

Peter Purcell's letter

Precursor Society [published 7 January 1839]

To the Editor of the *Freeman's Journal*

Sir — In announcing my determination to retire from the Precursor Society, I deem it due to the security of my character to state the circumstances that have influenced me in coming to this decision; for did I remain satisfied with a simple and unexplanatory letter of resignation, I doubtless would expose my political conduct to the censure of inconsistency, and my motives to the most unjust imputations; for these reasons I have decided on making this public statement.

On the 9th of December I ascertained that Mr Lawrence Finn, the treasurer of the Precursor Society, had resigned his trust, for reasons which he can best explain himself. This circumstance led me to make inquiries as to the disposition of the funds — it induced me to see where the sums remitted from the country had been lodged, and to whose custody they had been entrusted. With some surprise I discovered that all the moneys received from the day of the organization of the society up to the period of my inquiry, were safely lodged in the Tralee branch of the National Bank, to the credit of Daniel O'Connell, Esq, MP.

Upon finding this to be the case, I lost not a moment in communicating with Mr O'Connell's friends; I mentioned without reserve what my opinions were; I stated that the future prosperity of the society and his own character depended on the funds being transferred to other hands. Those who are his most devoted adherents all concurred in my views, and besought me to speak to him on the subject. I did so, and represented the matter as forcibly as I was able — impressed on his mind the impropriety and impolicy of having the funds so situated. I stated the suspicious appearance which such a disposal would have, not only with our political opponents — with his personal foes, but with the public generally. I urged that if he desired it, the funds might be lodged with the National Bank; but that it was perfectly indispensable that they should be under the controul and to the credit of treasurers publicly appointed.

He appeared struck with the prudence of my observations, and agreed to my suggestions. He even went further than I anticipated; for he said the money should be invested in the Hibernian Bank, not the National Bank. With his perfect concurrence and sanction I solicited three gentlemen, Messrs Ignatius Callaghan, Laurence Finn, and James Martin, to undertake the office of treasurers, and, at my request, they consented to act, and were accordingly proposed to this high trust by Mr O'Connell, and were approved of by the unanimous consent of a public meeting, on the 9th December. [Actually 11 December: Purcell corrected this in a letter published in the *Freeman's Journal* on 8 January 1839]

Having accomplished my object — having performed what appeared to me to be a duty of a most imperative nature — I laboured in unsuspecting confidence, and with all my energy, to place upon a secure and permanent basis an association which I fondly hoped would be the means of ameliorating the defective institutions of the country. My anticipations were, however, interrupted, and my apprehensions excited by having my attention again directed by a member of the association to the condition of its financial department; and I do not hesitate to state that my surprise, as well as my feelings of disapprobation, were strongly aroused by finding that not one shilling of the funds had been paid to the treasurers from the period of their appointment, or prior to it, up to the date of my second inquiry, the 28th ult.

I saw, with pain and regret, that the sums already received, and in progress of receipt, were still lodged in the Tralee Branch of the National Bank, to the credit of Mr O'Connell; and that my

personal remonstrance, and those of his friends, had been attended with no useful effect, inasmuch as the same objectionable management of finance was in full operation. Under such circumstances, I saw that it was my imperative duty to take the most active and instant measures with a view to the remedy of this defect. For the protection of my own personal honour and character I clearly saw how incumbent it was on me to demonstrate to the gentlemen who, by my interference, were induced to act as treasures [sic], that at least I was no party to the proceedings which made them sinecurists — nominal guardians of the people's money in the eyes of the public but, in truth and fact, entrusted with no real responsibility.

As a member of the committee — as a man of honour and sincerity — I was bound to protest against this delusion; as the individual who had solicited those gentlemen to assume their office, I was above all bound to clear myself of conduct so equivocal. Therefore in the committee-room, upon the 29th ult, in the presence of others I spoke to Mr O'Connell — without success. His answers were vague and unsatisfactory — his reasons for persevering in his own course were, in my mind, of no value. I then remonstrated with him, through his private friends; the same success awaited their efforts which had attended my appeal; and having no other alternative, I then addressed to him a letter, of which the following is a copy:

My dear Sir — Since I saw you yesterday I have been thinking about the funds of the Precursor Association, and, in consequence, I am, if possible, the more convinced that the prosperity, nay, the very existence of the society depends on maintaining the public confidence which we now so extensively possess. With this view you will pardon me for again suggesting to you the propriety, if not the necessity, of having our accounts of receipts and disbursements up to this period at once audited, and the balance paid into the hands of our treasurers.

You will recollect that the gentlemen who have undertaken to act as treasurers were approved of by you, previous to their acceptance of the task, and by you were proposed to their office, at a public meeting of the body. I have duly considered the objections you referred to as to the delay and difficulty of procuring money through a finance committee, with all the promptitude which an unexpected emergency might require, but I respectfully contend that this objection is not tenable, when it is obvious that there exists no probability of a sudden demand arising; and, above all, when we know the thorough confidence which every member of the committee reposes in the expediency of any matter you might think it right to suggest, with a view to the expenditure of our funds.

In conclusion I cannot help feeling that if the management and controul of the funds with which we are entrusted be continued on the present system, and be so exhibited to the people, against which no precautions can be taken, the public confidence which we now enjoy is inevitably lost, no matter how pure our motives and well-intentioned our conduct.

Believe me, with unalterable regard and esteem, yours faithfully
Peter Purcell
Dec 30 1838

To this letter, Mr O'Connell has not condescended to reply. This discourtesy to me I pass over, and merely mention it to explain why I have not addressed to him this letter, instead of to you, Sir.

In conclusion, I have to express a hope that this public statement will produce that effect upon what I conceive to be his erroneous conduct which neither entreaty, advice, nor remonstrance

has been able to accomplish, for I am reluctantly obliged to state that, even upon this day I have seen, by the books of the society, that since my letter of the 30th ultimo two additional sums of money have undergone the same process of investment.

Allow me to add, that I consider so sacred a fund as that which has been collected from the hard earnings of a confiding peasantry should not only be secure (which I fully believe it to be in the hands of Mr O'Connell), but that it should be so placed as to be above suspicion, even in the minds of our political enemies.

From the various circumstances which I have brought under your notice I feel I have only one course to adopt, and that is, relieving myself from all future responsibility by separating for ever, from the Precursor Society.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient servant
Peter Purcell
Saturday 5th January 1839