

### **‘Would you agree that Charles Stewart Parnell’s achievements and failures were both significant?**

### **Explain your answer.’ 2019**

Charles Stewart Parnell was born on 27 June 1846 in County Wicklow into a family of Anglo-Irish Protestant landowners. He had an anti-English attitude from early on. He studied at Cambridge University and was elected to parliament in 1875 as a member of the Home Rule League. His abilities soon became evident. In 1878, Parnell became an active opponent of the Irish land laws, believing their reform should be the first step on the road to Home Rule. He knew that obstructionism was popular in Ireland especially among the Fenians and he realised how important it was to be popular with the Irish in order to achieve his goals, thus he won their respect through defending the Manchester Martyrs.

Parnell was gaining popularity but he realised he needed more support to win over the Irish completely. In April 1879 he held a protest meeting in Mayo which 10,000 people attended, he also protested in Westport in June in which he said to "demand a fair rent" and "keep a firm grip on your homestead" In 1879, Parnell was elected president of the newly founded National Land League by Michael Davitt, however it was really under Fenian control. The following year he visited the United States to gain both funds and support for land reform. In the 1880 election, he supported the Liberal leader William Gladstone, but when Gladstone's Land Act of 1881 fell short of expectations, he joined the opposition. By now he had become the accepted albeit unofficial leader of the Irish nationalist movement.

Due to depression, Land League spread all over the country and became very popular. There was a lot of Agrarian violence which was used to intimidate landlords. The public sent letters, burned barns and killed animals! Parnell thought the British would react badly and so he told the public to use "moral force". Parnell now encouraged the popular strategy of boycotting as a means of influencing landlords and land agents, and as a result he was sent to jail and the Land League was suppressed. From Kilmainham prison he called on Irish peasants to stop paying rent. In March 1882, he negotiated an agreement with Gladstone - the Kilmainham Treaty - in which he

urged his followers to avoid violence. But this peaceful policy was severely challenged by the murder in May 1882 of two senior British officials in Phoenix Park in Dublin by members of an Irish terrorist group. Parnell condemned the murders.

In 1886, Parnell joined with the Liberals to defeat Lord Salisbury's Conservative government. Gladstone became prime minister and introduced the first Irish Home Rule Bill, which included that Ireland would get its own Parliament but Westminster would control the defence, war and trade. Also there would be no Irish MP's in Westminster and Ireland would pay 1/15 of the cost of running the empire. Parnell believed it was flawed but said he was prepared to vote for it. The Bill split the Liberal Party and was defeated in the House of Commons. Gladstone's government fell soon afterwards. Salisbury became Prime Minister after Gladstone resigned.

In April 1887, the Times published a reproduction of a letter, allegedly bearing Parnell's signature, that excused the Phoenix Park murders. Through cross examination his lawyers produced proof that the letter was a forgery, which transformed Parnell into a hero in the eyes of English liberals and he received a standing ovation in the House of Commons. It was the peak of his career.

It was a short-lived resurgence, however. In December 1889, William O'Shea, formerly one of Parnell's most loyal supporters, filed for divorce from his wife Katherine on the grounds of her adultery with Parnell. Kitty had in fact been Parnell's mistress for some years and Parnell was the father of three of her children. The scandal provoked a split in the party and Parnell was replaced as leader. It was evident that he was politically side-lined when there was a by-election held in Kilkenny which tested Irish opinion, the anti-Parnellites won two to one. He worked tirelessly making speeches all over Britain and Ireland but he still kept losing by-elections. His health deteriorated and he died in Brighton from a cold on 6 October 1891.

In conclusion, he was a hero in the eyes of republicans such as the Fenians and also to romantics like W.B. Yeats and James Joyce. However his ambiguity in expressing his opinion means that it is not clear if he was in fact a republican as he tended to sway in the direction that would gain him as much popularity as possible. However he remains to be a symbol that captured the zeitgeist of Ireland in the 1900s. The quote "No man has a right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation" which is inscribed on his monument, perfectly captures this idea.