

cc: Mr Bell (o/r)
Mr Williams (o/r) - B
Mr Wood (B&L) - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Daniell - B
Mr Maxwell - B
Mr Alexander, NIB
Dr P Smyth
Mr Camplisson

Mr Camplisson 19/8
- I hope that the famine will not figure much in our consciences in the coming year. JAC 19/8.

From: Mr J A Canavan

19 August 1994

To: Mr D J Watkins - B

Mr Camplisson 19.8
Thank you - a useful conviction which I'm sure Peter Smyth will take on board.

UNDER/ SEC S11/8
18 AUG 1994
CENT SEC

THE IRISH FAMINE

1. I have seen Chris Maccabe's note of 15 August and previous faxes from Don Alexander on the subject of interest in the commemoration of the Irish Famine. The potential Irish/American dimension has been noted and Mr Maccabe has also pointed to possible interest in the subject in GB. I am not sure what official commemorations are intended in ROI, but the anniversary will certainly not go unnoticed.
2. In adopting a defensive posture on likely criticisms of the British record in Ireland during the famine, it would be necessary to strike a balance between two extremes. The radical nationalist version is set out in the letters to the Irish/American press which Mr Alexander enclosed with his correspondence. These letters are riddled with historical errors - 2m people did not die, this figure is the population fall between 1841 and 1851 and is attributable primarily to emigration; the catastrophe was not man-made; parallels with the Nazi holocaust are false (not only in scale, but in the implication that a Government deliberately attempted to commit genocide on a

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population under its control). All these claims are gross distortions and can be answered by historical fact to the satisfaction of those with ears to hear. Dr Smyth's research will undoubtedly provide the material to do so.

3. However, I fear there is a danger of falling into the trap of endorsing the revisionist version which has been peddled in the past 30 years by (mainly economic) historians, that Government action to assist the famine victims was simply alien to mid-Victorian thinking and it is anachronistic to expect the Government to have behaved in any other way. My problem with this thesis has always been the strong suspicion that London would have reacted differently to a similar agricultural catastrophe in Wiltshire or Wales. The Union had been justified on the grounds, inter alia, that it would improve the socio-economic condition of Ireland. The famine demonstrated that this had not happened and that large parts of Ireland remained economically peripheral (though politically united) to the most advanced economy in the world, with the Government taking that peripherality for granted. Subsequent Governments did, however, modify their laissez-faire attitudes to Ireland. The land reforms of the second part of the 19th century involved the State intervening in ways unthinkable in GB (shades of TSN perhaps?).
4. As in everything to do with Irish history, this is all more complicated than it appears at first sight and requires immense sensitivity. In terms of a defensive posture for Government, there are 2 basic points to be made. First, it was all a very long time ago and there has been a lot of water under the bridge since, a fact which will be apparent to, and accepted by,

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everyone except the most committed nationalists. Second, the direct impact of the famine in what is now Northern Ireland was limited, compared to the West and South of the Island. Indirectly, of course, the subsequent influx of landless Catholics from the West of Ireland to work in the expanding industries of Belfast had a profound impact on the sociology of the city.

5. Looking ahead, the more challenging anniversary for us to anticipate is the bicentennial of the 1798 rebellion, but that is for another day.

[Signed: JAC]

J A CANAVAN

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