Beresford, John

by James Kelly

Beresford, John (1738–1805), politician, of Abbeville, Co. Dublin, and Walworth, Co. Londonderry, was born 14 March 1738, fifth but second surviving son of Marcus Beresford, 1st earl of Tyrone, and Lady Catherine Beresford (née Power), Baroness de la Poer. Educated at Kilkenny schools and TCD (1755–8), he enrolled in Lincoln's Inn in 1756, but though he was called to the Irish bar in 1761, he never practised. In November 1760 he married Annette (Anne) Constantia, daughter of the comte de Ligondes of Auvergne, France, who had settled in England; they had four sons and five daughters before her death in 1770. By this date, Beresford was one of the leading officeholders in the Irish administration. Elected to the house of commons for Co. Waterford in 1761 (the first of eight consecutive occasions), he and his brother, George de la Poer Beresford (1735–1800), second earl of Tyrone (from 1789 1st marquess of Waterford), harboured ambitions of creating a powerful political interest following the precedent set by other undertakers in the mid-eighteenth century. This did not quite come to pass, though Lord Waterford commanded a significant political interest, of which Beresford was a leading member throughout his life. Beresford's forte was administration, and his skills and attentiveness in this respect, his mastery of and attention to detail, and his considerable political and debating skills brought him to the notice of Lord Townshend (qv) who recommended him for the Irish privy council in 1768, and appointed him commissioner of the revenue in 1770. Townshend's preparedness to appoint him to such an important position indicates that by that date Beresford was already guided in his political actions by his commitment to uphold the interests of English government in Ireland. This was his political lodestar for the rest of his life.

At the same time, his eagerness to become speaker of the Irish house of commons when John Ponsonby (qv) controversially resigned the post (1771) indicated that he had not completely abandoned his wish to become an undertaker. Townshend was understandably reluctant to perpetuate the practice, inaugurated by William Conolly (qv) and continued by Henry Boyle (qv), whereby one person was enabled to accrue such influence as to diminish the authority of the lord lieutenant, and the speaker's chair went to another. Perhaps chastened by the experience, but also conscious of his family responsibilities, Beresford devoted his energies in the years that followed to the care of his family, which continued to grow after his marriage (1774) to Barbara Montgomery, one of 'the Graces' immortalised by Joshua Reynolds, with whom he had five daughters and three sons, and to the improvement of the operation of the revenue system.

His most visible achievement in the latter area was the construction of a new Custom House. There was stout resistance within corporation and mercantile circles to the relocation of the Custom House down river from its cramped quarters
near Essex Quay, but the skill and determination with which Beresford pursued his goal enabled him to outmanoeuvre his opponents, and the foundation stone of the new building was laid in 1781. Designed by James Gandon (qv), it was quickly identified as one of the architectural gems of the elegant Georgian city then taking shape (to which Beresford made a vital contribution in his capacity as wide streets commissioner), but it was not ready for occupation till 1790. By then it was caricatured as emblematic of the political corruption with which Beresford was identified. This accusation took most vivid form in the oft-quoted assertion of Lord Fitzwilliam (qv) that Beresford ‘was filling a situation greater than that of the lord lieutenant himself, . . . he was virtually king of Ireland’ (DNB). Arising out of such perceptions, Beresford was subject to two investigations for corruption in 1794–5, neither of which reached a positive conclusion. Throughout his life, Beresford had no hesitation in soliciting positions for members of his family, but he consistently resisted the politicisation of the revenue establishment on the grounds that it was ‘improper’ as well as organisationally retrograde (Sneyd papers, 2/63). Though his reputation continues to be associated with jobbery on a large scale, most of the accusations of corruption levelled at him during his lifetime were politically inspired.

From the late 1770s, when Lord North suggested that he would make an excellent chief secretary, only to have the suggestion rejected out of hand by the lord lieutenant, the earl of Buckinghamshire (qv), Beresford was one of the towering presences in the Irish administration. His knowledge and ability was recognised in 1780 when he was deputed to go to London to hammer out the administrative implications of ‘free trade’, and was appointed chief commissioner of the revenue in Ireland. His relationship with subsequent administrations ranged from warm (as in the case of that of the earl of Carlisle (qv), 1780–82) to cool (as in the case of both the Temple (qv) (1782–3) and Northington (qv) (1783–4) administrations), but he displayed an ever-readiness to stand forward to support government policy in the cause of maintaining a harmonious Anglo-Irish connection. Beresford's ‘anglicanism’ (Bolton papers, MS 16351/7A) – which is how one chief secretary characterised his outlook – was well received in England, but it was his organisation, presence of mind, and reasonableness that elicited commendation. His immense contribution to the elaboration of a commercial arrangement in 1784–5, in particular, both won him the respect of and drew him to William Pitt. One tangible personal result of this was his appointment to the British privy council in 1786, and he demonstrated that the trust reposed in him was well deserved when he opposed the Irish whigs’ attempts in 1788–9 to offer George, prince of Wales, a regency on terms different to those favoured by the government at Westminster, and in 1793 when he voted (but did not speak) in favour of catholic enfranchisement.

As this suggests, Beresford was ideologically more flexible than John Foster (qv), with whom he did not get on, and personally more flexible than John Fitzgibbon (qv), with whom he worked happily, the other principals in ‘the Irish cabinet' in the 1790s. This 'cabinet' possessed no constitutional legitimacy, but in the increasingly polarised political atmosphere of 1790s Ireland it wielded great power. Beresford's
own conservative instincts meant he was at ease politically in this company, but it also meant that he was perceived by his political opponents as someone who had to be removed if reform was not to be obstructed. This explains the controversial decision of Earl Fitzwilliam to dismiss him (January 1795) from the revenue shortly after his arrival in Ireland. Beresford was understandably upset by this and by the imputation, identifiable in Fitzwilliam’s defence of his actions, that he had not always behaved honourably. He challenged, and exchanged shots with, Fitzwilliam as a consequence, and his vindication was complete when Pitt’s demand that Fitzwilliam resign paved the way for his restoration as chief commissioner of the revenue. Ironically, Beresford could have been persuaded to retire at this point, whereas Fitzwilliam’s precipitous action ensured his return to the corridors of power.

His primary concern in the late 1790s was to ensure that ‘the damned demagogues and the United Irishmen’, on whom he blamed the disorderly state of the country, were ‘run down’ (Sneyd papers, 2/13) and he had no difficulty sanctioning ‘the most vigorous measures’ as ‘nothing else will or can save us from ruin’ (ibid., 2/23). Influenced by this as well as by his continuing disposition to promote the wishes of English government in Ireland, Beresford contributed to the elaboration of the economic provisions of the act of union, having indicated his unwillingness ‘to vote for it’ (ibid., 2/46) if it embraced catholic emancipation. Having already spent forty years in the Irish parliament, Beresford might reasonably have retired on the union’s enactment, as he had long talked of doing, but chose to remain in political life. Obliged by law to choose between office and parliament, he surrendered his revenue commissionership for a pension of £2,000, bought a house in London, and concentrated on representing Co. Waterford at Westminster. He was not an active parliamentarian, preferring to revert to his long established practice of advising behind the scenes, but when he did exert himself it was generally in support of Pitt. His name was mentioned as a possible chief secretary for Ireland in 1802, and again in 1805, but he was, as Lord Hardwicke (qv) pointed out, simply too old. Besides, his health was increasingly fragile. He died shortly afterwards, on 5 November 1805, at Walworth. It was ten years since his second wife had died, but the many children he had fathered (including Bishop George de la Poer Beresford (qv) and John Claudius Beresford (qv)) ensured that the Beresford name was to figure prominently in Irish public life for at least another generation.