

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC ASSOCIATION

Henry Paget, Marquis of Anglesey (1797–1869)

to Lord Francis Leveson-Gower (1800–1857)

3 July 1828

I will give you my opinion upon the state of things and upon the great question.

I begin by premising that I hold in abhorrence the Association, the agitators, the priests, and their religion; and I believe that not many, but that some of the Bishops are mild, moderate, and anxious to come to a fair and liberal compromise for the adjustment of the points at issue. I think that these latter have very little, if any, influence with the lower clergy and the population.

Such is the extraordinary power of the Association, or rather of the agitators, of whom there are many of high ability, of ardent mind, of great daring (and, if there was no Association, these men are now too well known not to maintain their power under the existing order of exclusion), that I am quite certain they could lead on the people to open rebellion at a moment's notice; and their organization is such that, in the hands of desperate and intelligent leaders, they would be extremely formidable. The hope, and indeed the probability, of present tranquility rests upon the forbearance and the not very determined courage of O'Connell, and on his belief, as well as that of the principal men amongst them, that they will carry their cause by unceasing agitation, and by intimidation, without coming to blows. I believe their success inevitable—that no power under heaven can arrest its progress. There may be rebellion, you may put to death thousands, you may suppress it, but it will only be to put off the day of compromise; and in the meantime the country is still more impoverished, and the minds of the people are, if possible, still more alienated, and ruinous expense is entailed upon the empire.

But supposing that the whole evil was concentrated in the Association, and that if that was suppressed all would go smoothly; where is the man who can tell me how to suppress it? Many, many cry out that the nuisance must be abated; that the government is supine; that the insolence of the demagogues is intolerable; but I have not yet found one person capable of pointing out a remedy. All are mute when you ask them to define their proposition. All that even the most determined opposers to emancipation say is that it is better to leave things as they are than to risk any change. But will things remain as they are? Certainly not. They are bad; they must get worse; and I see no possible means of improving them but by depriving the demagogues of the power of directing the people; and by taking Messrs. O'Connell, Sheil, and the rest of them from the Association, and placing them in the House of Commons, this desirable object would be at once accomplished.

The present order of things must not, cannot last. There are three modes of proceeding:

1st—That of trying to go on as we have done.

2nd—To adjust the question by concession, and such guards as may be deemed indispensable.

3rd—To put down the Association, and to crush the power of the priests.

The first I hold to be impossible. The second is practicable and advisable. The third is only possible by supposing that you can reconstruct the House of Commons; and to suppose that is to suppose that you can totally alter the feelings of those who send them there.

I believe nothing short of the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, and martial law will effect the third proposition. This would effect it during their operation, and perhaps for a short time after they had ceased, and then every evil would return with accumulated weight.

But no House of Commons would consent to these measures until there is open rebellion, and therefore until that occurs it is useless to think of them. The second mode of proceeding is then, I conceive, the only practicable one, but the present is not a propitious time to effect even this.

I abhor the idea of truckling to the overbearing Catholic demagogues. to make any movement towards conciliation under the present excitement and system of terror would revolt me; but I do most conscientiously, and after the most earnest consideration of the subject, give it as my conviction that the first moment of composure and tranquility should be seized to signify the intention of adjusting the question, lest another period of calm should not present itself.