

‘A major role in saving Europe?’ from Die Zeit (12 June 1992)

Caption: On 12 June 1992, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit analyses the economic and political situation in Ireland on the day after the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty.

Source: Die Zeit. 12.06.1992, Nr. 25. Hamburg. "Eine Hauptrolle als Retter Europas?", auteur:Alioth, Martin, p. 5.

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The Irish Government is hoping for financial gain from Maastricht. But the people are still suspicious

A major role in saving Europe?

According to the Irish Prime Minister, Albert Reynolds, next January we might find that there is not even a Treaty. But, he says, that is not the case at the moment and may not be the case then. This fence-sitting statement underlies his decision to let the Irish decide for themselves about the Treaty of Maastricht on 18 June, despite the Danish 'No'. His words sounded like those of a drowning man.

The surprising result announced from Copenhagen came as a final blow to the Irish politicians. The abortion debate, with its legal nit-picking and broad generalisations, had just about worn the Irish people down, and now they were turning their attention to the issue of European integration in an exhausted state. The sensational news from Denmark followed immediately, however, and Albert Reynolds reacted instinctively. He sees politics as a test of manhood: politicians have to show their mettle, grit their teeth and get on with it. To the applause of the still half-dazed European Commission, Reynolds is offering the Irish the chance to save Europe. Where the Vikings had stumbled, the Celts would triumph. A resounding 'Yes' to European Union might prove a useful bargaining tool in future negotiations. Critics, on the other hand, are talking of the most expensive public opinion poll in the world.

The Danish 'No' has triggered contradictory reactions in Ireland. Contemporary historian Ronan Fanning is appealing specifically to the Irish nation's volatile sense of self-esteem, reminding them that, all of a sudden, Ireland has to make the most important decision in European history. The Irish enjoy the reputation of being good Europeans. They are happy to change and come into line with their partners' expectations. There were appropriately large 'Yes' majorities in the 1972 referendum on EC membership and the 1987 referendum on the Single European Act. Their enthusiasm stems in part from the realisation that membership of the EC has enabled the Irish to emancipate themselves from the United Kingdom both economically and intellectually. Their pride in the (official) equality that the small nation of Ireland enjoys at the Brussels conference table contrasts starkly, however, with the disdain with which the Irish Establishment now views the dissident Danes.

The good conduct displayed by the Irish in matters of European policy also reflects their desire not to rock the boat in any way. The unconventional Cork historian John A. Murphy, an independent Senator in the Irish Parliament, has criticised the government's 'Yes' campaign, claiming that the Irish will be told that they are too poor and too dependent to allow themselves the Danish luxury of a 'No'. While it is true to say that the two major parties have so far based their arguments mainly on the expected financial jackpot, Reynolds found himself on thin ice when, six weeks ago, he promised that Maastricht would net the Irish over 16 billion by 1997. It is now conceded that the doubling of the Structural Funds is merely at the budget proposal stage and is, moreover, not directly dependent on the Maastricht Treaty.

No one disputes the fact, however, that Ireland has always been given a generous slice of the European financial cake. The Irish receive far more per capita than the poorest countries, Greece and Portugal. At the start of every new Irish motorway there is a large sign on which are emblazoned the 12 gold stars, and every vocational trainee collects his or her education grant from the Brussels coffers. In recent years, farmers have produced mainly for the EC's cold storage plants. Membership of the European Monetary System brought the economy low inflation rates and a hard Irish punt. The high unemployment rate (21 %), on the other hand, results more from population growth and the former debt economy than the EC. All this ought to be reason enough for an enthusiastic 'Yes' in the coming week, provided that the Government manages to make the Irish believe that a 'No' also automatically means exclusion from Europe — to some extent reproducing the Albanian scenario.

Since the Danish referendum, however, the foundation for this black-and-white portrayal of the situation, which precludes any chance of a free vote, has not been as strong as it was. The politically discriminating Irish may now select their place in history. No one expects the Maastricht Treaty in its present form to survive rejection by the Irish. The spectrum of Irish opponents to the Treaty ranges from the traditional opponents of the EC who, after all, secured 30 % of the vote in 1987, to militant feminists and the Greens, and from the ultra-conservative Catholic lay groups to the fragmented Left. Because of the diverse motives of the

opponents, the institutional phalanx of supporters (parties, trades unions, employers and farmers' organisations) offers no guarantee of there being a positive outcome, even in Ireland.

The reason for the breadth of the resistance is the unfortunate link between the debate on Europe and the emotive subject of abortion. Despite the government's ritual assurance that the two issues had been separated, nothing of the kind has happened. On the contrary, Reynolds is openly threatening renewed legal action against pregnant Irish women who have an abortion in England if the electorate returns a 'No' vote on 18 June. At the same time, all sides are in agreement that the overwhelming chaos in the abortion issue is of Ireland's own making. This issue does, on the other hand, have a link with Maastricht through the Irish Protocol (No 17), which rules out any recourse to European law in abortion cases. Since these plans for an unfair curtailment of Irishwomen's civil rights had been made clandestinely, the case of a 14-year-old rape victim plunged the Irish public into deep moral conflict. Although the Irish Supreme Court held at the time that the girl's threat of suicide justified abortion, at the same time it denied the basic right of freedom to travel.

For the militant opponents of abortion, the legalisation of pregnancy termination — contrary to the absolute ban on abortion in 1983 — was tantamount to a declaration of war. They are calling for a new referendum to bring back the absolute ban and are being supported in this demand by the Catholic Church. The liberals, on the other hand, are outraged at the voluntary abandonment of progressive EC norms and are calling for a guarantee in Irish law of freedom to travel and to obtain information before they agree to Maastricht. They have every reason to doubt the Reynolds Government's good intentions to hold a referendum on abortion in November.

The opponents' mixed-bag coalition has accused the Government of treating them like mushrooms: keeping them in the dark and showering them with ... manure. Reynolds' refusal to deal with the outstanding pregnancy termination issues before the European referendum is still beyond comprehension.

Since the Danes have proved that a 'No' vote is possible, other issues that were previously overshadowed by the abortion debate have also come in for criticism, however. One such issue is Irish neutrality, which defies definition and to which the Irish have become attached — even if only because it prevents the former colony from becoming embroiled in superpower adventures. The Government is again adopting a head-in-the-sand approach to this issue and claims that a decision is not due until 1996. At the same time, however, it is applying for permanent observer status in WEU. Opponents are stirring up unrest in the meantime with scaremongering claims that this will mean conscription.

Since Garret FitzGerald failed to be re-elected Prime Minister five years ago, no top Irish politician has taken the trouble to bring the European ideal home to the Irish people. His successor, Charles Haughey, saw the EC merely as a way of embellishing his aura of statesmanship. The present incumbent, Albert Reynolds, is groping about aimlessly in the dark. These failings are fuelling the mood of insecurity. Although the young Irish Republic may, on balance, guard its sovereignty far less jealously than other older states, this society has its sensitive areas, including abortion and neutrality or anti-militarism. The question now is whether the hope of financial gain will motivate a sufficient number of the pro-Maastricht camp to vote, especially as the topic of the referendum itself might easily evaporate.

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