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Member States must enact Lisbon Treaty: Ireland must step out of EU into EFTA

Recommendation to
the European Council
Ireland

by André Nilsen

The Lisbon Treaty is of fundamental importance to the unity, legitimacy, and effectiveness of the European Union. It moreover enjoys overwhelming democratic support through its ratification so far by 18 Member States. The national leaders, meeting in the European Council in Bruxelles on 19-20 June 2008, must therefore act calmly, responsibly, and confidently to ensure its scheduled coming into effect on 1 January

2009. They must let the remaining 8 Member States complete ratification while facilitating that Ireland immediately but temporarily steps out of the EU into the EFTA.

Ireland temporarily moving from the inner EU circle to the outer EFTA circle is a practical solution that respects both the isolated rejection by Ireland and the unified support of the other 26 Member States. While

MAIN POINTS

The Lisbon Treaty is crucial to Europe. Ireland must after its failed referendum immediately but temporarily step out of the EU into the EFTA while the other Member States must complete ratification and ensure enactment. Ireland can later hold a new referendum, ratifying the treaty with special protocols, to rejoin the EU.

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the EU is both political and economic, the EFTA leaves out the politics while still fully participating in the economics. Ireland can along with Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein continue to enjoy the same economic benefits simply through the EFTA while the other 26 Member States separately can progress to update the political institutions in the EU. The 862,415 Irish no-voters should be respected but can of course not hold back 497 million European citizens.

The Lisbon Treaty is absolutely critical to make Europe sufficiently unified, democratic, and powerful to i) cope with enlargement from 15 to 27 Member States, ii) prosper in a globalized world in hard competition with not only the US but also China, India, and Russia, and iii) advance a better world with multilateral solutions to climate change, energy security, nuclear proliferation, global terrorism, financial stability, world trade, international development, humanitarian aid, human rights, international law, and UN reform. It achieves this by providing i) stronger leadership (e.g. a new President, a single Foreign Minister, and a streamlined Commission), ii) fairer governance (e.g. increased co-decision for the Parliament, expanded qualified majority voting in the Council, reinforced authority for the Court, a binding Fundamental Rights

Charter, and enhanced consultation with national parliaments), and iii) a greater international role (e.g. the new President, the single Foreign Minister, a new diplomatic service, and a new mutual defence commitment), with various exemptions for Ireland, Poland, and the UK.

The Irish no-vote however addressed neither the essential objectives nor the institutional innovations. It was instead driven by protests against the establishment, concerns about the economy, hostility towards immigrants, and popular ignorance over the treaty. It was furthermore distorted by fear campaigns making false accusations regarding its impact on tax, neutrality, abortion, euthanasia, prostitution, gay marriage, hard drugs, strike rights, and market liberalization. The truth is of course, there is nothing in the treaty that damages the constitution, interests, or sensitivities of Ireland. Quite the contrary, it simply ensures the continued survival, accountability, and functioning of an organization that has injected unprecedented progress, pride, and prosperity – including € 40 billion net budget receipts – into Ireland, transforming it from a peripheral backwater to the Celtic Tiger. Indeed Ireland has reaped greater benefits than any other Member State from the EU.

Ireland must now immediately step out of the EU into the EFTA to allow the other 26 Member States to move ahead while it conducts a serious public debate on its destiny in Europe. While this goes on, Ireland can through the EEA fully participate in the Single Market and through a special arrangement still participate in the Single Currency. When the time is ripe, if Ireland so chooses, it can then hold a new referendum, ratifying the treaty with special protocols of explicit assurances, to rejoin the EU.

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