

'With the experience of 1846 and 1847 before them': the politics of emergency relief, 1879-84

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The Great Famine cast a long shadow over Irish politics. Public memory of the Famine permeated political discourse in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century, influencing perceptions of the past, the present and the future. Irish and British politicians agreed that the lessons of the Famine should not be forgotten. Where they differed was in their view of what those lessons were. Within nationalist ideology the Famine was presented as a damning indictment of British rule, and became a symbol of the suffering of the Irish people at the hands of the British. For the British also the Famine symbolised deeper ills, being associated with Irish improvidence, ingratitude and economic backwardness. These divergent interpretations coloured attitudes to subsequent economic crises and food shortages. This article re-examines the economic and political upheaval of 1879-81 and explores how the experience and memory of the Great Famine shaped responses to the crisis and its aftermath.

Eighteen seventy-nine brought a third consecutive bad harvest. A combination of bad weather, the poor harvest, and depressed livestock prices precipitated a major subsistence crisis. The small farmers of Connacht and Donegal were particularly hard hit since agriculture in the west had remained heavily dependent on the potato. Supplies of food and fuel were virtually exhausted by the end of 1879 and it was clear that the winter months were likely to see serious and widespread distress among the poorer classes. People had no money and were unable to get credit. Tenant farmers, many of whom were in arrears with their rent, were unable to meet demands for payment from their landlords and thus faced the very real prospect of eviction. The number of ejection decrees applied for by landlords in Mayo, for example, almost doubled between 1877 and 1879.¹ It was against this background that a protest meeting was organised at Irishtown in County Mayo in April 1879 to publicise the problems facing tenant farmers and to demand a reduction in rents. The agitation spread to other parts of the country and led to the establishment, first of the Land League of Mayo, and then, in October 1879, of the Irish National Land League. The Land League brought together tenant activists, Fenians and Home Rulers to

¹ Donald E. Jordan Jnr., *Land and Popular Politics in Ireland: County Mayo from the Plantation to the Land War* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 217.

fight for reform of the land system and self-government. These were the long-term goals. In the short term the leaders urged members of the agricultural community to unite in their own defence since it was only by doing so that they would be able to prevent a repetition of the events of the Great Famine. As Michael Davitt explained in his history of the Land League, arable land in Ireland had earned no rent in 1879:

and we were resolved as far as possible to prevent any being screwed out of the impoverished people. One thing was determined upon: there should be no slavish moral cant like that of 1846–47 – that the tenants should starve rather than ‘defraud’ the landlord of his rent ... No matter from what quarter, religious, social or political, this was to be met and stamped upon remorselessly by the power of our organisation.²

Davitt’s political outlook owed much to his own experience of the Great Famine and its effects. His parents had been evicted from their holding in County Mayo in 1852 and had been forced to emigrate. ‘That eviction and the privations of the preceding famine years, the story of the starving peasantry of Mayo, of the deaths from hunger and the coffinless graves on the roadside’, provided, he was later to recall, ‘the political food ... which had fed my mind in another land’. As he saw it, the sufferings of the Irish people during the Famine were the responsibility primarily of Irish landlords. But he did not absolve the Irish people themselves from blame. He was fiercely critical of the ‘epidemic of national cowardice which was common to all Ireland at the period of the great famine’,³ and had been determined to prevent a similar outbreak in 1879. Davitt was not the only one to draw direct comparisons between the situation facing tenant farmers in 1846–7 and 1879. In his speech to a meeting at Westport in June 1879, C.S. Parnell declared that tenants must be guaranteed security of tenure so long as they paid a fair rent. His definition of a fair rent was a rent that:

the tenant can reasonably pay according to the times, but in bad times a tenant cannot be expected to pay as much as he did in good times three or four years ago. If such rents are insisted upon a repetition of the scenes of 1847 and 1848 will be witnessed. Now what must we do in order to induce the landlords to see the position? You must show the landlords that you intend to keep a firm grip of your homesteads and lands. You must not allow yourselves to be dispossessed as you were dispossessed in 1847.⁴

By linking economic and political grievances, the leaders of the Land League were able to build a mass-based, popular organisation capable of promoting sub-

² Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London, 1904), pp. 187–8. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 45, 53. ⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 9 June 1879, cited in T.W. Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution, 1846–82* (Oxford, 1982), p. 305.

stantial levels of agitation across the country. But that linkage was in one sense counter-productive, for it encouraged the government to dismiss reports of famine conditions following the harvest failure of 1879 as political propaganda. The initial reaction within both government and the British press had been to downplay the crisis, claiming that its seriousness and extent were being exaggerated. Reports of famine conditions, one official recalled, were regarded as 'a move in the political agitation rather than a well-founded cry of distress'.⁵ For Irish MPs this was the Great Famine repeating itself. In May 1879, A.M. Sullivan, MP for County Louth, attempted to alert the government to the extent of the agricultural depression in Ireland. Contrasting the situation in England, where landlords helped their tenants in hard times, with that in Ireland, where the tradition was 'that distress was all pretended', he recalled that 'the cry of famine in 1847 was said to be the pretence of agitators'.⁶

Conservative ministers were doubtful of the veracity of newspaper reports detailing the spread of famine,⁷ and were reluctant to act precipitously on the warnings of either nationalist representatives or Catholic priests. In order to obtain reliable information on which appropriate action could be taken, a number of temporary local government inspectors were appointed in November 1879 to investigate the state of the country. One of these was H.A. Robinson, the 23-year-old son of the vice-president of the Local Government Board. In his memoirs, Robinson admitted that, like many others, he had initially assumed that reports of famine and starvation were 'grossly exaggerated'. A visit to a remote village in the Galway mountains in the autumn of 1879 had, however, brought him face to face with people who 'were living skeletons, their faces like parchment. They were scarcely able to crawl ... It was appalling'.⁸ This description is startlingly reminiscent of eyewitness accounts of the Great Famine itself. Shocked by what he had seen, Robinson wrote to the under secretary at Dublin Castle, Thomas Burke, alerting him to the severity of the situation. Robinson's letter brought him to the attention of the Irish government and led to his appointment as a temporary inspector.⁹

The temporary inspectors' reports convinced ministers of the necessity for government action. They also reveal the extent to which officials viewed Irish distress through the prism of the poor law. The operation of the poor law rested on a distinction being made between independent labourers and paupers, a distinction that was policed by requiring applicants for relief to demonstrate their eligibility by entering the workhouse. Even though the experience of the Great Famine had clearly demonstrated the deficiency of the workhouse test during a

⁵ Sir Henry Robinson, *Memories: Wise and Otherwise* (London, 1923), p. 22. ⁶ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, vol. 246, col. 1395 (27 May 1879). ⁷ See, for example, the series of reports in the *Freeman's Journal* on the land crisis in Ireland, August–September 1879, and a further series on famine in the west, February–August 1880. ⁸ Robinson, *Memories*, p. 10. ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

period of exceptional distress, officials found it very difficult not to apply it as a test of eligibility in 1879–80. In January 1880, temporary inspector, Algernon Bourke, concluded that the people of County Clare could not be ‘absolutely in starvation’, since they were not entering the workhouse. He refused to believe that a man who saw ‘his family starving about him, and he himself feeling the sharp pangs of hunger, with its warning of death’, would not ‘sink his pride and seek safety and life in the workhouse’. In the same report, Bourke described seeing ‘a father standing idle at his door, a woman with her children crouching round the dying embers of a meagre fire [and] poor hunger-stricken children wandering with aimless purpose on the road’. These were scenes, he acknowledged, that ‘would force themselves upon us, and which spoke to those who will observe with an eloquence which carries with it the convictions of the truth’.¹⁰

The difficulty Bourke experienced in assimilating and interpreting what he had seen is typical of famine witnesses.¹¹ Although he was able to describe the scenes themselves simply and clearly, he could not articulate their meaning. He also expressed an ambivalent attitude common to famine writing, empathising with the plight of the victims but at the same time denying the extent of their suffering. The discomfiture felt by both Robinson and Bourke on being forced to confront their own preconceptions and prejudices is evident from their responses to what they had witnessed. Both men were clearly sympathetic to the plight of the western peasantry. They were also deeply imbued with the ideology of the poor law believing that it was morally wrong to give public aid to people unless they were truly desperate.

Drawing a distinction between eligible and ineligible applicants for relief encouraged fears of ineligible applicants abusing the system. Local government inspectors were on constant guard against this danger. In January 1880, Robinson visited Ballinrobe Union in County Mayo where he found a considerable amount of distress. He observed, however, that there was

a wide difference ... between ‘distress’ and ‘famine’ and while a pressure for relief from the poorest classes may without much foresight be prognosticated, it will not be so general this year, or so alarming as the visions which are being conjured up by local agitators would lead me to believe.¹²

In March, he noted that a personal inspection of places where distress was said to exist had revealed ‘comfortable farms with a large complement of potato pits,

¹⁰ Report of the Hon. A. Bourke, 13 January 1880, *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, Parliamentary Papers [hereafter PP], 1880 [c 2603], xxviii, 155. ¹¹ Scott Brewster and Virginia Crossman, ‘Re-writing the Famine: witnessing in crisis’, in Scott Brewster et al. (eds), *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (London, 1999), pp. 52–3. ¹² Report of H.A. Robinson, 2 January 1880, National Archives, Dublin (hereafter NA), Chief Secretary’s Office Registered Papers (hereafter CSORP), 1880/7070.

oat-stacks, pigs and cattle'. Furthermore, money was by no means as scarce as it was represented to be. He had encountered very few people after the market was over 'who were not more or less intoxicated'. His observations led him to conclude that,

the question as to whether there really is distress depends entirely on the definition which is put on the word. If a worthless supply of seed, a low price for stock, a complete withdrawal of credit and heavy incumbrances (*sic*) are signs of distress, then I have to report that distress there is, throughout the entire Union. But here the terms distress and starvation are often used in precisely the same sense although they are by no means synonymous. Starvation, however, should only be applied in the gravest sense of the term, and although there is something akin to it over the Cappaghduff mountains, I am happy to say that generally the union is far removed from it.¹³

Robinson believed that a distinction between starvation and distress was central to a responsible relief policy. If mere distress was to be relieved the labour market and the economy would be weakened, and the poor law undermined. It was only by limiting emergency relief to the prevention of starvation that the government could protect the wider interests of the country. He did not blame local people for seeking government help:

Who, indeed, could be surprised at it? Conceive what weekly payments of wages must have meant to a people living on credit ... Small wonder, then, when relief works were hinted at, that the people were almost beside themselves in their efforts to persuade the Government that the distress was acute and overwhelming near their homes[.]¹⁴

He was nevertheless convinced that ministers were morally obliged to reject such demands, however unpopular that rejection might make them.

Memories of the Great Famine reinforced the belief within government that relief measures should not be introduced lightly. It was only in exceptional cases, the chancellor of the exchequer, Sir Stafford Northcote, reminded the House of Commons in February 1880, that the government 'would be justified in departing from the principles of the poor law'. Ministers, he explained,

remembered the years 1846 and 1847, and we know at that time a very large amount of money was unfortunately wasted upon works undertaken without due consideration and carried on in a manner which nec-

¹³ Report of H.A. Robinson, 12 March 1880, *ibid.* ¹⁴ Sir Henry A. Robinson, *Further Memories of Irish Life* (London, 1924), pp. 78–9.

essarily involved considerable waste ... [T]he fact was that a very great evil was done, the people were demoralised.¹⁵

Ministers and officials played down comparisons with the Famine as regards the nature of the crisis and the extent of distress. In its annual report for 1879–80, the Local Government Board acknowledged that there had been

much suffering and exceptional distress in many parts of Ireland ... but we are glad to be able to state that privation did not reach starvation in any union, and having caused careful inquiry to be made by our Inspectors into every case in which it was alleged that death had been occasioned by want, we usually found that it had resulted from other causes which were clearly ascertained.¹⁶

The following year it was noted that the outbreak of fever in some southern and western unions was not the relapsing fever associated with the Famine but either typhus or typhoid, or a fever of 'a mild continuous character'.¹⁷

Ministers insisted that they were only acting responsibly in obtaining accurate information before introducing any relief measures. Nationalist MPs interpreted the government's failure to act promptly in 1879–80 as wilful negligence. Those who had warned the government of the impending disaster, A.M. Sullivan complained, had been 'charged with exaggeration' and 'told that they were panic-mongers'. Requests for assistance had been treated with 'contemptuous indifference'. People had died in 1846 and 1847, he reminded the Commons,

because they had a Government almost as inactive as that now presided over by the Chief Secretary for Ireland. In 1846 there was much circumlocution, but nothing was accomplished. They who saw the fearful slaughter then were alarmed now, as they recollected those memories, and compared what they saw then with that which was happening now before their eyes.¹⁸

Irish MPs had no hesitation in using highly emotive language in their attacks on government inaction. Sullivan, for example, accused the government of 'wilful murder ... because, though forewarned and forearmed, they were again allowing the people to perish, and were not averting the spread of famine'.¹⁹ John Redmond rejected the government's claim that everything necessary had been done, asserting that 'men and women had already died for want of food

¹⁵ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 250, col. 170 (6 February 1880). ¹⁶ *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, PP 1880 [c 2603], xxviii, 13. ¹⁷ *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, PP 1881 [c 2926], xlviit, 275. ¹⁸ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 250, col. 140 (5 February 1880). ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, col. 232, (6 February 1880).

... but for the great charity of private individuals thousands of people would have starved'.²⁰

Liberal and radical MPs were equally critical of the government for ignoring the warnings of impending famine, but they accepted ministers' assurances that nobody had actually died of starvation. Joseph Chamberlain charged the government not with allowing deaths by starvation, but

with not taking steps to prevent the deaths which would have taken place but for private charity; they are charged with having allowed a number of the Irish people to be so reduced by starvation that if an epidemic were now to occur the people would be swept away by tens of thousands.²¹

English MPs were also notably more reluctant than their Irish colleagues to make comparisons with the Great Famine. W.E. Forster, who had visited Ireland during the Famine, was being typically cautious when he observed that while he had no doubt there was great distress in Ireland, the present state of things was different to what had occurred in 1846 and 1847 and could not be described as famine.²²

The Irish poor law system had proved an inadequate mechanism for the distribution of famine relief in the 1840s, and was to do so again in 1879-80. It was widely acknowledged that Irish people were extremely reluctant to enter the workhouse, due partly to the association in the popular mind between workhouses and Famine deaths. There was disagreement, however, over the full extent of this reluctance. Government officials such as Bourke and Robinson insisted that if people were really starving they would choose entry over death. Others, such as Joseph Chamberlain, maintained that the Irish people had such 'a rooted terror of the workhouse, it is not surprising that many of them would even prefer death by starvation rather than go to the workhouse'.²³ This disagreement reflected the gulf between the resolutely prosaic approach that characterised the attitude of most Irish officials, and the more fanciful notions of some British politicians who invested the Irish people with exceptional sensitivity. The reality probably lay somewhere in between. The genuine reluctance of people to enter the workhouse in many western unions in 1879-80 seems to have been as much due to practical problems such as the distances involved, and the difficulty of travel, as to any emotional or cultural proscription. Aid from charitable sources enabled many people to avoid having to choose between starvation and the workhouse. Visiting two remote and inaccessible villages in the Cappaghduff mountains in March 1880, Robinson had found that there was sickness due to malnourishment in nearly every cabin. Yet few people had

²⁰ *Ibid.*, cols 154-5 (6 February 1880). ²¹ *Ibid.*, cols 390-1 (10 February 1880). ²² *Ibid.*, col. 293 (9 February 1880). ²³ *Ibid.*, col. 391 (10 February 1880).

applied for aid to the relieving officer, 'for while they were receiving meal from the Charitable Committee at Cappaghduff, they preferred living on the half-rations which it afforded to going to the workhouse'.²⁴

The popular view of outdoor relief was hardly more positive than that of the workhouse. It was generally assumed that boards of guardians would not grant outdoor relief. Although the statutory prohibition on outdoor relief had been relaxed during the Famine so that boards were able to grant outdoor relief in certain circumstances – to relieve the sick and disabled for example – it remained the case that the vast majority of applicants received indoor rather than outdoor relief. Bourke attributed the growing level of distress in Ballyvaughan Union (County Clare) in January 1880 to a continued absence of employment combined with 'the withholding of outdoor relief by the Board of Guardians from those classes to whom they possess the legal authority for affording it'. He warned that the disinclination of the board to grant outdoor relief was, 'so well understood by the poor that applications for the purpose have ceased, and on that account the limited number of people in receipt of that form of relief affords no criterion of the real condition of the poor'. The chief secretary, James Lowther, noted that it appeared from Bourke's report that 'had it not been for the voluntary relief committee, the machinery of the poor law as exercised by the Guardians would have been totally insufficient. I do not think this is satisfactory'.²⁵ One of the problems facing the Local Government Board, as a member of the Mansion House Committee observed, was that it could not compel guardians to grant outdoor relief where people were receiving charity.²⁶

As this case indicates, in many districts the primary providers of emergency relief over the winter of 1879–80, as they had been in 1846–7, were voluntary and charitable organisations. In December 1879 the duchess of Marlborough, wife of the viceroy, had established a fund for the relief of distress. The fund amassed a total of £135,000, the money being used to supply food, fuel, clothing and seeds, and to establish relief works. The Mansion House fund, established in January 1880 under the presidency of the lord mayor of Dublin, Edward Dwyer Gray, was even more successful, collecting over £180,000. This fund appealed, R.V. Comerford has suggested, to 'all those who as catholics, catholic nationalists, or liberals were unwilling to give the duchess a free run for

24 Report of H.A. Robinson, 12 March 1880, NA, CSORP, 1880/7070. Robinson instructed the relieving officer to grant emergency outdoor relief, and the board of guardians to apply to the Local Government Board for authorisation to grant outdoor relief to the able-bodied. 25 Report by A. Bourke, 17 January 1880; note on Bourke's report by James Lowther, 31 January 1880, NA, CSORP, 1880/4115. The Local Government Board subsequently wrote to the Ballyvaughan guardians reminding them of their legal responsibilities and of their power to grant outdoor relief to some categories of destitute persons (Secretary of the Local Government Board to the Clerk of Ballyvaughan Union, 3 February 1880, *ibid.*). 26 J.A. Fox, *Reports on the Condition of the Peasantry of the County of Mayo in 1880* (Dublin, 1881), p. 47.

the title of chief benefactor of Ireland'.²⁷ Further aid was made available via the Land League and in the form of private gifts and donations from members of the Irish community in America. Ministers privately acknowledged the vital role of voluntary activity in relieving distress. Their critics were less reticent. Speaking in the Commons in June 1881, Gray declared that it was solely owing to charitable organisations such as the Mansion House Fund, 'that the people had been preserved from starvation. It certainly was not owing to anything that had been done by the ... Government',²⁸

It was not until the beginning of 1880 that the government announced emergency measures to combat the crisis. In January 1880 up to £500,000 was made available for loans to landowners and local authorities to undertake improvement projects, and thus provide employment. The following month, a bill was introduced to provide a further £250,000 for such projects and to authorise poor law boards to relax the restrictions on the granting of outdoor relief to enable them to relieve the able-bodied and small land-holders outside the workhouse. In addition they were empowered to borrow money at a low rate of interest to fund the provision of such relief. Most importantly, on the suggestion of Irish MPs, the government agreed to make loans available via the Board of Works to enable poor law boards to provide distressed districts with supplies of seed potatoes and seed oats so that crops could be planted for the following year. By this means it was hoped to avoid the situation that had occurred during the Famine whereby people had eaten their seed potatoes or planted diseased seed thus exacerbating food shortages. The government's approach was intended to avoid the mistakes made during the Famine era. Landowners were seen as appropriate initiators of works schemes in 1879–80 because 'the public funds would be lent on good security and would be disbursed among the most necessitous of the people'.²⁹ Public money would thus be expended to good purpose and not wasted on unproductive, untargeted relief works. This did not prove a popular policy and its adoption indicates the disparity between public and official opinion. At a time when landlordism was under attack as the root of Ireland's social and economic problems, channelling large amounts of public money into the pockets of landowners was not the most politic solution to the problem of tenant distress.

Irish nationalists denounced the government's relief measures as inadequate and inappropriate. Many Liberals shared this negative judgement and following Gladstone's return to power at the general election of April 1880 a different approach to distress was adopted. The Liberal chief secretary, W.E. Forster, had held back from criticising the previous administration's handling of the crisis but had made clear his belief that if

²⁷ R.V. Comerford, 'The politics of distress, 1877–82', in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland: VI, Ireland under the Union, 1870–1921* (Oxford, 1996), p. 37. ²⁸ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 252, col. 1806 (11 June 1880). ²⁹ Report of Relief Measures in 1880–81, 23 June 1891, NA, CSORP, 1891/17944.

the Government with the experience of 1846 and 1847 before them, had not been alive to the danger of another famine, and had not done what they could to ward it off, no words could sufficiently express the censure that ought to be conveyed.³⁰

Forster believed Britain had a moral obligation to assist Ireland to recover from the effects of the Great Famine. During his tour of the west in 1846–7 he had come to the conclusion that it would take a long time, ‘before, with her utmost efforts, [Ireland] can recover from this blow, or be able to support her own population. She must be a grievous burden on our resources, in return for long centuries of neglect and oppression’. Forster’s perception of Ireland was clearly coloured by his experience of the Famine. It could hardly have been otherwise, as he himself acknowledged in 1847, observing that the ‘impression made on me by this short tour can never be effaced’.³¹ Like Davitt, Forster reserved some of his harshest criticism for evicting landlords. He had seen ‘so much of evictions, starvation and disease’, Robinson recalled, ‘that at the very mention of evictions the iron seemed to enter his soul’.³² In June 1880, Forster’s adopted daughter, Florence, noted in her diary how much her father hated having to authorise the use of military force in order to help landlords ‘to clear their estates by evicting the peasants under the present circumstances of unavoidable distress and poverty’.³³

That Forster saw evictions and distress as closely linked is evident from his reaction to the introduction of a bill sponsored by John O’Connor Power, the Home Rule MP for County Mayo, intended to deprive landlords of the power to evict for non-payment of rent. Forster believed that the bill went too far. However, since it dealt with a real grievance, and ‘a grievance, moreover, which was so intimately connected with the distress which the Government had pledged themselves to relieve’,³⁴ he felt the government could not ignore it without appearing to side with evicting landlords. He therefore decided to include a clause in the government’s Relief of Distress Bill requiring landlords to pay compensation to tenants evicted for non-payment in cases where the tenant was unable to pay due to the pressure of distress caused by the famine. Such was the outcry from Conservative MPs that Forster was obliged to abandon the clause and introduce a separate Compensation for Disturbance Bill.³⁵

The government’s relief bill, minus the compensation clause, reached the statute book at the beginning of August 1880. This measure provided a further £750,000 for relief works and eased the repayment terms of loans taken out by

³⁰ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 250, col. 293 (9 February 1880). ³¹ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847* (Dublin, 1852), p. 159. ³² Robinson, *Memories*, pp. 29–30. ³³ T.W. Moody and R.A.J. Hawkins (eds), *Florence Arnold-Forster’s Irish Journal* (Oxford, 1988), p. 6. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5. ³⁵ The Bill passed the Commons but was rejected by the Lords.

boards of guardians for the provision of outdoor relief.³⁶ During the debate on the Bill, Parnell proposed that a relief commission should be established to take responsibility for the distribution of emergency relief. It was unrealistic, he argued, to expect boards of guardians to provide outdoor relief to all those who needed it. Most Irish guardians looked on outdoor relief 'with the utmost repugnance and aversion as a plan opposed to all their most cherished convictions'.³⁷ Forster rejected this proposal as 'altogether without precedent', and insisted that while there was great distress in some districts the poor law had been 'found sufficient'. He did, however, accept an amendment to enable the Local Government Board to make grants rather than loans to poor law boards for the provision of outdoor relief if it was found that distress could not be relieved otherwise.³⁸

The response of Conservative and Liberal governments to the Irish crisis highlighted the gulf between the parties in their approach to Ireland. While the Conservatives remained the party of property, the Liberals perceived Irish landowners as part of the problem of Irish distress, rather than part of the solution to it. In February 1880 the Conservative chief secretary, James Lowther, had declared his belief that the less governments interfered in 'the relations between man and man in connection with land the better'.³⁹ Liberals argued that the prevailing distress necessitated further reform of the land system. Gladstone justified the Compensation for Disturbance Bill as an exceptional measure 'produced by an extraordinary and exceptional state of things'.⁴⁰ Even though it failed to pass, the Bill was of enormous political significance, for, as Comerford notes,⁴¹ it represented a public acknowledgement by government of the justice of tenant grievances regarding eviction.

The Liberals' policy opened them to attack from those who believed government intervention in economic affairs to be wrong, and who saw the events of the Famine as confirmation of their convictions. Sir Charles Trevelyan, who, as assistant secretary to the treasury, had been closely involved in framing relief measures during the Famine, issued a public condemnation of Forster's approach to Irish distress. The Irish government, he complained, had abandoned the policy that had proved so successful in 1845–6. The object of the relief operations during the Famine, Trevelyan asserted, had been to maintain the physical condition of the people. This object had been pursued, 'irrespective of every question of land tenure, leaving free scope to the natural process, whereby an overcrowded, pauperised population adjusts itself to the means of subsistence and rises to a higher state'. Forster had abandoned this principle and instead of con-

³⁶ The rate of interest was reduced from 3.5 per cent to 1 per cent, and payment postponed for two years without incurring any interest. ³⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 253, cols 801–2 (24 June 1880). ³⁸ *Ibid.*, cols 804, 1459–60 (3 July 1880). ³⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 23 February 1880. ⁴⁰ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 253, col. 1654 (5 July 1880). ⁴¹ Comerford, 'The politics of distress', p. 41.

fining himself to giving relief had 'stereotyped the system of small holdings and inflicted a deadly blow and great discouragement upon the system of responsible, improving proprietors, substantial farmers and well-paid labourers'.⁴²

Even though the 1880 harvest was good, the relief effort continued. This was the result partly of the severity of the winter of 1880–1, and partly of the poor state of landlord-tenant relations. Annoyed by the participation of their tenants in the land agitation, many landlords had either refused to establish employment schemes for their tenants, or endeavoured 'to employ the tenants with whom they were on friendly terms, rather than those who were most necessitous'.⁴³ Forster was concerned by the manner in which the political situation was undermining the efficacy of the government's relief policy. In December 1880 he notified Gladstone of a request from poor law guardians in County Carlow to grant outdoor relief to unemployed labourers. To allow this, Forster observed, 'would be a most dangerous and mischievous precedent at the beginning of the winter and in such a county as Carlow'. Carlow was a prosperous county and labourers were out of work mainly because landlords were not receiving their rents and were therefore refusing to give employment.⁴⁴

During 1881 the situation improved sufficiently to allow relief works to cease. The power to extend the provision of outdoor relief expired on 1 March 1881.⁴⁵ Towards the end of 1882 serious distress was reported to have returned to the west. The *Kerry Sentinel* claimed in January 1883, that 'the condition of the people in some parts of Ireland is more desperate now than it has been at any time since the great famine'.⁴⁶ Alarmed by the extent to which 'small farmers all over the country, and particularly in the western seaboard, had been utterly demoralised by the constant succession of overlapping relief measures ever since the winter of 1879',⁴⁷ the government determined not to open fresh relief works. Destitution was to be relieved by the poor law alone. In its annual report for 1883–4, the Local Government Board claimed that although the numbers receiving both indoor and outdoor relief rose significantly during the spring and summer of 1883, 'all who were really destitute had the means of obtaining needful aid and support'. It was found necessary, however, to make grants amounting to over £10,000 to five western unions to relieve ratepayers of the financial burden of the relief provided.⁴⁸ This was a tacit acknowledgement that destitu-

⁴² *The Times*, 27 July 1880. ⁴³ Report of Relief Measures in 1880–81, 23 June 1891, NA, CSORP, 1891/17944. ⁴⁴ Forster to Gladstone, 2 December 1880, British Library, Gladstone Papers, Add MS 44158, f. 1. Poor law boards in 75 unions were authorised to give outdoor relief to the able-bodied during the winter months (*Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, PP 1881 [c 2926], xlviii, 278). ⁴⁵ *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, PP 1882 [c 3311], xxxi, 12. ⁴⁶ *Kerry Sentinel*, 9 January 1883. ⁴⁷ Robinson, *Memories*, p. 43. ⁴⁸ *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, PP 1884 [c 4051], xxxviii, 13–14. The report contradicts Robinson's claim that 'in spite of the prophecies in the press there were no authentic cases of anything approaching starvation and no increase in numbers admitted to the workhouse' (*Memories*, p. 50).

tion in the west could not in fact be relieved by the poor law alone. Its severity was such that it required the intervention of central government.

Official returns indicate that in total over £2 million was expended in government grants and loans 1879–80, with a further £600,000 being provided in the period up to 1884. The bulk of this money was used to provide loans for relief works.⁴⁹ In addition over £1.2 million of private money was distributed. The combined relief effort did achieve its objective. As Comerford has noted, while there 'were deaths in 1880 from diseases related to malnutrition ... the general picture is one of successful aversion of threatened calamity through practical and sensible effort on many fronts'.⁵⁰ This achievement has been attributed to a number of factors. The crisis itself is generally agreed to have been less severe than in 1846–9. Moreover the rural economy had developed since the 1840s. Fewer people were dependent on the potato, Indian meal had become a staple element in the diet of the poor and internal communications had greatly improved. Fears of a repeat of the Great Famine were almost certainly unwarranted in 1879. Changes to the social and economic fabric of Ireland had radically reduced the likelihood of such an event recurring. Those fears did, however, help to ensure that people reacted to the crisis very differently from their forebears. The assertive popular response to the crisis of 1879–80 both locally and nationally provided a significant contrast to the 'fatality and passivity shown by the peasantry in the great famine'.⁵¹ This contrast can be overdrawn, but it is clear that the role of voluntary relief organisations, including the Land League, was vital in the early months of the crisis. During this period, J.S. Donnelly has concluded, 'the enormous work undertaken by private relief organisations was considerably more important than government activity in relieving distress'.⁵² For most historians the significance of the economic crisis of 1879–80 lies in its political consequences. 'In 1879', Moody observed, 'the distress precipitated a well-organised movement of resistance to the landlords – the "land war" – that challenged the very authority of the government.'⁵³ Less well appreciated are the consequences within government.

The experience of 1879–84 reinforced official concerns about the provision of emergency relief. The success of the relief effort had, officials believed, been achieved at a high cost. Not only had public money been wasted, but people had also been encouraged to look to the government for assistance instead of to their own efforts. A report drawn up by the Local Government Board in 1891 noted that 'although the intentions of the government were excellent in theory, the practical effect of the relief measures by which they sought to carry

49 Expenditure on Relief of Distress 1879 and 1890, 13 July 1891, NA, CSORP, 1891/17944.

50 Comerford, 'The politics of distress', p. 38. 51 Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution*, p. 330.

52 J.S. Donnelly Jr., *The Land and People of Nineteenth-Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question* (London, 1975), p. 261; see also, Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution*, p. 331.

53 Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution*, p. 332.

out their policy was entirely disappointing'. Lack of co-operation between those organising relief schemes had meant that 'the Irish peasant passed through a season which for many of them was characterised by rapidly alternating periods of scarcity and abandon'.⁵⁴ This judgement would probably have carried little weight with Liberal MPs such as the Sheffield MP, A.J. Mundella. It was 'far better that the Government should have recourse to the most lavish and open-handed relief', Mundella had declared in February 1880, 'than that it should be said the English people and Parliament allowed any number, however small, to perish of famine'.⁵⁵ Nor would it have unduly concerned Irish nationalists, for whom a more pressing issue was the fact that relief of distress monies came predominantly from the Irish Church Surplus Fund, rather than from Treasury funds. As John Daly, MP for Cork City, had argued in July 1880, since 'the distress in Ireland was national in its character', it ought to be treated nationally. 'It was most unfair that the people of Ireland were to have no claim upon the Imperial Exchequer in times of natural distress.'⁵⁶ The view of the Local Government Board did, however, prove influential amongst ministers.

Henry Robinson described English ministers in Ireland in the 1880s, as being:

exasperated or amused, according to their several temperaments, by the determined efforts of the western peasantry, year after year, to establish the existence of famine conditions demanding the immediate institution of relief works as the only means of preventing wholesale deaths from starvation.⁵⁷

Robinson was not a disinterested observer, but his account is corroborated by other sources. John Morley recounted in his memoirs how he had refused to grant the clamorous requests for relief works that greeted his appointment as chief secretary in 1892, after seeing police reports denying the existence of widespread distress. A chief secretary, Morley noted sanctimoniously, 'need not be a wizard to see the moral mischief that has been wrought by the timorous alms-giving of British governors'.⁵⁸ Presenting the issue of emergency relief as a problem of 'famine-mongering'⁵⁹ was one way of avoiding the contradiction at the heart of government policy. The primary aims of that policy were to relieve distress, to do so for the least possible outlay of government money, and to ensure that relief went only to those actually in need of it. The problem was that these aims were not always compatible. No government agency had over-

⁵⁴ Report of Relief Measures in 1880-81, 23 June 1891, NA, CSORP, 1891/17944. ⁵⁵ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 250, col. 424 (10 February 1880). ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 253, col. 1496 (3 July 1880). ⁵⁷ Robinson, *Further Memories*, pp 78-9. ⁵⁸ John Viscount Morley, *Recollections* (2 vols, London, 1917), vol. 1, 331. ⁵⁹ This term was used by Robinson in a letter to Gerald Balfour concerning emergency relief measures in 1898: Robinson to Balfour, n.d., Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, Balfour Papers, GD433/2/114/14.

all control of relief efforts. The Local Government Board was responsible for relief under the poor laws but had no control over the loans for relief works provided by the Board of Works. The poor law was not designed to cope with exceptional distress, and as a result the Local Government Board found it difficult to switch its priorities from poor relief to famine relief. The operation of the poor laws rested on a distinction between poverty and pauperism. The Local Government Board approached famine relief in a similar way, assuming that the situation was not as bad as was being claimed, and that all applicants should be regarded with suspicion. Poor law guardians were normally encouraged to restrict the provision of outdoor relief not to extend it. Expecting guardians to change their whole approach to relief overnight was, as Parnell argued, simply unrealistic. His proposal for a relief commission would have helped to overcome this problem, as well as that of lack of co-ordination, but it also threatened the primacy of the poor law and thus the central plank of government policy.

Many of the attitudes that hampered the effectiveness of relief during the Great Famine continued to hamper relief efforts in the post-Famine period. The fear of relief being abused led to the imposition of restrictions and limitations on relief that were so strict that many people simply did not bother to apply. Levels of mutual suspicion – government of people and people of government – clearly made the effective administration of relief more difficult. Furthermore the difficulties encountered confirmed the negative view held by government of the people, and vice versa. Provision of emergency relief had become, and remained, a highly political issue and was used on all sides for propaganda purposes. Allegations that reports of distress were exaggerated for political purposes formed part of the broader critique of Irish untrustworthiness and incapacity for self-government. Official refutation of and refusal to act on such reports were presented as evidence of the failure of the imperial government to listen to Irish people, or their representatives, or to rule in their interests. The debate over emergency relief became part of the wider debate over the most appropriate form of government for Ireland. Though evident from the time of the Great Famine, this process acquired fresh impetus and significance following the events of 1879–84.