

Taking Our Rightful Place Ireland, the Lisbon Treaty and Democracy

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A Basis of Right

The Irish electorate has voted in favour of many European treaties since the original treaty of accession in 1971. Until the Nice Treaty any deal struck by Irish negotiators with their European partners included generous financial incentives. These incentives are indisputable and easily grasped. They have been our point of entry into Europe up till now and no other vision has been offered by our political leaders, who now have left it too late to redeem their failure of leadership. They have appealed too often and too eagerly to narrow self-interest and, as a result, they have lost the ability to inspire any generous sentiment.

The time has come for straight-forward if unfamiliar questions. What is this entity, the European Union? How have we Irish benefited from membership? What are we willing to contribute? And why?

The Experience of Total Warfare

There can be no understanding of the movement for European union without reference to the experience of France and Germany after the second world war. They shared an experience which ran deeper than victory or defeat. In neither Britain nor America, and certainly not in Ireland, did the entire population have to face that horrific feature of the modern industrial age – total warfare. This experience goes beyond grief at the death of loved ones or bewilderment at the slaughter of millions. The true horror of total warfare brings people face to face with the unpredictable and universal human capacity for wanton destruction and with the indiscriminating sense of shame which it leaves in its wake.

Only against this background can the opening words of the Schuman Declaration, the founding document of the European Union, be fully appreciated: ‘World peace cannot be secured without creative efforts equal to the dangers which threaten it’. In signing this document on 9 May, 1950, France and Germany, later joined by Italy and the Benelux countries, set out to make warfare both ‘unimaginable’ and ‘materially

impossible’. Their express goal was ‘a wider and deeper community between countries long opposed to one another by bloody conflict’ and they saw this European enterprise as a model for the world. This is the founding vision of the European Union.

The Story Moves On

We Irish have become part of that story and part of the achievement. While our point of entry was economic interest rather than political reconciliation, the interaction of Irish and British politicians and public servants which EU membership brought about certainly contributed to a building up of trust between both governments which made the Irish peace process possible. The man who is, more than anyone else, responsible for initiating that process, John Hume, consciously modelled his approach on the European experience.

Few would seriously deny that our interests have been served by our participation in Europe, but we have yet to grasp that there is more at stake, even for us, than ‘our national interest’. The founding of the European Union only became a possibility when those involved came to see that national self-interest, however ‘enlightened’, failed to do justice to the challenge they all faced. They had reached that point of human solidarity which only a shared sense of vulnerability can bring.

We in Ireland will have to find our own answers to questions which first arose for others in the midst of warfare and carnage. The challenge of solidarity cannot be met by clichéd moralising. Before we claim to be looking beyond our own self-interest there is no way around that honestly self-centred question: What is our interest? What has Europe done for Ireland? What are the benefits? And how might they best continue?

Confidence, respect and...

The most obvious, if transitory, benefit is money. We Irish became wealthy. Financial transfers from other Member States certainly played a part in this

achievement, but they do not come anywhere near explaining it. No amount of money poured into a depressed area will guarantee that such an area will prosper. Indeed, any attempt to explain Ireland's relationship with Europe in terms of money radically underestimates the nature of that relationship and the benefits which have come from it.

Yet these benefits are seen in their clearest light when, paradoxically, we look at the experience of poverty and its effect on the human spirit. John Adams, successor to George Washington as President of the United States¹, wrote of how poverty precludes people from the joy of participation in society. 'The poor man's conscience is clear... Yet he is ashamed... He feels himself out of the sight of others, groping in the dark... He is not disapproved, censored or approached; he is only not seen... To be wholly overlooked and to know it are intolerable'.²

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Ireland's experience as a member of the European Union is one of overcoming this 'shame' of isolation, which John Adams attributes to the 'poor man'. Before joining the European Union Ireland's poverty and 'invisibility' went hand in hand and it had a real effect on our self-confidence as a people. One great benefit which Europe has brought to Ireland is the joy of participation in a political process which is bigger than this small island. Far from being overwhelmed by what we found, we thrived on it. Even those financial transfers did not just happen. We had to argue our case. We had to make ourselves heard.

By working with people from other countries on shared problems we have grown in international respect and influence. This is the case not only in the policy making forums of the European Union, but in business, the arts, education and professional life. Through this joy of participation we have become a confident assertive people, in a way which would have been unimaginable only a

few decades ago.

Confidence grows in response to the winning of respect from others. To be respected in this way is to enjoy the trust of others and, as a result, to be in a position to command attention when we need a hearing for our concerns. Part of the Irish achievement in Europe is to have built up a network of trust which, while it depends on good judgement, cannot be sustained by ingenuity or slickness. That fund of goodwill, which we have come to enjoy, has been damaged by the inability of our political leaders to present Ireland's participation in Europe from any perspective other than self-interest. The result is that both our own confidence in ourselves and the respect which others have for us have been undermined. We will only rebuild that confidence and regain that respect by constructive participation in the European project.

...liberty

There is another benefit. We have become a freer society because of the European Union. Political freedom – or liberty, a word with greater emotional resonance – is never simply present, never merely observed. It is celebrated because it is fragile and needs the kind of nurturing which is only to be found in human solidarity. Liberty presupposes the presence of others and interaction with them in a spirit of goodwill. Without such interaction, particularly in the realm of political life, the structures which sustain liberty cannot survive. The fullest expression of liberty is the readiness of people to deal with each other in a spontaneous, inventive and playful manner. The first people in history to call themselves democrats – the citizens of ancient Athens – noted as much about their distinct system of government: 'And just as our political life is free and open, so is our day to day life in our relations with each other'.³

Travel, both to and from Ireland, is one area where a growth in freedom has been particularly evident. While we used to travel in order to escape hardship, in recent years we have made our way to every part of the world for the sheer enjoyment of it, confident that our Irishness is a badge of goodwill, bringing real opportunities for human contact. Whatever the future holds, that experience will be part of our memory. Those who have come to live in Ireland in recent years have certainly been attracted by our higher standard of

living but also, as with many who left Ireland in the past, by a less inhibited way of life which goes hand in hand with prosperity.

This playful and spontaneous aspect of liberty is only possible when fear and distrust are minimised. When people are unafraid, they speak their minds freely, they engage in conversations, exchange views, make plans and commit themselves to projects. Liberty and prosperity are interdependent. Only when people are unafraid are they willing to take the calculated risks which make economic development possible, but if those risks become reckless to the point of undermining credit, levels of fear rise and personal options are constrained, as is now the case throughout the world, but particularly in Ireland.

Learning from achievements

Amidst the uncertainty created by the current economic downturn, we need to remember that there have been some enduring achievements. The move from protectionism towards an open economy, which began with the First Programme of Economic Expansion as far back as 1958, finally put a halt to the decline in population which had undermined this country since the Great Famine. This move was copper-fastened by the decision to join the European Economic Community in 1972.

Throughout Europe there is a growing gap of incomprehension and distrust between politicians and people.

It has clearly been in Ireland's interest in recent decades to turn outwards. We have always seen this in terms of advancing our national self-interest, but that perspective is itself limited. The intelligent promotion of self-interest certainly plays a significant part in human affairs, but the perspective is one of trade – the striking of good and mutually profitable bargains. The underlying framework which makes the pursuit of self-interest profitable, however, is that element of trust and goodwill which underpins both liberty and credit. There comes a point where that underpinning cannot be taken for granted. This

point had been reached between France and Germany when they decided that they had to share sovereignty. This point has also been reached for Ireland in its relationship to the world economy. It simply no longer makes sense for us as a people not to see global issues as an ethical challenge which, if ignored, will bring grief not only to ourselves, but to the world in which we live.

Political drama, public knowledge

In less than one year Ireland's relations with our European neighbours have changed from being full of possibility to being fraught. We can react by retreating into an aggressive nationalism or we can wearily fall in line with the craven 'pragmatic' leadership offered to date by the pro-European parties. But there is a third option. We might consider the welfare of the European Union as bound up with our own. We might consider the value, to both ourselves and others of making a contribution to this project.

The fact that our stocks may be low in the eyes of many at this moment is immaterial. To be fair to our politicians, they are faced with a challenge which their counterparts in other countries have successfully avoided. The original Constitutional Treaty was rejected by the electorates of both France and the Netherlands; the Lisbon Treaty was cobbled together in the aftermath of this setback. Throughout Europe there is a growing gap of incomprehension and distrust between politicians and people. Ireland is distinguished by the fact that this gap has come unambiguously into public view twice in the past ten years – in the first referenda for Nice and Lisbon respectively.

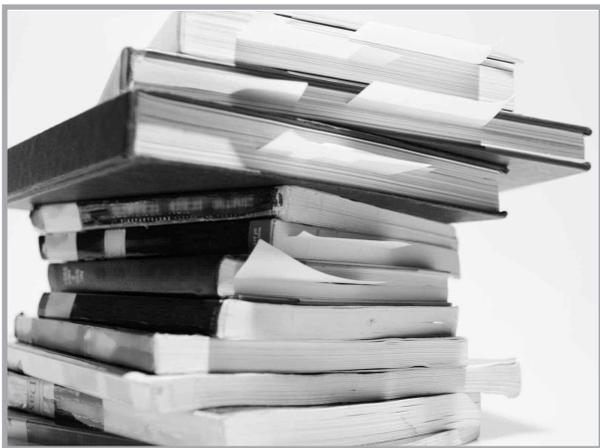
The resulting vulnerability of our politicians could turn out to be an opportunity for Ireland to make a real contribution. It would not be the first time that, as a people, we would overcome weakness with ingenuity. The first grass roots mobilisation of ordinary people in a campaign of peaceful protest for equal rights was organised here in Ireland, lead by Daniel O'Connell. The modern party political machine, which gave the working classes a voice in government throughout the western world, was first devised here in Ireland by Charles Stuart Parnell.⁴

O'Connell and Parnell, in their time, saw power being exercised in a manner which placed the powerful beyond the reach of justice. The old strategies which they put in place have become a

celebrated part of our political culture. Yet we can march in the streets till we are blue in the face and we can vote parties in and out of office, but we know that there is something beyond our reach, something which no one is able to call to account. The complexity of government in the modern world has become a barrier between politicians who have been elected to govern and the people who elect them.

The role of the bureaucrats

This situation is in no one's interest. It is facile to dismiss those who go to the trouble of getting elected and their attempts to make the democratic process work in a world which modern technology has made increasingly complex and vulnerable. They have inherited, from an earlier age, a system of government which has brought great benefit to the world, firstly, by granting every citizen the vote, and then by developing elaborate administrative structures to respond to their demands. Without these structures much of what we take for granted in modern life would turn from being a benefit to being a menace – road, air and sea travel, electricity, electronic communication, employee and consumer protection etc.



Bureaucracy in Europe

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The resources of the legislature, which established the administrative structures of modern democracies in the first place, are now dwarfed by those same structures and dependent on them. In other words, public representatives are now dependent on unelected public servants if they are to function effectively. At the same time those who stand must behave as though they are in charge and have real power over this complex web of organisations which they have inherited.

To do otherwise would be to undermine the legitimacy of existing structures without offering any viable alternative.

Parliament did not always dominate popular attention. For many centuries the drama of public life was played out in the court room. That drama still continues and at times it can command considerable attention. The rise of parliament went hand in hand with the vote and the party political machine. What people seek today is not the vote, or some mass movement, but a greater say in their own lives and, in particular, in the way their lives are affected by the many and confusing agencies of government. The growing complexity of our technological world makes this development inevitable because technology has a potential for evil as well as good. It needs regulation, and that in turn needs greater cooperation between national governments. Without this cooperation, of which the EU is by far the most effective example, international trade would have to deal with a myriad of differing sets of national rules and regulations.

The result of all this is that the traditional role of parliament has been sidelined. Our politicians are aware of this and they are also aware that there can be no going back. Two years ago the leaders of five Irish political parties put their names to the following statement: *The elaborate bureaucracy of the modern state has become a barrier between elected leaders and ordinary citizens, yet within that perceived barrier lie the means of restoring popular trust in public life.*⁵ If this 'restoration' is to happen, however, leadership will be required and it will have to come from within existing structures.

We need to explore new ways of interaction between the structures of public administration and the citizen. In recent years a vibrant civil society has emerged in Ireland. It plays a growing role in the formulation of policy and not only within an Irish context. In particular it has enabled groups who are marginalised by existing political structures to find a real voice. That voice remains tentative, but it is growing in confidence and in skill. The current recession certainly represents a set-back for those campaigning groups which have emerged at the margins of traditional politics but, in the long run, the underlying legitimacy of their role cannot be ignored without imperilling one of the cardinal principles of democratic government – that no group in society be excluded from a say in government.

The underlying challenge of marginalisation is all the more significant in that it is far from being unique to Ireland. Indeed it is a challenge which the European Union is singularly well equipped to meet. The European Commission in many ways represents the tip of an iceberg of public administration which can be clearly recognised in all the member states and which, because it is hidden, is increasingly resented. It is in the interests of both politicians and public administrators that this iceberg be made visible. Ireland has, up until recent events, enjoyed a high standing among its fellow EU Member States. While our standing clearly has been damaged, perhaps we could redeem ourselves by developing a process of reflection within our political structures whereby the administrative state can become, and be seen to be, more accountable.

The makings of this process are already in place with the Conversation on Democracy in Ireland, an initiative of the Irish Jesuits. The underlying purpose is to promote a more reflective and effective democracy by inviting citizens, politicians, and public servants to reflect together on public life and, in this way, to develop new insights to be made accessible for wider discussion and debate. We need a national conversation on the future of the democratic process with a view to both adapting our own institutions and challenging our fellow Europeans to do likewise. The underlying challenge which we all face will not go away and if we in Ireland back away from it, and from the implications for our role in Europe, we will be condemning ourselves to a future in which we will have no say because we are too timid to take our rightful place.

Notes

1. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London: Penguin 1990, p. 126ff.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
3. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Bk. 2. 37, London: Penguin Classics.
4. See Edmond Grace, *Democracy and Public Happiness*, Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 2007, p. 129.
5. *Ibid.*, p. iv.

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