

## 'EU postpones key decisions' from The Irish Times (18 June 1997)

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## EU postpones key decisions

European Union leaders last night concluded their summit in Amsterdam with a treaty making changes in the EU's structures and powers. The revised treaty seeks to build on agreements made in the Maastricht Treaty six years ago. The changes are designed to prepare the Union for its enlargement and to extend its capacity to act more coherently on the world stage. It has to be said that the last minute postponement of decisions on a reweighting of votes and of representation on the Commission until enlargement occurs means that the IGC has failed to resolve one of its central tasks.

The summit has nonetheless made some solid progress, notably by incorporating provisions for free movement of peoples, strengthening foreign policy capacities in peacekeeping, and by enhancing employment, social and environmental policies. It has also reinforced the momentum towards economic and monetary union. From Ireland's point of view the outcome has positive elements. The much cherished freedom of movement with Britain is preserved without prejudicing the right to join the more integrated Schengen system of movement on the continent at a later stage. So is the option to retain this State's military neutrality.

From a broader perspective, the new provisions for social and employment policies should strengthen the framework within which economic and monetary union will be introduced. The continued strong commitment to monetary union is reflected in two resolutions passed by the summit. One of them endorses the Stability and Growth Pact agreed in Dublin last December, the other elaborates on EU policies for growth and employment, in response to urgent pleas from the newly elected Socialist government in France.

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Agreement in these areas should help to enhance the prospects that EMU will meet its timetable, despite the recent difficulties between the German government and the Bundesbank and a certain frisson in the Franco German relationship. That said, Paris and Bonn can each claim credit for brokering this outcome. But the impact of the new Blair government, which adopted a markedly more constructive approach than its predecessors to summit business, should not be underestimated. Britain made substantial proposals on employment priorities and structural reforms in the labour market.

The summit has not achieved all its objectives. Negotiations on the kind of institutional and constitutional changes required to prepare the EU for enlargement have been postponed. The fact that preparations for EMU have come to overshadow this agenda tells its own story about how monetary union has become a more pressing matter than enlargement, about how it will provide the main dynamic for further integration in coming years.

The reduced level of ambition at the summit and the lack of trust it betokens among the member states will necessitate another conference in several years' time to make the Union more effective before it enlarges for the fifth time. The complexity of the compromises agreed yesterday will make the European project of integration still more difficult to sell to a critical public.