

How the irish famine shapes irish social policy assignment

[Sociology](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Social policy Essay 2000 words The single most important event in the shaping of social policy in the 19th century was the great famine of 1845-1849 (Burke 1987). Discuss the impact of the famine on the Irish Poor Law and on the development of Irish social policy and after the famine. Before the Great Famine hit, Ireland was already one the poorest countries in Europe. Income per capita in Britain was over double what it was in Ireland (O Grada, 1993).

Despite the existence of poor laws in England since 1601, poor laws were only brought into Ireland in 1838, 7 years before the first signs of potato blight. The poor laws were finally introduced into Ireland after years of debate about how they should be implemented. In 1833, Richard Whately was sent to Ireland to recommend how the poor and accepted by the government. According to Edwards and Williams (1994) Ireland unlike England which had a system dating back from Tudor time, was looked on as an unspoiled field where a poor law in complete accord with prevailing economic theory could be introduced.

As a result of this, the Poor laws introduced into Ireland were stricter than English Poor Laws. Kinealy (1995) cites three major ways in which the laws differed; firstly and significantly, relief was only given in workhouses in Ireland, outdoor relief was strictly forbidden. Secondly, no "right" to relief existed in Ireland. And thirdly the law of settlement, which stated that a person must have proof of permanent residence in a parish was not introduced into Irish Poor Law as it had been in English Poor Law.

These differences meant that from the outset, Irish paupers were to be treated more harshly than their English equivalent. As Kinealy (2002) puts it The differences between the two poor laws made it clear that the Irish Poor even less deserving than the undeserving English poor The laws were introduced quickly into the country. Within a few years of the laws introduction, the country was divided into 130 administration units, each containing a centrally located workhouse. However, from the beginning, it was apparent that problems existed within the new laws.

Even the commissioner, George Nicolls admitted that the Irish Poor Laws would be unable to provide adequate relief if a period of severe distress or a famine was to occur (Kinealy, 1995) The workhouses had a limited capacity of approximately 100, 000 paupers and under the poor law that Nicolls had introduced, once the workhouses became full, the responsibility of the poor law to provide relief had ended. “ it was feared that any change might become permanent” (Edwards and Williams, 1994, pg 209).

Instead he took a number of steps in combating the issue of potato blight, all the while maintaining a laissez-faire approach to relief. First he set up a relief commission to organise food depots. Next he imported ? 100, 000 worth of Indian maize secretly from the USA. This was sold to the depots around the country. According to Daly (1995), the importation of maize was not an effort to feed the poor, instead it was an attempt to prevent food prices from rising. Next, Peel controversy had the Corn Laws abolished. These laws put a tariff on corn from abroad.

Peel then introduced special famine relief works and by the summer of 1846, approximately 130, 000 were employed on relief works. Daly (1995) states that the 'Freeman's journal' claimed that nobody had died of starvation during Peel's time as Prime Minister. She also states however that the reason for this may not have been a result of Peel's strategies but instead, she suggests, Peel ended his time as Prime Minister before the worst of the famine had come. In the summer of 1846, Peel's conservative government fell and was replaced by John Russell's liberal government.

Peel's government continued with a laissez-faire approach. Despite the extreme distress being experienced at this stage all over Ireland, Russell closed the grain depots and proposed that all further relief works were to be paid by local areas. By the end of 1846, over half of the workhouses were full and having to refuse admittance. In autumn 1846, reports from boards of works stated that the men on the schemes often had no food. Food supplies had become inadequate and were only half of what was usually available. (Daly, 1995). Food prices rose rapidly and forced more and more people into workhouses. When workhouses became full, many boards of guardians provided outdoor relief to additional paupers, against the wishes of the Poor Law Commission. Kineally (1995, pg 111) believes that this was done "due to a combination of fear and compassion". By the start of 1847, soup kitchens ran by voluntary or religious organisations such as the Quakers began to gradually replace the failed public works (Donnelly, 2001).

Finally, in the summer of 1847, when soup kitchens were at their peak, Russel's government completed plans to reform the poor law were

introduced under the Poor Relief Extension Act 1847. Under this act, the full responsibility for famine relief was placed on the poor law system. The act also called for the extension of workhouses to increase their capacity, as many were constantly full. To facilitate these new provisions, the government made a radical change to one of the most central principals of the Poor Law and allowed for outdoor relief.

By doing this the government showed that they were continuing their shift away from the traditional laissez-faire approach to relief and social policy. There were many restrictions to this outdoor relief, for example Those entitled to outdoor relief included the infirm, the old, orphans and widows with more than two legitimate children. Able-bodied destitute people could still receive outdoor relief as a last resort, if the workhouse was full. Outdoor relief was to be provided for no more than two months and should take the form of cooked food (<http://www.rishhistorian.com/IrishFamineTimeline.html>) However this act marked a significant change in Irish social policy in the 19th century. After the famine, the poor law authorities attempted to discourage the use of outdoor relief. Crossman (2002, pg 14) states however that “ they were fighting a losing battle”. Outdoor relief had become very popular among the people. It was seen by many as a more modern approach to social policy. (Crossman, 2002). As a result of the famine, the use of outdoor relief became a permant feature of Irish social policy.

By 1906, the Vice commissioner of the Poor Law Reform found that outdoor relief was Often given to persons who though poor are by no means destitute of resources and means of living... instead of being the sole

supporter of the destitute, it has become merely an item in the receipts of the poor person... this is not at all what was intended by the Poor Law, but the system seems to be popular and appears to have taken root (Crossman, 2006, pg 14) In conclusion, the poor laws introduced into Ireland in 1838 were totally unsuitable to meet the needs of the Irish population.

The laws were inadequately adapted from the Poor Laws of England, a country with entirely different needs than Ireland. As Kinealy (1995, pg 105) states A system of poor relief was transported from the wealthiest and most industrially , government attitudes towards social policy were forced to move away from a traditional laissez-faire approach towards a more modern approach. For these reasons, the famine had a huge impact on the shaping of Irish social policy in the 19th century.

References 1. Burke, H, 1987, The people and the poor law in 19th century Ireland, Women's Education Bureau, West Sussex 2. Crossman, V, 2006, Politics, pauperism and power in the late 19th century, Manchester University Press, Manchester. 3. Daly, M, 1995, The operation of famine relief 1845-1847, in The Great Famine, (ed) Cathal Poirter, Mercier Press in association with Radio Telefis Eireann, Cork 4. Donnelly, J, 2001, The great potato famine, Sutton Publishing Ltd, Gloucestershire. 5.

Edwards, R and Williams T (eds) , 1994, The Great Famine; studies in Irish history 1845-52, Lilliput Press, Dublin. 6. Kinealy, C, 1995, The role of the poor law during the famine in The Great Famine, (ed) Cathal Poirter, Mercier Press in association with Radio Telefis Eireann, Cork. 7. Kinealy, C 2002, the Great Irish Famine: impact ideology and rebellion, Palgrave, Basingstoke. 8. <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-irish-famine-shapes-irish-social-policy-assignment/>

O Grada, C, 1993, Explorations into economic history, 1800-1925, :
Manchester University Press, Manchester. 9. O'Sullivan, P (ed), 1997, The
meaning of the famine, Leicester University Press, London