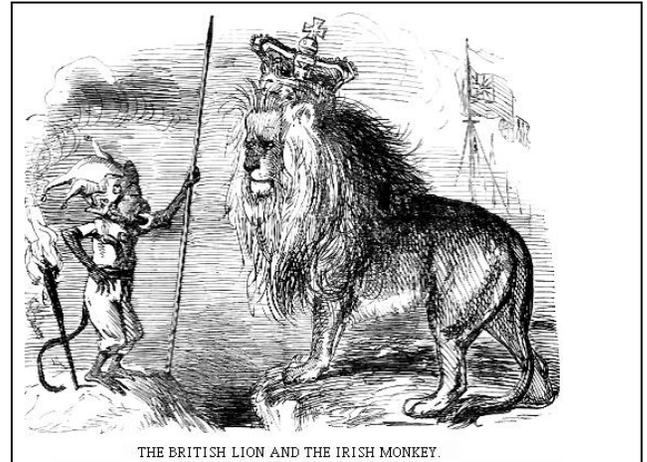


13.7 Political Situation in Ireland (1846)

Background: For centuries prior to the Act of Union in 1800, Ireland was subject to Britain, but had its own parliament in Dublin. The Irish parliament had considerable autonomy but membership was restricted to Protestants. Under the Act of Union, while Ireland was represented in the parliament of the United Kingdom at Westminster, its interests were subordinated to those of Britain. The following extract from a speech by Earl Grey, in the early days of the Famine, expresses the views of an influential member of the British establishment on Ireland's situation under the Union. Grey, the son of a former Prime Minister, was then a member of the Liberal opposition party; following the change of government later that year he held office as Colonial Secretary.

Questions

1. How does the cartoonist view the relationship between Great Britain and Ireland?
2. Why does Grey describe conditions in Ireland as “notorious”?
3. Who does Grey blame for the conditions in Ireland?
4. What does Grey believe is the most “alarming” “symptom of the condition of Ireland”?
5. In your opinion, what is the significance of Earl Grey, an influential member of the British establishment, taking this position?
6. In your opinion, does Earl Grey agree with the cartoonist? Explain.



A. The state of Ireland is one which is notorious. We know the ordinary condition of that country to be one both of lawlessness and wretchedness. It is so described by every competent authority. There is not an intelligent foreigner coming to our shores, who turns his attention to the state of Ireland, but who bears back with him such a description. Ireland is the one weak place in the solid fabric of British power; Ireland is the one deep (I had almost said ineffaceable) blot upon the brightness of British honour. Ireland is our disgrace.

B. If such be the state of things, how then does it arise, and what is its cause? My Lords, it is only by misgovernment that such evils could have been produced; the mere fact that Ireland is in so deplorable and wretched a condition saves whole volumes of argument, and is of itself a complete and irrefutable proof of the misgovernment to which she has been subjected. Nor can we lay to our souls the ‘flattering unctious’ that this misgovernment was only of ancient date, and has not been our doing.

C. No man has a stronger opinion than I regarding the iniquitous system of misgovernment in Ireland prior to the Union. But the Union is not an event of yesterday. It is nearly half a century since that measure passed. For nearly fifty years, now, Ireland has been under the immediate control of the Imperial Parliament. Since it has been so, a whole generation has grown up, and is now passing away to be replaced by another.

D. By the report of that Commission we are informed that the agricultural labourers are still suffering the greatest privations and hardships, and still depend upon casual and precarious employment for their subsistence; that they are badly fed, badly clothed, badly housed, and badly paid for their labour; and the Commissioners conclude this part of their report by saying: “We cannot forbear expressing our strong sense of the patient endurance which the labouring classes have generally exhibited under sufferings greater, we believe, than the people of any other country have ever endured.”

E. But there is another symptom of the condition of Ireland, which seems to me even more alarming than the prevalence of distress -- I mean the general alienation of the whole mass of the nation from the institutions under which they live, and the existence in their minds of a strong deep feeling of hostility to the form of government under which they are placed.