

Public letter from Vere Foster to Charles Stuart Parnell, Irish politician, asking him to support emigration as a short term solution to Ireland's problems. Parnell did not endorse Foster's views

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Transcript:

DISTRESS IN THE WEST OF IRELAND

Persons of influence in the west of Ireland in favour of the practical rather than the Utopian are urgently entreated to promote the object of the accompanying letter, by encouraging a willingness to accept aid in the form of assisted emigration; thus strengthening the hands of Mr. Parnell in his appeal for American sympathy.

Charles S. Parnell, Esq., New York.

Sir, --As you are a gentleman by birth and education, and are in the enjoyment of youth, of good health, of an independent fortune, and of great influence among the Irish people, I take the liberty of addressing you as follows:

I believe that the prosperity and happiness of the people of Ireland would be greatly advanced by such large increase in the number of freehold properties in land as that the number of resident owners in fee simple should be increased at least one hundredfold. I therefore desire that the multiplication of small holdings in fee simple should be promoted by the abolition of the laws of primogeniture and entail, and by the simplification of legal proceedings for the transfer of ownership in land.

So far I agree with you, and heartily endorse your sentiments; but I cannot believe that the interests of the tenant farmers or of good government would be promoted by adoption of the course proposed by some theoretical enthusiasts--namely, the compulsory purchase by Government of the estates of all landlords, and their subdivision among the present tenants, who would thereafter themselves become landlords through purchase from the Government by means of annual instalments spread over a number of years. For instance, suppose a farm of ten acres, rented at £1 per acre. In cases of compulsory purchase compensation should be liberal, therefore the Government should be expected to pay, say, thirty years' purchase of the rental, 300 pounds. The tenant desirous to purchase the freehold of his farm would have to redeem this sum, according to the usual practice of Government loans, by annual instalments at the rate of five per cent. spread over 35 years, so as to clear off both capital and interest. Accordingly, he would have to pay for thirty-five years an advance of 50 per cent. on his present rent--namely, 15 pounds per annum instead of 10 pounds.

To be sure, he would be his own landlord at the end of that time, but if he finds his present rent burthensome, he would perhaps find its increase by fifty per cent. intolerable, the Government, insisting on payment, would become more unpopular and hateful to the disaffected than ever it has been hitherto, and the Irish difficulty would become intensified; nor can I see, if compulsory subdivision is right, why it should stop short with the tenant farmer, holding perhaps fifty or one hundred or maybe a thousand acres, and not embrace the common labourer by dispossessing all capitalists and employers or labour of every degree, subject to compensation of course, for the benefit of those men only who till the land with their own hands.

Still less can I approve of the advice which you are incessantly tendering to the tenant-farmers of Ireland to demand reductions of rent; to refuse any payment whatever if these demands are not complied with; and to keep, nevertheless, a firm grip of their holdings.

I am bound to say that such advice is most mischievous; that it is calculated to sap the foundations of civilised society by Invalidating all contracts; that it would, if followed, inaugurate a pandemonium, and lead to misery far greater and more widespread than that which already exists; and that it is quite inconsistent with your position in society as a legislator, for lawmakers should not be inciters to lawbreaking. while, however, I dissent from compulsory dispossession, whether for the benefit of tenant or labourer, from violations of law, and from social disorder.

I desire to invite your attention to assisted emigration as the most practicable and certain mode of, not only temporarily but permanently relieving the present poverty and ever-recurring distress in the West of Ireland. It is as natural and prudent for young people to emigrate from over-peopled countries to new regions as it is for young bees to swarm, and it is unstatesmanlike and cruel to the poor to contravene the laws of nature by decrying emigration as some people do. I took an active part in organising and assisting emigration from Ireland to America, and from New York to the West, between twenty and thirty years ago, with the best results. I am now too old to resume the necessary labour, but I believe that, if you would apply your acknowledged talents and influence to solicitation of public subscriptions, and to organising a scheme of assisted emigration to the Western States of America and to Canada, you might be eminently successful in conferring lasting benefits on great numbers of poor people whose normal state is ever verging on starvation.

These persons have no reasonable expectation of improvement in their condition here, but they might, under your auspices, migrate to happier homes in a magnificent country which has an ever-increasing glorious future before it, and where there is already a greater number of inhabitants of Irish extraction than there is even in Ireland itself. If you should think proper to embark in such a project, I feel sure that you will receive the hearty co-operation in money and work of the American people, whether of Irish extraction or otherwise.

In proof of my sincerity, I hereby express my willingness to subscribe towards the proposed Emigration Fund at the rate of 2 pounds for each young man or woman between eighteen and thirty-five years of age, in the proportion of one of the former to two of the latter, because, as men earn higher wages than women, they are usually better able to provide for themselves. This offer to hold good until the end of

the present year, and not to exceed £15,000 in all, and to be paid by me in instalments as may be hereafter arranged on information reaching me from yourself or your agent of the embarkation of each such emigrant from the province of Connaught or from the counties of Donegal, Clare, Kerry, or Cork, with particulars of name, age, and parish.

I am, sir, your obedient servant,

Belfast, January 10, 1880.

VERE FOSTER.

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