

Denis Maher, The Tortuous Path

Caption: In his memoirs, Denis Maher, former Member of the Irish Delegation to the negotiations on the accession of Ireland to the European Communities, describes the debates concerning the popular referendum of 10 May 1972.

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The process of information and debate about membership had been going on since 1961 when Ireland first applied for membership of the EEC. Dáil debates and White Papers were ably supplemented by the national media, whose commentators were given increasing space to describe the origins and operations of the Communities and the progress being made with implementation of the founding treaties, such as the gradual build-up of the Common Agricultural Policy. Members of the Dáil and Seanad, journalists and representative groups were encouraged by the European Commission to visit Brussels. Ministers of the governments of the member countries as well as members and senior officials of the Commission visited Ireland at frequent intervals. On many occasions these visitors from the Communities gave public addresses and subjected themselves to close cross-examination at press conferences. The Irish Council of the European Movement had striven over the years to sustain interest in European integration and in the possible role Ireland might one day play in that process. With this level of activity it is not surprising that the view was held in Brussels that the Irish public must be among the best informed in Western Europe on the Communities.

The level of activity did, of course, rise and fall according as hopes of membership of the Communities rose and fell. The decision of the Summit Conference of 1/2 December 1969 agreeing to the opening of negotiations with the four applicant countries gave a powerful stimulus to the revival of public interest.

When, by mid-1971, it became apparent that the accession negotiations would be completed by the end of the year, the tempo of the publicity drive quickened. An EEC Information Service was set up in the Department of Foreign Affairs, its Vote provision being trebled between 1970/71 and 1971/72. This Unit had a major role in the task of informing the public as to the principal characteristics of the European Communities and the terms of accession secured by Ireland.

These activities were paralleled by a campaign to ensure a 'yes' vote, undertaken by the Government and supported by the Fine Gael Party and groups such as farming, industrial and commercial organisations, and the Irish Council of the European Movement.

Labour Party opposition was supported by the trade union movement which feared a growing loss of jobs in industry according as Ireland moved to full free trade with the rest of the Community. The Labour Party adhered to the line they had consistently held down the years, that there was an alternative to membership of the Communities, namely, association which would enable the country to prosper and at the same time avoid the harsher obligations of membership.

More forthright opposition was offered by a variety of smaller bodies ranging from the Common Market Defence Campaign to the Common Market Study Group, the two Sinn Féin organisations, the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Association and some small radical dissident groups. Some like-minded people in Britain, deprived of a similar opportunity to register their opposition to British entry to the Communities, supported the efforts of their Irish counterparts, some to an extravagant degree. One propagandist reached the wilder shores of speculation by predicting 'a very challenging influx of low-wage Italian farm labourers [which] would further heighten the social and regional depression aspects of the CAP.' While the referendum campaign may be said to have begun with the commencement of the parliamentary debates on the Third Amendment of the Constitution Bill in December 1971, it moved into top gear towards the end of April. From that point on it showed all the trappings of a general election campaign with public addresses by the various protagonists, press conferences, posters, leaflets, stickers, and for those groups which lacked resources, wall paintings with the appeal 'No EEC'.

The campaign ended with an eve-of-poll speech by the Taoiseach which he concluded by saying:

If I were to sum up in one word what the European Community will mean for Ireland I would say 'opportunity'. The opportunity to realise our economic and social potential and ensure the welfare of our

people; the opportunity to realise our European heritage in a much fuller and more significant way than heretofore; the opportunity also to play a meaningful and positive role in working for peace in the world. The opportunity now before us will certainly bring its own demands and challenges. But has anything worthwhile been achieved by our nation - any nation - without effort and imagination? We are now being offered this great opportunity and these major challenges. The question tomorrow is: are we prepared to grasp them? I am fully confident that the Irish people will wholeheartedly accept them by recording a massive 'yes' vote at the polls tomorrow.

Voters were furnished with the text of the proposed amendment to the Constitution, as set out in the Third Amendment Bill, and were asked:

If you approve of the State's becoming a member of the European Communities, mark X opposite the word Yes on the ballot paper.

If you do not approve of the State's becoming a member of the European Communities mark X opposite the word No on the ballot paper.

The results, which surprised many people, can be summarised as follows:

Total electorate	1,783,604
Total poll	1,253,781
'Yes' vote	1,041,890
'No' vote	211,891
'Yes' vote	83.1 per cent of the poll

The results by constituencies in terms of 'Yes' votes varied from 73 per cent of the poll in Dublin South-West to 91 per cent in North-East Donegal.

The Third Amendment of the Constitution Bill became law on 8 June. Another stage on the road to membership had been completed.

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