

John O'Donohoe and the Politics of Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Ontario

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John O'Donohoe is an individual rarely encountered in standard accounts of nineteenth-century Ontario politics. Like many of his politically active contemporaries he had little impact on the debates and controversies which form the staple of traditional political history. Indeed, his major claim to prominence before entering the Senate in 1882 was a brief stint as M.P. for Toronto in the mid-1870s. As a spokesman for Irish Catholic immigrants, however, the most distinctive ethno-religious group in the province at Confederation, O'Donohoe had a significance far greater than these modest achievements suggest. This mandate, the *Globe* explained in an 1874 editorial, endowed him with a status possessed by few other politicians:

He is at the head of a large party of his countrymen, and he represents a section of the community of the Province which in accordance with our theory of Parliamentary Government, should be represented at Ottawa. When he gets up to speak in the House, he will speak not merely for himself, not merely for Toronto, but for numbers scattered far and wide among different counties and various townships...¹

In articulating the political goals of the Irish community and negotiating relations between them and the established authorities, O'Donohoe functioned as an ethnic political broker. Widely believed to control a significant bloc of voters, he consequently figured prominently in the calculations of party notables and election strategists. John O'Donohoe was therefore an influential and often controversial member of the professional political elite of his period, illustrating both the evolution of minority group politics and the impact of religion and ethnicity on the political process in nineteenth-century Ontario.

Although leadership by its nature negates typicality, O'Donohoe's career provides at least a rough index of the response of Irish immigrants to the

¹ *Globe*, 7 December 1874.

political situation in their new environment.² In expressing their interests he articulated the Irish demand for political recognition on a corporate ethnic basis and their desire to live in a society based on religious and ethnic pluralism. To this end he sought to mobilize the ethnic and religious loyalties of Irish immigrants to transform them from a scattered and marginalized element into a cohesive and influential pressure group. Irish Catholics therefore functioned within the political system as an ethno-religious minority group, and O'Donohoe served both as their leader and spokesman and as an intermediary between them and the Canadian political establishment.

Between 1820 and 1860 over 200,000 Irish Catholics emigrated to Upper Canada. The huge Famine influx of the late 1840s placed an enormous burden on the institutions of the host society, for while the majority eventually moved onto the land, many also congregated in urban centres and were only slowly integrated into the embryonic capitalist economy.³ Irish integration was also impeded by a seemingly undifferentiated prejudice stemming from a nativistic reaction against their religion, culture and the destitution in which some arrived. This social ostracism was mirrored in the political arena.⁴ While the liberalism of the Reform party was reminiscent of Daniel O'Connell, George Brown's vitriolic NO POPERY crusade made his party anathema to the Irish; and the close association between Macdonald's Conservatives and the Orange Order rendered the Tories equally objectionable.⁵ Given this social and political isolation, it is not surprising that Irish Catholics withdrew into an exclusive and defensive ethnic group, constituting in the opinion of one hostile observer "a semi-ethnic sect," distinct from the mainstream population.⁶ Irish Catholic alienation was therefore prompted initially by rejection and discrimination but Irish separatism was also fostered by elements within the community as

² The relationship between leaders and rank and file in the evolution of ethnic communities is explored in J. Higham, ed., *Ethnic Leadership in America* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 1-18.

³ The settlement patterns and economic adjustment of Irish Catholics in Ontario have recently attracted considerable scholarly debate. See D. Akenson, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984) and M. Nicolson, "The Irish Experience in Ontario: Rural or Urban?," *Urban History Review* 14 (1985), pp. 37-45.

⁴ Public Archives of Ontario [hereafter PAO], Mackenzie-Lindsay Collection, T. Webster to W.L. Mackenzie, 28 January 1857.

⁵ F.A. Walker, "The Political Opinion of Upper Canadian Catholics," Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Report*, 1955, pp. 75-86. C. Fahey, "Irish Catholics and the Political Culture of Upper Canada: The Case of the Toronto Mirror, 1837-1865," in R. O'Driscoll and L. Reynolds, eds., *The Untold Story: The Irish in Canada* (Toronto: Celtic Arts, 1988), pp. 811-28.

⁶ *Globe*, 25 October 1856.

a strategic response to their new environment.

Ethnic consciousness was first mobilized by the Church, which sponsored the development of a province-wide network of parallel social institutions, designed to assist the adjustment of Irish immigrants and reestablish clerical control over their lives. But these efforts failed to satisfy all the needs of the Irish community. Unable to express the secular nationalism integral to traditional Irish culture, clerical control also frustrated the natural desire for initiative and leadership amongst the laity.⁷ These shortcomings were felt most acutely by the Irish Catholic middle class which began to emerge within a decade of the Famine.

Typical of this group was John O'Donohoe, a young businessman who had arrived in Upper Canada before the Famine.⁸ Though far from wealthy, the O'Donohoes were well-established and stood in sharp contrast to the bulk of Irish urban immigrants. From an early age O'Donohoe demonstrated ambition and organizational talent as well as business acumen. A model Catholic, he served on the executive of various Catholic organizations, and was elected to the Catholic Separate School Board in 1852. He also played a leading role in lay organizations, serving as Chairman of the Catholic Colonization Society and as Vice-President of the Toronto St. Patrick's Society. In 1856 he was elected President of the Young Men's St. Patrick's Association, an exclusively Catholic organization which sought to engender pride in their heritage and secure the collective advancement of Irish Catholic immigrants in their new home.⁹

By the late 1850s O'Donohoe had established a strong record of service to the Catholic Church and the Irish community. He possessed impressive credentials for an aspiring ethnic leader, for his Catholicism and nationalist sympathies appealed to the two main tenets of Irish Catholic culture; and fluency in the Irish language also enhanced his appeal. Only in his late thirties, he had already established a wide personal network and accumulated sufficient prestige to consider entering politics.

In launching his political career O'Donohoe was assisted by like-minded individuals within the Young Men's St. Patrick's Association. As well as

⁷ B. Clarke, "Piety, Nationalism and Fraternity: The Rise of Irish Catholic Voluntary Associations in Toronto." (Ph.D.thesis. University of Chicago, 1986), p. 296.

⁸ O'Donohoe was born in Tuam, Co. Galway, in 1824 and was educated in the Christian Brothers College in that town. He emigrated with his family to Toronto in 1839 and joined his brother Bamey's wholesale and auctioneering business in the mid-1840s. W.S. Wallace, ed., *The Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), p. 626. The most complete biographical sketch is in the *Irish Canadian*, 10 October 1881.

⁹ *Toronto Mirror*, 30 November and 21 December 1855, 21 March 1856, and 20 February 1857; *Irish Canadian*, 10 October 1881.

supporting O'Donohoe's successful bid for a seat on the Toronto Corporation in 1857, this clique participated in the joint decision by a number of Irish ethnic organizations to invite Thomas D'Arcy McGee to Montreal to provide experienced political leadership for the Irish community in the province.¹⁰ A product both of growing Irish assertiveness and increasing resentment at their treatment by the host society, this may be seen as an example of "reactive ethnic militancy," where Irish Catholics, led by a self-conscious elite, were driven by the rejection of external forces to look for leadership within their own ranks.¹¹ Perceiving themselves to be excluded from the political process, they were also aware of the potential power of Irish votes if they could be mobilized by appealing to the ethnic consciousness fostered by religion and nationalism. Organized into an assertive political interest group, Irish ethnicity could thus be used to demand political recognition on a corporate basis, forcing the state to respond to their particular interests and providing leverage for Irish Catholics in their struggle for individual and collective advancement. The personal benefits of this strategy were equally apparent for its promulgators. For, as well as boosting the careers of the politically ambitious Irish Catholic middle class and securing upward mobility for themselves and their supporters, their new mandate as political brokers would also bolster their claim to ethnic leadership alongside the Roman Catholic clergy.¹²

O'Donohoe's entry into public life was therefore overshadowed by McGee, but he soon emerged as a crucial figure in the latter's political machine. Sharing his determination to forward the interests of the Irish community through political action, O'Donohoe also agreed that this could best be achieved in alliance with the Reform party. Under his leadership the Young Men's St. Patrick's Association became a support group for McGee in Toronto, as the president presented the "policy of conciliation with the Reform party" as a means of ending religious persecution and dramatically improving the political and social position of the Irish community in the province.¹³

These overtures came at an opportune moment, for the Reform party's long period in opposition and the humiliating "Double Shuffle" experience

¹⁰ O'Donohoe was elected in the heavily Irish St. David's ward. *Toronto Mirror*, 6 January 1858; R. Burns, "Thomas D'Arcy McGee: A Critical Biography" (Ph.D.thesis, McGill University, 1976).

¹¹ For a theoretical analysis of the politicization of ethnicity, see J. Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 137-41.

¹³ *Toronto Mirror*, 9 October and 20 November 1857; National Archives of Canada [hereafter NACi, John O'Donohoe Papers, McGee to O'Donohoe, 15 October 1857.

forced party strategists to re-appraise their position. Having “ridden the Protestant horse” as far as it would take them, Brown and his colleagues clearly recognized the necessity of broadening the party’s base by appealing to Catholics. While French Canadians were the primary target, the emergence of McGee and O’Donohoe afforded an ideal opportunity of building a bridge to the Irish vote.¹⁴ This support did not come unconditionally, however, and during the 1858 by-elections an arrangement was reached between McGee, his Toronto supporters, and leading Reformers. According to subsequent accounts, the latter promised to suspend their anti-Catholic crusade, enact measures to curtail the Orange Order, and reach a settlement to the education controversy favourable to Catholics. The Reformers also committed themselves to advancing the Irish politically by granting them a more generous share of public patronage once in office and by nominating and supporting Irish candidates at the polls.¹⁵

With Reform support O’Donohoe was re-elected shortly after to the Corporation, where he became Chairman of the Finance Committee; and Frank Smith, another rising Irish star, was elected to the London Corporation. These gains demonstrated both the potential power of the Irish community and the efficacy of supporting the Reform party. But though McGee was soon confidently predicting that “perhaps two thirds of the Catholic Irish in Upper Canada will be found confirmed anti-Ministerialists at the next elections,” there were those within the Irish community who were not so sanguine about such a prospect.¹⁶ The Irish-Reform alliance stood in sharp contrast to the agenda of the Roman Catholic clergy, who had traditionally provided political leadership for the group. Although the French-born Bishop Armand de Charbonnel was reluctant to alienate the new lay elite, the appointment of John Joseph Lynch as Bishop of Toronto in 1860 introduced a new and powerful figure into the Irish Catholic community, leading to the first of a series of clashes between clerical and lay leaders over political matters. The Irish-born Lynch emphasized religion as the primary facet of Irish identity, and his subordination of all other loyalties to the interests of Catholicism was typical of the Ultramontane ideology developing within the North American Church. This made him extremely suspicious of lay initiative, especially when it vitally affected the institutional existence of the Church in the province. Politics, therefore, was a pursuit which could not be

¹⁴ PAO, Mackenzie-Lindsay Collection, J. de Witt to W.L. Mackenzie, 28 January 1858. NAC, G. Brown Papers, L. Holton to Brown, 1 August 1858; J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe: The Voice of Upper Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 263-80.

¹⁵ NAC, C. Murphy Papers, Vol. 48, McGee to J.G. Moylan, 3 June 1861; and G. Brown Papers, L. Holton to Brown, 10 May 1862, and McGee to L. Holton, 1862 (no day or month given).

¹⁶ NAC, G. Brown Papers, McGee to Brown, 20 September 1859.

safely entrusted to the laity, and Lynch immediately set about establishing the primacy of the hierarchy in formulating the political opinions and directing the political behaviour of the Catholic community in Upper Canada.¹⁷

Alarmed by the excesses of European liberalism, Lynch and his colleagues within the Upper Canadian hierarchy shared a fundamentally conservative outlook and viewed the secularist and voluntarist planks of the Reform party with abhorrence. They believed that the interests of the Church were best served by Macdonald's Conservatives, since their alliance with the French Canadian *Bleus* made them of necessity more tolerant of Catholicism in Upper Canada. The recent gains made by the opposition, moreover, ensured that the clergy received a sympathetic hearing from the Conservatives and shortly before the elections of 1861 Lynch succeeded in extracting promises of future concessions in exchange for Irish support at the hustings.¹⁸ Although Macdonald risked alienating some Protestant supporters, his dwindling parliamentary majority necessitated such an alliance, and it was also consistent with his policy of elite accommodation. Believing that the most effective means of conciliating different interest groups was to co-opt their leadership, Macdonald regarded the hierarchy as the natural leaders of the Irish community and the key to securing their votes.¹⁹

The exigencies of Upper Canadian politics made for strange bedfellows indeed, for while both parties openly appealed to Protestant prejudices, neither was above courting the Catholic vote, albeit clandestinely. This situation revealed serious ideological differences within the Irish community, pitting the liberal-minded laity against the conservative hierarchy for control of Irish political opinion. In this case the resources of the church were vital, for the hierarchy commanded a province-wide network and could call on the presence and moral authority of the clergy to mobilize the Catholic vote. Although pockets of support for the "policy of conciliation" survived, the politicized laity were no match for Lynch, and both McGee and O'Donohoe were forced to acknowledge the futility of any Irish political initiative

¹⁷ G. Stortz, "John Joseph Lynch, Archbishop of Toronto: A Biographical Study of Religious, Social and Political Commitment" (Ph.D.thesis, University of Guelph, 1980).

¹⁸ NAC, J.A. Macdonald Papers, Lynch to Macdonald, 29 April 1861.

¹⁹ This practice of elite accommodation became institutionalized with the creation of the federal political system at Confederation. R.V. Presthus, *Elite Accommodation in Canadian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

without the co-operation of the Church.²⁰ It came as little surprise, therefore, when McGee followed the bishops into the Conservative camp shortly thereafter. O'Donohoe's reputation also suffered as a consequence of this setback, and personal factors further contributed to his withdrawal from public life for several years.

Fortunately his past services were not forgotten, and when McGee was appointed Minister of Agriculture in 1864, he rewarded his old ally with the position of Chief Emigration Agent in Toronto. This brought a salary of \$600.00 a year, and the temporary financial security also allowed him to develop a new professional career. After studying law in his spare time he was called to the bar in 1869. With a lucrative practice and the heightened prestige derived from his new professional status, O'Donohoe was now in a position to revive his political career, and in this he was assisted by the emergence of new forces within the Irish community.

O'Donohoe's years on the sidelines were turbulent ones, as the rise of the militantly nationalistic Hibernian Benevolent Society demonstrated both the resentment of Irish Catholic masses at their continued marginalization, and their willingness to resort to violence to redress these grievances.²¹ This was an aspect of Irish culture frequently lamented by the host society, but the close association between the Hibernians and the Fenian Brotherhood was even more damaging, for it suggested that a radical minority were even prepared to support an external conspiracy to overthrow the state. While obviously exacerbating existing resentment, the potential threat of Irish alienation also increased the bargaining power of Irish leaders in their relations with the Canadian political establishment. And the coming of Confederation further increased the significance of the Irish vote in Ontario.

The demand for Irish political recognition and advancement was further intensified by the entry of Irish nationalists into conventional politics after the abortive Fenian raids of 1866. This development first surfaced in June of 1867 when a huge convention of Ontario Catholics was organized in Toronto to protest their continued political inferiority and devise a strategy which would secure equality with their "fellow citizens of other creeds in all their political rights and freedoms."²² Although this meeting had little immediate impact, it demonstrated the persistence of Irish alienation and brought

²⁰ Analysis of voting patterns in the 1861 election suggests that the bulk of the Irish vote went to the Conservatives at the behest of the Roman Catholic clergy. J. Wearing, "Pressure Group Politics in Canada West Before Confederation," Canadian Historical Association, *Report*, 1967, p. 88. See also *Globe*, 13 July 1861.

²¹ B. Clarke, "Piety, Nationalism, and Fraternity," pp. 289-415; P. Toner, "The Rise of Irish Nationalism in Canada" (Ph.D. thesis, National University of Ireland, 1974); G. Sheppard, "God Save the Green: Fenianism and Fellowship in Victorian Ontario," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 20 (1987), pp. 129-44.

²² NAC, J.S. Macdonald Papers, F. Smith *et al.*, 21 June 1867.

together middle-class Catholics such as O'Donohoe and Frank Smith, and Irish nationalist leaders such as Patrick Boyle, who claimed to speak primarily for the plebian Irish. O'Donohoe's prominent role in the Convention marked the rehabilitation of his political career and also began an extremely profitable alliance with the organized nationalist movement in Ontario. The Hibernians offered manpower and a rudimentary province-wide organization, while their weekly newspaper, the *Irish Canadian*, edited by Boyle, enjoyed a large circulation.²³ By allying with the nationalists O'Donohoe secured a reliable means of disseminating political information and increasing his own personal stature, and he also gained access to an embryonic network for mobilizing Irish voters. Disappointed in their hope of achieving Irish deliverance through the Fenians, the nationalists were now looking to conventional politics as a means of continuing their campaign for Irish rights. And in O'Donohoe they found an ally with impeccable patriotic credentials who also possessed the respectability and skills required to represent Irish interests in the political arena. Unlike other members of the Irish middle class, O'Donohoe never concealed his support for physical-force nationalism and he was regarded as "one who never halts on the road to patriotism and philanthropy, but keeps due on regardless of sordid gain or the frowns of office."²⁴

These services to the Irish cause were rewarded in 1869 when O'Donohoe was invited to deliver the keynote address at the annual St. Patrick's Day parade, long an occasion of nationalist triumphalism.²⁵ Predictably, politics constituted his main focus and in discussing the position of the Irish in their new home, O'Donohoe insisted that political weakness still constituted the main impediment to acceptance and success. And he reminded his audience of the recent consequences of this impotence:

During the past year we have seen our people forced into prison, and obliged to flee the land which they have helped to make home... without a man belonging to us to tell the Minister of Justice to stay his abuse of power. Had we our fair proportion, or even less, of representatives, would or could this occur? Look at the Legislature of Ontario and you find our body as completely excluded as if we formed no portion of the body

²³ As late as 1892 the *Irish Canadian* had a circulation of 14,000 and was acknowledged to be the most popular and influential Irish Catholic newspaper in the Dominion. M. McGowan, "We are All Canadians: A Social, Religious and Cultural Portrait of Toronto's English-Speaking Roman Catholics, 1890-1920" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1988), p. 275.

²⁴ *Irish Canadian*, 5 August 1868.

²⁵ C.J. O'Fahey, "Reflections on the St. Patrick's Day Orations of John Ireland," *Ethnicity* 2 (1975), pp. 244-57.

politic.²⁶

But O'Donohoe had clearly learned from his previous mistakes, and while calling for a new political initiative, he conceded that this could only be done with the approval of the clergy:

Let us practice unanimity and in cordial co-operation with the authorities of our Church, from [*sic*] a united phalanx determined to live in harmony with all men – but determined for our right.²⁷

This desire to remedy Irish political exclusion was clearly shared by his colleagues. Even the Catholic hierarchy was exasperated with their treatment by the Conservatives, and with a Liberal victory widely anticipated in the forthcoming provincial elections, there was little incentive to continue this alliance. The impending election therefore provided an ideal opportunity to reappraise their stance.

The formation of the Catholic League in Toronto in December 1869 broke new ground for Irish political culture. Stressing the achievements of the Irish community in the province rather than their marginalized status, its prospectus insisted that as taxpayers and productive members of the community they were entitled to equality of citizenship in the form of political representation and patronage. The League was therefore a clear demand that the Irish Catholic community be taken seriously as a political interest group, and letters were immediately dispatched to both political parties demanding their response to a list of demands.²⁸ The League reflected a new confidence stemming from prosperity and the gradual acculturation of Irish immigrants in Ontario. It also demonstrated a growing realization of their potential power, and produced an unprecedented unanimity among the leaders of Irish political opinion. Prominent support came from Conservatives such as Frank Smith, founding president of the organization, and John O'Connor from Essex, the only Irish Catholic M.P. from Ontario. Liberal Irish were represented by O'Donohoe, initially secretary of the League, and the organization was enthusiastically publicized by Patrick Boyle in the *Irish Canadian*. The scheme also won the endorsement of the Roman Catholic hierarchy as Archbishop Lynch publicly commended the leaders for their noble action, encouraged them to conclude a formal alliance with the party most favourable to their interests, and advised them to

²⁶ *Irish Canadian*, 24 March 1869.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ M. Nicolson, "The Irish Vote and the Catholic League: Early Ethnic Politics in Toronto," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association (Guelph, 1984), p. 20. NAC, John O'Donohoe Papers, O'Donohoe *et al.*, 1 March 1871.

organize the enfranchised Irish to “vote as one man for that party.”²⁹

This union of all shades of Irish opinion greatly assisted the League in its attempt to attract attention to Irish interests, for the fragmentation of the Irish vote had been a major source of weakness in the past. The impending elections therefore made the prospect of an Irish bloc vote extremely attractive, and both parties responded immediately. Macdonald’s tactic of elite accommodation had served to keep the Conservatives in power virtually since the 1850s, but the gradual defection of Protestant supporters now made it imperative to conciliate the Irish lay elite. With this in mind the president of the Catholic League, Frank Smith, was appointed to the Senate in early 1871, and the Conservatives promised to nominate a large number of Irish candidates in the forthcoming provincial elections. Private assurances were also given that the remaining Fenian prisoners would be released, thus resolving a long-standing Irish grievance.³⁰

These concessions demonstrated the immediate efficacy of the League in pressing Irish demands, but Macdonald was disappointed in his hope of undermining Irish alienation. Liberal supporters dismissed it as a death-bed conversion, and O’Donohoe accused Smith of being seduced by the Tories and personally “selected by the slippery Premier to carry his nefarious design of destroying the League into effect.”³¹ O’Donohoe was far from being a disinterested observer, however, for his years of service were finally rewarded with the Liberal nomination in East Peterboro. With the personal endorsement of Archbishop Lynch, O’Donohoe secured the bulk of the Irish vote in the riding, but his nationalist reputation weakened his appeal to Protestant voters.³² Local Conservatives astutely exploited this difficulty by depicting him as a Fenian and sworn enemy of the Orange Order, and this Protestant backlash was compounded by a shortage of funds, resulting in a narrow defeat.³³

Despite this personal reversal O’Donohoe could take some satisfaction from the contest, for the activities of the Catholic League broke the Conservative strangle-hold on the Irish vote and contributed to the Liberal

²⁹ Nicolson, “Irish Vote,” p. 20.

³⁰ NAC, J.A. Macdonald Papers, Vol. 574, Macdonald to J.S. Macdonald, 29 November 1870. Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto [hereafter AAT], Lynch Papers, J.A. Macdonald to Lynch, 10 January 1871.

³¹ *Irish Canadian*, 22 May 1872.

³² AAT, Lynch Papers, Lynch to O’Donohoe, 12 February 1871; *Irish Canadian*, 22 March 1871.

³³ J.L.P. O’Hanly, *The Political Standing of Irish Catholics in Canada: A Critical Analysis of its Causes and Suggestions, for its Amelioration* (Ottawa, 1872), p. 58.

victory.³⁴ Determined to consolidate their gains with a federal election pending, the Liberals honoured their pre-election commitment and immediately announced their intention of appointing an Irish Catholic to the cabinet. O'Donohoe had originally been earmarked for this position, but his defeat caused the appointment of R.W. Scott from Ottawa as Edward Blake's Commissioner of Crown Lands.³⁵ Coming after Smith's elevation to the Senate, this appointment demonstrated the new power and respect wielded by the Irish, and encouraged the Liberals within the Catholic League to redouble their efforts for the approaching federal contest.

To strengthen this organization and formally establish it as a Liberal party machine, remaining Conservatives were expelled in 1872 and the executive came firmly under Liberal control. O'Donohoe replaced Frank Smith as President, and prominent Irish nationalists also moved into more influential positions. A propaganda campaign was also undertaken to convince Irish Catholics that they had consistently fared better in terms of representation and government patronage when the Liberals were in power.³⁶ Nationalists also threw their support behind the Liberals, and Patrick Boyle appealed to anti-Orangeism and sentimental patriotism to persuade his readers.

O'Donohoe therefore had cause for satisfaction entering the 1872 federal contest. Instead of the former indifference a total of eight Catholics, evenly divided between both parties, were nominated, and once again O'Donohoe served as the Irish Liberal standard-bearer.³⁷ Running in his home riding of East Toronto, the large Irish presence combined with the endorsement of the *Globe* and the *Irish Canadian* made him confident of victory on this occasion. An early lead and the promise of a huge victory celebration brought large numbers of Irish workers onto the streets. But the Conservatives were unwilling to accept defeat and mustering all their resources they ensured that "money carried the day."³⁸

Although this defeat was a major disappointment for O'Donohoe and confirmed the power of the Orange Order in Toronto, he delivered an extremely creditable performance in coming within eighty-four votes of victory in a Conservative stronghold. Also satisfying was his success in

³⁴ B. Hodgins, *John Sandfield Macdonald, 1812-1872* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 113.

³⁵ AAT, Lynch Papers, G. Brown to Lynch, 21 December 1871; J.D. Livermore, "The Ontario Election of 1871: A Case Study of the Transfer of Political Power," *Ontario History* 71 (1979), p. 48.

³⁶ O'Hanly, *Political Standing*, p. 50.

³⁷ For an excellent discussion of the battle for the Irish vote in this election see D. Swainson, "James O'Reilly and Catholic Politics," *Historic Kingston* 21 (1973), pp. 11-21.

³⁸ PAO, A. Campbell Papers, C.J. Campbell to A. Campbell, 18 August 1872.

mobilizing the Irish vote, for it was reported that an overwhelming majority of Irish voters proved faithful to their countryman.³⁹ O'Donohoe had clearly become the most popular Irish political figure in Ontario, and his growing stature as a political broker was not lost on the Liberals. Aware of the Irish obsession with patronage, the party immediately moved to reward his services by appointing him Crown Attorney for York and the City of Toronto. A lucrative and prestigious position, this appointment was a major boost to his reputation and obviously reinforced O'Donohoe's belief in the efficacy of political activity as a route to upward mobility. The appointment also provided gratifying evidence of the rewards accruing to those who supported the Liberals. But neither the prestige nor the salary slaked his appetite for parliamentary honours, and after the Pacific Scandal brought down the Conservatives, he resigned his position to contest the elections called for early 1874.

Running once again in East Toronto, O'Donohoe was in a stronger position than before. The enthusiastic support of Boyle and the *Irish Canadian*, combined with his own record of service to the cause, ensured that there was no shortage of nationalist shock-troops at his disposal. But O'Donohoe had learned from his previous experiences and nothing was left to chance. Financial and physical resources were carefully mobilized and liberally employed during the contest and this combination of votes, money and violence was sufficient to ensure victory.⁴⁰

After years of frustration this was a remarkable triumph of Irish political power and was celebrated in great style. A boisterous torch-light procession wound its way through the streets for hours and around midnight over two thousand people gathered in St. Lawrence Hall to toast the victor. Feasting on fried bacon and sweet cakes washed down with liquor provided from Liberal party coffers, it must have seemed to the assembled that they had finally "arrived." Having survived the fever sheds and the refrain of "No Irish Need Apply," they had succeeded within thirty years in electing an Irish Catholic to represent the "Belfast of Canada." Obviously the crowning event of O'Donohoe's career to that point, the election consolidated his reputation as the most influential Irish politician in the province and secured his credentials as a member of the Canadian political establishment. Heartening also was the news that throughout the province Irish voters had followed his lead. Over two-thirds were reported to have voted Liberal, contributing to that party's overwhelming majority in the new parliament.⁴¹

With the Liberals now in power both in Ottawa and Toronto, and

³⁹ Ibid., 21 September 1872.

⁴⁰ PAO, E. Blake Papers, A. Mackenzie to Blake, 4 January 1874; *Irish Canadian*, 7 January, 21 January, and 18 February 1874.

⁴¹ *Irish Canadian*, 11 April 1874.

O'Donohoe ensconced in the House of Commons, those Irish Catholics who had doggedly supported the Liberals since the 1850s were naturally overjoyed.⁴² These expectations were unrealistic, however, and a number of incidents quickly developed which soured even the most devoted Irish Liberals. Predictably, given their obsession with symbolic recognition, the question of cabinet representation rapidly became a bone of contention; for while Mackenzie's original cabinet included two Ontario Catholics, neither was of Irish origin, and this was deemed unacceptable. A delegation soon called on the Prime Minister to demand that one of their own be taken in and a petition was presented identifying O'Donohoe as the most popular candidate. Southern Ontario already had its quota of cabinet positions, however, and O'Donohoe's inexperience coupled with his reputation as an Irish extremist, militated against his appointment.⁴³ Although the Liberals engineered the election of T.W. Anglin as Speaker of the House in an obvious attempt to mollify the Irish, it failed to conciliate O'Donohoe and his supporters.⁴⁴

This failure to appoint an Irish Catholic to the cabinet or to increase the amount of patronage allocated to them, was exacerbated by the government's handling of the various religious issues which emerged in the following years. Neither the New Brunswick school question nor the Riel amnesty controversy were dealt with in a manner acceptable to the Irish. O'Donohoe, in fact, broke party ranks on the latter issue, delivering an impassioned parliamentary speech in defence of the rights of the Métis minority, which was "such as to command the respect of everyone not blinded by prejudice."⁴⁵

Having failed to secure the cabinet seat which he had expected, O'Donohoe suffered a more serious reversal when his election was controverted, and he was unseated on grounds of bribery and intimidation late in 1874. Although clearly guilty, O'Donohoe himself had been the victim of such tactics in the past and to have his hard-won victory snatched away after so many defeats was heart-breaking. In these circumstances it was easy to believe that he had been singled out for censure because of residual hostility to Irish Catholicism and a determination that "no Papist [should]... ever attain to places of trust or emolument."⁴⁶ In re-contesting the seat,

⁴² *Irish Canadian*, 14 January 1874.

⁴³ D. Thomson, *Alexander Mackenzie: Clear Grit* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1960), p. 172. The composition of his cabinet remained a constant difficulty for the Irish were not alone in feeling overlooked. See Sister T.A. Burke, "Mackenzie and His Cabinet, 1873-1878," *Canadian Historical Review* 41 (1960), pp. 128-48.

⁴⁴ *Irish Canadian*, 26 November 1873, 3 June and 16 September 1874.

⁴⁵ *Irish Canadian*, 22 April 1874; AAT, Lynch Papers, Lynch to Cardinal Taschereau, 23 November 1874; P. Toner, "The New Brunswick School Question," *Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Study Sessions* 37 (1970), pp. 85-95.

⁴⁶ *Irish Canadian*, 2 December 1874.

O'Donohoe indeed faced a bitter campaign, as his controversial career was scoured to fuel traditional anti-Irish prejudices. His alleged Fenian sympathies were once again unearthed, and he was touted as a tool of the Ultramontane clergy. To these was added the crime of supporting the Manitoba rebels, and it was alleged that his "hands were red with the blood of Thomas Scott."⁴⁷ The Liberal press did its best to combat this campaign, lauding O'Donohoe as a man of "great political instinct and statesmanlike grasp of mind."⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the defection of a large number of non-Irish voters left O'Donohoe over four hundred votes behind when the polls closed.

A life-long Liberal supporter, he could claim a large measure of the credit for swinging the Irish vote to that party in the 1870s. Yet after twenty years of service he was left completely excluded from political life and forced to return to a private practice neglected because of these labours. To these personal grievances was added the fact that the Liberals had refused to honour their commitments to the wider Irish community. When O'Donohoe met the Prime Minister shortly afterwards, he was rejected with "warmth if not impudence."⁴⁹ This seemed poor gratitude, indeed, and made the recent Conservative performance difficult to ignore. For Macdonald was indicating a renewed interest in winning Irish support, and after much persuasion he induced O'Donohoe to throw in his lot with the Conservatives. The misery experienced by Irish Catholic workers during the economic recession of the late 1870s was used to justify this defection, since O'Donohoe claimed he could no longer support a party which "sacrifice[d] the working class of Canada to the ruinous and brutal teachings of free trade."⁵⁰ But it is clear that the promise of personal reward and generosity towards his group was the real motive for altering his political allegiance. Although dramatic and abrupt, this shift appeared to cost him little internal support, for Irish revulsion against the Liberals was widespread on the eve of the 1878 federal election.

O'Donohoe played a prominent role in this campaign and in the provincial election of 1879, and the results on both occasions were gratifying. Assisted by his faithful ally Patrick Boyle, O'Donohoe was soon as active on behalf of the Conservatives as he had previously been on the Reform side. The old watch-words of organization and unity were revived, and to these was added the new claim that Catholics held the balance of power in fifty constituencies in Ontario. And since the Liberals had "changed their policies and their platform and violated every plank upon which they ever stood," he argued that their only option was to support the

⁴⁷ Clarke, "Piety, Nationalism and Fraternity," pp. 464-65.

⁴⁸ *Globe*, 5 and 7 December 1874

⁴⁹ *Irish Canadian*, 8 March 1876.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Conservatives.⁵¹ O'Donohoe's support, Macdonald was informed by one correspondent, "could make a difference of 60 or 70 votes" in any constituency and at a time when most elections were won by less than a hundred votes, this influence was obviously an extremely significant factor in bringing the Irish back to the Conservatives in 1878.⁵²

This realignment of the Irish vote contributed to the return of the federal Conservatives to power, and also brought immediate and tangible benefits to the Irish community. Four Catholics were returned in the federal election of 1878, and nine were elected in the provincial contest the following year. After decades of exclusion from the political arena this breakthrough represented a dramatic improvement in the political standing of the Irish community and vindicated the strategy of ethnic politics pursued by the group's leadership since the 1850s. But while this had been largely developed and tirelessly pursued by O'Donohoe, he still had not received the anticipated reward. The dilemma which he posed for the Conservatives demonstrated the ambiguous position in which the Irish community in Ontario still found itself, for while Macdonald was informed that O'Donohoe's election would "strengthen the party both from a Dominion and local point of view," the Prime Minister was concerned that many Protestant supporters would also be alienated.⁵³ As a radical nationalist and an avowed enemy of the Orange Order, O'Donohoe could mobilize the Irish vote, but since his followers did not command a majority in any riding Macdonald also had grave doubts about his electability.⁵⁴

The problem for the Prime Minister was that his strategy of elite accommodation had failed to achieve the expected result in this instance. It was increasingly obvious that neither Frank Smith nor John O'Connor, his leading Irish Conservative supporters, were sufficiently influential within their own group to act as reliable brokers in delivering the Irish vote. The party desperately needed a representative with the prestige and influence to control this vote, and Macdonald reluctantly concluded that O'Donohoe alone possessed such credentials. Despite previous difficulties with the clergy and lingering hostility on the part of some of his former Liberal colleagues, O'Donohoe's nationalist leanings and his long years of service ensured that he was enormously popular with his own people. Only he, the Prime Minister was informed, could command the support and respect of the "Irish Roman Catholics to a man, from the Archbishop to the hackman on the street," and

⁵¹ *Irish Canadian*, 4 September 1878.

⁵² NAC, J.A. Macdonald Papers, Vol. 351, A. Boulton to Macdonald, 2 September 1878.

⁵³ NAC, Mackenzie Bowell Papers, Vol. 1, F. Smith to Bowell], 19 April 1879.

⁵⁴ NAC, J.A. Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to J. Johnston, 23 April 1879.

his informant insisted that it would be useless “to fight for the Roman Catholic vote without him next election.”⁵⁵

As well as mobilizing votes for the Conservatives, O’Donohoe’s special rapport with Irish nationalists was desperately needed by Macdonald at that time. Deteriorating economic conditions and the emergence of a second generation ready to perpetuate the Old World tribal feud led to an increase in Orange-Green violence in the late 1870s. This revival of ethnic confrontation facilitated the re-emergence of radical Irish nationalism in Canada, and reports of a resurgent Fenian movement added new urgency to the Conservative desire to accommodate the Irish elite. Previously desirable from the perspective of partisan advantage, conciliating the Irish was now necessitated by the requirements of national security, and Macdonald eagerly sought to find O’Donohoe a safe seat in the upcoming federal election.⁵⁶

The Irish leader was now close to sixty, however, and his many defeats had obviously dissipated his enthusiasm for the cut and thrust of electoral politics. Although still eager for political glory, his obvious repugnance to the non-Irish population made him wary of risking another electoral battle and he chose instead to accept a safer form of advancement. Shortly before the 1882 elections an agreement was worked out whereby O’Donohoe would be appointed to the Senate and taken into the cabinet as Minister without Portfolio, in return for mobilizing Irish voters for the party and cooling the tempers of disaffected nationalists. As Macdonald explained to the Governor General:

I find some dissatisfaction existing among Irish Catholics due to their want of position in Ontario – indeed in Canada generally – By far the most influential Roman Catholic in Ontario is Mr. O’Donohoe of Toronto. – We need have no fear now... that the Irish Americans will get any material countenance from their countrymen in Canada.⁵⁷

Although Macdonald did experience some difficulty with the Orangemen, his arrangement with the Irish elite worked to their mutual satisfaction. The Tories retained their hold on power, and as well as securing a number of high-profile government positions the contest also saw the election of six Catholics from Ontario. A further indication of their growing political power, the election of 1882 confirmed that Irish Catholics were finally beginning to achieve the recognition and influence which their

⁵⁵ NAC, J.A. Macdonald Papers, Vol. 265, J. Shiels to Macdonald, October 1881 (no day given).

⁵⁶ NAC, Lord Lorne Papers, Vol. 1, Macdonald to Lome, 26 January and 26 February 1881.

⁵⁷ NAC, Lord Lorne Papers, Vol. 1, Macdonald to Lome, 30 May and 28 July 1882.

leaders had long demanded. In hailing the results as “a great day for Ireland,” the *Irish Canadian* undoubtedly reflected the sentiments of its readers. O’Donohoe unfortunately never received the promised cabinet seat, for the Orange Order vehemently opposed it and Macdonald was unwilling to commit political suicide by alienating them further. The Senate appointment provided a fitting climax to O’Donohoe’s career, however, and he remained in the upper house until his death in 1902.

O’Donohoe’s career as an ethnic politician was built on the presence in Ontario of a distinct religious and cultural minority. Perceiving themselves to be excluded from politics because of antipathy to these alien traits, Irish Catholics produced an indigenous leadership cadre to represent their group interests and demand a voice in the political process. A driving force behind this initiative, O’Donohoe deserves credit for forcing the political establishment to recognize Irish Catholics as a distinct sector within the Canadian polity, with interests both legitimate and deserving of accommodation. Given the sectarian basis of Ontario political culture, with both parties responsible to an electorate generally animated by anti-Catholicism, this was a remarkable achievement. The bias of Ontario politics made O’Donohoe’s task as a political broker extremely problematic, as did the internal divisions which emerged among Irish immigrants as they adjusted to their new environment. Conflicting ideologies, class identifications and religious commitments, and different responses to their countries of origin and adoption constantly undermined the unity which Irish leaders sought to foster. And these internal tensions were manifested most clearly in disputes over the political agenda and party allegiance which the group should subscribe to. Although enjoying a broad appeal, therefore, O’Donohoe spoke primarily for those within the Irish community who emphasized a secular rather than religious dimension to Irish ethnicity and demanded a vigorous assertion both of the Irish presence in Canada and of their commitment to the homeland. Though frequently submerged by the conservative and assimilationist tendencies articulated by the clergy and their lay supporters, O’Donohoe’s success demonstrated the enduring influence and voting power of the liberal-democratic and nationalistic element within Irish immigrant culture.

Perhaps the greatest irony of O’Donohoe’s career, given his long association with the Liberal party, was that he ended his life as a Conservative. While his defection in the late 1870s was undoubtedly motivated by personal considerations, it also reflected a fundamental incompatibility between Irish and Canadian liberalism. Closely identified with Catholicism since the time of O’Connell, the Irish emphasis on patronage and their personal conception of government was also difficult to reconcile with the doctrinaire secularism and abhorrence of patronage professed by Liberal leaders such as Brown and Mackenzie. More flexible and pragmatic than its

opposite, nineteenth-century Conservatism made few demands of its adherents; and Macdonald's tendency to view society in corporate terms also made him more receptive to the Irish demands for recognition on an ethnic basis. In attempting to induce his followers to vote Liberal, O'Donohoe was therefore fighting an uphill battle. And his defection to the Conservatives may be seen as a belated recognition that Irish-Catholic interests were best served in alliance with that party, despite their close association with the Orange Order.

A product of the Irish response to their new environment, O'Donohoe personified the phenomenon of minority politics which was to become an increasingly common feature of the Canadian political landscape with the advent of large-scale immigration. Like future leaders of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities O'Donohoe spoke the language of grievance and separation, yet the whole thrust of his career was to integrate Irish Catholics into the political structures of the state. Although his use of ethnicity as a political strategy was frequently condemned as divisive and disruptive, it was ultimately beneficial. For, in forcing the state to respond to Irish interests he mitigated Irish alienation, and facilitated the peaceful adjustment of a group which could have otherwise become subversive to their new homeland. But this was far from being a one-sided process, and in securing the entrenchment of minority representation, O'Donohoe contributed to the evolution of a pluralistic rather than a monolithically Protestant and British Ontario.