

Address given by Dick Roche: Ireland's Place is in Europe (19 July 2002)

Caption: On 19 July 2002, Dick Roche, Irish Minister for European Affairs, emphasises the importance of the Treaty of Nice and the European Union for the Irish and warns his fellow citizens against making the same mistake as the United Kingdom in its policy towards Europe.

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Ireland's place in Europe

Speech by Dick Roche TD, Minister of State for European Affairs (Douglas Hyde Conference, Roscommon, 19 July 2002)

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure and honour for me to open the Dr Douglas Hyde Conference, 2002.

The topic for the Conference Ireland and Europe: a historic connection is both timely and topical. Indeed, reading down through the programme for the weekend fills me with a deep sense of regret that I will be unable to participate in the entire proceedings.

In the autumn we will have a second Referendum on the Nice Treaty. It will come as no surprise to you to know that I will be campaigning strongly for a 'yes' vote, as I firmly believe our nation's future prosperity and ability to control its environment depends on a positive outcome.

Today, however, I want to reflect on just one aspect of the European Union. That aspect is the interaction between our national sovereignty and the European Union.

The Union is essentially about nations pooling sovereignty, creating a synergy on which peace, democracy and prosperity has been built in Europe over the last 50 years.

No future of any value can be built without full appreciation of the past. This was one of the touchstones of Dr Douglas Hyde, who was a key mover in Ireland's cultural and political revival. It should also be a touchstone for the Irish people as they approach a momentous decision on their future in Europe.

During the Nice Referendum and previous referenda on Europe, much has been made of an alleged loss of sovereignty. The same point was also made in the Referendum on Ireland's entry to the EEC, on Maastricht and on Amsterdam. In the Nice Referendum in particular, a poster campaign warned in doom-laden terms of a loss of control by the Irish people over their destiny within Europe.

It is absolutely true that the membership of the European Union involves a pooling of sovereignty. This was absolutely true in 1972 when we had a Referendum on joining the European Community, and it is still absolutely true.

Far from being a negative, this sharing of sovereignty has been the single most important reason why the European Union, and its predecessors, the ECSC and EEC, have been effective in building Western Europe, which has enjoyed a lasting peace, allied to economic prosperity and social progress.

After the Second World War, Europe stood at a crossroads. A French political leader of vision, Schuman, put forward a proposition which was revolutionary at the time, and which was aimed at making war in Europe not only unthinkable, but materially impossible.

The idea was based on the concept of pooled sovereignty. War was only possible, Schuman argued, if individual Governments controlled the material for war. He proposed that a new Community be formed. In that Community, national Governments would pool sovereignty in the areas of coal and steel. A new form of Community would be established. This new Community would assume responsibility for coal and steel. It would control production of those elements which were central to war and in that way make war materially impossible.

At the time this was a truly revolutionary idea.

It was not an idea that was universally welcomed. The political leadership in six European States had the vision and the courage to commit to the new principal to establish in a treaty binding arrangements which would mean not that sovereignty was lost, but that sovereignty in vital areas would be pooled.

That treaty, the Treaty of Paris, also contained a new and novel form of institution arrangement. In that new arrangement, there would be an executive, a High Authority, which would be independent of the individual member states, focused and dedicated in the interests of the new Community.

The second institutional instrument would be a Council of Ministers with responsibility for representing the interests of the Member States and for adopting the legal instruments and decisions through which the Community operate. A third institution established was a common assembly, a very weak predecessor of the current European Parliament, and a fourth significant institution was a Court, the precursor of the current Court of Justice of the European Communities.

These arrangements were to become the model for the institutional arrangements later put in place by the Treaty of Rome.

The new idea was challenging. Not all political leaders had the vision or the courage to rise to the challenge.

When the Schuman proposals were first circulated in Europe, Adenauer, the German leader, responded positively within a matter of hours. Within days, the political leaders of Italy and the Benelux countries also responded to the challenge in positive terms. These six states went on to become the founders of the European Coal and Steel Community and, later, of the European Economic Community.

Not all political leaders had the same vision. In the case of Britain and the Scandinavian countries, Governments were reluctant to participate in the new arrangements. In particular, they were unwilling to participate in any arrangement which involved the sharing of sovereignty.

The response of political leadership in Britain at the time was particularly interesting. It was what we would now call Eurosceptic. The view was taken that Britain, a world power, victor from the second major war, leader of the Commonwealth, head of the Sterling area enjoying a special relationship with the United States, had no need to be involved in the new venture. Political leaders in Britain were not willing to contemplate the idea of sharing or pooling sovereignty, particularly in the case of recently nationalised industries such as coal and steel.

Importantly, in the context of current Irish debates, British Governments then and for many years into the future were opposed to the institutional arrangements on which the new Community was to be based. The British Government of the day favoured the type of intergovernmental arrangements proposed to this day by many on the Eurosceptic side.

Without delaying overlong on the history of those events, the Coal and Steel Community was a phenomenal success. It became the basis on which Europe could rebuild. More importantly, the new arrangements created a Europe at peace with itself, in which democracy could flourish, and the peace and the democracy which followed provided the foundation upon which Europe's prosperity was and remains based to this day.

The success of the community experiment involved in the ECSC led directly to the foundation of the EEC in 1958. Again the EEC was based on a community of six nations pooling sovereignty. The Treaty of Rome created a community based on fundamental freedoms, the free movement of Trade, free movement of Workers, free movement of Capital, and free movement of Enterprise. The Treaty of Rome went much further; it envisaged the creation of an Economic and a Monetary Union and a union of States involved in ever closer political and economic ties.

As with the Coal and Steel Community, British political leadership found the idea of pooling sovereignty in the new EEC unpalatable. Indeed after the founding of the EEC in 1958, the Government of Britain went on to become the main driving force in the establishment of an intergovernmental organisation, the European Free Trade Area.

As you will know, in stark contrast to the community-based EEC model, EFTA, the intergovernmental

model, was far from successful. EFTA was based on very weak executive structures; decision making was on an intergovernmental basis.

While the EEC prospered and grew to become the European Union we know today, EFTA did neither and is now really little more than a footnote in history.

The argument between the need for a community with powers independent of the individual Member States, or the creation of a Union where the Member States are totally in control of the pace of progress has continued since the 1950s.

In spite of the demise of EFTA and similarly structured organisations, it is the model which seems to be that advocated by the 'no' side here and elsewhere.

With the obvious success of the ECSC and the EEC, Britain, having refused to take part in the creation of the European Economic Community, applied within a very short period for membership. The British paid a very high price for failing to commit to the community method. The British lost out on the evident benefits of the ECSC. The British could not avail of the funding which allowed European coal and steel industry to restructure. We know the consequences. Britain remained outside the EEC until 1973. It lost an opportunity to play a central role in the creation and the development of highly successful communities.

The British experience should not be lost on those advocating a 'no' vote, nor should the high cost the British paid.

Perhaps the most important ingredient of the community method is trust. By working together, Member States develop an understanding of each other's needs. It is perhaps the greatest achievement of Europe that nations which viewed each other with fear and suspicion for centuries are now willing to share the most sensitive information and decisions. The trust that has grown and developed is the bedrock on which peace and stability have been built. The EU has rightly been labelled the most effective peace process in history.

You will notice that I have made no reference to an Irish role in the historic process of deciding the future of Europe in the 1950s and the 1960s. There is one very simple reason for that. We were less than free agents. We did what Britain did. Given our total economic dependence on the United Kingdom, entry into the European community without Britain was not possible and staying outside the European Economic Community, if Britain went in, was not possible. In short, ladies and gentlemen, we, for all practical purposes, in the economic sphere at least, had no possibility of an independent policy.

We may well have gained political independence, but our capacity to operate independently in the economic sphere was very limited indeed. We were not only not the masters of our own destiny – we were the prisoner of ideas decided without our having any role in their shaping. We did what we had to, not what we necessarily wanted to do. It is indeed ironic that some of the most trenchant critics of the EU and of our ratification of the Nice Treaty continue to hang their hat on the sovereignty argument.

The process of European integration has been important to Ireland because, in a real sense, it has been liberating. It has enabled us to achieve true economic independence, to achieve undreamed of levels of cultural and social self confidence and, above all, to achieve a deeper level of economic and political independence on the European and world stage.

In doing so, we are building on the political and cultural renewal achieved by Douglas Hydes' generation. We have only been able to do this because we became a member of the European Union. Pooling sovereignty has strengthened this Nation immeasurably. We have found our feet in Europe. Ireland's place is in Europe, at the very heart of Europe, not up some cul de sac on the periphery as mere observers.

In recent years, there has been a perceptible change in the public mood on Europe. While, for instance, opinion polls tell us that Irish people still strongly favour European Union membership and that the Irish people are supportive of enlargement, in a series of four referenda on European treaties the 'yes' vote has

declined. The decline culminated in the defeat of the referendum on the Nice Treaty.

The Irish people's rejection of Nice came as a shock to the vast majority of the commentators and politicians of this State. It came as a shock to the other Member States of the European Union. And it came as a particular shock to the Applicant States for membership of the European Union.

The Government has acted vigorously and quickly to address the sense of public disconnection with Europe revealed by the 'no' vote. We have not been unconscious of the message that has been sent.

In the National Forum for Europe we have created a space for real debate on European issues.

In the Seville Declarations and the revised Constitutional Amendment, we have given cast-iron guarantees that Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality will not be affected by our European Union membership. In voting 'yes' later this year, Irish citizens will be permitting ratification of Nice, allowing enlargement to take place and ensuring that no Irish government can sign up to a mutual defence without first getting the express approval of the Irish people in another referendum.

We have also put in place greatly enhanced procedures for Oireachtas Scrutiny of proposed European legislation.

Like all debates however, the debate on Nice has moved on. Having claimed to support enlargement in the first referendum many of the 'no' advocates have now resorted to the crude tactic of seeking to excite groundless fears in relation to immigration. By doing so, they diminish themselves and the case they put forward. The incipient xenophobia has been met with silence by many on the 'no' side because it is convenient to do so. Their silence however also diminishes them. It is odd that they have been silent on the matter. It is still not too late for them to redeem themselves.

Most, if not all, of the arguments put forward by the 'no' side are not new. They have appeared before. Many of the arguments are not even particularly Irish; they have appeared elsewhere. In this regard, I feel a speech by Tony Blair to the European Research Institute last November is worth quoting at length. In this speech, for the first time, a British Prime Minister reflected in public on both the mistaken decisions and the lost opportunities that arose from cynicism and hostility to Europe and the Community process which I have described.

Mr Blair recalled, in 1950 we jibbed at the supranational nature of the proposed Coal and Steel Community, the first institution of European unity. Herbert Morrison complained that the Durham miners will never wear it, although staying out didn't save their jobs in the 1960s and 70s.

So we said that it wouldn't happen. Then we said it wouldn't work. Then we said we didn't need it. But it did happen. And Britain was left behind.

In 1955, the founding six nations of the Common Market met in Sicily at Messina to discuss further integration. R. A. Butler, Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, dismissed the negotiations as archaeological excavations. When it became clear that a free-trade area was taking shape, Britain toyed with feeble alternative plans. Then in May 1956, the Venice conference took one and a half hours to decide to form the Common Market – without us. We were invited, but didn't bother to show up.

We said that it wouldn't happen. Then we said it wouldn't work. Then we said we didn't need it. But it did happen. And Britain was left behind.

We were left behind because it succeeded. The six founder members had created something which worked.

It worked in making friends out of old enemies – precisely the goal set out in the Schuman Declaration, to make war not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.

It worked by making them richer.

It worked by making them a force to be reckoned with in the world.

Once in, we wanted the single market so that we could sell our goods and services freely across Europe. But we jibbed at changing the voting rules to make it happen... Without more voting in the council, without more single European rules in place of conflicting national ones, there would have been no single market.

I find Mr Blair's speech interesting. It reflects a theme that I have developed with students for over 20 years. It is possible to point to the exact moment when Britain lost the adjective Great. It was the moment when a cabinet decided to turn its back on Europe.

We in Ireland never aspired to be Great. We do aspire to be equal. The equal of any other sovereign state. We have found that equality in Europe.

Many in Ireland have watched the destructive debate on Europe in the UK with fascination. Are we, who were bemused by the intensity of British divisions on Europe, in danger of donning the intellectual hand-me-downs of Margaret Thatcher? Are we indeed, by rehearsing the arguments of the 1950s, in danger of detaching ourselves from the Europe of the 21st Century? Surely, our aim should be to build a strong and confident nation within a strong and diverse Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen.

To conclude then, Ireland is at a key moment in the history of its relationship with Europe. We have reached one of those crossroads. We as a nation must decide both where we stand in Europe and where we stand on Europe's future.

I, and other supporters of Europe and the Nice Treaty, have fought and will continue to fight for a strong Ireland in a strong Europe. I believe with passion that is where we belong.

The quality of life of the citizens of Europe has been transformed by a half-century of European integration. We must ensure that, in fifty years' time, our children can look back on a full century of progress.

In the autumn, we can ensure that Ireland contributes to meeting this objective. We can only do so by voting 'yes' to Nice. Voting 'no' is not cost free. It carries very great risks, no benefits, no visible opportunities and would in effect amount to a rolling back of much that we have achieved since the Irish people first had to courage to say 'yes' to Europe.

Thank You.