

The Act of Union, 1800

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1. Union

In 1800 the Act of Union abolished the Irish Parliament which had existed in one form or another since the thirteenth century. Abolition represented a reversal of the recently adopted policy of giving the Irish parliament more freedom. Until 1782, the Irish parliament had been closely supervised by Britain, but in that year Britain conceded Ireland a large measure of independence.

This concession did not bring Ireland the stability so much desired by Britain and thus, after the United Irish Rebellion in 1798, William Pitt decided to get rid of the Irish parliament altogether. Quite simply, Britain did not trust the Irish Parliament to govern Ireland effectively, especially when Britain was at the wrong end of the war with revolutionary and Napoleonic France.

Henceforth for the next 120 years Ireland was governed from London and had representatives in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords at Westminster.

2. The Irish Parliament before 1782

Composition

For much of the eighteenth century, the British ruled Ireland in much the same way as they ruled the American colonies. The King of Britain, King George III, was also King of Ireland. Ireland had its own parliament with a House of Lords and a House of Commons, which made laws for Ireland. Only Protestants, members of the established Church of Ireland, could be members of the Irish parliament.

Limited powers

Like the American assemblies, the Irish parliament was not free to do as it wished. Under one law, 'Poynings's Law', dating from 1492, the king could stop any act it wished to pass, while under another statute, 'the Sixth of George I, 1726', the British parliament could make laws for Ireland with or without the consent of the Irish parliament.

The executive

In addition, the laws which the Irish parliament passed, were put into operation by the king's representative in Ireland, the Viceroy. The Viceroy was appointed by the king and was always an English nobleman. He obeyed the king and not the Irish parliament.

Patriot Party

Irish people had protested against these limitations from time to time, and from the middle of the eighteenth century the protest had been led by the Patriot Party, a small group of men, never more than fifty, in the Irish Parliament. They demanded a free parliament but until the beginning of the 1780s their demands were ignored by Britain.

3. Grattan's Parliament

Renunciation Act, 1782

At the beginning of the 1780s, however, it looked as though the Irish Parliament had a rosy future. In 1782 the British Parliament passed the Renunciation Act, giving up for ever the power to make laws for Ireland. Ireland had now gained, the Patriots claimed, 'a free constitution'.

The Irish Parliament of that time is often known as Grattan's Parliament, after Henry Grattan, one of the most interesting of the Patriots, an ungainly chimpanzee-like man of outstanding eloquence.

Britain's concession

The question is why, having resisted demands for so long, did the British Government make this concession in 1782. The answer is that Britain had too much on its plate to be able to resist renewed Irish demands for greater parliamentary freedom. Since 1775, Britain had been at war with the thirteen American colonies who had declared their independence, and Holland, France and Spain had also declared war on Great Britain, while Russia, Denmark and Sweden had formed the hostile Armed Neutrality against her (1778-79). With this tense international situation, Britain felt that she could not resist the demands made by Irish reformers, now formidably organised into an Irish Volunteer movement.

Irish Volunteers

The Volunteers seemed a formidable force, originally organised for home defence in the war. The trouble was that they would not confine themselves to defensive activities, and soon began to demand concessions for Ireland. Not content with commercial concessions, they claimed constitutional concessions as well.

Dungannon Convention

The spirit of the Volunteers was summed up in the Dungannon Convention of February 1782. Delegates from 143 corps in Ulster attended this Convention. Armed volunteers lined the streets to the church in which the delegates sat until nightfall, hearing speeches from Henry Grattan, Lord Charlemont and Henry Flood. Attacking Poyning's Law, which limited Ireland's freedom, the delegates resolved unanimously that 'the claim of any body of men other than the King, Lords and

Commons of Ireland to make laws for this Kingdom is unconstitutional, illegal and a grievance'.

Glorious independence?

Such demands, repeated throughout the country, resulted in the Renunciation Act of 1782. It supposedly introduced a period of 'glorious independence'.

Some of these descriptions of Ireland towards the end of the eighteenth century were true. Certainly, a measure of independence had been gained, for parliamentary bills had no longer to be sent to England for approval. The parliament did encourage trade and industry. Ireland did enjoy a period of prosperity.

However, there is little to support the contention that the Parliament was 'Grattan's' - he and his friends had very little influence in it - and there seems no justification for calling the period glorious. The expected political reforms, reducing the privileges of the Protestant Ascendancy and its share in the government of the country, did not materialise. In many respects, the conduct of the Irish Parliament was the reverse of glorious, and its poor performance was watched with increasing dismay by British politicians.

4. The Limitations of 'Grattan's Parliament'

The main defect of the Irish Parliament was that it was out of touch with the country at large in at least three respects: its exclusion of Catholics; its exclusion of many Protestants; and the limited freedom of many of its members.

Exclusion of Catholics

First of all, until 1793, the Irish Parliament represented only Protestants, for Catholics, the majority (seventy-five per cent) of the population, were not allowed to vote in parliamentary elections. Although Catholics were allowed to vote after 1793, the Irish Parliament set its face against full Catholic emancipation - the admission of Catholics to Parliament.

Exclusion of Protestants

Secondly, the Irish Parliament did not even represent all Protestants, owing to the electoral system. Protestant Dissenters did not have the vote until 1793, and although the county franchise was wide and uniform, in the boroughs and towns, that is in the majority of seats, the right to vote was narrowly restricted.

Restricted franchise

Most of the boroughs were closed, which meant that only members of the corporation - seldom more than twelve prominent citizens - voted to return two members of parliament. Other boroughs were in theory more open, but they, too, had restricted electorates. There were rotten boroughs, such as Clonmines in County Wexford, which had no inhabitants at all; and there were pocket boroughs, usually on the estate of some land lord, which elected men nominated by the land lord. For instance, one of the biggest pocket boroughs was Belfast. No Protestant, merchant or manufacturer, had a vote, and the two members were nominated by Lord Donegal, a great land owner.

M.P.s not free agents

Patrons

A further defect of the Irish Parliament was that many of its members were in no sense free agents. Members returned for pockets and rotten boroughs had usually to vote the way their patrons directed. At a conservative estimate, some 176 members were elected by individual patrons. What made the matter worse was that these

patrons were not necessarily free agents either. They could be influenced by the government. Often peerages were given to boroughmongers. In fact, the chief reason for creating peers in Ireland was borough ownership, and by the 1780's the Irish peers controlled some 124 seats in the Irish House of Commons.

Crown salaries

Yet another limitation on the independence of members of the Irish House of Commons was the fact that often one-third of them were in receipt of Crown salaries and pensions. Many new posts were created for government supporters and, according to one critic in 1790, these new places were 'but a supplement to the most corrupt traffic of many old places, to the prostitute disposal of state pensions, and to the public and scandalous barter of the honours of the Crown, all recently perpetrated for the purpose of accomplishing a depraved influence over members of this House'.

Critics of the Irish Parliament

Criticisms of these defects was voiced not only within parliament but increasingly from without, in speeches, articles and ballads such as this:

What came in Eighty-two?

The name of a free nation

A parchment liberation

That came in Eighty-two!

5. The United Irishmen

The most insistent criticisms came from the Society of United Irishmen, founded under the stimulus of the French Revolution.

Wolfe Tone

The instigator of the United Irishman was the Dublin-born Wolfe Tone, who had distinguished himself by his gay (in the traditional sense of the word) student life at Trinity College, Dublin, and his elopement with a sixteen-year old Matilda Worthington. Struck by the French ideal of Fraternity, Tone wanted the union of all Catholics and Protestants and exhorted Catholics and Northern Presbyterians to reconcile their differences.

Society of United Irishmen

Originating in Belfast in October 1791, and soon spreading to Dublin, the Society was at first open and above ground. It demanded the reform of parliament and argued 'that no reform is practicable, efficacious or just, but shall not include Irishmen of all religious persuasions'. However, it was soon driven underground when Britain declared war on France in 1793. In face of attempted suppression, the Society reformed itself as a secret organisation, bound together by the solemn oath 'to form a brotherhood of affection among Irishmen of every religious persuasion to obtain equal, full and adequate representation of all the people of Ireland'. The plan was to organise a rebellion in Ireland with French help.

Obstacles

Government repression

The endeavours of the United Irishmen met many obstacles. Most pressingly, the government got wind of their plans and tried to disarm the rank and file and to arrest the leaders. In doing so, the government concentrated on the disarming of Ulster, and in March 1797 an army under General Lake was sent to that province. Within two weeks it had collected 5,400 guns, over 600 bayonets, and about 300 pistols. It did so often in a barbaric manner. One landlord protested in the English House of Lords, telling how

Men had been half hanged and then brought to life in order, by fear of having the punishment repeated, to induce them to confess to crimes

of which they had been accused.

Nevertheless, this terroristic policy worked. Many who had been United Irishmen left the Society, and only a small number of determined but ill-organised men remained hoping for revolution.

French aid

A second difficulty was French aid. Though the French were willing to use Ireland as a back door to the invasion of England, French aid was dogged with ill-luck and ill-timing. For instance, in 1796 a French fleet, with 15,000 troops and Wolfe Tone on board, set sail for Ireland, but misfortune accompanied it. Fogs and storms separated the ships and only 6,000 soldiers were on board those that arrived in Bantry Bay, off the coast of Cork. Even these few could not land against the stiff easterly gale. A despairing Wolfe Tone wrote in his diary:

We have now been six days in Bantry Bay within 500 yards of the shore without being able to effect a landing. We have been dispersed four times in four days and at this moment, of the 43 sail of which the expedition consisted, we can muster no more than fourteen all our hopes are now reduced to getting back safely to Brest, and I believe we will set sail for that port the instant the weather will permit.

The Rebellion

In face of the setbacks and the arrest of their military commander, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, the Society decided that it was now or never, and on 24 May 1798 the rebellion began.

The 1798 rebellion was a disappointing affair. Sporadic outbreaks occurred in Counties Kildare, Dublin, Meath, Carlow, Queens and Wicklow, but only in two areas did the rising alarm the Irish and English governments - Counties Down and Antrim in the north, and County Wexford in the south. Moreover, not only was the internal rising readily suppressed, but the external aid was easily repulsed.

As usual, the French arrived too late. Only after the Wexford rising had been suppressed did the French arrive at Killala Bay in County Mayo in the August, and in Lough Swilly in the September. Despite these so-called Castlebar races (when the English Commander-in-Chief fled in face of the French troops advancing from Killala Bay), the French troops proved harmless enough and surrendered at Ballinamuck in County Longford.

6. A Proposal for Union

In some senses, however, the Rebellion had not been completely abortive, because it determined the English government, led by William Pitt, to abolish the Irish Parliament and to unite the two kingdoms.

Pitt and Union

A great deal of nonsense is talked about Pitt's decision to unite the two kingdoms. There was no deliberate plot to obliterate Irish nationality. Pitt's motives were twofold, representing a fine balance between self-interest and altruism.

Safeguarding British interests

First, Pitt thought union would protect Britain in her war with France, for, as the events of 1796 and 1798 showed, the disturbed and discontented state of Ireland seemed almost to invite French invasion.

Regulating tensions in Ireland

Secondly, it was hoped that union would also weld Ireland into a united and contented nation, because, it was thought, the British would be able to regulate and mitigate social tensions and conflict in Ireland.

British critics of Union

There were critics of union in Britain, although these were in a minority. Some opponents in England thought that it would increase the power of the Crown; some believed that union would undermine British industries by exposing them to the competition of Irish industries using cheap labour; and some just did not want any Irishmen in the House of Commons. As one man put it,

I totally disagree with you as to the admission of 100 wild Irish. The intrusion of 80 is rather too much, 75 would be sufficient, the present House of Commons is very trumpery and bad enough. I do not think any of our country gentlemen would venture into parliament if they were to meet 100 Paddies.

British acceptance of Union

In the main, however, Englishmen accepted the need for union unquestioningly and for adequate reasons. There is no substance to the claim that the British government and its supporters in Ireland deliberately fermented rebellion in order to have some excuse to abolish the Irish parliament. England was at war with France at the time and not doing too well. It would be no exaggeration to say that the fate of the war was hanging in the balance and that England was almost at her last gasp. It was inconceivable that Britain not involved in a deadly war would deliberately set out to ferment a rebellion, a rebellion which immobilised a large portion of an army which was desperately needed for action elsewhere.

The Irish ascendancy and Union

The same can be said for support of the union in Ireland. It is difficult to conceive that even the most ardent government supporters among the Dublin Castle officials and the local aristocracy were anxious to provoke a revolt, for they dreaded a rising above all other things, fearing that the consequences would be general massacre and complete revolution, involving the confiscation of property and the establishment of a Republic on French principles.

This apprehension was most clearly shown in the letter written six weeks before the rebellion by one of the most reactionary of Irishmen, Lord Beresford. He vehemently denied the charge that Protestants in Ireland were deliberately fermenting rebellion.

We who are on the spot, witnesses of everything, whose lives and properties are at stake, whose dearest connections are threatened with massacre, who see our connection with Great Britain and our constitution in Church and State on the brink of ruin, who is everything dear and valuable in life depends on the measures which shall be taken to avert the danger, are supposed to be foolishly, wantonly, and corruptly pushing the people forward to the committal of those crimes which must be our ruin. How can rational men entertain such notions?

7. Irish Opposition to Union

Many Irish people, however, did not agree with the idea of the union. Consequently, however, the government was faced with the active and organised opposition of a large section of the political nation, particularly from inside the Irish parliament and from the city of Dublin, from independent country gentlemen and the Church of Ireland. The motives of the opposition ranged from the patriotic to the selfish.

Irish objections to Union

Loss of Irish identity

Some people were horrified that Ireland should lose its separate identity and that the Irish nation would be submerged under the English yoke. They insisted on 'the undoubted birthright of the people of Ireland to have a free and independent legislature'.

Loss of legal advancement

The legal profession put up strenuous opposition, for lawyers in Ireland hoped to make their fortunes spouting in parliament rather than at the Bar.

Loss of Protestant ascendancy

Orangemen and the Church of Ireland fought to retain an independent parliament as a bulwark of Protestant power and privilege.

Loss of boroughmongers' income and influence

Boroughmongers, holding valuable property in the shape of parliamentary boroughs, opposed a measure which would result in the lessening of their income and influence.

Loss of capital status

Finally, the city of Dublin was antagonised by the proposal and the question dominated the capital for some time. Dublin had flourished as the capital of Ireland and as the seat of the Irish parliament, and it not unnaturally resented the union proposal.

A measure of Dublin's opposition was the treatment it dealt out to parliamentary supporters and opponents of the union. Opponents, like Grattan, were cheered; supporters of the union, like Lord Clare, were mobbed. One lady described this

scene in Dublin in February 1800:

Great mobbing and rioting is threatened, but I hope Mr Grattan is a little afraid of his head. He got out of *one scrape* miraculously. However, I trust he is aware that 'miracles don't happen every day'. This *amiable idol* was carried all about Sackville Street, Putland Square, etc. etc. the day before yesterday in his *sedan chair* by a most tumultuous and riotous mob, and deposited afterwards at Mr George Ponsonby's, where a fine dinner was made for him, and where he was ushered in with the shoutings, huzzaings and applauses enough to rend the skies! After which the mob proceeded to a Mr McClelland's (a Northern member, I believe) whom they knew as a Unionist, and paraded before his house of long time menacing and abusing and calling him to appear, that they might apprize him of his fate and all those who acted as he did. However, they dispersed at length after thundering at the knocker and frightening all the poor females of the family into fits etc. etc. I assure you, my dear Lord, *none* in this country can walk *upon velvet*. ... The exasperation of this town is most alarming. Indeed, one knows not what may be the end or issue of this formidable undertaking in the *state* and *temper* in which the whole kingdom is at present. God grant it may come to fortunate conclusion.

Determined agitation against Union

Opponents of the union expressed their views vehemently - with scant regard for personal feeling. Thus having condemned the 'black corruption' of the Irish government, one opponent of the union, Plunket, proceeded to insult Lord Castlereagh, the Chief Secretary, rumoured to be impotent, as 'a green and sapless twig'.

The opponents of the union were also well organised, arranging for petitions against the union to be submitted to the Irish government.

Union defeated

How much opposition there was to the union may be judged from the fact that the government proposal was at first defeated in the House of Commons by 111 votes to 106. That was on 24 January 1799.

8. The passing of the Act of Union

The government thus had its work cut out but, by the following year, the Irish House of Commons had changed its mind, and finally the union was passed with a government majority of 43. On 1 August 1800, the king signed the Act of Union, and in Dublin the event passed off peacefully. As the Viceroy, Lord Cornwallis reported to a friend on 2 August 1800:

I yesterday gave the Royal Assent to the Act of Union, when there was not a murmur heard in the streets, nor I believe an expression of ill-humour throughout the whole city of Dublin; had one prophesied this, when the measure was first proposed, he would not have met with more credit than my friend Mr Dobbs did respecting the appearance of the Messiah at Armagh.

Why did the Irish Parliament change its mind?

The burning question of the day, and later, was why did the Irish Parliament finally agree to the Union, to vote itself out of existence. A glib answer is corruption - government bribery and deceit, and there is some substance to this allegation. To overcome hostility, the government tried to smooth the way forward for the union.

Government promises

On the one hand, groups outside the 'political nation' - the Roman Catholics and the Presbyterians - were offered advantages - the Catholics were promised emancipation.

Exercise of government authority and patronage

On the other hand, the government exercised its authority and patronage, much to the disgust of Lord Lieutenant Cornwallis. He once wrote,

My occupation is now of the most unpleasant nature, negotiating and jobbing with the most corrupt people under heaven. I despise and hate myself for engaging in such dirty work, and am supported only by the reflection that without a Union the British Empire must be dissolved.

As a result of this exercise in government power, one contemporary wrote felicitously, 'every man became in a prosperous state of official pregnancy'. It is this

exercise of patronage that has been held to have besmirched the union.

Persuading the Irish parliament

Strengthening ranks

In the first place, the government strengthened its own ranks. In order to present a united front in parliament all ministers and placemen opposed to the union were dismissed, such as the respected Sir John Parnell, the Vice-Treasurer. These dismissals caused a great deal of indignation because there was no tradition of collective responsibility in Ireland. Nevertheless, they were necessary to demonstrate the government's determination. Doubtful M.P.'s would hardly have been convinced that the government was in earnest had known opponents of the union been allowed to remain in office.

Securing a compliant Parliament

Secondly, the government worked hard to secure a compliant parliament. A few votes may have been bought directly for cash but, certainly, hesitating M.P.s were given jobs for themselves and their relations. William Gore, M.P. for Carrick-on-Shannon got a post with an annual salary of £400. Others were given titles. Thus, Sir Thomas Mullins of Dingle became Lord Ventry in 1800. A large number of titles were thrown around at the time of the union: five Irish peers were given United Kingdom peerages; 15 others were promoted in the Irish peerage, and 19 peers were created. Such titles were not given to members changing sides. Rather, they were given to men who exerted themselves in the unionist cause, usually by using their influence in the boroughs they owned.

Offering compensation

A third way in which the government tried to reconcile people to the union was by the offer of compensation. Owners of pocket-boroughs which were to be abolished (and all but 31 borough seats were to be abolished) were to get a lump sum of £7,500 per seat. This went not only to supporters of the union, but also to its opponents who denounced the compensation proposal as a piece of bribery. Not one of the anti-unionist boroughmongers refused to accept compensation, and the most stern opponent of the union, Lord Downshire, received £52,500 plus interest for his four boroughs which were disenfranchised. In all, compensation cost £1.25 million.

Not only were boroughmongers compensated. Office holders were also compensated, officials high and low, including the 'Lord Lieutenant's Rat Catcher at the Castle' and 'the Necessary Woman to the Privy Council'.

9. Corruption and Deceit?

These government's efforts to secure Union raise a number of questions, not least how far can they be stigmatised as corrupt, besmirching the Union.

Contemporary morality

It could be argued that Castlereagh's methods accorded with the ideas of the time. Offices and seats were regarded as pieces of property; and perhaps the most eloquent testimony that Castlereagh's methods suited his time was that the most heavily compensated official was John Foster, the partisan and virulently anti-union Speaker of the Irish House of Commons.

Severity of the crisis

Moreover, the severity of the crisis could be held to justify even transgressing contemporary morality. As Castlereagh himself remarked:

The Irish government is certainly now liable to the charge of having gone too far in complying with the demands of individuals, but, had the union miscarried and the failure been traced to a reluctance on the part of the government to interest a sufficient number of supporters in its success, I am inclined to think that we should have met with and deserved less mercy.

Securing the Union

The other question raised by the government's efforts is how far did the methods of patronage secure the passage of the Union. It seems, despite tradition, that 'corruption' had less influence than has formerly been supposed. There are two grounds for saying this.

Voting Records

First, G.C. Bolton (in *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union*, London 1966) has made a study of the voting behaviour of the Irish House of Commons in the Union debates. He has concluded, for example, that peerages and promotions within the peerage were not given to reward members who changed sides, and the number of converts from the anti-unionist side due to patronage was almost insignificant. Only twelve who voted against the measure in 1799 voted for it in 1800; and against them can be set

the three 1799 unionists who, in 1800, crossed to the anti-unionist side.

Ireland's best interests

Secondly, it is often forgotten that there were good grounds for Irish people to support the Union. Even independently-minded men could see that union could be in Ireland's best interests - for security and economic advancement.

Union and security

The 1798 rebellion had come as a terrific psychological shock to the landed classes. In the memoirs of Dorothea Herbert, a Tipperary clergyman's daughter, there is a wonderful picture of the wave of horror and repudiation that swept across Ireland, often based upon personal experience. Thus, Dorothea's mind was unhinged not only by her own unrequited love for John Roe of Rockwell, but also by the horrors of the rebellion - the rebels had riddled her nurse with bullets and the sexton had been hacked to pieces with a chopper.

Such incidents seemed to raise the whole issue of the land settlements of the seventeenth century, and the Irish gentry looked to England for protection, a protection that seemed guaranteed by the presence of a large number of British troops drafted in during the rebellion.

Union and economic advancement

Not only was there this general concern for national security, there were also other hopes that Ireland might gain from the union. There was hope of economic development, for there were many prophecies that union would cause a great influx of English capital into Ireland. In particular areas, these hopes of economic advancement took different forms. Those who voted unionists in Connaught looked to an increased pastoral trade with Great Britain, while Cork, quite rightly it transpired, hoped for its advancement as an entrepôt port.

Discrediting the Union

These considerations, as much as the allurements of place, had their part in determining votes. It is a superficial and exaggerated view to assume that corruption was the main factor which carried the union. The pressures affecting members' votes were many and varied. If anything discredited the union, it was not the method of its passing but the failure to keep the promise of Catholic emancipation.