

THE CATHOLICS AND THE UNION

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IN late-1800, after the passing of the Union, Lord Cornwallis wrote a carefully argued paper on Catholic emancipation in which he posed the chilling question:

What then have we done? We have united ourselves to a people whom we ought in policy to have destroyed.¹

That Cornwallis, one of the leading proponents of both the Union and Catholic emancipation, should have put the question in such stark terms is revealing. For him, Union without emancipation was worthless; the government would not secure the loyalty of the country, and there would never be a genuine uniting of the peoples on the two islands. The lord-lieutenant's analysis summed up the challenge facing the government towards the end of 1800: how to reconcile the claims of the Catholics with the fears of the Protestants before the beginning of the united kingdom on 1 January. This was a critical issue, because over the previous two years the government had tried to make the Union appear all things to all men, and all creeds. For some, the Union was supported because it seemed to be the best mechanism for securing Catholic emancipation; for others it was welcomed as a way of closing the door on the Catholics for ever. The political crisis of 1801 was a direct result of this confusion and culminated in both the collapse of the ministry and the end of Cornwallis's hopes of making the Union complete.

It is necessary to examine two complex areas to fully understand the nature of the relationship between the Catholics and the Union. The first, is the status of the Catholic question in the Union deliberations; the second (and related) area, is the response of the Catholic leadership to the measure during the various shifts in policy. Only by examining these aspects simultaneously is it possible to explore the reaction of the largely Catholic Irish population to the Union, influenced as they were by both.

A legislative Union had been something Prime Minister William Pitt

¹Cornwallis to Portland, 1 December 1800 (*The correspondence of Charles, 1st Marquess Cornwallis*, ed. Charles Ross, 3 vols. (1859), III, 307).

had long been considering for Ireland. He saw it as the only way of resolving the ambiguities in the Anglo-Irish relationship that had existed since legislative independence. But, despite what Thomas Bartlett and others have argued, the Union was not predicated in a desire to pass Catholic emancipation. Rather it was conceived to bring about an imperial security and allow a stable framework to address the Catholic question, either then or at a future date.² Emancipating the Catholics, giving them the right to sit in parliament and serve in the higher legal offices, was seen by some observers (like Cornwallis) as the only way of keeping Ireland tranquil. But many others (like Pitt) were unwilling to allow emancipation as long as the Irish parliament remained independent. A Catholic parliament in Dublin risked too much, but allowing them to sit in a united parliament (where their influence would be diluted) offered one solution to this problem.

Discussing a Union with Pitt as early as 1792, the viceroy of the time, Lord Westmorland, gave a precise assessment of opinion in Ireland that was still valid in 1798. Westmorland shrewdly observed that the Irish Protestants would prefer a Union to conceding emancipation, and that likewise the Catholics would prefer a Union rather than continue as they were. In his response, Pitt admitted, that the idea of a legislative Union followed by the civil emancipation of the Catholics was one that had 'long been in my mind'.³ He explained how

the admission of catholics to a share of the suffrage could not then be dangerous – the protestant interest in point of power, property and church establishment would be secure because the decided majority of the supreme legislature would necessarily be protestant.

The arch-conservative, and resolutely anti-Catholic, Westmorland was not impressed with this analysis and asked Pitt if he meant 'to force the Protestants to a Union'.⁴ His advice encapsulated the Union dilemma: he warned Pitt to 'choose between the Catholic or the Protestant interest', refusing to be drawn into a discussion about the question.

As ever, the focal point for many of the concerns in this period was the French revolution. The fear of revolutionary fervour sweeping Britain was intensified once the countries went to war in 1793. As Bartlett has shrewdly noted, it is no coincidence that the Catholic relief

² See Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation* (Dublin, 1992).

³ Pitt to Westmorland, 18 November 1792 (quoted in G.C. Bolton, *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union* (London, 1966), 12).

⁴ Westmorland to Pitt, 10 January 1793 (Cambridge University Library, Add. MS 6958, f. 1199).

acts of the late-eighteenth century were always passed in times of war. The government's reasoning for this was obvious: the support of the Irish Catholics was critical in any wartime situation, both because Catholic troops were necessary for any war effort, and also because relief measures helped neutralise the threat of insurrection in Ireland, thus securing the weak flank of the empire.

The French Revolution also helped to define the Catholic bishops' response to political events in Ireland. The natural response of the hierarchy to the events of 1789 was one of deep distrust and suspicion. Many of the bishops and priests had been educated in France; they retained a strong affection for the country, and had genuine fears about the revolutionary contagion reaching Ireland. This was not helped by the revolutionaries recent imprisonment of Pope Pius VI. One case study is worth mentioning, to illustrate just how real the French revolution was to some leading Catholic figures. During the September massacres in France in 1792 a middle-aged Irish priest, Peter Flood, narrowly escaped death at the hands of an angry mob. Rescued by two municipal officers, he was imprisoned for a time, as his appeal to be allowed to return to Ireland was rejected by the national assembly. A professor of moral theology, Flood had been regarded as the 'finest scripturist and casuist in France', but had been dismissed from his position after refusing to take the oath for the civil constitution of the clergy in 1791. Eventually released, Flood returned to Ireland where he became a parish priest in Co. Longford. However in January 1798 he was elected the second president of Maynooth College, and was in charge during the rebellion in the summer, and the subsequent passing of the Act of Union. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Flood was a vehement opponent of the 1798 rebellion, and refused to allow expelled students to return. He also supported the Union in 1799 and 1800, grateful that the government had not ended its grant to Maynooth. The chief secretary, Viscount Castlereagh, praised him as 'a very worthy and respectable man' and noted that he was 'a zealous supporter of the great measure in contemplation'.⁵

Of the twenty-two Catholic bishops and four archbishops in Ireland, almost all were unambiguous in their condemnation of the rebellion. The challenge that faced them was to try and maintain their fragile relationship with the British government while simultaneously avoiding the alienation of their flock. Unquestionably, their main objective was to secure Catholic emancipation, and this influenced both their response to the 1798 rebellion and the subsequent Union. Determined to be loyal, and to be seen as loyal, they did not wish to give any opportunity

⁵ Quoted in Richard Hayes, *Biographical Dictionary of Irishmen in France* (Dublin, 1949), 99.

to the Protestant reactionaries to make their extravagant claims that the Catholics could never be trusted.

The subtle nuances in the Catholic hierarchy's leadership was best epitomised by the behaviour of the archbishop of Dublin, John Thomas Troy. Although a strong advocate of loyalty to the state, he had also courted controversy, especially in 1793 with his *Pastoral on the duties of Christian citizens* when he had referred to the Catholics as 'an enslaved people' and provoked outrage by his use of the word 'citizens' in the title.⁶ Troy's overriding concern was to disassociate the rebellion from Catholicism, and he prepared various addresses and pastorals proclaiming the church's loyalty while simultaneously attempting to ensure that loyalty throughout the country. On 27 May he published short instructions that were uncompromising in their attack on the rebels and which threatened excommunication unless they desisted. As a result Troy found himself assailed from all sides, regarded with suspicion by the government, mistrust by many of his own clergy, and hostility by the rebels; in July Castlereagh placed him under government protection for his own safety.⁷

Other bishops had similar experiences during the rebellion. William Coppinger, the bishop of Cloyne and Ross, was publicly opposed to the rising, and produced a controversial social pastoral against insurrection which argued that the poor would remain poor no matter what type of government was in power. Coppinger had been educated in France, and had even applied for a commission in the French army, before deciding on the priesthood. In Cork his uncompromising opposition to the rebellion was not well received and during the summer of 1798 he was forced to flee from his home in Youghal, and settle in Middleton. Unlike almost all the other bishops, however, he refused to acknowledge the potential benefits of a legislative Union, and resolutely opposed it in 1799 and 1800, despite some pressure. He was, he insisted, 'little in the habit of bowing at the castle'.

Acting as a counterpoint to Coppinger, was the bishop of Killala, Dominic Bellew. A somewhat controversial figure, his loyalty to the state was questioned in 1798 because of his perceived sympathies for the rebels. It was in his diocese that Humbert landed, and Bellew served as president of a committee of public safety in Ballina. His brother, Thomas Bellew, a former soldier, became a rebel general, and was hanged for his part in the rising, casting more suspicion on the bishop. After the rebellion was extinguished Bellew was summoned to Dublin to defend himself, and he insisted that he had remained neutral to avoid trouble; satisfied, the castle dropped the charges. However,

⁶ See Dáire Keogh, *The French Disease* (Dublin, 1993), 62–4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

perhaps because of this taint on his reputation, Bellew became an uncompromising supporter of the Union, and between 1799 and 1801 was determined to prove his loyalty.

The response to the rebellion in London made the Catholic question assume a major significance in Anglo-Irish politics. On 28 May, upon hearing news of the outbreak of the rising, Prime Minister Pitt decided to introduce a legislative Union as soon as the rebellion was crushed. One of the first key decisions made about the measure was the replacement of Earl Camden with Marquess Cornwallis as viceroy. This change is usually only seen as a minor point of the Union business, but as Bartlett correctly notes it showed that Pitt was, at a minimum, keeping an open mind on the Catholic question.⁸ Unlike Camden, who had once admitted that he was 'quite possibly, a very prejudiced Englishman', Cornwallis was a firm proponent of Catholic emancipation. Indeed he had refused the office of lord lieutenant on a previous occasion, because there was to be no alteration in the government's policy towards the Catholics. The threat to the empire in 1798 saw him accept the position without any such assurances, although he was determined to see that the benefits of the Union reached the entire Irish population.

Crucially, it seems certain that Pitt, in the summer of 1798 shared Cornwallis's sympathies towards the Catholics. He and Lord Grenville, the foreign secretary, wrote an important paper on the Union in early June that contained interesting insights about the status of the Catholic question. Although this paper has proved elusive for historians, there is sufficient internal evidence to show that it is the undated document, 'Points to be considered with a view to an incorporating Union of Great Britain and Ireland'. In the section on parliamentary representation, the paper suggested 'giving to Catholics, as well as Protestants, the right of eligibility', to stand for election to the united parliament. Pitt and Grenville both admitted in the autumn that they had initially supported the idea of accompanying the Union with emancipation.⁹

In October 1798 the first serious shift in the Union policy occurred. The occasion was the visit to London by the Irish Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Clare. This consultation on the Union is credited by Peter Jupp, Grenville's authoritative biographer, with persuading the foreign secretary to reconsider his support for emancipation. It also appears to have shaken the opinion of Pitt, who decided to keep the issues separate so as to avoid unnecessary conflict. Arriving in England, Clare was horrified to find that the ministers were 'as full of their popish projects

⁸ Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, 246.

⁹ See P.M. Geoghegan, *The Irish Act of Union* (Dublin, 1999), for a wider analysis of the significance of this document.

as ever'. However after some lengthy discussions he won the argument and it was decided to go for 'a Union strictly Protestant'.

In Ireland, Cornwallis, realising that the Catholic question was about to be sacrificed, entered the debate with a forceful letter to Pitt that transformed the discussions in England. The intervention was a nasty shock for Clare, who noted with horror that 'some untoward devil must have taken his station in my accursed country ... Nothing more unfortunate and ill-timed could have happened than the letter of Lord Cornwallis'.¹⁰ Accepting that even with emancipation the Catholics would not immediately become good subjects, the lord lieutenant argued that if the

most popular of their grievances is removed (and especially if it could be accompanied by some regulation about tithes) that we should get time to breathe, and at least check the rapid progress of discontent and disaffection.¹¹

Cornwallis's timely letter ensured that the Catholic question was left open, 'for a full demonstration of what is right upon it at a proper season'. The government meetings then ended with much 'drunkenness at Bellamy's'.¹²

The only minister who retained a full belief in the necessity of emancipation accompanying the Union was Henry Dundas, the secretary of state for war. Interestingly enough, he was also a close friend of Cornwallis, soon to be his only friend in cabinet. Unfortunately for the Catholics, however, he was in Scotland when the deliberations with Clare occurred, and returned to find the question decided. This led to 'some dryness' between him and Pitt, and Cornwallis speculated that had his friend been present he might have 'been able to carry the point of establishing the Union on a broad and comprehensive line' although he accepted that 'things have now gone too far to admit of a change'.¹³

The abandonment of the Catholic emancipation principle caused some discontent in the Irish administration. William Elliot, the castle under-secretary for the military department, came close to resigning over the issue. A shy, reserved man, the English-born (but of Scottish descent) Elliot had become a supporter of emancipation under the influence of Edmund Burke, and had acted as Cornwallis's envoy during the discussions in England. Privately accepting that the Irish

¹⁰ Clare to Auckland, 28 October 1798 (Public Record Office Northern Ireland, Transcripts 3287/7/22).

¹¹ Cornwallis to Pitt, 8 October 1798 (National Library Ireland, Manuscripts 886, ff. 385–6).

¹² Canning to Windham, 23 October 1798 (British Library, Additional Manuscripts 37844, f. 274).

¹³ Cornwallis to Ross, 15 November 1798 (*Cornwallis correspondence*, II, 433).

Catholics had justifiable grounds for complaint,¹⁴ Pitt's weakness was much criticised. Elliot felt that a little more firmness in London might have enabled the Catholic claims to have been incorporated into the Union. Instead, the prime minister's 'lamentable facility, yielded the point to *prejudice*, without I suspect, acquiring a support in any degree equivalent to the sacrifice'.¹⁵ Some historians, like Bartlett, have dismissed these criticisms as being 'wide off the mark',¹⁶ but Elliot had had long discussions with Pitt on the Catholic question and was fully aware of the prime minister's new position on the subject. As Pitt himself wrote to Cornwallis at the time, Elliot had not convinced him 'of the practicability of such a measure at this time [n]or of the propriety of attempting it'.¹⁷ In the end Castlereagh, who had struck up a close friendship with Elliot, persuaded him to withdraw his resignation, but the very fact the a senior member of the administration came so close to resigning on the Catholic question is significant.

With Catholic emancipation definitely to be excluded from the terms of the Union, Cornwallis's task in persuading the Catholic leadership to support the measure became much more difficult. However he was soon pleasantly surprised to discover that Lords Fingall and Kenmare (he referred to them as 'my' lords) were favourable to the Union. With the disbandment of the Catholic committee, Fingall, Kenmare and Troy were the three most influential Catholic leaders in the country, and all shared a close relationship with the lord lieutenant. They also had personal reasons for being friendly with the castle. Kenmare, whose title had been a disputed Jacobite creation, finally received a new viscounty from the king on 12 Feb. 1798 and was anxious for an earldom; similarly Fingall also wanted his position recognised in any new arrangement. Both men were therefore willing to give a cautious support to Cornwallis and the Union. Desperate to remove the remaining restrictions on the Catholics through peaceful means, and disillusioned with the ascendancy Irish parliament, Troy was also 'perfectly well inclined'¹⁸ to the measure, provided the Catholic question was left open for a future date.

On 15 December 1798 forty prominent Catholics met in Dublin to discuss the Union – comprising 'respectable persons, gentry, and principal merchants of the city'. It followed on the heels of a meeting of the Irish bar, which had been almost unanimous in its opposition to the measure. The meeting of the Catholics saw far more uncertainty

¹⁴ Elliot to Castlereagh, 28 November 1798 (*Memoirs and correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, ed. Marquess of Londonderry, 12 vols. (1848–53), II, 29).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, p. 248.

¹⁷ Pitt to Cornwallis, 17 November 1798 (*Cornwallis correspondence*, II, 440).

¹⁸ Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, 249.

about how to proceed; some thought the opposition of the orangemen was enough of a reason to support the Union, while others remained suspicious about the exclusion of the Catholic question from its terms. The meeting was adjourned for a week, during which time Cornwallis canvassed some leading sceptics, and in the end the participants decided to leave the subject open. As Troy informed Castlereagh, the Catholics decided 'not to deliberate on the Union as a question of empire, but only as it might affect their own peculiar interests as a body'.¹⁹ Thomas Bartlett in his chapter on this period in his book *The fall and rise of the Irish nation*, probably the finest account of the status of the Catholic question during the Union, argues that this was the best possible result for Cornwallis. There is much truth to this. A declaration in favour of the Union from the Catholics would have alienated many Protestants, and weakened the measure in the month before the Irish parliament was to meet. Conversely, a declaration against the Union would have risked alienating the Catholic population from the measure completely. The Catholics were not powerful enough to guarantee the success of the Union, but they were capable of preventing it ever passing; and this distinction helps explain their importance during the different attempts to bring about the measure.

The role of Cornwallis during these negotiations is worth examining. During his viceroyalty he acted as an unofficial spin-doctor for the Catholics, always writing up their support and loyalty in his official despatches, but privately despairing about their likely conduct. Therefore Cornwallis's various statements about having enlisted the support of the Catholics should never be read unquestioningly. At the end of December many of the Dublin Catholics were becoming increasingly cynical about the Union, and Cornwallis received a report that they were even considering joining with the Protestants to defeat the measure if this would best serve their interests. Nevertheless the lord lieutenant refused to pass on this distressing (and probably exaggerated) intelligence to London, merely warning that the Catholics appeared to be hardening against the measure. In private, he was consumed by doubts, and darkly admitted that he thought 'from the folly, obstinacy, and gross corruption which pervade every corner of this island, that it is impossible that it can be saved from destruction'.²⁰

The Irish parliament was due to meet on 22 January 1799, and ten leading bishops met a few days before to discuss a proposal from Dublin castle. Their meetings took place on 17, 18, and 19 January, and the four archbishops, Richard O'Reilly of Armagh, Edward Dillon of Tuam, Thomas Bray of Cashel, and John Thomas Troy of Dublin all

¹⁹ Troy to Castlereagh, 24 December 1798 (*Castlereagh correspondence*, II, 61).

²⁰ Cornwallis to Ross, 12 December 1798 (*Cornwallis correspondence*, III, 16).

attended. It seems Cornwallis had offered the hierarchy a government stipend for the clergy, in exchange for the concession of a veto on the future appointment of bishops, an issue that was to become increasingly contentious in the decades ahead. It was probably implicitly understood that the bishops would also support the Union in return for this deal. Somewhat reluctantly, the bishops decided to accept the government's offer, although the proposal did not get any further. When George III discovered the overture later in the month he was furious, and ordered an immediate end to the negotiations.

In any case, the status of the Catholic question had changed anyway, after the extraordinary events in the Irish parliament. Attacking the implicit mention of a Union in the king's address, the opposition inflicted an important defeat on the government, which saw its support haemorrhage in the commons. Castlereagh was forced to inform the house that the Union would not be introduced that session, and that the government would wait until the mood of the country and the parliament had changed before attempting it again. The week after this defeat was critical for the government. For a time it appeared that the Catholics would join with the anti-Union Protestants in opposition to the measure, forming a powerful coalition that would have virtually blocked any future attempts. On the day the parliament met, as Kenmare later informed Cornwallis, George Ponsonby, a leading anti-Unionist, had promised the Catholics that emancipation would be granted at a future date if they presented a petition against the Union. This offer had been rejected, but the castle feared that such an alliance would be formed in the wake of the defeat in parliament. Indeed on 26 January a story circulated that a deal had been done, causing great despair, but this was soon shown to be an unfounded rumour.

The refusal of the Protestant opposition to negotiate with the Catholics proved to be a fatal mistake. But in many ways any such alliance was impossible. To understand the delicate negotiations during the Union debate, it is necessary to examine the four major groups that existed. The first comprised those who were pro-Union, and pro-Catholic (for example Cornwallis), the second, was those who were pro-Union but anti-Catholic (for example Clare), the third was those who were anti-Union, but pro-Catholic (for example Henry Grattan), and the final group was those that were anti-Union and anti-Catholic (for example, John Foster, the speaker). It is pointless to speculate about what would have happened if the Foster faction had joined with the Catholics to oppose the Union in return for emancipation. One of the chief reasons why so many opposed the Union, was because they wanted to protect the ascendancy, not break it. Others, like John Beresford, supported the Union for the very same reason.

For their part, the position of the Catholics in 1799 was no different

from what it had been in 1792 when Westmorland had explained it to Pitt. This was plain to see for Cornwallis, who advised Portland, the home secretary, about their likely conduct at the end of January. It was clear the Catholics would prefer equality without a Union to equality with one. Cornwallis accepted that 'in the latter case they must ever be content with inferiority; in the former, they would probably by degrees gain ascendancy'.²¹ The problem was that this analysis was equally obvious to Foster, and explains why no alliance was formed. When the chief opponents of the Union met in February 1799 they passed politically insensitive resolutions espousing high Protestant principles.

On 28 January the Catholic hierarchy met to discuss their position on the Union a second time. They decided to postpone the question 'for the present' and thus avoid embarrassing the government, something Cornwallis (who was close to being sacked) was very grateful for. Thus, as Bartlett notes, 'if the castle refused to race, so too did the opposition',²² and the support of the Catholics remained in limbo. However, the Catholic leadership remained in a strong negotiating position. Three figures, Archbishop O'Reilly, Archbishop Troy, and Bishop Patrick Joseph Plunkett of Meath, were authorised 'to treat with Lord Castlereagh on the subject [of the Union], when[ever] he may think expedient to resume' their discussions.²³

Of the four Catholic archbishops, the two most senior, Richard O'Reilly and John Thomas Troy, both gave a steady support to the Union. Of the men, Troy was the most committed to the measure and was probably the government's strongest ally amongst the hierarchy. For example, in February 1799 he helped persuade recalcitrant Catholics to vote for Isaac Corry, the new chancellor of the exchequer in his by-election, and Matthew Lennan, the local bishop of Dromore, observed that 'the Catholics stuck together like the Macedonian phalanx'.²⁴ If Pitt supported Union as the best means of achieving an imperial security, then Troy supported the measure as only means of achieving a Catholic security. For Troy, Union represented the only protection for Catholics against 'a faction seemingly intent on their defamation and destruction'.²⁵ Troy had many private discussions with Castlereagh about the measure and agreed to enlist the support of the bishops and clergy as far as was practicable. With this in mind he wrote to Thomas Bray, archbishop of Cashel, who was less sure on the question, asking him to 'discreetly exert' his influence 'in the counties of Tipperary and

²¹ Cornwallis to Portland, 28 January 1799 (*Cornwallis correspondence*, III, 54).

²² Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, 254.

²³ Troy to Hippisley, 9 February 1799 (*Castlereagh correspondence*, II, 172).

²⁴ Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, 255.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

Waterford' to procure Catholic petitions in favour of the Union.²⁶ Bray was cautious in his response, and warned that the instructions of an archbishop would not necessarily be followed by the people. This is an important caveat to bear in mind. The power of the Catholic leadership chiefly derived from the control they were able to exert over the people. But it was never likely that the Catholics would follow blindly the advice from the altar; 1798, if nothing else, had shown that many were prepared to disagree with the instructions of their bishops even if it risked excommunication. As Bray reminded Troy in July 1799 'what little influence we have over them [the Catholics] in political matters', should not be risked, and he advised against acting publicly in favour of the Union 'to avoid censure'. However he did intimate that the Union would have his 'good wishes' and 'the whole of my little mite of assistance'. Bishop Plunkett of Meath expressed similar sentiments, and refused to support a pro-Catholic petition in his diocese until the mood of the country had changed. Repeating Bray's analysis, he admitted that 'in political questions it becomes us rather to *follow* that to *lead*'.²⁷

The fourth, and most junior archbishop, Edward Dillon (he had only succeeded Boetius Egan in 1798) was also canvassed by Troy to come out publicly in favour of the Union in July. Dillon was unsure about how to proceed and asked both Bray and O'Reilly for advice; O'Reilly advised him to sign the resolutions in favour of the Union.²⁸ If Troy was the most enthusiastic of the archbishops about the merits of a Union, then Dillon was the most suspicious, but it is interesting that within the space of two months he had come to share Troy's sentiments. The reasons for his change of heart reveal much about the status of the Union with the Irish people in general. After a summer of visiting his dioceses, Dillon revealed that he had observed 'how little averse the public mind is to that measure'. He also admitted that he had 'an opportunity of acquiring the strongest conviction that this measure alone can restore harmony and happiness to our unhappy country'.²⁹

Francis Moylan, the bishop of Cork, and one of the most influential members of the hierarchy, confirmed Dillon's findings. In September 1799 he declared that 'the Roman Catholics in general are avowedly for the measure', and prayed that 'with the blessing of God, it will be effected'.³⁰ It is more than possible, though, that the bishops were exaggerating the support in the country for the Union. The following year would show that it was not as solid as they claimed, and it suited

²⁶ Bray to Troy, 1 July 1799 (*Castlereagh correspondence*, II, 345).

²⁷ Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, 256.

²⁸ Dillon to Troy, 9 July 1799 (*Castlereagh correspondence*, II, 347).

²⁹ Dillon to Troy, 1 September 1799 (*Castlereagh correspondence*, II, 387).

³⁰ Moylan to Hipplesley, 14 September 1799 (*Castlereagh correspondence*, II, 399).

their interests to make it appear that the people were friendlier to the government than they actually were.

A distinction must also be made between the Catholics of Dublin and those in the rest of the country. The inhabitants of the capital were even less willing to take instructions from the hierarchy than those elsewhere. But ultimately even they were unwilling to press too strongly against the measure. As Cornwallis reported to the British government in August 'little more is to be expected than neutrality'. In the end the Union secured 79 petitions from the country in favour of the measure, and as Bartlett shows 11 were exclusively from Catholic bodies; and of the 50 petitions that were against Union, none was from Catholic groups.³¹

To re-emphasise, the support of the Catholics in 1799 for the Union should not be exaggerated. In some instances they were indifferent to the proposed measure because the Irish parliament had little effect on their lives. In other cases they gave it a grudging support only because they held out an expectation that Catholic emancipation would accompany it. With the Union about to be reintroduced in 1800 its success was still largely dependent on the support of the Catholics. The government were in no doubt about the precariousness of their position. As long as the Catholics remained friendly, or at least neutral, towards the measure it would pass, but if they became alienated from the government the entire policy would hang in the balance. This danger was made even more apparent to the castle when an unfounded rumour was 'industriously propagated' in Ireland that the passing of the Union would:

preclude for ever the Roman Catholics of this kingdom from the hopes of further emancipation, that, under the imperial parliament, the junto who opposed them would still prevail, and hold the reins of the government of this country.³²

The propaganda war for the support of the country was now turning nasty, and with this in mind, Castlereagh was sent to London in September to receive firm instructions on the Catholic question. His mission was to force the cabinet, which had been discussing the problem with some regularity, to come to a decision, and end the debilitating uncertainty in Ireland.

Thus, in November 1799, the most serious shift in the status of the Catholic question took place. Distracted by foreign policy, and other concerns, it was only in that month that the cabinet were able to have a thorough examination of the Union question. On two consecutive

³¹ Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, 257.

³² Moylan to Hippinesley, 14 September 1799 (*Castlereagh correspondence*, II, 400).

days, either the 15th and 16th, or the 16th and 17th November, the ministers heard Castlereagh explain just how precarious the support in Ireland for the Union actually was. The cabinet heard from the chief secretary how:

we had a majority in parliament composed on very doubtful materials; that the protestant body was divided on the question with the disadvantage of Dublin and the orange societies against us – and that the Catholics were holding back under a doubt whether the union would facilitate or impede their object.³³

With the sides so evenly matched, Castlereagh explained that the decision of the Catholics would prove decisive. Success hinged on their support. The ministers were told bluntly that: the measure could not be carried if the Catholics were embarked in an active opposition to it.³⁴ As it seemed inevitable that the Catholics would be ‘unanimous and zealous’ in their opposition to the Union if it excluded emancipation, Castlereagh warned that a radical shift in policy was unavoidable. As Cornwallis would not hold out false promises to the Catholics, whose trust and goodwill he had carefully nurtured, some direct assurances were necessary from Whitehall. Unwilling to risk the entire Union strategy being defeated, the ministers decided to accept the advice of Cornwallis and his chief secretary. At the second cabinet meeting, Castlereagh was informed that

as far as the sentiments of the cabinet were concerned, his excellency need not hesitate in calling forth the Catholic support in whatever degree he found it practicable to obtain it.

The ministers even debated whether or not they should make a public statement on their support for the Catholic question. This was decided against, mainly because of fears that it might alienate Protestants in both countries against the Union, ‘in a greater degree than it was calculated to assist the measure through the Catholics’. Castlereagh returned home with instructions that the castle could do whatever was necessary to win the support of the Catholics, preferably without having to make any explicit promises, but these were authorised in the event that they were unavoidable.

As it turned out Cornwallis did not have to make any explicit promises to the Catholics. But he did allow the Catholic leadership to implicitly understand that emancipation would soon accompany the passing of the measure. The change in the status of the Catholic question was kept a secret, hidden even from key supporters of the

³³ Castlereagh to Pitt, 1 January 1801 (C.U.L., Add. MS 6958, f. 2827).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Union. Clare was not told of the new policy, and was later furious that he had been deceived by the castle. This deception was only to be expected, for Clare had informed Cornwallis earlier in the year that if emancipation was to accompany the Union he would put himself at the head of all the Irish Protestants in opposing it. Upon hearing this, Cornwallis discreetly changed the subject.

The new policy on the Catholics appealed greatly to the lord lieutenant. Cornwallis was glad he did not have to make any official pledges on the controversial question. Doing so would have weakened the authority of the Union, as it would be believed that the government had bartered emancipation for the Catholics' support. For Cornwallis, 'a gratuitous concession after the measure' was far more preferable. But, again, the support of Troy and the bishops, and the approval of leading gentry like Fingall and Kenmare, did not guarantee the support of the people. As the Union was debated in the Irish house of commons in the first half of 1800 the position of the Catholic population remained unclear. It was a nervous time for the castle, because even though they had a majority in the commons, they realised that popular disturbances could still defeat the measure out of parliament. As Cornwallis warned Whitehall, it was reckless to think that 'a measure so deeply affecting the interests and passions of the nation can be carried against the voice of the people'.³⁵ In late January it appeared that the Catholics would refuse to support the Union. This was Cornwallis's own opinion, although he carefully shielded it from the ministers in London. Privately, however, he regretted that he had not been able to 'obtain the smallest degree of favour' from the Catholics who had been increasingly alienated by the 'imprudent speeches and the abuse cast upon them by our friends'.³⁶ The following months, however, would reveal that the lord lieutenant had become a victim of his own neuroses; the support in the commons held firm, and the Catholics remained aloof from any unconstitutional attempts to prevent the measure. The extraordinary declamation of the young barrister, Daniel O'Connell, in 1800 did not come to pass. In an early example of O'Connell's great gift for extravagant rhetoric and hyperbole, he had confidently insisted that the Catholics would rather see the return of the penal laws than achieve emancipation through supporting a Union. This was nonsense. O'Connell could not claim to know what the Irish people would prefer, and the indifference in the country to the passing of the Union, showed the foolishness of his pronouncement.

In the first half of 1800 the Union passed inexorably through the commons, and in June the bill went through its final reading. Cornwallis

³⁵ Cornwallis to Ross, 21 January 1800 (*Cornwallis correspondence*, III, 167).

³⁶ Cornwallis to Ross, 31 January 1800 (*Cornwallis correspondence*, III, 174).

attributed much of the success of the Union to his relationship with the Catholics. Archbishop Troy was full of praise for his handling of the delicate negotiations, and wrote to the Home Office to congratulate the lord lieutenant for being ‘all benevolence, all liberality’.³⁷

However, with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland due to come into effect on 1 January 1801, the second half of 1800 became a tense time for Dublin castle. Both Cornwallis and Castlereagh were under no illusions about the likely opposition to emancipation in England, and feared that their honour would be compromised by vacillating ministers in London, who were afraid of provoking their king. The Catholic bishops were quietly confident about the start of the new year, and felt that they had done their part in the success of the Union. Cornwallis was less sanguine, and spent months trying to force the cabinet into honouring their commitments towards the Catholics. In a carefully argued letter in December, he reminded the ministers that even if the Roman Catholics were full ‘of obstinate and irreclaimable disaffection’, this would be ended once they were ‘no longer the objects of suspicion and are relieved from their present mortifying and degrading exclusions’.³⁸ As far as Cornwallis was concerned the cabinet had to decide whether the Catholics could ever be good subjects. If they believed they could, then emancipation must logically follow the Union. If they did not, if they agreed with ‘the hereditary prejudices’ of the Protestants in Ireland, then the Union had been a foolish measure: ‘what then have we done? We have united ourselves to a people whom we ought in policy to have destroyed’.³⁹

The arguments had little effect. The cabinet was disintegrating in England, over a combination of foreign and domestic policy concerns, and the Catholic question became one issue too many. With a divided ministry, Pitt had little hope of persuading the king to relent on his coronation oath. In any event, the question was soon taken out of his hands. A public levee on 28 January saw George III react furiously to the presence of Viscount Castlereagh. Having heard of the planned Catholic emancipation policy, through other sources, he rounded on Henry Dundas, and declared:

What is this catholic emancipation which *this young lord, this Irish secretary* has brought over, that you are going to throw at my head? I will tell, that I shall look on every man as my personal enemy who proposes that question to me.⁴⁰

³⁷ Troy to Home Office, 26 April 1800 (N.L.I., MS 5027).

³⁸ Cornwallis to Portland, 1 December 1800 (*Cornwallis correspondence*, III, 307).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Camden, ‘Memorandum’ in Richard Willis’s ‘William Pitt’s resignation in 1801: Re-examination and document’ (*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xlv, no. 110 (1971), 252).

There was no way around this impasse. A broken man, Pitt tendered his resignation, the ministry collapsed, the king went mad, and a new government was formed on high Protestant principles. The emancipation policy was dead. To preserve calm in Ireland, Cornwallis met with Fingall and Troy on 13 February and explained the current crisis. With Pitt's help, two papers were also prepared for the Catholics to prevent any violent response, and encourage the people not to become disillusioned from the Union. Both the viceroy and Castlereagh resigned along with Pitt, explaining that to have remained would have constituted a 'breach of faith' with the Catholics. Bitterly disappointed, there was little Troy could do. Having come so close to securing emancipation, it was demoralising to have had it prevented by the prejudices of leading figures in England. It was obvious that the Catholic question would have to sleep for the remainder of George III's reign. The Catholic leaders continued with the only strategy they had – demonstrating their loyalty to the crown, proving that the Catholics could be trusted, and hoping that some day this would be recognised and that their remaining restrictions would be lifted.

In a wonderful, but largely meaningless, soundbite Professor Bartlett has said that 'the Catholics carried the Union; the rest is detail'. A former viceroy, Lord Buckingham, had insisted that the Catholics were the 'sheet anchor' in the Union project. The reality is that the Catholics had had the power to frustrate the Union, but chose not to for a combination of reasons. The main one is that, prompted by the bishops and the gentry, they were encouraged to see the Union as the best means of relieving them from their civil restrictions. The political crisis of 1801 ensured that the loyalty of the Catholics was not secured, and a genuine opportunity for creating a new imperial security was lost. Without emancipation accompanying it, the Catholics soon became alienated from the measure. As a unifying security mechanism, the act of Union was stillborn. It is very difficult, on this occasion, to disagree with the conclusion of Sir Jonah Barrington, who summed up the treatment of the Catholics at this time in one sentence:

In 1798 they were charged; in 1799 they were caressed; in 1800 they were cajoled; in 1801 they were discarded.⁴¹

⁴¹Jonah Barrington, *Historic memoirs* (1833), II, 332. I would like to thank Rory Whelan and Michael Brown for their excellent assistance with earlier drafts of this paper, and Anthony Malcomson for his kind comments and advice at the conference.