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Enlightening the Debate on Good Governance

Ireland's National Forum on Europe

TONY BROWN



European Essay No.33

A Definition of Federalism

Federalism is defined as 'a system of government in which central and regional authorities are linked in an interdependent political relationship, in which powers and functions are distributed to achieve a substantial degree of autonomy and integrity in the regional units. In theory, a federal system seeks to maintain a balance such that neither level of government becomes sufficiently dominant to dictate the decision of the other, unlike in a unitary system, in which the central authorities hold primacy to the extent even of redesigning or abolishing regional and local units of government at will.'

(*New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*)

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Forum on Europe**

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Note on the author

Tony Brown represents the Irish Labour Party on the Steering Committee of the National Forum on Europe. He is a founder member, and Director, of the Institute of European Affairs, Dublin. He chairs the Institute's Balkans Study Group. He was an adviser to the Irish Parliament delegation to the Convention. From 1997 to 2000, he was the Irish member of the Board of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Foreword

A recurrent theme of the past seven years of Labour government in this country has been that of referendums and talk of referendums. Important constitutional changes in the United Kingdom have been ushered in under this government by the use of referendums, most notably in Scotland and Wales. But one much-discussed referendum, namely that on the euro, has not yet taken place, while another, that on the European Constitutional Treaty, has been promised for an unspecified future, probably in 2006. From being a rare and marginal phenomenon in British political life, referendums have now moved to its centre.

There are many countries in Europe with far greater experience than the United Kingdom of the referendum process, particularly on European issues. One of them is our closest neighbour, Ireland, where changes in the national constitution are regularly put to the popular vote, sometimes with an unexpected outcome. One such unexpected outcome occurred in 2001, when the Irish electorate voted to reject the Nice Treaty. This event and what followed from it is the starting-point for Tony Brown's fascinating and authoritative account of the work of the Irish National Forum on Europe, set up to combat the widespread sense of disengagement from European issues among the Irish electorate which manifested itself during the 2001 referendum.

Tony Brown is rightly cautious about drawing comparisons between the European debate in Ireland and that in its larger, perhaps instinctively more Eurosceptic neighbour. It may be that in the United Kingdom political attitudes towards the European Union are too entrenched to permit the sort of civilised and constructive exchanges which characterise the Forum's work. So much the worse for us if that is indeed so. The Irish National Forum is rightly seen as a model in many other European countries, and I

am sure its example will be followed elsewhere over the coming years. I hope that all who read it will ask themselves if such an institution as the Forum would really be impossible in the United Kingdom. Pro-Europeans in this country sometimes like to speak of a 'Great Debate' on Britain's role in the European Union. A British National Forum would certainly facilitate that debate.

Brendan Donnelly
Director of the Federal Trust
October 2004



Ireland's National Forum on Europe

Tony Brown – Institute of European Affairs, Dublin

On Thursday 1 July 2004, in the formal setting of Dublin Castle, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Bertie Ahern, launched the official report on Ireland's Presidency of the European Union and outlined the main elements of the Constitutional Treaty agreed at the June European Council. Senior Ministers flanked the Taoiseach and the IGC team of civil servants were in attendance.

Unlike many such presentations, the Taoiseach's statement was debated for three hours by the representatives of seven political parties, independent parliamentarians, MEPs, the SDLP from Northern Ireland and speakers from non-governmental organisations ranging from the Congress of Trade Unions and farming bodies to the National Youth Council, the poverty lobby and the anti-EU campaigners from the Peace and Neutrality Alliance.

This was the forty-third plenary session of the National Forum on Europe, established following the debacle of the first Nice Treaty referendum in 2001.

Background: The Nice Referendums

The first Nice Treaty referendum in Ireland was the only consultation of a national electorate on that agreement. On 7 June 2001, the electorate voted 'no' by 54 per cent to 46 per cent with an extremely low turn out of 35 per cent. This was a major reversal for both government and most opposition parties as well as for key groups in civil society. Ireland's standing as a traditionally *comunautaire* member state was shattered so that the perception of an 'Irish problem' now existed in respect of the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty.

After the referendum an opinion survey was carried out on behalf of the Dublin office of the European Commission. The key issue was the level of abstention, the main reasons for which were summed up by Professor Richard Sinnott, designer of the research:

'...it appears...that more than two-thirds of people had an inadequate understanding of what the Treaty was all about, one third didn't know what it was all about, at all. When you do a detailed analysis of the data you find that people's own understanding of what was going on – or rather their lack of understanding and lack of information – was a major cause of abstention...

...the basic message that we would want to convey...is that a lot more persuasion and a lot more information, basically a lot more debate and argument needs to go on so that people arrive at an understanding of European issues and of the Treaty that they themselves have confidence in.'

This message struck a responsive chord. The low quality of public debate in Ireland on European issues had been recognised by many commentators but had not been addressed in any systematic way. Political leaders in favour of the general direction of European integration had relied upon two, closely related factors in urging support for the Single European Act in 1987, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the Amsterdam Treaty in 1998.

Membership of the EC/EU had brought unquestioned economic and social benefits to Ireland – in agriculture, in trade, in inward investment and in substantial transfers of resources through the Structural Funds. Indeed, viewed in retrospect, the Maastricht and Amsterdam referendum campaigns were largely exercises in saying 'yes please!' to European funding for Ireland's physical and training infrastructure.

These positive elements of membership, coupled with the evident political advantages for a small, island nation in taking a place at Europe's top table – in effect breaking once and for all time the historic dependency relationship with Britain – had led to a public attitude accurately defined as a 'permissive consensus' which led to an approximate 2:1 majority in favour of ratification of each of the three treaty amendments.

The first Nice campaign saw a distinct change. While the number of 'no' votes was almost exactly the same as in the Amsterdam poll only three years earlier, many of those who had previously been certain 'yes' voters failed to show up. It was perceptively remarked that 'we got away with it to some extent in the Amsterdam referendum...but there was still a problem with knowledge and understanding ...if you come back a couple of years later with another treaty ...then you are likely actually to generate an increased sense among the public of lack of confidence in their own ability to handle the issues.' A notable campaign slogan had suggested 'if you don't know, note no!'

The Idea of a Forum

Prior to the first Nice referendum, the Irish Labour Party had proposed the establishment of a representative forum to facilitate the 'deeper and wider debate on the future of the European Union' called for in the Nice Declaration on the Future of Europe. That debate had started with a speech by the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, at Berlin's Humboldt University in May 2000, in which he had discussed the theme 'From Confederation to Federation' and which had led to a series of responses from across the political spectrum in the member states and the candidate countries of Eastern Europe.

Labour's forum proposal – and its associated initiative to strengthen the scrutiny powers of the Irish Parliament's European Affairs Committee – was initially dismissed by the Government as irrelevant opposition headline seeking. It accorded new respect as the shock referendum result concentrated minds on the need for what the Taoiseach called 'an extended period of reflection.' Immediately before setting off to explain the dismal outcome of the referendum to his colleagues at the Gothenburg European Council in June 2001, Bertie Ahern announced the creation of a National Forum on Europe 'to allow for a more systematic and extensive debate on the European Union and its future direction than has ever before proved possible.'

At Gothenburg the EU leaders insisted that the ratification process for the Nice Treaty would continue despite the Irish result but agreed that they were willing to help the Irish Government find a way forward. Minds began to focus on the precedent of the Danish rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and its eventual acceptance in a second referendum. It became clear that Ireland and the European Union were faced with a problem requiring a solution in Ireland, which could only be delivered by a second reference of the Nice text to the people. This reality formed the backdrop to the political reaction in Dublin to the announcement that a forum would be established.

The coalition government parties – Fianna Fail and Progressive Democrats – were now fully supportive of the forum and saw a second referendum as essential to both Irish and European interests. The question of the timing of a new poll became the critical issue of government strategy.

The Labour Party, mildly indignant about the theft of its idea, welcomed the decision but insisted that it could succeed only if it were properly structured and resourced. It would be counter-productive to focus on the possibility of a second referendum. A broader debate would help to clarify many of the issues that were the focus of public concern.

The smaller parties – Sinn Fein, Greens and Socialists – which had been on the ‘no’ side responded positively with the proviso that any forum must be balanced in its terms of reference and composition. The referendum result meant that the Nice Treaty was dead. The forum must address the main issues in the debate on the EU’s future.

Then, the main opposition party, Fine Gael, announced that it would not participate. The forum would be ‘a long drawn out talking shop’ while necessary debate on issues related to the future of Europe should take place in parliament. This was a mere exercise in kicking the issue to touch, avoiding decisions and disguising policy differences.

Negotiations commenced on the composition and terms of reference of the Forum with an initial effort to meet the Fine Gael objections. This proved impossible but, over the summer period, the Government and the other parties reached a general agreement on the practical arrangements and on a starting date.

Arrangements for Establishment of the Forum

It was agreed that the inaugural meeting of the National Forum on Europe would take place on 18 October 2001 in Dublin Castle where the Forum Secretariat was provided with offices and conference facilities. The location of plenary meetings was to be the ornate St Patrick’s Hall, at various times the scene of formal occasions under the British regime, of the inauguration of eight Irish Presidents and of meetings of the EU Council. Provision was made for holding meetings of the Forum at centres outside Dublin.

Following consultations involving the political party leaders, an independent Chairman was chosen in the person of Senator Maurice Hayes, a non-party member of the Irish Senate. Maurice Hayes had a distinguished career background in the Northern Ireland public service, as Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health and Social Services, as the first Ombudsman and as a member of the Patten Commission on Policing. His appointment to the Irish Senate – in 1997 and again in 2002 – was in line with recent precedent whereby the Taoiseach nominates a leading figure from Northern Ireland.

The Terms of Reference of the Forum were designed to locate its work in the framework of Ireland’s experience of membership and its evolving relationship with the Union, including the context of enlargement. The agreed text was as follows:

‘The National Forum on Europe will provide the basis for an inclusive and broadly-based debate on Ireland’s participation in the European Union, and on the overall functioning and future development of the Union. In this regard, and in the context of the issues raised by the debate on the Treaty of Nice, the

Forum will examine Ireland's experience of and evolving relationship with the Union, and consider the implications for the Union, and for Ireland as a member, of the extensive enlargement now in prospect. Against this background of significant expansion in the membership of the Union, and with a view to contributing to the wider review now under way among all member states, the Forum will also consider the range of issues which arise in relation to the Future of Europe debate which is intended to culminate in a further Intergovernmental Conference in 2004. These issues will include the topics identified by the Heads of State or Government at the European Council in Nice in December 2000.

In the first phase, to conclude within about three months, the Forum will focus on the implications of, and the preparations for, the proposed enlargement of the EU. It will also consider the organisation and structure for the debate on the Future of Europe, which are to be decided at the Laeken European Council in December 2001.

The Forum may, as it so decides, present a report or reports.'

Composition of the Forum

The agreed composition of the Forum limited membership to members of the Oireachtas (Parliament) and those nominated by parties represented in the Oireachtas. Each of the seven parties with parliamentary representation was allocated seats – for delegates and alternates – on the basis of the outcome of the 1997 General Election. Despite its initial refusal to participate, Fine Gael was allocated seats, which were eventually to be taken up following the 2002 general election and a subsequent change in party leadership. There was provision for representation of the Independent members in the two Houses. Rights of participation were given to MEPs from both the Republic and Northern Ireland.

The agreed breakdown of membership was as follows: Chairman; Fianna Fail 10 delegates / 7 alternates; Fine Gael 7 / 5; Labour 5 / 3; Progressive Democrats 3 / 3; Green Party 2 / 2; Sinn Fein 1 / 1; Socialist Party 1 / 1; Dail Independents 2 / 2; Senate Independents 2 / 2. A further category of Substitutes was created, mainly to cover absences due to parliamentary duties. The formal membership of the Forum is 60, currently comprising the Chairman, 30 Members of the Dail, 10 Senators and 2 MEPs, with the others including Local Government representatives and party policy experts.

While there have been changes in personnel over the life of the Forum the membership has been of a consistently high political status. On the Government side, membership of the Forum includes the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, the Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister), Mary Harney, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen, and seven other Ministers. The opposition party representatives now include a former Taoiseach, John Bruton, and eleven former Ministers, most of whom served in the 1994-1997 Coalition and in the 1996 Irish Presidency.

The Special Observer Pillar

A major issue in the negotiations leading to the establishment of the Forum had been the need to ensure that it would not become a closed system replicating party political divisions and insulated from the concerns and insights of the broader community. To this end it was agreed to constitute a Special Observer Pillar with rights of participation. Invitations were initially addressed to a number of organisations, including the Social Partners; groups active in the Nice referendum campaign or European affairs generally; registered political parties not represented in the Oireachtas and political parties from Northern Ireland. It was indicated that membership of the Observer Pillar was not restricted and provision was made for applications from other organisations which wished to be included.

Membership of the Observer Pillar conferred certain privileges: the right to intervene in plenary discussions, under the authority of the Chairman; access to all documents put before the plenary sessions of the Forum; circulation of agendas and associated papers; systematic consultation with the Chairman and access to the Secretariat.

Participation in the Special Observer Pillar has expanded to involve up to forty large and small bodies (listed at the end of this Essay).

Organisation of the Forum

The practical management of the work of the Forum has been based on two permanent structures: the Forum Steering Committee and the Secretariat.

The Forum Steering Committee includes the Chairman and one representative from each of the seven parties and from Independent Deputies and Independent Senators. In the early days of the Forum it met weekly to develop a balanced agenda, make decisions on speakers and venues and establish public relations and information programmes. As the work has evolved, with patterns established, the Committee meets less frequently but remains the focus for all key decisions.

The first meeting of the Steering Committee was a somewhat tense affair. This small group included personalities who had confronted each other during the Nice referendum campaign and who held strong views on both sides of the argument. Those from the larger parties – all on the ‘yes’ side – were still somewhat shellshocked. Those from the smaller ones were, at the same time, relishing their victory but deeply suspicious of the likely move to hold a second referendum. Questions of balance arose in respect of both subject matter and invited speakers. A great deal depended on the personality and independence of the Chairman and on the skills of the Secretariat.

Neither disappointed. Senator Maurice Hayes imposed himself from the first moment and succeeded in winning the confidence of all participants. His personal integrity and his willingness to listen were evident. His judgement and timing were remarkable while his refusal to put up with either intemperate exchanges or boring repetition of policies and prejudices created a focused working climate. By his side, the Forum's Secretary General and the small Secretariat quickly established their authority and skill.

The Secretary General, Walter Kirwan, came to the Forum with a reputation gained in managing previous consultative bodies on Northern Ireland issues and in successful Irish Presidencies of the EU Council. He established a team of seconded civil servants and specifically recruited experts in the fields of public relations and media. The high level of integrity and balance in all aspects of the work of the Secretariat has been critical to the evolution of the Forum and to its standing.

Perhaps the most remarkable success of the two structures has been the production to date of four progress reports. At an early stage the Steering Committee reached a consensus that a report could not be produced by drafting in committee. Each of the reports has been drafted by the Chairman, on his own authority, but with time-limited consultation of the individual members of the Steering Committee to ensure that no major errors have crept in and that no important sensitivity has been overlooked. The fourth report, published in July 2004, reviewed the work of the Forum related to the outcome of the European Convention, the draft Constitutional Treaty and the IGC, and summarised the content of the various plenary sessions, the full transcripts of which are posted on the Forum website (www.forumoneurope.ie)

Work of the Forum – the First Phase

The Forum commenced its work at a formal Launch Session on 18 October 2001 which was addressed by the Taoiseach, Party Leaders and other senior representatives. The Taoiseach set out his vision of the Forum's role:

'I want our national debate to be as wide-ranging as possible and I believe that the Forum will be structured and organised to achieve that goal. I also hope that we can be as calm and as rational as possible. Let us look clearly at the facts. Let us try to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, the possible and the impossible, the likely and the unlikely. Let us all be prepared to see our assumptions and beliefs subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Let us accept that nobody has a monopoly on wisdom, on sincerity, on patriotism. Whether as political representatives or as leaders in civic society, we have a duty to conduct the debate in ways that will inform and enlighten the people we serve.'

A warning note was introduced by the Green Party leader, Trevor Sargent, who indicated that his party wished 'to ensure that this Forum is not used in order to facilitate

the Government in taking the very anti-democratic decision of not accepting the will of the people and forcing another vote, Nice Mark Two, sometime next year. At any rate, we are fully confident that any such re-run would lose by even a bigger margin.'

At the outset the Forum concentrated its attention on key aspects of the issue of EU enlargement which had been at the heart of the first Nice referendum debate. The first seven plenary sessions addressed topics such as the enlargement process, the perspective of candidate countries, enlargement and trade / investment, environmental and social aspects of enlargement and the links between enlargement and agriculture.

From these initial exchanges it emerged that there was broad support for the enlargement project. No voice was raised against it but there was agreement that not only the twelve candidates but the member states themselves had much to do to prepare for enlargement. However, a set of concerns emerged around four 'clusters' of areas linked to the future of the EU: balances between member states; legitimacy, accountability and transparency; concerns about sovereignty and sensitive policy areas; and governance of the Union.

The working method of the Forum plenary sessions was quickly established by the Chairman. Keynote speakers are invited to address the meeting. Then the Chairman brings in as many members as possible, for brief comments and questions, and reverts to the speakers for responses. In a second round, members of the Special Observer Pillar get their chance to intervene. The speakers have the last word. The order in which the contributors are called is a matter for the Chairman who seeks to ensure balance. On a number of occasions - for example, when the Forum addressed issues of specific concern to the Social Partners or Development NGOs - priority has been given to interventions by the relevant members of the Pillar.

In the winter period 2001/2002 the Forum moved out of Dublin Castle and a series of what were called 'listening sessions' took place in six regional centres and in Dublin suburban locations. The growing acceptance that the Government was moving towards a decision to hold a second Nice referendum gave relevance - and some political edge - to these meetings which were well attended and widely covered in local media. Local radio and newspapers are increasingly important in the Irish political scene.

In early 2002 the Forum widened its focus and held a series of plenary sessions on the EU Institutions, CFSP/ESDP, Social Policy and Culture. Plenary sessions were held in Cork and Galway. A call for submissions from interested groups and individuals resulted in a number of plenary sessions devoted entirely to presentations drawn from among more than eighty such inputs. Several individuals made thoughtful contributions on specific issues on either side of the Nice debate. Many of the submissions were

posted on the Forum Website, which was also developed to provide for interactive exchange of ideas and opinions.

A feature of the work of the Forum from the beginning has been the involvement of prominent visiting speakers from existing and candidate states and from different political backgrounds. The first two plenary sessions heard presentations from John Palmer of the European Policy Centre in Brussels and from the former Prime Minister of Malta, Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, who called for the dissolution of the EU! The President of the European Parliament, Pat Cox, and Commissioners Chris Patten and Margot Wallstrom made contributions to the debate. Other guests came from Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Austria, Denmark, the UK and Belgium, whose European Affairs Minister, Annemie Neyts, ended her presentation with a memorable plea to Irish voters based on the closing word of Joyce's *Ulysses* – 'yes.yes.yes....'

The Second Phase

As the inevitability and timing of the second referendum became clear – and as the Convention began its work in Brussels in February 2002 – the Forum faced a challenging task. It was decided that the Forum should track the debate in the Convention and that opportunities should be provided to the public to debate key issues arising in the Nice debate in a neutral setting.

The run-up to the second referendum commenced with a plenary on 21 March 2002 addressed by Commissioner David Byrne and Polish Foreign Minister, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz. The coverage of the Convention began on 18 June 2002 with formal presentations by the three Irish members of the Convention: former EU Commissioner, Ray MacSharry, for the Government; former Taoiseach, John Bruton, and Labour Party President and MEP, Proinsias de Rossa, representing parliament.

There then commenced a programme of plenary and regional meetings dealing with both themes. Between June and early October 2002, the three plenary sessions addressed the issues of civil society in a new EU, the costs and benefits of EU accession and the foreign policy options of smaller EU states. Ten regional meetings took place which dealt with subjects such as Ireland's experience in the EU; the costs and benefits of enlargement, the place of small countries in the expanding Union, the importance of democratic accountability and the future role of national parliaments and politicians. In each case, two keynote speakers put forward views from the opposite sides of the Nice debate before the meeting was opened to the audience for questions and opinions.

In addition, four National Conferences were organised to address issues of concern to four groups identified in opinion research as most likely to abstain from voting in

any referendum: industrial workers, young people, women and the farming community. Visiting speakers made a notable contribution to these meetings, including Slovenian President Milan Kucan, Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, Prof Danuta Hubner from Poland (now EU Commissioner for Regional Policy), Czech MP and Convention member Jan Zahradil, leading Estonian Eurosceptic Uno Silberg and Prof Larry Siedentop of Oxford University.

It emerged that 2002 would see two important political contests in Ireland. A General Election was scheduled for mid-June and second referendum on the Nice Treaty for 19 October. The Steering Committee decided that the Forum would close down for the three-week period of formal electioneering in May/June and October. The General election saw the re-election of the Fianna Fail / Progressive Democrat coalition.

The Second Nice Referendum

The second campaign was very different from that in 2001. The 'yes' side was determined to set the agenda and to take the relevant issues to the people. Three main themes were identified and highlighted: the imperative of enabling enlargement to proceed on schedule; acknowledgement of the many benefits of EU membership to Ireland; recognition of the damage to Ireland's goodwill and influence - and potentially to inward investment - which could follow a second 'no'.

The result of the referendum was a decisive 'yes'. With a turnout of 48.5 per cent, the necessary amendments to the constitution were approved by 63 per cent to 37 per cent. Of great significance was the fact that the referendum was carried in all 42 parliamentary constituencies. This was a genuinely national result, reflecting the fact that the central issue of enlargement had dominated the campaign.

Richard Sinnott once again published his assessment of the outcome, on the basis of a new opinion poll:

'The second Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty saw a marked improvement in communication and a substantial increase in people's sense that they could understand the issues at stake. The improvements in communications were concentrated in the mass media...and in interpersonal discussion of the issues. The Government's White Paper or summary of the White Paper and the activities of the Referendum Commission also played a role in this improved communication process. All of this was accompanied by a 25 percentage point increase in the proportion of people who felt they understood at least some of the issues involved in the Nice Treaty'

Of particular significance was the indication that the National Forum had played an important role in increasing turnout. Awareness of the Forum rose from about 10

per cent after the first campaign to almost 60 per cent after the second. As many as 25 per cent of the electorate stated that they found the Forum to be useful as a source of information in the period leading to the second poll.

The Third Phase

The eventual ratification of the Nice Treaty saw the Forum move into a further phase of its work, devoted to the work and outcome of the Convention and, more recently, of the Intergovernmental Conference. The fact that Ireland took over the EU Presidency in January 2004 was an added and important ingredient which was taken into account as the Steering Committee planned its work programme from November 2002.

Starting with a plenary session on 14 November 2002, addressed by Dr Kirsty Hughes of CEPS, Brussels, who became in effect the Forum's *rapporteur* on the Convention, there were 29 meetings on Convention and IGC matters. These included 21 plenary sessions and eight regional meetings. Three plenary sessions were addressed by the Taoiseach, two of these in his capacity as President of the European Council, and ten by senior Ministers. Visiting speakers were again present at many sessions, including Convention Vice-President, Giuliano Amato, and Convention members from the UK, the Netherlands and Romania. Professor Maria Joao Rodrigues from Portugal spoke on the Lisbon Agenda, of which she may be seen as the principal author. High Representative Javier Solana and Commissioner Chris Patten addressed aspects of CFSP and ESDP.

The Forum and the Public

The National Forum has to date published four reports prepared by its Chairman. The verbatim proceedings of all plenary sessions are available either in printed form or through the extensive Forum website which also contains the various submissions and expert reports made available to members and observers.

It has prepared a reader-friendly summary of the draft Constitutional Treaty together with a glossary of terms in frequent use. A revised text, summarising the final text from the IGC will be published later in 2004.

A video / DVD was prepared to explain the work of the Convention. Presented by one of Ireland's most popular young TV personalities, this was targeted in particular at the 'transition year' in secondary schools (15-16 year-olds) but was well received when screened at regional meetings. It was used, in 2003 and 2004, as the basis for successful essay and debating competitions for transition year students.

A second video / DVD was prepared to explain the work of the Forum itself and to provide details of meetings, submissions etc. This was made available at the time of an Irish Presidency initiative: the Informal Ministerial Conference on Communicating Europe held outside Dublin in April 2004, at which Ministers from the member states and from some of the Western Balkan states discussed strategies for informing and engaging EU citizens. The Chairman and members of the Steering Committee made presentations on the work of the Forum which evoked much interest.

Attention has been devoted from the outset to the tasks of publicity and media relations. Specialist Media Relations Officers have been employed to build a strong media profile at national and local levels. Continuing effort is required to ensure that the activities of the Forum are accorded due attention by busy national news desks. At local level, it has proved possible to meet the constant demand of local papers and radio stations for news items and for people to interview. Advance publicity of regional meetings is by way of local radio and newspaper advertisements together with interview opportunities for speakers and, very often, the Forum Chairman. Working with Independent Network News, the Forum has syndicated news pieces on plenary discussions for local radio.

Some Relevant Facts

Overall, the National Forum to date has held 81 meetings – 43 Plenary Sessions; 30 Regional Meetings; 4 National Conferences; 4 Report Launches. Apart from Dublin Castle, plenary sessions have been held in three other Dublin venues and in Cork and Galway. Regional meetings have taken place in 29 locations outside central Dublin, in 20 of the state's 26 counties. There have been visiting speakers from 20 countries (19 member states / accession states and one candidate state); 26 formal presentations by Government Ministers and ten by Opposition Party Leaders.

The work of the Forum has involved a modest cost. To date, total expenditure has been in the region of Euro 4 million, covering staffing, office costs, expenses of delegations, research, communications and catering. The staff of the Forum has averaged ten, mainly seconded civil servants from the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Foreign Affairs, with two specialists on communications and media relations. The 2004 Book of Estimates shows that costs in 2003 totalled euro 921,000 while the estimate for 2004 is euro 1,151,000.

Assessment

Speaking at the plenary session on 23 October, 2003, the Taoiseach summed up his views on the Forum's work:

'This Forum has proved itself a major success. Since it was established two years ago, you have provided a cross party and cross community space for debate on the key issues on the European Union agenda. You have examined enlargement, the Treaty of Nice, the future of Europe and the full range of European issues that impact so vitally on all of us in this country. You have handled the debate on these issues in a lucid and transparent manner....

....Not only has the Forum spoken to the public in clear language, it has brought its activities to the people in a tangible way. You have travelled the length and breadth of Ireland giving everyone a chance to have their say in Europe...

The Forum then has made Europe accessible for Irish people. Indeed, you can claim with some justification that this is the most extensive and sustained process of public outreach and debate that exists in any of the 25 members and accession countries of the European Union.'

These comments add up to a good introduction to the positive assessment which must be made of the work of the Forum over the past three years.

The Forum provided a new start for debate in Ireland on EU matters. It offered a possibility of moving beyond the simplistic emphasis on structural funding, details of agricultural policy and more or less accurate representations of EU regulation in practice. The initial discussion of enlargement – and the consensus it demonstrated – was critically important in the eventual ratification of the Nice Treaty. The identification, in the Chairman's first report, of a number of areas of concern provided a focus for debate which had been missing in other settings. The successive phases of the work reflected the dynamics of a period of movement and change in European affairs.

The cross-party nature of the Forum has been of particular importance in raising the level of parliamentary debate on EU matters. The Chairman has commented that 'if public representatives are not well informed, citizens will never be. It was clear from before the Forum began that politicians, not just citizens, would have to be connected to the European debate.' With parallel reforms over the past three years in the remit and working methods of the parliamentary scrutiny committees, the positive influence of the Forum's debates and reports has been obvious to those who follow their deliberations.

The links achieved between the Forum and the activities of the Convention, the IGC and the Irish Presidency led to a number of stimulating sessions. The Irish Convention members brought the reality of the debates in Brussels into the mainstream of Irish political and public discourse. The full scale encounters with senior Ministers

on issues such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Common Commercial Policy, involving not only the party representatives but the observers, provided opportunities to go well beyond the 'one-liners' of media interviews and the formalities of much parliamentary debate.

The open debate with Ministers was paralleled by the importance of the Forum's many visitors from across the geographical and political spectrum of the Union. From the early visit of Jens Peter Bonde, with his capacity to challenge his Europhile listeners by his mixture of focused argument and charm, to the more recent *tour de force* by Javier Solana, with exactly the same personal traits, the visitors have made a critical input. The role played by Ireland at the heart of the Union was demonstrated by the authoritative contributions of Commissioner David Byrne, the President of the European Parliament, Pat Cox, and the Secretary General of the European Commission, David O'Sullivan.

The Forum has achieved a remarkable degree of inclusiveness. The disproportionate representation of the smaller parties was critical, given their role in the successful 'no' campaign in 2001. The broad range of interests brought together in the Special Observer Pillar and the openness of the Forum to increase the number of observer groups has provided a more than useful platform for input from interested and informed sources. And there is strong evidence that involvement in the Forum has stimulated debate on, and serious analysis of, key European issues in the member organisations of the Pillar.

A notable example of the value of this interaction arose from the plenary session on 23 October 2003, when the representative of the European Anti-Poverty Network made a direct request to the Taoiseach to seek an amendment to Article III-2 of the Draft Treaty which would highlight the fight against social exclusion. The Taoiseach requested draft wording, which was provided on the spot. The wording was tabled at the IGC and included in the final text of the Constitutional Treaty.

The early stages of the Forum succeeded in bringing together the many protagonists of the Nice campaign – and of earlier confrontations on European themes – in relatively civilised personal interaction. The innovation of providing a good buffet lunch, with a few glasses of good wine, after each plenary proved particularly useful. On many occasions groups from all sides carried on their discussions over coffee well into the afternoon. Sadly, but perhaps inevitably, the lunches were discontinued after the second phase of work, as the catering budget fell victim to the characteristic long-term vision of the Department of Finance!

The national outreach achieved by the Forum has been a unique feature. In January 2002, for example, the Forum held eight meetings in suburban Dublin and six regional

centres in each of the four provinces. Hundreds turned up to listen, question and express opinions. For many, these meetings provided the first opportunity to seek, and obtain, answers to both simple and complex questions. It could no longer be argued that no-one was prepared to explain or answer. These meetings were organised to maximise local contacts. In addition to the public sessions, visits were arranged – to schools and local radio stations – and, where appropriate, seminars were scheduled with college students in relevant areas of study. The growing interest in the specific programmes for secondary schools across the country has been encouraging and it has been impressive to observe the facility with which students cope with the complexities, and indeed the opacity, of EU policies and institutions.

These are positive achievements which have firmly anchored the National Forum on Europe in the Irish political system. For those of us who have worked in the Forum since its inception, perhaps its greatest success has been in driving home the message that our membership of the European Union is not a matter for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and his diplomats but central to our national life and critical for its future and, thus, a necessary element of political discourse at all levels.

There is one issue which does give rise to real concern in any assessment of the overall impact of the Forum. It must be admitted that coverage of the Forum has been patchy, with some reasonable and insightful feature writing in a number of newspapers and some good radio and TV discussions, but with important moments ignored or treated superficially. The hunger of many editors for 'hard' stories based on division and confrontation has proved a barrier to coverage of serious debate. It is frustrating to hear serious journalists commenting on the quality of debate at Forum sessions but admitting that it would be pointless to submit anything to the news desk beyond a reference to a sharp exchange between speakers, often on a peripheral point of disagreement.

And, then, there is the short-term horizon of much media activity. On his arrival at the April 2004 plenary to report on the Spring European Council the Taoiseach was surrounded by reporters demanding a quotable comment, not on the Madrid bombings or the Lisbon Agenda, but on the breaking story that a leading member of an opposition party had transgressed the new smoking ban in the parliament bar!

In this connection, the Forum, in a recent report, has concluded that:

'The issue of how Europe communicates with its citizens has come to a head in Ireland in advance of most other EU states because of its obligation to hold referenda on treaty changes. The National Forum on Europe has been a key element in Ireland's strategy for raising awareness and connecting the Union with Irish citizens.

Recent Eurobarometer and other surveys confirm that the issue that came to the fore in Ireland remains a serious challenge for and throughout the European Union. A union that did not engage its citizens would lack legitimacy. This challenge calls for a strong and multi-faceted response...

...it is also essential to bring to the citizens the message of a Union that adds value, in ways that catch their imagination and respond to their hearts and emotions. Ireland's National Forum on Europe is one response to this challenge.'

Conclusions

The Forum, under the leadership of its outstanding Chairman, has established itself as an indispensable element of the national political scene and its future seems assured as the country faces yet another referendum on Europe. It enjoys the commitment, and high level participation, of the political parties and of the many civil society bodies within the Special Observer Pillar. It gets a positive rating for its work from national and local media, but would probably prefer a little less praise and a little more in-depth coverage.

The period ahead will see the Forum playing a central role in ensuring that all aspects of the necessary debate on the Constitutional Treaty will receive serious and focused debate in the most accessible form possible. It will also seek to open up key aspects of the future evolution of the European Union. The programme envisaged for the year ahead is likely to deal with the next phase of enlargement, the prospects for the Balkans region, the Union's relations with its 'new neighbourhood' and the day-to-day economic and social implications of the current expansion.

The work of the Forum and its growing contacts with European political and civil society circles have generated considerable interest in the other EU member states. During the period of the Irish Presidency, the Forum Steering Committee has been happy to welcome delegations from Germany and the Netherlands to discuss the structures, working methods and practical experience of the Forum while the Chairman has been invited to visit several capitals over the past three years to speak about the Forum as a model. The invitation to the Forum to participate in the Irish Presidency conference on Communicating Europe, described above, was a clear acknowledgement of its standing.

Insofar as the Forum may be seen as a model, the question arises of its applicability in other countries. It is never easy to transfer such an initiative from one country to another, having regard to issues such as geography, scale and political structures and culture. However, certain elements of the Irish experience may be relevant to any discussion of local possibilities. Four essential ingredients may be identified.

First, it must be stressed that finding a Chairman who can combine independence and authority is critical. Then, the structure must be characterised by political inclusiveness. The Fine Gael party's decision to stay away from the early phases of the Forum's work was a real setback while the inclusion, in the Observer Pillar, of registered parties not represented in parliament has ensured that strongly held minority views are given an outing. A third positive factor has been the opening of the structure to the representatives of social partners and civil society which has taken the debate beyond the confines of party politics. Finally, the Forum's outreach to the regions has been widely acknowledged as answering a real need.

Facing into yet another Irish referendum on Europe the National Forum enters yet another phase of work. Explaining the content of the Constitutional Treaty and providing a genuinely neutral space for discussion and debate will be a demanding but necessary contribution to the democratic process. Everyone connected with the Forum will seek to live up to the commendation of one visiting speaker who remarked that 'the National Forum on Europe is an outstanding example of how Ireland, while serving its national interest, succeeds in also providing an important contribution to Europe as a whole.'

Appendix

Membership of the Special Observer Pillar of the National Forum on Europe.

Economic Organisations:

Irish Congress of Trade Unions; Irish Business and Employers Confederation; Small Firms Association; Chambers of Commerce; Civil and Public Service Union; Construction Industry Federation; five Farm and Rural Organisations.

Political Parties not represented in the Oireachtas:

Communist Party; Workers Party; Christian Solidarity Party; Christian Democrats.

Northern Ireland Parties;

Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP); Alliance Party; Northern Ireland Womens' Coalition.

Religious Bodies:

Roman Catholic Bishops Conference: Church of Ireland; Presbyterian Church; Jewish Representative Council; Islamic Cultural Centre; Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

National Organisations:

National Womens Council; National Youth Council; Irish Delegation to the Committee of the Regions.

Social and Development NGOs:

Action from Ireland (AFRI); Conference of Religious in Ireland: Comhlamh (Union of Development Workers); Dochas (Umbrella Body of Development Organisations); European Anti Poverty Network.; The Wheel.(Community Development Co-ordinating Body).

European Issues Organisations:

European Movement; Institute of European Affairs; National Platform; Peace and Neutrality Alliance; Association of Former EU Officials.

Nice Referendum Campaigns:

Ireland for Europe; No to Nice Campaign.

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