The key to understanding both the emergence of independent Ireland and the shape of modern Irish politics lies in the history of the Home Rule movement. This book examines the leadership and collective behaviour of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), a group of roughly eighty pledge-bound Irish Nationalist MPs, between 1900 and 1918. These years represent the final phase of a longer struggle by Irish constitutional nationalists stretching back to 1870.

Home Rule MPs attended Westminster with the aim of leaving it. Their two unifying policies were land reform and the establishment of an Irish legislature – something which had not existed in Ireland since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Outside the issues of land and Home Rule, the Irish party was a green umbrella under which nationalists of many hues found shelter. Within the broad church of Irish nationalism were distillers and teetotallers, industrialists and exponents of workers’ rights, landlords and tenants, Catholics and Protestants, and proponents and opponents of female suffrage. The chairman of this grand alliance in the period under consideration was John Redmond.

Redmond was a compromise candidate for the party’s leadership when supporters and detractors of Redmond’s predecessor, Charles Stewart Parnell, finally put aside their differences in 1900 after a decade of division. However, reunification was definitely a process rather than a single event. The egos cultivated during the 1890s and the divisions established between Parnell’s former lieutenants lay at the heart of much of the factionalism that persisted into the twentieth century among Irish constitutional nationalists. Like Parnell, one of Redmond’s successes was that he managed to maintain a relatively stable union over such a long period of time among his own forces.

One of the principal aims of this work is to show that Redmond did not achieve this on his own. It examines the role played by those who were closest to Redmond in his party, arguing that a small oligarchy and not a solitary chairman was responsible both for the successes and
failures of the Irish party in the years under consideration. Identifying and charting the evolution of this oligarchy is one aim of this book, the other is to examine the collective behaviour of the IPP at Westminster. If the party ostensibly rested on two pillars of land reform and the repatriation of an Irish legislature, did it still manage to have policies, unintentionally or otherwise, on the other big questions of the day that came before the 670 assembled MPs of the imperial House of Commons at Westminster?

Rather than assessing the work of the IPP through an examination of MPs’ self-perception, this study lets the actions of MPs speak for themselves. Through empirical analysis of changes in the party’s parliamentary behaviour – in division voting and parliamentary questions – light is shed on the nature of Nationalist participation in parliament. The discipline, cohesion, and vitality of the Irish party at Westminster are universally acknowledged as having been impressive. Here, this is put in hard figures. Analysis of division voting shows how rhetoric translated into action at Westminster. Changing levels of voting activity and alignment are used to explain how party policy evolved during the early twentieth century.

For four decades, Home Rule dominated the Irish political landscape. At intervals, Home Rule also managed to dominate British political discourse, most notably when Home Rule bills came before parliament in 1886, 1893, and 1912–14. The IPP was not merely a momentary anomaly in the House of Commons. It constituted the most powerful ‘third party’ in the history of British politics until the emergence of Scottish nationalism. In addition, Irish nationalist MPs in this era represented the most serious internal threat to the existence of United Kingdom ever to have existed. While in more recent times, the Scottish National Party has hoisted a question mark over the future of England’s union with Scotland, Irish nationalist MPs successfully conducted a campaign for the legislative recognition of their demand of an Irish Home Rule parliament for nearly half a century. In examining the final phase of this chronology, encompassing the apparent triumph and subsequent collapse of the movement, the party is found at its most disciplined and also at its most distressed.

Fresh research has shown how the IPP interacted with the British political parties of the day. It debunks any archaic claim of Irish exceptionalism by showing how similar both Home Rulers and Irish Unionists were to their British colleagues in certain aspects of their behaviour at Westminster. In the Irish party, discipline was strictly enforced in parliament and a deeply hierarchical system was established which extended from the chair of the parliamentary party right down to the grassroots.
Between parliament and constituency, an elaborate system of clientelism and patronage developed. Historians such as Michael Wheatley and James McConnel have made significant advances in understanding the operation of patronage between parliament and parish in the closing years of the Irish party’s history.3

While Wheatley focuses specifically on the local, McConnel provides fresh insight into the relationship between the MP and his constituents as well as examining some of the groups that emerged as enemies and contenders to the Irish party in this period. Where this study differs from Wheatley and McConnel is that, here, the party is considered in the imperial House of Commons rather than in its Irish context. In so doing, it builds upon both these works, tackling some of the same questions, especially on the decline of the party, but it considers these questions through an examination of the top of the party rather than approaching them from below.

If the aim here is to examine the parliamentary party as a machine, it is important to consider its nerve centre: its leadership. Like Gladstone for the British Liberals, Parnell had been a charismatic chief. His cult of leadership and the increasingly unilateral manner in which he steered Irish party policy has led some to paint this personality-driven style of leadership onto Parnell’s successors: the leaders of nationalist Ireland in the 1890s and onwards into the early twentieth century. When he took over leadership of the reunited party in 1900, John Redmond certainly did not resemble his erstwhile hero and mentor Parnell either in his power or in his style of leadership.

Political parties are never truly autocracies. Even when the leader is highly charismatic – as Parnell and Gladstone both were – the party leader is invariably supported, and sometimes even controlled, by a small team of advisers and enforcers. In conjunction with their titular leader, this group constitutes an oligarchy. The inner circle may often be unappointed and unofficial, as is the case here. The power and legitimacy of these advisers derives solely from their leader. This book charts the emergence, work, and breakup of just such a group during the chairmanship of John Redmond up until his death in March 1918. Emphasising that control of the party rested collectively with this oligarchy and not in Redmond’s hands alone, it will be shown how Redmond ultimately relinquished the leadership and left it to his colleagues to decide which of them would take his place just days before his unforeseen death.

Overall, it has been found that divisions and discord between the members of this inner circle could have a stifling impact upon their ability to negotiate effectively with government and to shape party policy.
When functioning harmoniously, the inner leadership proved capable of impressive feats of coordinated action, leveraging the strengths of its membership to engineer solutions that were acceptable to the often discordant interests of their electorate and those with whom they were bartering in the sphere of British high politics.

If the party leader is not quite as hegemonic as he or she is sometimes portrayed, then why is it that, in salvaging constitutional nationalist figures from the scrapheap of Irish collective memory, it appears that only John Redmond has fully been rehabilitated? While historians have for decades been doing the painstaking work of augmenting scholarly literature with biographies of other Irish MPs from this period, it appears that only Redmond has slowly become a household name. Even then, his revived fame is largely born out of his close association with recruitment and Ireland’s contribution to the war effort from 1914 onwards. One possible cause for this is the fact that the contemporary press typically focused on personalities.

Like Parnell, Redmond became the popular embodiment of the movement over which he presided. This was especially true once the Home Rule crisis of 1912–14 broke and cartoonists and columnists began to portray John Redmond and Edward Carson as the very personifications of their irreconcilably opposed movements.4

This book not only endeavours to question the sometimes simplified image of John Redmond, it also puts the received Redmond-centred image of the IPP after 1900 under the microscope. Central to this is a fresh examination of the part played by John Dillon: leader of the anti-Parnellite majority from 1896 and arguably the most important figure in post-Parnellite constitutional nationalism. In the reunited party after 1900, Dillon did not take up the chairmanship but he did retain his power. The story of the party after 1900 is one in which Dillon worked to purge his old opponents from the party and where he and Redmond searched for a model whereby they could work harmoniously. The new chairman relied heavily on Dillon’s popularity and his knowledge of every corner of nationalist Ireland, especially in the early years. Redmond, for his part, proved to be a more palatable face for the movement in Britain where his image and modus operandi fitted better than Dillon’s with politicians and public alike.

The centenaries of Ireland’s independence struggle have brought with them an upsurge in new writings on the history of this period. Debates about constitutional nationalism have reignited. However, the resurfacing of these issues appears to have as much to do with the aftermath of the Northern Irish peace process as it does with commemoration. In the present day, the achievement of the Home Rule movement is commonly
interpreted as a triumph for constitutional and non-violent methods despite the haemorrhaging of support away from Home Rule in the closing years of the First World War. By contrast, revolutionary Irish republicanism is seen to have only retrospectively received a popular mandate in the general election of November 1918.

This oversimplified dichotomy between ‘moderate’ and ‘advanced’ nationalists distorts the reality of Home Rule politics before the 1916 Rising. Constitutionalism was not an ideology, it was a tactic. Home Rulers effectively fused constitutionalism with illegal and extra-parliamentary agitation during the land war in the 1880s. They also blurred the lines of constitutionalism when they took control of the paramilitary Irish Volunteer Force in the summer of 1914. Just as Home Rulers harnessed the power of the threat of violence, so too did advanced nationalists, and eventually republicans, ultimately turn to constitutional methods when violence ceased to suit their purposes at different points in the 1920s.

Rather than being a party of tolerance and moderation, elements of the Irish party harboured a reverence for Fenianism and others exhibited a growing sense of Catholic triumphalism which occasionally manifested itself as sectarianism. At a parliamentary level, the Machiavellianism, oligarchical tendencies, and regimented discipline that made the Irish party so effective are too often underplayed and the party’s demise is instead blamed on the generational divide that separated Sinn Féiners from Home Rulers. However, before skipping to the end of this period and the origins of Ireland’s independence struggle, it stands to examine the origins of the discipline and leadership in the movement which reconstituted itself under Redmond’s chairmanship in the spring of 1900.

Notes

4 Redmond collected a scrapbook of caricatures of himself and his contemporaries in which he can be found depicted as everything from a hedgehog to a tiger (NLI, RP, MS 7441).