

Ireland and Europe – 50 Years A-Growing

Seminar Presentation

“Laying the Foundation – Politics”

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Addressing the issue of the political context at the time of Ireland’s first application to join the Common Market (as it then was) has more than a few ironic aspects in the light of more recent events, and I would like to address a few of them.

One of them is the relationship between Ireland and Britain, then and now. Needless to say, any resemblance to current political events is entirely unintentional. Another is a sub-set of that – the foreign policy of Fianna Fáil in relation to both to Britain and to Europe, then and now. A third is the political culture of this Republic as a whole, then and now. You do not have to delve too deeply into political history to unearth evidence that things were not always as they seemed in these departments, or at least not as they are generally remembered.

The core reality in all of this has been the extent of our dependence on the British market – very much less now than half a century ago, but still substantial. Intercut with this for many years was the issue of Northern Ireland. And one of the interesting things about reviewing the politics of the 1950s and early 1960s, in that context, is to see how this issue moved gradually from being a running sore whose obstinate refusal to heal was a permanent obstacle to better economic relationships between the Republic and Britain, and began to assume a more positive role as an element in a multi-level, increasingly leveraged framework of negotiations that found a new focus in Europe and opened up new possibilities across the board.

Despite his early role in the League of Nations, de Valera’s foreign policy attention-span was almost entirely devoted to relations with Britain, not least over partition. In 1949 he warned the Council of Europe that “for seven and three quarter centuries we

have fought to preserve our own national being and to prevent it from being destroyed, submerged or absorbed by a larger political entity.”¹ In 1952, just after returning to power, he told a British diplomat, evidently with some pleasure, that he had “recently scored off Federalists in Europe by pointing out to them that they [Ireland] had only recently managed to extract themselves from a much smaller combine.”² I very much doubt, despite the absence of much evidence one way or the other, that the views of his party as a whole were very different.

His only obvious foreign policy initiative in his final phase as Taoiseach was in 1958, when he made an unpublicised visit to London, in the company of Frank Aiken, to propose that Northern Ireland should surrender its direct allegiance to the Queen in return for a united Republic of Ireland within the Commonwealth, which would recognise the Queen as its head. The UK, he suggested, should take the initiative towards such a solution of the problem. This initiative was doomed to failure. The British, for their part, believed that it only underlined the validity of an earlier remark by Lord Rugby, Britain’s former representative in Dublin, that “Irish rapprochement is a unilateral process in which you advance while he [i.e. De Valera] stays put.”³

Lemass’s views on international organisations, on the other hand, while rarely expressed in policy initiatives until after he became Taoiseach, were demonstrably different from those of his Taoiseach. As early as 1944 he was telling a Dublin audience that a determination to preserve independence was not to be confused with a policy of isolationism. The possibility of Ireland cooperating in a geographical group or economic bloc would be part of his agenda, he said, as long as Irish participation “would be as a free people, who, in agreement and equality with other free peoples, might accept a voluntary limitation on sovereignty in return for greater security or other mutual benefit.”⁴ In 1947 he attended a Marshall Plan conference in Paris, where he supported the value of the role of small nations in international organisations. This was in sharp contrast to de Valera’s view, conditioned no doubt by

¹ Public Records Office, Kew, W.C. Hankinson to Sir Archibald Leisching, 2 January 1952, DO 25/5205.

² Ibid.

³ Public Records Office, Kew, Anderson to W.F. le Bailly, 1 September 1960, DO 35/8033.

⁴ *Irish Times*, 8 March 1944.

his focus on the partition issue, that in international organisations large nations would always call the tune.

Fianna Fáil was out of government for six years of the nine years between 1948 and 1957. In these circumstances, domestic economic policies, and their electoral implications, always took the high ground. Almost as soon as Lemass returned to office in 1957, however, he began to canvass the opinions of the farming community, business leaders and trade unions on the merits of joining either the European Free Trade Area or the EEC. When he became Taoiseach in 1959, the narrowness of de Valera's economic policies, and related foreign policies, was rapidly consigned to the dustbin. In 1959 the EFTA option was discarded,⁵ although it would later be resurrected as a sort of stalking-horse. Lemass next went so far as to consider the establishment of a new ministry for Europe, and asked Brian Lenihan to prepare for it, but had second thoughts or was dissuaded from it.⁶ In March 1960, one of his first acts after becoming Taoiseach was to have exploratory talks with the British Government about the possibility of an updated trade agreement, but the time was evidently not ripe, and apparently the British were uninterested in any case.⁷ In the same year, Ireland signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Events like these were in any case rapidly overtaken by moves to enlarge the Common Market, involving a membership application by Britain, which created a completely new dynamic.

On 5 July 1961 Lemass told the Dáil that if Britain applied to join the Common Market, Ireland would follow. Reaction at that stage was, to put it mildly, muted. Most public and newspaper attention seemed to accept that we had little option: such speculation as there was concentrated on the potential benefits for agriculture. The *Irish Times* remarked sagely that “at least we can now be assured of the constant goodwill of the United Kingdom, our most important trading partner for years and now our partner in an assault on the European Community that may decisively alter its future.”⁸ An unscientific opinion poll published by the *Irish Press* on 12 July 1961,

⁵ Murphy, Gary, and Puirseil, Niamh, “Irish Entry to the EEC and Popular Opinion”, *Irish Political Studies* (2008), 23:4, 533-553.

⁶ Private source.

⁷ *The Statist*, 10 March 1965.

⁸ *Irish Times*, 20 July 1961.

however, revealed that 36% of the 943 people asked said they had “never heard of” the EEC, and the same percentage admitted to having only “a vague idea” of it. This was a theme which was constant almost to the date of the referendum more than a decade later. The formal announcement of our decision to the Dáil on 1 August 1961 received a cautious welcome, although there was a brief blast of election-related opposition from Fine Gael deputies who argued that native Irish industrialists would be “left out in the cold.”⁹ The timetable, while it echoed the one declared by the British government, also had major significance domestically in that it gave Lemass an opportunity to make this a central plank in his campaign for the general election in October 1961, secure in the knowledge that the Opposition parties were in deep information deficit about the policy and its consequences – as, indeed, was almost everyone else.

The formal application in January 1962, which we are commemorating here today, also raised relatively few questions, although a few eyebrows were raised when it was noticed that Lemass was not accompanied to Brussels by his Tánaiste and Foreign Minister, Frank Aiken. The *Irish Independent* came closest to identifying some of these questions when it scrutinised Lemass’s declaration that the political aims of the Community were aims to which the Irish government and people were ready to subscribe. “How many people in the country”, it asked mildly, “have any inkling of what the political aims of the EEC are? How much has the government done to enlighten them in any detail?”¹⁰

The only major political issue that arose at that time did so in connection with the issue of NATO, not least because of the controversial speech by the Minister for Lands, Mr Ó Mórain, in Mayo on 5 February 1962. Even then, the main charge in the Dáil was led by Deputies Noel Browne and Jack McQuillan. Lemass rejected Gerard Sweetman’s allegations based on what Sweetman called “evidence of the people at the dinner”, by remarking, with a somewhat disingenuous willingness to assist, that “no sober person at that dinner could have heard differently from what the press reported.”¹¹ Lemass blunted the edge of most of these attacks by Fine Gael in the

⁹ Dáil Report, *Irish Times*, 4 August 1961.

¹⁰ *Irish Independent*, 19 January 1962.

¹¹ Dáil Debates Vol. 193, 14 February 1962.

Dáil by referring to, and echoing, previous inter-Party government positions on NATO and partition. Outside the Dáil he was generally more forthright, and Lemass's interview with foreign journalists on this topic on 5 September 1962 greatly reassured Hallstein, who told the Irish ambassador to Belgium the following January that no-one could any longer question Ireland's readiness to accept the political implications of membership.¹² From my own memory (as an *Irish Times* reporter) of hearing James Dillon announce, to an excited Ancient Order of Hibernian rally in Co. Monaghan during the mid-1960s, his vision of "a Christian Europe spreading from the Atlantic to the Urals", it was evident that, on this issue at least, there was little danger that Lemass would be outflanked by the main Opposition party.

In truth, he was not taking too great a risk, either in announcing our willingness to adopt the political aims of the Community or in declining to specify them in any detail, because these aims had not really been clarified anywhere. Asked by James Dillon to publish a White Paper on these issues, he replied with characteristic understatement: "There is, as far as I know, nobody in the world who could write that White Paper."¹³

The effect of all of this on the Fianna Fáil faithful – the presumed lock-step with Britain, and the possible implications for partition – can only be guessed at. The *Irish Press* maintained a brief and uncharacteristic silence before welcoming Ireland's application in a brief editorial, clichéd even by the standards of such utterances, in Irish.¹⁴ The prevailing mood was affirmative but questioning. The Rev. James Kavanagh, later a bishop of the Dublin diocese, told that marvellously-named institution, the Dublin Institute of Catholic Sociology, in March 1962, that some of our old ideas on national sovereignty would have to disappear. A month later, *Exchange*, a magazine edited by two UCD economics students named Dermot McCarthy and William Scally, announced gravely that "The EEC has its own uncertainties."¹⁵

¹² National Archives, agenda and notes of meeting of Committee of Secretaries, 10 January 1963, S 17246 W/63.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "An Chéad Chéim", *Irish Press*, 23 January 1962.

¹⁵ *Irish Press*, 2 April 1962.

Concern about these uncertainties would have been even more widespread had the Irish public, or even Irish politicians, been aware of the degree to which the Irish application, at this early stage, had been totally overshadowed in the councils of Europe by de Gaulle's widely anticipated rejection of the British application. In late February 1962, Desmond Fisher, then London editor of the *Irish Press*, wrote, in his final contribution to that paper, an account of an exclusive interview he had secured with Walter Hallstein, President of the European Commission. When Fisher asked Hallstein how the Irish application was progressing, he opened a drawer in his desk and took out a sheaf of paper, saying: "That is the Irish application. I haven't even looked at it since Mr. Lemass gave it to me." He explained that if and when the UK was admitted, Ireland would also be admitted; if the UK were refused, as de Gaulle insisted, Ireland would also be refused. As might be expected, the journalist immediately filed the story for his paper. As might equally have been expected, the *Irish Press* never published it.¹⁶ By 7 March, more soothing noses were emanating from Brussels, as the Council of Ministers decided to set up a committee of permanent representatives of the Six to examine Ireland's application, and to seek additional information from Ireland.

Although this may have been little more than a political fig-leaf to cover the inevitable initial refusal, Lemass set about changing the Irish economy with his by now customary sense of urgency. There were signs that the material with which he had to work was improving. Although emigration was more than 44,000 in 1961 – the fourth highest of the decade since 1951 - it was to be halved in 1962, and the 1962 figure was almost halved again in 1963. Economic growth in 1961 was an enviable 8%. The buzz-words were exports and efficiency, and steps were even taken to see whether the EFTA structure would be a suitable training and proving ground for the leap into Europe.

One way or another, after the EFTA initiative ran into the sand, the decks were rapidly cleared for the achievement in 1965, of a new Anglo-Irish Trade Agreement. This achieved a notable balancing act between the inter-connected elements of Anglo-Irish trade, industrial protection, Northern Ireland interests and British

¹⁶ Author's communication from Desmond Fisher, 1 January 2012.

Commonwealth preferences. Although this agreement had not been concluded when the general election took place on 7 April in that year (it was signed on 14 December), the timing and progress of the negotiations were undoubtedly politically advantageous to the government.

The measure of support that this agreement achieved can be demonstrated by the fact that the only TD to vote against in the Dáil it was James Larkin Jr. And its place in the scheme of things was underlined more than once by Lemass's insistence that "it will only be an interim agreement – membership of the EEC is still the aim."¹⁷

If there were doubters, they were as likely to be found within Fianna Fáil as outside it. In 1964, Aiken had written to Lemass to express his concerns that NATO would be paying the expenses of agricultural personnel to a meeting in Norway on the 'Mechanisation of Field Experiments'. Lemass soothed his Minister for External Affairs by suggesting that the Irish delegation should pay their own expenses. A note on the file from a civil servant cautiously reminded the Taoiseach that after 20 years membership of NATO, any member state could opt out at a year's notice.¹⁸

Aiken's scepticism remained undimmed. In the internal Fianna Fáil foreign affairs committee at around this time members had a major disagreement with Aiken about the wisdom of providing an ambassador to the EEC as a 'listening post'. Aiken argued that there was no point, because all the issues would be sorted out at a political level. Later, Garret FitzGerald put down a motion on the same lines in the Seanad and, to the surprise of Fianna Fáil senators, Aiken responded to the debate by saying that there was merit in the idea. At a subsequent Fianna Fáil parliamentary party meeting members expressed their frustration at what had happened: a discomfited Aiken told his critics that they should have consulted him before making their remarks. They worked out afterwards that the reason had changed his tune was probably because the Taoiseach had instructed him to do so.¹⁹

¹⁷ Speech at Shannon Airport, reported in *Irish Press*, 13 December 1965.

¹⁸ National Archives, Lemass to Aiken, 28 April 1964, S 14291 B/95.

¹⁹ Author's information from Michael O'Kennedy.

Elsewhere, opposition was slow to materialise. In the course of a television debate in March 1968, Brendan Corish accepted that our application for full membership of the EEC was a national policy, and that the effects of membership on our political life presented no insuperable difficulty.²⁰ By 1969, Frank Aiken had departed the scene. At around the same time, however, the Labour Party had reverted to its inability to accept that anything that was good for the country could possibly also be good for the Labour Party, although some prominent members of that party later campaigned against entry through gritted teeth. What remained constant was the degree of ignorance of the issues: a public opinion survey carried out by the Department of Foreign Affairs before the 1972 poll revealed such worrying levels of public ignorance, apathy, and downright opposition, that it was kept secret for 35 years.²¹ Whether by accident or by design, the government's campaign, and in particular its very specific instructions to its by now committed army of canvassers,²² seemed to be based on the insight that the best way to convince a cautious and conservative electorate, traditionally resistant to change, of the need for change, was to persuade voters that the referendum represented a God-given opportunity to vote against change for the worse. By the time of the poll, the core opposition vote had shrunk from its poll figure of about a quarter to 17%, and the "don't knows" had either stayed at home, or voted, evidently more out of a sense of resignation than with enthusiasm, for entry.

The rest, as they say, is history.

²⁰ *Irish Press* report of the programme, 16 March 1968.

²¹ Murphy and Puirseil, *op. cit.*, p. 549.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 548.