

The Lisbon Treaty Referendum in Ireland

Another obstacle in the path of the architects of a Europe of Capital

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The NO victory in Ireland is a clear demonstration of the lack of support among the people for the European project being promoted by the Brussels technocrats and the transnational corporations grouped together in the capitalist cartel, the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT). This rejection by the country with the highest levels of approval and popularity for the EU shows that a different form of European unity is needed, a real unity of all the people. And the gap between public opinion and their “representatives” is a clear sign of the crisis in representative democracy and the need for direct democracy.

Against (almost) all the predictions from the political elite, the Lisbon Treaty was rejected by referendum in Ireland. With over 50% of the electorate participating, the No vote won by a clear margin of just over 53% of votes. The result is like a bucket of cold water for the Irish and European elite. And there is no doubt that the result is cause for celebration for a majority of European citizens, who have been denied a chance to vote on the Treaty by a European Union that is becoming increasingly less democratic and more bureaucratic.

Every possible means to put pressure on the electorate to endorse the Treaty was used: media terrorism that forecast all sorts of dire consequences for the economy and society if the referendum were defeated; the saturation of radio and television with messages calling for a Yes vote in an attempt to brainwash the people. And instead of providing information that was as impartial as possible, the press opted for enthusiastic and unashamed support for the ratification. Everything was tried, everything was done in order to ensure a Yes vote. Everything except one thing – providing a convincing argument in favour of the Treaty.

Vote Yes, vote with your eyes closed...

Propaganda in favour of the Treaty started late in order to avoid debate, and never provided serious arguments in favour of its endorsement as it stuck to bland clichés, tired slogans and meaningless phrases, such as “Yes to Europe”, “For more jobs, vote Yes”, “Let’s stay at the heart of Europe”, “Good for Ireland, good for Europe”, etc. Apart from seeking to instill fear into the hearts of the electorate, the Yes camp behaved appallingly, trying to fool the electorate of this country (which has some of the the highest levels of support for the EU in the whole Union), and making out that the Lisbon Treaty and the European Union are synonymous. According to them, “No” to the Treaty would mean “No” to Europe...

What is certain is that the Yes campaign was unable to provide convincing arguments because they had none: they could not show the average citizen of the Republic what benefits the Treaty would bring, or in what way it would benefit the interests of society as a whole, of social rights or of greater participation and democracy. This sort of debate was avoided at all costs by the government and by the whole political elite as they knew perfectly well that they would have lost. Thus, they placed all their bets on a vote of trust: posters showed the faces of politicians from all the main parties: Labour, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats. Next to their happy (but fake) smiles, the call to vote Yes.

Some went a little further in their defence of the vote of trust. A couple of days before the referendum, in the right-wing Irish Times newspaper, caricaturist Martin Turner published a cartoon showing two people: one was saying “I’m not buying into Lisbon as I don’t understand it and have never read it...”. Beside her, the other was saying “I won’t be buying a car as I don’t understand the internal combustion engine and have never read a manual...”. The message was

that it was not necessary to know the ins and outs of the Treaty, it was enough to trust the “great men who guide the destiny of the nation”. They would not trouble themselves to explain how the motor worked, they just asked us to trust the mechanic. But what they forget is that politics works differently to a motor. Society is not governed by the laws of physics or chemistry. In society, there are social alternatives and the people have the right to know everything about the political processes that concern the way they live. If the Yes camp was unable to provide arguments in favour of its option (and the burden of proof was theirs), then it was natural for voters not to trust “the mechanic”.

The entire spectrum of official/parliamentary politics (except for the Sinn Féin republican party and several independents) supported ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. But nevertheless, the people voted against the opinion of 94% of their elected representatives — a clear rejection by Irish people of this country’s traditional politics and a distancing of themselves from it. At the same time they distanced themselves from the official media, which strongly supported the Yes campaign. Indeed, seeing party leaders like John Gormley (Green Party), Eamon Gilmore (Labour), Bertie Ahern (Fianna Fáil, ex-prime minister who was forced to resign recently for corruption) and Enda Kenny (Fine Gael) hand-in-hand with the insufferable Progressive Democrats (ultra-neoliberals), all calling for a Yes vote, they have every right in having suspicions about what is going on...

The No vote: many different reasons, but the right instinct

But it would be quite wrong to suppose that the triumph of the No vote is explained only by the campaigns waged by a range of groups and organizations from right to left, just as it would be wrong to deny their importance as the government is trying to do. These groups, coming from different and often contradictory perspectives, actually provided more convincing arguments than their adversaries. The No was not simply a form of punishment as the disheartened Lisbon supporters would have us believe. The No vote came about for various reasons, as many as the various reasons given during the No campaigns. One thing is certain: the so-called “Europhobe” vote in Ireland is insignificant. In general the people’s instinct was correct in rejecting bureaucratic centralization in Brussels and the project of the elites, cooked up with the leftovers from the European Constitution that was rejected a few years ago in popular referendums in France and the Netherlands. Not a few people asked themselves why such an important document was being put to referendum only in Ireland...

If the people’s instinct was right in rejecting the democratic deficit represented by the Lisbon Treaty, the arrogant and deeply hostile reaction from the European authorities to this manifestation of sovereignty by the Irish has only served to confirm that Ireland was right to say No. Tantrums on the continent have been the order of the day: from Sarkozy, who continues to ignore the “Irish incident” and is proceeding as if nothing had happened, to the German minister who hinted at the possible exclusion of Ireland. These histrionics should be taken for what they are and there is no need to give them any more importance than that. They do, however, bear witness to the “value” that the European political establishment places on the simplest of democratic rights: “if the people do not vote for what we want, then we just ignore them (at best) or punish them (at worst)”.

One thing about which there can be no doubt whatsoever is that European and Irish politicians will have neither the moral stature to accept the result nor the humility to respect the choice that has been made, nor even the intelligence to understand its significance: that the process to build a Europe of Capital which has been accelerating since the days of the Maastricht Treaty, lacks all legitimacy. Anyone who doubts this can just wait to see if they will have the nerve to hold a referendum on this in the other countries of the Union...

From instinct to an alternative

The voice of the people of Ireland should provide a rallying point for European social movements to think again about the sort of Europe we want, whether it be a Europe artificially imposed from above, from Brussels, or one that is born organically from every corner of Europe, with real participation at all levels. If we want a Europe at the service of a few big capitalists or if we want a Europe that builds its economy in a sustainable way, at the service of its people, whose economic ties with the rest of the world must also be based on solidarity.

We know that this “incident” will not stop the architects of the Europe of Capital: there are too many interests at stake. We know that the opinion of a few hundred thousand people on a remote island in the North Atlantic will not change the opinions of Barroso, or Mandelson or the powerful business lobby, the ERT. If Shell can do it, we can be sure the EU will, too. In fact, there is already talk of a new referendum, which shows the extent to which they scorn our opinion. But it should be clear that it is not in Ireland where a referendum is needed — it is in the rest of Europe that a referendum needs to be held, in every country of the EU. But this is something they will not want to do, preferring instead to push ahead with their project. And of course they will be able to do this, though it will no longer be in our name. And this became abundantly clear on 12th June in the peaceful little country of Ireland.

Thinking about the sort of Europe we want has become an urgent necessity: with or without Lisbon, the EU is anti-democratic. It is at the beck and call of the capitalist elites and is creating an imperial project that is expressed in a series of free-trade agreements with the third world, such as the Latin American Association Agreement, the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean — something else we are never consulted on, of course. Thinking about this project, thinking about alternatives, is vitally important if we do not want to go on simply having to react to the manoeuvres of the European elite. If we do not take this step, today’s small victories will become tomorrow’s disastrous defeats, at the hands of an enemy who never drops his guard.

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