

THE CATHOLIC QUESTION

Robert Peel (1788–1850)

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I think that the Roman Catholic Question can no longer remain what is called an open question, but that some definite course must be taken with respect to it by His Majesty's servants in their collective capacity.

It is not consistent with the character of the government, with the proper exercise of authority in Ireland, nor with the permanent interests of the Protestant Establishments that the Roman Catholic Question should continue to be thrown loose upon the country—the King's Ministers maintaining neutrality, and expressing no opinion in common upon the subject.

Experience must have convinced us that neither a divided government in Ireland nor a government in that country united in opinion, but acting under a divided government in this, can administer the law with that vigour and authority which are requisite in the present condition of Irish affairs...

The more I consider the subject the more I am satisfied that a government ought to make its choice between two courses of action, either to offer united and unqualified resistance to the grant of further privileges to the Roman Catholics, or to undertake to consider without delay the whole state of Ireland, and to attempt to make some satisfactory adjustment on the various points which are involved in what is called the Catholic Question.

If it be admitted that such are the alternatives, it remains to be considered which of the two it is most practicable or most expedient to adopt.

Can the first be adopted? Can a government be formed on the principle of unqualified resistance, which shall be composed of persons of sufficient ability and experience in public life to fill with credit the high offices of the state, and which can command such a majority of the House of Commons as shall enable it to maintain the principle on which it is founded, and to transact the public business?

I think it must be granted that the failure of such a government—either through its sudden dissolution or its inability to conduct public business on account of its weakness in the House of Commons—would have a prejudicial effect generally, and particularly in reference to the Catholic Question. It would surely render some settlement of the question in the way of concession unavoidable, and would in all probability materially diminish the chances of a safe and satisfactory settlement.

No man can therefore honestly advise the formation of an exclusive Protestant government, unless he believes that it can maintain its ground, and can conduct with credit and success the general administration of the country.

The present state of the House of Commons appears to me an insuperable obstacle, if there were no other, to the successful issue of this experiment.... There are other considerations which incline me to think that the attempt to settle that question should be made....

First, there is the evil of continued division between two branches of the legislature on a great constitutional question.

Secondly, the power of the Roman Catholics is unduly increased by the House of Commons repeatedly pronouncing an opinion in their favour. There are many points in regard to the Roman Catholic religion and Roman Catholic proceedings in Ireland, on which Protestant opinion would be united, or at least predominant, if it were not for the difference which exists as to the civil incapacities.

Thirdly, in the course of the last autumn, out of a regular infantry force in the United Kingdom, amounting to about 30,000 men, 25,000 men were stationed either in Ireland or on the west coast of England with a view to the maintenance of tranquility in Ireland—this country being at peace with the whole world.

Fourthly, though I have not the slightest apprehension of the result of civil commotion—though I believe it could be put down at once—yet I think the necessity of being constantly prepared for it while the government is divided, and the two Houses of Parliament are divided, on the Catholic Question, is a much worse evil than its actual occurrence.

Fifthly, the state of political excitement in Ireland will soon render it almost impracticable to administer justice in cases in which political or religious considerations are involved. Trial by jury will not be a just or a safe tribunal, and, above all, not just nor safe in cases wherein the government is a party.

These are practical and growing evils, for which I see no sufficient remedy if the present state of things is to continue; and the actual pressure is so great as fully to warrant, in my opinion, a recourse to other measures.

My advice therefore to His Majesty will be, not to grant the Catholic claims, or any part of them, precipitately and unadvisedly, but in the first instance to remove the barrier which prevents the consideration of the Catholic Question by the Cabinet—to permit his confidential servants to consider it in all its relations, on the same principles on which they consider any other great question of public policy, in the hope that some plan of adjustment can be proposed, on the authority and responsibility of a government likely to command the assent of Parliament, and to unite in its support a powerful weight of Protestant opinion, from a conviction that it is a settlement equitable towards the Roman Catholics, and safe as it concerns the Protestant Establishment.

Robert Peel, *Peel Memoirs* (1856), I:284–294.