

Statement by Bertie Ahern following the rejection in the Irish referendum of the Treaty of Nice (12 June 2001)

Caption: On 12 June 2001, commenting on the referendum on the ratification of the Treaty of Nice held in Ireland on 7 June, Bertie Ahern, Irish Prime Minister, expresses his disappointment at the country's rejection of the Treaty in spite of his calls to approve it.

Source: Outcome of the Referendum on the Nice Treaty. [ON-LINE]. [Dublin]: Department of the Taoiseach, [20.06.2005]. Available on <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?locID=369&docID=495>.

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Publication date: 19/12/2013

Outcome of the Referendum on the Nice Treaty (12 June 2001)

Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern, T.D., on the Outcome of the Referendum on the Nice Treaty
Dáil Éireann, Tuesday, 12 June, 2001 at 6.30 p.m.

Let me begin by stating that I fully respect the outcome of the Referendum on the Nice Treaty. Before I address the outcome of the referendum in detail, I wish to state that the Government, the vast majority of the members of this House and in my view the vast majority of the Irish people are committed to Ireland's full and active membership of the European Union, and to the Union's enlargement. Indeed, of those who urged a 'No' vote, I believe that only a small number opposed enlargement. I, of course, am deeply disappointed by the Referendum result. I am also disappointed that all of us on the 'Yes' side, the Government, the main political parties and the social partners were not able to persuade a higher number of voters to participate in making such an important decision. The result has also disappointed our partners and the applicant countries, whom we will be meeting in Gothenburg at the end of this week. Clearly, the outcome poses difficulties for all involved.

While it is too early to say what approach should now be taken, the Government have launched an urgent review of all the factors which may have led to this result. In doing so, we will be talking to other parties and organisations involved and listening very carefully. The reasons why almost two thirds of the electorate failed to vote on this occasion will be included in that review. But our review needs to extend beyond the Treaty of Nice itself. The manner in which the Oireachtas monitors and evaluates ongoing EU business will form a core part of our work. The review will be conducted in full consultation with our EU partners, all of whom remain committed to the ratification of the Nice Treaty.

Yesterday, in Luxembourg, our partners expressed their readiness to contribute in every possible way to help the Government find a way forward, taking into account the concerns reflected by the referendum result. They have, however, excluded reopening the text of the Nice Treaty. This is one of the factors we have to take into account.

The Treaty of Nice is about enlarging and extending the European Union, and about giving to others the same chance to develop that was given to us thirty years ago. Ever since the collapse of communism, entry to the EU has been a primary objective of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. They see EU membership as creating a framework to secure peace and prosperity, and to achieve the economic and social benefits of participation in the Union's programmes and policies. That is the view of the Nice Treaty held throughout Europe, and a view I share. I also believe that it is a view that is shared by the vast majority of people in this country. However, there were many issues raised in the campaign which were not directly relevant to the Nice Treaty and we on the 'Yes' side might have done more to address those issues.

The Treaty is totally inline with the Government's policy of neutrality and non-participation in military alliances. But we are equally strongly committed to active engagement in both regional and international peace-keeping efforts and humanitarian tasks, provided, of course, that they have a UN mandate. The Treaty of Nice is not about a European Army, there will not be a mutual defence pact, and any future participation in any given initiative involving the Rapid Reaction Force will be dependent on the safeguards we have set out: Irish support for the initiative; Dáil approval on a case-by-case basis; and a UN mandate.

While I am certain that the vast majority of the Irish people remain strongly committed to the European Union and to enlargement, it is clear that there are genuine anxieties and concerns about the future, including about continuing democratic accountability in each Member State, which go well beyond the terms of the Treaty itself. We are going to have to reflect deeply on how those may best be addressed. In particular, people have questions about where the European Union is going in the long term.

Fundamental issues have been raised in major speeches by several of my European colleagues, and it has been agreed that, in 2004, there will be a further Intergovernmental Conference on the Future of the Union. The preparations for this Conference are at a very early stage.

It has been agreed that there should be an extensive preparatory debate across Europe involving, not just Governments and Parliaments, but the social partners and wider civic society. This will take place over the next couple of years. I have already made clear that there will be a full debate here which will help prepare our input into the European discussions. In order to ensure that this debate is both comprehensive and inclusive, the Government has decided in principle at its meeting today to establish a national Forum on Europe. This Forum will be representative of the political parties and the social partners. The Forum will be broadly modelled on other fora, such as the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation and the National Economic and Social Forum. It will have all the resources necessary. The Government will be in touch with the main opposition parties shortly to discuss the establishment and terms of reference of the Forum.

While it is still early days, I think a number of things can already be said about the Future of Europe debate. First, the core questions will relate to democratic legitimacy, transparency and effectiveness. How can the EU be made more meaningful to the people? How can the people better understand and control what happens in Europe? What is best done at European level, and what is best done nationally?

Second, it is clear that, contrary to what some may fear, there is by no means a single vision of Europe among our partners. There are in fact many different views, both about what Europe should be doing, and how it should do it. There is no question of some uniform blueprint which is going to be imposed. The debate will be genuine and comprehensive and decisions will have to be based on consensus. The result therefore will reflect the will of each Member State. We must have confidence in our ability to play a distinctive and positive part in this crucial exercise for Europe's future, rather than try to opt out because it is too complicated or because we are not confident of our ability to hold our own vis à vis the larger states. It would be wrong to pre-empt the national debate. The issues which arise will be extremely complex, but we have plenty of time in which to consider them fully, without rushing to judgement.

But a number of basic starting points can be identified. First, there is an overriding need for the EU to continue to deliver practical benefits for people on the ground, and to achieve results in its ongoing business. The emphasis in this debate must be more on substance – what should the EU do and how should it do it – than on abstract institutional questions.

Second, from an Irish perspective, and from that of other smaller states, the traditional balance between the institutions has worked well and does not need radical alteration.

And, thirdly, the reality remains that, while people see themselves as Europeans, the great majority primarily identify with their own countries. The nation state remains the basic building block of the European Union, and this will continue to be the case. That does not mean, however, that Ireland should take a narrow or isolationist view. I reject simplistic attempts to play on fears of the possible loss of sovereignty or independence. I said in March that, for me, the true sovereignty of the Irish people is not a theoretical concept but a measure of how successfully we can protect and promote our basic national interests and our social and economic well being as a people. I believe that our consistent national policy towards the EU over the past thirty years has done far more to enhance our real sovereignty than standing aside would have done.

In the real world, all countries, especially small ones, operate within very considerable constraints. The question for Ireland now, as it was thirty years ago, is whether we are better off co-operating and pooling our resources and sovereignty with similar, like-minded states in the EU than we would be on our own. All of the evidence surely is that we are. It has been argued that enlargement should wait until these longer term questions are resolved. But it is the firm view of all Member States, and of the applicants, that enlargement can, and should, proceed on the basis already agreed, and that to create an unnecessary and unjustified linkage between it and the Future of Europe debate would have the effect of delaying accession to the EU for several more years.

The fact remains, that it is the consensus view among other Member States and the accession candidates that the changes made in the Nice Treaty are all that are required for enlargement to proceed. This was again made clear by the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg yesterday.

I reiterate that the Irish people want to see enlargement take place on schedule. In particular, I simply do not agree with any analysis that the Irish people, in voting on Thursday, acted out of any selfish or narrow interest, though there is a danger that it might be misinterpreted as such. I think that we know well, that the Union, while it must bring practical benefits to its people, is also about a broader ideal. Of course, from day to day, countries are keenly aware of their own interests as they see them, and rightly so.

The reality is that EU membership has been overwhelmingly and directly to our benefit. Our net receipts from the CAP have amounted to close to £20 billion. Intelligent use of the Structural Funds has helped to develop our economy and has been a substantial factor in our recent social and economic transformation.

Membership of the Single European Market has been crucial in positioning Ireland as a key player in transatlantic trade and investment. Our membership of EMU has brought interest rates down to what are, in terms of recent history, remarkably low levels.

While the EU has been good for Ireland in direct, material ways, I believe that the Irish people have always been fully aware of its wider dimensions. I certainly remember, back in 1972, a strong feeling that joining the EEC, as it then was, was a decisive step in our movement towards a more positive and outward looking approach to the world. We realised that we were opening ourselves up as a society as well as an economy. And, once again, the balance sheet has been overwhelmingly positive in this area too. EU membership has allowed us to play a role in the wider world which would have been impossible otherwise. It has modernised our approaches to issues such as gender equality and environmental protection. It has meant that Ministers and other members of the Oireachtas, public servants, business people, trade unionists and many others have widened their horizons.

Moreover, EU membership, by changing the context in which we relate to Britain, and by helping us to break out of a pattern of excessive economic dependence, has greatly enhanced the British Irish relationship. We have moved to seeing one another as partners, with many shared interests and objectives. The strong relationship between the two Governments has been the bedrock on which the peace process, and the Good Friday Agreement, have been built – and, of course, the EU has very generously supported us in building reconciliation and in stimulating North/South links. I am convinced that the Irish people are fully aware of those benefits. Whatever reasons prompted them to vote against the ratification of the Treaty, or to abstain, for most people our EU membership and the historic necessity for an enlarged European Union were not at issue.

As I indicated last Friday, the difficulties which we face will not be easy to resolve. We need to take our time to consider and consult. The Government, therefore, will not be coming to any hasty conclusions about the next steps. I would ask all of those who favour Ireland's continued full and active participation in the European Union to adopt a similar measured approach.

Thank you.