

Why is daniel
o'connell considered
to be a great
nationalist leader
essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Daniel O'Connell was the most prominent Irish Nationalist figurehead throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. He is remembered as possibly the greatest leader of Irish Nationalism as he was, in reality, the first to have any real success in elevating the condition of his people. In the main, O'Connell favoured a more peaceful, and compromising approach in the battle for Irish reform. This approach was considerably successful with the British Government, particularly that of Wellington, and Peel.

Perhaps his success was aided due to the stark contrast in his attitude, to that of the revolutionary Wolfe Tone, leader of the militant Society of United Irishmen. As well as O'Connell being the most successful Irish Nationalist of his time, O'Connell was also a strong supporter of Catholic emancipation. As an educated Catholic, O'Connell was strongly opposed to the Union from the start. Though the union meant that Irish Parliament was offered improved representation, it also meant that Catholics would become a minority, and therefore would see little, if any improvement in their conditions.

In 1823, O'Connell formed the Catholic Association, this was an extremely successful movement, and drew on support from huge numbers, with a fundamental aim of Catholic emancipation. The organisation was mobilised by a subscription fee which was collected through the Catholic church. Not only was the church vital in funding the association, it also played a prominent role in expanding interest in the organisation within communities. This was accentuated by the fact that the Church played a major part in the lives of Catholics, particularly the peasantry masses.

O'Connell often held open-air meetings, trying to drum up support. These were greatly successful, largely this was due to the substantial oratory skills of O'Connell. These meetings helped him to build a healthy rapport with the Catholic peasantry. O'Connell played a pivotal role in the demise of the Protestant ascendancy, this in itself was a great victory for nationalists. He achieved this by winning a seat at County Clare in the 1828 election, during the campaign for which he used his superb use of the rhetoric to sway support from the forty-shilling freeholders.

O'Connell had hardly taken on an easy seat to win, going up against the amiable and popular Vesey Fitzgerald and winning was a victory in itself. Elected as an MP, O'Connell was unable to take his seat due to him being a Catholic. This forced the British Government into conceding emancipation, Wellington and Peel were fearful of an uprising which in comparison would have been more problematic than emancipation. With hindsight, however, this had sent out a message to the Irish nationalists that if pushed hard enough, the British government would concede.

O'Connell had been raised to hero status by this victory, and his position as Irish leader was unrivalled. After Catholic emancipation, O'Connell's influence was stronger than ever before, he became head of a small group of Irish Nationalists in the House of Commons, known as the O'Connellites. O'Connell was aware that they wouldn't achieve much on their own, and consequently he became far more affiliated with the English Whig Party. Though O'Connell was hopeful of the repeal of the union and the whigs were most certainly against it, he felt that they were a good deal better than the Conservatives.

In fact, O'Connell did win a steady trickle of reforms through his work alongside the whigs, where more people were given the vote, plus a new poor law system was introduced, as well as the passing of the Corporations Act. Undeniably though, the Irish were still treated quite differently to their English neighbours. However, the Whigs seemed to gain more from the relationship, with O'Connell being forced to compromise on numerous occasions in order to keep the Whigs in power. It became apparent that O'Connell's influence in Ireland had begun to wane, largely as a result of his increasing concentration on parliamentary politics.

As a result of this, the association with the Whigs had all but diminished by 1840, when the National Repeal Association was formed. This agitation and general demand for reform had grown in prominence following the election of the Conservative Peel in 1841. After 1840, O'Connell made the repeal of the Union his sole aim, in effect the campaign seemed a replica of the emancipation campaign, just on a larger scale. O'Connell was hugely successful in drumming up support from the masses, with the Catholic peasantry often turning up in hoards to support.

Again O'Connell relied on support from the Catholic Church, and many bishops openly came out in praise of the movement. But he lost much support from the middle-class Catholics as they were far happier with the materialistic advantages which the union offered them, especially when contrasted against the hardly 'guaranteed' long term benefits of repeal. This can hardly be blamed on O'Connell, who could do little to appease their anxieties about the economic implications of repeal. The Repeal Association

still attracted huge support, the attendance of ' Monster Meetings' was very much a prominent date in any repeal supporters clalendar.

At the height of their popularity, in fact toward the end of the campaign, these meetings brought up to 4 million spectators with them. The campaign was ended however, in 1843, when the British Government banned a meeting in Clontarf, after O'Connell had been thrust into an increasingly threatening posture. O'Connell accepted the decision peacefully, and as a result was criticised by many of his supporters as well as his colleagues. Clontarf was the end of the repeal campaign and effectively the end of O'Connell's career as an Irish Nationalist leader.

The peaceful and negotiating attitude which had been so succesful in his Catholic emancipation campaign, had backfired on him in the repeal campaign. Undoubtedly, the winning of Catholic emancipation was the greatest nationalist victory up until it was effected. The tact which had served him so well in securing election, and thereby forcing emancipation without violence was no longer sufficient. The criticism which he received from groups such as ' Young Ireland' over the Clontarf incident was not without foundation, but was somewhat overlooking of the fact that O'Connell had received much success in the past.

Undoubtedly, O'Connell had failed this time, and possibly some militant action was needed in order to force an Act of such magnitude, but as O'Connell stated himself the repeal campaign had, ' aroused' England ' from a slumber' and made them aware of what Peel called, ' Ireland's social ills'. O'Connell is remembered as such a great nationalist leader because he

opened the door from which improvement in Catholic conditions, and Ireland as a whole, would come flooding. He was the first nationalist to have any real success, and as a result deserves his place in Irish folklore as 'The Liberator'.