Structured Essay 1

What did Charles Stewart Parnell contribute to land reform and to the development of the Home Rule Movement?

Introduction
Elected MP for Co. Meath in 1875, Parnell rose rapidly in the ranks of the Home Rule Party. He was strongly committed to the restoration of an Irish Parliament and became popular among Irish emigrants in England and the USA, particularly following his defence of Fenian prisoners. With the onset of the agricultural crisis in 1877, Parnell quickly appreciated the need to embrace the Land Question as a step towards achieving popular support for Home Rule: thus, from around 1878 until the Kilmainham Treaty of 1882, Parnell’s main focus was on land reform; from 1882 he was to concentrate on building up a strong Home Rule Party in the Westminster Parliament.

The New Departure
Realising the need to embrace the Land Question, Parnell became part of the New Departure with John Devoy and Michael Davitt in 1878 – this was an agreement between physical-force nationalists and constitutional nationalists to give priority to solving the Land Question. With the formation of the Land League, Parnell recognised the opportunity to link land reform with the cause of Home Rule. As the historian Joseph Lee remarked, for Parnell, the land movement would be ‘the engine which would draw Home Rule in its train’.

The Foundation of the Land League and the Land War
Parnell became President of the newly formed Land League in 1879. Through his involvement with the Land League, he spearheaded a mass movement that combined popular agitation with parliamentary pressure. In a series of powerful speeches throughout Ireland, he called on tenants to resist eviction (‘keep a firm grip on your homesteads’) and agitate for the three Fs (fair rent, fixity of tenure and freedom of sale). During the Land War (1879–82) Parnell played a key role in marshalling public opinion in Ireland and placing pressure on Gladstone’s government at Westminster. In 1880, during a speech at a meeting in Ennis, Co. Clare, he introduced the Land League’s most powerful tactic: boycotting.

The Kilmainham Treaty
As agrarian violence increased, Gladstone introduced his Second Land Act (1881), representing a significant advance for tenant farmers, with the establishment of land courts, loans to tenants to buy their farms, and the concept of dual ownership. Parnell, in attempting to strike a balance between his more extreme and moderate supporters, criticised aspects of the act and made some personal comments about Gladstone, as a result of which he was imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol in October 1881, from where he issued the No Rent Manifesto. He was released when he and Gladstone reached an agreement – the Kilmainham Treaty – which resulted in improved terms for tenant farmers, such as the inclusion of tenants with arrears within the provisions of the Act. This agreement was to signify a watershed in Parnell’s political career, as from this point on his main focus was on the cause of Home Rule.
The Home Rule Party 1882–85
In 1882 Parnell replaced the Land League with the Irish National League: controlled by him, it raised funds for the Home Rule Party and selected candidates to run in elections. Between 1882 and 1885 he created a strong, unified and pledge-bound Home Rule Party in Westminster. After the 1885 general election, Parnell's party held the balance of power in the House of Commons and helped the Conservative Party to form a government. Parnell's support for the Conservatives was short-lived and, with the conversion of Gladstone and the Liberal Party to the cause of Home Rule (‘Flying the Hawarden Kite’), the Liberal Alliance began.

The Home Rule Movement 1886–91
Gladstone, with the help of the Home Rule Party, became Prime Minister in February 1886 and introduced the First Home Rule Bill in April 1886 – the bill was defeated but the Liberal Alliance was maintained. In 1889 Parnell was at the height of his popularity when an attempt was made to discredit him by means of the ‘Pigott Forgeries’. His career came to a dramatic end when his affair with a married woman, Katharine O’Shea, became public, resulting in the withdrawal of Liberal support for Home Rule for as long as Parnell remained leader, and leading to bitter divisions in the Home Rule Party which were to last for a decade after Parnell’s death in 1891.

Conclusion
Through his involvement in both the land movement and the cause of Home Rule, Parnell forged a link between constitutional nationalism and physical-force nationalism. In championing land reform, he secured important concessions for tenant farmers and advanced the quest towards a lasting resolution of the Land Question. His greatest political achievement was in building a disciplined and organised Home Rule Party and transforming the cause of Home Rule from an aspiration with little support to a realistic and achievable goal. The tragedy of his downfall lay in the fact that he placed his own personal interests before the interests of the party and cause.