

Ireland must vote on whether we remain a member of the EU



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ANALYSIS

EU leaders will look to the Taoiseach this week to tell them what Ireland intends to do about Lisbon. A referendum on nothing less than our continued membership of the union is what is required

IN THE years to come we may well look back on the failure of the Lisbon Treaty referendum as the last manifestation of the hubris which characterised the Celtic Tiger era.

The illusion created by our sham prosperity suckered many people into believing that no serious negative consequences would follow on from a No vote.

But the rejection of the treaty by the electorate presented the Government with the most serious crisis in external relations since the second World War, and the damage wrought by the June poll has been severely compounded by the banking and financial crisis and the budgetary retrenchment which has followed: hubris has predictably turned to nemesis.

Truly, these are the worst of circumstances in which the Government could have envisaged revisiting the Lisbon Treaty.

Now, however, in the run-up to this

weekend's European Council summit in Brussels, expectations are growing that Taoiseach Brian Cowen will provide a clear road map for an Irish solution to the EU's constitutional imbroglio, and enable the EU to resolve the impasse created by the referendum's failure.

There are two core elements to the Irish approach, although there is still some uncertainty as to the precise form and shape these measures will take, and the degree of accommodation that will be offered by our EU partners.

The first element of the plan revolves around the future composition of the European Commission.

Cowen has quietly pursued EU-wide agreement which would sanction a "one member state, one commissioner" rubric, and Ireland would thus be allowed to retain a permanent place at the commission table.

Although this is not yet a done deal (and there remains significant opposition to it in some member states) all the signs indicate that the Brussels summit will agree to the Irish proposals and provide Dublin with some crucial wiggle room as it contemplates a second referendum campaign.

The second part of the plan is for the EU to provide a series of specific declarations on some of the other issues deemed to be key concerns of Ireland's No voters.

The Irish approach has focused on the opt-outs secured by Denmark from the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and Irish diplomats have engaged in close consultation with Copenhagen throughout the autumn. But it is unclear as yet whether this model will simply acknowledge formally the Irish right to decide policy for itself in these defined areas or reference specific opt-outs from EU policies *à la* Denmark.

There are good grounds for arguing that going down the Danish route is mistaken.

The Danes themselves now acknowledge that opting out of defence and security policy has severely restricted Denmark's freedom of action in this area.

In testifying before an Oireachtas sub-committee on Ireland's future in the European Union recently, Danish parliamentarians made it clear they now

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regret going down the opt-out route.

Indeed, the Danish government was preparing a new referendum at the time of our June referendum specifically focused on opting back into those areas which they had previously opted out of.

In the Irish context, as recent contributors to these pages have pointed out, significant reservations continue to be expressed at ministerial level about the impact on Irish peacekeeping activities of voluntary exclusion from EU security and defence policy.

Minister for Defence Willie O'Dea, for one, remains strongly opposed to the idea of opt-outs.

Former taoiseach John Bruton has succinctly summed up the problem with the opt-out model: it would reduce Ireland's influence but still leave us having to deal with the policies drawn up by our partner states in the Council of Ministers.

I argue that the only viable option open to the Irish Government is to hold a second referendum on the substantive question of whether or not Ireland remains a member of the EU.

The first argument in favour of such an option is one of equity. In a context where each of the other 26 member states will have ratified the Lisbon Treaty, those states will have demonstrated that they accept the rules and procedures of the club.

Assuming that ratification is completed by early 2009 in our partner states, it is simply inconceivable that Ireland, with a population of less than five million EU citizens, can

continue to block the introduction of a constitutional and institutional framework accepted by the democratically-elected representatives of 495 million EU citizens.

In asking voters to endorse Ireland's continued membership of the EU, the proposition would thus categorically imply an endorsement of Lisbon as the EU's normative-institutional bedrock.

Second, such a referendum proposition would bring back into play the significant economic dimension to Irish membership of the European Union, which has been marginalised in the three most recent referendums.

When voters are reminded of the potentially catastrophic cost of being excluded from the single market area, and from the vital decision-making structures in the Council of Ministers and the European Central Bank to name just two of the most important, it reinforces what is at stake in a substantive decision to either remain or leave.

The recent turmoil in financial markets has only served to reinforce this point: simply put, Ireland's economic future cannot be contemplated seriously outside of EU structures.

Indeed, Irish Ministers have consistently argued that Ireland would have gone the way of Iceland in recent months were it not for Irish membership of the EU.

The traumatic experience of other small states such as Hungary and Serbia provides a cogent reminder of the vulnerability of small states to exogenous economic shocks and the protection offered by euro-zone membership from adverse international developments.

Thus by focusing again on the question of Ireland's economic wellbeing and appealing to the more material instincts of Irish citizens, such a referendum stands the best chance of producing a solution to the EU's protracted constitutional row.

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