

A repeat of the Turmoil of 1914-1922?

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This post is by Prof Sean Danaher and was on [Progressive Pulse](#) last week. It is far too good not to share a little more widely, with Sean's permission:

History, as it is taught in British schools, remembers 1914 as the year WWI started. WWI was of course a horrific event, but less is remembered of the political turmoil at the time. As Robert Saunders writes in [“Breaking the parliamentary machine”: lessons of the 1914 crisis](#):

The crisis of 1914 far eclipsed Brexit, and brought Britain closer to revolution than at any time since the 17th century. The Times called it “one of the greatest crises in the history of the British race”, while Conservative election literature warned that Britain might soon be “stained with the blood of civil war”. Yet it offers some striking similarities with the present, and a warning of what could lie ahead.

The article is beautifully written and is well worth reading in full. Saunders goes on to explain:

The trigger was the election of December 1910. For the only time in British history, the result was a dead heat: the governing Liberal Party and its Conservative and Unionist opponents both won 272 seats. The Unionists won more votes, and a series of by-elections quickly made them the largest single grouping; but the outcome was a minority Liberal government, dependent chiefly on the Irish Nationalists. The price of Irish support was Home Rule, giving Ireland its own parliament with control over domestic legislation.

The Irish had been demanding Home Rule (very similar in the range of powers to the now Scottish Parliament) for decades, attempts could and had been blocked by the Upper Chamber, but the Parliament Act of 1911 stripped the House of Lords of its veto. The [third home rule bill](#) after a glacial and bitterly fought, many stage, campaign in parliament, was due to become law in January 1915.

Ireland effectively had Home Rule up to 1800, when the Acts of Union (Ireland) were passed. Though not perfect, Ireland was a wealthy and populous country.

The Union was a disaster for Ireland. In 1800 Dublin was the 6th largest city in Europe (Table 1), sandwiched between Amsterdam and Lisbon, and one of the wealthiest. While obviously far behind London, it was more than twice the size of the next two largest cities in Britain: Manchester and Edinburgh. In 1800 Ireland has over twice the population of the Netherlands (5M as opposed to 2M) and over half the population of England (c 8M).

By 1914 Dublin was an impoverished slum and smaller in population than Belfast. Ireland had a lower population in 1914 than in 1800 (c 4.4M), whereas England's population had grown by a factor of four to c 36M and the Netherlands by over a factor of three to c 6.2M. Something clearly had gone disastrously wrong, this was the Great Famine from 1845-1848. This was by far the greatest peace time calamity in 19th century Europe, about 1M died and 2M emigrated. It was so badly mismanaged by the London government that it created resentment on a monumental scale, still present especially among th

TABLE 1
THE THIRTY LARGEST CITIES IN EUROPE BY POPULATION (in Thousands), 1050-1800

c. 1050		c. 1200		c. 1330		c. 1500		c. 1650		c. 1800	
Cordova*	450	Palermo	150	Granada	150	Paris	225	Paris	400	London	948
Palermo*	350	Paris	110	Paris	150	Naples	125	London	350	Paris	550
Seville	90	Seville	80	Venice	110	Milan	100	Naples	300	Naples	430
Salerno	50	Venice	70	Genoa	100	Venice	100	Lisbon	150	Vienna	247
Venice	45	Florence	60	Milan	100	Granada	70	Venice	140	Amsterdam	217
Regensburg	40	Granada	60	Florence	95	Prague	70	Milan	120	Dublin	200
Toledo	37	Cordova	60	Seville	90	Lisbon	65	Amsterdam	120	Lisbon	195
Rome	35	Cologne	50	Cordova	60	Tours	60	Rome	110	Berlin	172
Barbastro	35	Leon	40	Naples	60	Genoa	58	Madrid	100	Madrid	168
Cartagena	33	Ypres	40	Cologne	54	Ghent	55	Palermo	100	Rome	153
Naples	30	Rome	35	Palermo	51	Florence	55	Seville	80	Palermo	140
Mainz	30	Bologna	35	Siena	50	Palermo	55	Florence	74	Venice	138
Merida	30	Toledo	35	Barcelona	48	Roma	55	Vienna	70	Milan	135
Almeria	27	Verona	33	Valencia	44	Bordeaux	50	Granada	70	Hamburg	130
Granada	26	Narbonne	31	Toledo	42	Lyon	50	Marseille	70	Lyon	109
Speyer	25	Salerno	30	Bruges	40	Orleans	50	Copenhagen	65	Copenhagen	101
Palma	25	Pavia	30	Malaga	40	London	50	Genoa	64	Marseille	101
Laon	25	Messina	30	Aquila	40	Bologna	50	Bologna	63	Barcelona	100
London	25	Naples	30	Bologna	40	Verona	50	Antwerp	60	Seville	96
Elvira	22	Genoa	30	Cremona	40	Brescia	49	Brussels	60	Bordeaux	96
Cologne	21	Angers	30	Pisa	38	Cologne	45	Lyon	60	Genoa	90
Trier	20	Palma	30	Ferrara	36	Seville	45	Rouen	60	Manchester	84
Caen	20	Speyer	30	London	35	Marseille	45	Danzig	60	Edinburgh	83
Lyon	20	Worms	28	Montpelier	35	Malaga	42	Leiden	55	Turin	82
Paris	20	Ferrara	27	Rouen	35	Valencia	42	Valencia	50	Florence	81
Tours	20	Orleans	27	St.-Omer	35	Ferrara	42	Prague	50	Valencia	80
Verona	20	Metz	27	Lisbon	35	Rouen	40	Hamburg	40	Rouen	80
Worms	20	Valencia	26	Angers	33	Cremona	40	Cologne	40	Nantes	77
Lisbon	15	Cremona	25	Marseille	31	Nuremberg	38	Nuremberg	40	Stockholm	76
Florence	15	London	25	Toulouse	30	Bruges	35	Ghent	40	Prague	76

SOURCE.—The Bairoch data base. See Paul Bairoch, Jean Bateau, and Pierre Chèvre, La population des villes Européennes de 800-1850 (1988).
* Russell's estimates of the populations of Cordova and Palermo in 1050 are only one-third as large.

Home rule was backed by a super-majority in Ireland, but the one part of Ireland that had prospered through the Union, the NE corner surrounding Belfast, was implacably opposed. Approximately 80% of the industrial capacity of Ireland was concentrated in this region in 1914. It had for example the largest shipyard in the world, Harland and Wolff, most famous for building the Titanic.

The NE had a Protestant majority who hated Home Rule and started their own totally illegal private army, the Ulster Volunteers. Far from being condemned by the Tories they were backed to the hilt. Andrew Bonar Law leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition was photographed inspecting the Volunteers, who pledged to bring down the third Home Rule Bill — an Act of Parliament.

Again quoting Saunders article:

Crucially, the Conservatives did not simply argue that Home Rule was wrong. They rejected the democratic legitimacy of parliament, which they accused of defying the will

of the people. Party literature told voters that “the House of Commons does not truly represent the people, nor do its votes represent the opinions of the electorate”. Conservatives talked openly of “breaking the parliamentary machine”, pitting “the Supremacy of the People” against the “paid puppets” of the House of Commons. Parliament was urged to surrender its functions to a referendum, to ensure that MPs could not “cut ‘the people’ out of the constitution”.

The constitutional crisis at the time was averted by WWI, which seemed almost a blessing initially. Indeed some historians argue that the “Irish Question” played a far greater part in Britain’s willingness to go to war than is generally acknowledged. Sadly WWI, far from being over by Christmas, turned out to be a cataclysmic disaster.

Aftermath

Civil war was averted in Britain, but Ireland was not so lucky. Far from being deterred by the Ulster Volunteers, a host of pro Irish Independence paramilitary groups were formed, leading to the 1916 Rising, a war of independence and the peace [Treaty of 1921](#). Ireland was partitioned between the 26 county Free State and the 6 county Northern Ireland. (A good podcast on the period by the Irish Passport team is available [here](#)).

The actual treaty granted nothing like the full independence of the entire island of Ireland, with the 26 counties granted Dominion Status within the British Empire and NI granted Home Rule (a protestant parliament for a protestant people). Irish pragmatists saw it as “the freedom to obtain freedom”. Lloyd George, the PM, is reported to have said “I may have just signed my political death warrant” to which Michael Collins (the lead figure on the Irish side) replied “I may have signed my actual death warrant”.

The Treaty was totally unacceptable to many in Ireland, in modern parlance far too many red lines had been crossed and the result was Civil War. Collins proved very prescient as he was killed during the Civil War in August 1922 at Béal na Bláth.

The Free State could be fairly accurately described as an impoverished wreck by the end of the Civil War. Many in Northern Ireland and Britain saw it as too poor and too small to succeed on its own. Very similar to today’s arguments on Scottish Independence (but with considerably more justification). Northern Ireland, with as previously stated, 80% of the island’s industrial capacity and part of the greatest empire the world had ever seen, seemed destined for success.

It did not turn out that way. As Prof Brendan O’Leary discusses in his definitive three volume [A Treatise on Northern Ireland](#), by 1940 Northern Ireland was essentially bankrupt, where the Irish Free State was a much greater success. Whilst still not wealthy, very firm and robust democratic foundations had been laid for future prosperity. (For those with neither the time or money to read the Treatise there is an excellent Irish Times podcast available [here](#)).

Winding rapidly forward to the current day, the two economies are not really

comparable, with IE not only being way ahead of NI but also Britain on international metrics such as the Human Development Index IE 4th, UK 14th. GDP per capita is over twice as high in IE than NI and I would be surprised if even 8% of the island's industrial capacity was based in NI.

"The freedom to obtain freedom" analysis has turned out to have been correct in retrospect. Ireland is a modern successful country with considerable state and diplomatic capacity, which has been used very successfully throughout the Brexit process, perhaps most clearly on display at PM Johnson's visit to Dublin on Monday. Ian Dunt [tweeted](#) regarding their post-meeting statements: "Quite painful to watch. Varadkar conducting himself as a leader and grounding his comments in reality. Johnson looks like a child who won a Willy Wonka ticket to appear alongside him".

Are There Parallels to be Drawn to the Current Crisis?

The current crisis seems to be a pale shadow of 1914, there are no major private armies being raised. Again however there are bitter arguments about the supremacy of parliament vs. "the people". The country seems, or at least its political class, bitterly divided. It is possible however that Dmitry Grozoubinski has it correct in that the vast majority of the British Electorate just want Brexit to go away (Fig. 1).

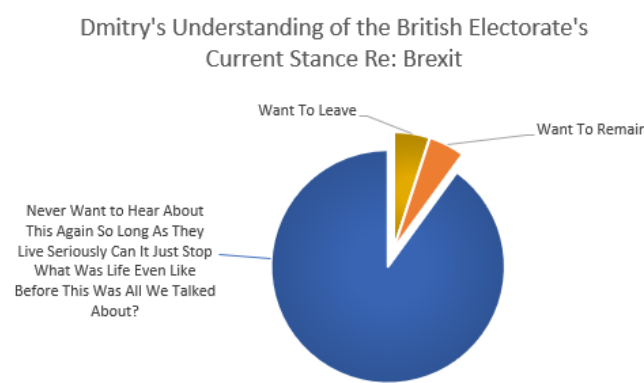


Fig 1. Are the public fed up with Brexit?

There is an Irish dimension, with the Irish again holding, until the dramatic withdrawal of the whip from 21MPs, the balance of power, but this time the DUP rather than the [Irish Parliamentary Party](#) (IPP). Will the DUP be eventually betrayed by Westminster just as the IPP was in 1915? There are rumours that something like the NI only version of the Backstop may be resurrected.

There are obvious parallels between the Withdrawal Agreement (WA) and the 1921 Treaty. For many the WA is nothing like the "cake and eat it" promises made during the Referendum Campaign. Signing up to the WA however is unlikely to unleash civil war in Britain, though not signing may through the introduction of a hard border in Ireland, triggering considerable violence.

The Treaty was signed ultimately because of power asymmetry. Ireland was under no illusion that it was far weaker than Britain. The realisation of the power asymmetry between the EU and the UK seems not to dawn on many of the Brexiters, but will

mean that any eventual treaty will be more weighted towards the EU than the UK.

The political situation in Britain was saved by WWI. There is nothing like a good war to unite the country as Margaret Thatcher found during the Falklands War. Hopefully starting a War is not part of Cumming's master-plan.

The Irish dimension is likely to play an important part, not least because Phil Hogan of Fine Gael and a close ally of Varadkar has been nominated as [EU trade commissioner](#) and will be the EU representative at the WTO and in charge of a future EU trade deal with the UK. He is known as the "Bruiser" and a wily operator. The fact that he will be supported by [Sabine Weyand](#), who was Barnier's right hand "man" during the negotiating of the withdrawal agreement, may fill some on the UK side with dismay.

Hopefully Marx's view that "history repeats the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" will not come true, but it is inevitable that Britain will need eventually to come to terms with the limitations of its power, as Ireland did in 1921, hopefully sooner rather than later.