

Constitution of the United Irishmen 1797

In the present era of reform, when unjust governments are falling in every quarter of Europe, when religious persecution is compelled to abjure her tyranny over conscience, when the rights of men are ascertained in theory, and theory substantiated by practice, when antiquity can no longer defend absurd and oppressive forms, against the common sense and common interests of mankind, when all governments are acknowledged to originate from the people, and to be so far only obligatory, as they protect their rights and promote their welfare, we think it our duty, as Irishmen, to come forward, and state what we feel to be our heavy grievance, and what we know to be its effectual remedy. We have no national government, we are ruled by Englishmen, and the servants of Englishmen, whose object is the interest of another country, whose instrument is corruption, and whose strength is the weakness of Ireland; and these men have the whole of the power and patronage of the country, as means to seduce and subdue the honesty of her representatives in the legislature. Such an extrinsic power, acting with uniform force, in a direction too frequently opposite to the true line of our obvious interest, can be resisted with effect solely by unanimity, decision, and spirit in the people, qualities which may be exerted most legally, constitutionally, efficaciously, by the great measure, essential to the prosperity and freedom of Ireland, an equal representation of all the people in parliament.

Impressed with these sentiments, we have agreed to form an association, to be called the Society of United Irishmen, and we do pledge ourselves to our country, and mutually to each other, that we will steadily support, and endeavour by all due means to carry into effect the following resolutions:

- 1st. Resolved, That the weight of English influence in the government is so great, as to require a cordial union among all the

people of Ireland, to maintain that balance which is essential to the preservation of our liberties, and extension of our commerce.

2nd. That the sole constitutional mode by which this influence can be opposed is by a complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in parliament.

3rd. That no reform is practicable, efficacious, or just, which shall not include Irishmen of every religious persuasion.

Satisfied, as we are, that the intestine divisions among Irishmen have too often given encouragement and impunity to profligate, audacious, and corrupt administrations, in measures which, but for these divisions, they durst not have attempted, we submit our resolutions to the nation, as the basis of our political faith. We have gone to what we conceived to be the root of the evil. We have stated what we conceive to be remedy. With a parliament thus formed, everything is easy – without it, nothing can be done – and we do call on, and most earnestly exhort our countrymen in general to follow our example, and to form similar societies in every quarter of the kingdom, for the promotion of constitutional knowledge, the abolition of bigotry in religion and politics, and the equal distribution of the rights of man throughout all sects and denominations of Irishmen. The people, when thus collected, will feel their own weight, and secure that the power which theory has already admitted as their portion, and to which, if they be not aroused by their present provocations to vindicate it, they deserve to forfeit their pretensions for ever.

1st. This society is constituted for the purpose of forwarding a brotherhood of affection, a community of rights, and a union of power among Irishmen of every religious persuasion; and thereby to obtain a complete reform in the legislature, founded on the principles of civil, political, and religious liberty.

2nd. Every candidate for admission into this society shall be proposed by one member and seconded by another, both of whom shall vouch for his character and principles. The candidate to be

balloted for on the society's subsequent meeting, and if one of the beans shall be black, he shall stand rejected.

3rd. Each society shall fix upon a weekly subscription suited to the circumstances and convenience of its numbers, which they shall regularly return to their baronial by the proper officer.

4th. The officers of this society shall be a secretary and treasurer, who shall be appointed by ballot every three months: on every first meeting in November, February, May, and August.

5th. A society shall consist of no more than twelve members, and those as nearly as possible of the same street or neighbourhood, whereby they may be all thoroughly known to each other, and their conduct be subject to the censorial check of all.

6th. Every person elected a member of this society shall, previous to his admission, take the following test. But in order to diminish risk, it shall be taken in a separate apartment, in the presence of the persons who proposed and seconded him only, after which the new member shall be brought into the body of the society, and there vouched for by the same.

TEST

In the awful presence of God, First Name Surname, do voluntarily declare, that I will persevere in endeavouring to form a brotherhood of affection among Irishmen of every religious persuasion, and that I will also persevere in endeavours to obtain an equal, full, and adequate representation of all the people of Ireland. I do further declare, that neither hopes, fears, rewards, or punishments, shall ever induce me, directly or indirectly, to inform on, or give evidence against, any member or members of this or similar societies for an act or expression of theirs, done or made collectively or individually in or out of this society, in pursuance of the spirit of this obligation.

7th. No person, though he should have taken the test, will be considered as an United Irishman until he has contributed to the

funds of the institution, or longer than he shall continue to pay such contribution.

8th. No communication relating to the business of the institution shall be made to any United Irishman on any pretence whatever, except in his own society or committee, or by some member of his own society or committee.

9th. When the society shall amount to the number of twelve members, it shall be equally divided by lot (societies in country places to divide as may best suit their local situation), that is, the names of all the members shall be put into a hat or box, the secretary or treasurer shall draw out six individually, which six shall be considered the senior society, and the remaining six the junior, who shall apply to the baronial committee, through the delegates of the senior society, for a number.

This mode shall be pursued until the whole neighbourhood is organized.

Order of Business at Meetings

1st. New members read declaration and test, during which subscriptions to be collected.

2nd. Reports of committees received.

3rd. Communications called for.

4th. Candidates balloted for.

5th. Candidates proposed.

Constitution of Committees

Baronial Committees

1st. When any barony or other district shall contain from four to ten societies, the secretaries of these shall constitute a lower baronial

committee, they should not exceed ten, and be numbered in the order of their formation.

2nd. An upper baronial, to consist of ten secretaries from ten lower baronials.

3rd. Baronial committees shall receive delegates from societies of a contiguous barony, provided said barony did not contain four baronial societies.

County Committees

1st. When any county shall contain four or more upper baronial committees, their secretaries shall assemble and choose deputies to form a county committee.

2nd. County committees shall receive delegates from baronial committees of adjacent counties, if said counties do not contain four baronial committees.

Provincial Committees

1st. When two or more counties shall have county committees, two persons shall be elected by ballot from each to form a provincial committee (for three months).

2nd. Delegates from county committees in other provinces will be received, if such provinces do not contain two county committees.

National Committees

That when two provincial committees are formed, they shall elect five persons each by ballot to form a national committee.

Societies first meetings in November, February, May and August to be on or before the 5th, baronial committees on or before the 8th, county committees on or before the 25th of the above months.

Baronial, county, and provincial committees, shall meet at least once in every month, and report to their constituents.

Names of committee men shall not be known by any person but by those who elect them.

Test for Secretaries of Societies or Committees

In the awful presence of God I, First Name Surname, do voluntarily declare that as long as I shall hold the office of secretary to this I will, to the utmost of my abilities faithfully discharge the duties thereof. That all papers or documents received by me as secretary I will in safety keep; I will not give any of them, or any copy or copies of them, to any person or persons, members or others, but by a vote of this and that I will, at the expiration of my secretaryship deliver up to this all such papers as may be in my possession...