

# **The Great Irish Famine: Public Works Relief During the Liberal Administration**

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The tragedy of the Great Irish Famine (1845-51) had a disastrous impact upon the Irish population. While more than eight million persons lived in Ireland in the pre-Famine period, the official census of 1851 recorded a number of about six million and a half Irish inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Sir Robert Peel, the Conservative Prime Minister of the time, administered Famine relief from the appearance of the potato blight in the autumn of 1845 until June 1846. Apart from the traditional form of relief, the Poor Law, the Conservative government relied upon two temporary relief measures which were Indian Corn relief and public works. After the fall of Peel's government, British politics entered a new era under the Liberal administration of Lord John Russell. Though the Liberal government kept the Conservative schemes, it changed the way in which they were administered. It also introduced a system of free distribution of soups after the failure of public works to tackle destitution effectively. More importantly, Lord John Russell and his government insisted on the fact that the alleviation of destitution in 1847 had to rely on employment schemes and that the landlords in Ireland should be more answerable to the funding of the relief operations. His attitude towards the Famine in Ireland was largely shaped by the current economic ideology of Political Economy.<sup>2</sup> The latter discouraged all forms of governmental intervention whether in the economy or in the field of public charity. The provision of assistance to the needy in society was even regarded as being detrimental to both the paupers and the economy.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis of the Liberal government upon a policy of financial retrenchment resulted in a historiographical debate over the extent of the government's commitment to the principles of Political Economy. While a group of historians concluded that the British government of the time did what it could to tackle the Famine, others believed that the Liberal government deliberately inflicted high levels of suffering upon the Irish population. Cecil Woodham-Smith, for example, argued that the Irish had enough resources to avert the Famine if food exports from Ireland had been prevented in the 1840s. The historian Mary Daly, however, objects to the use of 'the market driven' approach while assessing the Famine events.

Daly also traces this approach back to the Famine period itself while refusing the charge levelled by nationalist historians against the British officials of the time such as Sir Robert Peel and Charles Trevelyan. She mainly criticises the focus of a number of historians on the government's responsibility while dealing with the issue of food exports and the repeal of the Corn Laws.<sup>4</sup> While nationalist historians accused the British officials of deliberately exterminating the Irish population, Daly believes that the charge of genocide is groundless since a prevention of food exports could not have ended the Famine.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the British politicians' commitment to the principles of Political Economy, the historian Peter Gray identifies another important factor that played a major role in framing the official response to the calamity. After studying the ideological framework of the period, he concludes that a large number of policy-makers held a providential interpretation of the situation along with their strong defense of a non-interventionist policy in Ireland. Key government officials such as Lord John Russell, Charles Wood and Charles Trevelyan believed that the Famine represented God's will.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the efforts of the government could not avert it. In this way providentialism and the principles of Political Economy discouraged an interventionist policy in the field of public charity. Recent research has also shown that they transformed a subsistence crisis into a famine.<sup>7</sup>

Though this article examines the extent to which the British officials relied on their ideological assumptions while administering the scheme of public works in 1847, it does not seek to understate what really happened during the Famine years. Nor does it provide a highly exaggerated account of the system of public works. Apart from the use of a number of secondary sources, its main conclusions are drawn from a careful examination of the official records of the time. It mainly draws upon a wide range of reports and a number of debates in the House of Commons in order to reach a better understanding of the system of public works. One of the main objectives of the article is to try to demonstrate that the officials of the Liberal government deliberately chose to provide an ideologically-motivated form of relief while administering public employment. Contrary to many other studies,<sup>8</sup> this article mainly emphasises the dissenting voices during the operation of public works. This is carried out through an examination of the high level of objection to the government's policy by both senior and junior officials of relief as well as the Irish paupers.

Before the implementation of the Liberal programmes of public works under the provisions of the Labour Rate Act, relief officials had to carry on the operation of the schemes already introduced by Sir Robert Peel.<sup>9</sup> After

the end of the Conservative schemes, the new government quickly reorganised the administration of relief. Accordingly, the Labour Rate Act was introduced in August 1846. One of the major principles upon which the Liberal government acted was the limitation of the government's role in financing the relief schemes. While the implementation of public labour during the first year of the Famine had been equally shared among the government and the local baronies, the Labour Rate Act stipulated that all expenditure was to be the responsibility of the localities. It also stipulated that the government could advance money in the form of loans to be repaid wholly by the landlords.<sup>10</sup>

The Liberal administration reorganized the Board of Works and introduced a number of administrative reforms in an attempt to limit the expenditure of relief and control the activities of the Local Relief Committees. The newly appointed chairman of the Board of Works, Lieutenant Colonel Jones, withdrew from the local bodies the right to grant relief tickets to the destitute people. He mainly feared that the latter might grant relief to the undeserving paupers. He indicated that the lack of a controlled system of relief would violate two major objectives of the government which were public order and the provision of relief to the needy:

The peace of the country may be considered mainly to depend upon a proper selection being previously made, and regulations established which may have the force of law, so that every person requiring relief, and thereby employment, may receive it, and know where he is to present himself to the engineer.<sup>11</sup>

The limitation of the role of the Local Relief Committees reflected the dissatisfaction of relief policy-makers with the role of the localities under the Conservative government. There was a widespread consensus among the Liberal officials that the members of the Local Relief Committees allowed cases of abuse and negatively contributed to the collapse of the system of relief. The government also seemed to be cautious about the new role of the staff of the Board. The Treasury therefore stated that 'no person on the permanent establishment of the Board of Works, from the commissioners to their most subordinate officers, should be at liberty to accept any private employment'.<sup>12</sup>

The Liberal Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Bessborough, also emphasised the introduction of a well-administered system of relief. He shared with the chairman of the Board of Works the same views regarding the limitation of the role of the Local Relief Committees. He stated that the new role of the latter was to be confined to the preparation of the lists of

paupers with a detailed report about the family conditions of each applicant.<sup>13</sup> He also indicated that 'no encouragement should be given to the labourers to leave their ordinary employment and congregate on the Relief Works'.<sup>14</sup>

The Liberal government introduced a system of task work. The remuneration of labourers was decided in proportion to the work performed.<sup>15</sup> Instead of providing an efficient form of relief, the government sought to reduce the level of assistance provided to able-bodied paupers. Indeed, the continuation of the Famine into 1846 had a negative impact upon the physical condition of the labourers. Accordingly, under the operation of task work, able-bodied paupers earned less than what they used to earn under the payment of daily wages. Being fully aware of the insufficiency of wages, the government decided on a fixed rate of 8d for those who did not earn more than that by task-work.<sup>16</sup> The reduction of wages was in harmony with the ideological background of relief policy-makers. Apart from reducing the governmental intervention in the field of public charity, the principles of Political Economy sought to change the character of the Irish paupers. The destitution of the latter was blamed on their moral failings and their indolence. Therefore, political economists promoted the spirit of industriousness and self-reliance.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly, after the operation of public works under the provisions of the Labour Rate Act, the administrators of relief were exposed to the ideological weaknesses of the very system they were administering. The overcrowding in the works showed that the reduction of both the number of relief recipients and relief expenditure represented far-fetched objectives. In addition, the engineers in many districts were unable to commence the works as soon as they were sanctioned because of the insufficiency of assistants. The role of the engineers became increasingly complicated as their duties increased with the increase in the demand for relief:

The duties of our Engineers have been extremely arduous, called on, in the first instance, to attend day after day, the various Presentment Sessions in different baronies, and then to commence works simultaneously in different and distant localities, when, from the introduction of labour, by measured or task-work, even the simplest hill-cutting frequently required their personal attention, it has, in consequence, been impossible to avoid delays.<sup>18</sup>

The pay-clerks were also unable to cope with the huge number of labourers which reached 150,000 men in 5,000 separate works. Most of these clerks could not carry out the task of paying in small sums a large number of individuals. Though the Board of Works appointed a number of

267 pay-clerks, an average of one or two in each barony varying according to the works undertaken, their role was generally ineffective. The Commissioners of the Board of Works described them as being 'unaccustomed to act together in concert, and in the face of a populace always excitable, and often turbulent'.<sup>19</sup> Apart from blaming the situation on the character of the Irish paupers, the Commissioners also believed that the government's scheme of public works represented a generous form of relief.<sup>20</sup>

In October 1846, the number of labourers increased dramatically. The Board of Works registered 772,994 applications made by destitute families.<sup>21</sup> Though the relief operations of the Board covered the vast majority of the counties, the sanction of the projects in most of the localities was partial. The commissioners of the Board of Works only sanctioned part of the proposed works for short periods. In Deece Lower barony in County Meath, for example, the Board of Works only sanctioned one-seventh of the total projects proposed by the Local Relief Committees.<sup>22</sup> In County Galway, in the barony of Athenry, the Board also sanctioned 3 out of 46 locally required projects. The amount of money recommended was £600 while the Local Relief Committees applied for £13,447.<sup>23</sup>

The significant demands being placed upon the Board of Works emphasised the weaknesses of the Liberal relief policy in Ireland. The major administrators of the Board of Works admitted that the increase in the number of labourers was beyond their expectations.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the fact that the applications for the creation of public projects exceeded the potentials of the Board of Works, the delay in the transmission of returns represented an additional problem to the machinery of relief. Due to the fact that public works represented the chief form of relief, the Commissioners of the Board of Works faced serious difficulties in March 1847 when they had to provide relief to about 714,390 workers.<sup>25</sup>

The increase in relief expenditure seemed to alarm all the relief administrators. In a letter to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, regarded the adoption of more efficient relief measures necessary. A Treasury Minute dated 10 March 1847, indicated that the operation of public works was by no means efficient since farm work was abandoned by the destitute labourers. The British government therefore decided on a gradual reduction in the number of labourers. Because the administrators of relief mainly condemned the role of the Local Relief Committees, the government urged a strict scrutiny of the relief lists under the direction of the Board of Works:

My Lords, therefore, convinced that the only effectual mode of checking the expenditure, and inducing the Committees to perform their duty in revising the lists, is by positive instructions, issued on the direct responsibility of Her Majesty's government, to limit the number of persons employed, leaving it to the local Committees, with the assistance of the Inspecting Officers of the Board of Works, to carry those instructions into effect, according to the circumstances of each district.<sup>26</sup>

The government decided that the reduction of labourers in public works was to be accompanied by the introduction of a new relief measure in the form of the free distribution of food known as the Soup Kitchens. In April 1847, most of the public works were ended. Despite the fact that public works represented the only form of assistance in many localities especially in County Cork, the major administrators of relief stated that the closure of public projects was not at the expense of the destitute.<sup>27</sup>

The Liberal scheme of public works came under heavy criticism in the Irish newspapers. The nationalist newspaper *The Nation* considered the quick reductions of labourers during the closure of the public projects as an evidence of the government's hostility to the Irish people. It also criticised the official commitment to the current economic ideology. It stated that the government wanted to drive 'men into the market where there was no market'.<sup>28</sup> Another newspaper, *The Cork Examiner*, also emphasised the inadequacy of the ideological background of relief policy-makers:

SIR – Political economy is doing its bloody work – slowly, steadily, but not the more surely. One day we read of 47 deaths from starvation in Mayo, ratified by the solemn verdicts of so many coroners juries [ . . . ] Not a single day passes by without abundant evidence of the total inadequacy of the present government, to wield the destinies of this great empire, or to preserve from *actual starvation* the great majority of this long misgoverned and unfortunate country.<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of the political motivations of *The Nation* and *The Cork Examiner*, the reductions in the number of the able-bodied men employed in the works had a negative impact upon a large number of people in Ireland. Though surviving official statistics only mention the number of men discharged from the works, they hide the fact that the reductions in public works affected not only the labourers but also their dependents. A study has shown that the total number of persons affected by the reductions exceeded three million in June 1847.<sup>30</sup> The Liberal relief policy was also highly criticised in the British Parliament. Though no accurate system of death registration existed, a Member of Parliament argued that the death-

toll was very high. In March 1847, Smith O'Brien, an MP for Limerick and a leader in the Nationalist party of Young Ireland, made an estimate of about 240,000 deaths from starvation. He attributed the high rate of mortality to the ideologically-motivated reaction of relief policy-makers. Therefore, he charged Lord John Russell's government with the extermination of a massive number of paupers since he believed it was in the power of the legislature and Government to prevent a single death from starvation in Ireland, and that, if the present state of things was permitted to continue, he would do his utmost to endeavour to draw the attention of the civilised world to the fact that his countrymen were allowed to perish like vermin by that legislature and by that government.<sup>31</sup>

Being a strong critic of the Liberal Party, O'Brien undoubtedly had an interest in emphasising the government's responsibility for deaths from starvation. Though Lord John Russell regarded the estimate of O'Brien as highly exaggerated, he did not provide any death figures. He also stated that there was a difficulty in getting reliable information on the subject.<sup>32</sup> The government of the day seemed to promote uncertainty about the exact number of those who died. Lord John Russell even rejected a suggestion to count the number of deaths from starvation.<sup>33</sup> Undoubtedly, the rate of mortality from starvation was a sensitive political issue that could alarm the critics of Russell's government in case the number of deaths proved to be very high. Additionally, Lord Bentinck, the leader of the Protectionists opposed Russell's commitment to free trade. He negatively compared the operation of public charity during the Liberal administration to the measures adopted by Peel's government. He gave Peel credit for his limited commitment to the ideological imperatives of the time while he rendered Russell's failure to solve the problem of destitution to his dogmatic belief in the ideology of political economy:

The late government had treated the destitution of that country on a better plan [. . .] than the present Government, who were administering the affairs of Ireland on the principles of political economy, and hence the afflicting situation of that country.<sup>34</sup>

In point of fact, the exorbitant prices of food made the labourers unable to support their families. A labourer earning six shillings per week was by no means able to afford supporting five dependants for more than four days since the price of Indian meal was about two shillings six pence, per 14 pounds weight.<sup>35</sup> Even the chairman of the Board of Works criticised the very policy he was implementing. Though he initially supported the payment of low wages to the workers,<sup>36</sup> the escalation of destitution convinced him that the ideological background upon which he acted was

detrimental to the paupers. Indeed, his direct involvement in the provision of relief made him aware of the realities of the Irish people. In January 1847, he acknowledged that the workers were unable to earn sufficient wages because they were weakened by the Famine. He also seemed to be concerned with the impact of the government's policies upon the people as he believed that the system of relief would result in alarming levels of mortality in the most affected localities such as Clare, Cork and Galway.<sup>37</sup>

Though the low wages contributed to a further deterioration of the living conditions of the Irish paupers, proponents of the current economic ideology urged government officials to pursue their ideological imperatives. William Neilson Hancock, a professor of Political Economy at Dublin University, argued that the wages in the works were higher than those paid in private employment. The high allowances, which the very strong men were able to earn at task-work, raised their condition above that of the independent labourers. This introduced many who were not destitute to crowd on the relief works, to the disadvantage of those who were destitute.<sup>38</sup>

Though Hancock stated that strong men earned high wages, the physical conditions of most of the labourers were deteriorated because of the extension of the Famine to a second year. The wages paid in the works did not enable the workers to buy food for themselves and their family members. Accordingly, hundreds of thousands of destitute families depended upon a very limited income.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the direct contact of many relief officers with the escalating destitution enabled them to distance themselves from the dominant economic ideology of Political Economy. They proved to be critical of the impact of task-work upon the destitute people in Ireland. In a large number of localities, they reported to the central administration of relief that wages were not sufficient to provide the labourers and their families with the minimum means of subsistence. An Inspector in County Limerick clearly pointed out that the paupers would 'not long exist' if the government did not intervene. He suggested that the government should lower food prices in the market.<sup>40</sup> In County Leitrim, a government inspector indicated that the suffering of the destitute class was intensified by the high prices of food and that the wages were 'quite inadequate to purchase a sufficiency to feed many large families'.<sup>41</sup> Another administrator of relief, Deputy Commissary-General Dobree, seemed to be more radical in his suggestions. As early as January 1847 he wrote to the Chairman of the relief Commission:

I can not help representing to you in the strongest manner my conviction, that if there were to be no immediate extensive [. . .] employment afforded throughout the country, no reduction of these



famine prices, and no immediate cheap food available for the poor [. . .] a very great portion of the population, now fast comprising artisans, tradesmen [. . .] must die of starvation.<sup>42</sup>

A relief inspector, Colonel Stokes, also condemned the government's policy of financial retrenchment. He observed that the relief policy of the government made the situation of the poorest section of the society more complicated:

I lament to be obliged to add, that it has not proved sufficient to prevent deaths from starvation and that a most fatal description of dysentery is now prevalent, occasioning many deaths, and brought on by want of clothing [. . .] of a sufficiency of food, and by not preparing the Indian meal with sufficient care, or cooking it enough, and this often because they cannot afford enough of fuel.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, many relief officials warned the Treasury about the negative impact of the Labour Rate Act upon the economy. One of the reports stated that while farm work was urgently needed, a large number of farm labourers were engaged in public works. It indicated that in some localities, farm labourers turned down a wage of one shilling per day and sought work in the fisheries or road construction.<sup>44</sup> Public labour also deterred a number of small farmers from working the land. In Ennistimon, the Commissioners of the Board of Works removed from the relief lists farmers holding between 15 and 30 acres of land.<sup>45</sup>

The overcrowding in the works resulted in a mood of pessimism among relief officials. The latter emphasized the weaknesses of the system they were administering. One of the administrators of relief, Captain Froode, stated in a report that his life became 'a constant worry' and that 'next year will be much worse than this'.<sup>46</sup> Another official indicated that the period of the provision of relief appeared to be 'not a succession of weeks and days, but one long continuous day, with occasional intervals of nightmare sleep. Rest one could never have, night nor day, when one felt that every minute lost a score of men might die'.<sup>47</sup>

The paupers also protested against the government's policy since the implementation of a policy of financial retrenchment resulted in the intensification of destitution. The paupers' dissatisfaction with the system of relief was translated into violence. In Tipperary, for example, the labourers employed in the works attacked the engineer with their barrows.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the administrators of relief often received threatening notices.<sup>49</sup> In Tulla, a group of about 300 men threatened the official of the Board of Works with death in case he did not employ them in public works.<sup>50</sup> In

Cork, a large number of able-bodied men marched demanding the provision of relief in the form of labour. About 400 men who had been employed on the public works near Ballygarvan assembled and marched in procession into Cork. Having drawn up before the door of the Board of Works' office, they sent a deputation to confer with Captain Broughton, to state the distress they were suffering in consequence of being suddenly dismissed off the works. He assured them he could do nothing for them.<sup>51</sup>

The government also recorded cases of discontented groups of men marching with spades in an attempt to press upon the relief administrators to create employment.<sup>52</sup> In Clare Abbey, one of the most violent attacks was committed against the overseer of the works. While walking with a clerk of the Board of Works, the overseer was attacked by a man who fired a blunderbuss at him.<sup>53</sup> Throughout autumn 1846, the task of the officers of the Board of Works was difficult due to the rise in rural violence. In the midst of violence, the Board of Works often resorted to the help of the constabulary in order to protect its staff while supervising the works.<sup>54</sup> The famine specialist, Amartya Sen, has argued in a recent article that the violence of the Irish paupers in the 1840s did not represent a real challenge to the British authority. However, he has indicated that the 'memory of injustice and neglect' largely contributed in the long run to the violent character of Anglo-Irish relations.<sup>55</sup>

The commitment of the Liberal government to its ideological background proved to be detrimental to the paupers in Ireland. Due to the fact that relief policy-makers relied upon a policy of financial retrenchment, the relief schemes in the form of public works did not tackle the problem of destitution. Throughout the second year of the Famine, the officials of the Board of Works were unable to control the increasing number of the destitute. They also seemed to be unable to decide fair wages as the remuneration in the works was too low to support the relief recipients and their dependents. One might argue that British contemporaries lacked the experience and skills to administer relief to large numbers of paupers. However, the government's subsequent relief measure, the Soup Kitchens, showed that relief officials fed about three million paupers at a low cost. Instead of alleviating destitution, the government's scheme of public works resulted in the protest of many MPs, relief administrators, and the paupers. While relief administrators and MPs criticised in their reports and speeches the official commitment to the principles of Political Economy, the dissatisfaction of a large number of Irish people with the current system of relief was often translated into violence. The importance of the vehement objection to the government's policy lies in the fact that British politicians were made conscious of the

inadequacy of the principles of Political Economy. However, their refusal to deviate from their course of action could be regarded as evidence of the fact that they deliberately chose to give priority to their ideological concerns at the expense of the paupers.

## Notes and References

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- 5 Daly 85.
- 6 Peter Gray, 'The Triumph of Dogma Ideology and Famine Relief', *History Ireland* (1995): 26-34.
- 7 David Lloyd, 'The Political Economy of the Potato', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 29 (2007): 311-35.
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- 9 Commissioners of Public Works to the Lords of the Treasury, September 1846, Sixth Monthly Report, Appendix C, *Correspondence Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Board of Works Series) First Part, 1847 (764)*, vol 50, 80.
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- 16 Copy of Letter Lieutenants of Counties, 7 September 1846, *Correspondence Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Board of Works Series) First Part, 1847 (764)*, vol 50, 140.
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- 19 Commissioners of Public Works to the Lords of the Treasury, 12 November 1846, *Correspondence Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Board of Works Series) First Part, 1847* vol 50, 197.
- 20 Commissioners of Public Works to the Lords of the Treasury, 12 November 1846, *Correspondence Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Board of Works Series) First Part, 1847* vol 50, 198.
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- 30 See James S. Donnelly, *The Soup Kitchens*, W.E. Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 310.
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- 52 Woodham-Smith 150.
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