

Statement by Bertie Ahern to the Irish Parliament on the eve of the second referendum on the Treaty of Nice (Dublin, 10 September 2002)

Caption: On 10 September 2002, one month before the second referendum on the Treaty of Nice is held in Ireland, the Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, emphasises to the Irish Parliament the importance of the Treaty for Ireland's place in Europe.

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Speech by the Taoiseach Mr Bertie Ahern, T.D., to Dáil Éireann, on the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the Constitution (Dublin, 10 September 2002)

Nice Treaty – Ireland at the Crossroads

A Ceann Comhairle,

I speak in Dáil Éireann today not just as Taoiseach, or as a party leader, but as an Irish citizen. In the course of our national life, there are historic moments when we must move beyond politics. This referendum on the European Union is one such moment.

We have reached a great crossroads, a turning point of enormous consequence for our people. Within weeks, the sovereign people of this Republic will cast a vote that will set our course far into the future. The result is awaited across Europe, within and without the Union. It will set new possibilities or new limits for Ireland. It will form our national horizon. The choice we make, more than any other single action we take as a people in the next few years, will decide our standing in the world and decide whether Ireland succeeds and moves ahead in the right direction.

So I come to Dáil Éireann today to say with all the conviction that I can muster, that Ireland must vote ‘yes’ if we are to advance as a society, as an economy, and as a free people.

The Critics of the Past

The arguments put forward by the opponents of the Nice Treaty have a familiar ring. Whether it was at the time we entered the European Union itself, or when we adopted the common currency, whenever the issue of Europe arises, Eurosceptics have repeated the same old refrain.

If we had not joined the European Union and they asked for a ‘no’ vote when we joined as well – where would Ireland be today?

The EU has been a powerful engine of economic and social progress in Ireland. Without aid from Europe, our phenomenal progress would have been unimaginable. An Ireland outside the new Europe would still be the same old Ireland of unemployment and emigration with more and more of our people leaving an Ireland left behind.

Instead, more and more of our people are staying and returning to an Ireland renewed and strengthened with the infrastructure and investment which have come about because we went into the European Union.

Our membership of the European Union has brought not only economic progress, but profound social progress as well. Equal pay and equal opportunity in Ireland owe much to our membership of the European Union. Better conditions of employment, better health and safety regulation, maximum working hours and protection of young workers, equal treatment for men and women in social security payments, maternity leave, parental leave and child care have all been achieved in collaboration with our European partners.

If we had not joined Europe, much of what today we take for granted would still be a distant hope or an unattainable dream.

Now, those who have consistently campaigned against the European project are campaigning negatively again. But the Eurosceptics cannot escape history; the European Union has been good for Ireland, and our place in it has played a vital part in lifting our standards of living and our quality of life. Since joining the EU, we have been able to attract unprecedented foreign investment. We have been able to create jobs and build prosperity in large part because we have served as a gateway to Europe for the English speaking world.

This can be demonstrated in very real terms. The Structural and Cohesion Funds have been a driving force

in our development through investments in roads, environmental services, public transport, education, training and the promotion of new industry. Between 1973 and 2001, Ireland received 15.5 billion from these funds, with over 800 million received in 2001 alone. That is an undisputed fact and the irrefutable reality of our membership in Europe.

In agriculture, Ireland has received over 29 billion in market supports and direct payments – promoting our farming, keeping people on their land and sustaining our rural communities. CAP transfers from 1973 to 2001 amount to almost 32 billion and, from now through 2006, we will receive billions more. Total transfers from Europe from 1973 to 2001 are some 45.6 billion.

Socially and politically, our horizons have broadened. In particular, the relationship between Ireland and Britain has developed through our common membership of the European Union. This has been essential in our quest for peace on our own island. So, to all those who said in the past that being in Europe would only hurt Ireland, I say you were wrong then. To those who criticise this treaty now, I say you are wrong again.

That is why I am here today, to explain in detail why I feel so strongly that we should vote ‘yes’ in the European Union referendum.

Listening to the People

I want to state plainly that I understand the concerns that people had when they voted last year against the Nice Treaty. I know that many people did not vote; many said they refrained from voting because they were not sure which side was right.

Confusion reigned and I think the responsibility for much of that lies with all of us charged with leadership, both politicians and social partners, who have a duty to make the issues as clear as possible so the people of Ireland can make the most informed choice.

The responsibility also lies with others who practice the politics of confusion as a political tactic.

For our part, we have listened to the Irish people. We have addressed issues of concern such as neutrality and effective parliamentary oversight of the EU. So when people ask why vote on this Treaty again, I tell them there are many compelling reasons to do so.

First, this is a decision of the utmost importance for Ireland, with serious implications for our long-term prosperity and place in the world.

Second, the Government has acted to change the context in which the decision will be taken. The Seville declarations confirmed that Nice poses no threat to our policy of military neutrality. The proposed amendment to the Constitution copper fastens this by making it clear that Ireland will never be committed to a common defence unless the Irish people agree otherwise in a referendum.

Third, there has been, for the first time ever, a structured national debate on Europe in the National Forum and the Government has put in place rigorous new arrangements to assist the Oireachtas in the more effective scrutiny of EU business.

Fourth and finally, our partners in Europe, present and future, have asked us to reconsider this question within the changed context. For the applicant countries in particular, the outcome has profound implications.

Simply put, we are asking the Irish people to vote on this critical decision again because it is the right thing to do, for others as well as ourselves; because meaningful progress has been made in addressing the concerns that people had when they first voted, and because this decision is at the vital centre of our aspirations for Ireland’s future.

The issues of neutrality and effective Oireachtas oversight of EU business, which the Government has

addressed, are a substantive response to the concerns expressed by voters in the first Nice Referendum. The commitment we have made to a referendum, before Ireland can be involved in any European common defence, is to be written into the constitution of our country. Constitutional protection is the ultimate – in Government of the people and Government by the people.

We have listened and we have learned; we have worked hard to answer the questions and address the concerns of the people. Important issues have been addressed and the context has now changed.

I would like here to sound a note of caution. This is a treaty of the utmost importance to the States and peoples of Europe. They are closely following our National Debate. They rightly expect the Irish people to make their decision on the basis of the Treaty of Nice.

We, the Irish people, owe it to ourselves to make the decision on the basis of the Treaty of Nice.

Already, issues such as the Free Movement of Workers and the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy have been thrown into the debate. These issues have nothing to do with Nice. They are part of the normal day-to-day business of the European Union.

Ireland has manoeuvred skilfully to protect and advance its national interests in Europe. We have not achieved our aims by threats or tantrums. We have achieved our aims by building alliances and constructing compromises. To attempt to use the Nice Treaty as a bargaining chip in the day-to-day business of the Union would be both short-sighted and wrong.

Finally, to use the Referendum on the Nice Treaty to make a party political point would be a case of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Weakening Ireland's position in Europe by voting 'No' will make it more difficult for any Government to deliver economic and social progress.

Vote 'Yes' for Jobs, Growth and Ireland's Future

So the debate that begins here should focus on the real consequences of our choice. And my message today is to vote 'yes' for jobs, for growth and for Ireland's future.

Every time Ireland has voted for a new European Union treaty, we have gained increased jobs, increased trade, and increased investment. And we have benefited more than any other Member State of the European Union.

We will benefit again if Ireland votes 'yes'. The treaty is a good deal for Ireland. It protects both our rights and our standing within the European Union.

Some of the sceptics suggest that we will lose power and influence, that we will lose our right to appoint a member of the European Commission, if this Treaty is ratified. This argument is a red herring. In fact, passage of this Treaty establishes, for the first time, equality among Member States with regard to membership of the Commission. At present, the five larger countries – Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Britain – have a right to nominate two members of the European Commission. Smaller states such as Ireland have the right to nominate one member. But now, Ireland, like all other members, will have one Commissioner after 2005. And that will be the case until membership reaches 27 nations. From that point forward, the right to nominate a Commissioner will be rotated among the Member States on the basis of strict equality.

This system ensures that Ireland will be represented no differently from the largest states and will have the same right to representation as Germany, France, or any other member.

If there is no doubt about the benefit that Ireland has received from our membership in the European Union, then we need to ask the question: Is it right for us to deny that chance to others? Is it right for us to deny the chance for other European nations to participate in this Union and to advance themselves through that

participation? Is it right for us to deny people who desperately want and need the chance to join the rest of Europe to raise their standard of living and secure their social progress?

The answer is that it is not right to deny the opportunity for a better life to so many of our fellow Europeans. Ireland should not be the barrier to the march of other nations. Their progress is our opportunity.

Rebutting the False Fears of Massive Immigration

I know there are some voices who even raise the spectre that the passage of this referendum will lead to a wave of immigration to our shores. Of all the objections that I have heard about this Treaty, I think this is the worst and the most unworthy.

It is the worst because it is simply not true. It is a shameful and distasteful piece of propaganda. The simple fact of the matter is that fears of mass movements of people at the time of previous enlargements – for example, when Spain and Portugal joined the Union – simply did not materialise.

But, I suppose what disturbs me most when I hear the charge that immigrants will flood our shores, is what it says about how the Treaty's opponents see us as a people. Surely, we do not want to build a wall around this island and tell all others they are never welcome. This is the nation of the great Irish Diaspora. The immigrants who left here and their descendants have gone on to be leaders and nation builders around the world. There is absolutely no credible reason to believe that enlargement will be accompanied by large movements of people.

The best way to ensure, now and in the future, that Ireland will not be a magnet for immigration is to make other European countries stronger economically, not weaker. The best path is to raise their standards along with ours and allow them to move along with us into a new era of growth and opportunity. That is what Europe did for Ireland. That is what Europe will do for them.

There is absolutely no evidence that Ireland will have a problem with free movement of workers on accession.

In any event, Ireland, like every other Member State, retains the freedom to take measures to protect the labour market.

The agreement reached in June last year between the existing Member States, including Ireland, and the applicant countries, provides that Member States will continue to apply their own national policy on free movement of workers to the citizens of the new Member States for a period of two years. In Ireland, our policy will, of course, be determined by conditions in the domestic labour market.

After the first two years of enlargement, Ireland, like the other Member States, will have the option of continuing to apply its existing national measures for a further three years. National measures may be applied for a further two years with Council of Ministers approval, if the necessity arises.

Increasing Foreign Trade and Investment

An expanded European Union single market will provide significant increases in trade, investment and job opportunities for Ireland. Irish exports to the ten largest of the enlargement countries have grown from 160 million in 1994 to 1,190 million in 2000, a seven-fold increase. And such exports will continue to grow strongly in the future, as these countries become more prosperous and more integrated into the European Union. A 'no' vote would put this developing trade in jeopardy and adversely affect Irish jobs.

Ireland also needs a 'yes' vote to increase foreign direct investment in our domestic economy. Foreign firms provide almost 140,000 jobs directly in Ireland, and indirectly support many thousands more. That is why we truly can promote ourselves as the gateway to Europe for the United States. Unhindered access to the European market is a huge attraction for foreign direct investment, since 70% of our exports are to the

European Union. If we were to vote 'no', then foreign based companies would perceive that we are in full retreat from our stake in Europe, from our full commitment to the single European Union market, and from the expansion of that market by enlargement – an expansion of 100 million new customers – creating a European market of almost 500 million customers.

This negative signal to foreign investors would be exposed and exploited by our competitors. This would cost us new business, new jobs, and new growth.

We have learned the hard lessons of protectionism in the past. We correctly decided to leave behind the unsuccessful protectionist era and to embrace the open global market; at the heart of that commitment is our membership of the European Union.

Not only have we realised an extensive trading benefit from this participation; it has also facilitated a stable macroeconomic regime with historically low interest rates – and all of this has underpinned Ireland's economic development. It would be against the whole thrust of European economic policy – an economic policy that all governments have practised and perfected in recent decades, an economic policy which has been so successful in providing virtually full employment and finally ending involuntary emigration from our shores, if we were to draw back from full engagement with an expanding European Union single market. That would be a devastating reversal for Ireland.

What would hurt us in the European budget process is not voting 'yes', but voting 'no'. If Ireland became the barrier to progress, our partners would be far less likely to respond to our priorities. The fact of the matter is that we will shortly be entering the next budget round and the upcoming mid-term review of the common agricultural policy. Our goal there should be to protect our farm families and secure the gains made in Agenda 2000 in Berlin. These will be difficult negotiations. We need to engage in them from a position of strength and centrality, not as obstructionists.

The European Union Contribution to Peace

Finally, let me say that I believe that we should give credit where credit is due, and the EU deserves credit for its support of the peace process on this island. The support has been both political and financial, assisting economic development, North and South, and especially in the border regions.

Since 1995, the EU has provided some 1.3 billion in Structural Funds in support of the peace process. This funding has particularly focused on investment in Northern Ireland and the adjoining regions of the Republic. And it has focused on the areas and individuals most affected and afflicted by the years of violence. It is another real-world example of why the EU has been good for Ireland.

Achieving Unity

In the final analysis, reflecting on the peace process may be the best context in which to decide how to vote. We here on this island understand the meaning of political division and separation. A country or a continent split asunder stands at odds with the spirit of Republicanism which I know that at heart we all share.

The principles that compel us towards the realisation of the goal of one Irish nation achieved by mutual consent and mutual understanding are the same principals that inspire a greater European Union:

That greater unity can lead to greater strength;

That we are bound together by a common history and shared destiny; and

That we all want to create a place where we can live in freedom and tolerance, and where our children can build an even better life in an even better Ireland which is fully and truly part of a better Europe.

Ireland should show the way, not block the way, at this historic crossroads. For Ireland and all of Europe, let

us be the ones who take the right direction. Let us choose progress by voting 'yes' for jobs, for growth and for Ireland's future.