

# Ireland: Yes vote in referendum on European Union expansion

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The dominant sections of Irish business and the political and media establishment finally secured a yes vote in an October 19 referendum on the terms laid down in the Nice Treaty for European Union enlargement. Sixty three percent of the 1,442,000 people who voted supported the treaty, while 37 percent voted against it. Turnout was 49 percent.

The result removes a major obstacle on the road to the planned enlargement of the EU in 2004. It overturns last year's Irish referendum vote, which rejected EU enlargement by 54 percent to 46 percent on a 35 percent turnout—a result which took the Irish government, and the EU, by surprise. This time around, it appears that the no vote held relatively constant, while most of the expanded turnout voted yes.

In contrast to last year's referendum, in which only the "No" campaigners—principally the Green Party and Sinn Féin—showed much energy, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, the Progressive Democrats, along with Labour, many trade unions, the media and business united to lead an expensive and glossy campaign. According to the *Irish Times*, both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael contributed 650,000 euros, Labour and the Fianna Fail's coalition partners, the Progressive Democrats, contributed 275,000 euros, while farming, business and financial groups also contributed significant sums. The government itself spent 750,000 euros to explain the Nice Treaty in what the No campaigners claimed were pro-treaty terms. By contrast, the No side had only 170,000 euros to spend.

The Nice Treaty aims to secure EU domination of the former Stalinist-ruled countries of Eastern Europe and to push forward the development of a European army. The government campaign to sell it used a variety of dishonest arguments which bore little relationship to the content of the treaty, but which appealed to voters' economic fears, their generosity and sympathy for the people of Eastern Europe, and to traditional nostrums of Irish politics.

Taioseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern, for example, told a pre-vote Fianna Fail rally in Dublin, "When they earned their freedom, the people of Central and Eastern

Europe chose the route of peace and democracy. ... the only hurdle they now face is the ratification of the Treaty of Nice. I appeal to the Irish people not to stand in their way."

In reality, the Nice Treaty represents the next stage in the subordination of the markets and cheap labour supplies of Eastern Europe to the major European powers. While there is an objectively progressive content to the economic integration of the continent, under the domination of the European imperialists the populations of the former Eastern bloc countries will face no let up in the continuing social polarisation and catastrophic collapse in living standards which has characterised the entire process of capitalist restoration. Abundant cheap labour will be used to drive down living standards across the continent.

There is an implicit danger of eastward expansion drawing investment and EU funds away from peripheral regions such as Ireland—an issue that motivated the "No" campaign—but the "Yes" campaign argued that to oppose expansion would only leave Ireland isolated on the fringes of political and economic events.

Since Ireland joined the European Economic Community in 1973, simultaneously with Britain, EEC and EU funds to the least developed regions within the trade bloc have played a crucial role in attracting transnational, mainly American, investment to the Irish Republic. Cheap labour and access to European markets has made the Irish economy the fastest expanding in Europe for much of the 1990s and growth rates, although rapidly faltering, remain high. As such, Europe is not the subject of popular nationalist antipathy as it is in, say, Denmark or Norway.

Playing the role of "good Europeans" has allowed successive Irish governments to cultivate certain political standing on the continent and with business figures. Ahern warned, "There is no doubt whatsoever that our negotiating strength will be hugely damaged if we stand against every member of the Union and every candidate country and refuse to ratify Nice. A No vote is the surest possible way of damaging the goodwill which so many countries feel towards us." Ahern was echoed by former Taoiseachs John

Bruton and Garret Fitzgerald.

The other contentious issue was neutrality. Since its founding, the Irish Republic has maintained a position of military neutrality, and the policy is something of an article of faith amongst much of the population. The Republic kept out of the World War II and did not join NATO on the basis of refusing to cooperate militarily with Britain, the power that was occupying Northern Ireland.

As long as the EEC and EU were conceived of only as trading and economic blocs, maintaining economic relations with Britain and Europe was not problematic. However, contained within the Nice Treaty, and implicit on the trajectory of world politics, is the development of an independent European military capability. Already the country has joined NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme. But Irish support for the Nice Treaty raises point blank not only the end of neutrality, but the possibility of a military alliance with Britain. To avert the possibility of a nationalist backlash against such a possibility, the government inserted a guarantee that neutrality would not be challenged without another referendum.

The "No" campaign was again led by Sinn Féin and the Greens, along with some trade unions, but also incorporating extreme right-wing and religious elements. It opposed the second referendum as undemocratic, representing the first time since the founding of the current Irish constitution, in 1937, that an existing referendum vote had been ignored. "No" campaigners also pointed out that the true purpose of Nice was to secure the domination of the larger countries. As an alternative, however, the No campaign based itself on calls for economic nationalism or greater national assertiveness within the EU. Not for the first time in Europe, the far-right and sections of the middle class radical left found themselves arguing from much the same standpoint of defence of the nation state. During the campaign, anti-abortion activist and No campaigner Justin Barrett was exposed as having attended rallies organised by both the extreme right wing National Democratic Party in Germany, and the neofascist Forza Nuova in Italy.

The No campaign hoped to benefit from rapidly growing disaffection with the recently re-elected Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrat coalition government. Bertie Ahern's popularity has suffered much following the Flood report, which exposed former government minister Ray Burke as corrupt. Ahern, although not personally accused in the report, had promoted Burke to a government position.

Ahern has also suffered from a worsening of state finances under the impact of the world recession. Fianna Fáil concealed the extent of the state's financial decay during the recent elections, but drastic spending cuts are predicted. A recent opinion poll found that 84 percent of those questioned

considered that Finance Minister Charles McCreevy misled the electorate over the true condition of state finances. Five months after the elections, only 33 percent trusted the government.

In the end, however, suspicion of Ahern and his government did not translate into hostility to the Nice Treaty. This reflects not only the money and effort expended by the major parties, but genuine support among broad layers of Irish people for European unity and the inability of the No campaign to articulate a progressive alternative means to unify the continent not based on support for the EU.

The Irish vote was hailed by Europe's governments and social elite. European Commission President Romano Prodi praised Ahern's energy in winning the vote. Phillip de Buck, general secretary of Unice—a federation of European employers—called it "an historic decision, which will allow Europe to unite at last, and which will spread stability, growth and welfare across our continent." The currency and bond markets celebrated. Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller waxed lyrical about his taste for Guinness and looked forward to Polish accession.

When the euphoria wore off, however, the continent's editorial writers sought to draw lessons from the experience. Never again must such a crucial treaty be put to a popular vote. The German *Frankfurter Rundschau* worried that the vote could not have been forced through in a larger EU country. The right-wing French paper *Le Figaro* wrote, "If every country has to ratify every treaty where will we be when we have 25 or 27 members?" In Britain, the pro-Labour *Independent* darkly complained, "It is surely a sign that something fundamental is amiss that an organisation designed to bring the peoples of Europe 'ever closer' should twice have had to repeat a question in a referendum before it got the 'right' answer."



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