

1829 – 1852

Despite the Whig leader Lord John Russell's efforts to work for justice to Ireland, his policies ended mainly in failure. Dr Jonathan Parry explains why.

# Lord John Russell and the Irish Catholics

Lord John Russell was not only the major influence on parliamentary Liberal politics between 1830 and 1852, but was also the leading force in persuading the party to work for 'justice to Ireland' – a cause to which, like Gladstone later, he devoted much of his career. Indeed he made two fact-finding visits to Ireland in 1833 and 1848 (Gladstone made only one, in 1877). Ironically, however, his Irish policy ended mostly in failure. This article seeks to explain why.

Russell's core attitudes to Ireland came – like most of his attitudes – from his mentor, the Whig leader Charles James Fox, and from his father, the Sixth Duke of Bedford, who was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland during the 'Talents' ministry of 1806–07, the Whigs' only taste of power in the fifty-six years before 1830. The Whigs were committed to Catholic Emancipation. They believed that it was wrong and counterproductive for the state to impose a civil penalty on account of religious beliefs, and, specifically, that the Union with Ireland forced through in 1800 would not work unless Catholics had representation in the United Kingdom Parliament. Bedford's government of Ireland set out to conciliate the Catholics, while it was the whigs' refusal to abandon the principle of Catholic Emancipation that led to their dismissal by George III in 1807.

Russell, born in 1792, thus grew up in a party that was stuck in opposition because of its commitment to the principle of Emancipation and civil equality. Emancipation was finally granted in 1829, fifty years too late, according to him. The rule of the Protestant ascendancy had become too entrenched and too hated. If Catholics had been granted political status earlier, the subsequent lessening of tension would have encouraged landlords to reside on their estates and invest capital in economic modernisation. Russell's goal was the full assimilation of the Irish

Catholics into the United Kingdom, as a precursor to Ireland enjoying the economic and social progress that the mainland was experiencing. Russell was a vehement supporter of the Union. Notwithstanding the unfortunate legacy of Tory rule in Ireland, he believed that the state had the responsibility and the ability to secure good government there. The Union had replaced sectional rule in Ireland – that of the Protestant ascendancy landlords – with the possibility of disinterested national leadership. Russell's political philosophy gave a crucial role to the state as the arbiter between interests that would establish a mutually acceptable civic framework.<sup>1</sup> Thus he remained a strong critic of Protestant cliques and landlord evictions.

Russell's policy for Ireland between the Whigs' return to government in 1830 and his resignation as prime minister in 1852 was basically fivefold: First, to secure the confidence of the Catholic population by making many Catholic appointments to political and judicial office and the police force. Second, to use legislation to help to check the landlords' abuses of power and to force them to accept their responsibilities to their people. Third, to establish a dialogue with the representatives of Catholic opinion (just as the 1832 Reform Act required governments to pay more attention to legitimate political pressure groups on the mainland, Russellite politics required the emergence of clear leaders of Irish political opinion, formulating grievances so that the government could decide on a response). Fourth, to combine this with the firm implementation of the rule of law, indicating clearly that the maintenance of the Union was a non-negotiable principle. Fifth, to reach an accommodation between the state and the Irish Catholic Church by which the state would accept the Church's dominant standing among the Irish people and would give the Irish priesthood

more financial security, and with it the enhanced status that would encourage responsible political behaviour. Russell supported what was called concurrent endowment – the granting of financial support to Catholics along with Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

In combination, these five principles were meant to strengthen the power of, and respect for, the British state in Ireland through an informal alliance with the leaders of political and religious opinion. The idea was that this would encourage the leaders of Catholic Ireland to appreciate the benefits of Union, and check the evil that political agitators and narrow-minded priests could easily do. But the government also had a side of the bargain to keep, because it had to accept that Ireland had its own needs and could not be governed by the imposition of ‘English’ views. Since Russell and other Whigs prided themselves on their cosmopolitanism – on their understanding of the variety of governing approaches taken in European countries, in many of which the Catholic Church was a powerful force – this did not seem impossible.

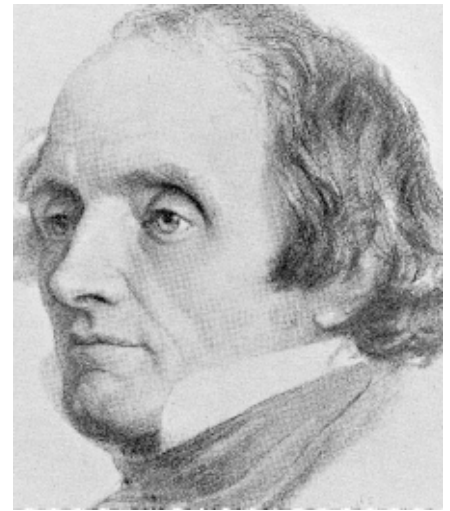
The first period of Russell’s influence in Irish policy was, broadly speaking, a success. The Whigs, increasingly known as Liberals, returned to government in 1835 in a tacit alliance with O’Connell – the so-called Lichfield House Compact. They upheld a policy on reform of the Anglican Church in Ireland that Russell had first set out in 1834 – the appropriation of its surplus revenues for general educational purposes. Russell’s declaration of 1834 had split British politics but had ensured that Ireland would be a major issue for Liberals for the rest of the 1830s. In March 1835 he proclaimed that misrule in Ireland had long ‘induced the people to consider themselves rather as the victims of tyranny, than the subjects of just Government’.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1835 and 1841 the Liberal government, of which Russell was Leader of the House of Commons and Home Secretary, appointed at least six Catholics to political office, reformed the Irish police force, bringing in many Catholics, and removed large numbers of Protestant magistrates – whom he famously called the ‘miserable monopo-

lising minority’. The Lord Lieutenant, Mulgrave, and his Dublin Castle officials assiduously identified themselves with aspects of Irish popular sentiment. Municipal reform in 1840 opened to Catholic leadership cities like Dublin (where O’Connell was elected Lord Mayor in 1841), although the House of Lords greatly limited the scope of the legislation. The introduction of a Poor Law in Ireland in 1838 made the landlords responsible for poor relief; it was hoped that this would force them to invest in agriculture in order to minimise their relief burdens. O’Connell wrote that the government was ‘conquering the “anti-Saxon” Spirit of Ireland’.<sup>3</sup> The number of MPs advocating Repeal of the Union fell sharply between 1835 and 1841.

Yet already government plans were being frustrated by Tory and Protestant opposition in Britain to Catholic influence in Ireland. Supposed Liberal sympathy for O’Connell was one of the two main reasons for the Tories’ revival that led them to victory at the general election of 1841. In the late 1830s the Lords were able to kill major legislation, most notably appropriation, with impunity, while Russell was unable to bring in his plan of 1838 to endow Catholic priests. Moreover, the very success of Liberal reforms left Irish MPs divided on their future direction. And once the Irish MPs were no longer agreed on a drive for clearly articulated reforms, this reduced their clout and made it even easier for British Protestant opinion to ignore Irish demands.

O’Connell’s death in 1847 made this problem worse. But by then, the difficulties of governing Ireland had been enormously exacerbated by the terrible tragedy of the potato famine of 1845 – 46. This was a tragedy that the government, now headed by Russell as prime minister after the fall of Peel in 1846, was inevitably ill-equipped to meet. The reappearance of the potato blight in August 1846 threw out government calculations that the temporary public works established under Peel could soon be phased out, so they were continued. But it was not administratively or politically feasible to expand the works to the extent required. Government and British public opinion assumed that one object of



Lord John Russell (1792–1878)

policy should be to force the landlords to take more responsibility for the relief of their tenants. This concern to avoid pouring money into the landlords’ pockets helps to explain opposition to some of the relief schemes floated over the next two years, such as assisted emigration. Policy disputes made legislation problematical, though in the end in 1847 the scope of the Poor Law was greatly widened and state-subsidised soup kitchens were established on a large scale. Three million people were being fed from them by the summer. However, the Poor Law machinery was not adequate for the burden that the government required it to bear, especially in poorer districts where rates could not be collected.

British public opinion reacted to the plight of Ireland in a way that to modern minds seems unacceptably unsympathetic. This negative response must be viewed in the context of a long-existing critique of high taxation, combined with a particular suspicion of excessive poor relief to the ‘undeserving’, and a heightened anxiety that dictated the need to reduce government expenditure because of the depression of 1847–48. Indeed the banking crisis of 1847 was widely blamed on ‘extravagant’ expenditure on the Irish, whose landlords, it was felt, should be digging deeper into their own pockets. *The Times* articulated standard prejudices when it spoke of the ‘innate indolence’ of the people there. The last straw was the failed Young Ireland rebellion of July 1848, widely seen as a spectacular ingratitude for past concessions. Even a

powerful government could not have ignored such a mood, but Russell had no parliamentary majority and was dependent for support on the most vehement advocates of laissez-faire, Peelites and radicals. As it was, the government had to introduce four Budgets in 1848 before parliament would agree on a taxation policy. In the circumstances, extra relief was politically impossible, and this was disastrous given that the potato crop again partially failed in 1848 and 1849. The influence of laissez-faire ideology on some government ministers added to the difficulty of implementing a generous relief policy, but the true cause, as Russell sadly remarked, 'lies deep in the breast of the British people'.

The dominance of anti-Irish attitudes was strengthened by the lack of a vocal and united Irish parliamentary force, to which British politicians would have to listen. Not for some years after 1847 would any Irish politician be able to create a common purpose out of diverse local concerns. With Irish lay leadership unfocused, the role of the Catholic Church assumed heightened importance. Bishops had lobbied the government in October 1847, in order to counter the anti-Irish polemics of the *Times*. But Protestant British suspicion of the ultimate loyalties of the Catholic priesthood was intense. The 1847 parliament was the most 'Protestant' of the nineteenth century, because of the electoral consequences of the debates about the Maynooth grant in 1845–46. When an Irish landlord, Denis Mahon, was assassinated in November 1847 shortly after apparently being denounced from the pulpit by a priest, British press hostility to the Catholic Church intensified. Moreover, in October 1847 the pope had condemned the mixed higher education colleges, the Queen's Colleges, set up by Peel's government in 1845.

Thus Russell's dream of conciliation in Ireland was diminishing in the face of ultra-Protestant hostility in England and Scotland from Churchmen and Dissenters, and from the growth, partly in reaction, of uncompromising Irish clerical vigour. The latter became particularly associated with Archbishop Paul Cullen, who was made Archbishop of Armagh in 1849 after nearly thirty

years' residence in Rome. Cullen's aspiration was to bring the Irish Catholic Church to a better appreciation of the spiritual and doctrinal leadership provided by the revived Papacy. Cullen was particularly opposed to the idea that the bishops should enter into agreements with the British government, or that the Papacy should be encouraged to go down this path. This made him Russell's most significant opponent in Ireland, and Russell knew it. Already in autumn 1847 Russell had sent his father-in-law and cabinet colleague Minto to Rome to attempt to persuade the Pope to support the cause of order and government initiatives in Ireland. This mission had little effect. Nor, it turned out, did Russell's endowment scheme, which he had hoped to make the centre of his Irish reforms in 1848, but which was so obviously disliked by important spokesmen on both sides of the religious divide that it was never introduced to Parliament.

The failure of the policy of endowment was a serious blow to Russell's Irish policy, which he blamed in part on the increasing intransigence of the bishops. It made him all the more determined to press ahead with raising the educational standards of Irish Catholics by establishing the non-denominational Queen's Colleges, set up in 1845, as the main university for them. There was considerable support for the Colleges from lay Catholics and a large minority of bishops led by Archbishop Murray. Russell hoped that the Catholic Church's anxiety about the excesses of the European revolutions of 1848 would lead it to appreciate the benefits of working with the state to support the cause of order. But Cullen called the Synod of Thurles in 1850 to secure, by a narrow majority, a condemnation of the Colleges as injurious to the faith and morals of Catholics. Cullen argued that few of the initial professorial appointments at the Colleges went to Catholics, and that it was essential to preserve the independence and vigour of Church teaching – by establishing a separate privately funded Catholic University, for which he then worked tirelessly.

By 1850, the combination of the Famine, the virulence of Protestant

feeling in Britain, and the opposition of the Cullenites in Ireland had left Russell's mission to Ireland looking like a humiliating failure. Russell was a proud man, and this calamitous outcome explains his last, most disastrous and still often misunderstood miscalculation – his strong criticism of the Catholic bishops in his Durham letter of November 1850 and Ecclesiastical Titles Act of 1851.

The cause was the Pope's declaration that he had established a hierarchy of twelve Catholic bishops in England, a declaration trumpeted exultantly by the leader of English Catholicism, Wiseman. The re-establishment of the hierarchy – in place of the system of vicars-apostolic – made little practical difference, certainly not to the safety of the state, to which all Catholic officeholders had to swear an oath of allegiance under the terms of the 1829 Emancipation Act. If anything, the new departure encouraged a spirit of self-government, independent of Rome, among English Catholics. However it was anathema to excited Protestant opinion, and marked the high point of Victorian anti-Catholicism. By December 1850 5 per cent of the British population had petitioned the Queen to challenge the pope's action. It was also anathema to Russell, though for different reasons – his Whig insistence that a liberal state must not cede any of its temporal powers to ecclesiastical forces which by nature were intolerant, narrow and proselytising. This was a classic point of Whig-liberal doctrine, about which Russell felt particularly vehemently because of the rise of a Tractarian movement in the Church of England which sought to assert clerical independence from state courts and parliament in doctrinal matters. Russell's declaration in the Durham letter that the Pope's act was invalid until approved and regulated by the state was correct in law. However it ignored the realities of Ireland, where the British state and the courts had in practice recognised the status and rights of the Catholic bishops for many years.

Some historians have assumed that Russell stupidly 'forgot' about Ireland in making his declaration, but this is most unlikely. Though in the Durham letter his main fire was reserved for the Tractarians, by the time that he came to

introduce the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill it was aimed squarely at Cullen, whom he clearly saw as a major enemy of a liberal state in its attempt to pacify and improve Ireland. But his insistence that Catholic bishops had no right to their titles without the state's acquiescence generated great opposition from the Irish MPs, led by G.H. Moore. Indeed the debates on the bill were key steps in the development of a more coherent grouping of Irish representatives, the 'Irish Brigade', which went into opposition to Russell and, assisted by unprecedented clerical electoral influence, emerged as a party at the election of 1852 with over forty seats.

Russell's speech in 1851, and a further tirade against the Catholic Church's interference in politics in 1853, broke his long-standing informal alliance with Irish representatives and did a lot to erode his political position: he did not return to the premiership until 1865. It is often said that his behaviour on these issues was an incomprehensible betrayal of his earlier pro-Catholic approach. But this is a misperception. Russell was an ardent Protestant, more earnest on religious subjects than the vast majority of nineteenth-century prime ministers. He hated what he saw as the superstitious intolerance of Catholicism. His policy was always the Erastian one of active state interference in religious affairs in order to check the potential aggression of churches. This, he thought, was the only way to maintain state power and promote beneficial reform. To him this went hand-in-hand with a policy of proper representation of minorities and civil equality in office-holding, so as to enhance the effectiveness of political dialogue with lay Catholic opinion. In his eyes, Liberal government meant opposing the imposition on Ireland of both English prejudice and narrow clericalism.

Russell's policy was not a complete failure. Between 1846 and 1851 Catholics enjoyed extensive political patronage, while a Franchise Act of 1850 significantly increased the Catholic electorate, and the Queen's Colleges were given university status in 1850. But the most crucial parts of it were killed, not just by the tragedy of the famine, but

also because of the decisive polarisation of Protestant-Catholic relations which followed it. Cullen's influence in Ireland increased in the 1850s, while most politically influential Englishmen had little sympathy for Irish reform, and an era was emerging in which it was generally assumed that 'English' governing notions were best for Ireland. Indeed, imbued with the economic and political confidence of the 1850s, significant parts of the British public felt that there were few parts of the world that were *not* suited to a dose of 'English' values. What is striking is that, when G.H. Moore opposed the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill, he argued that Russell's approach, of state power over the Church, was the 'despotic' one adopted by continental regimes, and was inappropriate for a free people. The same argument was used by British Protestant Dissenters. This rejection of any form of Catholic alliance with the state, as an 'un-English' strategy, paved the way for the settlement of the Irish Church question in 1869, not by concurrent endowment but by disestablishment and disendowment. By this act, all Irish religions were set free from an association with the state, and even the grant to the

Maynooth seminary ceased. The policy of 1869 was broadly approved by British opinion. The sympathy for Irish Church disestablishment expressed at the election of 1868 is sometimes seen as the beginning of a new era of English sympathy with Ireland and Irish values. It is, however, arguable that this is wrong, and that most of the Englishmen and Scotsmen who supported it did so because they thought that disestablishment was the only solution to the Irish religious problem that was in tune with 'English', as opposed to Continental, ideals. If this is true, it is not surprising that the decline in Anglo-Irish relations described elsewhere in this issue by Alan O'Day and Ian Machin was so soon to follow, and Ireland to be in turmoil again by 1880.

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- 1 *Hansard's parliamentary debates*, 3rd series, vol. 27, c. 365, 30 March 1835.
- 2 P. Scherer, *Lord John Russell: a biography*, Selinsgrove, 1999, p. 97.
- 3 Donal Kerr, 'A Nation of Beggars'? *Priests, people, and politics in famine Ireland, 1846–1852* Oxford, 1994, p. 198.

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