GPO refused to handle them and a public battle ensued. At the Language Week procession, which occurred at the height of this conflict, the Archbishop of Dublin, William Walsh, told the crowd he had attended the event primarily 'because of the attack made by the post office'³⁷. He praised the Gaelic League for its work in attempting to 'bring Ireland back to her proper place in the world'.³⁸

The battle between the GPO and the Gaelic League was carried out in the pages of *An Claidheamh Soluis* which claimed; 'The Gaelic League and the British state [...] sees clearly, that an educated Irish speaking Ireland means, in the truest sense of the words, a free Ireland'.³⁹ Letters to the editor complained vociferously about the penalising of Irish speakers by the GPO.⁴⁰ In November 1911, the central council of the Gaelic League resolved that under any scheme of Home Rule it was essential that the Post Office be placed under Irish control 'otherwise it will be a grave danger to the Irish language and Irish Nationality'.⁴¹ In the same year the Dungarvan branch of the Gaelic League

³⁷ *The Times*, 13 March 1905.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 28 October 1905.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 March 1913.

⁴¹ *The Times*, 11 November 1911.

adopted a resolution requesting the appointment to the Post Office in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, of a postmaster having knowledge of Irish. It argued that over 20,000 postal packets passed through the Post Office each year and were often delayed, and that members of the branch were expected to assist postal authorities in translating names and addresses. In 1912, the newly appointed English-born Secretary of the Post Office, Arthur Norway, despite being 'quite in sympathy with the Irish language movement as an evidence of patriotic feeling or as a literary pursuit,' considered it unnecessary to insist upon a knowledge of Irish as a condition for appointment. He thought it would only encourage 'other similar applications from other quarters' and would cause 'a good deal of unnecessary trouble'.⁴² It was decided that the advertisement would not call for Irish speakers as the 'more suitable candidate would not apply'.⁴³ *Sinn Féin Weekly* pointed out in response that 'nearly 40 per cent of the people of the town of Dungarvan speak Irish and two out of every three persons in the surrounding country are Irish speakers' and suggested the PMG would not attempt to do a similar thing in Wales.⁴⁴

The appointment of Norway stimulated a chorus of complaints in the nationalist press and political circles. It was expected that James Mac Mahon,

⁴² British Postal Museum Archive (BPMA) Post 36/190 Irish minutes 1912.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Sinn Féin Weekly*, 14 December 1912.

the assistant secretary of the GPO and a Catholic, would be given the job.⁴⁵ The dissident Nationalist MP Tim Healy saw it as a sign that the Liberals did not believe home rule would become law.⁴⁶ It was as a 'conspiracy that made a mockery of Home Rule.'⁴⁷ The Archdeacon of Armagh, Monsignor Patrick Segrave of Drogheda, declared it 'an insult' and 'particularly hurtful at the present moment' in light of Home Rule.⁴⁸ *Sinn Féin Weekly* argued Ulster Unionists would be stupid if they did not 'see in the appointment a stronger anti-Home Rule argument than any it has yet been able to forge. The appointment was a declaration of Irish incapacity for administrative government'.⁴⁹

Other nationalist groups demanded control over the Post Office. D.P. Moran's nationalist journal *Leader*, which championed control over the Post Office, denounced Norway's appointment 'as an insult to Ireland'.⁵⁰ Arguing that the Irish Post Office had for generations been ruled 'by unsympathetic Englishmen who have never gained the confidence of the people or the respect of the staff,' Moran complained 'for too long we have been putting up with the

⁴⁵ McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle*, p. 164.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ L. O'Broin, *Dublin Castle and the 1916 Rising* (Dublin 1966) p. 15.

⁴⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 1 August 1912.

⁴⁹ *Sinn Féin Weekly*, 17 August 1912.

⁵⁰ *The Leader*, 24 August 1912.

tap of the Orange drum'.⁵¹ Norway's appointment, he suggested, provided nationalists with an opportunity to show that Ireland is determined to 'fight her corner'.⁵² He argued that unless the Irish party responded there would a loss of confidence in the 'ability and grit of the party.' With acute prescience, he asked: 'who's to say the government won't cheat them over Home Rule in the details?'⁵³

The *Leader* denounced discrimination against Catholics in employment and saw the Post Office as a hotbed of recruitment for Freemasonry. It decried any appointments made to non-Catholics, or men 'dumped from England'.⁵⁴ Moran's editorial condemned the transfer of control of the Dublin Stores branch to London, challenging the Irish parliamentary party to do something.⁵⁵ The *Leader* saw all these changes as part of a Unionist plot for which the Liberal government was responsible, as they were 'calculated to place extra difficulties in the way when the Post Office in Ireland comes to be placed under a Home Rule government'.⁵⁶

⁵¹ *The Leader*, 31 August 1912.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *The Leader*, 9 March 1912.

⁵⁵ *The Leader*, 24 February 1912.

⁵⁶ *The Leader*, 17 February 1912.

The radical separatist political movement, Sinn Féin, also called for control of the Post Office in its mouthpiece *Sinn Féin Weekly*. In 1907 Sinn Féin issued a stamp which it claimed stood for 'the right of the Irish people to have their own Post office'.⁵⁷ It issued propaganda labels bearing images reflecting very distinct Irish themes such as the harp, Irish wolfhound and shields of the four provinces of Ireland. Thomas Esmonde MP, who had split briefly from the IPP to join Sinn Féin and who designed the first propaganda label, suggested he would only reply to letters bearing the stamp.⁵⁸ He was well aware of the dilemma posed by his former colleague, Nationalist MP Tom Kettle who wrote, acerbically, that Sinn Féin would 'undergo corruption once more when it sticks on its letter a stamp with the superscription of an English king'.⁵⁹ The PMG later issued regulations preventing the use of the stamp on the address side of the envelope.⁶⁰ These stamps would later resurface at the time of the 1916 Rising.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Irish Independent*, 20 January 1908.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 January 1908.

⁵⁹ T. Kettle, 'A Note on Sinn Féin in Ireland', *The North American Review*, Vol. 187, No 626, Jan 1908, p 54.

⁶⁰ *Freemans Journal*, 23 July 1908.

⁶¹ C. Dulin, *Ireland's Transition*, p. 281-2.

II

The third Home Rule Bill was far from satisfactory for all sides. It offered a modest measure of self-government, not as thorough as Gladstone's recommendations. Nationalists, under the leadership of John Redmond, were dissatisfied with the financial provisions but pragmatic about them,⁶² and British and Irish unionists were unhappy that it gave too much. The radical nationalist group Sinn Féin denounced it. The unionist *Irish Times* declared there was a widespread 'lack of interest in the bill, that 'honest nationalists, if not hostile in their criticism, are lukewarm in their general approval, while Unionist businessmen openly condemn it as political trickery'.⁶³ Initial debates on the bill concerned the financial aspects, described by contemporary politicians as presenting the likely major difficulty.⁶⁴ With the financial

⁶² P. Jalland, 'Irish home-rule finance: a neglected dimension of the Irish question, 1910-14,' *Irish Historical Studies*, 23/91 (1983) pp. 233-4.

⁶³ *Irish Times*, 15 April 1912.

⁶⁴ Jalland, 'Irish home-rule finance', pp. 233-4; Parliamentary Archives (PA) SAM A/41 'Irish Finance Present Position and outline of Proposals'

settlement dependent on a unitary state, a compromise on Ulster would have meant complete readjustment of the financial settlement.⁶⁵

The financial scheme of the bill was complex.⁶⁶ Under the new scheme while the Irish parliament was denied full responsibility for Irish finance, it gained control over some Post Office revenue. This excluded the Post Office Savings Bank, which remained one of the reserved services and would not be transferred until well after the Irish government had been established.⁶⁷ Administrative control of the Post Office was transferred to the Irish government. Nationalists were pleased that this meant control over about 25,000 Irish civil servants.⁶⁸ The Irish government would be able to alter certain stamps, stamps on bills of exchange and contracts. An advisory committee on Irish finance, led by Henry Primrose, found that while there had been a decrease in population there was an increase of nearly seventy-four per cent in fifteen years in the cost of running the Post Office and concluded that much of

⁶⁵ A. Jackson, 'What if Home Rule had been enacted in 1912' in N. Ferguson, *Virtual History* (Cambridge, 1997) p. 197.

⁶⁶ Jalland, 'Irish home-rule finance' p. 244.

⁶⁷ A bill to amend the provision for the Government of Ireland, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1912-13, No. 136, vol 2, clause 44 pp 26-7; *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912 vol 42 col. 1515.

⁶⁸ O'Halpin, *The Decline of the Union*, p. 7.

the rising cost was due to the unified system of administration.⁶⁹ Herbert Samuel, the Postmaster-General, who was in charge of drafting the financial provisions of the bill, later rejected the Primrose committee's recommendations for Irish financial independence, but concurred with its findings regarding the Post Office. As the financial burden on the postal system had increased to more than 250,000 pounds, he argued the Home Rule Bill aimed to 'throw upon the Irish people, the responsibility of regulating the Post Office'.⁷⁰

The initial objection to the inclusion of the Post Office in transfer of powers to an Irish parliament was part of general criticism of what was seen as the anti-imperial nature of the bill and the effects it would have on the north east. Ulster Unionists' strongly opposed the bill and plans to establish a provisional government had begun in September 1911.⁷¹ In his maiden speech in the House of Commons Belfast-born Liberal Unionist MP for Cambridge University, Joseph Larmor, asked a Dublin controlled post office would protect the commercial interests of the north of Ireland. Arguing that the reason for the increased costs of the Post Office in Ireland was due to the south and west of Ireland he claimed that the nationalists have been able to bring pressure on the

⁶⁹ Report by the Committee on Irish Finance, 1912, Cd 6153, p. 6. See also Minutes of Evidence taken by the Committee on Irish Finance, 1913 cd 6799, particularly M.A. Ennis pp. 134-5, and Charles A. King, pp. 147-158.

⁷⁰ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1511; a study of Samuel's papers concerning Ireland do not shed more light on this aspect of the Bill, PA, SAM A/41.

⁷¹ A. Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History, 1800-2000* (Oxford, 2003) pp. 138-9.

government for their own purposes.⁷² Conservative MP Donald Macmaster argued it would put into the hands of the Irish government an enormous power should they wish to use it in event of conflict between it and the Ulster people, and asked 'is this a preparation for that conflict'?⁷³ Underlining Ulster Unionists' fervent opposition to Home Rule, and the threat that they would not pay taxes to an Irish parliament, he asked whether they would now be compelled to buy Irish stamps.⁷⁴ Liberal MP Robert Harcourt mocked that the battle cry of 1912 was 'No disintegration of the Post Office.'⁷⁵ Following the initial debates, *The Times* predicted 'from the Unionist side, with much sympathy from the Radicals, an attack on the surrender of the Post Office in Ireland'.⁷⁶

On 17 October 1912, as the Commons sat to debate the legislative powers of the Irish government, Scottish unionist MP John Stewart Murray, the Marquis of Tullibardine, proposed an amendment to reserve the Post Office to the Imperial parliament. This led to a very long debate from which it is clear that the main objections to transfer of the Post Office to an Irish government reflected anxieties about Home Rule in general: threats to imperial authority

⁷² *HC Debates*, 8 May 1912, vol. 42, col. 453.

⁷³ *HC Debates* 7 May 1912, vol. 42, col 317.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *HC Debates*, 9 May 1912, vol. 42, col. 671.

⁷⁶ *The Times*, 10 June 1912.

and status, national security, financial interests, the question of patronage and Ulster's position.⁷⁷

One of the main charges levelled at the government for including the Post Office in the Home Rule Bill was that it was a shameless ploy to get Irish votes designed to fan separatist hopes. It has been suggested that British and Irish Unionists interpreted the Home Rule bill as an assault on Britain's unwritten constitution.⁷⁸ Austen Chamberlain argued that a separate Post Office was 'a contravention of the settled principle of every Constitution in the British Empire'.⁷⁹ Conceding such 'universally regarded' sovereign powers, would 'fulfil the Nationalist idea' of sovereignty by giving Ireland the appearance of sovereign power.⁸⁰ It would encourage the Irish government to enforce further claims and eventually rid itself of any control by Westminster.⁸¹ The Liberal Unionist Harry Lawson claimed this would give the Irish government an 'opportunity for the exercise of the national fancy'. It would be

⁷⁷ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1491.

⁷⁸ D. Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912-39* (Oxford, 1998) p. 44.

⁷⁹ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1523.

⁸⁰ *HC Debates* 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1518-9.

⁸¹ *HC Debates* 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1524.

able to 'issue stamps and this could be interpreted as an indication of a National Government exercising national prerogatives'.⁸²

Unionist leader Edward Carson suggested the government was trying to satisfy the nationalists by supplying them with a national badge through the Post Office. He argued that those 'great commercial people who hated the national badge' would suffer great inconvenience if a separate post office was established in Ireland.⁸³ He attacked the separatist doctrine that Ireland was run at a loss to England as part of the UK and challenged the postmaster general to go to the south and west of Ireland to tell home rulers that the main objective was to save the British exchequer and transfer the cost to Ireland.⁸⁴ Drawing on an argument that lay at the heart of Ulster Unionist objections to Home Rule, Carson argued that separation would lead to economic hardship. He accused nationalists of sacrificing prosperity for principles, arguing they preferred 'empty stomachs and rags' to not having their 'sentimental' aspirations of nationality satiated. He objected to the imposition of this on those who did not share those aspirations.⁸⁵

⁸² *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1506.

⁸³ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1563.

⁸⁴ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1564.

⁸⁵ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1566.

William Moore, MP for Armagh North, feared the provision would reduce the 'mercantile industrial part of the country to a mere rural delivery.'⁸⁶ He saw nothing in the bill preventing the Irish Parliament when it became 'master of its own postal service' from making its own postal rates, wondering what was to prevent the Irish Government from announcing England was a foreign country.⁸⁷ Furthermore, he argued when the Irish parliament wanted to raise some revenue, it would extract it from Belfast:

Why not get it out of the North? After all we are 75% engaged in agriculture, do not bother very much about writing letters, and we are not very much concerned about newspapers, but those wretched fellows in Belfast are writing letters, hundreds of them every day, and many of them to England. Let us put an extra half-penny on the fellow who writes to a foreign country. It will help to relieve our burden.⁸⁸

Colonial analogies, which were a prominent feature of the debates on Home Rule, were applied to the position and role of the Post Office⁸⁹ and comparisons made with Australia, South Africa, and Canada, where separate

⁸⁶ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1538.

⁸⁷ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1540.

⁸⁸ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1540.

⁸⁹ See G.K. Peatling, *British Opinion and Irish Self-government, 1865-1925: From Unionism to Liberal Commonwealth* (Dublin, 2001), Alan J. Ward *The Irish Constitutional Tradition*, (Dublin, 1994) pp. 81-84.

post offices were abolished after federation.⁹⁰ One MP argued that the bill threatened to 'put the clock back in this country, a clock which has been very much advanced under Liberal auspices in the Colonies'.⁹¹ The British and Irish postal systems, it was argued, were more interdependent than postal systems in the colonies.

Arguably, the most controversial aspect of the possible transfer of the Post Office was the issue of patronage, with many objectors claiming it was the sole reason for the provision. Nationalists were concerned about the lack of control over patronage, and critics argued that Irish nationalists had always been jealous of the London central office exercising this in Ireland.⁹² The question of patronage and Home Rule was a vexed one.⁹³ Carson claimed that patronage was 'the emblem of sovereignty for which Ireland are so enthusiastic',⁹⁴ while Lord MacDonnell had claimed that this was mostly of a

⁹⁰ See K.T. Livingstone, *The Wired National Continent: the communication revolution and Federating Australia*, (Melbourne, 1996); W. Smith, *The History of the Post Office in British North America 1639-1870* (Cambridge, 1920).

⁹¹ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col 1494.

⁹² *The Times*, 18 October 1912.

⁹³ See J .McConnell, ' "Jobbing with Tory and Liberal" : Irish Nationalists and the Politics of Patronage, 1880-1914', *Past and Present*, No 188 (Aug.,2005) pp 105-31.

⁹⁴ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1561.

‘petty and purely local character’.⁹⁵ William Moore argued it was ‘naked and unashamed transaction’, which would see the Post Office ‘packed with all the promising recruits from the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Gaelic League and the United Ireland League.’⁹⁶ As positions in the Post Office did not require a skilled education or examination, the ‘password of the Hibernians will be enough to get the job’ and all the extremists in the nationalist movement would fill the positions and be paid by the British government. Moore argued that jobbery was already a feature of the British Post Office, and that the nationalists led by Joe Devlin had made ‘a point of getting their nephews, cousins, aunts and everybody else jammed into the Post Office at the present time’. He then broadened this to a concern about general security: ‘When you have the Post Office handed over to these people, what security will there be for those who differ with them, those who are in a minority and must, ... suffer?’⁹⁷

While Moore, a Unionist judge who played an active part in strengthening Ulster unionist forces by reviving the various Ulster defence associations against any attempt to weaken the link with the union,⁹⁸ was not an unbiased commentator, the reference to the Ancient Order of Hibernians

⁹⁵ MacDonnell, ‘Irish Administration Under Home Rule’, p. 57.

⁹⁶ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1536.

⁹⁷ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1537-8.

⁹⁸ See Patrick Buckland, *Irish Unionism 2: Ulster Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland 1886-1922* (Dublin, 1973) p. 20.

(AOH) was not unfounded. It reflected a genuine fear held by Ulster Protestants. The AOH was an oath bound society, which it has been argued, was viewed by Ulster unionists as more important than the Irish parliamentary party.⁹⁹ Even Nationalist MPs had serious concerns about the AOH.¹⁰⁰ On a popular level, such fears were great. Incidents such as the threatened boycott of the post office at Glenfarme in Co. Leitrim over the appointment of a protestant postmaster in a district, which was 95% Roman Catholic, led the unionist press to ask if that was what was to be expected under Home Rule.¹⁰¹

In Tipperary in a meeting at Cahir Castle on Monday 20 May 1912 to protest against Home Rule, local Unionists under the Irish Unionist Alliance registered their disapproval of the idea of a separate Post Office.¹⁰² In Coleraine, at a meeting of North Derry Unionists the MP for north Londonderry, Hugh Barrie claimed that nationalists were:

rubbing their hands and gloating about the prospect of bespoiling the Philistines; They already had practically full control as the squeezing out of protestants had been going on steadily for the last six years.

⁹⁹ P. Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question* (Oxford, 1994) p. 75.

¹⁰⁰ A.C.Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford 2008) p96.

¹⁰¹ *The Scotsman*, 29 October 1913.

¹⁰² *Irish Times*, 21 May 1912; *Dublin Daily Express*, 21 May 1912

Once you let them be supreme masters of the situation and the notice would immediately be posted: No protestant need apply.

He was convinced that nationalist control of the Post Office would be irreparable.¹⁰³

The question of the use of the Irish language also elicited great concern among unionists. At the committee stage of the bill in October, unionists moved an amendment aiming to prevent an Irish parliament making it a requirement to have Irish as a qualification for public positions.¹⁰⁴ L.S. Amery argued that 'every citizen of the UK had as much right to expect as good service in Ireland as he gets anywhere else in the UK' and this included English being spoken in post offices in Ireland.¹⁰⁵ Duncan Pirie, the Scottish Liberal MP for Aberdeen North, labelled the establishment of a separate Post Office a 'most retrogressive step'. He claimed that when in Dublin, he 'found characters which, if I had not known what they were, I should have taken for Greek or Hebrew. [This bill] with its fantastic propositions, is driving many Home Rulers away from Home Rule'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *Irish Times*, 1 June 1912.

¹⁰⁴ Bew, *Ideology*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ *HC Debates* 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1529.

¹⁰⁶ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol. 42, col. 1526.

For all the objections made to the transfer of control of the Post Office to the Irish government the amendment was lost; but the government majority fell from 108 to 79. Concerns about security led to an amendment in committee stage that in times of war control of the Post Office would revert to the imperial government.¹⁰⁷ The unionist press lauded attacks made on the proposal. *The Belfast Newsletter* argued that the debate on the Post Office and financial aspects of the Bill, 'betrayed the secret of the Bill's iniquities – the surrender of the Government to the Nationalists' demands that make for the assertion of national independence'.¹⁰⁸ *Northern Whig* claimed the debate only served to 'emphasise the horrible muddle into which the Government has got itself'. It argued that the only reason for handing over the Post Office was for patronage and the big drop in the majority was an indication of uneasiness among the rank and file.¹⁰⁹

The nationalist paper the *Freeman's Journal* accused the Unionists of histrionics and 'indulging in the wildest exaggerations' claiming that if an Irish postage stamp meant the disintegration of the Empire they could not have 'denounced the symbol of a separate Irish authority with more vehemence.' While Carson was 'eloquent', on the economic consequences of nationalism it

¹⁰⁷ A Bill as amended in committee to amend the provision of the Government of Ireland Act, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1912-13, No. 341, Vol. 2, Clause 45, p. 30.

¹⁰⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 October 1912.

¹⁰⁹ *Northern Whig*, 18 October 1912.

claimed 'a ragged nationality' would at least be 'respectable and would give more promise for the future'.¹¹⁰ The *Irish Independent* bemoaned the present 'extravagant' 'unified system', responsible for the increase in expenditure.¹¹¹

There was also concern about increasing political activity in the Post Office. In August 1912 there was speculation that Belfast postal workers intended to mutiny on September 28 and take over the Post Office to show their contempt for the present government. A correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* argued that 'no-one acquainted with the local conditions' could have made such a statement as it 'was common knowledge that the greater proportion of men and women employed in the Post Office are Nationalists, socialists or adherents of Sinn Féin'. It argued that the unrest which has been growing in Belfast was not political but due to genuine grievances of high pressure, low pay and alleged favouritism. Any action that would take place would do so with fellow workers in Dublin.¹¹² However, the date in question was the day on which Ulster Unionists would sign the Solemn League and Covenant in protest at Home Rule. Furthermore, the *Derry Journal* reported that plans were afoot by the Provisional Government to replace the King George

¹¹⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 18 October 1912.

¹¹¹ *Irish Independent*, 18 October 1912.

¹¹² *Manchester Guardian*, 9 August 1912.

stamp with one bearing the image of Carson.¹¹³ Many postal workers were involved in political organisations, and a few were dismissed from service due to this.¹¹⁴ Many Post Office officials were in the Gaelic League both in Ireland, and in particular the London branch, where they were introduced to separatist politics.¹¹⁵

III

By December 1913, it was clear that changes to the provisions on the Post Office in the bill were afoot.¹¹⁶ By then, Ulster unionist opposition to the bill had escalated. In January 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force was formed. In December 1913, in a speech to the Reform Club in Manchester, Asquith intimated that he would jettison the idea of establishing a separate Post Office under Irish rule. Asquith's speech was in response to one made by Carson which had stipulated three main objections to the Home Rule Bill. These were that no settlement

¹¹³ *Derry Journal*, 19 August 1912.

¹¹⁴ See Maguire, *Civil Service and the Revolution in Ireland*, p 31.

¹¹⁵ Ibid p 30; R. Foster *Vivid Faces*, (London, 2014) p. 236.

¹¹⁶ The National Archives (NA) CAB. 37/117/9 , A suggestion for the Solution of the Ulster Question 18 Dec 1913 p 2; PA SAM A/41 draft.

would humiliate Ulster; that Ireland should not get any separate/exceptional treatment to other parts of the UK; and that there would be no separation.¹¹⁷ Asquith argued that the bill had no such intentions (of causing separation) and, directing his words to 'our federalist friends' that the government was willing to 'consider with an open mind, any stipulations in the Bill – I refer to the case of the Post Office - which in their view, have a separatist or anti-Federal tendency.'¹¹⁸

Speculation about the possible omission from the Bill of the transfer of the Post Office produced an outcry in nationalist circles. The Irish writer and enthusiast Peadar Toner Mac Fhionnlaoich (McGinley) writing under the name of *Cú Uladh*, the Hound of Ulster, called on the Gaelic League to act:

With the single exception of the National Board the Post Office is the deadliest influence in Ireland against the Irish language...Home Rule without the Post Office will be treated by us – that is by Irish Ireland – as no Home Rule and that any settlement with the Post Office left out ...[is] no settlement at all.¹¹⁹

A letter to the *Irish Independent* decried 'this great and good bill is having its powers so watered down that it suffers by comparison with any of the British

¹¹⁷ *The Times*, 4 December 1913.

¹¹⁸ Speech by Asquith cited in *The Spectator*, 13 December 1913.

¹¹⁹ *Irish Independent*, 19 December 1913.

self-governing colonies'.¹²⁰ It argued that England had failed in her administration of the Irish postal service, and that taking this over was a national imperative for Ireland.¹²¹ It accused the government of pandering to the Ulster Unionists to avert a possible rebellion.¹²²

In a bid to placate unionists, in December 1914 Asquith offered Carson a vague kind of 'home rule within home rule', making many concessions to the Unionists. As expected, one of these was the removal of the Post Office from the control of the Irish legislature.¹²³ Redmond reluctantly agreed. In Redmond's personal papers, there is an underlining of the amendment declaring the withdrawal of the clause providing for a separate Post Office.¹²⁴ The nationalist press made much of the fact that the Nationalist party did not seem to be fighting the government on this. A letter to *Irish Independent* admonished the 'silence of the IPP, and others on the matter' and wondered whether due to its deficit, 'people were indifferent to what becomes of the Post Office'.¹²⁵ In the meantime, Carson rejected the suggestions and this later led to the exclusion of

¹²⁰ *Irish Independent*, 19 December 1914.

¹²¹ *Irish Independent*, 2 February 1914.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ NA CAB 37/119/20, 'Suggestions in regard to Irish Government Bill, 1914' p. 1.

¹²⁴ National Library Ireland (NLI) MS 15,266 John Redmond papers, 'Suggestions for a settlement of the Irish question'.

¹²⁵ Letter to *Irish Independent*, 2 February 1914.

some part of Ulster from the bill, and eventual partition of Ireland. As Redmond's hope of achieving Home Rule was lost, so too was the chance for a separate Post Office.

The overriding objection to the granting of a separate Post Office for Ireland was predicated on the belief that it represented a step on the way to separation. Conservatives and many Liberals fundamentally believed that home rule would never satisfy nationalists' demands. Unionist MP Walter Long claimed nationalists disliked the bill seeing it as a transitory measure on the road to separation. The debates on the transferring of control of the Post Office to an Irish government reveal the deep concerns about the wider implications of granting a legislature to Ireland.

An all-Ireland settlement to the Home Rule question proved impossible in 1914. Ronan Fanning argues that Redmond and the nationalists refused to acknowledge this impossibility by the liberal government, which colluded in the pretence that it would be passed in the form it was introduced.¹²⁶ The debates and eventual *volte face* on the Post Office can be seen as part of this, nothing but an illusion of a national fancy.

¹²⁶ Fanning, *Fatal Path*, p. 351.

IV

Recent work on the Irish revolution has examined the ideological justification for targets chosen by the 1916 rebels.¹²⁷ The long running battle between the Gaelic League and the Post Office over the use of Irish in the mail, and the desire of nationalists to have control over this institution, gives context to the choice of the GPO as a rebel target. In March 1914, commenting on the continued refusal of the Post Office to accept mails in Irish, one of the founding members of the Irish Volunteers, The O'Rahilly, argued 'being evidently regarded as a minority too weak for effective resistance they are made Outlanders in their own country.' He noted that packages in French were accepted without question whereas Irish speakers were ordered to learn English. As to the silence of the press on this, he wrote 'nobody cared tuppence about the rights of a minority unless that minority is organised, armed and unscrupulous'.¹²⁸ States have long made symbolic use of the environment through government and public buildings.¹²⁹ As G.A. Boyd argues the GPO

¹²⁷ See Lauren Arrington, 'Socialist Republican Discourse and the 1916 Rising: The Occupation of the Jacob's Biscuit factory and the South Dublin Union Explained, *Journal of British Studies* 53/4 (2014) pp. 992-1010.

¹²⁸ *Irish Freedom*, 'The Post Office and Irish', March 1914.

¹²⁹ L. Vane, *Architecture, Power and National Identity* (New Haven, 1992) p. 3.

demonstrated British presence from its architectural features to the diurnal departures of the mail coach bound for London. Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the rebellion, is said to have understood the value of space and a physical architectural backdrop for action.¹³⁰ As a space of power, the GPO in Dublin, like post offices throughout the land, was a physical expression of the British state in Ireland. After the outbreak of war in 1914, Post Offices throughout Ireland displayed recruitment posters and Nationalists were arrested for tearing them down throughout the country.¹³¹ During the Rising, copies of the Proclamation of an Irish Republic were pasted over at least eleven recruitment posters while others were torn down.¹³²

The importance of institutions for the building of national character was repeatedly expounded by the Gaelic League, which argued ‘deprive a nation of its institutions and you deprive it very largely of its national mind, and of the

¹³⁰ G.A. Boyd, ‘Negation: The GPO and a collapsing of Time’, in G.A. Boyd and J. McLaughlin, (eds) *Infrastructure and the Architectures of Modernity in Ireland 1916-2016* (Farnham, 2015) p. 11.

¹³¹ *Derry Sentinel*, 15 April 1915; *Dublin Daily Express*, 12 May 1915, 22 March 1915

¹³² Bureau of Military History Witness Statements, (BMH WS) No. 288 Charles Saurin, p. 17; *Irish Times*, 26 February 2016; For a copy of the Proclamation posted over the recruitment poster ‘Will You Make a Forth?’ see E. Madigan, ‘A Seamless Robe of Irish Experience’: The First World War, the Irish Revolution and centenary commemoration’ *History Ireland*, 4 Vol 22 July/August 2014.

means of giving effect to its national will.’¹³³ Nationalists saw securing control of the Post Office, as a step towards realising its national will. A letter to *The Times* during the debate on the third home rule bill, suggested that ‘A peculiar postage stamp is a symbol of separateness which must have an alienating effect of the rising generation’.¹³⁴ During the debates in the House of Commons, one Conservative MP claimed it would be ‘a source of legitimate pride to a Nationalist when...he can lick his own national stamp and put it on his own letters’.¹³⁵ The *Irish Worker* reminded its readers ‘we want to be recognised as a Nation ...Did you ever hear of a colony – never mind a nation – which had not the right to issue stamps?’¹³⁶ D. M. Reid has argued that ‘for the colonized, postage stamps were one more daily reminder of their humiliation and powerlessness’.¹³⁷ At the time of the Rising the banned Sinn Féin propaganda labels were reprinted and used.¹³⁸

¹³³ ‘Home Rule and Nationality’, *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 20 April 1912.

¹³⁴ *The Times*, 4 December 1913.

¹³⁵ *HC Debates*, 17 October 1912, vol.42 col. 1544.

¹³⁶ *Irish Worker*, 26 October 1912.

¹³⁷ D.M Reid, ‘The symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 19/2 (1994), p. 246.

¹³⁸ C. Dulin, *Ireland’s Transition*, p. 281-2.

Nationalists realised the power of possessing control of the Post Office and hence were adamant it be included in their demands for self-government. Unionists feared what the loss of this control would do to the safety of empire and their livelihoods and their sense of national identity. Just as the likelihood of the Home Rule Act to deliver the Irish a reasonable form of self-government and the ownership of an independent Irish post office seemed unlikely in 1916, the seizing of the GPO by the rebels to announce the republic was hugely emblematic. As a bastion of the British state from which the Union flag flew and letters bearing the stamps of the empire were sent, it was an important space to assert ownership of 'that patriotic emblem' which had for so long been denied them. Far more than being merely symbolic, it was a key assertion of identity, power and nation.