

Debate in the lower house of the Irish Parliament concerning the referendum on the Treaty of Nice (9 May 2001)

Caption: On 9 May 2001, the members of the lower house of the Irish Parliament debate the possibility that the Irish people will vote against ratification of the Treaty of Nice in the referendum on 7 June. Points for discussion include the Irish Government's effective distribution to citizens of information about the content and implications of the treaty.

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Other Questions — Treaty of Nice (9 May 2001)

Mr. Higgins (Dublin West) asked the **Minister for Foreign Affairs** when the White Paper on the Nice Treaty will be published; and if he has decided on a date for a referendum in this regard.

Ms O'Donnell: As no doubt the Deputy is aware, the White Paper on the Treaty of Nice was launched on 28 March. The White Paper explains, in a factual, objective and readable manner, the content of the treaty signed by European Union Foreign Ministers in Nice on 26 February. The treaty, as the House is well aware, is designed to prepare for enlargement by agreeing necessary changes to the institutions and to the decision-making procedures of the Union.

Following publication, the White Paper has been distributed to public libraries, citizen information centres, third level colleges, local authorities, social partners and other relevant bodies. The text of the Treaty of Nice itself has also been widely distributed, including to public libraries and citizen information centres. The White Paper, the summary of the White Paper in Irish and English language versions and the Treaty of Nice, also in Irish and English, are available on my Department's website.

To maximise public awareness of the treaty, the Government has also arranged to have the summary of the White Paper distributed to every household in the country. The delivery to close to 1.3 million households should by now be well advanced. The summary also includes contact details for obtaining copies of the full White Paper.

In addition, the Referendum Commission, which operates independently of Government, will distribute information, in line with its mandate, in respect of the proposed referendum.

In short, every effort is being made to assist the public to make an informed choice when voting in the forthcoming referendum.

The Government is strongly in favour of ratification of the Treaty of Nice, a position shared, I am glad to say, by the two major Opposition parties. The Government will seek the strongest possible endorsement of the treaty in recognition of the importance of the European Union for Ireland and for the countries engaged in accession negotiations.

Mr. Higgins: (Dublin West): Does the Minister of State agree there are two divergent opinions of the Nice Treaty? Does she agree that it is unfair that the Government side, in the White Paper, has been distributed to every home in the country while no such provision has been made for those who disagree with what the Government is saying and who believe the Government is being disingenuous in some of its claims as to what the treaty does and does not stand for?

Does the Minister of State agree that it is disingenuous of Government spokespeople to state that the Nice Treaty will benefit the 150 million people of central and eastern Europe? What studies have been done on the effect of joining the EU on the two million Polish farmers or on what would happen to State subsidies—

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's minute is concluded. I call the Minister of State.

Ms O'Donnell: The Referendum Commission will devise its own strategy for informing the Irish public. It is true that the White Paper has been distributed and the treaty itself is available to the public but the Referendum Commission, which is independent of Government, will be in a position to lay out the arguments for and against ratification of the treaty. That is quite proper.

There is an entitlement to public rational debate on this issue. The Taoiseach has stressed the need for debate on the real issues. People should be asked to vote on the basis of realistic information and not hysterical rhetoric. The accession countries are in favour of joining an enlarged Union. I do not see how it is practicable for opponents of the “yes” vote here to try to second guess what is good for the accession countries. They are to the fore and are pressing the agenda. They are anxious to join the European Union and we are anxious to join with them.

Mr. J. O’Keeffe: It may be that the people of Ireland are not aware that the applicant countries are so keen to join the European Union. Many suggestions have been put about that they are not, whereas in fact it is quite clear that they are.

Is the Minister concerned about the dangers of a low turnout for the referenda? Is there not a danger that this referendum in particular could be lost due to apathy? Has the Government any programme in place to encourage a major turn out on 7 June, particularly for the referendum on the Nice Treaty?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before the Minister replies, I would draw the attention of the House to the fact that three Deputies are offering. If they are brief in asking their questions we will clear all three of them.

Mr. Gormley: In the condensed White Paper it is stated that Ireland's neutrality will not be affected. Can the Minister explain why it is that the Government continues to state that Ireland is neutral, whereas the Finns and Swedes say they are “non-aligned” and not “neutral”? That needs to be explained. I reject the criticism that we are somehow being hysterical.

Mr. M. Higgins: Would the Minister agree that it is singularly unhelpful in a referendum campaign to use language such as “hysterical rhetoric”? Given that the issues are complex and many people will arrive at a conclusion on balance, such an approach is singularly unhelpful in the conduct of any referendum.

Mr. Higgins: (*Dublin West*): Would the Minister agree the Government is saying that joining the EU will be of great benefit to the peoples of central and eastern Europe? On what study is the fate of the ordinary people in those countries based? The elite are in favour of joining the EU because they want to get their snouts into the trough along with everybody else.

Would the Minister agree it is disingenuous for the Government to say that the Nice Treaty has nothing to do with militarisation when it consolidates the procedures put in place in the Amsterdam Treaty leading to the so-called rapid reaction force which in reality is an EU army?

Ms O’Donnell: As regards Deputy O’Keeffe's question about a low turn out, the Government is anxious that people should come out and articulate positive support for the European ideal. It is an ideal opportunity for the people to endorse the European project, yet again. They have to do this, however, on the basis of clear information and we fully intend to get that information across to them. These are complex issues and it is difficult to deal with the technical aspects of the treaty in a rational way. Today, the Government launched its campaign and we hope to have a reasoned and fair-minded debate on the issues.

Deputy Higgins asked how we knew the accession countries wanted to join the European Union. The accession countries have been involved in the most detailed accession negotiations with the European Commission over several years. They all realise they have everything to gain by joining the Union and that enlargement will be to their benefit, as it will be for the existing member states.

The treaty makes only limited changes to the existing provisions of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, as agreed at Amsterdam. Contrary to the impression that has been conveyed in

some quarters, the development of the EU Security and Defence Policy is based on the provision of the Amsterdam Treaty. In other words, it has already been agreed by the people. It does not affect Ireland's policy of military neutrality. Our participation is only to be in any crisis management mission and that remains to be decided by sovereign decision of the Government, subject to Oireachtas approval on a case by case basis. Moreover, we will only take part in missions authorised by the United Nations. This is clear and unambiguous. The issues at stake are, clearly, important, not just for the accession countries but for Ireland. Ireland, which has gained so much from its membership of the European Union should be the loudest voice in favour and since we are the only country to have a referendum ours should be the loudest voice by the people coming out in large numbers to vote "yes".