

“The Six and Ireland, 1945-1973: from perceptions to enlargement”

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Perceptions of Ireland

In 1922, Ireland officially became known as the Irish Free State. Successive governments with a strong nationalist ethos would seek to make the country strongly Irish again. Following some of the precepts of Sinn Féin’s ideology, great emphasis was laid on Irish culture and the Irish language. Protectionism was the main economic tenet. Catholicism became a major feature of identity and way of life. Already isolated from the rest of Europe because of its remote location, the country became very insular despite the fact that in previous centuries very strong relations with the continent had existed, notably with France. Continental influences in Ireland were very limited be it economically or culturally. Ireland now had her own parliament and government, and would have her own head of state when she officially became a republic in 1949 although Douglas Hyde was already President of Ireland in 1938. Yet, this political independence from Britain masked the fact that Ireland was still heavily economically dependent on her former coloniser. From 1945 to 1955, Ireland’s average of exports to the United Kingdom was 89,2% and a mere 5,5% to the future six member-states of the EEC; Ireland’s average of imports was 51,5% from the United Kingdom and 8,3% from the Six. The Irish pound was coupled to pound sterling until the 1970s which in effect meant that the Irish government could be at the mercy of British financial policy. But, the fact that the country was in a British economic straitjacket did not seem to bother the first successive Irish governments which were content with the symbols of political independence such as the Dáil, the Seanad, the Taoiseach and the President.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Ireland opted for neutrality. This was not really surprising as she had a major bone of contention with Britain about partition. Dublin would not recognise the existence of Northern Ireland. Therefore to have officially sided with Britain in the war could have led to serious internal troubles. Neutrality was a way of showing political independence from Britain.

However, behind the scenes, the Irish government showed that its conception of neutrality was rather elastic to say the very least. In fact, it secretly collaborated with the Allies on a rather grand scale. Furthermore, anything between 40,000 to 80,000 Irishmen and women volunteered to fight in the British army, the figures still being debated between historians. In any case, 40,000 would represent about three British army divisions and 80,000 about six. These divisions were neutral Ireland's main contribution to the liberation of Europe from Nazism. But, right at the end of the war, de Valera committed the blunder to extend his sympathies to the German ambassador on Adolf Hitler's death. The reasons for his doing so, are still not entirely clear. It would seem that his observance for diplomatic protocol and his personal esteem for the ambassador might have influenced his decision. Not only did this damage his reputation as an international statesman but it also tarnished the country's reputation as it was deemed by some to have had sympathies for Nazi Germany. In 1945, some French journalists wrote that Ireland had sided with the Germans. In 1957, on the occasion of de Valera's 75th birthday, some Dutch newspapers depicted him and Ireland as sympathisers of Nazi Germany. Most understandably, the Irish ambassador felt obliged to strongly deny this.

In 1945, Europe lay in ruins and Ireland saw an opportunity to return on the continental stage. In August, the *Irish Times* announced that the government had decided to implement a relief scheme of £3,000,000 for Europe. Supplies would be sent to the continent and would reach as far as the Balkans. One particular country which benefited from this Irish aid was the near famine-stricken Netherlands. When the ship transporting supplies reached the harbour of IJmuiden, Dutch people waved home-made Irish flags. One man who deeply appreciated Irish help and who was the Dutch minister for supplies at the time was Sicco Mansholt. He described it as a 'very considerable gift'. Years later in 1970, Mansholt successfully persuaded Irish farmers that EC-membership was in their interest. Gustav Heinemann, who was president of West Germany in the early 1970s, also remembered Irish aid to the city of Essen of which he was a mayor after the war. In France, Radio Paris announced Ireland's help and the government's satisfaction. The French press, however, was divided. On the one hand, there were newspapers stressing Ireland's pro-German sympathies and which sarcastically commented on the country's help towards 'poor Germany' while on the other hand, there were newspapers lauding Ireland's generosity. Ireland's relief

scheme for the continent was in fact her first step back into Europe, a few years before she joined the Council of Europe in 1949. It is interesting to point out that today this episode is largely unknown among historians and public alike.

Partly because of Ireland's rather self-imposed isolationism, knowledge of the country was poor on the continent. The country was not unknown but badly known and stereotyped images were rife. In 1956, the journalist Desmond Fennell published an article in the *Irish Times* entitled "As others see us; Saints, Butter and Bombs". In this very humorous, yet serious article Fennell described how continentals perceived Ireland just at a time when the IRA had launched its so-called "border campaign" against British presence in Northern Ireland. He wrote:

I have met the Facts everywhere over the past few years. They are:

- 1) The Irish are the enemies of the English (This excites a certain fellow-feeling towards us among England's enemies).
- 2) The Irish are very Catholic. (This excites fellow-feeling among those Continental Catholics, e.g. Spaniards, who still view the world in terms of the Counter-Reformation; it confirms their delightful idea of Irish medievalism, remoteness and romanticism for those who confuse religion with folklore).
- 3) Ireland is very green.
- 4) All the policemen in New York are Irish.

Fennell was probably not exaggerating as the lack of knowledge about Ireland on the continent was widespread, even among the better educated classes. Two brief examples will amply illustrate this. In 1961, the West German Ministry of the Economy wrote about 'the Irish Free State's application for EEC membership' whereas Ireland had officially been a republic since 1949... Perhaps worse was to follow. In 1964, the Irish embassy in The Hague received a phone call from the Dutch police commissioner. The commissioner asked whether the important Irishman currently visiting the Netherlands should get extra police protection. The ambassador was obliged to very diplomatically explain that Captain Terence O'Neill came from 'that part of Ireland still under British rule'... It was in this cloud of ignorance that Ireland decided to get closer to the continent again.

Ireland and the road to EC membership

The disasters and horrors engendered by the Second World War led to the beginnings of European integration. This integration process was at first viewed suspiciously by Irish politicians who deemed that it would erode national sovereignty. Also, it went against the isolationist frame of mind. In 1948, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) was founded in Paris. The OEEC's task was to implement the financial aid to the reconstruction of Europe provided by the American Marshall Plan. But in Dublin, people felt ill at ease with possible plans for economic unification, political federation and defence commitments for Western Europe. As well, governmental officials were afraid that all this might upset Ireland's very close economic relations with Britain. Seán MacBride, then minister of external affairs, took an interest in these early beginnings of European integration but only partly because it could affect Ireland's relations with Britain. Conor Cruise O'Brien, then a young diplomat in the Department of External affairs, suggested in his memoirs the fact that Ireland's interest in integration was questionable: 'I started a Weekly Bulletin of the Department, in the early issues of which MacBride showed a keen interest. I ran a poster campaign advertising Ireland's alleged devotion to the cause of European Unity'. The reality was, however, quite different.

But, the year 1948 is perhaps best remembered for the Congress of Europe in The Hague. Delegations from various countries met in the Dutch city to discuss the way forward in Europe. Ideas like economic and political union between the states, a European federation, social progress etc were discussed. A European Movement was created, the aim of which being to promote the ideal of European unity. An Irish delegation was present and although it was enthused, it did not really actively participate in the debates. Back home, it was a different story. Not many politicians shared the delegation's enthusiasm. Eamon de Valera, then in opposition, simply did not like the idea of sharing sovereignty in a European federation. Most agreed with him. Generally, politicians favoured intergovernmental cooperation or the concept of a Europe of the Nations. Although the event was fully covered in the media, the Irish delegation's presence had been overlooked. The *Irish Independent* was frankly sceptical:

A complete federation, a European Parliament, common citizenship, a single

Defence Force, unified economy, common currency and removal of all customs barriers cannot be brought about without sacrifice of national sovereignty on the part of the members of the federation.

With hindsight it is easy to argue that the newspaper lacked vision as much of it turned out to be true in the long run.

But the Irish did take an important step in early European integration as their country became a founding member-state of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in 1949. The Council of Europe was composed of a Committee of Ministers and a Consultative Assembly. The aim of the Council according to article one was ‘to achieve a greater unity between its Members’. It was to look after economic, social, cultural, scientific, judiciary and administrative issues. Defence was not included. The Council of Europe was in fact a kind of think-tank where issues were debated in the Assembly and propositions ultimately adopted or rejected by the Committee of Ministers. States remained relatively free to sign the treaties or not. This suited the Irish and the British as intergovernmental cooperation without sharing of sovereignty was the *modus operandi* of the Council. At the very beginning, the Irish delegates showed their rather limited vision of the world as they believed that partition was among the most important issues in a Western Europe that had just emerged from a devastating war. They did not hesitate to turn the Assembly into an anti-partition platform where they denounced the British government’s Northern Irish policy while at the same time signing Anglo-Irish trade agreements with that same government to make sure the country would economically survive. This approach understandably exasperated Assembly members and chairmen. Paul-Henri Spaak, the eminent Belgian statesman who would later be nicknamed “Mr. Europe” owing to his efforts in bringing about European integration, was at pains to discipline the Irish delegates. The unionist *Belfast Newsletter* reported:

M. Spaak, sweat streaming from his bald forehead, expostulated in French while Éire’s Deputy Premier, Mr. William Norton, and Mr. de Valera poured out words of naked aggression against the Six Counties [Northern Ireland]. More than 100 continental politicians looked on in amazement and the public gallery dissolved in laughter as M. Spaak tried to gain control. (...) ‘Non, non, monsieur’, shouted M.

Spaak, 'It is quite impossible. Please respect the dignity of this solemn debate'.

But, after a rather boisterous start, the Irish delegates eventually made some very positive contributions. They laid less stress on partition and, for example, played a major part in the drafting of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. However, when economic integration issues were debated, the Irish were very much isolated. William Norton explained that his country 'wanted to work in close association with Europe [but that] any proposal to establish a customs union with Britain or Europe would mean that our young and not fully-developed industries would not be able to withstand world competition from highly industrialised and highly capitalised countries'.

Meanwhile, it was not in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe where European integration was developing but in Brussels, Paris and Rome. In May 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman declared the intention to create a coal-steel pool between France and West Germany which would be placed under the authority of a supranational body. The idea came in fact from Jean Monnet, one of France's most brilliant civil-servants. It was a way to preserve peace between the two old enemies by reducing nationalist antagonism. Almost a year later, on 18 April 1951, the Treaty of Paris set up the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). There were six member-states: France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. As could have been expected, Ireland was not interested in the ECSC for the simple fact that her coal and steel productions were insignificant. But there were other reasons. Like the British and the Scandinavians, the Irish still deeply distrusted anything supranational. The British ambassador in Dublin reported that Taoiseach Eamon de Valera had told him that 'he had scored off Federalists in Europe by pointing out to them that [Ireland] had only recently managed to extract [herself] from a much smaller combine'. Curiously, de Valera did not seem to be bothered that his country was still almost totally economically dependent on that 'smaller combine', in other words, the United Kingdom. In his mind, economic independence did not seem to have the same symbolic value as political independence. It was a denial of reality. At the end of 1953, Mr. Colin de Terrail, Secretary-General of the French National Committee of the International Chamber of Commerce, had been touched by the welcome he got in Ireland. But after his stay in the country, he wrote:

(...) Ireland is still more insular than England and public opinion is wary of countries which it knows nothing about and whose help will not be forthcoming to solve the only problem which interests it: the partition of Ireland (...).

It was an accurate description.

In 1957, European integration went a big step further with the signing of the Treaty of Rome by the Six. This treaty created the European Economic Community (EEC), also known as Common market, and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). The three organisations, ECSC, EEC and EURATOM were known as the European Communities (EC). Ireland did not join any of these organisations because she had only a limited interest in them, was generally hostile to the idea of a European federation and also because she was ultimately dependent on the decision of the British government to join or not. Ireland's economic dependence on the United Kingdom was such that she could not afford to join the EC if the British did not as this would have serious repercussions on her economy. The British refused to join because they rejected anything that would erode their sovereignty. They still believed, wrongly, that their country was an economic super power and preferred to stress their relations with the Commonwealth countries. However, as the years went by, London realised that the country was not as strong as it used to be. Furthermore, London became worried about a possible Franco-West German domination in Western Europe as General Charles de Gaulle and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer got along well. To compete with the EC and to weaken Franco-West German collaboration, the British created their own economic bloc, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1959. The EFTA included the United Kingdom, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria and Norway. Ireland had not even been invited to participate in the talks to set up the EFTA because it suited the British to maintain their present economic arrangements with Ireland, as Ireland was a source of cheap food imports, and also because the Danes did not want Ireland in the EFTA. The Danes reasoned that Irish goods should become more vulnerable in the British market and so facilitate the sale of Danish goods. This was very bad news for Ireland and she was now squeezed in between two economic blocs, the EC and the EFTA.

However, the year 1959 saw something of a velvet revolution in the country. Eamon de Valera retired as Taoiseach and became President of Ireland. He was replaced by a man of economic vision, Seán Lemass. Lemass now believed that Ireland had to rethink her economic policy altogether. Heavy protectionism had been a serious mistake and Ireland had to embrace free trade. First Lemass was seriously worried by the evolution of European integration and the fact that Ireland had been left out altogether. He travelled to London where he met a British delegation to which he explained Ireland's critical situation and put forward certain ideas. One of them was the complete reintegration of the Irish economy into the British economic system. Lemass, who had fought against the British army during the Easter Rising of 1916, must have swallowed hard when he said this. Had it all been in vain then? But the British did not agree with it. Instead, the British economic straitjacket became tighter as both countries went on to sign more bilateral trade agreements, notably the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement (AIFTAA) in 1965. Was there no way to get out of the British economic straitjacket? The Irish set their eyes on the EC. There were possible export outlets there and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) looked very promising, not forgetting the possibilities of serious financial funding for various projects. But as long as the British were not interested in joining, there was little hope. But all of a sudden, things changed as London decided to apply for EC-membership in 1961. The British government knew that the EFTA was no match for the powerful EC. If the British wanted to play a main role in Western Europe, they had to join the EC. But it all depended on the French and General de Gaulle was opposed to British membership as he believed London represented American interests in Europe and as he feared the British would challenge French or Franco-West German leadership in the EC. The other five member-states were not opposed to British membership in principle. So it was that Ireland depended on the French agreeing to let the British join if she was to join herself. In the summer of 1961, Seán Lemass' government also applied for membership. The Taoiseach stressed Ireland's interest in the process of European integration right from its beginnings and said that his country had always felt European. Those who heard the Taoiseach's speech must have taken his declaration with a pinch, if not a handful of salt, notably Paul-Henri Spaak! Ireland applied because of economic reasons and was not as much interested in the political projects of the EC. Everybody knew this on the continent.

It would be impossible here to mention in detail the negotiations for membership during Ireland's three applications in 1961, 1967 and 1970. Instead, let us briefly focus on each of the six member-states and the Commission's positions towards Ireland.

France. Unlike what is sometimes believed, Charles de Gaulle had nothing against Irish entry, on the contrary. He was himself of distant Irish ancestry and was proud of it. He fully realised Ireland's awkward situation, namely that she was totally dependent on Britain for entry. But as he was against British membership, the problem turned out to be unsolvable in the end. When Georges Pompidou replaced him as president in 1969, this paved the way for British and Irish entry. The French feared West Germany's increasing domination and allowed the British to join and act as a counterbalance to German domination. These higher strategic considerations, coupled with the fact that more and more people in France were in favour of enlargement, played into Ireland's hands. To the French, Ireland's non-NATO membership and neutrality was not an issue, especially after France's break with NATO in 1966.

West Germany. There were some divisions within the German government about Irish membership. Initially, the Foreign Ministry believed that Ireland was neither economically nor politically fit to join while the Ministry for the Economy believed the contrary. Ireland's non-membership of NATO posed a few problems to top civil servants although not to Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano in 1961. Despite these inner disagreements the government rapidly came to accept the validity of Ireland's application. However, West Germany did not succeed in changing de Gaulle's mind about British membership.

Italy. Italy favoured British and Irish membership but avoided to antagonise the French. Her diplomats played a crucial role in forcing the French to reply positively to Seán Lemass' letter of membership-application and to begin entry-negotiations with Ireland. Lemass' government had been waiting for one and a half years for this reply. The Italians operated as skilful brokers between all parties concerned. Non-NATO membership was not an issue for them.

The Netherlands. The Dutch were arguably Ireland's staunchest supporters. They wanted the British in the EC at all costs as they rejected Franco-West German domination. They provided the Irish with confidential information about EC Council and Commission meetings. Foreign Minister Joseph Luns worked sincerely in favour of Irish membership but could be clumsy and unpredictable at times. The Dutch rejected from the beginning any attempt to make NATO-membership a precondition for Ireland's entry into the EC.

Belgium. Belgium viewed with sympathy Ireland's application attempts although she initially had misgivings about Ireland's economic suitability to join the EC, believing it was too weak. Non-membership of NATO appeared not to be an issue although Prime Minister Paul Vanden Boeynants surprisingly told Taoiseach Jack Lynch in 1967 that the Six liked every member-state of the EC to be a member of NATO also. It remains unclear why he said this. It might be that he was simply testing Ireland's interest in political cooperation.

Luxembourg. At first the Grand Duchy was not sure whether Ireland's economy would be able to adapt itself to EC-membership and carefully advised association instead of full-membership to begin with. Yet, Luxembourg eventually accepted Ireland's case for membership and gave very useful advice to Dublin. She operated as an 'honest broker' between all parties concerned and played an important role in solving the Common Fisheries Problem (CFP) in 1971. Although Luxembourg insisted that Ireland had to accept the political objectives and implications of the Treaty of Rome, she did not insist on NATO-membership.

Commission. The European Commission did not welcome with open arms the United Kingdom and Ireland's first applications in 1961 because they arrived at a time when the EC was consolidating. Therefore, it felt that newcomers could upset this process of consolidation. There were similar concerns among the individual member-states too. President Walter Hallstein had a very ambivalent attitude. In public, it seemed that he was in favour of Ireland's entry, while in private he expressed doubts. However, the Commission was most definitely in favour of enlargement in 1967 and 1970. It certainly did its best to make the entry-negotiations succeed and was lauded

by several Irish politicians and diplomats, although its handling of Ireland's problems with the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) was very controversial.

Conclusion

Finally, Ireland became officially a member-state of the EC on 1 January 1973. Once, the main problems during the British negotiations had been solved in 1971, the negotiations with the other applicant-countries became almost a formality. However, unlike the United Kingdom, Ireland's case posed very few problems during the negotiations and it was agreed by the Six and the Commission that Ireland's demands for exceptional treatment etc had been very modest. Minister for External Affairs Patrick Hillery proved to be an outstanding negotiator. EC-membership would allow Ireland to become less dependent on the United Kingdom and to fully reintegrate the concert of European nations by getting out of her self-imposed isolation. According to most politicians and specialists, Ireland became a success story, if not the success story of the EC and later the European Union.