

'Ireland's place in a United Europe' from The Irish Times (16 June 1992)

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Ireland's place in a United Europe

Perhaps four events in the relatively short history of this State stand comparison in their significance with the decision to be taken in Thursday's referendum.

On December 6th, 1922, the provisional Government headed by Arthur Griffith moved into the Dublin City Hall, marking the end of British executive power in this part of Ireland.

On July 1st, 1937, Eamon de Valera's constitution – Bunreacht na hEireann – was ratified by plebiscite. To this day it remains the anchor point of Irish national principles and aspirations. In a series of measures between the autumn of 1948 and spring 1949 John A. Costello's inter-party Government proclaimed the Republic of Ireland, severing the last effective links with the Commonwealth. On May 10th, 1972, the electorate approved the Third Amendment to the Constitution, allowing Ireland to move forward the following year into the EEC.

As much as each of these events has shaped today's Ireland, the decision to be taken on Thursday will shape it for our children. Is Ireland's future to lie within the structure of the new European partnership or is it to be in some form of external association? Will Ireland be a full member of the European union, with all the privileges and responsibilities that carries, or is it to go forward as an independent but solitary entity, making its way on its own initiative and resources?

Whether these alternatives are judged in terms of economics, of social development, of personal freedom and opportunity or, indeed, in terms of security, the overwhelming balance of argument is in favour of Ireland remaining at the core of European union. This is not just the considered judgment of the Government and the principal opposition parties. It is the opinion of the trades unions, the representatives of industry and business, the farmers, the leading professional associations, the semi-state organisations, the financial community and a wide range of umbrella groups.

It is also the view of the Council for the Status of Women – representing almost 90 women's organisations throughout Ireland – that notwithstanding the controversy over abortion and Protocol 17 of the Maastricht treaty, women's interests, on balance, will be better served by a "yes" vote.

This newspaper has consistently proclaimed the ideal of a united Europe and of Ireland's place within it. It has argued that Ireland is strengthened in shared sovereignty with its European partners. It has argued that Europe's economic potential, cultural richness and social diversity constitute a rich birthright for the generations to come. It has viewed the coming together of the European nation-states as a framework to sustain lasting peace and stability and has argued that in properly defined circumstances Ireland must be willing to play its part in securing and maintaining these.

The case for full economic and monetary union, for Ireland maintaining its place at the core of the European process, enjoys greater acceptance than virtually any other proposition across a wide spectrum of public life. Yet never has there been an issue so enmeshed in misunderstanding or so distorted by misinformation. The result is that even now, with two days to go to polling, a large proportion of the electorate is still in the dark as to the implications of a vote either way. Fertile ground has thus been left for exploitation by conspiracy theorists. Reasonable people, with reasonable questions, have been unable to get authoritative answers; instead the most improbable bogeys have been enabled to materialise, raising spectres and spreading fears.

Most of this can be laid at the Government's own door. Its handling of genuine public concerns and unease has surpassed, in its ineptitude and insensitivity, anything in the recollection of most commentators. There is widespread suspicion at the failure to publicise and make the text of the treaty available; there is confusion, anger and deep resentment at the Taoiseach's and the Attorney General's various statements on women's rights; there is fear and apprehension at the evasiveness on the defence issue; there is resentment and a sense that fair play is being denied, that the democratic process is being short-changed, in the Taoiseach's commandeering of the airwaves – while refusing to engage in open debate.

In this atmosphere it is difficult for voters to know who or what to believe. In consequence, there is widespread doubt as to the substantive reality of the Maastricht treaty at this time. Denmark's "no" vote is perceived by many as having terminated the process put in train at the signing last December, thus rendering redundant any other ratification measures throughout the Community.

The reality is that the process is not dead – and in this certainly Mr Reynolds has been firm and clear. It remains in being until next year by which time all 12 signatories are obliged to have deposited their instruments of ratification. Only when – or if – one or more members fail to do so can the process be declared to have fallen. There is nothing unreal or conditional in Thursday's vote.

Even if there were – even if Maastricht has to be replaced by some other vehicle in order to complete the journey – there should be no doubts that the large member-states are resolved to reach the destination of European union. The argument of the "no" campaigners, that some reverse gear will have to be found if Ireland follows Denmark's lead, fails to recognise the economic and social momentum and the depth of political commitment which have brought the Community thus far.

There is a simplistic – and dangerous – argument that by voting "no" Ireland can avoid the possibly unpalatable implications of full union while enjoying the advantages of the status quo ante – its present membership of the EC. It is true that the EC can only cease to be with the unanimous agreement of its members. Thus, it would remain at least notionally in existence as at present constituted. But it would rapidly become a shell, a structure without internal substance, with the great majority of its membership, the overwhelming bulk of its resources and all of its dynamic energy invested in the European union. This supposed choice for Ireland is no choice. Either we go with full union or we seek to come to some accommodation from outside.

The concept of European union deserves better advocacy than it has had over several weeks. It is an ideal, involving a two-way commitment, offering gains but also insisting on a contribution from those who would be part of it. Its representation as a cash bonanza, with guaranteed benefits and an assurance of no losses, has been crude and transparent and it has – rightly – been met with scepticism by the electorate.

There may or may not be a £6 billion transfer. There may or may not be an economic surge within the union. There may or may not be more employment, lower interest rates and controlled inflation. But there will be a single market of 340 million people, with a common currency, sharing common economic and monetary objectives. With membership of the union, Ireland has a vote equal to that of any other member and the opportunity to fight its corner and defend its own interests in the decision-making process. Outside of the union, it is scarcely possible to see Ireland with much real influence in dealing with the states which already comprise 75 per cent of its export trade. We are not Denmark, with possibly the highest standard of living in the world. We do not live in the rich Nordic circle. We do not have the luxury of worrying lest we drop to the standards of the European average.

The union will very probably go further than mere economic and monetary partnership. It is already committed to a common social policy. Its legal institutions will have the power to supersede those at national level. There will be common foreign and security policies and probably, in time, a common defence policy. Ireland will have the opportunity to decide by referendum in four year's time – a pledge affirmed in the past week by the leaders of Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour and the Progressive Democrats – where it stands on that.

There are no guarantees and no safe tickets. When Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet and a few other visionaries sought to build a community where war would be redundant and where the peoples of Europe would build upon their common civilisation and abilities, few would have rated their chances very highly. Historically, Europe had known nothing but war. Virtually every generation of its youth since the emergence of the nation-states had been sent into battle. At the Somme, Ypres and Passchendaele and later in Normandy, Italy and Germany, they died in their millions as 20th-century technology transformed the scale of battlefield body-counts.

That vision of Schuman and Monnet is now seen to have ranked with the setting up of the United Nations as the most enlightened and far-seeing development on the planet in the post-war era. It transformed western Europe from a series of military camps into a community motivated by productive economic activity. Far from seeking to go back to what was before, the Maastricht process is aimed at consolidating Europe's economic and social dimensions. It is one more evolutionary step along the way of peace which was set down in 1957 in the Treaty of Rome; a way in which economic resources must be developed in common, in which the great and the small must stand as equals and in which each people's security, safety and freedom are guaranteed by the others. Never hesitating to insist on its entitlements and freedoms, never doubting its ability and its right to utilise the structures of the union to its own ends, Ireland should embrace that ideal in full with a "yes" vote on Thursday.