

Parliamentary question by Irish MP Jim O’Keeffe on the referendum on the Treaty of Nice (16 October 2001)

Caption: In a parliamentary question on 16 October 2001, Irish MP Jim O’Keeffe asks Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowen about any proposals the government intends to put forward, four months after the negative referendum on the Treaty of Nice.

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Priority Questions — Nice Treaty Referendum (16 October 2001)

Mr. J. O’Keeffe asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Government has reflected on the outcome of the Nice Treaty referendum and the various issues raised during the referendum campaign; the results of such reflection; and the specific proposals the Government intends to put forward to address the concerns expressed during the referendum campaign.

Mr. Cowen: Fully-committed membership of the European Union has been of great benefit to Ireland and will continue to be essential to our national development. That fundamental reality must form the basis of our approach to the present situation.

The Government remains committed to the enlargement of the European Union, and we recognise that the ratification of the Treaty of Nice is necessary for enlargement to proceed. The Taoiseach and I made our position clear to our EU partners and to the applicant states in the period immediately after our referendum, including at the Gothenburg European Council, and we continue to do so on all appropriate occasions. Our partners have made clear their readiness to contribute in every possible way to help the Government find a way forward. They appreciate that time is needed to enable us to reflect fully on all the concerns which arose and to reach conclusions.

That process of reflection is continuing. It is clear that many factors contributed to the defeat of the referendum and to the very poor turnout. By no means were all of these directly related to the treaty itself. Accordingly, it seems clear that our response to the situation will have to be multi-faceted. A central aspect of the process of reflection will be the work of the National Forum on Europe, which meets for the first time on Thursday. While I regret that Fine Gael does not for the moment intend to take part, the forum will allow for a very broadly based and wide ranging debate on Ireland's participation in the European Union, and on the overall functioning and future development of the Union, including in the context of enlargement. While we see the forum as ranging much more widely than the Treaty of Nice itself, we hope it will promote genuine and well-informed discussion of many of the issues which arose during the campaign and will contribute to an improved public understanding of the Union and its activities.

In so far as it emerges that there may be matters related to the Treaty of Nice on which clarification could usefully be sought, without re-opening the text of the treaty, the Government would consider raising these issues with our partners at an appropriate time, bearing in mind their commitment to help find a way forward.

As many of the issues which arose were related more to the longer-term future of the Union than to the Treaty of Nice, the Government also recognises the importance of ensuring that the Future of Europe debate, which is to culminate in a further Intergovernmental Conference in 2004, has as an overriding objective, the strengthening of the connection between the Union and its people. It must be grounded in a realistic appreciation of what people want and need from the Union. I have made this point strongly to my European colleagues, including at last week's meeting of the General Affairs Council.

The Government, in line with the commitment I gave during the Second Stage debate on the Labour Party's European Union Bill, is also considering how Oireachtas scrutiny of European Union matters might be enhanced. It is the intention to come forward with initial proposals before too long.

Mr. J. O’Keeffe: Has there been any analysis by the Government, in the four months since the referendum, of the theme which dominated the debate and why it is felt that the referendum was not successful? At this stage, has the Government any proposals under consideration to deal with the

consequences of the referendum? I do not accept the setting up of a forum as being an answer from the Government.

Mr. Cowen: It is certainly better than sitting alone in a corner and being ignored. I understand there is some EU Commission research due for publication shortly, in relation to public opinion surveys on the issues and what influenced people during the campaign and that should make interesting reading. I understand that Professor Sinnott of Trinity College is preparing, on behalf of the Commission, an analysis which will be in the public domain in due course. It is important that we should not be prescriptive at this stage. The advice offered to the Government was to take account of analysis from all sides. I do not believe the forum will bring about any artificial consensus and there are certain issues on which there will not be full agreement in this House. That is the democratic position and we have no problem with it. However, we need a structure for transparent and open debate on many issues, which will helpfully inform Members of the House, members of the forum and the general public and re-engage the public on the issues as to what is in our interest in going forward, recognising there are different views within Europe but that should not militate against the fact that our essential national interests are confirmed within membership of the European Union. If we had been prescriptive, we would now be accused of pre-empting the forum's deliberations on this aspect of its work, which will not be the only aspect of its work. I gave assurances to parties in the House who agreed to participate that we would not seek to corral or channel the debate in any particular way. Accordingly, we can have, on its merits, a good debate on all the issues from all perspectives and then, having listened and, perhaps, taken an interim report from the forum on those aspects of its deliberations, the Government can come forward in the context of its primary responsibility to put a position to the people, in due course. We will not be rushed to judgment in this matter.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Very briefly, Deputy O'Keeffe. Time is running out.

Mr. J. O'Keeffe: I will not get involved in the forum issue. The Minister knows I do not agree that engaging in a non-binding open ended talking shop will achieve anything. Does he agree there is need for some Government leadership, for an analysis of the causes of the problem? The Minister should look at a very good paper which was completed on this, by Professor Laffan, some weeks after the referendum. Even more importantly, is there not a need for the Government to come forward with proposals for consideration as to how the matter is to be handled, with the aid of our European partners and domestically? That would provide some evidence of Government leadership on the issue at this stage. Is the Minister saying that will not be done, that everything will be lofted over to a sub-committee and buried in the forum for God knows how long?

Mr. Cowen: No, it will not be left to rest indefinitely in the forum. The Government does not intend to have a break in the enlargement process, which must be completed by the end of 2002. It does not reflect very well on a party claiming pro-European credentials to suggest that nothing can be achieved in what the Deputy calls a talking shop. That the forum does not have executive power does not prevent it from doing a very valuable job. The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation did a very valuable job and the New Ireland Forum did an outstandingly valuable job. If Fine Gael is trying to find some rationalisation for not participating in this exercise, it should find a better one than that. I am sure many of the Deputy's colleagues in the European People's Party would be interested to hear why Fine Gael is not getting involved in the debate on the future of Europe. That is what is in the Nice declaration, which involves every member state and all parties associated with the European People's Party will be involved. The Fine Gael Party is looking foolish and it is time its members copped themselves on.