Isaac Butt and the Limerick By-Election of 1871

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The unopposed return of Isaac Butt to Westminster as M.P. for Limerick City, in September 1871, was an important step in the rise of Home Rule as the dominant force in Irish politics. Electing 'the Father of Home Rule' accentuated the electoral success of the new movement; without him in Parliament it could not really claim to represent the wishes of the Irish people.

The election is not of interest for the contest it evoked, because defeat for Butt was considered most unlikely. However, the campaign was a significant Home Rule demonstration; it showed Butt's immense popularity—how far he had gone in becoming the first national leader since O'Connell—and it helps explain the attraction of the new movement. In an age of limited franchise and dictatorship from above, the election was run on democratic lines. The people of Limerick, and not the traditionally accepted custodians of the constituency—the Catholic clergy—would appear to have decided the issue. The influence of Liberal Unionism was shown at a serious discount, and the power of its ally, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, temporarily muted.

This article will attempt to give a brief introduction to Butt's Home Rule movement; the Limerick by-election campaign will then be described; and, finally, the widespread reaction to this event will be discussed.

I

The movement to secure an Irish parliament under a federal connection with Britain was founded in 1870, largely through the efforts of Isaac Butt. During the following three years, federalist or Home Rule candidates enjoyed remarkable success in a series of by-elections. The outcome if this popularization of the nationalist idea was that, as a result of the general election of 1874, a majority of the Irish representation elected to Westminster stood pledged to the demand for legislative independence.

Home Rule wiped out Irish Liberalism at the polls in a way similar to the achievement of Sinn Fein in 1918. Butt did not succeed in winning much for this country by his agitation. However, he ensured that from the 1870s onwards, Ireland would always be represented by a nationalist majority; in other words, that the cause of Irish nationalism—in one form or another—would remain to the forefront in United Kingdom affairs.

He killed Liberal Unionism in Ireland at a time when it threatened to 'pacify' Ireland for the British connection. For Gladstone's first ministry (1868-'74), was a revolutionary one in that it adopted, and partly implemented, positive reform for Ireland. In 1869, Gladstone disestablished the Irish Protestant Church. The following year he pushed through a Land Act, which, although it did not satisfy the Irish tenant,
started the great movement that culminated in the ownership of the bulk of the land passing into the hands of Irish farmers. Furthermore, Gladstone undertook to provide some facilities of higher education for Irish Catholics.

Thus, the Prime Minister won the support of a large body of influential opinion in Ireland—most notably among the Catholic bishops. Sixty-five out of the one hundred and five Irish M.P.s were Gladstonians in 1868. By 1870, the Irish Liberal alliance—between Gladstone, most of the Irish bishops, and a majority of the Irish representation—was cemented on the foundation of practical reform. How did the cracks in this formidable structure develop? Three sections of opinion were seriously disaffected. Firstly—the Irish Protestants, after the disestablishment of their church, were beginning to doubt, for the first time in many years, the advantages of the Act of Union. Secondly—‘the hidden Ireland’ or the Irish masses, were incensed at Gladstone’s refusal to release the Fenian prisoners. Thirdly—the farmers were bitterly disappointed with the Land Act and with being thwarted in their efforts to secure Tenant Right.

The man who combined these three areas of discontent—in what was only a temporary alliance as far as the majority of Protestants were concerned—was Isaac Butt. This colourful and dynamic character—a Protestant, one time Tory, celebrated lawyer, defender of political prisoners, pamphleteer, and an impecunious rake—was fifty-five years when he founded the Home Government Association in 1870. In the previous five years he had become the best known and most popular man in Ireland through his defence at the Fenian trials. He was president of the Amnesty Association for the release of the Fenian prisoners which had become, during the summer of 1869, the greatest mass movement since O’Connell. He was also leader of the Tenant Right agitation, which was active around the same time.

Butt was almost ideally placed to raise the depression of those years after the Fenian Rising, and to channel the frustrated energy of Irish nationalism into a national party. The Protestants respected him, and they supported his idea until the more radical spirit became involved. To the masses he was a lovable figure, and they backed his essentially conservative plan as something honest, national and a change from Whiggery.¹ To many of the bishops and priests, however, Butt was a shady character who associated with Tories and Fenians, and who threatened to thwart their hero, Gladstone.

Butt made it clear at the outset that he was merely proposing a solution to the Irish question.² He wanted to show how ‘independence’ was possible ‘without breaking up the unity of the empire, interfering with the monarchy, or endangering the rights or liberties of any class of Irishmen.’ Under federalism the United Kingdom would remain intact: Ireland would have a domestic legislature ‘consisting, be it always remembered of the Queen, Lords, and Commons . . . controlling all the affairs of our internal administration’ and she would still send 105 representatives to Westminster, to vote on ‘all questions of Imperial concern’; the parliament in London would retain

¹ In the event of confusion arising from the terms used in this paper: Liberal and Whig are usually synonymous, and likewise with Conservative and Tory, and with Home Ruler, Federalist and Nationalist. The "Ultramontanes" were the Catholic party interested primarily in the Education question.

² I. Butt, Home Government for Ireland, Irish Federalism: its meaning, its objects, and its hopes, 1st edition 1870; all references in this paper are to the 4th edition, Dublin 1874.
control over all foreign relations, the army, and defences.

It is clear that Butt was essentially a conservative nationalist (this is less clear from his speeches at Limerick), as well as a pragmatist. He put forward a plan that might have preserved the unity of Ireland. It is ironic that the kind of ‘Home Rule’ proposed by Butt—with a special eye to the Irish Protestants—is closely similar to the system that pertains in Northern Ireland to-day!

As Butt no doubt realized, ‘Home Rule’ was potentially the strongest issue in Irish politics. The aftermath of the Fenian activities showed the depth of emotional nationalism among the masses. In 1869, when Gladstonian Liberalism was at the height of its popularity in Ireland, the Liberal M.P., Bernal Osborne, admitted to the Chief Secretary that, ‘It is impossible to shut one’s eyes to the fact that the feeling of Irish nationality pervades the entire working class.’ Butt’s success was largely due to the way in which he harnessed this feeling to the federalist agitation. The emphasis at the hustings was that federalism meant simply Home Rule, rather than on the imperial safeguards inherent in the new plan.

II

Isaac Butt agreed to stand for the Limerick City vacancy at the invitation of Philip Callan, M.P. for Dundalk, on ‘behalf of many sincere friends of the national cause in Ireland.’ The first meeting of Butt’s election supporters was held in the Labourers’ Hall, Limerick, on the 4th of September, 1871. The assembled group consisted of friends and admirers, many of whom had campaigned with Butt in the Tenant Right and Amnesty movements. The local Farmers’ Club, under the presidency of William Bolster, played a major part in the election campaign. Together with Henry O’Shea, secretary of the Congregated Trades, and John Ellard, the town clerk, they organized regular meetings and provided the principal speakers. W. H. O’Sullivan from Kilmallock, notable as the father of an imprisoned Fenian, was a prominent member of the election committee. John Daly, the Fenian uncle of the executed 1916 leader, claimed a large part of the credit for ensuring the absence of Whig opposition.

The dramatic election campaign coincided with a particularly bad phase in the Home Rule Leader’s recurrent financial difficulties. Butt spent only a few days in Limerick, after which he had to flee from debtors’ bailiffs, to England. (The air was full of rumours: apparently Butt’s debts were catching up on him at an extremely awkward time.) Robert Butt came to Limerick to represent his father.

Apart from the son and a few gestures of support from independent sources, the election was organized and paid for by local effort—which was as Butt wished. He wanted to keep the central organization in Dublin, the Home Government Association, and the Home Rule issue as such, free from the controversial issues likely to emerge at

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8 Osborne to Fortescue, 4/11/1869, Strachie MSS, Carlingford Political.
4 The Nation, 2/9/1871.
5 Limerick Chronicle, 5/9/1871.
6 Ibid., 16/9/1871.
He therefore felt more free to speak as a popular leader at Limerick and it is in this light that we must consider his radical speeches and the way he introduced issues on which opinion was divided.

Butt’s election committee—drawn mainly from the lower-middle class—was a radical break with customary procedure, when it is considered that, generally speaking, before the days of Home Rule the priests and gentry selected, and usually succeeded in returning, their own candidates. The Farmers’ Club, already angry at the re-election of the government supporter William Monsell (the Postmaster General) for Limerick County in January, 1871, were determined not to miss a second opportunity to return the nationalist leader for a Limerick seat.

The local Roman Catholic bishop, Dr. George Butler, supported the Liberal government. He probably would have liked to have helped his friend Monsell to secure the seat for the Attorney-General, Charles Barry. When he saw that a Whig candidate stood no chance of success—because of the determination of the Home Rulers—he took no part in the election. The Catholic clergy, influenced no doubt by the attitude of their bishop, played little active part in the campaign. A few priests did appear on Home Rule platforms, many of the lower clergy probably sympathised with the popular cause, but the most prominent ‘national’ priest, Father Quaid, came from the diocese of Killaloe.

The only danger to Butt—after his adoption by the democracy of Limerick—was that the government camp might put forward Charles Barry at the last moment. It was embarrassing for the government that Barry—an important official, should be without a seat in parliament. As he was a native of Limerick, this seemed a likely opportunity for the Attorney-General. However, he was anathema to the people, mainly for his role as prosecution agent during the Fenian trials. The Irish Times considered that his presence in the city would provoke riots ; extra police were drafted in for his arrival. Barry, on his way to Limerick, left the train at Charleville because 500 people were waiting at the city station to give him a ‘Fenian’ welcome.

The strength of the revived nationalism in Limerick was further shown by the fact that all the others who initially put themselves forward as candidates, declared for Home Rule. Tait, the wealthy Scottish benefactor to the city (remembered by his clock opposite the Dominican church), was one of the early runners. Some of his supporters held that the people who met at the Labourers’ Hall had not the right to dictate policy. This was a reference to the lack of ‘respectable’ electors in evidence at that meeting. Colonel Vereker, the son of Lord Gort, was interested, but it was thought that he would not split the ‘Liberal interest.’ Francis Spaight, one of the big names in the city’s commercial world, was the choice of the conservatives. The Tories, who formed one third of the estimated 2,400 electors, could only hope for—

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9 Flag of Ireland, 14/1/1871.
10 Monsell MSS, 8317, Nat. Lib. Ire.
11 Irish Times, 4/9/1871.
12 Ibid.
13 The Nation, 9/9/1871.
14 Cork Examiner, 4/9/1871.
15 Limerick Reporter, 8/9/1871.
16 Irish Times, 8/9/1871.
victory if there was a split in the Liberal-Home Rule camp, but as long as the Catholic bishop remained aloof from the contest there was little prospect of this.

At a crowded meeting organized by his election committee in the Theatre Royal, Limerick, on September 4th, Butt was chosen as the next M.P. for the city. According to the hostile *Limerick Chronicle*, the audience was composed chiefly of labourers, but the *Cork Examiner* claimed that there was a large number of leading electors present, including two priests.\(^\text{17}\) The tone for the evening was set with cheers for the 'Irish Republic'—before the speakers arrived.\(^\text{18}\)

Michael Ryan, J.P. from Bruree, proposed Butt for the seat. He considered him the most suitable man to win over the Protestants to the national cause.\(^\text{19}\) W. H. O'Sullivan, seconding the motion, referred to Butt as Ireland's 'greatest patriot,' as the leader of tenant right, and reference was made to his efforts on behalf of the Fenian prisoners.

Butt's entry was the signal for a demonstration of sympathy. He addressed the crowd in a rousing manner, explaining the rise of the Home Rule spirit:

> when he was not cowed by the charge of Fenianism which kept so many people away—when he identified himself with the cause of amnesty, and supported first by hundreds ... and, finally by hundreds of thousands, to demand from the British government the liberation of good men—it was in that struggle for amnesty that the Irish nation rose—it was on the field of Cabra the might and majesty of the Irish national spirit was evoked, and it was to that movement they owed the spirit and determination by which they were now actuated.\(^\text{20}\)

Here was Butt the splendid demagogue; what of his value as a contemporary historian? It must be held in mind that his purpose was to please what was a rather unsophisticated audience. Moreover, he was mesmerized by the giant amnesty meeting at Cabra in 1869.\(^\text{21}\) Given all that, it was a significant statement. He explained the evolution of Home Rule from the amnesty movement, which had been inspired by the suffering of the Fenian prisoners. Butt went on to tell why he wanted a seat in the 'alien assembly.' Now that Ireland was aroused, the final part of his task was to go to Westminster and win self-government for the Irish. The *modus operandi* was to return 'so honest men,' as they ought to do at the next general election.\(^\text{22}\) Butt made it found so feasible—the only flaw in his reasoning was that he seemed to have as strong a faith in the 'justice' of the British as he had in the desire of Ireland for Home Rule. He forgot that there was a stubborn barrier obstructing the reconciliation of the two islands, namely the entrenched prejudices and fears of the English and Irish ruling classes.

Butt spoke on tenant right, and the need for a Catholic university in Ireland. This latter issue proved the most controversial. The *Daily Express* set the lines for future cleavage:

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\(^\text{17}\) *Limerick Chronicle* and *Cork Examiner*, 5/9/1871.

\(^\text{18}\) *Daily Express*, Dublin 5/9/1871.

\(^\text{19}\) *Limerick Reporter*, 5/9/1871.

\(^\text{20}\) *Cork Examiner*, 5/9/1871.

\(^\text{21}\) Cf. T. de V. White, *The Road to Excess*, Dublin 1946, p. 245.

\(^\text{22}\) *Limerick Chronicle*, 5/9/1871.
The few Protestants who have been led to join the nationalists will have their eyes opened and at length see that the success of the latter would be conducive to the domination of the ultramontanes. Home Rule and Rome Rule have joined hands, and we conceive for the future few Protestants will be beguiled into connexion with such an unholy alliance. 23

The Cork Constitution stated that his 'startling declaration' on education, 'has produced the desired effect,' and that priests were 'quietly furthering his canvass.' 24 By adopting the Irish bishops' demand for a Catholic university, Butt made it difficult for the Limerick Whigs to float an opposition candidate. He made his candidacy acceptable to influential sections in the community and helped secure clerical neutrality.

On the other hand, it is doubtful if Butt would have been defeated in Limerick, even without clerical neutrality. On the nation-wide level however, the hostility of the Catholic hierarchy was proving the biggest obstacle to the expansion of Home Rule. If the movement was going to take over the Liberal preserves, which on paper included most of the country, the influence of the hierarchy would at least have to be neutralized, by adopting their demand. The Limerick election represents a concerted effort on Butt's part to enhance his status as national leader, and the reference to the ultramontane platform was part of this. (In any event, he believed in the justice of providing a university for Catholics.) 25 He may have felt in a sufficiently strong position to chance overcoming Tory prejudices. Over all, it could be stated that he gained at the expense of the Liberals but lost sharply on Home Rule's already dwindling Conservative support.

However, the Theatre Royal audience was oblivious to these undertones and the Home Rule leader was unanimously adopted. But the official nomination was still over a fortnight away. The meeting 'had a most startling effect in favour of Mr. Isaac Butt's candidature' 26 and the opposition crumbled: on the following day, the three candidates who claimed to support Home Rule retired. Tait stepped down 'rather than split the nationalists,' or was it because he was an army contractor and therefore ineligible?, quipped the Irish Times. 27 Vereker and Spaight also retired. 28 Shortly afterwards it was announced that Vereker was a close friend of Butt's and that Spaight never really intended to oppose the Leader—that he was part of his reserve forces all the time. 29

These avowals cannot be accepted purely at face value. Any of the three would have liked the seat in Parliament. The way in which they pulled out shows the great power of popular opinion in 1871. None thought it wise to oppose Butt after the democratic caucus decision.

This was the deciding point in the election. Thus, '... after repeated interviews between Mr. Monsell, her Majesty's Postmaster General, and the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, the Attorney-General's chances of success are regarded as all but hopeless, that Government influence is at a serious discount...'. 30 The Irish Times did like to gloat on the failure of Gladstone's administration, but it was substantially correct. On the same day as the above report appeared, Barry wrote to Gladstone refusing to

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23 Daily Express, Dublin 5/9/1871.
24 Quoted in Limerick Reporter, 12/9/1871.
25 I. Butt, The Liberty of Teaching Vindicated, Dublin 1865.
26 Irish Times, 5/9/1871.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Limerick Chronicle, 14/9/1871.
30 Irish Times, 6/9/1871.
stand: 'no man not putting "Home Rule" forward as the strength of his programme would be listened to, and I fear that it will be the same in every constituency.'31 This was the epitaph to the alliance of 1868. The Home Rule agitation made Ireland unwilling to remain part of the British political machine. Land and education were but subsidiary factors in the rise of the new movement and the failure of the Liberals to solve these chronic Irish problems added to the disillusionment which strengthened the national ranks.

Butt's speeches, before he left the city, are noteworthy for the radical sentiments expressed by a man who is generally remembered as a conservative. Five thousand people attended one mass meeting and heard the Home Rule leader declare that: 'It was from the people that the regeneration of this country must come... let the people follow the dictates of their own consciences and not mind the advice of the grandees.'32 Butt realized where his strength lay—with the plain people, electors and non-electors. He wanted to control the 'national mind' because he believed in the power of moral force expressed through an organized public opinion, and because he believed in his ability to keep subversive elements in check. He wished to rouse the masses, but he had no intention of allowing them to rule him. He believed in the success of his federal plan and that it would end disaffection and there would be adequate safeguards for property owners.33

Some light is thrown on the elusive Fenians of this period by the fact that Butt considered their goodwill worth securing. The following report of his speech also indicates the kind of supporters he had in Limerick:

He (Butt) hoped it would not come to that, but yet the nation that was not ready to sacrifice its life for freedom was not worth it. And whenever the day came when England should face them he was not the man for insurrection—yet he was not one who adopted the coward's signing of petitions when insurrection was justified; but when he had exhausted the only resource left him he would go and take counsel with himself, his conscience and his God, and do what was right then even at the risk of his life.34

Except that he had no intention of beginning a rebellion his rhetoric was simply Fenian sabre-rattling. The above passage sounds extremely like the speech, destroyed at Butt's request, which he had made to a group of amnestyed Fenians in an attempt to win their sympathy or support prior to the launching of the Home Rule agitation.35 The Limerick address is the nearest this writer has come upon in any public statement by Butt on the lines of the famous pact with the I.R.B. There is no definite proof, but most historians agree that he came to some agreement with the advanced party, probably in 1873. The alleged pact was that the I.R.B. would give Butt three years without hindrance, and that if after that period he had not gained self-government by negotiation, he would retire and leave the field to the revolutionaries.36

In any event, Butt departed from Limerick having captured the popular imagin-

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32 Cork Examiner, 7/9/1871.
33 Cf. Butt, Irish Federalism, pp. 37, 39 and 55.
34 Cork Examiner, 8/9/1871.
nation, and he was able to write from London that talk of an opposition candidate was all moonshine. However, his loyal committee, taking no chances, continued the campaign until his unopposed return on September the 20th.

An interesting sidelight was the scene created by John Daly when he interrupted a meeting of Butt’s election committee to demand the removal of two members, Messrs. Cusack and Gaffney. Daly, described as ‘an intelligent-looking young man,’ told the meeting:

you must remember that the men whom I represent are the very men who kept Charley Barry out of Limerick (cheers). A member of your committee has branded me as a Communist, and I say that the man who brands me as such also brands the men whom I represent (cheers)—those men of the city of Limerick who so far carried this election.

Robert Butt stated that:

I think no man could be a party to slandering as Communists the young men around me who have struggled at the risk of their lives to advance our cause.

The evidence shows that John Daly, far from being inactive as one authority has recently written, played a useful part in this election. Furthermore, trouble was taken to hold on to his support. Robert Butt made a remarkable, if patronizing, statement identifying Home Rule with Fenianism. The outcome of the Daly scene was that Cusack resigned and Gaffney succeeded in restoring himself to favour.

It was significant that Daly—a leading member of the organization pledged to physical force and supposedly against constitutional methods—should have been mixed up in this election, but the reasons for his intervention may be partly explained by the pact already referred to. Furthermore, Butt was president of the Amnesty Association, a movement that drew adherants of physical force and constitutionalists together, and Attorney General Barry, a prospective opposition candidate, had been Crown prosecutor. The absence of activity on the revolutionary front may also have been a factor, supporting Butt being looked on as a legitimate pastime for ‘good’ I.R.B. men, a situation noted in a number of constituencies for many years.

On nomination day only one candidate was put forward: Isaac Butt. It was the occasion of another mass demonstration by the friends of Home Rule. Symbolically, the Conservatives absented themselves—to attend the local race meeting at Greenpark—while the people came to the nomination. Among the speakers was a young curate, Father Edward O’Dwyer—afterwards the celebrated bishop of Limerick. He spoke of the ‘immense social, material, and political advantages’ that would come from self-government. His denunciation of Communism showed how much the Paris Commune influenced the minds of contemporaries; he considered that John Daly was ‘an honour to the working men of Ireland’ for the way in which he had repudiated the charge that he (Daly) was a Communist.

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38 Limerick Chronicle, 16/9/1871.
39 Ibid.
41 This decision may have been influenced by memories of the Limerick Tenant Right meeting disrupted by the Fenian element in 1869 (cf. Limerick Reporter, 5/11/1869).
42 Cusack was obnoxious to Daly since he had handed over a parcel of revolvers to the police (cf. Daly, “Recollections,” Irish Freedom, Sept. 1912).
43 Limerick Reporter, 22/9/1871.
44 Limerick Chronicle, 21/9/1871.
The Limerick by-election shows that a new force had emerged once again on to the political scene—the power of popular opinion. In this instance, as in a number of other national by-elections in the same years, the initiative came from below, and not from the clergy and gentry who had been the traditional wielders of political power in the constituencies. The reason was, broadly speaking, nationalism. Home Rule was something that excited the lower strata; the rest of society tended to have a stake in the existing set-up and were, therefore, less enthusiastic about a change. As D.A. Nagle of the Cork Herald wrote to Butt in 1872:

The upper classes, and the upper classes of the middle class are corrupted and imbecile and it is my theory it is from the lowest stratum working up, that Ireland’s regeneration will be achieved. You know well but for this leaven of society you would not now be M.P. for Limerick.45

The tenant farmers looked to Butt for economic salvation and Home Rule was hailed as the panacea for Ireland’s ills. Butt was returned unopposed firstly because of his stature as a national figure and secondly due to the organization of a group of nationalists—who used non-electors to influence public opinion. It is interesting to note that extreme political sentiments drew the most acclamation: at the hustings the revolutionary spirit had been exploited to advance the new movement.

III

The Tory critics of Home Rule claimed that the Limerick by-election was the work of the rabble, and a setback for ‘priests in politics.’46 This charge of mob intimidation was based on the demonstration evoked by Butt’s candidacy; on the democratic character of the nomination; on the fact that there was no opposition candidate; on the absence of ‘respectability’ from the hustings; and on Home Rule supporters such as the Kanturk Labourers’ Club.47 The Freeman’s Journal, always prepared to board the bandwagon, vehemently denied these charges:

When we see the intelligence, the respectability, no little of the wealth and nearly the entire sentiment of the city and county arrayed at the side of the popular candidate...48

This was a forceful vindication of Butt’s victory by the organ of the Catholic middle class—the element that formed a majority in the constituency. The Irish Times stated that Butt would be returned as M.P. for Limerick purely on his nationalist record: ‘the time honoured distinction between... Liberal and Conservative, is superseded by the more important one between Home Rule and London Rule.’49 It would be a mistake, therefore, to depict the outcome of the election as the result of mob intimidation. There is no binding evidence to oppose the view that ‘the Father of Home Rule’ was an acceptable choice to the majority of the electorate.

The Dublin Evening Mail considered that the election sounded the death-knell

45 Nagle to Butt, 20/5/1872, Butt MSS, 8694.
46 Daily Express, Dublin 21/9/1871; Irish Times, 13/9/1871.
47 Freeman’s Journal, 16/9/1871.
48 Ibid., 14/9/1871.
49 Irish Times, 8/9/1871.
to the political power of the Catholic clergy.50 This was rather wishful thinking on the part of the Tory organ. The Limerick Reporter, a newspaper likely to err in the opposite direction, denied the Tory view on the grounds that Fr. Quaid was a prominent figure at the Home Rule meetings, and because two other parish priests supported Butt.51 It was incorrect to state, continued the Reporter that the clergy 'as a body' were opposed to the new movement; neither had the Bishop been driven out of politics; it happened that he always spent the month of September 'in the bracing atmosphere of Western Clare'.52

The Reporter's case stands as flimsy evidence against the conclusion that, in the case of the Limerick by-election of 1871, the priests lost the position of prominence which they had previously held. The demonstration aroused on behalf of Butt's candidacy boded ill for the Liberal opposition, so Dr. Butler retired temporarily from politics and the clergy had little option but to follow their bishop. But for the latter, it is probable that many priests would have supported the popular side.

'The Fenians put Butt in against the priests' wrote J. A. Dease, a Catholic Whig observer.53 Dease—who was thwarted by Home Rulers for a seat in his native Westmeath—tended to dub all non-Tory opposition to Gladstone as 'Fenian.' His statement was significant in so far as that the Liberals could not get Barry's candidacy off the ground because of the hostility built up by Daly and company. But we cannot really say how determined anyone in Limerick was to push Barry's candidacy; nor is there evidence of determined clerical opposition to Butt.54

It is outside the scope of this article to deal with the London Standard's view that: 'Home Rule is nothing but Fenianism come to maturity and made respectable.'55 Hostile, ill-informed observers of the Irish political scene saw the existing order of Liberal and Conservative being replaced by a new force which was drawing support from the spirit engendered by Fenianism. There were other factors involved in this changeover—such as Gladstone's failure to settle the endemic problems of land tenure and education, and the cause of the Fenian prisoners. What the Establishment in both islands failed to appreciate was that Home Rule, particularly Butt's formula, was essentially a moderate demand, and that failure to grant a measure of self-government to Ireland was tantamount to driving her on 'the road to excess.'

In those days, the term 'Fenian'—like the term 'Communist' to-day—was a useful stick with which to beat political opponents. Those with emotional feelings for the Fenian prisoners, those with strong nationalist views, those with leanings towards Anglophobia (in its Irish administration form)—in fact, 'the people of Ireland,' generally, all came under the stigmatic brand of 'Fenianism' at this time. What helped this convenient grouping was the unity among the different classes of Irish agitators. The electoral success of Home Rule in general, and Butt's unopposed return in particular, was largely due to the same factor. 'Old world repealers,' such as

50 Quoted in Limerick Reporter, 19/9/1871.
51 Limerick Reporter, 19/9/1871.
52 Ibid.
53 Dease to Wm. Monsell, 29/9/1871, Monsell MSS, 8317.
54 Although the Daily Express, Dublin 7/9/1871, claimed that many priests said they would, rather support a Conservative than allow the constituency to be controlled by a few small-farmers 'a needy adventurer or two,' and the mob.
55 Standard, 18/9/1871. This theory is discussed more fully in the author's unpublished thesis for a Master's degree, "Irish National By-Elections, 1870 to 1874."
Michael Ryan of Bruree, William Bolster, the land reformer, W. H. O'Sullivan, the advanced constitutionalists, and John Daly, all supported the same cause in 1871. Toryism had always an instinctive distrust of Irish democracy and Limerick was, therefore, regarded as the work of the rabble—hence the 'Fenian' label.

The Daily News, the organ of the Liberal party, tried to play down the significance of Butt's victory—it was 'a personal triumph of a most unusual kind... the injustice of three centuries is not to be obliterated by three years of justice.' The Freeman's Journal saw the result as another 'message from Ireland' (along with the previous by-election results), to Gladstone. It was a striking illustration of the depth of feeling for Home Rule, and the lack of confidence in British legislation. Butt evoked particular enthusiasm because of his defence of political prisoners from 1847 to 1870: This

imparted to his candidature something savouring of persistent hostility to England, which is, just at the present time, peculiarly relished by a large body of persons not yet within the limits of the franchise, and who are strong and vehement in their discontent with the results, so far as Ireland is concerned, of British statesmanship.58

According to the Flag of Ireland, a journal that represented advanced political views, 'the people' alone put Butt in as M.P. for Limerick City. They did so because he represented the idea of legislative independence. Mr. Butt is sent to England as the ambassador of the Irish people, bearing the ultimatum on the Irish question. A vote of confidence in the celebrated lawyer was expressed: he would interpret the demands of Ireland, 'to our English rulers in terms not to be mistaken.' If his request was not granted, Ireland would return to less constitutional methods.

58 Quoted in Daily Express, Dublin 22/9/1871.
57 Freeman's Journal, 21/9/1871.
58 Ibid.
50 Flag of Ireland, 23/9/1871.