

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF SECRETARY FOR IRELAND

Until independence in 1922, British government in Ireland was headed by the Lord Lieutenant, who was appointed by letters patent from the Crown and served as the monarch's representative in Ireland. The Lord Lieutenant was always a peer of the realm, usually a nobleman, whose wealth and status made him a suitable regal representative. The Lord Lieutenant also had important political and administrative duties to perform. In theory, he was very influential, holding wide statutory powers and controlling appointments to numerous offices within the Irish administration. In the aftermath of the Irish Act of Union, the duties attaching to the Lord Lieutenancy became largely ceremonial in nature.

Immediately subordinate to the Lord Lieutenant was his Chief Secretary, who was originally his nominee, coming into office with him and leaving at the end of the Lord Lieutenant's tenure. The Chief Secretary served as the head of the Lord Lieutenant's secretariat. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the importance of the Chief Secretary grew as defence of government policy in the Irish House of Commons fell to him. While the Irish administration was not answerable to the Irish parliament, it needed to ensure the enactment of legislative measures required by government in London.

After the passing of the Irish Act of Union, the Chief Secretary's status, relative to that of his superior, increased. As chief executive of the Irish administration, the Chief Secretary grew more capable of dealing with parliamentary business in London, spending the recess in Ireland and the parliamentary session in Westminster, where his duty remained that of defending Irish policy in the House of Commons. This resulted in his being in close contact with cabinet ministers in London and his alignment with political groupings. This increased his importance at the expense of that of the Lord Lieutenant, particularly as the latter was now required to be resident in Ireland throughout his period in office. It is no surprise that appointments to the office of Chief Secretary came to be controlled by government in London and were viewed as political once the post ceased to be purely administrative in nature. Some Chief Secretaries would even attain the rank of cabinet minister.

Directly below the Chief Secretary was the position of Under Secretary, who was a permanent civil servant responsible for the day to day running of the British administration in Dublin Castle.

During the eighteenth century, the separate administrative offices of the secretariat of the Lord Lieutenant developed into one central office surrounding the activities of the Chief Secretary. Its business was the supervision of the operation of the Irish administration and the Chief Secretary's Office functioned as a channel of communication between government departments and offices in England and their counterparts or branch offices in Ireland.

Over the course of its existence, the Chief Secretary's Office was subject to administrative re-organisation on several occasions. By the end of the eighteenth century, it was divided into civil and military divisions. By the early twentieth century, the office had a judicial division, which maintained a watching brief on crime and security matters.

The office continued to function for the transaction of such business until 1922, after which time its activities were confined to supervising the transfer of administrative functions to the institutions of the newly established Irish Free State. The Chief Secretary's Office was abolished in October 1924.