4.3 1886–1906: The Conservatives and the land question

The Ashbourne Land Act

- In 1885, Parnell joined with the Conservatives to defeat Gladstone. To please him, Salisbury brought in the Ashbourne Land Act.
- It was the first full land purchase act. £5 million was lent to farmers to help them buy their land. They were to repay it over 49 years.
- The Act was a success, especially among Ulster farmers. 25,000 farmers bought their land under it.

‘Killing Home Rule with kindness’

- In 1886, the Conservatives won the election. In 1887, Arthur Balfour became Chief Secretary. His Irish policy was influenced by the Liberal Unionist leader, Joseph Chamberlain.
- In a pamphlet called “A Unionist Policy for Ireland” Chamberlain said that there were real problems in Ireland: land ownership, impoverished small farms and lack of local democracy. If the British government solved these problems, Chamberlain argued, it would kill the demand for Home Rule.
- Balfour made land purchase the central part of the Conservative's Irish policy because:
  - He hoped that when farmers owned their farms they would become more conservative (opposed to change) and want to stay in the United Kingdom.
  - Land purchase was also good for the landlords who were the Conservatives’ Irish allies. Earlier Land Acts had reduced their incomes. They now wanted to sell their land, but the tenants could only buy with government assistance.

1891: Balfour’s Land Act

In 1891, while the Home Rule Party was split over the O’Shea divorce case, Balfour introduced a major Land Act. It had two parts:

- It gave £33 million for land purchase to be repaid over 49 years. But landlords were paid in bonds, not cash, so many were reluctant to sell. Only 46,800 tenants bought their farms under this Act.
- It set up the Congested Districts’ Board to help poor farmers in the west who got nothing from land purchase. Its aim was to supplement farm incomes by creating alternative jobs:
  - It encouraged fishing with grants (to buy boats/nets), tourism (by building light railways), and crafts (like lace and tweed-making).
  - It also tried to increase farm size by buying big, underused farms and redistributing the land among small farmers.
  - It was successful in slowly raising the living standard of the poorest farmers.
The Recess Committee

- 1892–1895 Liberals return: The Conservatives lost the 1892 election and Gladstone became Prime Minister again. He introduced his second Home Rule Bill, but it was defeated in the Lords. He then retired and died in 1898.
- During this time MPs from several parties met (the Recess Committee) and drew up a list of reforms needed in Ireland.
- The Liberals lost the 1895 election and the Conservatives returned to power. Balfour's brother, Gerald Balfour, became Chief Secretary and adopted the Recess Committee's suggestions.
- In 1898, the Conservatives passed the Local Government Act which set up elected councils for counties and rural districts. These councils dealt with issues like roads, sewage and housing.
- In 1899, they set up the Department of Agriculture, headed by Sir Horace Plunkett, founder of the co-operative movement. The Department aimed to raise standards through education. It appointed instructors and encouraged farmers to modernise their methods.

The 1903 Wyndham Land Act

- In 1902, landlord and tenant representatives held a Land Conference to work out a final solution to the land question.
- They gave their plan to George Wyndham, the Chief Secretary and it formed the basis of the 1903 Wyndham Land Act:
  - £100 million was set aside for farmers to buy their farms.
  - Farmers had to repay the loans over 69 years (not 49 as in earlier Acts). The longer time made the annual instalments lower than rents. This gave tenants the confidence to buy.
  - The price to landlords was generous and they were paid in cash. Also, if a landlord sold his whole estate in one go he got a 10% bonus. This encouraged landlords to sell.
- The Wyndham Act was the biggest and most successful land purchase act. It is usually credited with solving the land problem.
- Under it, 270,000 farmers bought their farms and by 1920, when new Irish governments took over, only 20,000 were still tenants.
- The success of the Land Conference prompted some political leaders to suggest that Home Rule could be also be solved by a conference. But Redmond and Dillon rejected the idea. So did the Unionists who were uneasy at all the concessions to Nationalists. They forced Wyndham to resign and the experiment in killing Home Rule with kindness came to an end in 1904.
The co-operative movement

- The co-operative movement also helped to improve conditions for Irish farmers. It was started by Sir Horace Plunkett, a landlord and a member of the Recess Committee.
- In the 1880s, poor quality and bad marketing made Irish food produce uncompetitive on the British market. Plunkett pointed out that Danish farmers had overcome similar problems by forming co-operatives:
  - Co-operatives bought seed, fertiliser, etc, in bulk and sold it cheaply to their members.
  - They also processed their members’ produce, set high quality standards and sold at the best prices.
- In 1889, Plunkett founded a co-operative shop in Doneraile, Co. Cork and a co-operative creamery in Drumcollogher Co. Limerick.
- Some nationalists opposed co-ops because Plunkett was a unionist, while some shopkeepers opposed the co-ops because they affected their trade.
- Co-ops spread in spite of opposition. In 1894 Plunkett formed the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) to co-ordinate their work. In 1895 he set up a paper, The Irish Homestead, to spread the co-operative message.
- By 1914, the IAOS had over 1,023 affiliated societies with an annual turnover of over £3.7 million. It was most successful in dairy-farming areas. Co-operative creameries producing ‘creamery butter’ were built in many villages.
- Creamery butter captured the Irish market, but Irish co-ops were too small and too uncoordinated to regain the export market to Britain.

Assessment

- The Land Acts produced a peaceful social revolution in Ireland.
- In 1870, almost all land belonged to 20,000 landlords; by 1920, most farmers owned their own land.
- But land purchase did very little for the smallest, poorest farmers who had almost no land to buy. Only Balfour’s Congested Districts Board helped them.
- Land purchase did not improve the productivity of Irish farms. Only the co-operative movement and the Department of Agriculture affected that.
- The Conservative reforms did not kill the demand for Home Rule. In 1885, Home Rulers won 85 of the Irish seats at Westminster; in the 1906 election they won the same number.
Frustration at the failure of Home Rule

- From 1890 to 1910, Home Rule seemed like an impossible dream because:
  - The Home Rule Party was split into quarrelling factions
  - The Conservatives were in power
  - Even if the Liberals won, the House of Lords blocked the way
- In frustration, many young nationalists turned to other movements. Some became involved in cultural nationalism (see page 39). Others supported a new party Sinn Féin, founded by the Dublin journalist, Arthur Griffith. Some women got involved in the suffrage campaign.

5.1 Arthur Griffith and the ‘first’ Sinn Féin

A new interest in republicanism

- 1898 was the centenary of the 1798 United Irish rebellion and of Wolfe Tone, the first republican. That made people interested in republicanism
- One of them was Arthur Griffith, a Dublin journalist
- In 1899, he founded a paper, the United Irishman to spread republican ideas. He published articles by many young nationalists, supported the cultural revival and ran ‘buy Irish’ campaigns
- He also worked out his own ideas which he presented in a book called The Resurrection of Hungary in 1904.

Griffith’s ideas

- Griffith knew many people did not support republicanism because they disliked violence, but he also believed that Home Rule gave Ireland too little independence
- He proposed a middle way between the two:
  - Irish MPs would leave Westminster, set up an Irish parliament and peacefully take Ireland over from the British
  - To satisfy the unionists, they would look for a dual monarchy like in Austria-Hungary, (i.e. the King to be Head of State in both Ireland and Britain) rather than a republic
  - They would develop Irish industry behind tariff barriers.
1905–1910: The ‘first’ Sinn Féin Party

- In 1905, Griffith changed the name of his paper to Sinn Féin, and set up a movement called Sinn Féin to work for these proposals. It grew quickly and, in 1907, he turned it into a political party.
- The IRB and cultural nationalists supported it and it attracted disillusioned Home Rulers. Sinn Féin did well in local elections.
- In 1908, Charles Doran, a Home Rule MP resigned and joined Sinn Féin. He stood for election as a Sinn Féin candidate and got 30% of the vote.
- Griffith thought Sinn Féin was going to succeed but, in 1910, when Home Rule suddenly seemed likely, most of his followers went back to Home Rule.
- 1910-16: Sinn Féin as a party almost disappeared, but Griffith went on publishing his paper. As a result, the name ‘Sinn Féin’ was associated with extreme nationalists. When the IRB staged the 1916 rising, people called it a ‘Sinn Féin rising’ even though Griffith had nothing to do with it. This led to the formation of the ‘second’ Sinn Féin in 1917.

5.2 The demand for Women’s rights and the Suffrage movement

What rights did women have?

- In 1870, women in the United Kingdom had few rights:
  - They could not vote in parliamentary elections or hold public office
  - A single woman could own property, but once she married everything she owned, even her wages, belonged to her husband
  - Most girls got a basic education, but there were few secondary schools for girls and what they taught was of little value
  - Universities did not admit girls and they could not enter professions like medicine or law
  - Girls from poor families usually worked before marriage as maids, farm servants or in factories. But usually after marriage, they did not take paid employment
  - Most girls from prosperous families did not work outside the home. But if they had to work, their education only fitted them for poorly paid jobs as governesses and dressmakers.

Women demand their rights

- Some women refused to accept the role society imposed on them. From the 1860s, a few women began to campaign for educational opportunity, sexual equality and the right to vote
- Two Irish women played key roles in this campaign. They were Isabella Tod and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington
Isabella Tod (1836–96)
Born in Edinburgh, Tod spend most of her life in Belfast. Like most middle-class girls at the time, she did not got to school, but got her education from governesses and personal reading.

- Tod was a devout Presbyterian and this drew her into charitable work. When visiting deprived areas in Belfast she grew aware of the economic exploitation of women.
- As a result, she became involved in campaigns, then starting in Britain, to improve the social and legal status of women. Most of the women she worked with, like Anna Haslam in Dublin, were middle-class Protestants.

The campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act
- In 1864, the government brought in the Contagious Diseases Act. It decreed that prostitutes who had sexually transmitted diseases must be locked up while the men who used them went free.
- The unfairness of this double standard inspired women, including Tod, to mount a successful campaign to have the Act repealed.

The campaign for a Married Women’s Property Act
- Tod and Haslam became the Irish leaders of the campaign to have the law changed so that women could keep their property when they married.
- In 1868, Tod was the only woman asked to give evidence to the Select Committee of Inquiry on the Married Women’s Property. She urged that any reform must apply to both middle-class and working-class women.
- The campaign was successful. Acts passed in 1870, 1874 and 1882 gave women control over their own property, including wages.

The campaign for women’s education
- Tod was also interested in women’s education. In 1867, she presented a paper, *On advanced education for girls in the upper and middle classes*, at a meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. In the same year she helped to found the Belfast Ladies’ Institute. Like Alexandra College in Dublin, it aimed to provide a decent secondary education for middle-class women so that they would be able to earn a living.
- In 1878, the Conservative government brought in the Intermediate Education Bill. Tod and other women persuaded them to let girls enter public examinations on the same terms as boys. In 1879 when the Royal University was set up, they also campaigned successfully to allow women to take degree examinations.

The campaign for women’s suffrage
- During these campaigns, Tod became aware of how handicapped women were by not having the right to vote for the MPs who made the laws.
- In 1871, she set up the Northern Ireland Society of Women’s Suffrage (NISWS). In Dublin, Anna Haslam set up the Irish Women’s Suffrage Association (IWSA) in 1876. Their aim was to win for women the right to vote, not just for Members of Parliament, but also for local councils and Boards of Guardians who ran the services for the poor.
Tod toured Ireland tirelessly, making passionate speeches to win support. She also wrote pamphlets and articles, setting out the case for women's suffrage. Across Ireland, women organised meetings and wrote letters and sent petitions to political leaders but little was achieved by the time of her death.

**The campaign against Home Rule**
- Like most Ulster Presbyterians, Tod was bitterly opposed to Gladstone's Home Rule Bill in 1886. She founded the Liberal Women's Unionist Association and travelled widely in England in 1886, speaking at anti-Home Rule meetings. Home Rule, she argued, would destroy Ireland's economy. She also opposed Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in 1893, but by then her health was failing and she died in 1896.

**Votes for women**
- Tod did not see much progress towards women's suffrage but in the year she died, they were allowed to become Poor Law Guardians.
- The 1898 *Local Government Act* gave them the right to vote for local councils and to sit on district councils, though still not on the more important county councils.
- Anna Haslam renamed her organisation the *Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association* (IWSLGA) and urged women to use these rights. In 1899, 85 women were elected as Poor Law Guardians and 35 to district councils. These victories increased women's political awareness.
- Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, a university graduate, was angry that she could not vote, while an illiterate man could. She joined the IWSLGA, but became impatient with the slow progress.
- In Britain, the *Pankhursts* had begun a more militant campaign for the vote and in 1908 Sheehy Skeffington helped to set up the *Irish Women's Franchise League* to do the same.
- The issue of votes for women came to a head in 1910–1912. Ireland was to get a Home Rule parliament in 1914, but would women have the vote for it? Redmond said no.
- Suffragettes organised demonstrations in protest and heckled Redmond and other Home Rulers at public meetings.
- Some used violence and between 1912 and 1914, 35 women, including Sheehy Skeffington were jailed. Some went on hunger strike.
- When the Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, visited Dublin in 1912, two English suffragettes threw a hatchet at him.
- But as Home Rule grew nearer, the division between unionists and nationalists divided women too. The Irish Women's Franchise League was mainly nationalist and that alienated unionist women.
In 1911, they set up the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council to support Carson and the Unionist Party. By 1912 it had about 45,000 members. They organised signatures for the Ulster Covenant, acted as back-up to the Ulster Volunteers and did propaganda work for the unionist cause. When the first World War began in 1914 both the suffrage campaign and Home Rule were suspended. During the war women freed men to fight by doing their jobs and in 1918 the British government rewarded them by giving the vote to women over thirty.

In Ireland, women like Sheehy Skeffington were prominent in the independence struggle. The 1922 Free State Constitution gave them full and equal citizenship.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877-1946)

- Hanna Sheehy was born in County Cork, to a prosperous Catholic family, with a nationalist tradition. Her father was in the IRB and also a Home Rule MP.
- Thanks to the new educational opportunities, she received a BA degree from the Royal University in 1899.
- In 1903, she married Francis Skeffington, a socialist and feminist. To show the equality between them, they combined their surnames.
- Angry that she could not vote, Sheehy-Skeffington joined Anna Haslam’s IWSLGA. By 1908, she had lost patience with its gentle approach and helped to set up the militant Irish Women’s Franchise League (IWFL).
- When Redmond opposed giving women a vote in the Home Rule parliament, they protested by heckling politicians and breaking windows. Hanna and other women were imprisoned and several of them went on hunger strike.
- In 1912, the Sheehy-Skeffingtons set up the Irish Citizen to campaign for socialist and feminist aims. They supported the strikers during the 1913 Lockout. Hanna worked in an IT&GWU soup kitchen and was again imprisoned.
- When the first World War began the Sheehy Skeffingtons campaigned for peace. During the 1916 rising, a British officer murdered Francis.
- Hanna became a militant republican and rejected the 1921 Treaty. Later she broke with de Valera over his decision to enter Dáil Éireann in 1927. She continued to campaign on socialist and women’s issues until her death in 1946.