Catholic Emancipation

Background

In the 16th Century; British opinion for/against Catholics and Protestants changed back and forth, leading to many being killed for their religious beliefs. At the end, the protestants proved to be the majority and so catholic minority were prosecuted.

The Act of Union was passed in 1801 and meant Ireland was to become part of the United Kingdom – as long as Catholics were allowed to have full civil and political rights.

The idea of ‘Catholic Emancipation’ refers to ‘freedom’; for example the Catholic Relief Act, which was passed in 1778 and allowed Catholics to acquire property. Catholics were persecuted by Protestants because of their religion. There was great discrimination against Catholics from 1688. At the time, it was seen as important for everyone to be of the same religion and so Catholicism was un-favoured. Acts such as the Catholic Relief Act in 1778 did help Catholics but the general feeling of hatred was present until 1828.

Before the 1820s, all the bills introduced into the House of Commons by supporters of Emancipation were rejected by large majorities. There was even talk of a compromise emancipation bill; veto – yet this was vigorously denounced by Daniel O’Connell who rejected the veto, believing it was vital to maintain the freedom of the Catholic Church from interference by a British government. In 1821, a Catholic Emancipation bill obtained a majority in the House of Commons but was rejected by the Lords.

Daniel O’Connell:

1775 – Born
1811 – Set up Catholic Board
1823 – Founded the Catholic Association
1828 – Won County Clare election
1830 – Entered the Commons as the first Catholic MP in modern History
1841-2 – Lord Mayor of Dublin
1847 - Died

The Catholic Association

The Catholic Association was formed by O’Connell and his supports in 1823 as a constitutional organisation for the achievement of Catholic civil and political rights. However it only expanded in 1824, when O’Connell brilliantly introduced the ‘Catholic Rent’ of one penny a month for supporters, instead of the high subscription originally proposed. This enabled the association to become a truly national organisation with 15,000 regulars and 3 million associate members by 1829.

Aims

- Repeal of the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland.
- Universal male suffrage.
- Secret ballots for parliamentary elections.
- End of Irish tithe system – by which, everyone had to pay tax to the protestant church of Ireland.
interest and might unleash a social revolution if Emancipation was not granted. Wellington’s government resolved to allow Emancipation while dismantling the machinery for further nationalist protests in Ireland. He had neither the support in Parliament nor confidence in its success, to risk suppressing the movement with force. Peel agreed to shoulder the burden of getting the proposed bill through Commons.

**Roman Catholic Emancipation Act 1829**

The Emancipation Bill was passed through Commons early in 1829. The influence of the Protestant supporter of Emancipation in Commons was essential to the passing of the Act and they were helped by the disunity of the Tory party. By the lion’s share of the victory was, rightly, claimed by O’Connell. The Act granted virtually full civil and political rights to Roman Catholics, which meant that they could now become MPs and occupy the highest positions of state. However, the franchise qualification in Ireland was raised from 40-shilling freehold to a £10 household suffrage, and this cut the Irish electorate to one-sixth of its former size.

**ROLE OF O’CONNELL**

O’Connell was one of the most successful barristers in Ireland by the 1820s, and an early benefactor of the law allowing Catholics to enter the legal profession in 1792. Observers differed as to whether he was a sincere politician or a demagogue (orator who appeals to passions of his audience) whose arguments lacked conviction and coherence. He was also accused of financial self-interest especially with regard to Association funds. He was however an incredible orator at mass meetings in Ireland, and could harness mass numbers to the cause of Emancipation, which could only directly benefit a privileged few. He used language deliberately to instil confidence in his Catholic audience, and thereby question the Protestant Ascendancy.

O’Connell’s individual skills should also be seen within the context of the Catholic Association, a mass movement without which the campaign would have lacked urgency and strength. Hence the government was quick to disband it in 1829.

**Consequences of Catholic Emancipation**

Fundamental change in Ireland after 1829 was slow and indeed since the Emancipation Act was regarded by Irish Protestants as primarily a Catholic victory. In Great Britain, however, the Emancipation Act was followed by swift and dramatic changes in politics. It helped to precipitate:
- The breakup of the old Tory Party and the rise of the new Conservative Party
- The triumph of the Whigs and their allies at the general election if 1830and, subsequently, the passage of the Great Reform Act of 1832.

These years also saw the emergence of an Irish party in Commons, led by O’Connell who extracted reforms for Ireland.