

Ireland and the EU: Gift Horse or Trojan Horse?

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Both the Republic of Ireland and the EU have changed since Irish accession in 1973, and as a result Irish acceptance of continuing integration has become more conditional.

Ireland's increasingly contested relationship with the EU is partly a result of the success of the Irish economy in modernising and reinventing itself, which in turn has helped to make it more like other European states, economically, politically and socially. In the same manner as the Germans, the Irish people have become aware, and assertive, of their interests in the integration process, which has led to something of a popular backlash against the elite consensus on the value of EU membership.

Every country thinks of itself as special, and Ireland is no exception. Historical factors making Ireland special are: its relationship to the UK; the fact that historically it has been a site of emigration and relative underdevelopment; its particular political system (with political parties that do not fit into typical classifications); and its neutrality.

Irish EU membership came about as a consequence of its links with the UK, but has resulted in its emancipation from the UK and its linkage with a new source of modernisation, especially after Mediterranean enlargement (the enlargements to Greece (1981) and to Spain and Portugal (1987) were important in making the EU much more active in regional development, from which Ireland benefited extensively). There are thus historically positive associations between EU

membership and modernisation, with EU Development Funds as a key driver of this modernisation (although Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and internal growth reinforcement (the focus on infrastructure development for domestic economic actors to expand further) played an important role alongside EU funding).

Ireland has now reached the end of its '*Sonderweg*'. With the transcendence of historical patterns (Ireland's position vis-à-vis the UK, its economic development and its place in the post-Cold War international system) there is increased self-confidence in Irish debates. Ireland is less a poor supplicant, angling for funds, and more the best example of a progressive, successful modernisation project, with something to offer back to EU (with Irish rescue of the Constitutional Treaty in 2004, after the Italian Presidency's mishandling, as (paradoxically) a good example of this). Ireland is more active than before, in new areas of policy (for example, African development and the Lisbon agenda in 2004).

This trend has met a changing EU. The EU today is not the same as the EEC of 1973. There have been extensive changes in membership, in institutions and institutional balance, and in policy competences and impact on national policies. In some cases these changes have been aligned strongly in favour of Irish interests: regional development, free movement of people and capital, constraints on the actions of large member

states. But there has also increasingly been an encroachment into areas where the situation is more sensitive, areas which have importance to the Irish, both symbolically and culturally. Irish neutrality is impacted upon by the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). There are concerns about commitment to use of force and models of political control. Meanwhile EU social policy is seen as affecting social questions such as welfare, marriage and abortion, even though it does not in fact do so directly. And in the wake of the latest EU enlargements EU institutional modernisation is seen as threatening Ireland's specific weight within the system: the issues of the loss of an 'Irish' Commissioner (even though Commissioners do not 'represent' the countries they come from) and of votes to the European Parliament raise questions about how Irish interests can be protected. Also the partial closing-down of regional funding raises questions about what EU membership is good for (even though the impact of this is not as big as most people think). All these are seen as threatening by Irish voters, even though the threat is very strongly coloured by ignorance and misinformation.

There is thus a conditional relationship between Ireland and the EU.

The Irish looking at the EU see fewer clear benefits of membership than before. They have more doubts, and in this context the No vote on the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 is less surprising than it might at first appear. A broad elite and popular consensus in favour of EU membership still exists (80 per cent of

No voters were still generally positive on membership), but more critical voices have gained in confidence and number, even if they are still structurally marginal. A Eurobarometer survey in autumn 2008 saw big upswing in the percentage thinking that the EU was going in the 'wrong direction', overtaking the percentage thinking it was still going in the 'right direction'. Importantly, the lesson of the rejection of the Nice Treaty in the Irish referendum of June 2001 seems to have been forgotten in the pre-Lisbon vote campaign, namely that relying on the weight of the status quo and the broad pro-EU consensus is not enough. The No campaign was much more visible and vocal than the Yes campaign, pulling in disparate ideas and fears (often without justification), while the latter focused on benefits of membership. The No vote was also a way of sending a critical message to the Irish government, which was unpopular. We should note the key element of 'second-order voting': the referendum result was more about attitudes towards the national political situation than about the treaty itself. However, we should also note the failure of the pro-No Libertas movement to capitalise on the 2008 No vote in the European Parliament elections in June this year. Similarly the economic downturn has highlighted the benefits of membership of the EU and the euro and made the case for voting Yes all the stronger.

The EU looking at the Irish sees Ireland in the ever-wider context of an expanding EU. Ireland has been a model child in many ways: modernising, progressive, pro-integration. But increasingly Ireland is one of many increasingly assertive and conditional member states (including the Netherlands and Germany). The Irish rejection of the Nice Treaty in 2001 was a shock, and the EU was ready to accommodate Ireland. But this time

there is much less willingness on the part of the EU to reconfigure the Lisbon Treaty. The June decision at the European Council was essentially just explanations: it clarified what the Treaty meant rather than modifying it. Potentially, if Ireland continues to 'cause problems', then its stock will fall in the EU, in turn making it harder for it to achieve its goals. A 'Yes' vote this autumn in the second Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty will be greeted with a sigh of relief in the EU, but not with shouts of joy. Ireland needs the EU more than the EU needs Ireland.

Changing Irish attitudes are meeting a changing EU, to produce a more conditional relationship. The current economic crisis has demonstrated the value to Ireland of being part of an integrated economic area, but there has to be something of a question mark over how far other European leaders will be willing to adjust should there be another 'No' vote this autumn. This now seems unlikely, however.

Discussion

Simon said that the euro has been of enormous benefit to Ireland. Without it Ireland might have suffered the same fate as Iceland in the current economic crisis. In his view the UK ought also to adopt the euro. It just about managed to weather the crisis, but would have been able to do so much more easily if it had been in the euro-zone.

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