

Carson, Redmond, the Coalition and the War, 1915

By Ed Mulhall

When Unionist leader Edward Carson rose to speak to a packed House of Commons on 2 November 1915 he was breaking an awkward consensus that had lasted since the outbreak of the war, where there was no formal public criticism of war policy. He spoke to explain his reasons for his resignation from the coalition government. His speech followed that of the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, who was forced by recent events and dissent in his Cabinet, to give a detailed and at times emotional account of his handling of war policy. The inclusion of Unionist and Conservative leaders in that coalition government and the bi-partisanship that it entailed had changed things fundamentally, according to Ronan Fanning: 'The impetus, in short, was towards agreement on Ireland where previously it had been towards disagreement and agreement, in the context of coalition, meant partition.'¹ But on that November day, Carson's critical stance prompted Irish party leader John Redmond to break his own silence and air some of his concerns about the conduct of the war and how it was impacting on recruitment in Ireland. Both Irish leaders gave expression to serious concerns that had been discussed behind closed doors before then. The aftermath of the debate led to significant shifts in policy and personnel and, unbeknown to all three men, to a year that would be the bloodiest and most traumatic year of their lives.

The Coalition government was formed the previous May, when Asquith, in what he described as the 'worst week of his life' and facing an ultimatum from the Conservatives, resigned as Liberal Prime Minister to form a new administration with the opposition parties.² Central to that crisis was public pressure on the Government arising from the leaking of details about shell shortages to *The Times* newspaper. The leaking had been prompted by Army leader Sir John French who felt the War Minister Lord Kitchener was not being pro-active enough in pressing for additional munitions. Additionally there was private pressure within the cabinet where friction on Dardanelles policy and political maneuvering were coming to a head. The trigger for the crisis was the resignation of the naval commander, First Sea Lord Fisher who had been a longtime opponent of the Dardanelles operation which had been promoted by his boss at the Admiralty, Winston Churchill. Alerted to the resignation by Fisher himself, the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law went to the Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George and told him that they would not support Churchill staying on in the Admiralty in these circumstances. It was clear that the government now faced the prospect of open opposition in the Commons, and Lord Beaverbrook recalled what happened next: 'Lloyd George saw the position in a moment when faced with the alternative between Coalition and open rupture. Of course', he said, 'we must have a Coalition, for the alternative is impossible, and taking Bonar Law by the arm, he led him through the private passage which runs from the back of the Treasury to Nos. 10 and 11 Downing Street, and brought him to Mr. Asquith. From the moment the two men exchanged these sentences the Government was dead and the leading articles on Shell shortage of the next few days were only bullets fired into a corpse from which life had already departed.'³

Prime Minister Asquith's wife Margot, who was opposed to the prospect of coalition, gave an account from the PM's side in her diary of May 17th:

¹ Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path*, London, 2013, p138.

² It was a time of personal crisis for Asquith too as his 'confidante' Venetia Stanley told him of her engagement to the junior Minister Edwin Montagu thereby ending the period of intense infatuation and revealing correspondence. See Michael and Eleanor Brock, H.H. Asquith, *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, Oxford, 1982. For further detail and account of the positions of Asquith, Redmond and Carson at the beginning of the War see Ed Mulhall, *In Comradeship...*, Century Ireland: <http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/articles/in-comradeship-with-our-friend-in-the-north-we-will-defend>

³ Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War, 1914-1916* (London, 1928) 1960 p. 107. See also Roy Jenkins, *Asquith*, (London, 1964) 1986 for account of Coalition formation.

Henry...came in on Monday night I was sitting swamped up to my ears in the biggest bath in London

- M. Well, darling is Fisher resolved to go?
- H. Yes I made him write his reasons. His answer is simple: 'I cannot get on with Winston Churchill.'
- M. Oh! How sad, Henry! I am so sorry for you.
- H. I've had to take very drastic measures. I wrote to all my colleagues to resign. I shall form a Coalition government. I've just seen Bonar Law. He was pleased and happy; of course they long to be in it.

This announcement flabbergasted me. I flung the towel round me and said with horrified eyes:

- M. Oh! Darling- so it's come to that!! How terrible! Our wonderful Government and wonderful cabinet - (I could not trust myself to say another word for tears.)
- H. Curiously enough, B. Law says none of his men will stand K. (Kitchener) They think he has mismanaged, and there is this hideous row over munitions. He and French can't get on. French says - keeps things back from us, and K says French keeps things back from him. I expect K'll have to go through this will cause the greatest uproar of all. K is very unhappy himself

.....

- M. It seems so sad! Now Winston will get the coalition he has so often gassed about!
- H. The satire is he will very likely be excluded. I said to BL 'It's obvious to me Fisher wants to make himself first lord - a position corresponding to K's in the foreign office.' BL said 'I quite believe it they had both better go.' (Margot Asquith Diary May 17th 1915)⁴

So it was to be in the Cabinet that followed: Fisher was gone; Churchill was demoted to the Duchy of Lancaster despite a desperate last appeal to Bonar Law to be kept on in the Admiralty meaning he was in the Cabinet but only just. Lloyd George moved from Chancellor to take control of the problematic area of munitions. But it was the absorption of the Conservative and Unionist leaders that caused difficulty. The Liberals moved to keep Bonar Law out of the Chancellorship and Munitions, the key economic offices and he accepted the Colonial office. Both Liberals and Conservatives agreed that Edward Carson should be in the Cabinet as Attorney General and they were also determined that they should hold some office with responsibility for Ireland and so Lord Glenavy, then Sir James Campbell, was proposed as Lord Chancellor for Ireland. Asquith also wished to broaden the coalition by including the other parties. Labour joined, with one minister, but despite three attempts John Redmond refused a Cabinet post for himself or the Irish Party.

Redmond received the first offer late at night while at home in Wicklow on May 18th. The message from the under-secretary in Dublin Castle Sir Matthew Nathan contained the assurance that the Chief Secretary Birrell would remain in office but that the Opposition wanted Carson included. Asquith's message said: 'The Ministry is about to be constructed on a broad national basis, and certain Opposition and Labour Members will be asked to join. I am most anxious for you to join. The administration will be a war administration and will cease when the war is ended.'⁵ Redmond replied by coded message the following morning: 'While thanking you, I feel sure you will understand when I say the principles and history of the party I represent make the acceptance of your offer impossible.'⁶ He followed up this message later that day with a plea: 'In view of the fact that it is impossible for me to join I think most strongly Carson should not be included. From an Irish point of view inclusion would do infinite harm, and make our efforts far more difficult.'⁷ Asquith followed up the rejection with another appeal; this time sent through Birrell (and copied to John Dillon) for Redmond to reconsider: 'Labour has joined and without Ireland broad national basis and the consequent appeal for confidence will be endangered. If personal objections prevail, can you name someone else, anyone except T.P., to represent Ireland within Cabinet? Carson is put as leading member of Opposition. Do not know his own wishes. Nothing decided yet, but he might have to come in.'⁸

They was no doubting Carson's position; he joined, as his biographer put it, 'with more unfeigned reluctance than any of his colleagues' or as his wife wrote: 'They are pressing Edward very hard to come into Cabinet

⁴ Michael Brock, Eleanor Brock, Margot Asquith's Great War Diary, 1914-16 (London 2014)

⁵ Matthew Nathan letter to Redmond, 18th May 1915, in Redmond Papers, NLI 15,165/5

⁶ Matthew Nathan note of Redmond, message 19th May 1915, NLI 15,165/5

⁷ Matthew Nathan note of Redmond message, 19th May 1915, NLI 15,165/5

⁸ Denis Gwynn, The Life of John Redmond (London, 1932) p. 424

and he will have to, which I think is quite right as he must stand by Mr. Bonar Law who stood by him so well over Ulster.’⁹

Redmond replied again to Asquith that he spoke for the party and not one of them would join the Cabinet. Asquith tried one final time before an Irish Party meeting in Dublin. Redmond responded firmly and again appealed against the inclusion of Carson: ‘For the Irish people, it will mean installed in power the leader of the Ulster revolvers who, the other day was threatening hostilities to the forces of the Crown and the decision of Parliament.’¹⁰ But soon Redmond had a further worry. He wrote again: ‘If it were sought to carry the Coalition into the government of Ireland by supplanting the existing Irish office holders by Unionists, the greater confusion would arise here in the public mind, and a state of perturbation, suspicion, and I think indignation would ensue.’¹¹

Before long his suspicions were realised when he heard of the plans from an unhappy Irish Secretary Birrell:

‘However, once you start with *coalition* and *union* the basis seemed to be coalition *all through* and the incomers claimed their share *in Ireland* on the same terms as *elsewhere*, I made it *perfectly plain* that I would *not* hold my present office for a single hour on the terms of *sharing* the daily administration of Irish affairs with *anybody* belonging to the Unionist side. On this there was a *fight* and, of course, notwithstanding the *special* and *pre-eminent* claims of Ireland to be differently treated, having regard to Home Rule on the statute book, and so on, it was a little difficult to close the doors *altogether* in their ugly faces. The result is that Campbell has (I have no doubt, tho’ I am not *formally* appraised of the fact) effected a lodgment as Lord Chancellor, but *alone*. This is very awkward and damaging, but I have the P.M.’s assurance that *in his view* the administration of Irish affairs is to remain in my and Nathan’s hands *unaltered*....I feel *no* confidence in the future. I wish you could have come in *for my sake*, but I am equally sure that you did right to stay out. I am bound to cross to England tomorrow. Thank God I have already missed *two* Cabinets. When George IV first saw his future wife he called for a *brandy*!’¹²

The proposal to appoint Campbell was a bridge too far for Redmond. Campbell had, like Carson, been elected from the Trinity College Dublin constituency and was a source of particular enmity given his support for the Covenant movement. He was also close to those involved in the Curragh Mutiny. Redmond cabled Asquith on June 5th: ‘proposal to appoint Campbell has created intense feeling in Ireland, and would inevitably mean end of political truce in Ireland and necessitate immediate discussion in the House of Commons.’¹³

As the Conservative and Unionist leadership had indicated that they would leave the government if Campbell were not appointed, Asquith was faced with the possibility that his coalition would collapse before it had begun. He told Redmond that the offer had already been made and that the public opposition of the Irish party would be ‘fatal to the prospects of the new government.’ Redmond wouldn’t budge: ‘We in Ireland have kept the truce faithfully. Since the war broke out I have not made one single speech in Ireland. I am sorry to say that the Unionist party in Ireland have not adopted the same attitude...We cannot and will not agree to this.’¹⁴ Faced with this firm position Asquith compromised. The offer of the Chancellorship to Campbell was withdrawn. In return a less prominent unionist John Gordon was to be made Attorney General and in making the offer to Redmond Asquith repeated his assurance that the Irish government would remain under the control of Birrell and Nathan. Redmond agreed and Asquith in a handwritten note of June 10th thanked him: ‘and I hope you do not need to be assured how highly I treasure the memory of the work which we have done together in the past, and how unshaken and unshakeable is my confidence, not only in the justice, but in certain success of our common cause.’¹⁵

⁹ Ian Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson*, Volume 3, London, 1936 and Geoffrey Lewis, *Carson, the Man who divided Ireland* (London, 2005) p.174.

¹⁰ Redmond Asquith correspondence in Redmond papers NLI, 15,165/5 and Gwynn, 1932. P. 423

¹¹ Redmond Asquith correspondence in Redmond papers NLI, 15,165/5 and Gwynn, 1932. P. 423

¹² Gwynn, 1932, p425

¹³ NLI 15.165/5

¹⁴ Gwynn.1932,p 425

¹⁵ NLI 15.165/5. Campbell would follow Gordon as Attorney General in 1916 and then become Chief Justice in Ireland and eventually Lord Chancellor in 1918. He was the first Cathaoirleach of the Free State Senate in 1922.

This success notwithstanding, the formation of the coalition government with Carson and his conservative supporters was seen by Redmond's opponents such as Thomas MacDonagh as a justification for their more militant stance or as Alvin Jackson has put it: '[Carson's inclusion] apparently affirmed Ulster militancy while simultaneously slighting Irish constitutionalism.'¹⁶

For the two Irish leaders, Carson and Redmond, the period from this appointment to the Commons speeches in November was dominated by two growing and inter-related tensions; the challenge of recruitment at home and the worsening situation on the battlefields. In Cabinet, Carson and the Conservatives were firmly in favour of using conscription now and in concentrating the battle. They saw the initial failures in the Dardanelles a result of lack of men and spreading the effort too thinly. The possibility of conscription was also causing Redmond difficulty at home. Many of the anti-recruitment rallies, such as those that led to the arrest of Francis Sheehy Skeffington and Sean MacDermott, would have conscription as their focus.¹⁷ There had already been moves to prepare the ground with a registration bill moved in the Commons in July, with Scotland and Ireland exempted. But for Redmond the best way to prevent conscription was to keep the momentum up and to stress the need to support those already in action. Key to this strategy was getting support for Irish regiments and recognition for Irish gallantry. In some of this he was frustrated. Plans for a home guard and the release of RIC reservists into the army were not getting support from the War Office and there was also the frustration of seeing Irish units moved from one division or supplanted by other divisions as they were being moved into the action areas. (The treatment of Mahon's 10th Division in this respect was raised by Redmond early in the summer before it was moved to Suvla). Redmond sought and eventually got a meeting with Kitchener to address these issues.¹⁸

When there were major Nationalist mobilisations, as at the O'Donovan Rossa funeral and in an openly military display by Connolly and the Citizen Army - where they rehearsed an attack on Dublin Castle in September, Redmond urged restraint by the authorities, Birrell and Nathan. (A party of National Volunteers under Col. Maurice Moore had taken part in the O'Donovan Rossa funeral procession.)

For his part Redmond worked to energise the roots of the Irish Party by a number of meetings throughout the country aimed at maintaining membership levels as men enlisted. He also attended for the first time a meeting in the Vice-regal lodge in September, also attended by Unionist representatives and protestant bishops to assist the recruitment project. He made one major political speech at this time, on the extension of the Suspensory Act on August 23rd where he spoke firmly of his conviction that the ultimate political target was still in view. In that speech he referred to the gallantry of the 10th Irish Division who had landed at Suvla Bay two weeks earlier.

Redmond was soon receiving details of the disaster that was unfolding around Suvla Bay, the enormous casualty list and the military bungling. He forwarded to Lord Kitchener a letter he had received written by the Earl of Granard serving in the 10th Division to TP Gill outlining the catastrophe that had destroyed them as a fighting unit:

'The 10th Division has virtually ceased to exist as a fighting unit. The 30th Brigade, to give you an example, which should be over 4,000 strong has about 1,000 men left and as regards officers the position was even worse. This brigade should have 120 infantry officers; it has only eighteen left on duty, so you will see how sadly we have suffered....Whatever you may hear to the contrary, I pray you never believe for a moment that a single Irish soldier in the 10th Division behaved other than as a brave and efficient soldier should do. In fact, they are the only troops that have maintained the position they won at the original landing.' (Granard to T.P. Gill, 12th August, 1915)¹⁹

The correspondence outlined the deficiencies in the organisation with the 10th being split up, having no proper orders and operating without artillery support and without the proper logistical equipment, even

¹⁶ Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule, An Irish History 1800-2000* (London, 2003). See also Ed Mulhall, *Pacifism or Physical Force, Century Ireland*, <http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/articles/pacifism-or-physical-force>.

¹⁷ See Mulhall *Century Ireland*.

¹⁸ See Gwynn, 1932 and Kitchener correspondence in NLI 15,201/

¹⁹ In NLI, 15,190/3 and with Kitchener's acknowledgement in NLI 15,201/1

water. It laid the blame squarely with Hamilton and was always conscious of the wider implications of what was happening: 'Englishmen wonder why Ireland is not loyal, but after the treatment accorded to us it is marvelous that we get any soldiers at all in Ireland. General Mahon is frankly disgusted with the whole business and he himself has been treated abominably.' Redmond was also circulated with Keith Murdoch's damning report on the Gallipoli campaign which he had sent to the Australian Prime Minister on September 13th. (He would later gather a detailed account of the situation in early November from a Catholic chaplain, Father Murphy, who was home on leave and gave him details of the military shortcomings).²⁰ The pictures and death notices of the fallen were now dominating the pages of the Dublin newspapers.

Carson had more immediate information on the situation in Gallipoli. He now sat on the so-called Dardanelles committee, the sub-committee of the Cabinet that was responsible for the War. He joined in August as the crisis in Suvla developed. It was a committee sharply divided as to what course to take. Carson had his own source of information on the ground in Suvla. The commander of the 10th Division was his cousin, 'friend of his youth', old school fellow at Portarlington, Lieutenant-General Sir Bryan Mahon. Mahon had been anxious on arrival at Mudros Bay. In July he wrote: 'I know little or nothing of the situation here but all I can gather is unsatisfactory...The new Divisions have been sent without howitzers...the expedition must go on and succeed as there is no possibility of taking the troops away... But whether the gain will be worth the cost is another matter.'²¹ Two weeks, later having surveyed the place in detail, he was in no doubt of the hopelessness of the enterprise - even if they succeeded in their planned offensive - a siege running into the winter would be disastrous: 'I believe we would do better to evacuate the place...with the loss of prestige, stores and munitions; but it would be better than losing a whole army.'²²

A letter of 14th August following the Suvla landings gave the stark assessment, that operations had failed 'and under present conditions and management will probably continue doing so. Organisation is nil.' He told Carson his division had been split up and put under strange leaders the first time they went into action which would probably become a grievance for the Nationalist Party and would hamper recruitment in Ireland. On 28th August he wrote again to say another attack had failed. There was now stalemate but the Turks held all the high ground; another offensive was impossible without 3 additional corps of front line troops. He went on: 'Do not think I am a croaker, I really enjoy being here - it is full of excitement but you asked me...and I think you ought to know as one of his Majesty's Ministers. The Irish Division could not have done better but it is mostly gone - nearly 70 per cent gone already. We have lost 40,000 since August 6th for nothing. Shells are bursting all round as I write this. I have just got back from the front trenches. I go most days as the men like seeing me, and as it is almost all we can do for them - an exciting but rather dangerous walk.'²³

It was clear to Carson from this that they should withdraw immediately from Gallipoli but the Dardanelles Committee was sharply divided on the issue (Churchill was still a member) with Asquith hoping for a solution and Bonar Law, who was in favor of withdrawal, still trying to get agreement. Lady Ruby Carson summed up the atmosphere in Cabinet in a letter to Lady Londonderry: 'Edward is being worked much too hard but I hear he is the terror of the Cabinet which is good, but I still think most of them are a shiftily disgusting lot and I am sure Winston Churchill means to talk himself into the most powerful he can again.'²⁴

Carson seems to have been dissuaded from resigning on the issue following a Cabinet meeting on September 3rd. But he continued to press the issue. He met with Keith Murdoch, sent him to brief Lloyd George and then, using all his cross-examining skills, he confronted Kitchener with the detailed criticism of the campaign at the Dardanelles committee. Finally on October 9th, Kitchener gave Carson access to General Hamilton's dispatches from the Dardanelles and so at last he got the full detail. Lloyd George was becoming more of an ally and was aware of his frustration: 'Carson is sick to death of the eternal talk and policy of drift.' But Carson would not intrigue against the Prime Minister, he told Lloyd George: 'I am serving under Mr. Asquith as Attorney General and as long as I am in that position I shall join in no intrigue against him. If I find the service intolerable, I shall resign.'²⁵ When the Germans and Austrians crossed the Danube into Serbia followed by a Bulgarian onslaught from the east on October 9th, that resolve was tested. There was

²⁰ NLI 15,261/9

²¹ Ian Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson*, Volume 3 (London, 1936) p. 81-83

²² Colvin, 1936, p. 82

²³ Colvin, 1936 p. 82

²⁴ Geoffrey Lewis, *Carson, the Man who divided Ireland* (London, 2005) p. 175

²⁵ Colvin, 1932 p. 94

hesitation from the British in acting as they were still being pulled by the conflicting demands of Gallipoli. At the key Committee meeting Kitchener seemed unaware that the Danube had been crossed. Carson scribbled a note to Lloyd George: 'K does not read the telegrams - and we don't see them - it is intolerable.'²⁶

On October 12th Edward Carson sent his letter of resignation to the Prime Minister. Lloyd George told him he was doing the right thing but hoped he didn't think him a coward because he wouldn't do the same. Asquith, Bonar Law and Walter Long over the next few days all tried to persuade Carson to change his mind. But to no avail. The resignation was finally made public on October 19th. General Sir Henry Wilson wrote in his diary of 21st:

'Kitchener is frightened of Egypt, of India, of Mesopotamia, of going on in the Dardanelles, of coming away, of going to Salonica and of not going. He has no plan of any sort. Carson came to me and told me the whole story of his resignation. Absolute chaos and indecision reign in the Cabinet, all due to Asquith, who has gone to bed to gain some more time.'²⁷

The Prime Minister was indeed ill and Carson only made a brief statement confirming the resignation in the Commons on October 20th. It was a mollifying statement: 'there was no political difference...Nor no personal difference with the Prime Minister...' It was a question of policy upon which he pretended no superior wisdom but held 'consciously and patriotically.'²⁸ But some considered the resignation a tactical mistake. Bonar Law was also contemplating resignation over withdrawal. Lord Beaverbrook concluded that Carson should have stayed his hand: 'By putting his resignation alongside his leader's he would have immensely strengthened his hand and possibly helped to expedite the whole proceedings. Resignation in echelon, like attacks, are always a mistake.'²⁹

Having recovered and rested, Asquith moved to tackle the crisis. Carson had resigned. Lloyd George was threatening to go if Kitchener didn't, Bonar Law said he would resign if they didn't retreat from the Dardanelles. The Prime Minister proposed sending Kitchener to the Dardanelles to make a final assessment and proposed to take over the War office himself. General Hamilton, the army commander at Gallipoli, had already been recalled.

Asquith tabled a special motion in the House of Commons on November 2nd in the midst of the crisis and took to the floor of the House himself to give a major speech on the situation. In his statement he summarised the situation in France and the Dardanelles. There were nearly a million men enlisted under the command of Sir John French, the Dominions had rallied to the flag, there had been success in Mesopotamia but they had failed in the Dardanelles: 'I have never sustained a keener disappointment than in the failure of this operation.' He pledged support for Serbia and went on to discuss the differences within the Cabinet on the conscription issue but indicated that a practical decision would be made soon. He also indicated that he would move to have a smaller War committee (not less than three, not more than five). He concluded with a passionate determination to see it through, recognising the burden he carried: 'A terrible burden of responsibility it is, measured by what has happened, and by what still is to happen! Much of our best blood spilt! Thousands of young lives, the hope of our future, cut short in the very promise of their youth. The cry goes up in ever-increasing volume day by day and week by week from torn hearts and mutilated homes.' But taking courage from the example of stories like that of Edith Cavell, the English nurse executed in Belgium, he pledged: 'Let us be worthy of them and endure to the end.'³⁰

Carson was next to speak. As he rose, he took on the mantle of opposition leader in the House, making for the first time a detailed criticism of government policy and explaining his reasons for resigning. He argued that the time had come for free debate 'not in the consequence of any weakening of any single man in this House and in the country on the main object of the war' but from an anxiety as to whether what appeared to be grave miscalculations could have been avoided as to whether our resources in men and material are being

²⁶ See note in H. Montgomery Hyde, Carson (London 1953).

²⁷ C.E. Callwell, *Sir Henry Wilson...his life and diaries* (London, 1927).

²⁸ Colvin, 1936, p. 105.

²⁹ Beaverbrook, 1960, p.156

³⁰ Hansard, 2 November 1915, 527-529

used to best advantage - and thirdly, 'above all whether the machinery of Government for carrying on the war is the most adequate and effective that we can devise.'

In a detailed critique he stated that the Cabinet structure was 'totally incapable' of carrying out a war under the present conditions. Addressing the Prime Minister directly, he listed in detail the failures of the Dardanelles campaign, from the landing of troops 'where you lost in casualties 40,000 men and had an entirely insufficient force to enable you to go on', to Suvla 'where you had another 40,000 casualties and your expedition not advanced a single mile towards a successful conclusion' He asserted:

'From that day to this, when that disaster occurred - a disaster in my opinion the most vital that has happened in the course of this war- under your Cabinet system you have never been able to make up your mind, and you have not now made up your mind as to whether you ought boldly to withdraw your men and save the suffering and the loss which goes on from day to day with absolutely no hope of any satisfactory result.'

Carson argued for the replacement of the Cabinet with a more concentrated group of the best men available (and not the sub-committee proposed by Asquith). He said the abandonment of Serbia was both a failure of policy and a breach of promise (a statement that prompted a defensive response by Foreign Secretary Grey later) and he believed that if forces were to be removed from the western theatre they should go to Salonica and not Gallipoli. He read into the record of the House his resignation letter and concluded that the delays in deciding a firm action were dangerous. He hoped there was a plan for the new expedition (which had been sent to Egypt to await orders) 'because at the time I wrote my letter I could find no trace of any such existing.' Valuable time had been lost 'and unfortunately war does not stand still.'³¹

Carson was followed directly by John Redmond, speaking in debate for the first time since the Home Rule Bill went on the Statute Book fourteen months earlier. Redmond told John Dillon later that he felt Carson's speech had been a virulent attack on the Government and on Asquith but the most damaging parts, all that he had said about indecision and vacillation was 'absolutely true ... this kind of thing cannot go on.'³² He was therefore frank in his own response. He said that in fulfilling their commitment to support the War. 'We set ourselves the task of creating in Ireland - creating, mind you - an atmosphere favorable to recruiting. I say most solemnly in that task we were absolutely entitled to the sympathy and the assistance of the Government and the War Office. I am sorry to say we got neither. The fact remains that when we were faced with that difficult and formidable task practically every suggestion that we made, based on the strength of our knowledge of what was suitable for Ireland and the conditions there was put on one side.'

However, perhaps conscious of the pressures towards conscription, he put on record a note from Kitchener to the recruiting conference in September praising their efforts up to then in getting men to join in spite of the difficulties. Redmond claimed almost as many of his National Volunteers as of the Ulster Volunteers had joined (27,054 to 27,412) but still they were not being recognised as military force and used more widely (for home defense). He detailed his fears for the situation in the Dardanelles referring to the letters he had received about the catastrophe at Suvla and which he had sent on to the Prime Minister: 'I tell you that in the whole history of the war you will find that no troops ever were subjected to such horrible hardships and sufferings or showed such extraordinary gallantry as this 10th Irish Division.' He believed that the lack of recognition for the efforts of the Irish on V beach or at Loos the previous week was making matters even worse. He finished by saying that there could not be a premature peace, supporting Carson's view that Serbia should be supported and promised that: 'so long as the object we have in view is to bring the War to a victorious end, no matter how long the War may last, and no matter what sacrifices it may entail, you can count upon Ireland to the end.'

Redmond soon left London for France where he was to spend a week meeting the Irish regiments that were dispersed throughout many divisions.³³ He travelled with his enlisted son, Billie, his brother Willie the MP was also serving. Redmond reported on his visit in a pamphlet published soon afterwards and also gave an

³¹ Carson speech Hansard, 2 November 1915 529-

³² Dermot Meleady, *John Redmond, the National Leader* (Kildare, 2014) p. 350

³³ See Passport and correspondence on visit NLI 15,261/9. Pamphlet here:

<http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/images/uploads/further-reading/Ed67-RedmondsAccount.pdf>

account in a major speech supporting the London Irish regiment. He had visited every Irish regiment at the front with one exception: 'In most cases they marched on parade to hear my remarks, headed by a pipers band like you had here this evening playing O'Donnell Abu or God Save Ireland. They carried with them the green flag of Ireland.'³⁴ On the front line he found a battalion of the Ulster Division side by side with the Dublin's: 'I spoke to them all. I found that, so far from any friction having arisen between them, they were like true comrades and brother Irishmen. I pray God that may go on. I pray that whenever a battalion of the Irish Brigade goes into action there may be a battalion of the Ulster Division alongside of them. I need not point the moral to you. That is the way to end the unhappiness and the discords and the confusion of Ireland. Let Irish come together in the trenches and risk their lives together and spill their blood together, and I say there is no power on earth that when they come home can induce them to turn as enemies upon one another.'³⁵ The King sent Redmond a personal letter of admiration following the speech.³⁶

Carson, who had visited the Ulster Regiment before they embarked for France, was still engaged with the political crisis in Westminster in the days following the Commons debate. He received a number of letters supporting his stance; the novelist George Moore wrote: 'the mediocrity of the men that form the Cabinet frightens me and it is beginning to frighten the country...you have determination, courage and vision. You will not desert Ulster and I hope you will not desert the Empire in this terrible moment.'³⁷ General Henry Wilson wrote a number of detailed letters to Carson criticising the army leadership and making policy suggestions. (He was writing to Bonar Law as well).³⁸ Carson was becoming a leader of the opposition. He still liaised with Bonar Law and was with him in the days following Kitchener's dispatch to the Dardanelles. Bonar Law nearly resigned again but eventually drew from Asquith a commitment to withdraw. Asquith also formed his small inner Cabinet, leading to the resignation of Churchill to go into military service. As acting War minister Asquith set about changing the army leadership in France (and in the Dardanelles). Kitchener's report from the Dardanelles supported evacuations and these were completed successfully on December 18th -21st.

As these evacuations were occurring the balance in the debate regarding compulsory service was also shifting in the Cabinet. A new bill was being proposed, the so-called 'Bachelors Bill' which would bring in compulsory service for unmarried men. Ireland was to be excluded from the bill but the dangers of the conscription issue being raised in this way were evident to Irish Secretary Birrell who was a consistent opponent of conscription within Cabinet. He wrote to Redmond on December 19th with a warning to him about being complacent when he read of the numbers signing up:

'..I doubt not you have good sources of information as to the real condition of the country at the present moment, which I am sure, largely owing to this thrice damnable conscription scare, is very bad and may fairly be called alarming. During the last few weeks I have been reading nothing but uncomfortable figures about the Irish Volunteers who are steadily month by month increasing here and there, in this place and that. Whenever there is a plucky priest and two or three men with a little courage the movement is stamped out but unluckily such priests and laymen are not always to be found. I am afraid to say that there is now nearer 14,000 than 13,000 of these Volunteers, and although many of them are men of straw and wind, still whenever there is organisation it is a centre of sedition, both to Dublin Castle and the Government and the revolutionary propaganda grows in strength and, I think, in sincerity of purpose. How many rifles they have I don't know - some few thousands, I am certain,- and they are always trying to coax or steal from the far bigger numbers of National Volunteers, who at the time being are doing next to nothing. Shot-guns and revolvers abound on all sides and great efforts are being made to smuggle in arms and ammunition, and this requires most careful watching.'³⁹

³⁴ Gwynn, 1932, p. 452-3

³⁵ Gwynn, 1932 p. 453

³⁶ Gwynn 1932, p. 454.

³⁷ Colvin, 1936 p. 120

³⁸ Colvin, 1936 and Callwell 1927. For more on Wilson see Ed Mulhall, A historic meeting of men, Century Ireland. <http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/articles/a-historic-meeting-of-men-totally-ignorant-of-their-subject>

³⁹ See Birrell's letter s in NLI 15,169/4 and Gwynn, 1932. p. 459-60

Redmond was not as attuned as was being suggested as he persisted with his view that police numbers could be decreased to aid recruiting because of the relatively peaceful situation.

While the debate went on in cabinet, Asquith addressed the Commons on recruitment numbers on December 21st. He also reported on the Dardanelles evacuation. In reply Redmond and Carson were at one in sharply criticising the lack of a full account of what had happened in Gallipoli and the failure to explain or to publish General Hamilton's dispatches. Carson agreed with Redmond:

‘I join with the hon. and learned Member for Waterford. I think it is a great public scandal that three months have elapsed since the landing at Suvla Bay and that except a telegram or two we have never heard one word of these operations. The hon. Member for Waterford and myself are deeply interested in those operations because there was a brave division, of which I am as proud as he is, whom I think, if the matter is inquired into, it will be found in connection not only with them, but of some of the officers involved, a grave injustice has been done...But what the country would like to know is, if you were doing nothing in August, September, and October and up till the 20th of December, why were these men left in a kind of hell there, sometimes losing their men by sickness at the rate of a thousand a day while someone was making up their mind as to whether these men ought to be left there or ought not...The abandonment of Anzac and Suvla, in its operation itself, has been a glorious page in the history of the country; but the operation from August until now, the hesitancy, the doubts, the failing to make up your mind has been a blot upon management of this War which it will be difficult to obliterate.’⁴⁰

Carson stated his support for conscription, Redmond firmly stated his position against it: ‘With the man who would say that he would sooner lose the war than have compulsion I have no sympathy at all, and I do not believe anybody has... [but] if proposed under present circumstances, I, for one, shall oppose it by every means in my power. I am convinced it would break up the unity of the country. It would be fiercely resented and fiercely opposed, not only on the floor of this House, but outside, and in the end, I am profoundly convinced its result in point of men would be ridiculously small.’⁴¹

The limited Conscription Bill was agreed on by Cabinet, with one further resignation, Home Secretary John Simon, and introduced in January. Despite the exclusion of Ireland, Redmond and the Irish Party opposed it on First Reading and Redmond led the opposition speeches against it. As no other party opposed it, Redmond did not vote against the Bill again at its subsequent stages, a position welcomed by Carson who urged him to go one step further and support the inclusion of Ireland in the Bill’s provisions. Amendments to include Ireland weren’t successful and Redmond assured the Commons at the debate’s end: ‘It is true to say at this moment that the overwhelming sentiment of the Irish people is with the Empire for the first time.’⁴² That optimistic perspective was not held by Carson who summed up his view of the political situation on the last day of 1915 in a letter: ‘[T]he whole machine (of cabinet government) is as rotten as possible and I cannot see how we are about to win until both sides are exhausted. I don’t think the country will ever again trust what is euphemistically called “The Governing classes” with their everlasting playing for office and votes.’⁴³ When Lady Londonderry received this letter it was already 1916.

Ed Mulhall is a former Managing Director of RTÉ News & Current Affairs and Editorial Advisor to Century Ireland

⁴⁰ For speeches see Hansard 21 December 1915, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1915/dec/21/prime-ministers-appeal-to-unmarried-men>

⁴¹ Hansard, 21 December 1915)

⁴² Stephen Gwynn, *Redmond's Last Years* (London, 1919), p. 212

⁴³ Edward Carson to Lady Londonderry, 31 December 1915, Hyde, 1953 p. 397.

FURTHER READING:

- Denis Gwynn, *The Life of John Redmond*, London, 1932.
Ian Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson*, Volume 3, London, 1936.
Dermot Meleady, *John Redmond, the National Leader*, Kildare, 2014.
Roy Jenkins, *Asquith*, London, 1964, 1986.
Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path*, London, 2013.
H. Montgomery Hyde, *Carson*, London 1953.
Geoffrey Lewis, *Carson, the Man who divided Ireland*, London, 2005.
Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War, 1914-1916*, London, 1928, 1960.
Michael Brock, Eleanor Brock, *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary, 1914-16*, London 2014.
Frank Owen, *Tempestuous Journey, Lloyd George his life and times*, London 1954.
Robert Blake, *The unknown Prime Minister, the life and times of Andrew Bonar Law*, London. 1955.
Leon O Broin, *The Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell in Ireland*, London, 1969.
Stephen Gwynn, *Redmond's Last Years*, London, 1919
Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule, An Irish History 1800-2000*, London, 2003.
C.E. Callwell, *Sir Henry Wilson...his life and diaries*, London, 1927.