

'Ireland in the Community' from L'Europe en formation

Caption: In its June 1972 issue, the federalist journal L'Europe en formation draws lessons from the referendum organised in Ireland on 10 May 1972, at the conclusion of which more than 80 % of votes cast were in favour of the country's accession to the European Communities.

Source: L'Europe en formation. dir. de publ. Marc, Alexandre ; Réd. Chef Marc-Lipiansky, Arnaud. Juin 1972, n° 147. Nice: Presses d'Europe. "L'Irlande dans la Communauté", p. 1.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

Ireland in the Community

On 10 May, the Irish people voted to join the European Community by a massive majority of 83 % of the votes cast (the sort of majority President Pompidou would have dreamed of obtaining). The success of the Lynch Government surpassed the most optimistic forecasts. Even if a 'yes' outcome seemed a foregone conclusion in Ireland, as opposed to the referendum situation in Norway and Denmark, a high rate of abstention was feared. In the end, there was a 70 % turnout of electors registered in the Irish Republic.

The two main political parties, Fianna Fail, the party in power in Dublin, which historically rejected the division of the country in two, and Fine Gael, now in opposition, which traces its history back to those who reluctantly accepted the split, both recommended a 'yes' vote. Sinn Fein, the political arm of the clandestine IRA (Irish Republican Army), and the bulk of Labour and the trade unions campaigned for a 'no' vote.

Irish opposition to the integration of Eire into the European Community had two separate sources. The first was nationalist and anti-establishment and came from the most active sectors of the Catholic resistance in Ulster. For these people, such as Bernadette Devlin, following Great Britain into Europe would lead the independent south to delay any plans for reunification.

We strongly disagree with this argument, partly because the Irish economy depends heavily on the UK economy, leaving Dublin with no choice, unless it was prepared to run the risk of seeing its agricultural products barred from the British market. In addition, the Irish representatives will have the opportunity to bring up the issue of Ulster at Community level, and specifically in the European Parliament, where the cause of Irish unity can expect to find allies.

The other source of opposition to the Common Market relied on economic arguments: opponents of joining depicted the consequences in the bleakest terms, especially with regard to unemployment and the anticipated spread of regional inequalities. However, these questions have been more than adequately debated since Ireland first applied to join the Community on 31 July 1961; the result of the referendum shows how convincing the arguments were.

That said, the 'Irish question' itself remains unsolved. No doubt the British Government, by dismissing Stormont, the regional parliament dominated by Protestants, and instituting direct rule over Ulster on 24 March, has done something to calm the situation in Northern Ireland. But while the Catholic minority has not disguised its pleasure at this setback for the Protestant 'establishment' in Belfast and given a generally favourable reception to the decisions taken in London, it knows that these do nothing to resolve the fundamental issues and will not even put a stop to terrorist activities. In theory, British rule in Ulster should last one year, but in practice it is expected to go on indefinitely. For the moment, and doubtless for many years to come, there is no prospect of a compromise between Protestants and Catholics. It will take time, great determination and considerable imagination to resolve the problems posed by the division of Ireland, but that is the price that will have to be paid for a return to peace on the island.

We have already made the point elsewhere that reunification should one day provide an opportunity to put an end to the civil war in Ulster. However, it will not be possible to protect the minorities (whether the Protestant minority in a reunited Eire or the Catholic minority within the six counties of Northern Ireland) without some kind of federal structure and without the creation of a special federal status for both Belfast and Londonderry. These objectives can, however, only be met if the Irish Government makes preparations, in the form of constitutional changes in particular. The integration of a million Protestants into Irish society will only be politically possible if laws enacted in Dublin are shorn of their religious features, a sign of the unduly exclusive hold the Catholic Church has had over the Irish people since 1937.

In any case, joining the EEC should make it easier for Ireland to find and develop the right solutions. The home of St Patrick, Swift, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Shaw and Becket can then at last be reconciled with its destiny. Europe is not just a trading and institutional entity; it embodies moral values that are an essential basis for democracy and federalism. The case of Ireland is but one more example.