

'A peaceful Europe, secure jobs, sound money and safe streets' from The Irish Times

Source: The Irish Times. 12.12.1996. Dublin.

Copyright: (c) The Irish Times

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/a_peaceful_europe_secure_jobs_sound_money_and_safe_streets_from_the_irish_times-en-b2fec66-0749-4bc1-9e6c-0f4b9f9f65ea.html

Publication date: 18/09/2012

‘A peaceful Europe, secure jobs, sound money and safe streets’

THE Taoiseach, Mr Bruton, expects the European Council in Dublin to endorse a wide ranging programme of action against drugs and crime, to accept that the Irish draft of revised EU treaties forms the basis for a negotiated agreement over the next six months and he hopes it will finalise the crucial rules for the introduction of a single European currency from January 1st, 1999.

It will also register substantial progress on employment policy and put a firm stamp on a more elaborate and engaged external relations policy, notably on the Middle East and relations with the United States.

It adds up to a substantial achievement for the Irish presidency, he believes, across the span of issues he defined when it began in terms of the following objectives: "A peaceful Europe, secure jobs, sound money and safe streets". These have become part of the public vocabulary in Ireland and the Union and will help to engage citizens politically, broadening out the focus of integration, he hopes, from a narrow elite using incomprehensible jargon.

It has been an intensive six months for the Government. The presidency imposes burdens that are not widely recognised outside its ranks. When adversarial domestic politics continue through it, as they do in this State, the pressures are all the more intense. Harold Macmillan replied once, when asked what cost him sleep, "events, dear boy, events". It should be remembered that Mr Bruton has had to deal with the Lowry/Dunne affair on the run in the middle of a gruelling round of visits to 14 capitals before the summit

He believes the experience of the presidency will survive for a long time to come. It has exposed ministers and officials to a far wider range of issues than they would normally encounter as well as restoring momentum to the EU as a whole.

Paul Gillespie
Foreign Editor

Q: What would you regard as the main achievements of the Irish EU Presidency?

A: I think the big ones will be in the areas where we set out to have achievements. In the whole drugs and crime area there has been a very substantial range of decisions already taken with regard to cooperation between police and judicial authorities, in regard to the fight against drug abuse and initiatives taken to interdict the supply of drugs within the European Union.

Action has also been taken on the issue of child sexual abuse, where the mandate of Europol has been extended.

We are going further and we hope to have a declaration adopted at Dublin on organised crime. It will be calling for a work programme which will be more detailed. We will be putting that issue very firmly on the Community agenda. I think that will be a major achievement of the presidency.

Another achievement has been in regard to the Inter Governmental Conference. While we will not, of course, finalise the treaty we will have completed a very large amount of work on this.

We have brought the treaty far closer to finality than it was when we started, on a very patient basis, successively seeking to approximate its positions on all the contentious issues. And we have presented a draft which reflects that work.

It contains treaty language on all the main issues, except in those areas where the process has not gone far enough actually to turn anything into tangible treaty language, including institutional issues and flexibility.

I think also the record will show we have made very substantial progress on the preparations for the single currency.

The legal framework for it is finalised, we will have finalised the arrangement for currencies within the euro and those without, and we hope we may be able to finalise the Stability Pact – we may not complete every aspect of it, but a huge proportion of the work has already been agreed.

There are one or two outstanding issues which we hope will be agreed. We have got agreement that they will hold another meeting of Ecofin ministers in Dublin today, before the summit.

So on the three main dossiers we had, we have been taking very good action.

Q: What about external relations?

A: Here the Irish presidency has brought the European Union into the centre of policy making in regard to the Middle East peace process much more than ever before.

And we have done so on the basis that it is the European Union presidency that's doing the work rather than individual member states – I think that is an important achievement.

We had an approach in the past with regard to the Middle East where it was the individual member states that were doing the work. The individual member states continue to take a very practical interest, but there is a general acceptance of the EU presidency in this area which we have been involved in achieving.

Q: And is that welcomed by the parties in the area?

A: It is very much welcomed by the parties. The fact that Mr Netanyahu visited Dublin is an indication of the level of recognition of the EU role. No Israeli prime minister ever visited Ireland during any of our previous presidencies to discuss the Middle East peace process – or on any other occasion.

Also on the external relations front, we are looking forward to having a summit with President Clinton next Monday, after the EU summit. Again, quite a substantial amount of work has been done in preparation for that and we hope there will be a positive outcome from it.

Q: The main issues coming into the summit itself are in these areas you have discussed: is there anything supplementary that you would be hoping for?

A: We will be coming to substantive conclusions on employment in accordance with the so called Essen process.

There are 18 million Europeans who are out of work. It's very important that the European Union shouldn't be seen to be simply a financial and commercial concern – that it has an anxiety to make sure the social consequences of the industrial and economic growth it brings about should include substantial reduction in unemployment.

And we have an intensive process of work on policy in that area which will be reflected in the conclusions at Dublin.

Q: You spoke at the beginning of the presidency about improving its management, getting the decision making going more urgently and about a sense of mission. How would you comment on those elements?

A: Well, first of all, so far as management is concerned I think it's generally recognised throughout Europe that the Irish presidency has got the work done efficiently at the various councils.

The ones I would regard as particularly notable would include Justice and Home Affairs where far more progress has been made than has ever been achieved before under the chair of Nora Owen.

I think it's widely recognised throughout Europe that the work that Ruairi Quinn as Minister for Finance has done on the single currency has been exceptionally effective.

And of course the Tánaiste's work across all these areas has been of very high quality.

I think it also is the case that people in the Union who were sceptical about the idea of having an informal summit in Dublin are now very happy that we had it. They feel that the summit gave an impetus to the work of other councils. It also enabled us to take a lead role in the Middle East which the Union might not have been able to take if we didn't have that informal summit – which I chaired.

Q: You also spoke at the beginning of the presidency about the need to communicate the whole process politically.

A: Well, obviously we have availed of every opportunity when speaking about the priorities of our own presidency to talk about its role and objectives; and of secure jobs for people in Europe, stable money for the people of Europe, safe streets for people in Europe and peace.

And I think, that by putting it at every public appearance in those terms we have been able to focus public attention back on the practical tangible good effect of a well functioning European Union on the lives of ordinary citizens.

I think that's important in itself because there had been this tendency for discussion of EU issues to be confined to incomprehensible jargon exchanged between experts.

The use of those four central objectives has, I think, communicated itself to public opinion. Certainly I felt there was a strong resonance from that when I spoke in the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

In fact, members of the parliament were quoting back the four Irish objectives as an important encapsulation of what the whole exercise was about.

That has served a function of simplification that goes long and far beyond the Irish presidency.

Those four themes we put forward at the outset of our presidency will actually be used in some way in subsequent presidencies or subsequent statements by us as a good way of summing up what the European Union is in a way that the public will understand.

Q: A notable feature of the presidency has been the development of your personal relations with Dr Kohl and, more generally, Irish German relations.

A: We were very pleased to have the visit of a German chancellor to Dublin, for the first time since the 1970s, during this Irish presidency. That was a very important milestone in Irish German relations.

It is also a very clear indication of the pivotal role a small country in the presidency plays in the management of the Union, in the eyes of the largest single member of the Union – namely Germany.

But I would make the point that the work of the presidency has enabled us to improve our bilateral relations with every one of the countries in the Union, from Luxembourg up to Germany.

The intensity of the contact we have had in the presidency with all members, including of course with Britain, has enhanced the quality of the relationship with all those countries, because we are not just concerned with our own relationship with them.

We have a much deeper understanding of their wider concerns with European issues and that enhances the quality of our general relationship with all European countries.

Also I think the fact that we will be having an EU summit with the United States, on EU business, will enhance and broaden the relationship that Ireland has with the United States.

While hitherto that has been a very close and warm relationship, it has been mainly confined to Anglo Irish related themes. We will now be talking to the US about wider commercial concerns of interest to American citizens who have no interest in Ireland.

That will identify Ireland in the eyes of many people in the United States as a country which is capable of contributing to problem solving of interest to the whole range of people in the United States, whether they be interested in Ireland as such or not.

Q: As to Ireland's interests, how important have the six months been in enhancing them?

A: The fact that the presidency has been conducted well does remind people that being in the Union gives us a role in world affairs, particularly during our presidency, that we could never achieve were we not a member of the Union.

The knowledge, the experience and the expertise we have gained during this presidency will be of use to all of us involved, the officials and the politicians, for many years to come.

I also represented the Union in other important bilateral contexts, at the Lisbon OSCE summit and at the World Food Summit, where I spoke on behalf of the Union, and in important bilateral relations on behalf of the Union with countries such as China, Korea, Japan, Rwanda, Belarus, Ukraine – and again, in some cases these would be the first bilateral contacts we would have had with these countries.

Q: Have you found Ireland's reservations about neutrality and security policy in any way inhibiting in discussions about those issues?

A: No. But then those issues have not been to the forefront of the debate during our presidency. These are issue that will really come more to the forefront when the actual finalisation of the IGC comes about. So far the work of the president has been about presenting a document that represents an approximation of member states positions.

It may not become an issue of that great moment during the next Dutch Presidency but I don't know – it may.

Q: Would you expect to see a decision on Partnership for Peace membership for Ireland during the term of this Government?

A: Well that's really a separate matter from our presidency. I don't know the answer to that question. It is an issue we would take independently of our presidency considerations. We haven't faced any requirement to do anything specific in that direction arising from the commitments of the presidency.

Indeed we have been so busy dealing with presidency business that we haven't had time to deal in any detailed way with other issues.

Q: Would you be worried, finally, that because of the electoral arithmetic and campaign in Britain that the British might be tempted to make the summit in Dublin a conflictual occasion in which they would be looking for some kind of political advantage.

A: I haven't at the time we are speaking now had the opportunity to have a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Major. But I have to say from other contacts I have had that there is no indication to that effect.

I would be very surprised if anything of that nature was in the mind of the British Government.