Reforming the Undertaker System: Pelhamite Ireland

The Money Bill Dispute

The early 1750s marked the beginning of the emergence of two important factors that would shape the nature of Anglo–Irish politics for the next thirty years: firstly, a fruitful alliance between Irish patriots and undertakers, and secondly, the development of a more proactive Irish policy by the British government. The replacement of Lord Harrington, following a tumultuous period as viceroy, can be seen as a significant milestone in Britain’s rule over Ireland. It was the first time that the British ministry had been drawn to intervene directly in Irish affairs since the Wood’s halfpence dispute of the 1720s. Even the Jacobite threat of 1745–6 had caused less concern for Britain’s ministers. Harrington’s difficulties in Ireland coincided with developments in British imperial policy, effectively the end of the period of, in Burke’s oft repeated phrase, ‘salutary neglect’. The broad aims behind British imperial government had not changed, though there was perhaps a greater willingness to spend money on imperial defence and administration, if possible with increased contributions from the colonies. There was certainly a more determined effort to put Britain’s imperial aims into practice, made possible by the return of stable government under Pelham and the end of war with Britain’s continental neighbours. This, however, did not take account of the growing sense of independence in the colonies, and more particularly the fact that they were enjoying comparative freedom from British interference. However, it can also be argued that the sense that these increasingly valuable colonies were enjoying greater freedoms also prompted action. In the late 1740s changes to the way colonial policy was handled opened up the possibility that a more assertive approach could be adopted towards instability in the Irish administration.

As part of the general increase in attention paid to imperial affairs, individuals with an appreciation of the problems of empire were appointed to key positions. Lord Halifax became president of the board of trade in 1748. He wished to increase the board’s control over the colonies and colonial
patronage. As a result of his bid to improve colonial administration, the privy council began to discuss imperial affairs more frequently and with greater regularity. But intervention by the king ensured that he was unsuccessful in his attempt to gain cabinet status for the first lord of trade. In 1749 Henry Pelham established a committee to study colonial policy and suggest suitable reforms. The Nova Scotia settlement was upgraded, and there was an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to prevent colonies from issuing their own paper currencies. Pelham was determined that colonies should not be reimbursed for money paid out in their own defence, though he was unable to win over Bedford to this scheme. A number of acts were passed which on paper extended British interference in the government of its colonies, in areas like the attestation of wills, restraint of credit, and the construction of industrial sites. The vice-admiralty courts were strengthened as a means of exerting greater control over colonial trade, and in particular stamping out smuggling. These measures had little impact on Ireland and more generally they were unsuccessful due to the inflexible structure of eighteenth-century administration. Yet they set a precedent for the tightening of imperial control that would be introduced by subsequent politicians.

The origins of Britain’s more assertive Irish policy are rather difficult to discern, but they can be found in a combination of factors. Most notably, undertaker rivalry, the growth of patriot feeling, the appointment of ambitious individuals to Irish posts, pressure on the wider imperial system, and a shift away from a policy of ‘salutary neglect’ towards Britain’s colonies. The end result was a change in the nature of Irish government, and a number of other concomitant developments, including the metamorphosis of the office of chief secretary; the suggestion of a more symbiotic relationship between politics and politicians in Britain and Ireland; and the first signs of an attempt to rationalise imperial administration.

The hapless Lord Harrington was replaced by the duke of Dorset, who arrived in Ireland in September 1751, accompanied by his son Lord George Sackville as chief secretary. Despite the disruptions that occurred during Harrington’s viceroyalty, he expected a quiet parliamentary session. Sackville wrote optimistically on 3 October 1751 that ‘everybody seems in the best humour possible and everything looks favourably for a quiet session’. It seems likely that Dorset had every intention of following the precedent of most if not all of the viceroyalties of the preceding twenty years by governing through the undertakers. He had governed through the undertaker system during his previous viceroyalty, therefore circumstances would suggest that the parliamentary session beginning in October 1751 would have opened with Primate Stone, Speaker Henry Boyle and Lord Chancellor Newport fulfilling their duties as parliamentary undertakers.

In reality, however, the Dorset viceroyalty did not follow this traditional pattern, and as a result was very much maligned by contemporary