

Speech by Jack Lynch at the Irish Parliament (21 March 1972)

Caption: On 21 March 1972, the Irish Prime Minister, Jack Lynch, announces to the Dáil that a national referendum is soon to be held on the issue of Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

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[...]

The purpose of the debate is to give the Dáil the opportunity to discuss in advance of the referendum the terms negotiated for this country's accession to the Communities and the Government's assessment of accession on these terms as set out in the White Paper and the supplement. If the people approve in the referendum the amendment proposed in the Third Amendment of the Constitution Bill, 1971, and I am confident that they will, a motion will be introduced by the Government in Dáil Éireann in accordance with the requirements of Article 29 of the Constitution seeking approval of the Treaty of Accession, the text of which has already been circulated to Deputies.

The Government's intention is that the referendum should be held during the month of May. This will be after the new register of electors comes into force on 15th April, as we wish to ensure that young persons who have not previously been eligible to vote and who now have reached the voting age should have the opportunity to vote in the referendum on this issue which is so vital to their future and the future of our country. The form of the proposed constitutional amendment and the reasons therefore are explained in the White Paper and were fully debated during the passage of the Bill through the Dáil and Seanad. It is, therefore, unnecessary for me to go over this ground again. However, there is one point I feel I must stress once more, namely that the proposed amendment is specifically and deliberately confined to cover the acceptance by us of the obligations of membership of the three European Communities, the European Economic Community, the European Atomic Energy Community and the European Coal and Steel Community, which were established by the Treaties of Rome and Paris.

These obligations do not entail any military or defence commitments for there are no such commitments involved in Ireland's acceptance of the Treaties. The reason why I am emphasising this point again is that some people are persisting in their attempts to make this an issue in our membership of the Communities despite the clear evidence to the contrary and the repeated unequivocal assurances given by the Government on the subject. One can only assume that this is a diversionary tactic on their part, designed to distract attention from the real issues involved in membership to which they are opposed for other reasons.

It is of the greatest importance that the people are given clear and precise information on what membership of the Communities will mean for the country for it is they, the people, who must decide this issue. The White Paper is designed to present the facts which will form the basis of a mature and responsible decision. The terms agreed in the negotiations for our accession to the Communities are described in detail in that document and they are set out against the background of Community policies and arrangements for various sectors.

In this way a comprehensive and objective picture is given of the obligations which membership entails for this country both during the transitional period and afterwards. I am confident that anyone who, fairly and without bias, considers the terms we have negotiated will conclude with us that they are satisfactory. There will be some who while agreeing with this assessment consider that perhaps something more favourable might have been obtainable in one or other sector. Although I could not go along with this view, I accept that there is always scope for such argument after the conclusion of negotiations, however successful. What I cannot accept is the claim made by some that we could have obtained a much more favourable deal and even that we could have negotiated changes in Community rules and policies to suit us. These people choose to ignore the fact that these policies and rules were worked out by the present Member States after years of arduous and prolonged bargaining. The negotiations were conducted on the basis that the applicant countries accepted the provisions of the Treaties establishing the Communities and the action taken for the implementation of these Treaties.

The Government entered into the negotiations because they were convinced after the fullest examination that, given satisfactory terms for accession, our national interests would best be served by membership. The negotiations were essentially concerned with transitional arrangements necessary to enable the applicant countries to adapt to the obligations of membership. It was obvious that the views of the applicant countries

and the Community itself would differ as to the kind of transitional arrangements which would best serve their interests. Ideally, we would have liked a longer period for the removal of industrial protection and a shorter period for participation in the benefits of the common agricultural policy. Britain would have preferred to have it the other way round, while Denmark's best interest would be in a short transitional period in both sectors.

In view of this conflict of interests and to ensure a successful outcome of the negotiations it was agreed at the opening of the negotiations that in the trade sector the duration of the transitional period would be the same for all applicant countries and that an overall balance of reciprocal advantages would best be achieved by ensuring an adequate parallelism between progress in the free movement of industrial goods and participation in the common agricultural policy.

I have dealt at some length with the basis on which the negotiations were opened and co-ordinated because it is essential that we be clear on this point if we are to have a constructive and meaningful debate on the merits of the terms negotiated. I do not propose in this speech opening the debate to go into the details of the terms negotiated nor their implications and those of membership as a whole for this country. These are fully set out in the White Paper and the various Ministers will be dealing with them during the course of the debate. Let me say here that the Government are fully satisfied with the terms of accession. They will ensure that all sectors of the economy can adjust gradually to the conditions and obligations of membership. Not only this, they will enable us to derive substantial benefits immediately from the date of accession and to avail ourselves, also from this date, of many of the opportunities that membership will offer.

Many people had doubts about how accession would affect our industry and our policy of industrial development. The arrangements negotiated for this sector should remove these doubts. The timetable for the gradual removal of protection will give industry an adequate breathing space for making the necessary adjustments to conditions of free trade. A greatly extended transitional period has been obtained for the motor assembly industry and there are special arrangements for the steel industry to carry through its programme of reorganisation. Difficulties may still be encountered by some industries as a result of a lowering of protection but arrangements were agreed in the negotiations for a general safeguard provision which will enable us to take protective action for particular sectors.

We will also, where appropriate, be able to use our own anti-dumping legislation in case of urgency during that period. Protection against imports is only one aspect of the industrial picture. Our exporters, who have already proved their ability to exploit available opportunities, will now have greatly enhanced opportunities open to them with the removal of tariffs and other restrictions against their products in one of the richest and most populous markets in the world. These new export opportunities, together with the assurance obtained in the negotiations, reinforced by a special protocol, that we can continue to apply industrial aids and incentives, will provide a greater stimulus to industrial investment in this country. The protocol has been widely and rightly acclaimed as the major achievement in our negotiations. As a result, we can both continue our existing policies of industrial and regional development and look forward to extending and improving them where necessary.

There are no grounds for pessimism about the overall future of our industry in the Community. As a result of the terms obtained for this sector, we can look forward to substantial increases in both employment and output at an even more rapid pace than was achieved during the 1960s when industry played a leading role in our economic expansion. There is no need for me to recount the great advantages which accession will bring in the agricultural sector. These are appreciated on all sides, except by those whose opposition to membership blinds them to incontrovertible fact. I need hardly say that membership will give our farmers the greatest opportunity they have ever had to increase their production and income. Let me emphasise, too, that the higher prices which apply in the Community will be received by all farmers, large and small.

Finally, I should like to point out that we will begin to benefit from these higher prices immediately and that substantial savings on agricultural subsidies will also be available to us from the outset of membership. The prospects for industry and agriculture which I have outlined will mean increases in the incomes of these sectors. These, in turn, will have a beneficial effect on other sectors of the economy. It is estimated, taking

these factors into account, that the total employment will show a net increase of 50,000 by 1978 and that the gross national product will rise by about 5 per cent in a year on average over this period. Such a performance, especially in the case of employment, will represent a marked improvement on the record growth achieved in the 1960s and will be the first real prospect, since independence, of achieving full employment and ending involuntary emigration.

One other aspect of the terms of accession on which I wish to comment is our participation in the institutions of the Community. Although we will have transitional arrangements in a number of sectors prior to assuming the full obligations of membership, we will, right from the start, have a full voice in the decisions of the institutions and participate fully in their work. It has been stated in some quarters that our influence in the institutions will be too small to have any real effect on Community policies and that our interests will be ignored by Community decisions. This is not true. In the case of the Council of Ministers, which is the decision-making body of the Communities, we shall, from the very beginning, have a seat and a vote in the Council just as the present Member States now have.

It should be borne in mind that the invariable practice in the Council is that decisions affecting the essential interests of any one of the Member States are taken only on the basis of unanimous voting. As regards the other Community institutions and bodies, we shall have, in many cases, equal representation with the other Member States, and in others the size of our representation will be greater than would be warranted by reference to relative population or gross national product.

Most of the criticism of the Government decision to seek membership of the European Economic Community has been directed not so much against the terms of accession as against the idea of membership itself. The nature of this criticism spans a wide range of argument, but fundamentally the opponents of membership seek to base their arguments on either economic or political considerations. The main plank in the economic argument put forward by these people is that we would be better, or at least as well, outside the Community by negotiating some form of link short of membership. Let us be clear on what this argument is all about. It is primarily about the best means of achieving the aims of national economic policy on which we are all agreed. These aims include the rapid raising of the general standard of living of our people to a level approximating to the Community average; the elimination of disparities of a structural or regional character which bear harshly on certain sections of our people; the provision of opportunity for our agricultural population to earn an income comparable with that obtainable in other occupations; the absorption into gainful employment of our surplus labour force, including those who, of their own volition, will continue to leave agriculture; the stemming of emigration by the provision of adequate training and job opportunities and the continuing improvement of our social services.

The achievement of these aims represents a formidable task. The question we must ask ourselves is whether we are more likely to succeed in this task within the Community than outside it. The conditions of membership are clearly set out in the White Paper. The Government are convinced that these conditions, together with the transitional arrangements obtained in the negotiations, afford the best and perhaps the only opportunity we are likely to have of achieving those national economic aims. I am not seeking to play down the difficulties which will have to be overcome in some sectors. The Government have never pretended that the structure of industry would remain unaffected by the transition from a highly-protected market to free trading conditions. Over the years, they have spared no effort to facilitate this transition both by encouraging existing industry to adapt to a changing environment and by attracting new export-based industries on a large scale. Notwithstanding all that has been done there are likely to be some losses. These losses will be more than offset by the gains that can flow from membership of the Community, gains which will enable us to pursue our national economic aims with far greater prospect of success than would otherwise be possible.

Basically, the issue is one of confidence in the capacity of our people to make a success of membership. The Government have no doubts about the capacity of our people to do so and in this we are supported by the elected representatives of the great majority of the people. The opponents of membership, on the other hand, do not believe, or profess not to believe, that we as a nation are capable of achieving our national aims as a member of the Community. However, the extraordinary thing is that the most vocal opponents of membership have shown boundless confidence in our capacity to survive and prosper on the basis of an

alternative relationship with the Community, the terms of which are not known.

I do not propose to go into the possible content of such alternative relationship. This question will be taken up by later speakers from the Government benches. However, I would like to concentrate the attention of Deputies on the things that any such alternative relationship would not contain. First, let us take agriculture. What we want to achieve for our farmers are guaranteed access to a large market for their products and an assurance of remunerative prices. Experience has clearly shown that these objectives are not attainable on the basis of bilateral arrangements with individual countries. They are attainable within the framework of the Community's common agricultural policy. Participation in the common agricultural policy with all the advantages that it would offer for our farmers is only open to members of the Community. This is a verifiable fact. There is not a single country outside the Community — I repeat, not a single country — which has succeeded in negotiating terms of access to the Community market for their agricultural products remotely approaching what our farmers need. It is clear that such terms of access would not be available to us in any arrangement with the Community short of membership.

This is not all. If we are to remain outside the enlarged Community which will include Britain, the Community barriers which would be erected against our exports to the British market, which at present accounts for 80 per cent of our total agricultural exports, would have disastrous effects on Irish agriculture and the repercussions would damage the entire economy. Then, there is the matter of access to the Community's funds. The Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund in addition to providing market support for agricultural production has the function of assisting the structural improvement of agriculture in the Community. The European Social Fund provides funds for the training of workers and is assuming an increasingly important role in this area. The European Investment Bank is a major source of funds for development projects. Additional means of Community assistance are also being devised with the special object of dealing with the problem of regional and structural disparities within the Community. We could not expect that access to these various sources of Community assistance which would be of great benefit to our economic and regional development would be open to us if we were not a full member of the Community.

Finally, in the protocol agreed in the negotiations, the Community has acknowledged that it has a responsibility to assist economic development in Ireland and has therefore agreed to recommend that all the means at the disposal of Community institutions be used for this purpose. Can anyone honestly claim that this kind of general commitment on the part of the Community would be given to us outside the context of membership? Certainly, it is not to be found in any agreement negotiated with the Community with a non-member country. These are some of the advantages that would be lacking in any of the arrangements we might negotiate in place of membership. It is amazing that anyone should claim that without these advantages our goal of a growing and prosperous economy would be more easily achieved. It might be that with such an arrangement we could escape some of the losses which would occur if we remained totally aloof from the Community but it is certain that most of the gains which only membership can bring would be denied to us. The result would be a long period of economic stagnation which could be overcome if at all only by a national effort far greater than that required to meet the challenge of membership.

This highlights the kind of contradiction that lies at the heart of the economic arguments against membership. It seems clear that many of those opposed to membership, who advance the unfounded and illogical economic arguments I have discussed, really have objections of a political nature to membership. These objections are concerned chiefly with sovereignty and the political future of the Community. The wilder flights of anti-Common Market oratory introduce emotive expressions such as "rich man's club", "neo-colonialism", "capitalist plot" and so on. I hope — in fact I am confident — that this debate will not be conducted in these terms. The issues raised are important ones and deserve to be discussed in a serious way.

At this juncture I do not propose to deal with these political aspects in any detail since I have on many occasions inside and outside the House commented on these matters and later speakers on the Government side will also cover such points. I must, however, say that the political objections advanced by opponents of membership exhibit the same illogicalities, the same contradictions as their economic arguments. I have already pointed to their mental somersault concerning the behaviour of the Irish people themselves. Inside

the EEC, they allege that we will be unable to compete on level terms with the other member countries because of our many weaknesses and shortcomings. Outside EEC, however, we apparently would be able to call on boundless reserves of energy and enterprise in order successfully to overcome tariff barriers and other obstacles to economic expansion.

The same sort of mental gymnastics characterise the political objections to EEC. Inside EEC it is alleged we would be stripped of our sovereignty, our resources exploited by half-baked Europeans hungry for profits while we remain helpless in the face of decisions taken in the interests of the larger and more powerful Member States. Outside EEC, on the other hand, these same countries, it is alleged, would suddenly become filled with sweet reason and light willing to negotiate some form of agreement with Ireland which would take account of all our special circumstances. The fact that any such arrangement would mean almost total dependence on the Community without any say at all in its political or economic decisions would, apparently, be no cause for alarm because of the continued benevolence of the EEC towards us.

The same sort of confused thinking is evident also in the argument put out by the anti-Common Market lobby that joining the Community would perpetuate the division of our country and this, despite the disappearance of economic frontiers within the EEC and the commitment of the Community to an ever-closer union of its peoples. It passes comprehension how anybody could support that view. Surely it is self-evident that if we were to remain outside the Community we would be conferring on the Border the status of a frontier, both economic and political, between ourselves and the rest of Europe. Moreover, since Britain would continue to be the major market for agricultural products any agreement which we would make with the EEC as a non-member country would depend largely on the goodwill and favour of the British. Not alone, therefore, would we be copper-fastening Partition but by remaining outside the EEC we would be also increasing our dependence on Britain. Can any Irishman seriously want this?

The logical conclusion is that the political, economic and other interests of our country and our people are best served by membership of the Community. In saying this, it is not my intention to hold out membership of the Community as a universal panacea to cure all our ills. The Community has its defects as have all man-made institutions. Its most noteworthy feature however is the extraordinary progress it has achieved over the short period of its existence, a mere 13 years. In so far as the Community has defects, it would be for us as a member to work with our fellow members in order to remedy these defects.

It is a salutary exercise to reflect on the kind of Europe — even the kind of world — we would have today if the European statesmen in the seats of power at the beginning of this century had been endowed with the same vision, the same dedication to peace and the same sense of Community as were Schuman, Spaak, Adenauer and De Gasperi. It is conceivable that Europe and the world would have been spared two devastating wars, that we would not have had the division of Europe into two blocs and that we would be nearer to a solution of the problems of the developing world.

It is easy for us, with the benefit of hindsight, to pass judgment on the shortcomings of previous generations of political leaders. Let us not, however, forget that we in turn will be judged by posterity. Today we stand at a most important crossroads in our history. The road we take will determine not only the future of our country for generations to come, but also the contribution we make to the creation of a Europe that will measure up to the high ideals of the founders of the Community. I am confident that the decision we take will reflect our people's faith in their capacity to help fashion for themselves and for future generations of Irish men and women a better Ireland in a better Europe.

I have kept my speech short in the hope of setting an example. It is desirable that as many speakers as possible participate in the debate and perhaps before the debate develops much further there might be some agreement reached as to the length of speeches. That is a matter for the Whips. As I have indicated, those Ministers having special responsibility for any aspect of European Community will be dealing specifically with such aspects and I hope that it will be possible for the Ministers concerned to satisfy any Deputies regarding any questions that may be asked. I recommend the motion for the approval of the House.

[...]