

'The summit at Nice' from The Irish Times (11 December 2000)

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The summit at Nice

The negotiating agenda at the European Union summit in Nice has been narrow but deep. Its narrowness made it very difficult for certain compromises to be facilitated by side payments in the classical style of EU bargaining. And yet the issues at stake go to the heart of the forthcoming balance of political power in Europe. At the time of writing, the overall shape of a possible treaty is visible – and clearly much movement has been made towards reaching a progressive agreement.

But a full evaluation of whether it is adequate to the ambitious requirements of a reuniting continent has to await final agreement on the treaty text. As expected, the most difficult issues outstanding at the end of the marathon Nice summit include the transition to qualified majority voting in the most sensitive areas of taxation, social security, trade and cohesion funding and the equally sensitive question of changing weighted voting in the Council of Ministers, with Belgium and Portugal objecting strenuously to their allocations.

Qualified majority voting is essential to manage supranational integration in an EU with double its existing membership. The Taoiseach, Mr Ahern, said yesterday that agreement has been reached to extend it to 47 out of 49 areas listed when this Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) began earlier in the year. Last night's intense bargaining concerned limited areas of taxation. Mr Ahern made it absolutely clear he has no intention of surrendering the veto, which he believes protects a core Irish interest that must remain a sovereign national competence. He was not isolated and won his case, successfully resisting proposals to revisit the issue, including corporate taxation, in a later IGC. French difficulties with world trade mandates and Spain's with cohesion expenditure, were equally intractable.

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Reweightings of votes is complex but fundamental to the balance of power within the EU system. On it depends the ability of states to block proposals of which they disapprove, as well as the difficulty in assembling a majority reflecting states and populations. Other crucial strategic balances proved easier to resolve. The most important, from Ireland's point of view, concerned the European Commission. Mr Ahern helped to initiate a skilful compromise which will preserve states' representation on the Commission until its membership reaches 27, after which a strict system of equal rotation will apply. The Commission president's role is strengthened. This preserves its vital independent role, which protects the interests of smaller states.

Likewise, the agreement on a "post Nice agenda" is a creative compromise between those who wish to deepen integration and those who wish to preserve the central role of nation states and their democracies. There is much misplaced rhetoric and much room for genuine misunderstanding in the debate. The agreement reached at Nice emphasises that a new political process involving notional parliaments and civil society, as well as the usual political and bureaucratic players in such IGCs, must be created. It has also been agreed to relax the rules on reinforced co operation, which allow groups of states to work together within the EU on specified projects. To the relief of the Government, this will not now include military or defence co operation.

The French presidency's achievement cannot be fully evaluated until the Nice package as a whole is examined. But, regrettably, there has been almost unprecedented dissatisfaction with the way the French government has handled the six month office, both at Nice and before it. Ironically, one of the principal lessons to be learned from this display of often insensitive and regularly self interested chairmanship, is that the EU is better served by a rotating and balanced system of smaller and larger states than by a *directoire* of the larger ones which France has traditionally preferred.