

Intervention by Liam Cosgrave at the Irish Parliament (21 mars 1972)

Caption: On 21 March 1972, Liam Cosgrave, Leader of the Irish Liberal Party, Fine Gael, reiterates the implications of the forthcoming national referendum on Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Parliamentary Debates Dáil Éireann - Volume 259 - 21 March, 1972 Membership of EEC: Motion.. [ON-LINE]. [Ireland]: House of the Oireachtas, [18.04.2002]. Disponible sur <http://www.oireachtas-debates.gov.ie/>.

Copyright: (c) Houses of the Oireachtas

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/intervention_by_liam_cosgrave_at_the_irish_parliament_21_mars_1972-en-facbf47b-9ace-405d-bbec-ffc29fdbf151.html

Publication date: 23/10/2012

Intervention by Liam Cosgrave at the Irish Parliament (21 mars 1972)

[...]

This referendum is, I believe, coming at a time when it is being foreshadowed, as it were, by a debate which is taking place in utterly unreal circumstances. There is an air of unreality about this debate for some of the reasons that Deputy Keating put clearly and well before the House. There is at the present time a lack of confidence in the Government and that lack of confidence stems from the belief that it is both weak and indecisive. There is a threat to the very fabric of this State which transcends party politics and personalities. I subscribe to the view expressed by Deputy Keating that one of the ways in which the people in Northern Ireland could be attracted into this State is by making it more prosperous and, therefore, more attractive for them to come in here because they would be better off in here than they would be elsewhere. That opportunity certainly offered on one occasion. But the opportunity was missed because party and personality took precedence over the people's or the national interest. Whether it will ever return again is a matter of conjecture.

This discussion and the referendum are being held in circumstances and conditions that are unparalleled since the establishment of this State. They certainly have been unparalleled for 50 years. One of the important elements to get clearly and unmistakably before the electorate at this juncture is that the institutions of this State are going to last and the people and those elected by them are determined that they are going to last. Secondly, the decision taken on this matter will be the decision of the people. Whether it is for or against, it will be the people's decision and the politicians will naturally and properly have to accept that decision.

It is important to recognise the challenge that there is to the democratic institutions established here. There is a challenge. Because it is more obvious in the North of Ireland than it is here, it is, nonetheless, a real challenge and there is an inescapable obligation on public representatives and political parties to ensure that our democratic institutions, with all their defects, must be preserved and will be defended as representing the best interests of the Irish people. Having accepted this, I believe the issue is relatively clear.

The Common Market is now a fact of life. It is an institution of six countries which came together with the objective of unifying Europe and developing aims and objectives to which most Deputies here would subscribe. We, in common with other countries, sought membership just a decade ago. It is not necessary now to recount why we did not adhere to the Community before this. It is not necessary to recount what happened to prevent the enlargement of the community. If the Community is enlarged, and it now looks as though it is almost certain that it will become a Community of six plus Britain—whether the other two applicant countries and ourselves join depends on the results of the referenda in these countries—we must look at the facts of the situation on the assumption that Britain is as good as in. If we take our present trade with Britain and the trade we have with the EEC countries the total amounts to about 80 per cent of our total trade.

The European Economic Community operates, and this is an accepted fact, a common external tariff against non-members under a customs union in full operation for the benefit of member States. If, therefore, Britain, with which we have almost 70 per cent of our total trade, becomes a member and we then have the EEC and Britain together, then just 80 per cent of our total trade would be with this enlarged Community. A common external tariff would apply against non-members. It would apply against us.

Whatever argument there is, and I do not deny that there are aspects of the agreement that could be improved—I will refer to detailed provisions later—the fact is that, whatever alternative there is to full membership, there is no alternative to free trade in industrial goods. Whether we have a trade agreement, some form of association or full membership, it is recognised and accepted that the aim of the Community is to work towards and operate free trade arrangements in any event. That would put at risk here a total of 35,000 people in industrial employment. At the same time, we would have no direct say in Community decisions. To a great many people these are in many respects academic questions. The average individual looks at the proposal and tries to analyse the alternative. Having done that, he or she will decide for or

against. This is the issue the electorate will have to decide when the referendum is held. There is no point now in failing to disclose the actual date of the referendum. There are 31 days in May. On the assumption that it will not be held on a Sunday or on a Saturday, and it is unusual to have elections on either a Monday or a Friday, it leaves Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of four weeks. It should be possible to come to a decision on which day in which of these weeks it is proposed to have the referendum. It would simplify matters. I think it is symptomatic of the indecision that characterises this Government that they cannot announce on this date, 21st March, on what date in May the referendum will take place.

That is beside the point. What we have to decide and what we believe the people have to decide is, on the basis of the proposals that are put before the country and on the alternatives that are available, where does the balance of advantage lie. I approach this entirely in a pragmatic fashion. I think people generally subscribe to the idea of European unity, to the aims and objectives of bringing the countries of Europe closer together and of trying to eliminate the dissensions and causes of conflict that have bedevilled and affected Europe, particularly affected it twice in the last 50 years.

Leaving these altruistic aims aside, this is mainly, for the average individual, an economic or a social question. Whether he is a farmer, an industrial worker, a manufacturer or an urban dweller, no matter what his calling in life or his occupation, it is a question of economics or social interest that will decide the question. These are the issues that have to be decided and these are the questions that the average voter will have to ask himself when he comes to vote. Without again outlining the aims of the EEC in dealing with the ending of conflicts which divide Europe, the economic aims were to improve by joint action the working conditions and living standards of the people of Europe, to abolish the outdated barriers which split up western Europe in small protected markets, to speed up technological progress and to make possible large scale operations in the increasing number of industries in which it was essential and to make a special joint effort to help the less favoured areas of the Community and its other associates. With that end in view a number of decisions were taken by the EEC and certain actions were taken as a result of which this is the kernel of the question that the people will have to decide in the referendum.

[...]