

# **Interrogating the “Crisis-Reform” Hypothesis: A Case-Study of Poor Law Reform in Post-Famine Ireland**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the extent to which socio-economic developments in the aftermath of the Great Irish Famine (1845-1850) can be regarded as a direct response to the famine onslaught, as opposed to being part of the broader incremental socio-economic evolution of that era which may merely have been expedited by famine-era distress. Specifically, we analyse the reform of the Irish Poor Law in 1862 in order to assess the imprint of famine experiences on this process. A textual analysis is undertaken on the following documentary material referring to the famine conditions of 1845-50: (i) expert witness testimony provided to the Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) 1861; (ii) parliamentary debates preceding the legislation; and (iii) contemporary commentary surrounding the Irish Poor Relief Act (Ireland) 1862. This analysis is then used to interrogate the “crisis-reform” hypothesis, which contends that economic crises induce policy reform. Our paper challenges this hypothesis, arguing that it does not adequately incorporate the persistence of economic and social institutional structures.

## **1. Introduction**

The immediate devastation wrought by the Great Irish Famine

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(1845-1850) has been well documented: with an estimated 1 million famine-related deaths in a population of 8.5 million in 1845 and an exodus in excess of 1 million Irish emigrants, the suffering unleashed by the Famine culminated in a 20% population decline over the period 1845-1851.<sup>1</sup> Longer term consequences of the Famine have also been well established: continued population decline and emigration into the early decades of the twentieth century, as well as a transformation of Irish social and economic structures, given that landless labourers and smallholders had borne the brunt of the famine onslaught.<sup>2</sup> This paper considers a particular aspect of the post-famine socio-economic development: namely, the process through which the experience of such a catastrophic crisis brought about socio-economic reform.

Specifically, we analyse the reform of the Irish Poor Law in 1862 in order to assess the imprint of the famine experience on this reform process. Our aim is to determine whether this reform process should be characterised as a direct response to the famine, or instead characterised as being part of the broader incremental socio-economic evolution of that era. In order to explore this issue we undertake a textual analysis of the following archival material:

- expert witness testimony provided to the Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) 1861 as they compiled the report which would form the basis of the 1862 legislation;
- parliamentary debates preceding the 1862 legislation; and
- the contemporary reportage of Irish newspapers surrounding the Irish Poor Relief Act (Ireland) 1862.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Boyle and C. Ó Gráda, "Fertility Trends, Excess Mortality, and the Great Irish Famine", in *Demography*, 23:4, 1986, pp. 543-62; J. Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: a Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, George Allen & Unwin, 1983, pp. 265-266; C. Ó Gráda, "Mortality and the Great Famine," in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, Ed. J. Crowley, W.J. Smyth and M. Murphy, Cork, Cork University Press, 2012, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup> T.W. Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration and the Rural Economy in Ireland, 1850-1914*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1997, pp. 3-18; C. Ó Gráda, "Ireland's Great Famine: An Overview," in *When the Potato Failed: Causes and Effects of the Last European Subsistence Crisis*, ed. C. Ó Gráda, R. Paping & E. Vanhaute, Turnhout, Brepols, 2007, p. 52.

This textual analysis allows us to gauge the extent to which famine conditions of 1845-50 are referenced in these documents and to assess the prominence of famine-era experiences in driving the reform process.

This theme of reform in post-famine Ireland is particularly pertinent to one recent strand of economic research, namely the "crisis-reform" hypothesis, which contends that economic crisis induces policy reform. Our paper challenges this hypothesis, arguing that it does not adequately incorporate the persistence of economic and social institutional structures. Methodologically, our paper highlights the importance of case-study analysis to interrogate the hypothesised "crisis-reform" process – an approach which has been absent from the macro-level empirical "crisis-reform" studies.

## 2. The "Crisis-Reform" Hypothesis

The hypothesis that crises induce policy reform posits that crises create the conditions under which reforms that had previously been blocked or neglected can be realized. Under this hypothesis, as conditions deteriorate, societal interest groups realize that continued inertia will be more costly for them than to concede to what is, from their perspective, a sub-optimal solution proposed by other groups.<sup>3</sup> The hypothesis, referred to in the political economy literature simply as the *crisis hypothesis*, has gained currency over time, with advocates now referring to it as having attained the status of "conventional wisdom," part of the "orthodoxy" of the political economy of reform.<sup>4</sup> However, critics have argued that the hypothesis is essentially

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<sup>3</sup> A. Alesina and A. Drazen, "Why Are Stabilizations Delayed?", in *American Economic Review*, 81(5), 1991, pp. 1170-88; For a detailed review of theoretical approaches towards the crisis hypothesis, see A. Drazen, *Political Economy of Macroeconomics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> M. Tommasi and A. Velasco, "Where Are We in the Political Economy of Reform?", in *The Journal of Policy Reform*, 1, 1996, pp. 187-238; Drazen, *Political Economy of Macroeconomics*, p. 444.

a tautology, as reform naturally becomes an issue when policies are perceived to be inadequate.<sup>5</sup> Empirical studies of the crisis hypothesis focus on economic crises and their influence on (mostly financial and economic) reform measures.<sup>6</sup> Although such studies generally find some evidence for the crisis hypothesis, in that reform measures are seen to be introduced subsequent to crises, these studies also highlight serious conceptual and methodological limitations inherent in the hypothesis.

On the conceptual front, the nature of the crisis “trigger” for reform has been subject to a variety of interpretations. One argument for the necessity of crisis for reform refers to the actual perception of the need for reform.<sup>7</sup> The mere deterioration of economic or social conditions does not necessarily imply that established policies will be perceived to have failed and to be in need of change. In other words, no situation is yet bad enough that it could not become even worse. In that sense, the absence of reform could simply mean that the crisis has not yet become sufficiently severe.<sup>8</sup> As Drazen puts it,

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<sup>5</sup> D. Rodrik, “Understanding Economic Policy Reform”, in *Journal of Economic Literature*, 34(1), 1996, pp. 9-41.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, A. Abiad and A. Mody, “Financial Reform: What Shakes It? What Shapes It?”, in *American Economic Review*, 95(1), 2005, pp. 66-88; L. Agnello, V. Castro, J. Tovar Jalles and R.M. Sousa, “Do Debt Crises Boost Financial Reforms?”, in *Applied Economics Letters*, 22(5), 2015, pp. 356-60; L. Agnello, V. Castro, J. Tovar Jalles and R.M. Sousa, “What Determines the Likelihood of Structural Reforms?”, in *European Journal of Political Economy*, 37, 2015, pp. 129-45; J. De Haan, J.E. Sturm and E. Zandberg, “The Impact of Financial and Economic Crises on Economic Freedom”, in *Economic Freedom of the World: 2009 Annual Report*, edited by J. Gwartney, R. Lawson and J. Hall, Economic Freedom Network, 2009, pp. 25-36; E.A. Lora and M. Olivera, “What Makes Reforms Likely?: Political Economy Determinants of Reforms in Latin America”, in *Journal of Applied Economics*, VII(1), 2004, pp. 99-135; S. Waelti, “Financial Crisis Begets Financial Reform? The Origin of the Crisis Matters”, in *European Journal of Political Economy*, 40, 2015m, pp. 1-15; M. Bruno and W. Easterly, “Inflation’s Children: Tales of Crises That Beget Reforms”, in *American Economic Review*, 86(2), 1996, pp. 213-17; A. Drazen and W. Easterly, “Do Crises Induce Reform? Simple Empirical Tests of Conventional Wisdom”, in *Economics & Politics*, 13 (2), 2001, pp. 129-57; M. Hallerberg and C. Scartascini, “When Do Governments Improve Fiscal Institutions? Lessons from Financial Crisis and Fiscal Reform in Latin America”, in *Economica*, 16(1), 2015, pp. 41-76.

<sup>7</sup> A.C. Harberger, “The Search for Relevance in Economics”, in *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings*, 83, 1993, pp. 1-17.

<sup>8</sup> Rodrik, *Understanding Economic Policy Reform*.

"It is not simply the view that the current situation is unacceptable, but that different types of policies must be tried."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, while crisis conditions may induce governments to initiate reform processes, it is by no means certain that the reforms proposed will ultimately be implemented. The political and institutional framework in which reform processes are initiated plays an essential role both in enabling *de facto* implementation of policy reform and in precluding their reversal.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Campos, Hsiao and Nugent, like Tornell, find political crises to be even more important than economic crises as determinants of reform, calling for increased research activity in this direction.<sup>11</sup> Related to this, the role of interest groups in the process has begun to receive much attention, though the literature is divided in its assessment of the complex interrelationship of political factors and interest groups.<sup>12</sup> As Drazen points out, the influence of interest groups might actually become stronger in a crisis situation.<sup>13</sup> Whereas interest group opposition to reform may even have contributed to the emergence of a given economic or political crisis, the very same groups are often needed to mitigate the repercussions of a crisis, since their expert knowledge can be crucial.

<sup>9</sup> Drazen, *Political Economy of Macroeconomics*, p. 446.

<sup>10</sup> J. Williamson and S. Haggard, "The Political Conditions for Economic Reform", in *The Political Economy of Policy Reform*, edited by J. Williamson, Washington, DC, Institute for International Economics, 1994, pp. 525-69; J. Corrales, "Do Economic Crises Contribute to Economic Reform? Argentina and Venezuela in the 1990s", in *Political Science Quarterly*, 112(4), 1998, pp. 617-44.; S. Edwards and R. Steiner, "On the Crisis Hypothesis of Economic Reform: Colombia 1989-91", in *Cuadernos de Economia*, 37(112), 2000, pp. 445-93.; A. Alesina, S. Ardagna and F. Trebbi, "Who Adjusts and When? The Political Economy of Reforms", *IMF Staff Papers*, 53, 2000, pp. 1-29.

<sup>11</sup> N.F. Campos, C. Hsiao and J.B. Nugent, "Crises, What Crises? New Evidence on the Relative Roles of Political and Economic Crises in Begetting Reforms", in *Journal of Development Studies*, 46(10), 2010, pp. 1670-91; A. Tornell, *Reform from Within*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, 52, 1998. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w6497>.

<sup>12</sup> C.T. Hsieh, "Bargaining over Reform", in *European Economic Review*, 44(9), 2000, pp. 1659-76.; C. Martinelli and R. Escorza, "When Are Stabilizations Delayed? Alesina Drazen Revisited", in *European Economic Review*, 51(5), 2007, pp. 1223-45.

<sup>13</sup> A. Drazen, "Financial Market Crisis, Financial Market Reform: Why Hasn't Reform Followed Crisis", in DG ECFIN Sixth Annual Research Conference, Brussels, 2009.

On the methodological front, empirical studies utilising the crisis hypothesis tend to adopt a cross-country macro-level modelling strategy.<sup>14</sup> The onset of a crisis is modelled in terms of a set of economic indicators exceeding a certain threshold, with the implementation of reform being modelled as changes in policy indicators over a given time period. As well as utilising a very narrow characterisation of crisis, this approach also fails to properly capture the nuances of the reform process. Reform processes may vary in their required timeframe for elaboration and implementation: while stabilization measures to counter, say, hyperinflation may be implemented rather rapidly, more complicated reforms, such as labour market or health care reforms, are likely to be subject to more societal resistance and hence require a lot more preparation and time, especially for governments with constrained resources.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it may not be the case that all reforms undertaken in a given time period are directly attributable to a specific crisis. As this paper illustrates, these nuanced aspects of the reform process might be better treated by detailed case-study analysis rather than at the macro level.

### 3. Irish Poor Relief

A national system of poor relief had been established in Ireland prior to the famine by the Irish Relief Act of 1838. As Gray notes, the Irish Poor Law emerged “from a messy combination of complementary and contradictory impulses.”<sup>16</sup> The enactment of the Poor Law was preceded by almost a decade of intense debate over the merits and workings of such legislation. Arguments in favour of the introduction of an Irish Poor Law of one form or other could be found among elements of the Anglican and Catholic clergy, Irish radical political groupings, British commercial interests who hoped that the

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote 6, above

<sup>15</sup> M. Naim, “The Second Stage of Reform”, in *Lessons of the Venezuela Experience*, edited by Louis Goodman, Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> P. Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law*, Manchester Press, 2009, p. 341.

implementation of such a law would erode the competitiveness of Irish industry, and reformist British political groupings; those opposing the Irish Poor Law included orthodox political economists, Irish landowners, and conservative British politicians.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of a reform-minded Whig-Liberal government in 1835 heralded a change in the balance of political power and a more reformist approach to the "Irish question". Gray contends that the "Justice for Ireland" platform of the reformist Whig-Liberal administration was one facet of an agenda of broader social reform. This represented an integrationist vision whereby rather than allowing deteriorating social and economic conditions to exacerbate the colonial restlessness seen in other corners of the British empire, a more complete union could be formed "through the accommodation of Irish elites and the 'elevation' of Irish people to British standards."<sup>18</sup>

The Irish Poor Law differed from the English model in that relief was to be provided within the workhouse, rather than outdoors.<sup>19</sup> The Act established a system of 130 administrative unions, each to have a workhouse where the destitute would work for their keep. As argued by Nally and Gray, characterisations such as that of MacDonagh which depict the Irish Poor Law as being a replication of the English equivalent do not stand up to scrutiny.<sup>20</sup> Nally describes the Irish Poor Law as being devised not solely as a technique for ameliorating poverty, as in the case of its English equivalent, but also as an instrument to engineer social development.<sup>21</sup> Gray identifies the distinct political context in which the Irish Poor Law originated,

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-58.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> M.E. Daly, "Something Old and Something New: Recent Research on the Great Irish Famine," in *When the Potato Failed: Causes and Effects of the Last European Subsistence Crisis*, eds. C. Ó Gráda, R. Paping and E. Vanhaute, Turnhout, Brepols, 2007, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> D. Nally (2008) "That Coming Storm": The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 98:3, 2008, pp. 714-741; P. Gray, *The making of the Irish poor law, 1815-43*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009; O. MacDonagh, *Ireland: The Union and its aftermath*, Dublin, Ireland, University College Dublin Press, 2003, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Nally, *That Coming Storm*, p. 720.

emerged, and was contested as a differentiating factor from its English counterpart.<sup>22</sup>

However, the Irish workhouse system, designed with a capacity of 100,000, was not adequate to cope with the distress levels witnessed during the famine.<sup>23</sup> With the onset of the famine, the earliest measure taken by the Tory government of Sir Robert Peel was the secret purchase of £100,000 worth of Indian Corn and meal in the United States, with the supplies arriving in Ireland from February to June 1846. Local relief committees and a network of food depots were set up to distribute the food, though with some delay. A scheme of public works, mostly involving road improvements, was established in order to provide employment so that the destitute could purchase food. The public works schemes were overseen by either county grand juries, in which case the entire cost of the works was borne by the county, or a local Board of Works, whereby half the funds advanced were to be repaid to the British treasury and half chargeable to a consolidated fund.<sup>24</sup> By March 1847 the public works employed seven hundred thousand people (one twelfth of the Irish population) but they did not succeed in containing the famine, as they did not target the neediest, paid too low a wage, and exposed the malnourished and poorly clothed to harsh weather conditions.<sup>25</sup>

In Spring 1847 the incoming Whig administration of Sir John Russell replaced the public works scheme with a system of soup kitchens. These soup kitchens were also financed by local ratepayers and private subscriptions from local landowners, and provided meal-based gruel for three million people daily.<sup>26</sup> The soup kitchen scheme was brought to an end in September 1847, as mortality rates appeared to wane, food prices fell, and demand for seasonal work was anticipated. However, another season of complete potato crop failure

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<sup>22</sup> Gray, *The making of the Irish poor law*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> M.E. Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*, Dundalk, Dundalgan Press, 1986, p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> J.S. Donnelly, *The Irish Potato Famine*, London, Stutton, 2001, p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> Ó Gráda, *Ireland's Great Famine: An Overview*, pp. 47-49.

<sup>26</sup> C. Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine*, London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 46.

would follow in 1848. The British government's relief policy from September 1847 onwards was predicated on shifting the burden of financing relief from the British treasury to Irish landlords and tenants, with the workhouse system becoming the main thrust of subsequent relief efforts.<sup>27</sup> The Poor Law Amendment of 1847 allowed for the provision of outdoor relief to anyone unable to work due to age, disability or ill-health, together with orphans and widows with two or more children.<sup>28</sup> The able-bodied poor, however, were now permitted to avail of relief only within the workhouse, unless circumstances such as the workhouse being full or infected rendered outdoor relief necessary.<sup>29</sup> The 1847 amendment placed the financing of relief fully on the Irish ratepayer at a local level and the infamous Gregory Clause prohibited tenants with landholdings of more than one-quarter of an acre from accessing relief. The Gregory Clause led to a wave of land clearances and evictions, as landlords sought to remove impoverished cottiers from their property.<sup>30</sup> Many smallholders were forced to give up their land in order to qualify for relief, losing their homes in the process and swelling the numbers dependent on the workhouse system. The numbers seeking relief within the workhouses rose to 932,284 in 1849, with a further 1,210,482 seeking outdoor relief.<sup>31</sup> The overcrowded system, with its regime of hard labour and conditions that spread contagious diseases, led to very high mortality rates within workhouses. According to Ó Gráda, about one-quarter of all excess famine mortality occurred within the workhouse system.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*, pp. 92-98.

<sup>28</sup> V. Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland 1838-1948*, Dundalgan Press, 2006, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Donnelly, *Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 101-112; Estimates of the number of evictions over the course of the Famine vary greatly: Vaughan estimates that over 70,000 families were evicted over the period 1846-1853, while analysis undertaken by O'Neill puts the number of evicted families at 144,759 for the period 1846-1854; W.E. Vaughan, *Landlord and Tenant 1850-1904*, Dublin, Irish Economic and Social History Society, 1984, pp. 24-26; T.P. O'Neill, "Famine Evictions," in *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland*, ed. Carla King, Dublin, UCD Press, 2000, pp. 29-58.

<sup>31</sup> Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*, p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> Ó Gráda, *Ireland's Great Famine: An Overview*, pp. 47-49.

The immediate post-famine period has been characterised by Crossman as one of retrenchment and reform.<sup>33</sup> Retrenchment involved poor law boards quickly reverting to the pre-famine regime in which outdoor relief was either abolished or reduced to a minimum. Reform initially took the shape of the 1851 Medical Charities Act, which established a network of local dispensaries funded from the poor rate and administered by local communities. It was the early 1860s before a more comprehensive examination of the Irish poor relief system as a whole would be undertaken. In 1861 a Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) was established and the report of this Committee formed the basis of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1862. The most significant reforms introduced by the 1862 Act were: abolition of the quarter-acre clause for indoor, though not outdoor, relief; provisions for the boarding out of orphaned and abandoned children up to the age of eight years; a provision whereby an orphaned child baptised before entering the workhouse should be educated in the religion of the godparents; and the opening of workhouse hospitals to those who were poor but not destitute, thus providing medical services under the poor law for recipients both inside and outside the workhouse.

Recent studies of the 1862 reform process suggest that the reforms emerged from a confluence of post-famine influences, rather than as a direct consequence of the famine years' exposition of the deficiencies of the Irish Poor Laws.<sup>34</sup> Crossman in particular has pointed to a more complex set of contributory factors: the influence of the Archbishop of Dublin, Rev. Paul Cullen, who, in his efforts to promote a role for the Catholic middle class in government and administration, regarded reform of the poor law as essential to maintaining Irish social cohesion; post-famine public scrutiny on the management, effectiveness and cost of the Irish poor relief system,

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<sup>33</sup> Crossman, *Poor Law in Ireland*, p. 38

<sup>34</sup> V. Crossman, "Facts notorious to the whole country: the political battle over Irish poor law reform in the 1860s", in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series, 20, 2010, pp. 157-169.

as epitomised by former Assistant Poor Law Commissioner Denis Phelan's 1859 pamphlet calling for the introduction of a mixed system of indoor and outdoor relief similar to that practiced in England; high-profile scandals in 1859 concerning the conditions of Cork and Dublin workhouses; growing dissatisfaction with the unrepresentative nature of the Irish poor law commission, dominated by Protestant Englishmen; and the fact that the poor law commission's five-year term was up for renewal in 1862, which also necessitated legislative action.<sup>35</sup> The following sections set out an analysis of the imprint of famine experiences on the emergence of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1862.

Three archival data sources are utilised in this paper: (i) the evidence presented to the Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) 1861;<sup>36</sup> (ii) parliamentary debates surrounding the proposed Poor Relief Act (Ireland) as it progressed through the Houses of Lords and Commons; and (iii) the reportage of Irish newspapers for the year 1861, as contained within the online repository *Irish-newsarchive.com*.

This material is analysed by means of textual analysis, a qualitative analysis that, beyond the content of the documents, focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions. The textual analysis is operationalised using semiotic, narrative, genre or rhetorical approaches. In the following analysis, findings are presented in the form of a strategic selection and presentation of the text analysed.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. Irish poor law reform, 1862

In what follows, the archival material utilised in this paper is ex-

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<sup>35</sup> D. Phelan, *Reform of the Poor Law System in Ireland; or facts and observations on the Inadequacy of the existing System of Poor Relief*, Dublin, 1859.

<sup>36</sup> Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Administration of the Relief of the Poor in Ireland, Parliamentary Papers, 1861.

<sup>37</sup> E. Fürisch, "In defence of Textual Analysis: restoring a challenged method for journalism and media studies", in *Journalism Studies*, 10 (2), 2009, p. 240.

amined for references to the Great Irish Famine (1845-1850). The themes and the context within which these references emerge are then analysed and discussed.

#### 4.1 *Evidence presented to the Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) 1861*

The Select Committee called twenty-two witnesses over the period March-July 1861 to provide testimony on the nature and workings of poor relief in Ireland. The witnesses included work house guardians, poor law inspectors, physicians, a curate, an Archbishop, and a superintendent from the Scottish Poor Law Commission. Across these wide-ranging testimonies, the famine conditions of 1845-1850 are discussed by five witnesses in the context of their evidence before the committee.

The most extensive testimony was provided by Alfred Power, Chief Commissioner of the Irish Poor Law in Ireland. Power provided evidence in six sessions from 14 March to 29 April 1861, answering no fewer than 1,700 questions. In his first and second sessions, Power documented the relief provided to the Irish poor through the Board of Works from 1845-1847.<sup>38</sup> He noted the significance of the changes to the Poor Law introduced by the Poor Law Amendment of 1847, under which outdoor relief for the able-bodied poor was abruptly discontinued. This resulted in considerable numbers of poor who had been in receipt of outdoor relief ceasing to receive any relief from 1848 onwards.<sup>39</sup> The remaining sessions did not return to the famine years of 1845-1850, but instead focussed on the workings of the poor relief system as of 1861 in terms of medical provision for workhouse inmates, regulations pertaining to orphans and children, religious education and religious denomination of orphans, election and remuneration of guardians, as well as poor rates and the funding of the workhouse system.

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<sup>38</sup> *Report [on] the Administration of the Relief of the Poor in Ireland*, Q. 33-36.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Q. 37-61; Q. 146-149.

The famine experiences of 1845-1850 also featured in the testimony of Mr. Denis Phelan, who gave evidence based on his experiences as a medical officer in Ireland and subsequently as an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner. In all Phelan answered 441 questions before the committee, with his evidence focussing on the practical differences between the poor relief system in Ireland, based primarily on a workhouse system of indoor relief, and that of England and Scotland, in which outdoor relief played a far greater role. Phelan contended that had a system of outdoor relief been put in place in the years prior to the famine, it would have operated liberally without widespread abuse. According to Phelan, attempting to introduce outdoor relief during famine conditions was not conducive to an orderly expansion of the relief system and the legacy of perceived abuses of famine-era outdoor relief undermined efforts to extend the system in the post-famine years.<sup>40</sup> Phelan also noted that while very large numbers of persons received relief during the famine, this should not be taken as proof that the existing system of relief was capable of expanding according to the necessities of the country.<sup>41</sup>

As is further illustrated in the following section, famine-era experiences were invoked in arguments both for and against an extension of the Poor Act. Two witnesses – John Vandeluer Stewart, chairman of the Letterkenny Union, and Harrison Briscoe, General Superintendent, Scottish Poor Law Commission – made reference to the famine in the context of instances of abuse of outdoor relief during the famine years. Stewart, voicing his objections to any extension of outdoor relief, cited instances of fraudulent claims on outdoor relief in his electoral division during the famine.<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, Briscoe cited Scottish examples to support his view that extending outdoor relief had destroyed the sense of independence among the lower classes and was “especially detrimental to female chastity”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Q. 3495-3496.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Q. 3836-3843.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Q. 6181-6185.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Q. 7770-771, 7798-7800.

Both Denis Phelan and another witness, H.J. Macfarlane, *ex officio* guardian at the North Dublin union, emphasised the importance of the “workhouse test”, whereby a person who wanted to receive poor relief had to enter a workhouse and undertake a set amount of work, as a deterrent to fraudulent claims. Phelan, who favoured extending outdoor relief, said “I would test every case; I would give relief in the workhouse to idle and vicious persons, and those that were fit objects of it, I would relieve outside, very cautiously.”<sup>44</sup> Macfarlane, on the other hand, who opposed the extension of existing laws regarding outdoor relief, referred to instances where the “workhouse test” revealed large numbers of fraudulent claims for outdoor relief during the famine years in his North Dublin union.<sup>45</sup>

In all, the evidence presented to the Select Committee in 1861 indicates that although it was generally recognised that the experiences of the famine years (1845-1850) had exposed the flaws inherent in the Irish Poor Law, there was considerable disagreement as to whether or not these flaws warranted legislative reform. What is more, the bulk of the evidence given before the Select Committee focussed on contemporary features of the Poor Law, such as medical provision within workhouses, regulations pertaining to orphans and children, religious education, election and remuneration of guardians, and the funding of the workhouse system.

#### 4.2 *Parliamentary debates, March-July 1862*

Parliamentary debates regarding amendments to the Irish Poor Law took place intermittently from March to July 1862, culminating in the enactment of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act on August 7<sup>th</sup> 1862.<sup>46</sup> Initial House of Commons debates (24<sup>th</sup> March; 2<sup>nd</sup> May) set out the context of ongoing Irish distress and the necessity of poor law re-

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Q. 3535.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Q. 5174, 5359, 5363.

<sup>46</sup> Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1862 25 & 26 Vict c 83. For full text see: <http://www.irish-statutebook.ie/eli/1862/act/83/enacted/en/print.html?printonload=true>.

form, while a later series of exchanges (29<sup>th</sup> May, 1<sup>st</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> July) focussed on specific clauses within the proposed legislation as the draft bill made its way through the Houses of Commons and Lords. It is in the earlier debates that reference to the famine years of 1845-1850 can be found.

The textual analysis undertaken here identifies three distinct themes in which reference to the Great Irish Famine (1845-1850) features in the parliamentary debates prior to passage of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act. Firstly, the famine is invoked as a benchmark against which the deteriorating Irish conditions of 1861/62 are compared. However, this theme is common to both sides of the argument. Irish Members of Parliament argued that conditions in 1862 were worse than those experienced at the height of the famine. For example, John Maguire, an Irish Liberal MP representing Dungarvan, when recounting scenes of distress in his constituency, stated that "even during the awful famine of 1846-7 I never met such an object."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, John Blake, an Irish nationalist MP for Waterford city, cited government trade statistics to illustrate that Ireland had produced less agricultural exports in 1861 than it did during the height of the famine.<sup>48</sup> However, the famine was also invoked by those arguing that famine conditions were not evident in Ireland in 1861/62. The Chief Secretary for Ireland, Robert Peel, argued that "the alarms of famine which had been raised had not been justified by facts", claiming that although in the early part of 1862 there was a scarcity of fuel, the price of food was lower than in any other year since 1851.<sup>49</sup>

The second theme in which reference to the Great Irish Famine (1845-1850) features in the parliamentary debates is that of mismanaged famine-era public relief, cited as evidence against the utility of further large-scale publicly funded relief efforts. The Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, argued that the Irish relief efforts in 1847-49 should serve as a warning to the Government and Parliament not

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<sup>47</sup> Hansard HC Deb 02 May 1862 vol 166 cc 1134-83, 1145.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1152.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1163.

to have recourse to the same means of employing the population on a large scale without the clearest case of necessity.<sup>50</sup> A British Liberal MP, George Hammond Whalley, spoke of the “improper mode” in which grants extended to Ireland in 1847-1848 were utilised, though he was favourably disposed to extending loans for railway construction or lending money to landlords for improvements.<sup>51</sup> Irish MPs also appeared to concede that famine-era relief in the form of public grants had been problematic, as illustrated by the position of William Monsell, Irish Liberal MP for county Limerick, who argued that although it was perfectly true that great evils followed the money grants given to Ireland in 1848, yet of the loans made at that time for railway construction every shilling had been repaid to the Exchequer with interest.<sup>52</sup> The difficulty facing Irish politicians in this debate was summed up by Galway MP William Gregory: they were forced to appear as supplicants to the Government, stating that considerable distress existed and calling upon the Government to take measures to relieve it; if the facts were denied or not proven, they stood in the position of mendicants or impostors.<sup>53</sup> Gregory himself, infamous for the 1847 quarter-acre “Gregory Clause”, expressed his view that the greatest curse that could be inflicted on Ireland would be the extension of outdoor relief, that it would result in the paralysis of every honest exertion, and reduce the peasantry of the country to the level of shameless habitual mendicancy.<sup>54</sup>

The third famine-related theme to surface in the parliamentary debates is that of the need to repeal the Gregory Clause. As the bill passed through the House of Lords, the Duke of Newcastle recounted that the Clause had been enacted to reduce the pressure on landlords by ensuring that the guardians of unions should not give relief to any person who held land to the extent of a quarter of an

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1181.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1183.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 1182.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1173.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1175.

acre. However, his view was that the clause ought to be repealed and the law in that respect placed on the same footing as it now stood in England and Scotland. According to the Duke, the restriction was harsh in its operation, and did not provide that amount of security that had been initially contemplated against an improper administration of the poor laws in Ireland.<sup>55</sup> The Duke of Newcastle also noted that the MP from Galway (Gregory), who had originally proposed the clause, had recently stated in the House of Commons that the clause was, from the altered state of the times in Ireland, not only unnecessary but absolutely prejudicial to the labouring classes of Ireland.<sup>56</sup> The argument for repealing the Gregory Clause had previously been stated in more succinct terms in the House of Commons by Irish MP Patrick Mahon: If the authorities in Ireland received power to administer outdoor relief, and if the quarter-acre clause were repealed, a very beneficial alteration of the law would be effected, and much of the evil which resulted from the present system would be guarded against.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, however, the House of Lords consented to the repeal of the Gregory Clause only in cases of indoor relief. The clause would remain on the statute books in cases of outdoor relief.

The debates regarding the detail of the Poor Law legislation indicate that such reform efforts were not immune to underlying ideological, religious, or class fissures. As early as March 1861, the nomination process for the Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) was open to accusations of bias, with Irish nationalist MP John Blake complaining that the Committee had not been selected with fairness as there were too many landlords on it.<sup>58</sup> During the debate surrounding the reform bill in 1862, issues such as the religious denomination under which orphans were to be raised and the proportion of Catholic representation on Poor Law boards of guardians contin-

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<sup>55</sup> HL Deb 15 July 1862 vol 168 cc 333-44, 333.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>57</sup> HC Deb 02 May 1862 vol 166 cc 1134-83, 1171.

<sup>58</sup> HC Deb 07 March 1861 vol 161 c 1627, 1627.

ued to infuse the debate with a sense of grievance along religious lines.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4.3 *Irish newspaper reportage on poor relief reform, 1862*

Analysis of Irish newspaper reportage relating to the poor relief reform process in 1862 shows that reference to the famine experience of the Poor Law in 1845-1850 was implicit in the Irish commentary on the reform initiatives but was explicitly invoked only occasionally.

Of the 240 articles identified in our data gathering process as containing reference in 1862 to poor law reform, 19 contain what could be termed significant mentions of poor law reform as indicated by the title or sub-title. These 19 articles comprised: 7 commentary pieces; 7 reports on either the parliamentary debates or the efforts of Archbishop Cullen and the Poor Law Committee to demonstrate the need for extensive reforms; and 5 letters from contributors using pseudonyms. The commentary pieces tended to focus on the flaws inherent in the existing Irish Poor Law, as well as on objections to specific amendments contained within the proposed reform bill. Examples of the issues raised include: the rearing of children within workhouses; union rates as a method of funding the poor law system; Catholic representation on the boards of guardians; differences between Irish and English poor relief systems; as well as comparisons between Irish poor relief difficulties and the British government's initiatives to provide relief in 1862 to unemployed cotton workers in Lancashire.

In the 19 articles containing significant discussion of Irish poor law reform, the famine of 1845-1850 was referred to explicitly only in two instances in commentary articles, with both instances being relatively minor mentions in regional newspapers. In one, the *Kerry Star* (28 January 1862) expressed its scepticism over the extent of prospective poor law reforms given that the range of powers inher-

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<sup>59</sup> See HC Deb 24 March 1862 vol 165 cc 1958-82; HC Deb 29 May 1862 vol 167 cc 94-124.

ent in the existing poor law legislation had not been fully utilised since the famine years.<sup>60</sup> The second echoes an aspect of the Parliamentary debates of March 1862 in which the 1845-1850 famine was used as a benchmark against which to assess distress levels of 1861/62. The *Nenagh Guardian* (26 February 1862) reprinted an extract from the British establishment newspaper *The Times*.<sup>61</sup> This article dismissed MP John McGuire's claims that the current Irish distress has reached famine proportions and concluded that "but for the extraordinary policy pursued by the legislature towards Ireland, or indirectly affecting Ireland since 1845, we should now be witnessing not a very bearable amount of pressure and distress, but a repetition, most likely in an aggravated form, of the great Irish famine and pestilence".<sup>62</sup>

The famine of 1845-1850 was also implicitly invoked in Irish newspaper reportage by recourse to euphemisms such as "long subsisting grievances" and the inadequacies of the Poor Law in "years of pressure".<sup>63</sup> In contrast to this relatively measured rhetoric, the famine was also referenced in one letter, penned under pseudonym, published in the *Connaught Telegraph* on 6 August 1862.<sup>64</sup> It set out a very strong nationalist invective, castigating the British government for its culpability during the 1845-1850 famine, denouncing the continued exportation of Irish foodstuffs during the famine years, and characterising the distress experienced by Lancashire in 1862 as retribution.

The Poor Relief Act (Ireland) 1862 was met with disdain by the Irish nationalist press. The logic of repealing the Gregory Clause only in cases of indoor relief was ridiculed by the Irish regional newspaper the *Dundalk Democrat*: "Everyone knows that to ask a poor family, having a cottage and a rood of ground, to enter a work-

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<sup>60</sup> *Kerry Star*, 18 Jan 1862, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Nenagh Guardian*, 26 Feb 1862, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Freemans Journal*, 10 Feb 1862, p. 4; *Connaught Telegraph*, 6 Aug 1862, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Connaught Telegraph*, 6 Aug 1862, p. 3.

house and leave their little home to the mercy of the lawless is a stupid error which would cause much injury to the poor. But the Irish peers do not think so.”<sup>65</sup> The paper also lamented the fact that no change was made to the legislation regarding the religion which foundling children were to be denominated under: “The bigotry and intolerance of some of these Irish peers are unparalleled.”<sup>66</sup> In all, the paper concluded: “It is evident that this reform of the poor laws of Ireland is one that will produce very little benefit. [...] Its two leading features are – oppression of the poor of Ireland and the destruction of their religion.”<sup>67</sup>

While the Great Irish Famine undoubtedly cast a shadow over Irish newspaper coverage of the 1862 Poor Law reforms, Irish newspaper reportage focussed mainly on specific continuing grievances with the workings of the Irish Poor Law rather than invoking famine experiences as a justification for reform.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper explores the process through which reform of the Irish poor relief system emerged in the years following the Great Famine. Studying this reform process in detail allows us to cast a critical eye on a hypothesis that has recently gained currency in the field of political economic theory, namely that reform is induced by crisis. Our study of the emergence of the 1862 Poor Relief (Ireland) Act cautions against a linear characterisation of the relationship between crisis (in this case, the Great Famine of 1845-1850) and subsequent reform. Rather than the emergence of a consensus that poor relief should be extended in order to prevent similar scenes of deprivation and suffering in the future, post-famine attitudes to the Irish poor relief system were marked by a tension between retrenchment and reform.

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<sup>65</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 26 July 1862, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

The groundswell of pressure for Poor Law reform in the early 1860s was not a direct consequence of the Famine legacy. While Famine experiences had exposed the inadequacies of the Irish poor relief system, the 1862 reforms appear to have been triggered by a mix of both contemporary grievances, such as public outcry over the conditions in individual workhouses, and societal pressures, as represented by the positions of Archbishop Cullen and Denis Phelan. Indeed, as the textual analysis undertaken in this paper shows, in their testimony before the Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) 1861, the Famine of 1845-1850 is not featured prominently in the arguments set out by Cullen, Phelan, and other expert witnesses in relation to extending the Irish Poor Law.

Our analysis also highlights that in the debate over extending the Irish Poor Law, the Famine was invoked by proponents and opponents alike. While those in favour of a greater role for outdoor relief cited the Famine as an indictment of the workhouse-centred indoor relief system, those against it supported their arguments with Famine-era examples of abuse and fraudulent claims. Similarly, both sides of the argument invoked the Famine as a benchmark of sorts, with advocates of reform warning of a return of Famine-era conditions owing to poor harvests in the early 1860s and opponents dismissing the allegations of famine in the early 1860s and contending that the situation had not deteriorated to the levels of the 1840s. The overarching ideological, political, and religious fissures of the time also found expression in the debates: the reform process exhibited the hallmarks of religious tension in its discussion of issues such as Catholic representation on the Poor Law boards of guardians and the religious upbringing of orphan children; the conflicting interests of landlords and tenants permeated the discussion of how the poor relief system should be funded; political ideology infused attitudes towards government intervention and public monies, and nationalist discourse decried inequalities in the workings of the British and Irish poor relief systems. Although the Famine had cruelly exposed the inadequacies of the old Irish Poor Law, the subsequent move-

ments for reform exhibited layers of complexity that challenge the simplified, linear modern-day “crisis-reform” hypothesis.

More generally, we suggest that research into the aftermath of famine crises would be well advised to distinguish between post-famine economic recovery and post-famine economic (or socio-economic) reform. Despite recurrent poor harvests in the 1850s and 1860s, Irish living standards improved in the post-famine decades. Geary and Stark estimate that Ireland’s GDP per capita grew at an average of 0.9% per annum over the period 1871-1911, with GDP growth per worker averaging 1.1% over the same period. The corresponding figures for Great Britain are 0.8 %, both per capita and per worker. Irish average life expectancy rose from 40 years on the eve of the Famine to 50 by the early 1870s and 58 by the 1920s, while literacy levels and housing standards also improved.<sup>68</sup> However, economic recovery in itself is not necessarily indicative of purposeful reform initiatives implemented as a consequence of Famine-era experiences.

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<sup>68</sup> F. Geary and T. Stark “Examining Ireland’s Post-Famine Economic Growth Performance”, in *Economic Journal*, 112, 2002, pp. 919-935; C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780-1939*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 249-250.

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## Appendix

**TABLE A1**  
Overview of Famine references in witness testimony  
to Select Committee on Poor Relief (Ireland) 1861

Name of Witness	Profession	Date of testimony	Significant Famine 1845-50 Discussion? (Y/N)	Context of Famine 1845-1850 Discussion
Mr. Alfred Power	Chief Commissioner of the Poor Law in Ireland	14/19 March 1861; 15/18/25/29 April 1861	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Description of famine conditions and poor relief; (Q. 33-36)</li> <li>• Statement re: amount of relief supplied during famine to poor from whom outdoor relief was discontinued under Burgoyne Commission; (Q. 36-61)</li> <li>• Statement as to how such relief was administered (Q. 33-79; Q. 148-149);</li> <li>• Assistance from the British Association and the Government to augment the poor rates in 1847 and 1848 (Q. 69);</li> <li>• Details re: charges made on the central management in Ireland due to famine (Q. 146-148).</li> </ul>
Mr. Nicholls Mahony	Merchant	2 May 1861	No	
Mr. R.J. O'Shaughnessy	Clerk to Board of Guardians	6 May 1861	No	
Mr. James Hogan	Guardian, Limerick Union	9 May 1861	No	
Mr. Stephen O'Halloran	Guardian, Limerick Union	9 May 1861	No	
Rev. James Barry	Curate	13 May 1861	No	
Mr. D. Phelan	Medical officer	13/16 May 1861	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probability of a system of extensive outdoor relief in Ireland but for the experience of the famine (Q. 3495-3496);</li> <li>• Very large number of persons relieved during the famine – not proof that the system of relief expands according to the necessities of the country (Q. 3836-3843).</li> </ul>
Rev. P. Cullen	Catholic Archbishop	27 May 1861	No	

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Name of Witness	Profession	Date of testimony	Significant Famine 1845-50 Discussion? (Y/N)	Context of Famine 1845-1850 Discussion
Mr. G.G. Place	Guardian	30 May 1861	No	
Mrs. Woodlock	Principal of industrial school for girls	3 June 1861	No	
Mr. T. Donagh	Magistrate, Louth and Drogheda; <i>ex officio</i> guardian, Drogheda	3 June 1861	No	
Mr. M. Weddick	Master of workhouse, North Dublin Union	6 June 1861	No	
Mr. H. J. Macfarlane	<i>Ex officio</i> Guardian	10/13 June 1861	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of a test of destitution at the time of famine (Q. 5174, 5359, 5363);</li> <li>• Instances during the famine of the importance of the workhouse test in the North Dublin Union (Q. 5174, 5405, 5407)</li> </ul>
Dr. Daniel Brady	Physician	10/13 June 1861		
Mr. John Byrne	Guardian, South Dublin Union	13 June 1861	No	
Sir Edward Grogan	Magistrate, county Dublin; <i>ex officio</i> guardian, South Dublin Union	13 June 1861	No	
Sir Richard O'Donnell	Chairman of Newport Board of Guardians	17 June 1861		
Mr. John Vandeluier Stewart	Chairman of the Letterkenny Union	17/21 June 1861	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abuses during the famine in giving outdoor relief (Q. 6182)</li> </ul>
Mr. Henry Robinson	Poor Law Inspector	21 June 1861	No	

(continue)

*(continue)*

Name of Witness	Profession	Date of testimony	Significant Famine 1845-50 Discussion? (Y/N)	Context of Famine 1845-1850 Discussion
Mr. T.R. Sarsfield	Magistrate of County Cork	24 June 1861		
Mr. Edward Senior	Poor Law Commissioner	27 June 1861; 1 July 1861	No	
Mr. Harrison Briscoe	General Superintendent, Scottish Poor Law Commission	1 July 1861	Yes	• Abuses during the famine in giving outdoor relief (Q. 7770, 7798-7800)

Source: *Report of the Select Committee on Poor Relief, Ireland, 1861, proceedings, pp. v-xx; minutes of evidence, pp. 1-379, and index, pp. 1-29.*