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THE ANGLO-IRISH TREATY 1921: THE RESPONSE OF THE BRITISH
PARLIAMENTARY LABOUR PARTY AND LABOUR PRESS

ABSTRACT

The British Labour Party became increasingly aware after the First World War that it was potentially an alternative government in waiting. In opposition the party was generally supportive of Irish nationalism. It supported Home Rule and was adamantly opposed to the partition of Ireland contained in the 1920 Government of Ireland Bill. As the demands of Irish republicans became more radical and their tactics more extreme the Labour parliamentary leadership became wary of the electoral damage that could ensue if it was perceived by the British public that it was sympathetic to revolutionary Irish republicanism.

Despite the fact that the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 was inconsistent with Labour party Irish policy cementing as it did the partition of Ireland as well as hardly being an exercise in “self-determination”, both Labour MPs in the debate on the Treaty as well as the Labour press supported the Treaty as it offered a way out of the Irish *imbroglio* and a return to rational class-based politics. The overriding concern of, in particular, the parliamentary leadership of the Labour Party by now was to prove to the British electorate that it could be as protective of British state interests as its rivals.

The article argues that that this pragmatic about turn was adopted as many members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in particular were acutely aware that the party needed to be seen as patriotic, moderate and responsible if it was to stand any chance of being elected to power. The article traces this reversal in policy by

reference to contemporary parliamentary debates as well as through the columns of the contemporary Labour Press. These are the only sources evidencing this change in Labour Party policy. Recent literature on the Labour Party in the 1920s does not address this issue. There is no reference to the Anglo-Irish Treaty either in the minutes of the PLP nor in the papers of the two major players in Labour Party policy on Ireland, the leader Ramsay MacDonald or J. H. Thomas, later Colonial Secretary in the first Labour Government with responsibility for Ireland.

KEYWORDS Anglo-Irish Treaty, British Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald, partition, Irish Free State

ARTICLE

British Labour Party policy on Ireland after the First World War was inevitably influenced by the party's awareness that it was potentially an alternative government in waiting. Before this became apparent after 1918 and when it was little more than a radical adjunct to the dominant progressive party, the Liberals, Labour could afford to support Irish national demands in a general, instinctive and positive manner. However, once it became obvious that the Labour Party not only had the opportunity to overtake the Liberal Party as the foremost progressive party in Britain but, in effect, was the only viable alternative to the Conservatives, party policy had to become more focused. This change in fortune and the resultant need to re-assess its

Irish policy came about in the years immediately after the First World War and exactly at the time the transformation in Irish nationalism was taking place from a moderate devolutionist variety to a militant separatist philosophy.

At this time, when it was on the brink of exercising real political influence, the British Labour Party remained an often uneasy coalition of many different interests. Founded initially to represent the political interests of the section of the working-class consisting of trade unionised male industrial workers whose interests were interpreted quite narrowly as comprising of improvements in working conditions and wages, the early Labour Party unashamedly represented a limited sectional interest. It soon became apparent however, that if it was to reach beyond this narrow base it needed to broaden its appeal to other progressive sections of society. Allied to its trade union base, often uneasily, were the ideological socialists of the Independent Labour Party and, in particular, after 1918, middle-class former supporters of the Liberal Party who recognised that Labour had now usurped the Liberals' position as the foremost radical party in Britain.

No survey of the Labour Party and its policy on Ireland can be complete without reference to the role of the Labour press, particularly the Daily Herald. Until 1922, when it was rescued financially by the Labour Party and the TUC, the Herald was a Labour-supporting newspaper that was independent of the Labour Party. In this position it played an important role as part of the liberal campaign in 1920 and 1921 which was instrumental in informing the British public of the consequences of the military action that was being undertaken in their name in Ireland. It also played an

important role in critically but positively supporting Lloyd George during the peace negotiations leading up to the signing of the Treaty in 1921. The newspapers of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), Forward and Labour Leader, also contributed substantially to the debate on Ireland inside the Labour Party, particularly as the ILP was the British Labour Party's radical socialist wing.¹

Occasionally, the Labour Party leadership was taken to task by elements of the organised Irish community in Britain as well as by its own left wing and accused of not being robust enough in its support for militant Irish nationalism. Usually the party hierarchy was well able to fend off such criticism. In the case of the party's own members, criticism was never sustained and usually only emanated periodically from either backbench MPs representing, or party members living in, areas with substantial Irish populations. The fact was that the party membership, even the more militant elements, were, like the party leadership, far more interested in social and economic issues rather than getting involved in what they regarded as irrational and unpredictable problems such as Ireland for any length of time. In the case of the organised Irish community in Britain, the party leadership obviously took into account the fact that the largest Irish support organisation in Britain, the Irish Self-Determination League, put itself beyond the pale when, after the Treaty was signed, it came down on the side of the anti-Treaty republican irregulars rather than the pro-Treaty element. The leadership clearly came to the conclusion at an early stage that any courting of the Irish nationalist vote, particularly the republican vote, in Britain, could only be at the expense of undermining the party's carefully planned long-term strategy of attempting to appeal to the British electorate as a responsible, moderate

and, above all, patriotic party. By and large, this strategy was successful. It only occasionally foundered when, for example, Irish voters informed Labour during the Stockport by-election in 1920 that it ran the risk of losing the Irish vote as a result of the party's perceived tardiness in supporting Irish nationalist demands.²

Undoubtedly the British Labour Party used and exploited its Irish policy (whether in opposition or in government) in order to portray and position itself to the British electorate as a competent and responsible party fit to be entrusted with the sound management of the affairs and interests of the British state. In opposition, both the British Labour Party and a dynamic revolutionary Irish nationalism had a sympathetic but wary relationship with each other. However, as British Labour edged closer to government and Irish nationalism became overtly revolutionary the distance between the two accelerated as an increasingly respectable and cautious Labour Party sought to avoid the undoubted electoral rebuff too close an association with Irish nationalism could result in. Finally, in government, the relationship became no different from that of the two previous British governments of the 1920s involving a rigid and legalistic interpretation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in order to ensure that Irish politics did not return to the floor of the House of Commons. Indeed, when the British Labour Party took on governmental responsibilities in 1924 and became determined to establish its credibility at home by effectively representing the interests of the British state in the face of the scepticism of its domestic political enemies, it was confronted in Ireland by a Free State government that needed to be seen to be asserting Irish national prestige in the face of constant attacks by its former allies now organised in the anti-Treaty republican movement.

In the autumn of 1921, as the Treaty negotiations between British ministers and the Irish republican plenipotentiaries repeatedly oscillated between stalemate and progress and often appeared on the brink of complete collapse, the combined forces of the British Labour movement took the precaution of re-iterating their position on the talks. Included in a joint manifesto on British-American relations issued by the General Council of the TUC, the National Executive of the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party was a summary of the British Labour position on Ireland as it stood in late 1921. This was the policy first stated during the partition debates on the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 and repeated at a special party conference late that year and again at annual conference in the summer of 1921. It stated that

Should the present Conference fail, Labour will continue to demand for the Irish people whatever constitution for Ireland the Irish people desire, subject only to two conditions - that it affords protection to minorities, and that the Constitution should prevent Ireland from becoming a military or naval menace to Great Britain - a policy which has been accepted by Irish Labour.³

The Articles of Agreement signed on 6 December 1921 and more colloquially known as the Anglo-Irish Treaty created the Irish Free State with Dominion status similar to that pertaining at the time in Canada and Australia. In fact, Article 2 of the Treaty specified that the relationship of the Crown and the Imperial Parliament to the new Dominion should be that of the United Kingdom and the Dominion of Canada. The new political entity would take on a share of the United Kingdom national debt and would not raise a defence force greater, in proportion to the population, than that of the United Kingdom. British use of the 'treaty ports' in peacetime and other facilities in war were guaranteed, but after five years, Irish defence of the coast was

conceded, subject to agreement by joint conference. The provisions in respect of Northern Ireland maintained the terms of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act for a month after the official establishment of the Irish Free State (this occurred when the Irish Free State Constitution Act received royal assent on 6 December 1922) during which Northern Ireland could opt out of the new settlement. If this happened, the status quo with Northern Ireland, as constituted in 1921, staying in the United Kingdom, would remain. If Ulster chose to join the Free State, the Northern Ireland Parliament would remain but as a devolved assembly from Dublin. If Northern Ireland opted out of the Free State, Article 12 of the Treaty provided for the establishment of a Boundary Commission with three representatives, one from Northern Ireland, one from the Free State and one from the United Kingdom, to determine the boundary, 'in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions'.⁴ On 7 December 1922, Northern Ireland exercised its right under the Treaty to remain outside the Irish Free State.

The Treaty offered Irish nationalists complete independence in domestic affairs (including full fiscal autonomy) in the 26 county jurisdiction. It is also arguable that, given the rapidly evolving nature of Dominion status inside the British Commonwealth, that its 'external' freedoms would also be wide ranging and likely to expand. The Sinn Fein delegation were persuaded by Lloyd George to accept the Treaty because he argued that Ireland's 'essential unity' was given recognition first of all by the facility of allowing Northern Ireland to join the Irish Free State if it chose to and, if it didn't, by the continuation of the Council of Ireland from the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. In addition, the Boundary Commission could potentially

redraw the border and there was an expectation (or hope) on the Sinn Fein side, which Lloyd George assiduously cultivated, that the transference of much of the territory occupied by the substantial nationalist community in Northern Ireland to the Irish Free State would make it difficult for the northern state to survive. Lee believes that it was a substantial negotiating achievement on the part of Lloyd George to give the impression to the Irish representatives that the establishment of a Boundary Commission would lead to Irish unity, to the extent that they actually signed the Treaty. He emphasises the point that Arthur Griffith merely reflected the immaturity of nationalist thinking about Ulster in allowing himself to be deluded at the negotiations. De Valera, like Griffith and Collins, assumed that the Boundary Commission would so emasculate Northern Ireland that the rump would be forced into a united Ireland for economic self-preservation. All nationalists, whatever their position on the Treaty, insisted on misinterpreting the Ulster situation.⁵ Despite the fact that throughout negotiations the British government had rigidly adhered to the two conditions that Ireland must remain part of the Empire and that Ulster must not be coerced, the Irish signed the Treaty convinced that through the Boundary Commission they had secured the ending of partition.

During the concluding phase of the negotiations, with little definitive information being made available by both sides and with events developing rapidly, the Daily Herald became convinced that Ulster unionist obduracy and Lloyd George's dependency on the Conservatives inside the Coalition Government for political survival was going to result in a proposal falling far short of Irish national demands. As late as the weekend before the Treaty was signed, the newspaper was coruscating in its condemnation of what ultimately turned out to be the final

settlement involving as it did the oath of allegiance, Dominion status, partition and the naval ports. All of these, it argued, were simply evidence that the Government had given in to the Tories and their allies - the Ulster Unionists. The paper complained that

If the so-called new terms offered to Ireland are as rumoured they are no new terms at all, but, in essence, a reiteration of the British Government's old refusal to grant either of Ireland's demands: the demand for real and complete self-determination, and the demand for unity... this means the complete knuckling under of the British Government to the Die-Hards and Ulster.⁶

Even on the morning the Treaty was signed, the Daily Herald was despondent about the likelihood of a successful outcome to negotiations. It predicted that the Irish would never agree to the threat of coercion to accept partition or accept an oath of allegiance to the king as an alternative to the renewal of hostilities 'so it is inevitable that Lloyd George and the Government will have to confess failure'.⁷

On the face of it, the Daily Herald got it spectacularly wrong. The paper's anger and despondency was based on what it saw as terms so overly favourable to Ulster being offered to the Irish plenipotentiaries that they would have no alternative to reject. When it became apparent on the morning of 6 December that overnight the Irish had accepted the terms offered, both the Daily Herald and Labour politicians were wrong-footed. However, they quickly recovered. Leading Labour parliamentarians J. R. Clynes and Arthur Henderson were interviewed in the Daily Herald on 7 December and both expressed gratification at the previous day's developments 'which triumphantly vindicate the attitude which Labour has consistently taken up' added Clynes, without any awareness of irony at all.⁸ Indeed,

Henderson went further when he claimed that ‘the whole of the British Labour movement will welcome the news of the settlement, not only with joy but with great satisfaction’ as it vindicated Labour policy as regards self-determination tempered by protection for minorities and the removal of Ireland as a naval threat.⁹ After a holding statement in its editorial on 7 December, the Daily Herald observed that ‘on the details of the settlement we do not propose to comment. Approval or disapproval of this or that detail is now irrelevant; what matters is the great hope for the future that the settlement gives’.¹⁰

The paper soon recovered its composure, rowed in behind Labour Party spokesmen and adopted the same self-congratulatory air which was to characterise Labour’s policy on the Treaty. It claimed that

As regards Ireland, the Government has merely done what Labour told it to do from the first. It cannot take to itself any credit for the settlement, which has been forced out of it by the failure of its own blackguardly ‘reprisals’, by growing and worldwide hostility to its brutal excesses, and by the increasing pressure of Labour criticism.¹¹

It was left to left-winger and future Labour leader George Lansbury to proffer a more charitable and conciliatory interpretation but even he continued the tone of self-congratulation when he argued that

No one would grudge either Galloper Smith [Lord Birkenhead] or Lloyd George credit due to them, but the greatest credit of all was due to the Labour Party, which, when things were at their worst a few months ago, did its level best to bring about such a settlement as had now been reached.¹²

When the Articles of Agreement were signed on 6 December 1921, a joint meeting of the EC of the Labour Party and the TUC General Council, issued a statement declaring

with the deepest satisfaction that an agreement has been reached between the British Government and Irish representatives... the whole Labour movement rejoices that the Irish people are now within sight of a real peace... the Labour movement has constantly striven for an Irish settlement in harmony with the aspirations of the Irish people and the Labour Party Commission which visited Ireland during the dark days of open strife, laid down procedure which was, step by step adopted and which culminated in the present agreement.¹³

This overriding tone of relief and self-congratulation pervaded other Labour institutions as well. Labour Leader's sense of release from the Irish morass was apparent when it stated that it 'matters not that various political parties, Labour, Liberal and Coalition, is each claiming a share of the credit for the settlement. It is sufficient that the Irish Free State is hailed on all sides with warm-hearted approval'.¹⁴ It elaborated on this theme elsewhere in the same issue when it declared that 'the Labour Leader, for all the thirty years of its history and unswerving support of Irish freedom, welcomes, in common with all the liberal forces in this country, the opening of a new era of national culture in the land we have oppressed so long'.¹⁵ The self-congratulation appeared the following week when Arthur Henderson wrote that

The Irish peace terms commend themselves to British Labour because the settlement follows the lines advocated by Labour a year ago. While they may not satisfy everybody either here or over the Irish Channel, they are dishonourable to none, and by them the Irish will be masters in their own household. That is national freedom.¹⁶

Ramsay MacDonald put the same sentiment more pithily when he noted in the same issue that the ‘agreement vindicates the policy of the Labour Party, and condemns all that has happened up to a few weeks ago’.¹⁷ MacDonald was also one of the few Labour politicians to understand the wider political implications of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty when he noted that

For forty years we resisted Ireland’s claim when they were advanced constitutionally. We now congratulate ourselves in giving her more than ever she asked for before, because, in the words of one spokesman, Lord Birkenhead, ‘there was no prospect of subduing her after she declared civil war’. Are they pondering that in Egypt and in India today?¹⁸

It was becoming clear that the sense of relief that greeted the signing of the Treaty in Labour circles was beginning to obscure the very real, but conveniently overlooked, differences between the terms of the Agreement and what had been official Labour Party policy on Ireland. This was most strikingly apparent on the issue of partition, which the Treaty clearly buttressed but which had been the reason for so much Labour opposition to the Government of Ireland Bill only the previous year.

In the debate on the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 14 December 1921, J. R. Clynes MP spoke for the Labour Party in a similar tone to that which he and Henderson had adopted immediately after the settlement had been announced. He believed that

Reference has been made to the attitude of the Labour party in relation to these Articles. These Articles travel on the lines long advocated by Labour... the conscience of the Labour party is easy... I look upon these Articles of Agreement as the instrument of a lasting and beneficial settlement between Ireland and this country... it is essential to have unity between the South and the North of Ireland for the future prosperity of the whole of Ireland. I believe that, until the North

and South come together, they can never know how much they have in common and how little fundamental cause there is for conflict.... I say, therefore, that the Labour party rejoices with the rest of those who, either in the House or in the country, welcome this Agreement.¹⁹

Clynes' comments were made in the full knowledge that whatever new constitutional structures might result from the Treaty, the abolition of partition and the reunification of Ireland were not going to be amongst them. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the overwhelming sense of optimism that resulted from the Treaty being agreed when negotiations seemed more likely to fail, blinded Labour politicians to the fact that its terms were substantially short of what had been Labour's demands for Ireland. In Labour's defence, however, was the argument that it would have been politically difficult for a British political party to continue to make further demands on behalf of nationalist Ireland if its own representatives at the Treaty negotiations had already settled for less.

The terms of the Treaty were discussed in the Commons the following week. The Times reported that the debate on the Address in reply to the King's Speech was resumed on 16 December by Arthur Henderson MP who said that

the outstanding fact of the Irish Treaty was that it made peace with Ireland.... He denied that the Labour Party was unsympathetic to the population of Ulster. He agreed that the people of Ulster were entitled to have their position safeguarded.... He claimed that the Labour Party had previously expressed themselves in favour of the line of approach to a solution that had lately been followed by the Government.²⁰

Henderson added that there had been no speeches by any of the leaders of the Labour Party criticising the Government since the censure motion at the end of

October. This was because the Party recognised that the Government was making tortuous progress towards agreement. He concluded for Labour by stating that

We welcome the Articles in the Treaty which we hope will be ratified by a large majority of this House.... We of the Labour Party have strongly favoured the line of approach that has been followed by the Government.²¹

In his conclusion, Henderson referred back to his speech during the censure motion the previous October in which he had outlined how the Labour Party would assess the outcome of Lloyd George's negotiations with the Irish delegation. He declared that the Party was satisfied that Labour's demands for the protection of minorities and the security of the country had been met by the Treaty which, he believed

will establish an honourable peace and open up a new era of friendship and mutual confidence between the British and Irish peoples... not since the Government was elected in 1918 has it reflected more accurately the spirit and desires of our people than it has done in connection with this matter.²²

Finally, George Barnes, MP for Glasgow Central and a former wartime coalition cabinet minister, stated that the Labour Party had always stood for Home Rule for Ireland and therefore claimed the Treaty as its own.²³

The Daily Herald, however, remained extremely suspicious of Lloyd George's motives and reacted angrily to rumours that the Prime Minister would seek to benefit electorally from apparently securing peace in Ireland by calling a general election. It asked furiously

Can the public be diddled into forgetting the Government's hideous and filthy record of outrage and murder in Ireland, and induced to take, for election

purposes, the entirely false view that the Government's move in the right direction over Ireland was due to principle instead of expediency?²⁴

The newspaper also reacted in a similar fashion when Birkenhead, the Lord Chancellor in the Coalition Government and a signatory of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, accused Labour of seeking to undermine the 'stability' provided by Lloyd George's administration. The Herald replied that 'if there is any hope of stability in Ireland, it is because the Coalition did at last, after years of pain and shame, something approaching what Labour had told it to do all along'.²⁵

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, in effect, gave Dominion Home Rule to a partitioned Ireland. Harding believes that, to the British Labour movement, 'it came as a welcome relief and a convenient excuse for closing the book on their own tired Irish policies'.²⁶ In this, the Labour Party was not alone. For both Conservatives and Liberals in the Coalition Government the Treaty, on closer inspection, seemed to be at odds with both parties traditional stances on Ireland; one defending the unity of the United Kingdom and the other prepared to advance limited self-government to the island as a whole. However, there was little closer inspection; for both Coalition parties, the Treaty was a pragmatic solution to the ages-old intractable problem of Ireland and in the words of historian A. J. P. Taylor, Lloyd George had now magically 'conjured it out of existence'.²⁷ Given that the Treaty was regarded by most British politicians as a final settlement of Anglo-Irish difficulties, it is hardly fair to single out the Labour Party for wanting to wash its hands of the whole problem. Undoubtedly, it was with a feeling of relief that Labour left-winger, George Lansbury, could confidently state in 1925 that Ireland was 'a question which is practically settled today'.²⁸

By any criterion, however, the Anglo-Irish Treaty fell far short of Labour Party policy, enunciated by then Labour chairman William Adamson in the House of Commons in November 1920 on the third reading of the Government of Ireland Bill, confirmed at the Labour Party Special Conference on Ireland in December 1920 and repeated at the June 1921 Labour Party Conference. It obviously protected the Unionist minority (in the north, through reconfirming partition and in the south, by a senate weighted favourably towards former unionists) and it protected British strategic interests by reserving use of some Irish Free State ports to the Royal Navy but there was no mention of a Constituent Assembly for the whole country (a constant Labour demand) and the proposed Council of Ireland was a pale substitute. Ironically, it can be argued that it was the Labour Party retreating from 'free and absolute self-determination' as elaborated at its annual conference at Scarborough in 1920 to an insistence on the protection of minorities at its conference the following year that had facilitated its acceptance of partition. However, in the euphoria of the time the feeling of relief that the Irish question was at long last off the British political agenda and an impatience to concentrate again on British domestic issues meant that this potentially awkward detail was quickly ignored, even if it was at all recognised. Yet the Treaty terms were substantially short of what official Labour Party policy was on Ireland. Only a year earlier, the party had vehemently opposed the partitionist nature of the Government of Ireland Bill and had in fact boycotted the Bill in protest. Now they were giving their wholehearted support to a Treaty which to all intents and purposes reinforced the very partition of Ireland the party had always strenuously opposed. It seemed that Labour was no different to the other political parties when it wanted to see an end to the debilitating and, during the period of

terror and counter-terror, polluting effect of the Irish question on the British democratic system.

In their contributions to the House of Commons debate on the Treaty, Labour MPs hardly ever referred to the outstanding boundary issue even though anti-partitionism was the one issue which united the entire spectrum of Labour opinion on Ireland. The desire to move back to the safer political ground of traditional party politics in Britain obviously overcame any lingering tendencies (if there were any) to compare in any detail the apparent contradictions between the Treaty and Labour policy on Ireland. However, in supporting the Treaty and, by implication, Article 12 setting up the Boundary Commission, Labour at least tacitly accepted partition albeit with the possibility of revision of the boundary.

The potential embarrassment caused by the continuation of partition was nothing, however, to the paroxysms of fear that surfaced in British Labour politicians whenever the party was in danger of being associated in the public mind with revolutionary Irish nationalism. Thus explains why, according to McDermott, ‘the Labour Party, as a constitutional party aware that its day of glory was near, had neither the opportunity nor desire to oppose the treaty’.²⁹

Finally, in a letter to The Times, Fred Bramley, Assistant Secretary of the TUC General Council attempted to justify the Labour reaction to the Treaty and looked forward to the future when he said that

British Labour made no attempt to intervene to influence or to jeopardize in any way the [Treaty] negotiations which were taking place. We have also left the Irish people to accept or reject the findings of the official conference [the Dail Treaty debate] and British Labour now stands prepared to assist the Irish people to complete their political and economic emancipation.

He went on to call for an Inter-State Congress of Labour to be established ‘for the purpose of securing a greater unity of purpose between the workers of Ireland and Great Britain’.³⁰ Paradoxically, it was left to J. H. Thomas, the anti-republican trade union leader who had, to the fury of many Labour left-wingers, repeatedly expressed his preference for Dominion Home Rule, to draw attention to the shortcomings of the Treaty, which he did on the second reading of the Irish Free State (Agreement) Bill on 17 February 1922, saying ‘I do not believe you will ever get real peace with two parliaments’.³¹

There *was* disquiet inside the Labour movement as regards the continued existence of partition. The issue had not been satisfactorily addressed in a Treaty Labour had wholeheartedly welcomed. This anxiety surfaced usually after IRA outrages on the border in the early months of 1922. Following IRA incursions into the north, the Daily Herald commented on the unresolved issue of the border, arguing that

Of course, the Ulster boundary must be altered, and drastically. Best of all would it be for Ulster to come into a united Ireland. Failing that, the right which Ulster itself claims to contract out of Ireland must obviously be conceded to predominately Nationalist areas to contract out of Ulster.³²

Usually, however, Labour preferred to continue to blame Lloyd George for the problem, as the Herald did when the IRA killed four Northern Ireland B Special

police auxiliaries in an attack on a train at Clones railway station on 12 February. In an editorial the following day, the paper commented that in Ireland 'there is controversy and conflict over the border-line of Ulster. It seems that Mr Lloyd George must have said one thing to the representatives of one side; and the opposite to the representatives of the other'.³³

In the debate on the Irish Free State (Agreement) Bill, J. R. Clynes offered Labour support to the Government and suggested that the border issue could be resolved by recourse to a plebiscite. He went on to add that 'if there is any assistance which by speech or act we can give to the Government, in relation to settling Irish controversies, the Prime Minister may depend upon carrying with him our fullest goodwill'.³⁴ The Times reported Thomas as going on to say that the Labour Party believed that the Bill should be ratified as speedily as possible as

No Government had been faced with greater difficulties than those which confronted the Government of the Irish Free State.... Were the Bill to be rejected the consequences in Ireland would be disastrous. It would be said: 'Here is another illustration of English bad faith'. The foundations of the British Empire would also be shaken.³⁵

Thomas also alluded to the war-weariness which existed amongst the British public.

He stressed that

If there was anything of which the British people were more sick of it was this Irish trouble; and if any one proposed at a public meeting to send more British troops to Ireland and spend more money there, he would get a very short answer.... It was by agreement between North and South that the trouble must be settled.... The Labour Party, therefore, would support the Government.... They were not prepared to make political capital out of the unfortunate state of affairs in Ireland. They believed the Government were right in making the Treaty, and they would vote for the Bill.³⁶

He was backed up by George Barnes who also appealed to the House to pass the Bill as speedily as possible ‘so that the Provisional Government [of the Irish Free State] might be armed with power and authority to restore order in Ireland’.³⁷

A Conservative Die-hard amendment to the Bill demanding that the second reading be postponed until either the Boundary Commission element of the Treaty was eliminated or that any Boundary Commission decision be approved by the Parliament of Northern Ireland was roundly defeated by 302 votes to 60 and the Bill was then read a second time. In his contribution to the debate on the amendment, Barnes ridiculed Die-hard anxieties, stating that the readjustment of the boundary was a matter of practical politics in that it was only concerned with minimal changes in areas close to the border. He went on to say that ‘if it was a matter of a large area like Derry being taken out of Northern Ireland that would be a different thing altogether... outside the range of practical politics’.³⁸ Thomas had already stated during the debate on the amendment that ‘the situation was far too difficult for Labour to wish to make party capital out of it’. This was to sum up Labour policy in the future.³⁹

Notwithstanding Thomas' reservations, it is perhaps not surprising that the Labour Party welcomed the Treaty with such enthusiasm as they were merely representing the public mood not only in Britain but also in Ireland. Opposition to the settlement, apart from the Ulster unionists who were furious at the imposition of the Boundary Commission over their heads, came from the extremes of politics in both

countries. In Britain, most animosity came from the Die-hard Conservatives whose influence on Irish policy had declined substantially. In Ireland, it came from the die-hard republicans, out of tune with popular sentiment there as was evidenced by the June 1922 General Election results in the incipient Free State. Furthermore, if moderate opinion in Sinn Fein was at least prepared to accept the Treaty if the Boundary Commission gave them some eventual hope of a united Ireland, it would have been politically implausible for the main opposition party in Great Britain to appear more republican than the republicans by continuing to demand an all-Ireland constituent assembly in order to determine Ireland's future political status.⁴⁰ Apart from anything else, the leadership of the party was acutely conscious of their role as the government-in-waiting, determined to be seen to be maintaining a careful, constitutional, moderate and respectable approach on all issues.⁴¹

On 7 January 1922, the Treaty was approved in Dail Eireann by the perilously close margin of 64 to 57 votes. In the immediate aftermath of the narrow acceptance of the Treaty, both pro- and anti-Treaty forces in the IRA manoeuvred to get their forces into the key military positions vacated by British forces in the opening months of 1922. Meanwhile, the Provisional Government, established by the Treaty, appeared reluctant to confront its anti-Treaty former comrades-in-arms. This caused political embarrassment for the Coalition Government at Westminster. On the third reading of the Irish Free State (Agreement) Bill, the Government and Churchill, as Colonial Secretary, in particular, came in for sustained criticism from Conservatives both inside and outside the Coalition. They attacked the Government's perceived unwillingness to remonstrate with the Provisional Government as regards the worsening security situation in the nascent Irish Free State. Criticising Churchill for

his opaque and obfuscating language as to the legal and constitutional limbo Ireland was now in, Lord Hugh Cecil, scion of the Salisbury family, sarcastically remarked that

What the Right Honourable gentleman really meant to say was that we did not regard Ireland as independent, but that we earnestly wished that in Ireland it should be thought that we did.⁴²

In response, Labour backbencher Colonel Josiah Wedgwood's remarkably frank comments attracted Unionist cheers and, no doubt, caused the Labour leadership embarrassment, when he claimed that the Labour Party was

quite satisfied with the words as they stood in the Bill. They were convinced it was a Treaty that had been made between this country and the Irish Republic and it was useless for the Government to try to evade the issue by alleging the words were merely formal.⁴³

Wedgwood also managed to make capital out of the split in the Government over the Irish settlement when he jibed

Far be it from bystanders like the Labour Party to interfere in the domestic differences of the two interesting parties [Coalition Unionists and Liberals versus the Unionist Diehards] who are at present engaged in denouncing each other. The man who interferes between husband and wife is likely to get into trouble.⁴⁴

In the same debate, the Ulster Unionist MP, Captain Charles Craig, argued that Northern Ireland should be allowed to vote itself out of the Irish Free State sooner rather than later. This should happen, he suggested, as soon as the Bill was passed, rather than after the Free State had come into existence, as Unionists were

worried that if a Labour Government came to power it might interpret the Treaty differently and refuse to allow Northern Ireland to opt out.⁴⁵ Shortly afterwards, in a speech which seemed to sum up the relief of Labour members in general, the Labour backbencher, Jack Jones, said he was speaking as an Irishman living in England. As such he believed that the Treaty was ‘the best thing ever done in regard to the Irish problem, and all parties ought to unite in carrying it into effect’.⁴⁶

On 8 March 1922, the Irish Free State (Agreement) Bill passed through the House of Commons with a majority of 243. It was agreed by the House of Lords on 31 March and received the Royal Assent the same day. At the final reading of the Bill on 31 March, the Labour backbencher Colonel Josiah Wedgwood promised that ‘when a change of Government came about, the Labour Party would more easily be able to secure the continuance of those good conditions it had never done anything to destroy’.⁴⁷

In Ireland, however, political instability had not been ended by the signing of the Treaty and the agreement to establish the Irish Free State. Already in the south pro- and anti-Treaty forces were jockeying for both political and military positions while, in the north, sectarian bloodletting was beginning to reach previously unimagined depths. In response to the murder of five members of the Catholic McMahon family, both Craig (the northern premier) and Collins (as Chairman of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State) were summoned to London. At first, it seemed as if Craig would refuse to travel unless Article 12 of the Treaty setting up the Boundary Commission was withdrawn. This provided the Daily Herald with another opportunity to highlight Lloyd George’s supposed perfidy. It stated that

The boundary clause in the Treaty is of course, an unsatisfactory clause, because it is so inconclusive. It is one of the innumerable examples of Mr Lloyd George's talent for being too clever by half - for finding a formula which one set of people takes to mean one thing while another set of people takes it to mean another.⁴⁸

In early 1922, when Ireland appeared on the brink of civil war over the Treaty, the British Labour Party stood on the threshold of parliamentary success. It was now the largest opposition party ranged against the faltering and increasingly Conservative-dominated Coalition Government. It had been forced to think and act like an alternative government when rapidly evolving its policy on Ireland from Home Rule to Dominion Home Rule and 'self determination', unlike the period before 1914 when it merely fell in behind the Liberals and the Irish Nationalist Party and allowed these two rival parties to, in effect, determine Labour's Irish policy.

The constant and uppermost concern of the Labour Party after 1918 was that, at all costs, it must maintain its reputation for moderation and parliamentarianism. Fortunately for Labour, it came through its evolution of an Irish policy with both intact. 'Self-determination' did not mean sympathy for extremist republicanism and the party heavily castigated Sinn Fein and the Coalition Government when it felt both were departing from traditional parliamentary methods in order to achieve political ends. In a backhanded compliment to Labour, the disillusioned Lord Carson, contributing to the second reading of the Irish Free State (Agreement) Bill in the Lords, expressed his frustration with a government who, as he saw it, had surrendered Ireland to gunmen. He bitterly complained that

We are told that Labour is not fit to govern, and that we must unite against Labour as a means of keeping the Coalition together. When I am told that we must be afraid of Labour I ask: What could Labour do worse for the shattering of the Constitution, the precedent for which has been laid down by the Government under this Bill?⁴⁹

However, Ireland, long a faultline in British politics with the Conservatives staunchly backing Irish (and later Ulster) Unionism in response to Liberal and Labour support for Irish nationalism, ceased to be a divisive party political issue in British politics as the 1920s progressed. The Anglo-Irish Treaty, negotiated by both Conservatives and Liberals in Lloyd George's Coalition Government, had effectively neutralised Ireland's ability to foment party political antagonism at Westminster. At least Labour, on the verge of government, hoped it had. The party's overriding concern was to be seen to be capable of representing British state interests as assertively and as comprehensively as its predecessors. By 1924, when the first Labour Government in Britain took office, the full implementation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty by whichever party was in government had begun to take on the status of "holy writ" irrespective of whatever political reservations may have been expressed when it first appeared in December 1921.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the Treaty was overwhelmingly accepted by the Parliamentary Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party (through its organ Labour Leader), the TUC and the Daily Herald. The justification was that the majority of Irish people had accepted it, that it provided a promise of peace, that it would eventually lead to Irish unity and that it would improve Anglo-Irish relations. The

criticism of the Labour Party is not that it did not oppose the Treaty on the grounds that it was imperialistic as obviously either it did not interpret it as such or else the Labour Party itself was not anti-imperialist (or both!). It *can* be criticised on the grounds that the Treaty, in the context of Lloyd George's threats to unleash a renewal of the war if it was not signed, did not constitute 'self-determination' which *was* Labour Party policy although the definition of this was consistently ambiguous.

¹ For further reading see: K. Matthews, *Fatal Influence: The Impact of Ireland on British Politics 1920-1925*, (Dublin, 2004); G. Bell, *Troublesome Business: The Labour Party and the Irish Question*, (London, 1982); D. G. Boyce, *The Irish Question and British Politics 1868-1996*, (London 1988, 1996 edition); D. G. Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish Troubles: British Public Opinion and The Making of Irish Policy 1918-22*, (London, 1972); P. Canning, *British Policy towards Ireland 1921-1941*, (Oxford, 1985).p

² *Forward*, 3 April 1920.

³ *Daily Herald*, 21 November 1921.

⁴ Quoted in K Matthews, *Fatal Influence*, (Dublin 2004), p283.

⁵ J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985 Politics and Society*, (Cambridge 1989), pp52-53.

⁶ *Daily Herald*, 3 December 1921.

⁷ *ibid.*, 6 December 1921.

⁸ *ibid.*, 7 December 1921.

⁹ *ibid.*, 7 December 1921.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 7 December 1921.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 12 December 1921.

¹² *ibid.*, 12 December 1921.

¹³ *Labour Party, NEC Minutes*, 7 December 1921, p12.

¹⁴ *Labour Leader*, 8 December 1921.

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- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, 8 December 1921.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, 15 December 1921.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, 15 December 1921.
- ¹⁸ *Forward*, 17 December 1921.
- ¹⁹ *Hansard*, vol. 149, cols. 19-22, 14 December 1921 in NA, CAB 21/243 Irish Settlement.
- ²⁰ *The Times*, 17 December 1921.
- ²¹ *Hansard*, vol. 149, cols. 306-310, 14 December 1921 in NA, CAB 21/243 Irish Settlement.
- ²² *Hansard*, *ibid.*, col. 311, 16 December 1921 in NA, CAB 21/243 Irish Settlement.
- ²³ *The Times*, 15 December 1921.
- ²⁴ *Daily Herald*, 4 January 1922.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, 2 February 1922.
- ²⁶ K. Harding, '*The Irish Issue in the British Labour Movement 1900-1922*', unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Sussex, (1983), p299.
- ²⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History: 1914-1945*, (Oxford 1965), p236.
- ²⁸ Quoted in A. Shields, '*The British Labour Party and Ireland 1925-1949*', unpublished MA thesis, University College Galway, National University of Ireland, (1987), p43.
- ²⁹ D. V. McDermott, '*The British Labour Movement and Ireland 1905-1925*', unpublished MA thesis, University College Galway, National University of Ireland, (1979), p483.
- ³⁰ *The Times*, 14 January 1922.
- ³¹ *Hansard*, vol.150, col. 1442, 17 February 1922.
- ³² *Daily Herald*, 9 February 1922.
- ³³ *ibid.*, 13 February 1922.
- ³⁴ *Hansard*, vol.150, cols. 25-26, 7 February 1922.
- ³⁵ *The Times*, 18 February 1922.
- ³⁶ *ibid.*
- ³⁷ *ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Hansard*, vol. 150, col. 1432, 17 February 1922.
- ³⁹ *Daily Herald*, 18 February 1922.
- ⁴⁰ Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, p54.

⁴¹ P. Adelman, *The Rise of the Labour Party 1880-1945* (London 1972), p53.

⁴² *The Times*, 3 March 1922.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 3 March 1922.

⁴⁴ *Hansard*, vol. 151, col. 606, 2 March 1922.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, col. 677.

⁴⁶ *Daily Herald*, 7 March 1922.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 1 April 1922.

⁴⁸ *Daily Herald*, 27 March 1922.

⁴⁹ *Daily Herald*, 17 March 1922.