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The Rise of Northern Unionism's Influence on the Political Scene of Great Britain Against the Backdrop of Belfast's Social and Economic Transformations During the Great War

Summary: This article examines the situation in Belfast during the First World War, considering its role as the political and economic centre of the north of Ireland. It explores whether the global conflict contributed to the city's development or led to its stagnation, focusing on three key aspects: economic, social, and political. The economic analysis particularly highlights the state of the shipbuilding industry. The study of social conditions reveals the economic, religious, and cultural sources of divisions among Belfast's residents and shipyard workers. Meanwhile, the discussion of the political aspect traces key transformations within the Irish unionist movement, mainly its faction closely linked to Ulster and Belfast. The article aims to outline the situation in north of Ireland during the Great War to explain the causes of the growing social divisions in the interwar period, which ultimately led to the establishment of an administratively separate Northern Ireland.

Keywords: Ireland, Northern Ireland, Belfast, unionism, First World War, shipbuilding industry, Home Rule

Analyses of the transformations that Ireland underwent during the Great War usually focus on national issues and the actions taken by nationalist organisations. When discussing events on the island, the Easter Rising and the rise of the Sinn Féin party are therefore typically mentioned. However, the impact of the conflict on the northern region of Ireland and the distinct identity that developed in this area at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries — socially, economically, and politically — is rarely examined.

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Yet the changes that took place at that time had far-reaching consequences not only for this region but for the island as a whole, and it is precisely in the global conflict that the origins of Ireland's later partition can be found.

For this reason, this study aims to present the condition of Belfast as the political and economic centre of the north of Ireland during the First World War and to attempt to answer the question of whether this was a period of decline, stagnation, or development. To achieve this, it is necessary to distinguish three areas of analysis: economic, social, and political. The article will adopt a tripartite structure, allowing each of these aspects to be examined separately while also highlighting their inter-connected themes.

This topic has never been addressed in Polish academic research. The issue of social conflicts in the north of Ireland and the actions of politicians associated with the Northern Unionist movement appear only as a marginal theme in monographs on Ireland's struggle for independence. Meanwhile, the economic development of the north of Ireland and its shipbuilding industry has never been thoroughly discussed in Polish studies on Irish history.

Economic Aspect

Beginning the analysis with an examination of the economic aspect is justified for several reasons. Above all, these issues and the strategic significance of northern industry formed the foundation of the political influence of Northern Unionists. They also affected social relations by deepening existing religious divisions and adding a new economic dimension to them. Discussing the history of Northern Ireland's industrial development also allows for the introduction of key themes and for explaining the privileged position of the Protestant segment of Irish society.

The presence of this group in Ireland dates back to the early 17th century.¹ The division within Irish society, initiated at that time, was further reinforced by English and, later, British legislation that introduced social, economic, and political discrimination against Catholics, collectively known as the *Penal Laws*.² This led to the establishment of a social system in which Protestant landowners achieved a particularly privileged position, known as the Protestant Ascendancy. However, a distinctive feature of this system was a persistent fear of losing this privileged status. This fear motivated the desire to maintain political influence by ensuring a lasting connection between Ireland and Great Britain, as expressed through the unionist movement.

The economic development of Ireland, particularly its northern counties, was closely linked to this system. The legal privileges enjoyed by Protestants enabled

1 Anderson J., O'Dowd L. 2007, 941.

2 McGrath C. 2021, 13–48.

them to participate in the economic boom of 19th-century Britain. In the north of Ireland, a complete economic transformation took place where machine-based industry, driven by textile exports and shipbuilding, replaced the previously dominant agricultural production.³

Analysing Ireland's economic condition during its union with Great Britain is challenging due to a lack of sources providing data for a comprehensive assessment and comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom. The only such source is the economic census conducted by the British *Board of Trade* in 1907.⁴ The data collected in this survey indicate that agricultural and textile production played a more significant role in the Irish economy than the island's entire industrial sector. Ireland's textile industry was concentrated specifically in the six northern counties.⁵ Lacking access to rich coal deposits, Ireland was unable to follow in the footsteps of England or even Scotland in developing heavy industry.⁶ However, access to raw materials became one of the key factors behind the economic success of the six counties of what became known as Ulster.⁷

For Belfast's industry, the lack of domestic raw materials did not pose a significant problem due to the city's geographical location and its ability to import essential materials by sea through Belfast Lough.⁸ Higher production costs could be offset by access to a supply of cheap, unskilled labour.⁹ The north of Ireland also gained an advantage over other shipbuilding centres by successfully attracting skilled experts.¹⁰ By the early 20th century, Belfast's shipyards had become the largest source of employment in Ireland, providing jobs for over nine thousand people.¹¹ Additionally, the focus of the shipbuilding industry on exports made northern heavy industry less dependent on the low domestic demand for industrial production.¹² Similarly, Belfast's textile industry was oriented towards exporting its products to markets such as the United States and the Russian Empire.¹³

Nevertheless, during the 19th century, Great Britain was the undisputed leader in shipbuilding. How did the largest industrialists of the North compare to other British

3 Buckland P. 1975, 212.

4 *Report 1907*.

5 Bielenberg A. 2008, 829–830.

6 Bielenberg A. 2008, 832.

7 Ulster is the name of one of Ireland's historic provinces, which during the period in question did not function as the administrative designation of a county-divided island. However, the term refers not so much to a geographical area as to a political community of Protestants living in the north of Ireland, who generally held unionist views.

8 Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 49.

9 Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 49.

10 Lynch J. 1997, 36.

11 PRONI HWP D2805; PRONI MIN/A 1–3 – without pagination.

12 Bielenberg A. 2008, 832.

13 Good J.W. 1922, 270.

manufacturers? At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, practically all of Britain's merchant and naval ship production was concentrated in four major centres: Clydeside, Newcastle, Sunderland, and Belfast.¹⁴ By the 1880s, Belfast had already emerged as the most powerful of these.¹⁵ The dramatic growth of its local industry is well illustrated by statistical data. In the 1860s, the city played virtually no role in Britain's shipbuilding sector. However, by 1914, Belfast's docks, particularly those of Harland & Wolff and Workman Clark, were responsible for 10% of the entire British shipbuilding output.¹⁶

The strategic importance of northern industrial production became even more apparent in the context of Britain's economic position at the turn of the century and its economic rivalry with powers such as the German Empire and the United States. Belfast's shipyards were one of the key components of Britain's economic supremacy in the years leading up to the global conflict. Consequently, politicians from the north of Ireland, who were usually aligned with the unionist movement, possessed a particularly strong bargaining position.

An analysis of the activities of Harland & Wolff during the Great War provides crucial context for understanding the social and political issues of the north of Ireland during the conflict. These matters were inextricably linked. Before the war, the company focused on producing ocean liners in partnership with the White Star Line. Despite this specialisation in passenger vessels, Harland & Wolff played an active role in Britain's economic competition with Imperial Germany. For example, its investment in the Olympic-class liners¹⁷ was an attempt to outclass German competitors, particularly the Norddeutscher Lloyd company.¹⁸

The construction of the Olympic-class liners secured Harland & Wolff's reputation and a place in history, although perhaps not in the way that its director, William Pirrie, had hoped. The sinking of RMS *Titanic* brought financial difficulties to the company. Although it remained one of the largest shipbuilding firms in the world in 1914, the outbreak of war had a profoundly negative impact on its condition. The conflict disrupted the supply chains upon which Belfast's shipyards depended, affecting global markets and trade, as the company relied heavily on exports. This led to mass layoffs and created an atmosphere of uncertainty. However, by mid-September 1914, this uncertainty had dissipated, marking the beginning of a new era in the industrial history of the North.¹⁹

As previously mentioned, Harland & Wolff specialised in the construction of merchant and passenger ships. At first glance, this type of production might appear less

14 Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 42–43.

15 Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 46.

16 Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 49.

17 RMS *Olympic* produced in 1911, RMS *Titanic* – 1912, RMS *Britannic* – 1914.

18 Chirnside M. 2004, 11–14.

19 Mercer E. 2003, 30.

significant during a military conflict. However, given that the British Empire sought to maintain its economic dominance, preserving a strong merchant fleet was just as crucial. The offensive launched by German submarines forced Britain to adapt its production system and highlighted the need to maintain a secure number of merchant vessels essential for logistics and supply chains. In this context, Belfast's strategic importance grew even further.

For the first time in its history, Harland & Wolff also began fulfilling orders for the Admiralty during the Great War, constructing Abercrombie-class monitors. These contracts became a source of record-breaking revenue for the company.²⁰ The increasing economic and political influence of Harland & Wolff was reflected in the 1917 appointment of its director, William Pirrie, as Controller General of Merchant Shipbuilding.²¹

In 1915, the company reported gross profits exceeding 298,000 pounds. By 1916–1917, profits had risen to over 520,000 pounds. The year 1918 was an absolute record in the company's history, generating more than 930,000 pounds in gross profits.²² The firm also significantly invested in its expansion, allocating one million pounds to infrastructure development.²³

The data presented demonstrate that, from an economic perspective, the Great War led to the rapid development of Belfast, particularly its shipbuilding industry. However, did the growth of the company and the city translate into prosperity for its inhabitants?

Social Aspect

An analysis of Belfast's economic situation reveals a fascinating social phenomenon. Among the four major shipbuilding centres in the United Kingdom mentioned earlier, the average wages in Belfast remained the lowest until the year 1914.²⁴ This fact may have contributed to the competitiveness of this centre, which, unlike its domestic competitors, had to import all raw materials by sea.²⁵ Thus, low wages could have offset the increased production costs. Another puzzling fact is that despite such low earnings, Belfast remained free from strikes and demonstrations during the Great War.

At the root of this phenomenon lay a profound social, national, and, most importantly, religious division within the city. The issue of Protestant settlement on the island was outlined in an earlier part of this article, but it must be emphasised that the social structure of Belfast was a consequence of changes that accompanied

²⁰ Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 52.

²¹ Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 52.

²² Moss M.S., Hume J.R. 1986, 183.

²³ Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 53.

²⁴ Pollard S., Robertson P. 1979, 246–247.

²⁵ Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 49.

the city's economic development. In the year 1800, Belfast had a population of only 19,000, whereas by the beginning of the new century, in 1911, this number had risen to 378,000. Of these, approximately 100,000 were Catholics. However, the percentage of the Catholic population in this area was in decline (in 1861, they constituted 41% of the population, whereas by 1911, this had fallen to only 34%).²⁶ Meanwhile, the city continued to experience an influx of Protestant workers for economic reasons — educated and skilled craftsmen employed in the shipbuilding industry, originating from centres known for such production in Scotland and England.²⁷

Why, then, would educated workers migrate to Belfast if, as mentioned earlier, shipbuilding wages there were the lowest in the entire United Kingdom? This phenomenon can be explained by the division among workers into skilled and unskilled labourers.²⁸ Experienced and well-trained specialists formed the foundation of shipbuilding enterprises.²⁹ Securing as many of them as possible was the objective of employers. Unskilled workers, on the other hand, were easily replaceable and readily available, particularly in light of the massive migration of rural populations to the city.³⁰ Although wages in Belfast were generally lower than in other shipbuilding centres, this was due to the vast disparity between the salaries of skilled workers and those of the cheap labour force.³¹ In reality, a specialist in Belfast earned more than in other regions of the United Kingdom.³²

The economic divide in the class conflict was further compounded by national and religious divisions. The cheap labour force primarily consisted of Irish Catholics who had migrated to cities in search of work due to economic difficulties in agricultural regions. The skilled specialists, on the other hand, migrated to Belfast from Scotland or England and were predominantly Protestant. Tensions between these groups extended beyond wage disparities. Skilled workers formed an elite within the workforce and were fully aware of their crucial role in the production process. Unskilled workers, by contrast, were easily replaceable. Their mass dismissals represented the most convenient cost-cutting measure for companies, which became particularly significant at the outbreak of the Great War. In light of the temporary economic crisis of 1914, mass redundancies took place. Faced with a lack of means to support themselves, many labourers chose to enlist in the military, where the proportion of volunteers from more

²⁶ Jenkins G. 2010, 166.

²⁷ Lynch J. 1999, 37.

²⁸ Buckland P. 1975, 214.

²⁹ Lynch J. 1997, 48.

³⁰ Jenkins G. 2010, 166.

³¹ An unskilled labourer in Belfast earned 15–18 shillings per week, whereas in other shipbuilding centres, a similar position paid between 18 and 23 shillings per week. By comparison, a shipwright — a skilled worker — earned approximately 44 shillings per week. Lynch J. 1997, 48, 52.

³² Lynch J. 1999, 39.

privileged groups was considerably lower.³³ While the economic situation of unskilled workers became increasingly precarious during the war, the specialists' wages rose by as much as 70%, further deepening the economic antagonism between the groups.³⁴

This conflict was also evident in the structure (and weakness) of Belfast's labour movement. These groups did not join the same trade unions,³⁵ and all attempts to introduce more radical demands to the so-called 'labour aristocracy' — as the skilled shipyard workers were referred to — proved unsuccessful. The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union was unable to extend its influence beyond the environment of unskilled Catholic workers.³⁶

The division was not limited to the workplace but was also reflected in urban development. The groups resided in separate districts of the city, avoiding social interaction outside the shipyards.³⁷ This sense of distinctiveness stemmed from a combination of overlapping factors such as place of origin, social and economic status, and religious and cultural affiliation. The religious aspect was particularly significant: membership in the Catholic Church was a key element of identity for a section of the city's population and served as a vital bond for those of lower social and economic status. The strong anti-Catholic sentiment present in this Anglosphere society also greatly influenced the antagonism between the two groups. Political views were another crucial factor in reinforcing social divisions among Belfast's inhabitants.³⁸

These political views notably distinguished the 'labour aristocracy' from the rest of the workforce. Better educated, with experience gained through apprenticeships in other companies, and more worldly, they linked their prosperity to the British capitalist system. In their view, their privileged social and economic position depended on the development of enterprises and their success in the market. Thus, skilled workers closely aligned their interests with the prosperity of business owners. Consequently, the political beliefs of the wealthy Protestant bourgeoisie became shared by their significantly less affluent yet self-perceived elite Protestant labourers.³⁹

With each new attempt to introduce Home Rule in Ireland,⁴⁰ the prospect of Belfast's industry — and the entire north of Ireland — coming under the administration of Catholic Dublin caused significant concern among entrepreneurs and their skilled

33 Mercer E. 2003, 31.

34 The increase varied in percentage depending on the type of work performed. Lynch J. 1997, 48.

35 Lynch J. 1997, 58.

36 Grey J. 2013, 23.

37 Jenkins G. 2010, 167.

38 Buckland P. 1975, 214

39 Buckland P. 1975, 213.

40 'Home Rule' was a demand made by Irish politicians seeking autonomy from the British Empire. A key element of this independence was to be a separate Irish parliament in Dublin, which would decide on the island's internal affairs. Attempts to pass a law introducing autonomy were unsuccessfully made in 1886 and 1893.

workers. There was a prevailing belief among Protestants in Belfast that the northern industry could not operate under Catholic governance. In the Harland & Wolff company, the idea of relocating production from Belfast to other parts of the United Kingdom was even considered.⁴¹ The outbreaks of religious and national violence further fuelled this discussion.⁴² Both Edward Harland and Gustav Wolff were staunch opponents of autonomy and committed unionists. The economic and social components formed the foundation for the emergence of a 'siege mentality' among the northern Protestants, for whom the concept of autonomy was synonymous with the collapse of northern industry.

Political Issues

Economic and social factors had a significant impact on the political decisions made by voters in Belfast. However, to accurately describe the political situation in the North during the years of the Great War, a brief introduction outlining the roots of the region's most influential political force, the Ulster Unionist Party, is essential.

Although the concept of Home Rule envisaged maintaining the union while restoring a separate Irish parliament, for unionists, this demand was synonymous with the end of their dominance on the island and the conclusion of the so-called Protestant Ascendancy. There was also widespread fear of increasing Catholic Church influence on Irish internal politics.⁴³ Additionally, it is worth noting that the unionist movement had strong connections with the Orange Order — an organisation founded in the 18th century, whose goal was to uphold Protestant dominance in Ireland and counteract Catholic political emancipation. Traditionally, the unionist movement was also closely aligned with the British Conservative Party due to shared interests and a common electorate.

The period preceding the outbreak of the Great War saw the transformation of the unionist movement in Ireland, with activists from the north of the island, particularly from Ulster, taking centre stage. Belfast was indisputably the political hub of this transformation. Southern Unionists were pushed to the background, and the dominant role was assumed by the charismatic Sir Edward Carson, who sought above all to protect the interests of the North.⁴⁴

The dynamic actions and influence of Carson's movement became particularly evident between 1911 and 1914, during the constitutional crisis triggered by the limitation of the House of Lords' veto power. Up until then, every attempt to introduce Home Rule

41 Simpson G. 2012, 32.

42 Simpson G. 2012, 31.

43 Boyce D.G. 1970, 90.

44 Stubbs J.O. 1990, 879.

for Ireland had been blocked in the upper house of Parliament, which was dominated by the Conservative Party. However, with the constitutional reforms of 1911, it became apparent that the next attempt to implement Home Rule would likely succeed. This perceived threat led to an unprecedented mobilisation of unionists under Carson's leadership. The response of the North to this situation is known in historiography as the Ulster Crisis, characterised by the threat of an armed Protestant uprising against the imposed idea of loosening ties between Ireland and Great Britain. The argument of force relied on the potential military actions of the Ulster Volunteer Force. To arm and equip this Protestant paramilitary group, enormous quantities of weapons and ammunition were smuggled into the North illegally.⁴⁵ This posed a real threat to the internal security of Great Britain and the stability of the British Empire, especially in a period of heightened international tensions. Relations between unionists and the government continued to deteriorate, while the rivalry between Sir Edward Carson and John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, grew increasingly intense. Unionist politicians demanded the complete exclusion of the northern counties from the jurisdiction of the Home Rule Act.⁴⁶ By early 1914, it seemed entirely possible that armed conflict could erupt in the north of the island.

However, the outbreak of the Great War fundamentally altered the political landscape. In the face of such a global threat, neither Irish nationalists nor unionists could afford to openly oppose the imperial government, as they risked being accused of a lack of patriotism. Given the growing public anxiety about the war, both movements could have lost the support they had previously gained from British public opinion. For unionists, one of the key elements of their argument was the narrative portraying Irish Protestants as loyal subjects of the Crown — patriots abandoned to the mercy of Catholics by a treacherous imperial government. Maintaining the threat of an uprising during a global conflict would have completely undermined Belfast's image as a bastion of British patriotism.⁴⁷

This situation initiated a form of political competition between John Redmond and Sir Edward Carson. Each leader sought to present their movement as the more patriotic one and proposed the use of their respective paramilitary organisations to protect the island during the war.⁴⁸ Efforts were also made to promote the idea of voluntary military service among the Irish to emphasise their commitment to the defence of the Empire.⁴⁹ However, the significant response was not necessarily due to exceptionally patriotic sentiments among the Irish but rather the brief economic crisis

45 Jenkins G. 2010, 175.

46 *Hansard*, c. 337.

47 Stubbs J.O. 1990, 870.

48 Stubbs J.O. 1990, 870–872.

49 Boyce D.G. 1970, 49.

caused by the outbreak of war, as discussed in the previous section.⁵⁰ Three Irish divisions were formed. Two were composed almost entirely of Catholics, while the third became a stronghold of Irish Protestants. Engagement in military operations soon became a political argument, particularly well utilised by the unionist side.⁵¹

Although Home Rule was passed in 1914, its implementation was suspended for the duration of the war.⁵² Both sides agreed to set aside agitation related to the issue for the time being to focus on the immediate threat to the Empire. The Prime Minister assured that unionists would not be forced, under wartime conditions, to accept the terms they had so fiercely opposed. The outbreak of the war thus became not only a test of the professed loyalty of Irish unionists but also a turning point in the gradual increase of their political influence.⁵³

In 1915, the outbreak of a crisis related to the lack of supplies on the Western Front created a unique opportunity for an agreement between the government and the Conservative Party. A coalition government was formed under the leadership of Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, intended as an expression of national unity.⁵⁴ Although the Prime Minister strongly opposed entrusting the most important ministries to the Conservatives, the position of the unionists themselves increased, and key northern politicians, such as Sir Edward Carson, were granted governmental positions and the opportunity to influence policy at the imperial level.

At the beginning of 1916, the unionists possessed several extremely strong advantages: the industry of Belfast was gradually cementing its position as a strategic and indispensable element of the British war machine, and the engagement of Protestant volunteers in frontline activities clearly demonstrated the patriotic spirit of Ulster. In January 1916, the government decided to exclude the territory of Ireland from the operation of the Military Service Act,⁵⁵ which greatly angered Irish Unionists who demanded the introduction of conscription on the island as well. Once again, however, the unionists manifested their patriotism by refraining from opposing the introduction of the act in a form that did not meet their expectations.⁵⁶

In April 1916, with the outbreak of the Easter Rising, the position of the unionists was further strengthened by contrasting their stance with the actions of Irish Republicans, who cooperated with the German Empire to destabilise the situation in the United Kingdom. Although the insurrection was quickly suppressed, its effects were felt for a long time afterwards. The coalition government saw the need to ease the

50 Boyce D.G. 1970, 49–50.

51 Boyce D.G. 1970, 51.

52 *Government of Ireland Act 1914*.

53 Boyce D.G. 1970, 93.

54 Adams R.J.Q. 1999, 188.

55 *Military Service Act 1916*.

56 Stubbs J.O. 1990, 876.

situation by addressing the Irish question. Once again, the high standing of Sir Edward Carson's movement became evident. David Lloyd George, who was tasked with securing support for a new proposal, first sought the approval of the Unionists from the north of Ireland for the proposed solutions, thereby emphasising their growing significance not only within the unionist movement itself but also in Conservative circles. However, once again, an agreement could not be reached — this time due to the strong opposition of Irish Unionists from the South, who feared their complete exclusion from discussions regarding the future shape of autonomy.⁵⁷

An even greater rise in the position of the unionists came with the final months of the year 1916 and the resignation of Asquith from the position of Prime Minister. In the new government formed by David Lloyd George, the unionists gained greater influence and more key ministries (the Exchequer for Andrew Bonar Law, Sir Edward Carson as First Lord of the Admiralty, and the position of Attorney General for Frederick Edwin Smith, Carson's closest associate). The position of the new Prime Minister was largely dependent on strong support from the Conservatives and unionists.⁵⁸

This created a rather problematic situation for Lloyd George, who could not leave the Irish question unresolved. The issue of the United States entering the war forced the government to demonstrate a willingness to resolve the matter of Irish autonomy.⁵⁹ Other British dominions also expected the Prime Minister to take action on this issue, and in light of the increasing engagement of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada in the war effort, their voices could not be ignored.⁶⁰ Due to the coalition nature of Lloyd George's government, there were as many opponents as supporters of Home Rule in his cabinet.⁶¹ However, the Prime Minister benefitted from the trap that the unionists had set for themselves. As an opposition force criticising the actions of the Liberal government in 1913, they could afford an open and aggressive stance against the idea of autonomy. As members of a government that had to find a solution to the Irish problem, they could no longer permit such a sharp opposition. They were expected to take actions that would stabilise the situation in the United Kingdom. Any public support, particularly from the British Conservative public opinion, would have been withdrawn in response to such unpatriotic actions.⁶² The Irish Convention, convened in the year 1917 to develop a consensus on the matter, removed the burden of responsibility from the shoulders of the Prime Minister but did not bring the government any closer to solving the Irish problem.⁶³ However, what was certain was that

57 Boyce D.G. 1970, 94.

58 Stubbs J.O. 1990, 886.

59 Boyce D.G. 1970, 95.

60 Stubbs J.O. 1990, 885.

61 Savage D.W. 1972, 101.

62 Boyce D.G. 1970, 95.

63 Stubbs J.O. 1990, 886.

the autonomy established by the act of the year 1914 was already a dead idea. Nationalists from the south of the island had become drastically radicalised following the suppression of the Easter Rising, and the Irish Parliamentary Party, which had previously been key in the Irish political scene, was losing support in favour of a new movement — the radical Sinn Féin party.⁶⁴ The Irish Unionists were divided, and the Northern Unionism of Belfast seemed to dominate over the weakening influence of the unionists from the south of the island, ensuring continued tensions.⁶⁵

At the beginning of 1918, in the face of the German offensive, the most pressing issue for the government became that of conscription — this time, it was planned to be introduced in Ireland as well. However, there were fears that public opposition to such a measure would be too great and that the situation could spiral out of control, given the increasing radicalisation of Irish society. It became evident that conscription could not be introduced without first resolving the issue of autonomy. However, this matter was in no way expedited by the Irish Convention. The new proposal for autonomy suggested by the government was not accepted by Sir Edward Carson. The lack of a unified stance among moderate Nationalists under Redmond, as well as between Southern and Northern Unionists, resulted in another failure. The proposal for autonomy was rejected, conscription in Ireland was not implemented, and Sir Edward Carson, expressing his disapproval of the government's actions, resigned from his ministerial position in January 1918.

This situation, although highly disadvantageous for the British Empire, ultimately served to further cement the position of the Northern Unionists. Blocking a concrete, new form of autonomy proposed by Redmond's faction and the Southern Unionists temporarily safeguarded the interests of Ulster. Additionally, it weakened the position of the Northern Unionists' political opponents, exposing their inability to devise any binding solution without the consent of Carson and his faction. The prolonged deadlock on the Irish issue and the threat of conscription further radicalised society, leading to a steady decline in support for the Irish Parliamentary Party.⁶⁶

Conclusion

From an economic perspective, the period of the Great War can undoubtedly be described as the golden age of Belfast. The strategic importance of the shipbuilding industry guaranteed not only continued orders for the production of commercial vessels but also, for the first time in the company's history, orders from the Admiralty for the construction of warships. The company's wartime profits were a multiple of

⁶⁴ Coleman M. 2013, 40.

⁶⁵ Smith J. 2000, 61.

⁶⁶ Stubbs J.O. 1990, 891–892.

the revenues generated in the years preceding the conflict. 1917 was one of the most successful in the history of Harland & Wolff,⁶⁷ and by the end of the war, the company had produced more standardised ships than any other British manufacturer. The rapid growth witnessed during the war years became particularly evident in contrast to the post-war period, when the cessation of government orders and the decisions of the Washington Conference led to significant reductions in shipbuilding production.⁶⁸ According to later analyses conducted by the newly established Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Finance of Northern Ireland, this situation was expected to lead to financial difficulties and become one of the greatest challenges facing the autonomous region.⁶⁹

The prosperity of the Great War period also translated significantly into the well-being of the city's inhabitants, particularly skilled shipyard workers. Their wages increased by several dozen per cent during the war.⁷⁰ The priority status and strategic importance of Belfast's production ensured stable employment for educated workers, whose expertise was essential to fulfilling government orders. However, unskilled labourers did not enjoy the same job security, and for many of them, military service became the only alternative.⁷¹ This situation deepened the divisions between the Catholic and Protestant populations of the city, which had already experienced outbreaks of religiously motivated violence.⁷² More such incidents were to follow in the future.⁷³

The most striking transformation was in the position of the Northern Unionists. A movement that had threatened an uprising against British rule as recently as 1913 gained enormous influence and political significance during the Great War. From being a vocal and critical opposition, the Northern Unionists secured positions within the coalition government, initially receiving minor ministries and roles alongside members of the Conservative Party. However, this firmly established their presence in British politics. Over time, Carson's faction came to dominate the unionist movement, sidelining activists from the south of the island. The strategic importance of Belfast's industry also played a key role. Moreover, in the wartime context, the argument that Home Rule would destabilise shipbuilding production became a leading narrative. The rise of Northern Unionism progressed alongside the fall of Asquith's government and the formation of a new cabinet under Lloyd George in 1916. This time, key figures in the movement secured even more influential ministerial posts, further solidifying their power.

67 Geary F., Johnson W. 1989, 53.

68 Good J.W. 1922, 269–270.

69 PRONI FIN 3/C/6.

70 Lynch J. 1997, 48.

71 Mercer E. 2003, 31.

72 Simpson G. 2012, 32.

73 PRONI HA 32/1, 28.

Carson's ability to accurately determine when the interests of the North should be set aside to maintain government unity, and when they should be prioritised, ensured his continued influence over political affairs. The Northern Unionists' greatest success was their decisive takeover of leadership within the unionist movement, the marginalisation of their southern counterparts, and — through skilfully paralysing the Irish Convention — engineering a situation in which the broader Irish public withdrew its support for the Irish Parliamentary Party in favour of the radical Sinn Féin. Consequently, by the end of the war in 1919, these two political factions came to dominate the Irish political landscape.

The Government of Ireland Act became the legal safeguard for Ulster's interests,⁷⁴ with work on the legislation beginning in the latter half of 1919. Under its provisions, Great Britain was to grant autonomy not to the entire island but to its two parts: Southern Ireland and Northern Ireland. This secured key issues for Northern Unionism, such as maintaining control over the northern economy and its shipbuilding industry, preserving Protestant Ascendancy, and minimising Dublin's influence over Belfast's political affairs. As a result, the events of the Great War laid the groundwork for the legal division of the island.

For Belfast, the Great War meant economic growth and increased political influence. However, the global conflict also cemented divisions that, although present in earlier decades, had never before been so pronounced. The Great War significantly accelerated the partitioning of the island and laid the foundations for a prolonged conflict that would persist for several more decades within Ireland itself.

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