

12th, 2008, the Irish electorate was presented with the opportunity to vote “yes” or “no” to the Lisbon Treaty. This was the seventh referendum on European integration in Ireland in the last 36 years, so EU referendums are very much part of the political landscape. This one, however, was probably the most meaningful since Ireland voted to join the EEC along with the UK back in 1972. The significance of the vote was not down to the importance of the text itself, but due to the context in which the referendum took place.

In 2005, the EU constitution, which was supposed to replace the existing European treaties with a simplified text and a streamlined structure, was defeated in referenda in both France and the Netherlands. The Lisbon treaty more or less contained the same contents as the EU constitution. The major differences between the EU constitution and the Lisbon Treaty were the following

- Some of the symbolic elements, traditionally associated with nationalism, such as an official EU flag, anthem and “Europe Day” were ditched.
- The relative simplicity of the Constitution was replaced with an excessively complicated document, consisting of over 300 pages of amendments to earlier treaties, which could only be read in parallel with the existing treaties. The meaningful changes were buried among hundreds of terminological and cross-referential adjustments.

Other than these and a few other minor changes, the Lisbon treaty incorporated the structural changes to the EU that were present in the constitution into the text of the existing treaties. The repackaging introduced the changes in such a way so as to avoid the need for national referenda to ratify them, while the omission of the nationalist symbols was designed to allow the political leaders to sign the treaty without arousing the outright opposition of their citizenry.

The repackaging had been successful thus far. Stripped of its nationalist symbols and rendered excessively complex by the labyrinthine amendments, the political rulers of Europe felt confident enough in the face of their courts and domestic public opinion, to ratify the treaty through the formality of parliamentary approval and avoid putting it to a vote. Ireland was the only country which put the treaty to referendum and, until the referendum in Ireland, it was on course to be approved as a formality by the rest of the EU governments by the end of 2008.

The significance of the Irish referendum was not, however, simply due to the fact that it was the only country to hold a referendum. Ireland was also the only country to vote on the Nice Treaty, and the no vote that was delivered then had no obvious effect on anything much. The EU simply introduced a fairly vague

protocol on neutrality and implemented the treaty anyway and the Irish government eventually delivered a yes vote to support their decision to ignore the first result.

However, in the case of Lisbon, the context was quite different. The defeat of the EU constitution represented a significant blow to the project of EU integration. On the popular level, it undermined the perceived legitimacy of the EU institutions and curtailed the deployments of the nationalist symbols which have traditionally been employed by states to build up a sense of identification between the citizens and the state. If the EU is ever to emerge as a global power, it needs a significant proportion of its citizens to identify with it at some level. Flags, parades, songs and the rest of the romantic symbols of nationalism are still the most effective ways that states have to promote loyalty and patriotism. Therefore, the mutation of the constitution into the Lisbon treaty already represented something of a step backwards for the forces driving EU political integration. To understand the delicate position that the EU found itself in, on the eve of the Irish vote on the Lisbon treaty, it is necessary to take a brief look at these “integrationist*” forces and their opposition.

The Balance of Forces in the EU

The Integrationists

The EU integrationist forces are extremely powerful. They include amongst their number a large majority of continental Europe’s major industries, corporations and capitalists and a large majority of the political elites in most EU countries, with particular concentrations in the heartland of the EU’s industrial economy – France, Germany, the Benelux countries and Northern Italy. From their point of view, the project of EU political integration has been a no-brainer for a long time. An EU with increased political clout and the ability to “strategically project power” would be a very useful thing in practice. Without such a political actor to pursue their goals, Europe’s industries are helpless in the face of the risks to the supply of resources that they need. In a world where oil has hit \$135 a barrel, with “peak-oil” on the immediate horizon, at a time when energy supplies are increasingly used for political leverage, it’s not hard to see why European industrialists and politicians alike are well disposed towards the idea of an EU with greater political and military clout. And it’s not just the industrial barons who think like this, the need for an EU which can provide “energy security” was one of the major arguments of the Irish Green Party in favour of ratification of Lisbon.

The EU has always been economically dominated by the outlook of mainland European industry – which remains heavily concentrated in a relatively small area stretching from Northern Italy to Western Germany and Westwards into France. Europe’s major industries traditionally relied upon close integration with “dirigiste” state apparatuses. Due to its military strength and its relative autonomy from NATO, the French state has been the traditional political power-house of the EU and has been the driving force, in partnership with Germany in recent years, behind EU integration. The political leadership of France in EU integration can be seen in the primacy given to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in EU funding. On the one hand, food security is a basic requirement for any state with ambitions of being a global power, on the other, the French economy is unusual, in EU terms, for the importance of agriculture and the political power of farmers.

Left Wing & Nationalist Popular Opposition

The integrationists are by no means without opposition. Popular opposition and outright resistance to the EU project from the left and from the broad family of traditional European nationalisms have been obstacles that the integrationists have had to repeatedly overcome on their slow march towards a coherent federal EU state. However, as the various EU treaties have all been agreed to unanimously by each of the component governments of the EU after detailed negotiations, the ability of popular opposition movements to affect the course of the EU is severely limited. In most cases, it is the very governments which have signed treaties which subsequently ‘ratify’ them through parliamentary formalities. From time to time various governments have decided to hold referenda, or have been forced to do so by their courts or domestic political pressure, and popular opposition has had a chance to show its face. ‘No’ votes in referenda have done little, however, to alter the course of European integration. They have merely been treated as speed-bumps on the road, somewhat slowing the rate of progress. In general, in the face of no votes, some clause or exemption has been negotiated between the EU and the member government in order to give the impression that the vote has been respected, with the treaty being implemented regardless.

Apart from serving as general speed-bumps, the other meaningful way that popular movements have influenced the course of EU is through lobbying and applying various pressures on their national governments during negotiations. Such influence is, however, vastly weaker than the influence of the corporate world, with their armies of lobbyists and virtually unlimited access to key decision makers. Thus, the social aspects of the EU treaties remain relatively weak, lacking enforcement mechanisms or being too vague to be applied in practice.

The integrationists face other opposition forces, however, and these forces have proved powerful in influencing the direction of the EU project over the years. They represent a section of Europe's ruling class in a self-interested alliance with the US state. They represent those elites within the corporate, state and military sectors who feel threatened – generally with good reason – by the prospect of a politically powerful EU.

Atlantacist & Corporate Opposition

The UK economy is significantly different to those of its continental neighbours. Agriculture has not been important for over a hundred years. The financial services industry is a particularly strong part of the economy. Much of the wealth that flows through the markets of London originates from the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands and other crown dependencies that serve as global off-shore tax havens. To understand why EU political integration is seen as a threat to this sector of the UK economy, where better to turn than Professor Tim Congdon, a leading UK euro-skeptic economist. In a presentation to the anti-EU Tory think tank, the Bruges Group, entitled "The EU's Threat to the City of London," Congdon noted that "English speaking Crown dependencies have got a totally disproportionate share of the world's financial business." He went on to explain why these dependencies were important to London's financial services sector: "a lot of value added in terms of managing the assets and so on is actually done in London and this is critical to London's prosperity because we're talking about quite large sums of money ... it's now about getting on for \$20 trillion"

But what has this to do with the EU? "[T]here's resentment in the rest of Europe and there are some somewhat disagreeable aspects of this bond market ... much of the market arose because of tax evasion." Many of those who invest in these offshore havens are European citizens, evading taxes that are due to their states. Indeed, in Ireland, the Ansbacher report uncovered the fact that Irish banks were systematically colluding with wealthy investors to evade taxes by investing in fake off-shore accounts in the Caymans and the practice must be similarly widespread elsewhere – that \$20 trillion didn't come from nowhere.

This leads us on to the European "resentment". Firstly, the economic and monetary policies of the EU are geared towards servicing continental industry rather than UK finance – which have significantly different needs. One of the five economic tests established by Labour leader Gordon Brown in determining whether the UK should join the Euro-zone is "what impact would entry into the euro have on the UK's financial services industry?" When the UK joined the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, the Euro's precursor, in October 1990, it

remained within the system for less than two years. The markets exploited the differences in economic policies across the channel to force sterling out of the system.

The second major “resentment” relates to taxation. To put it simply, the continental powers would prefer that the tax money, which their states should be collecting, was not instead funnelled into offshore tax havens which are in practice, if not in law, based in London. They would also like to end the common practice of companies basing themselves in countries with low corporate tax rates, such as Ireland and the UK, when their business is conducted across the union. A common consolidated corporate tax base (CCCTB) has long been a publicly stated goal of the integrationists and has been the official policy of the EU commission since 2001, but has been actively opposed by the UK state over the years, regardless of government.

For these reasons, the UK financial services industry has always been a major opponent of EU closer economic and political integration as that would inevitably cause it to lose its influence on political decision makers and could threaten the tax loopholes that it depends upon.

The other major opposition to the project of EU political integration has come, in recent years, from elements within the US state and their security network. The European states are, bar one or two, currently subordinate members of the US-commanded NATO security system. The French state in particular has, since the Second World War, consistently seen European integration as a means of maintaining and reasserting their strategic power on the world stage, autonomous of US control. This ultimately requires the construction of a European army outside the orbit of NATO. Many of the internal battles that have raged within the EU over the last decades have been concerned with the apparently trivial details of whether the EU armed forces should use NATO planning staff or ‘duplicate’ these functions with their own staff. Ultimately, however, as European integration progresses, the US will inevitably lose this battle as the logic of having an autonomous military capacity becomes inescapable to the EU leaders and their industrial backers.

The political opposition of NATO generals and US state department officials is largely conducted in private. They have access to EU political leaders as well as to the governments of the constituent countries. Being representatives of the world’s super-power, they can wield a great deal of power and have access to a large selection of sticks and carrots to influence EU decision makers. EU political integration not only threatens their military hegemony, it undermines their ability to apply pressure to the individual European governments. On the other hand,

the US state is entirely supportive of European economic integration, as it provides their corporations with a convenient free-trade area. They are even supportive of military and political integration – as long as it is politically subservient to the US and militarily subordinate within NATO. Indeed the project of European integration was initially driven by post-war US planners and the various European movements were covertly funded from Washington for decades. The US is also in favour of increased EU military spending, within NATO at least. Their opposition is to political integration which would allow the EU to act on the world stage autonomously of the US. As integration proceeds, that is increasingly the reality they are facing.

This ‘Atlantacist’ opposition to the EU includes factions in most European countries – as their NATO links mean that they all contain a section of the elite who are more or less dependant on US hegemony for their power. It also includes several prominent US-based capitalists whose business interests in the EU give them significant influence. The most notable example is Rupert Murdoch, whose international media network gives him particular power and a unique ability to influence the opinions of the European masses against the plans of their leaders.

Overall, however, this opposition is most strongly concentrated in the UK due to the historic ‘special relationship’ with the US, its close relationship with Commonwealth countries, its prominent, if subordinate, position in the NATO command chain and the shared language and close cultural ties with its former colony. The strength of the Atlantacists in the UK dovetails neatly with the interests of the city of London to create a particularly strong opposition to further EU integration in the UK. These ‘euro-sceptics’, as they are known, are a powerful force in the UK conservative party and the media and have exercised a strong influence on UK government policy towards Europe over the years, regardless of who has been in power. Since its entry to the EEC, the UK has consistently acted as something of a ‘wrecker’ within the Union. This reached its nadir in the 1980’s when Thatcher’s government threw a succession of spanners into the EU’s works causing it to grind to a halt, but, regardless of government, the UK has always served as a major obstacle to political and economic integration. It remains outside the euro-zone, it has blocked the CCCTB for at least a decade and, in general, it continues to serve as a brake on political integration in all areas.

Nevertheless, the UK’s economy is still heavily dependant on remaining within the EU. While it can block integrationist plans, pulling out is not really an option. In the late 1990’s, the integrationists introduced a framework for ‘enhanced cooperation’ allowing 8 countries or more to forge ahead with closer integration

by themselves. This created a 'multi-speed' Europe, where the core continental economies have pursued closer integration in a range of areas, leaving the UK and others behind. It is also worth noting that a significant proportion of the UK political and industrial elite share the same interests as their continental peers. Therefore, while the UK has generally served as a brake on integrationists plans and continues to do so, the pressure of an internal pro-integration faction and the danger of being left behind by the continental powers have slowly forced it along the EU path. Each treaty represents, in the main part, a laboriously elaborated compromise between these various forces being represented most clearly by France and Germany on one part, and the UK on the other.

The Relevance of the Irish vote on Lisbon

In this context, with the project of the integrationists already on the back foot after the rejection of the EU constitution, the Atlantacists and anti-integrationist forces were dearly wishing that the Lisbon treaty would be defeated in Ireland. In the UK, the euro-sceptic British Conservatives were riding high in the polls. The Labour government was due to ratify the treaty just a week after the Irish poll. If they were to do so in a situation where the only referendum in Europe had rejected the treaty, they would find themselves under considerable popular pressure. The holding of a referendum on the EU constitution was a Labour campaign promise - reportedly extracted from Tony Blair by Rupert Murdoch as a condition for his support - and the opposition and media will not be slow to point out how similar the Lisbon treaty is to the constitution.

The Lisbon treaty already represents an agreed compromise between the various factions of the European business and political elite. At this stage the only real remaining weapon available to the anti-integrationist forces was popular opinion. While they can use the euro-sceptic press in the UK and elsewhere to rant and rave against the bureaucrats in Brussels, this had no affect whatsoever on the treaty's ratification in parliament. In Ireland, however, the referendum gave them a much more direct opportunity to throw another spanner in the works.

Defeat for the Lisbon treaty in Ireland represents a significant blow to the EU and has encouraged its opponents throughout Europe. It is impossible to tell exactly how this will pan out, but it is not inconceivable that it will engender a crisis amongst the integrationists. It has certainly not helped the legitimacy of the federal EU state or any of the member governments who have ratified the treaty or intend to do so - which might cause popular opposition to become much more problematic to the corporate and political elites driving integration. It has certainly encouraged the Atlantacists and the corporate opposition to EU integration.

While a yes vote would have allowed the good ship EU to sail serenely on its state-building course, an Irish no vote might yet serve as a significant blow to those plans.

In terms of the effect of a no vote on Ireland itself, it is almost impossible to predict since it largely depends on the effects elsewhere. It seems most likely that the EU leaders will simply press ahead regardless of the Irish vote. Whether they take a punitive or conciliatory approach to negotiations with Ireland depends mostly on the strength of opposition elsewhere in Europe. Whatever happens, the Irish state has ultimately no leverage in negotiations. Economically, Ireland mostly plays a parasitic role in the EU. It gobbles up agricultural subsidies and provides a tax haven for US multinationals doing business in the EU. It possesses almost no strategic resources or military might. The Irish state has thus no chips to bargain with. The only thing stopping the EU from being as harsh as it wants is the effect that this might have on public opinion elsewhere. Ireland has only been allowed to retain its low corporate tax rates and light financial regulation regime due to the fact that the UK also opposes “tax harmonisation”, while the CAP subsidies are due to France being their champion. If Ireland was the only country not to ratify the treaty, the Irish state would be isolated, with no real leverage and such policies could be vulnerable. That is the outcome that the Irish elite fear more than anything – it’s also probably the best thing that could come out of the vote for European workers, incidentally.

It is even possible that defeat in the Irish referendum, followed by an upsurge in opposition to the EU elsewhere might cause the integrationists to take a significantly different tack – for example by focusing on integration between the core continental EU states through “enhanced cooperation” or a similar arrangement and leaving Ireland and the UK on the outside. Still, it is probably most likely that the no vote will merely be treated as another speed bump in the EU’s path and they will simply continue with their onward march and maybe agree a new protocol to explain away the Irish public’s rejection.

The Treaty Campaign In Ireland

Given the wider context, it is not surprising that the political campaign surrounding the Lisbon treaty was unusually long-running and intense by the standards of Irish European referenda. The vote was scheduled for June 12th, 2008, yet public campaigning started in 2007. The breakdown of the forces ran pretty much exactly according to the standard European schema outlined above. On the yes side we had almost the entirety of the corporate and political elite, from the employers' federation IBEC, to the three largest political parties: Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour. 160 of the 166 members of the Irish parliament supported the treaty.

On the no side we had a wide array of groups. These can broadly be categorised as representing the left on one part and traditional nationalism on the other. The left incorporates Marxists, anarchists, some trade unionists and some social democrats. The traditional nationalists incorporate the catholic fundamentalists of Coir / Youth Defence as well as the various shades of Irish Republicanism (Sinn Fein, Republican Sinn Fein, 32 County Sovereignty Movement). Other oppositional groups sat somewhere between the two (Eirigi, People's Movement).

The Atlantacists were represented by Libertas, a political novelty in Ireland, which I've examined elsewhere [1]. They were weak in number, since there is no significant section of the Irish economy that does not depend on Ireland's EU membership in some manner or another. However, the reach of multi-national media corporations in Ireland, many of whom are owned and controlled by figures close to the US and UK administrations, amplifies their voice considerably. For example, Rupert Murdoch's News International broadcasts a range of widely received "Sky" television channels as well as publishing several daily and weekly newspapers with mass audiences in Ireland. These all took a marked "No" position in their coverage.

What was unusual in this campaign, however, is the fact that some of those advocating a no vote had access to considerable resources to run their campaigns. Both Libertas and Coir probably spent well over a million euros, money spent on billboards, posters, press conferences and advertisements. Both groups even spent significant amounts of money buying Google "adwords" – both purchased Google's sponsored links for "EU referendum" – costing them over 2 dollars every time somebody clicked the link! Libertas were preparing their campaign and appointing staff up to two years in advance of the poll and their campaign had swung into top-gear, with a public launch of their campaign,

accompanied by a truck-sized advertisement, in December 2007. They eventually claimed to have spent about €1.3 million, but that is unverified and the source of their funding remains mysterious. The amount of money that Coir spent is also unknown. Both groups have strong connections to US backed groups, the defence and intelligence communities in the case of Ganley and the pro-life movement in the case of Coir.

However, while the significance of the campaign, and the length of time that it covered, ensured that the media coverage was voluminous and the public debate was all-pervasive, the information content of the debate was probably, on balance, negative. A diligent and reasonably discerning citizen who relied upon the media for their information about the treaty would, on average, have emerged from the debate less well informed about the EU and the significance of the treaty than when the debate started.

Whenever a prominent campaigner issued a claim about some aspect of the treaty, it was widely reported by the media, no matter how obviously wrong or dishonest it was. Due to the fact that the elite forces on either side were naturally reluctant to argue their case openly, there was no shortage of spectacularly dishonest claims. The debate consisted of a bewildering blizzard of directly contradictory claims. For the vast majority of voters, the only really way to choose between these claims was on the basis of how much they trusted the people making them.

A second major problem with the public debate was the constant tendency towards simplification. A large number of groups in Ireland opposed the treaty, from a wide range of wildly different points of view. These ranged from anarchists and Trotskyists on the left, to fundamentalist Catholics and NATO supporters on the right. These groups were often more vocally opposed to one another than they were to towards those advocating a Yes vote. The political and corporate elite who backed the treaty were, on the other hand, fairly united. They ran a coordinated and coherent campaign which saw them all singing from the same hymn sheet. While it would be fair enough to describe this as a collective “Yes Campaign”, it would be enormously wrong to do the same with the “No Campaign” which consisted of a large number of different, mutually antagonistic groups. Yet that’s exactly what the media did. The campaign was simplified to a battle between the Yes Side and the No Side. Farcically, Declan Ganley, head honcho at Libertas, was frequently described as the leader of the No campaign despite the fact that his organisation had no more than a dozen members or so and most of them seemed to also be his employees. So, not only were Yes and No campaigners directly contradicting each other, “spokespeople for the No

Campaign” frequently made statements which directly contradicted the claims made by “spokespeople for the No Campaign.”

But it wasn't just the preponderance of wildly inaccurate and dishonest claims or farcical simplifications which detracted from the quality debate. Where information was accurate and well-grounded it suffered from an intense insularity, lack of context and narrowness of focus. It focused overwhelmingly on the question of “is the treaty good for Ireland?” and this narrow focus reduced much of the debate to a concentration on how the Irish state's voice in Europe would be affected if the treaty was passed. In the greater scheme of things, this is very much an irrelevance. Before the treaty, the Irish state, by itself, had a miniscule ability to influence European decisions and this will remain the case for the foreseeable future. The vast quantity of coverage which examined the various clauses of the treaty in minute detail to evaluate their likely impact on Irish decision making power was almost entirely pointless.

Worse still, all such arguments were essentially speculative since the treaty was to affect significant changes to the EU's decision making structures, to allow the EU to make decisions more efficiently and to carry them out more coherently. How these decisions would have impacted upon the interests of the Irish state would have depended upon what the decisions actually were. It is highly likely that they would, sooner or later, be used to attempt to end the tax-haven status of Ireland. Whether that succeeds or not depends upon the balance of forces between the UK and the continental core of the EU and has little to do with the treaty. It is highly unlikely that the Irish state will ever exercise a veto on anything significant since the major EU states are also the major driving forces in European integration and they possess between them the ability to apply overwhelming pressure on a weak dependant country like Ireland. The idea that the Irish state could veto a CCCTB plan that had been agreed – after decades of slow diplomacy – between the UK, France, Germany and the other major EU economies appears highly unlikely.

So, overall, the media coverage of the EU campaign was dominated by dishonest and clearly wrong claims. Where it managed to be remotely reality-based it was, more often than not, premised on a vast overestimation of the Irish state's influence on EU decisions. The bigger picture of the direction of European integration and the major forces influencing that direction, were almost totally ignored and remain almost entirely unknown to the public. In order to demonstrate this point, the following sections examine some of the issues that formed the focus of public debate in the media, how they were presented by the various campaigners, what the reality of the situation was, and how the public debate diverged from that reality.

Loss of Sovereignty

A significant proportion of the public debate focused on the claimed loss of sovereignty. Of the No campaigners, virtually every group bar the anarchists raised this as a complaint in one form or another. The specific complaints included the extension of Qualified Majority Voting, the dilution of the Irish state's veto rights over a range of areas, the new legal personality of the EU, the paramount nature of the European Court of Justice with respect to national courts, the loss of an automatic right of a commissioner and the creation of official EU representative positions. On the far right wing of the No campaign, this loss of sovereignty was equated with an "EU takeover" and even the "End of Nations".

The reality of the situation is that European integration must, by definition, lead to a progressive loss of sovereignty on the part of national governments – that's the whole point. The EU is a state in slow formation, each treaty has transferred some decision making power from the member countries to the EU and has consequently reduced the sovereignty of the member states. However, it is very much still a work in progress and it will be some time before effective political power rests in Brussels rather than Paris, Frankfurt and London. The EU lacks efficient enforcement mechanisms, it is internally divided, it is finding that economic liberalisation and political integration across languages and cultures is not straightforward, it lacks a real deployable security service and its decision making mechanisms remain laborious. While there has been a continuous and progressive transfer of power from the member nations to the EU since the start, it is far from being complete.

The Yes campaign either simply denied that the treaty implied any loss of sovereignty or avoided the question by describing it as "pooled sovereignty" or some other semantic chicanery. The reluctance to honestly address this issue simply sprang from the desire amongst the elites not to stir up traditional nationalist sentiment amongst the population – the ditching of the flag and other symbols from the constitution was testament to the strength of this fear. Therefore, in this at least, we can say that the Yes campaign was, at best, dishonest by omission.

While the claims from No campaigners about the loss of sovereignty might have been accurate in the general case, more often than not they were wildly inaccurate and misleading in the specifics. The claimed loss of sovereignty was presented as being much more sudden, absolute and complete than has actually been the case. For example, several nationalist groups claimed that the treaty would inaugurate the primacy of the ECJ - a primacy which in fact dates back to

1962. Many of the other changes that were claimed to represent significant blows to sovereignty were simply slight adjustments to existing institutions rather than state-defining moments.

Overall, in the public debate, the clear and obvious reality, of an incomplete and partial state in gradual formation with sovereignty being slowly and progressively ceded to the new state from its members was almost entirely obscured.

Taxation

The “protection of Ireland’s tax independence” was, naturally, a significant focus of the debate. The Atlantacists, the nationalists and even some of the left claimed that the Lisbon Treaty put that independence at risk. The Yes campaign, on the other hand, claimed that the Lisbon Treaty would not affect Ireland’s veto on tax-related matters and would provide the best protection of Ireland’s interests into the future.

The reality of the situation is that there has been a long term struggle between the continental core of the EU on one side and the UK and the Atlantacists on the other, as has been touched on above. This treaty does nothing one way or the other to resolve this struggle. The French state in particular is wedded to the idea of a CCCTB and it has been official policy of the EU commission since 2001. It is basically impossible to tell how the result of the treaty vote will affect the situation. It could be that the No vote will see punitive measures applied to Ireland which might undermine the state’s tax independence, but it is equally possible that the updated, more efficient decision making mechanisms of the EU that a Yes vote would have ushered in would have been used to place Ireland and the UK under significant pressure to harmonise their tax rates.

In terms of the public debate, pretty much every single claim from No campaigners about tax was either totally wrong or wildly speculative. From Libertas, to Coir, the People’s Movement and Sinn Fein, all of the claims about taxation were dishonest. These claims were even echoed, in a milder form, by some of the left. The fact that they are normally against the low tax rate for corporations seems to have been forgotten and they were, in effect, happy to oppose the treaty on the grounds that it reduced the ability of US corporations to avoid paying taxes. This compounded the dishonesty with a huge dollop of hypocrisy. The Yes campaign’s claims about taxation and the treaty were somewhat more honest, yet the lack of context and an implicit vast over-

estimation of the Irish state's ability to influence such matters also meant that the picture that they painted was woefully inaccurate.

Economic Policy

The effects of the Lisbon treaty on Ireland's economy formed another major focus of the public debate. This aspect was most strongly taken up by the left and the more left-leaning of the nationalists, who argued that the treaty would lead to privatisations and other neo-liberal measures. Libertas argued against the treaty on economic grounds from almost exactly the opposite point of view, denouncing the EU as a bureaucratic morass of anti-business red-tape. The Yes campaign, for its part, focused heavily on the past and future benefits of EU membership to Ireland's economy.

The reality of the situation is somewhat complex. Firstly, it is unquestionably true that EU membership has been beneficial to Ireland's economy as against its previous economic isolation and dependence on the UK. It is also unquestionably true that, as long as Ireland's economy is dependent on offering cut-price tax rates and receiving enormous agricultural subsidies, it will remain heavily vulnerable to decisions out of its control. It is also unquestionably true that, in the current situation, withdrawal from the EU would see Ireland's economy collapse. However, whether Ireland's membership of the EU continues to be economically beneficial is a matter outside of the control of the Irish state.

It is also almost impossible to argue that the EU's economic direction has not been progressing in a markedly neo-liberal direction in recent years. The Lisbon agenda, agreed by the council of Europe in 2000, adopted a general policy of market liberalisation in all spheres, which essentially means the progressive reduction of the state's role in the economy and in providing public services. The Lisbon treaty added several new areas to the specific list of sectors to be opened to liberalisation – most importantly health and education. This represents a small step forward on the neo-liberal structuring of the internal EU economy.

Yet, once again, it is mistaken to think that this change would see Europe suddenly order its member states to privatise their health and education systems. The reality of the situation is that neo-liberal economics is currently virtually ubiquitous amongst the world's political and economic elites. The thing that stops Europe's governments from privatising public service is not the fact that they don't want to do it, it's the fact that they find themselves unable to do so due to popular opposition. Privatisation and liberalisation in transport and energy in Ireland is still extremely limited, as it is elsewhere in Europe, while the Irish health system has always had a significant private element, despite the fact that

liberalisation in health has just been rejected while transport and energy have been 'liberalised' for some time. In this context, the idea that Europe might order the government to privatise is hardly meaningful.

Nevertheless, the prospect of granting the task of delegating such unpopular decisions to a remote federal government is an appealing one to many governments. Already, in many Irish disputes we see the government claiming that their hands are tied by EU legislation, for example invoking EU legislation during the bin tax dispute in 2004. The extension of liberalisation within the EU and the development of better enforcement mechanisms will eventually see the EU make and enforce such decisions at a federal level. There is no other reason to make such agreements, but it is likely to be a slow process.

In terms of the public debate over Lisbon, we can start by saying that the arguments of the Atlantacists in Libertas were generally vague and clichéd attacks on "the bureaucrats in city hall". They garnered a tiny amount of support from capitalists who felt threatened by one thing or another about EU integration, but there was no discernible specific complaints or proposed reforms suggested. It is hard to see these claims as anything other than general-purpose mud thrown to confuse the debate and sow doubt in the public mind.

The arguments of the left about the neo-liberal direction of the EU are difficult to argue with, although many of the specific claims were somewhat misleading, over-estimating the direct impact of the specific changes. The Yes campaign, for its part, relied upon generalised and non-specific allusions to how the EU had been good for Ireland's economy and that the treaty protected Ireland's interests. All specifics concerning economic risks and the economic direction of EU policy were studiously avoided.

Overall, thus, while the public debate did manage to convey the idea that privatisations and neo-liberalism are a strong force in EU decision making, this was obscured by the contradictory smoke emitted by the Atlantacists and where it did manage to make a splash in the media, it was often connected with a grossly exaggerated estimation of the significance of the current changes.

Militarisation

The implications of the treaty for military matters was another major focus of public debate. The left criticised it as leading to increased militarisation of the EU. This criticism was also echoed by others including Libertas and the nationalist groups. At the more extreme end of the claims, some groups claimed that the

treaty would effectively terminate Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality. The Yes campaign focused on the fact that an EU protocol, agreed as part of the second Nice treaty referendum, had guaranteed respect for Ireland's neutrality and that nothing in the current treaty could overrule that.

The reality is, once again, significantly more complex. The EU protocol guaranteeing Ireland's neutrality would indeed prevent the EU from ordering the Irish state to take part in an EU army or a collective war. However, as with privatisation, this is a rather pointless freedom since the Irish government and all the major parties are more keen than anybody to ditch their policy and to participate in future EU 'security' operations. The Irish army is, after all, currently in Chad providing an EU fig-leaf to the French army's fifth or sixth military intervention to prop up their favoured dictator there. They have rendered the meaning of neutrality virtually meaningless by offering whatever assistance they can to the US military's war in Iraq and the Irish courts have themselves ruled that neutrality is 'aspirational'. In a situation where the Irish state is so keen on participating in EU armed forces, it is really not that significant that the EU state doesn't have the power to order them to do so.

On the other hand, when it comes to EU militarisation, there is no doubt that the Lisbon treaty represented another small step on the road to military integration and a common EU army. The small modifications to the text that it contained serve to strengthen the language and put pressure on the member governments to spend money on standardising their armies in preparation for greater integration. The creation of such an army has been the unambiguous goal of the EU integrationists since the start. It is far from existing in practice, but at this stage it is well on the way. Most importantly it has finally managed to set up a planning centre and HQ that is independent of NATO. That hurdle having been cleared, it is quite possible that the pace of integration will increase, but opposition from NATO still has the possibility of being a formidable roadblock in their path. The treaty was a tiny step forward, but how significant it might have turned out to be will depend on events that are quite unpredictable at this stage.

On the claims of militarisation, therefore, the No campaigners were clearly somewhat accurate, albeit alarmist in some cases. On the claims of a loss of neutrality, the Yes campaign was somewhat accurate, although, once again, the lack of context led to them putting forward a very misleading story. The real source of the misinformation, however, was in Yes campaigners repeatedly conflating the two – when asked about EU militarisation, the standard reply was to deny any threat to Irish neutrality as if the two questions were the same.

Abortion, Euthanasia, Gay Marriage, etc

The implications of the Lisbon treaty on a broad range of social questions also formed the focus of some public debate. These issues were generally raised by the traditionalist nationalist wing of the No campaign, although they were echoed to a certain extent by the Atlantacists of Libertas. At essence, the claims were that a No vote could help see a situation where legalised abortion, euthanasia and various other measures which might undermine Ireland's traditional catholic ethos could be forced upon Ireland by decisions of the ECJ. The left wing No campaigners and the entirety of the Yes campaign dismissed these claims as baseless.

The reality of the situation is that there was no prospect of the ECJ acting to force the Irish government to introduce legalised abortion or euthanasia. There was also nothing whatsoever in the treaty that makes this prospect any more or less likely. The claims of the nationalist No camp were, in this regard, totally inaccurate. However, once again it's not as simple as that. As EU integration progresses there has been and will continue to be a harmonisation of social and cultural norms – the basic rights of citizens and so on. The period since Ireland joined the EU has seen an enormous decline in the power of catholic social teaching in Ireland. Ireland's progressive integration into an EU which is overwhelmingly secular in nature in comparison to Ireland has undoubtedly played a part in that. While the process of European integration continues, at a social and institutional level, the process of Irish de-catholicisation is likely to continue in parallel. This will eventually lead to a situation where continued bans on abortion in Ireland will come under pressure from the EU, through its courts and decision making institutions.

So, while one can say unequivocally that the traditional nationalists' claims about the treaty were wrong, their fears were not entirely misplaced. Indeed, it is the fear of gradual cultural assimilation into European secular norms that most strongly motivates this group to fight against European treaties. They understand that compulsory fidelity to doctrinaire catholic teaching is not much of a vote winner, thus they have to invent alarmist stories on some of the more polarising issues to try to reach a broader layer of public support.

Immigration

One issue that was barely mentioned by campaigners, but still cropped up repeatedly in the media was immigration. Only a handful of individuals on the very fringes of the no campaign raised the issue in public in relation to Lisbon, but it still cropped up repeatedly with reference to the Nice treaty and EU expansion, in advance of which the Irish government had assured the people that there would be only limited immigration into Ireland. In actual fact the Irish

construction boom saw tens of thousands of immigrants arrive. It was reported in various places that this had caused a feeling of resentment among large swathes of the public. It is highly likely that this fear was stoked in private campaigning by some traditional nationalist no campaigners. The basic problem expressed was that Ireland would lose control over its borders.

The reality of the situation is that freedom of movement within the EU has been a reality for a long time. Essentially, on this point, we can consider Ireland to be just like a US state. The very idea of immigration controls from the EU into Ireland makes as little sense as the idea that Nebraska might adopt immigration controls on the rest of the US. Similarly, given the internal EU freedom of movement, the Irish state has very little latitude to define immigration controls for those arriving from the rest of the world. The simple fact is that when there are jobs people will come, when there are no jobs people will leave. While Ireland remains part of the EU, this will remain the case.

Why the Campaign went the way it went

Finally, having looked at the European context and the stunningly poor quality of the public debate, we will briefly look at the course of the campaign to ask why it went the way that it did. There were several significant differences with past EU referendums, most notably the strength of the No vote in opinion polls leading up to the vote. The last two opinion polls before the vote registered a 35% to 30% lead for a No and a slim 42% to 39% lead for a Yes in the other. This was an unprecedented situation – even in the first Irish poll on the Nice referendum – which was defeated – the Yes vote was ahead in the last poll before the vote. Although the Yes side threw enormous resources into the campaign in the last few days before the poll and mobilised everybody they possibly could, they failed to stem the tide and the campaign was defeated by 53% to 47%, with a turnout of 51%, a marked increase over the numbers who voted on Nice.

In the early years of EU membership, Irish voters could be relied on to deliver a massive vote in favour of whatever European treaty was put in front of them due mainly to the fact that the EU seemed to be a plausible route out of poverty. By 2001, when the Nice Treaty was rejected, immediate economic necessity was far less of a force. However, this vote came after a relatively low key campaign and a very low turnout. When the political and business elite focused their energies and resources on delivering a Yes vote second time around, they managed to win 62% of the vote and were able to put the first loss down to “taking their eye off the ball”. For Lisbon, they most certainly did have their eye on the ball. They

ran a well resourced, intensive and expensive media campaign, fronted by a carefully chosen selection of political, economic and business leaders. They covered the country with posters and billboards and mobilised their friends in the media to help persuade the population. Yet they lost. So what happened?

Firstly, the nature of the referendum campaign conspired against the Irish elite. European treaties are complicated documents, concerned with the workings of arcane institutions governing distant affairs. Due to the lack of opportunities for personal advancement on offer, the major parties find it particularly difficult to mobilise their constituency organisations, while the nationalists and the left are generally more motivated than ever.

Thus, Ireland's political and business leaders have traditionally relied heavily on their advertising, PR and media resources in order to sell their case for European treaties. This was particularly so with Lisbon, but the difference this time was that, in Declan Ganley, they were opposed by somebody who had access to comparable PR resources and in Lord Rothermere and Rupert Murdoch, they were opposed by people who controlled a significant minority of the Irish media. Although the British tabloids have far less political influence in Ireland than the Irish press, a significant proportion of the voting population are not particularly interested in European politics, never mind the extension of QMV or new shared-competencies. They absorb information about the issues in fragments, an article here, a radio interview there. By introducing sufficient alternative interpretations of the significance of the treaty into the public sphere, Libertas and their media allies were able to neutralise the media as a propaganda tool. So, while the post-election opinion polls revealed that very few people voted against the treaty from a pro-business point of view, the PR and media work of Ganley, Murdoch et al were instrumental in levelling the playing field between the campaigns.

With a large number of conflicting interpretations in circulation, many voters' voting decisions depended on whom they trusted the most. When it came down to it, the side that was represented by politicians and IBEC was always going to be in trouble. In the end, the loyalty test split the electorate on class lines. The wealthier constituencies trusted their politicians and business leaders more, the rest of the country sided against them and with the left or the nationalists. Ironically, the intervention of NATO supporting businessmen helped significantly in exposing the class divide that runs through capitalist Ireland. The depth and distrust between the workers and their leaders was temporarily laid bare.

[1] <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/87311>

I use the term 'integrationists' rather than 'federalists' to describe the forces who favour European political integration in the EU. The EU is already a federation of sorts and most of the forces who are opposed to further integration support a federal arrangement between the EU states of one sort or another.