Commentary

Why Ireland rejected the Lisbon Treaty

Cathal M. Brugha*
School of Business, University College Dublin, Ireland

The reason why Ireland voted in a referendum on June 12th 2008 to reject the Lisbon Treaty was mainly due to the failure from Europe to articulate the overall justification for this strengthening of European powers in terms acceptable to the Irish, who hope for a federalist Europe, and don’t trust the global military intentions of some of Europe’s leaders. Most people were not canvassed door-to-door at all. Where there was a canvass it was generally against Lisbon, raising fears about threats to Irish neutrality, and of conscription, as well as about abortion, taxation, and the loss of an Irish Commissioner. While 51% of men voted in favour because of the perceived economic benefits, 56% of women voted against because of the perceived risks associated with a more powerful Europe.

It is very easy to see something unusual that happens in Europe as due to a national problem, in this case Ireland’s rejection of Lisbon as due to Irish difficulties, or possibly Irish idiosyncrasies. The view I will put here is that it was a mixture, but was more due to European factors than Irish, other than the obvious one that Ireland was the only country deciding by referendum.

The main mistake was a failure to articulate the overall justification for this strengthening of European powers. This created suspicion, which brought out groups who pursue a narrow political agenda to do with social issues such as abortion, and who see economically motivated agendas as likely to be in conflict with social or individual interests. The referendum campaign also provided an opportunity for parties such as Sinn Féin to increase their political visibility. (In their case they badly needed a lift as they had been expecting a dramatic increase in the number of their seats after their successes in entering government in Northern Ireland. Instead they actually lost.) And it opened the way for others, who have little in common with one another, to block the treaty for a variety of reasons for wanting to keep Europe weak.

This failure to articulate did not emanate from Ireland. The problem started in the European Commission, which has an apparently arrogant, but probably is more easily...
understood as a government servant distrust of the democratic political process. This could be described as: ‘it is too complicated for the electorate to understand; so try and ‘slip it through unnoticed’’. A more honest articulation might be: ‘it is too complicated for us to explain; also it would force us to reveal our global agendas; even worse it would expose our failure to resolve our own conflicts about Europe’s global agenda; so try and “slip it through unnoticed”’. In that sense it was a real failure of the political process in the European Union, which, as a rapidly developing institution, lacks political maturity. Could this have been resolved easily? Not really. Only politicians can resolve political issues. Most European governments were delighted to not have the headache of a referendum in their own country and, so, were very happy to be kept quiet about it, along with the Brussels EU government officials and hope that Ireland would ‘slip it through’. There was good reason to hope that this would happen. Ireland is very pro-Europe; and the Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern had negotiated the European Constitution, of which Lisbon was a dumbed down version. But then Ahern retired and his successor Brian Coven had not developed enough personal popularity to give the momentum required to get the electorate to pass it without a serious consideration of people’s fears. His own constituency was one of the few rural constituencies to clearly support the referendum.

Having formulated this ‘failure to articulate’ view, I discovered it resonated with that of Jürgen Habermas, the famous German philosopher (Irish Times Sat July 28—all Irish Times articles referred to here are available online). However, I am not suggesting that the Irish electorate would endorse his proposal of a two-speed Europe. The Irish really believe in a federalist Europe, and look forward to alliances within the European Parliament with significant peoples within Europe such as the Catalans and the Basques in Spain. The idea of facilitating the larger European countries, such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom, to copy the United States to fight global ‘resource wars’ is anathema to the Irish.

The Lisbon Referendum offered a choice between the status quo and something the people did not understand. If ‘Lisbon 2’ were to be presented as a choice between alternative models of Europe, the Irish would not vote for a two-speed Europe, because it would free the larger European countries to pursue an agenda the Irish do not want.

The way to understand the Irish electorate is to look to the obvious, remembering that Irish value their independence, and, like other electorates, are not stupid. In this case the promoters of the Lisbon Treaty did not articulate a clear compelling reason that explained the difference that Lisbon would make. The slogan used was ‘Good for Ireland; Good for Europe’ reflects a platitude that could have been used by either side.

It might seem unfair to put the blame on the Commission, given that, as government servants, they are answerable to the politicians. They have a circular bond with the politicians, answering to both the Parliament and to member of governments. They have the resources to carry out qualitative research, and they advise the politicians. It is easy for them to close down or open up agendas. In this case it was more convenient for them to close down the uncomfortable discussion about where exactly Lisbon might bring Europe. Rather than open up what might be a ‘hornet’s nest’ they took the chance of not articulating the reasons in a thorough way.

The European Commission’s risky strategy failed. Europe has gone through several processes of enlargement, all of which had a good reason, starting with the original founding fathers, who wanted to avoid future wars within Europe. More recently the people voted for Maastricht to provide for a single currency, and for Nice to facilitate the entry of Eastern European countries.

The interested reader can view the breakdown of how people voted in the following sites.

Ireland rejected the Lisbon Treaty


The last of these shows that Ireland rejected Nice 1 by almost an identical margin that they have just now rejected Lisbon, and then passed Nice 2 overwhelmingly a year later. This does not mean that Lisbon 2 would be passed easily. An opinion poll published on July 27th indicated it would be lost more heavily if it were run again immediately. This opinion poll was commissioned by a British Eurosceptic group ‘Open Europe’, and included a lot of bias in its questions. Nevertheless, its basic finding is accurate. Many who voted Yes would either vote No the next time or abstain if there was any sense of bullying, of being told to go back and ‘get it right’. And there is cynicism and distrust about French President Sarkosy’s visit brief to Ireland, a feeling that he lacks respect for people who do not agree with him, not just the Irish.

The following are some supplementary summary points that try to explain how a campaign that was supported by almost the entire Dáil (Parliament) in Ireland could fail.

First, I should point out that many Yes voters that I came across supported the Lisbon Treaty because they disliked Sinn Féin so much that they wouldn’t be on the same side as them. The result could have been worse, from the point of view of those in favour of Lisbon.

There were five elements to the campaign: radio and TV media, print media, campaign funding, posters and door-to-door canvas.

Radio and TV

Following a constitutional challenge in the Irish Courts, by former MEP Patricia McKenna, under Irish Law both sides in a referendum are allowed equal air time on TV and Radio. During the referendum campaign the 95% of members of parliament (TDs), Ministers, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) http://www.ibec.ie/ibecweb.nsf/wHome?OpenForm, the Trade Unions etc. were allocated exactly the same amount of broadcast time as groups most of whom were either unrepresentative or were set up for the purpose of the referendum: Cóir, Libertas, Sinn Féin, Peace and Neutrality Alliance (PANA) http://www.pana.ie/resource/index.html, People Before Profit http://www.people-before-profit.org/ etc and the People’s Movement http://www.people.ie/english7.html, most of whom were never elected by anybody.

Print media

The principal anti-Lisbon campaigner was a new group called Libertas, founded by Pro-U.S. Republican Declan Ganley, whose company Rivada Networks http://www.rivada.com/about/keypersonnel/declanjganley.htm has on its board people who served the US military, and others such as Don De Marino, who worked for the Reagan and Bush Senior Administrations. Ganley has described his views about Europe in http://www.fpri.org/ww/0405.200312.ganley.euconstitution.html http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20030311.ganley.europedirection.html He would prefer a Europe that was pro-US and that was free to have pan-European political parties that could elect a US style-president, and do US-style things in the world to make it a ‘free and safe place’.

FPRI: Who are they? The Foreign Policy Research Institute is a Neo-Con US support group for the Bush Administration, the American Military Complex, which looks for support for the War in Iraq. http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040510/press/3 Declan Ganley is English but with Irish connections. He lives in Washington, but has a house in Galway in the west of Ireland. His main business is Rivada Networks http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=9091, which he runs with Don de Marino http://www.zoominfo.com/people/De%20Marino_Don_61197556.aspx

Rivada is part of the US Military Establishment.

The Irish Times, Ireland’s ‘intellectual daily paper’ did an expose on Ganley http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2008/0520/1211232308995.html In general, people voted in favour of the referendum where this paper is read, i.e. in the more affluent areas of Ireland. Sinn Féin, PANA, People Before Profit, etc. would all be anti-Neocons and anti-Big Business, and campaigned in less affluent areas where a large majority voted No; such people tend not to read the Irish Times. These would not have known anything about Ganley or his motivations. How would they have responded if they understood that they had very strange bed-fellows? Since the referendum more has emerged about Ganley’s attempts to get US telecoms business in Iraq, and about some of his questionable business dealings.

Campaign funding

In Ireland there are fairly strict controls on campaign contributions, but limited controls on funding from outside Ireland. It appears that sizeable funding of the No campaign came from the United States. Ganley spent in this campaign more than the three largest Irish political parties together: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party. Sinn Féin is heavily backed by Irish-American groups. Under Irish Law it is not possible to question campaign funding until after the referendum. The large No poster campaign was very noticeable. Ganley’s team is reputed to be now trying to work out how to ‘get around’ their difficulties with Irish laws on contributions to campaigns.

Posters

Politicians on the Yes side used the referendum as an opportunity to put photographs of themselves on posters as an early start to next year’s European and Local Elections. In the case of Labour Party politicians the words Vote Yes to Lisbon were so small as to be barely visible, giving a clear message of lack of enthusiasm for Lisbon. (Labour Party—Ireland’s third largest party—supporters voted overwhelmingly against, whereas Fine Gael—Ireland’s second party—supporters broke about even, and Fianna Fáil—Ireland’s largest party and leader of the government—voted in favour.) Some of the posters used by the No side would have been challenged if they were erected by political parties, for example those by Libertas and by Coír, e.g. http://thatsireland.com/2008/05/14/illegal-anonymous-no-to-lisbon-posters/

Door-to-door canvas

In a general election every house tends to be canvassed several times. In the Lisbon Referendum most people were not canvassed door-to-door at all. Where there was a canvass it was generally for No, by one of the groups against Lisbon, mainly Libertas, Sinn Féin and Coír, who may have had 400 canvassers working non-stop in 3 months up to the referendum. In the last week of the campaign, when the parties realized that the opinion polls were indicating a loss, the main government party, Fianna Fáil canvassed in some areas, and where it did the referendum was won. But this canvass was difficult. A ‘No’ canvass needed to raise a fear on one issue. To succeed a ‘Yes’ canvass needed to re-assure a voter on about five issues, such as neutrality, conscription, abortion, taxation and the Irish Commissioner, and then discuss the positive reasons for supporting Lisbon: energy security, cross-border policing, etc. Seasoned Fianna Fáil local politicians admitted afterwards that they did not canvass because they themselves were unsure of how to explain the reasons for supporting Lisbon.

The issues

The Lisbon Treaty was about strengthening Europe to compete globally, to be a global player in issues such as energy. While 51% of men voted Yes because of the benefits, 56% of women voted No because of the risks.
Irish people are generally anti-war, and are very aware that their UK neighbour is at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Sarkozy has talked of bombing Iran if they get nuclear arms (The Times, 28 August 2007) and now wants a European Navy, and for France to rejoin NATO.

Ireland’s history of being a small pawn on the British Empire’s chessboard is central to the international perspective of Irish people, and is especially central to the scepticism of Irish women about global expansionism.

A cynical allegation about the threat of conscription to fight in Iraq, which people circulated by phone in the last days of the campaign, caused a surge towards the No side. The previous opinion poll had indicated that the Yes side had ‘woken up’ and had done enough to pass the referendum. While circulating a threat of conscription was a crude ply, it resonated with a real fear and swung Yes votes to No amongst women. It happened too late to be counter-acted. There are reported cases of people going to the polling booth intending to vote Yes, and then actually voting No.

The ‘elephant in the sitting-room’, i.e. Europe’s global military intentions, will have to be openly discussed before the Irish electorate will contemplate another referendum on Lisbon.

Ireland has a long tradition of suspicion about outside politics and about treaties. The 1691 Treaty of Limerick http://www.ucc.ie:8080/cocoon/celt/E703001-010 and the 1921 Treaty http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/The_Treaty_Negotiations_October-December_1921 that led to the setting up of Northern Ireland, and that also led to Civil War http://www.searcs-web.com/hist20.html, are generally seen in Ireland as capitulations to pressure from an external force, the British in those cases. It should be clearly understood that the Irish have no particular dislike of British people. However, they are particularly sensitive to being ‘pushed around’ by outsiders, and to attempts to force them to do anything they do not feel like doing.

The No to Lisbon Campaign was a brief coming together of extreme opposites, from Right and Left, who together associated an atmosphere of fear with the Treaty, and succeeded in persuading 53% of those who voted to reject Lisbon.

Apart from the scare about conscription to fight in Iraq possibly the second reason why the 53% voted No was because a very active anti-abortion group called Cóir, which was formed to campaign against Lisbon, claimed that the Treaty would give the European Court of Justice the right to decide Irish laws on abortion, euthanasia and prostitution.

Third: A very clever slogan was used: ‘if you are not sure of something don’t sign’.

Fourth: It was difficult to sell the positive features of the Treaty.

The Lisbon treaty is about strengthening Europe globally so that Europe can compete with the US, China, Japan, India, etc. The referendum should have been about who will lead the world. Will it be Europe with its federal system, independent countries, voting safeguards to prevent any group taking too much power, all written into the proposed constitution http://www.vote4europe.ie/? Or will it be the US, with Europe as a follower of the US, and European countries as members of NATO, apparently the Rivada vision?

The world is looking to Europe to provide a better leadership for the future than the US has been providing. Europeans that were anxious about the trends in global politics looked to their friends in Ireland to raise these concerns, as the only country holding a referendum, the only place where the people must support this treaty to ratify it. It is clear that US Neocons would not like to see Europe bringing its democratic federalism to the world.

The Cóir group against Lisbon, in targeting conservative, and generally older, Catholic voters, questioned the very assurances in the Lisbon Treaty that had been negotiated by the Irish Government, that were intended precisely to protect issues such as about abortion they were worried the treaty would weaken.

Positive aspects about the treaty that did not get aired in the campaign included that it extends European competence in three areas: Energy security (so that Ireland, which is
highly dependent on imported oil will not be left out), Transport development and Policing across borders (so that countries can coordinate better their tracking of international criminals who traffic in drugs and abductions).

Some further details of what went wrong with the campaign

1. There was always going to be a mid-term kick against the government, and this referendum, coming before the Local/Euro elections, provided the opportunity.
2. There does not seem to have been any proper in-depth qualitative research into the likely attitude of voters.
3. Lies were told about conscription, abortion, neutrality. There was no capacity or willingness to answer them vigorously, i.e. to really ‘take them on’, neither on the ground nor in the media.
4. The Yes campaign was totally defensive, late and weak.
5. The American Military Complex interests in keeping Europe weak were ignored despite the clear link to Rivada Networks to Declan Ganley to Libertas, and similarly with Ulick McAvaddy.
6. There was no conceptualization that this campaign was about Europe in the world, as a ‘player’ protecting our interests against the US (pro-War), Russia (energy supplier), etc., and consequently no compelling reason to vote Yes.
7. There was no acknowledgement of another ‘elephant in the sitting-room’: what would happen if Ireland voted No?
8. There was no consideration that controversial referenda in this country are almost never carried.

The failure of the government and almost the entire political establishment to pass the referendum was not due to laziness or slowness to start a campaign. There was plenty warning. The Government did campaign. In the long run up to the vote there were literally hundreds of meetings all over the country organized by the political parties, the Forum, EMI, the EU Commission office and indeed by Libertas—many with only 20 or 30 people turning up. The Government sent out 1.3 m booklets on the Treaty; the Referendum Commission also sent its booklet to every home. Fianna Fáil had a Lisbon specific website as did the Dept Foreign Affairs, IBEC, the Alliance for Europe and the Referendum Commission. There was a low-call phone line. There was plenty of information, but little addressing of the underlying concerns.

Biographical notes

Professor Cátal M Brugha http://mis.ucd.ie/staff/cbrugha is Director of the Centre for Management Science and Systems in University College Dublin’s Business School, and President of the Management Science Society of Ireland. He used to be involved in Irish politics, and, in his research, has recently extended the idea of Game Theory Dilemmas (Drama Theory/Confrontation and Collaboration Analysis) in a paper: ‘Conflict Decision Processes: with Illustrations from Ireland’, International Scientific Journal of Methods and Models of Complexity: ISJ M&MC, Published on the Internet in 2006 by SISWO, University of Amsterdam, http://www.nosmo.nl/isj/.