

***“THE EUROPEAN UNION AFTER THE IRISH VOTE NO TO THE LISBON TREATY”.***

**The Chairman’s** opening contribution focussed on the referendum campaign in Ireland. He explained how the NO side approached the campaign with simple slogans and quotes such as “People Died for Your Freedom”, “Vote No or You Will Pay” and “If in Doubt Vote No”. It appeared that Euro – Sceptics from all over Europe played a vital role in the campaign and there was a huge amount of funding made available to the NO Campaign. One prominent group on the NO side, Libertas, was financed by a well known business man in Ireland. The Chairman drew attention to the fact that funding of groups such as these could not be analysed during the campaign, and so even if the source of the funding was not in accordance with rules and procedures it would not be highlighted until after the referendum.

Groups such as Libertas and Coir launched huge poster campaigns, often with misleading information, which in turn started a whispering campaign in the lead up to the referendum on issues such as abortion, tax rates, army conscription and sovereignty. Some of these issues were simply misrepresented, which caused confusion and misunderstanding among the electorate.

When analysing the results post referendum, it appeared that a lot of young women voted no. It is believed that the widely circulated rumours regarding abortion attributed to this. There was a wide variation in the way people voted throughout the country, with certain constituencies voting 70% in favour and 30% against. However the extreme opposite occurred in other areas. All parties with the exception of Sinn Féin campaigned for a YES result. The Chairman emphasised that because of the McKenna Judgement the NO side was entitled to the same media coverage and time as the YES side. While all 17 members of the Joint Committee on European Affairs supported the YES side, equal representation had to be given to the NO side on their regional tour.

Deputy Durkan believed this to be unfair as it appeared to the public that parliamentary opinion was split equally, when this in fact was not the case at all.

The Chairman underlined that the Irish People's decision was sovereign. When asked where we go from here, Deputy Durkan stated that Ireland and Europe are now in a very difficult situation and must wait. He hoped that fellow Europeans will give Ireland the time it needs to see where we go from here. Other Member States have indicated that they have no wish to renegotiate the treaty; "We need to educate the Irish people about Europe and its institutions and quash beliefs that Europe is proceeding too fast. If Europe splits or proceeds without us it would be very bad for Ireland".

**Deputy Joe Costello** added to this by clarifying that Ireland is bound by its constitution to have a referendum; "Ireland will always have referenda, which leaves us in a catch 22 situation". He said that while the document was made available online and in all libraries most ordinary people were never going to read all 300 pages of it. He stated that it is an exceedingly democratic document but could politicians really expect people to vote in favour of a document they have never seen? He followed on from the Chairman's views on the media coverage of both sides. He believed that the coverage did not convey that 96% of Irish Parliamentarians were in favour of the treaty being passed and that a lot of the organisations on the NO side were privy to giving out ad-hoc information. "It is unbelievable that no-one can question the credentials of these organisations".

When asked where we go from here, Deputy Costello was of the view that people are now very suspicious of Europe, there is a feeling that it is going too far, too fast. He went on to say that a second NO vote would mean the end for Ireland in terms of our positive engagement with the EU, we really need to use the result of the referendum as a learning curve for the future. He finished by indicating that some Irish people had used the

referendum as a way to express their stance on domestic issues but that a lot of people just did not understand what they were voting on.

**Vice-Chairman Timmy Dooley** agreed with Deputy Costello. He mentioned Peter Mandelson and the WTO talks and how his comments were not welcomed by the farming community in Ireland, who make up a large proportion of the voting population. Outside comments such as those made by the French Foreign Minister may have been a bid to encourage the YES campaign, however they were portrayed by the media and the NO side as threats, and therefore had a negative effect on the choice voters made.

When discussing the NO campaign he claimed that a lot of the groups were disingenuous and that documentation circulated by them contained allegations which were grossly untrue. He also encountered the same issues highlighted above but brought particular attention to military spending, which is a sensitive issue in his constituency. It was difficult to combat untruths being circulated in the whispering campaign. He did find however that by campaigning door to door, he was successful in dealing with issues such as this.

He noted that the people's decision was sovereign and that there was a large turnout at the referendum so the government should not rush to make any decisions; "Results have indicated that people are not only suspicious of Europe, but are losing trust in politicians at a national level, we need to do something to combat this". Deputy Dooley highlighted in the economic downturn it is very important that Ireland stays on as a full member of the EU. He also referred to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which he said is an excellent document. With Lisbon the electorate voted in higher numbers than Nice 1 and 2, so this poses a problem. There is no chance of putting the treaty to the Irish people again unless some changes are made to it and as stated above, Europe has indicated that this is not going to happen. Irish citizens see Europe as a cash cow and if there is no

incentive to vote in a positive way in each treaty put to them they will vote no.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne** brought attention to common issues in European countries. He said that many Irish people were not aware that while abortion is neutral in countries like Finland and Austria, it is restricted in Malta. He highlighted that other countries in Europe such as Slovakia also have low consolidated tax bases but the NO side and the media put forward the argument that Ireland would lose its stance on tax rates and abortion if we voted yes, when in fact the opposite was true.

A lot of constituents did not believe that reducing the number of Commissioners in Europe was a positive thing, as they believed that Ireland would lose some of its power. He said that we must explain in clear and simple terms how the EU works and this education should start at an early level in schools; “Many young people voted no and we need to find out why”.

Some comments from the session included;

- The Irish NO vote is not a catastrophe for Europe but there are views that ordinary people did not need to read the text of the treaty.
- Some underlined that it was important not to underestimate the people but even more important not to overestimate them.
- It is a waste of resources having 27 commissioners so is it really necessary for Ireland to put every constitutional treaty before the people?
- It was highlighted that Europe did not learn from the French & Dutch rejection of the treaty. It was always going to be very difficult for Ireland to ratify the treaty when it had already been rejected by 2 other member states.
- With a worldwide recession in full flow and continents such as Asia becoming more empowered, countries in Europe need to stay together.
- Since Ireland’s rejection of the treaty, other countries such as Poland may not ratify the treaty.

The general consensus was that Europe should wait and not place pressure on other countries to ratify the treaty. Everyone at the talks agreed that the best outcome would be that Europe moves forward together, but how we do this, is the question.