

**DRAFT MESSAGE FROM PRIME MINISTER ON OCCASION OF THE GREAT
IRISH FAMINE EVENT: 31 MAY- 1 JUNE 1997**

I am glad to have this opportunity to join with you in commemorating all those who suffered and died during the Great Irish Famine.

The Famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and of Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. We must not forget such an immense human tragedy and must draw lessons from it.

While remembering with humility the devastation of the Famine, it is also right that we should pay tribute to the ways in which the Irish people have triumphed in the face of such a catastrophe. By 1861 there were over 800,000 Irish-born people in England, Scotland and Wales as a result of mass emigration from Ireland. Now, more people of Irish descent live in Britain than live in the Irish Republic. Britain has benefitted immeasurably from the skills and talents of Irish people, not only in areas such as music, the arts and the caring professions, but across the whole spectrum of our political, economic and social life.

Let us therefore today celebrate the resilience and courage of those Irish men and women who were able to forge another life outside Ireland, and give thanks for the rich culture and vitality they brought with them. Britain, the US and many Commonwealth countries, home to the majority of the Irish diaspora, are richer for their presence and the contribution they have made.

One hundred and fifty years ago, those who governed in London failed the people of these islands by adhering too strictly to economic dogma. What then began as a crop failure culminated in human tragedy. There are countries today facing natural disasters which threaten to overwhelm them. Particularly in the light of our own history and experience, we, the British and Irish peoples, must help tackle these problems with imagination, flexibility and compassion.

I know that the Irish people, catalysed by their own famine history, have long been particularly active in fighting poverty and hunger throughout the world. My government too has given a strong pledge to combat world poverty. I hope that this event, which commemorates a tragedy in our shared history, will give inspiration to all our peoples who strive for these shared goals.