

Welsh disestablishment: ‘A blessing in disguise’.

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Since King Henry VIII renounced papal authority, the church and state had been virtually indistinguishable and until 1919 the Church of England was reliant upon the United Kingdom parliament for legislation to govern its affairs. In both Ireland and Wales, where the majority of the population was not Anglican, this position would be challenged, and this resulted in the quest for disestablishment, that is a separation of church from state. In Ireland, this was enacted in 1869, after a short campaign. In Wales, it would take over half a century.

The movement for Welsh disestablishment maintained a truly radical objective. It is often dismissed today as a relic of some distant religious dispute between the Anglican church and Nonconformity, whereas it was actually politics in the raw. It amounted to an unprecedented constitutional and political challenge, by threatening to dismember one of the pillars of the English state and thereby severing a Church/state relationship which, to many, was immutable. Opponents considered that any modification to be unthinkable, sacrilegious and unnecessary, with unforeseeable, but potentially profound consequences for England. It was similar to the controversy surrounding Brexit, save that the disestablishment embroglio lasted for decades and decades. The two issues do bear other similarities, in terms of what was delivered at the end of the day.

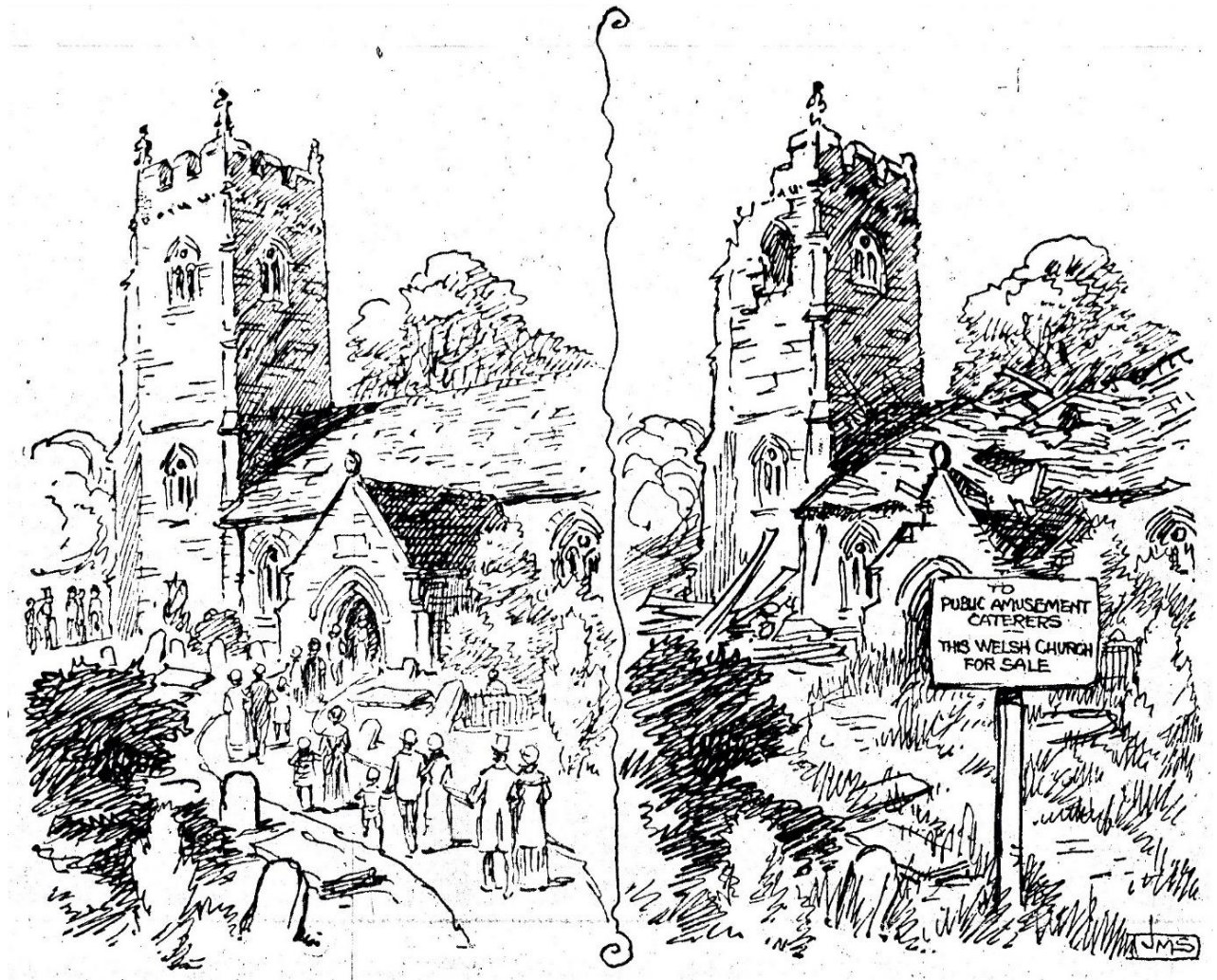
In order to gain an appreciation of the extraordinary parliamentary odyssey which eventually delivered (a form of) Welsh disestablishment on 31 March 1920, it is worth noting that it was first raised in the House of Commons in 1870, when Watkin Williams proposed that: ‘it is right and just that the Church Establishment in the Principality should, as such, cease to exist; that its union with the State should be put an end to’. Some considered the idea absurd because as W. E. Gladstone opined: ‘there really is no Church in Wales’. It was simply a question of it being ‘four diocese within the Church of England’. This premise was taken a step further by some leading Welsh churchmen, who argued that there was in fact no separate entity called Wales. Prior to April 1920 there was no administrative connection between those four dioceses, and the bishops looked to their archbishop of the Province of Canterbury of the Church of England.

Disestablishment gradually gained support from Welsh Liberal MPs, but the first legislation did not appear until May 1894. Although Welsh MPs were in favour, it did not elicit English support. A second bill, in February 1895, also hit the buffers. A third attempt, in April 1909, hardly got out of the starting blocks. Frustration was rife: at every general election since 1868, and by ever-increasing majorities, Wales had demanded disestablishment and disendowment. Since 1887 the Liberal party itself had been pledged to make it happen and yet four successive Liberal administrations had not delivered. But as one Liberal prime minister warned a Cardiff audience in 1895, there were seemingly insurmountable hurdles and, however much aspirations for disestablishment represented the desire of the majority of Welsh people, it faced a harsh democratic reality, in that: 'it is hard for the representatives of the other 37 millions of population which are comprised in the United Kingdom to give first and the foremost place to a measure which affects only a million and a half'. There was also another 'elephant in the room'. Until the Parliament Act 1912, the House of Lords would have an ultimate veto. After 1912, the Lords would still be able to delay legislation which they disliked but, in theory and with the Patience of Job, it could become law.

The Welsh Church Bill was introduced into parliament on 23 April 1912, and Section 1 of the statute provided that with effect from the date of disestablishment: 'the Church of England, so far as it extends to and exists in Wales and Monmouthshire (in this Act referred to as the Church in Wales), shall cease to be established by law'. Due to the veto exercised by the Tory controlled House of Lords, it was not to be enacted until 18 September 1914. It gives a flavour of the adverse reaction to this legislation, when a leading politician stated, without hyperbole, that it 'was probably the greatest interference on the part of the State in the affairs of the Church which our history has seen in other than times of open revolution'.

Fighting dirty in politics is nothing new, and Pembrokeshire Baptists, meeting in Llangwm, complained that Tory landlords were inducing their tenants to sign petitions against disestablishment. Such petitions were regularly presented to parliament, but there were regular concerns about the validity of signatories, or the methods used to collect them.

As the bill wended its way through interminable sessions in parliament, parties were at work to portray the outcome. The following cartoon provides a graphic, and totally erroneous, depiction of what could be expected.



‘Look On This Picture And On This’: *Western Mail*, 4 April 1914.

LH Panel: ‘Sunday morning. The Welsh Parish Church as at present with its endowments.’

RH Panel: ‘Sunday morning. The Welsh Parish Church with its endowments taken away and used for secular purposes.’

Although the Welsh disestablishment legislation passed in 1914, its operation was suspended due to the outbreak of war, and it did not take effect until 31 March 1920, almost eight years after it was introduced. There had been a scramble, as the war ended, to ‘moderate’ the terms of disestablishment and it can be argued that the Church in Wales emerged re-established and re-endowed. It had gained freedoms which the Church of England could only envy. The Church of England has had numerous reports over the decades to examine its links with the

state, but that is another story. In 1913, when, ironically, there were last ditch attempts to defer, or at least modify, Welsh disestablishment, the Church of England's Representative Church Council passed a resolution requesting a committee to report on the relationship between Church and State, to secure 'a fuller expression of the spiritual independence of the Church as well as of the national recognition of religion'. The issue still haunts the Church of England today.

Of course, whilst the struggle for disestablishment assumed all the attention, it was becoming obvious that some were less inclined to worship at either church or chapel. In 1910, Rev. H. Evans, the rector of Llangwm, expressed a refrain which became increasingly common. He regretted that 'young men nowadays did not appear to interest themselves in church life or in anything outside purely worldly affairs'. He felt that they were only concerned with business or pleasure. He did not express any opinion about young women!

The supreme irony is whether the relatively benign, 'soft' disestablishment that was to emerge in 1920, with the Church in Wales still viewed as 'having many of the characteristics of establishment', merited the bitter, protracted, monumental struggle that had characterised the disestablishment campaign. The result should also be considered against the impact upon Wales's political and spiritual life and whether the expenditure of such extensive political capital caused other Welsh causes to be starved of attention.