

Sir Edward Carson

Sir Edward Henry Carson (1854-1935) led the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force in opposing Home Rule plans for the whole of Ireland, eventually succeeding in ensuring Northern Ireland remained part of the union.

Born on 9 February 1854 to a Protestant family - ironically in southern Ireland, in Dublin - Carson established his name in the legal profession as a formidable advocate. It was Carson who as Queens Counsel cross-examined the Irish writer Oscar Wilde and brought about his conviction for the then illegal practice of homosexuality.

Early on in his career, while living and working in Ireland, Carson developed a mistrust of Irish separatists. He was appointed Irish Solicitor General in 1892, the same year he was elected to the House of Commons. He was called to the Bar the following year, serving as British Solicitor General from 1900-05.

In February 1910 Carson ended his prospects of leading the Conservative Party in the House of Commons by accepting the leadership of the Irish Unionists - a party determined chiefly with an anti-Home Rule policy.

Carson quickly ran up against Herbert Asquith's Liberal administration which in 1912 resolved to bring forward an Irish Home Rule bill. Carson spoke out vociferously - and persuasively - against Home Rule in the House of Commons, while signing (along with other prominent leaders) a so-called 'covenant of resistance' to Home Rule on 28 September 1912.

Establishing a provisional government in Belfast in apparent readiness for what he regarded as inevitable civil war, Carson successfully recruited some 80,000 men to what amounted to a private army, the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

The UVF was determined to resist - by violent means if necessary - the imposition of Home Rule in Ireland. He also took possession of a large quantity of German-sourced weapons at Larne in County Antrim in April 1914.

In the event Asquith's governments decided to negotiate with Carson with the consequence that, following concessions, in July 1914 Carson agreed to Irish Home Rule with the exception of Ulster.

The outbreak of war with Germany in August 1914 brought to a halt plans to enact Home Rule - it was eventually brought in in 1921. Carson responded to the spirit of national co-operation by joining Asquith's coalition government on 25 May 1915 as Attorney General. Many members of the UVF enlisted for service with the 36th (Ulster) Division.

Carson resigned from Asquith's administration the following year however, on 19 October 1916, ostensibly in dissatisfaction with Asquith's conduct of the war; Carson was a fervent 'Easterner', along with Lloyd George, and favoured remaining in Gallipoli.

In actuality however his resignation was planned in conjunction with David Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law in order to oust Asquith from office.

With Asquith's own resignation on 5 December 1916 Lloyd George became Prime Minister. Carson consequently rejoined the government as First Lord of the Admiralty. Although seemingly well suited to his portfolio he nevertheless proved reluctant to impose his will upon the naval professionals with whom he worked, in particular over the controversial issue of convoys (which he favoured but which met with professional opposition).

Replaced on 17 July 1917 by Sir Eric Geddes Lloyd George nevertheless persuaded Carson to remain in the Cabinet as Minister without Portfolio, recognising that it was better to keep Carson in the government than to allow him to agitate as a powerful figure from outside.

After the armistice Carson was awarded a life peerage and accepted an appointment as Lord of Appeal in Ordinary from 1921-29.

He died on 22 October 1935 in Kent, aged 81.