

IRELAND: 1992 AND THE 'NEW' EUROPE: SOME REFLECTIONS.

Kieran O'Donoghue

Integration has been central to the post-war European experience. For almost 50 years Europeans have been trying to remodel their anarchic State system and dilute the nationalism that has sustained it. From the ashes of World War II to the present day Jean Monet's dream of an integrated Europe has emerged quietly intact.

At times the ideal of an integrated Europe has proved mere fantasy and illusion. The persistence of the nation-State and the concepts of sovereignty, national identity and economic independence have not looked kindly upon European Union. Inflation, recession and growing social and economic inequalities have helped compound the wounds of disenchantment. Since the Signing of the Treaty in 1957, the Community has evolved along a path punctuated by varying degrees of success and failure.

The early achievements such as the creation of the Common Agricultural policy and the establishment of the Common Market were followed by a series of failed initiatives. Like its namesake, EMU, the plan for Economic and Monetary Union never took off and still awaits clearance. The various plans from Barre through Werner to Marjolin and MacDougall fell prey to serious disagreement in the face of fiscal crisis and high structural unemployment. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s the process of economic and political union was undermined by a series of crises which destroyed accepted orthodoxies. Keynesianism was replaced by monetarism, growth by recession and development by decline. Numerous Summits and ritual declarations of the desire for greater union failed to conceal the facts. The EEC was running out of steam.

In the mid-1980s, the international economy experienced some modest improvements and the climate for investment was renewed. In Europe the significance of improved economic conditions was quickly realised by the European Commission. New economic conditions would help create a more optimistic environment within which they could fruitfully pursue political and economic union. Project 1992 is the Commission's new initiative designed to take advantage of the new and more optimistic environment which has enveloped Europe since the mid-1980s. It is a complex project designed to renew progress in the movement towards European Union. To-date Project 1992 has caught the imagination of many Europeans and has encouraged a fresh debate about the Community itself. In each member State, the mass media, libraries, learned journals and University departments are awash with the 'literature' of 1992.

As a result of the great interest in 1992 the concept of integration which lies at the very heart of the Community's development has re-taken centre stage. In addition and of great importance is the fact that 1992 has also harnessed the attention of a new generation of young people who consciously see or seek a congruence between their legitimate aspirations and the very success of the project itself. The Commission's new initiative has given birth to a strange identification of national and individual 'self-interest' with the objectives of the Community. This new found common ground is strange and indeed dangerous because it is narrow and undiscerning. Too many are readily transfixed by the prospect of free markets, free transfers and free competition. In reality 1992 offers something much more potent and attractive than 'cheap bread'.

The real significance of 1992 awaits us in the wings and is concerned with the Community's most instrumental forces: power and politics, the forces that ultimately prey upon those motivated by narrow self-interest and those unable or unwilling to discern the truth of real events. Nineteen ninety-two gives force of word and of deed to Walter Hallstein's claim in the 1950s that:

"We [The European Commission] are not in business,
we are in politics" (Hallstein, 1961).

Nineteen ninety-two reflects the Commission's decision to continue to use what Holland has described as 'Instrumental Economics' as a means of achieving political ends. Serious cause for concern, however, emerges when people and countries begin to treat the economics of integration as an end in itself. Nineteen ninety-two is concerned with factors greater than increased structural funding and improved factor mobility. Nineteen ninety-two is about politics and indirectly concerned with securing the European Community's position in a World undergoing rapid social, economic and political transformation. In truth, it represents the Commission's attempt to create the political and economic foundation for a fledgling superpower.

The suggestion that the Community is a nascent federal superpower is not unreasonable. The dynamic process of integration set in motion by the fears of post-war Europe is proceeding towards the ultimate goal of political union. For the Community the decline of long-standing political and economic structures has added a sense of urgency to the process of integration. American hegemony is at an end. The decline that took root in Vietnam is now well established. U.S. economic supremacy has waned under a series of profligate administrations. The cost of Truman abroad and Reagan at home has proved unbearable. In the East stagnant communism has led to glasnost, perestroika and open revolt.

Nineteen ninety-two is part of Europe's response to a "new realism" as the Community prepares a place for itself in the new order. American threats of a trade war with "Fortress Europe" and Soviet diplomacy armed with glasnost in one hand and a begging bowl in the other are the elders grudging respect for the child become man. The Europe that grew up midway between American tutelage and Soviet antagonism is undergoing radical changes in status and outlook.

The emergence of a 'new Europe' is an issue of some significance for Ireland. The country is no longer just a member of a Community of Nations but a constituent part of a fledgling superpower. Acceptance of this proposition underlines the importance of an examination of Ireland's relationship with the European Community. What are the issues at the heart of such an assessment? Firstly, one could be forgiven for thinking that the real significance of 1992 has been lost or ignored in Ireland. The country has yet to consider the real implications of the new Europe.

Vested interests will not admit it but 1992 will effectively assist the erosion of Ireland's political and economic independence. Since 1973, Ireland has consistently avoided acknowledgement of the geopolitical consequences of membership. Instead a narrow and undiscerning approach to the Community has helped to de-emphasise the critical issues. Ireland has gladly obliged the Commission's 'carrot and stick' approach to political union in return for financial transfers.

Indeed, this approach cannot be faulted for inconsistency as the country's immediate interest in 1992 would suggest. Nineteen ninety-two will help copper fasten a process within which Ireland will ultimately lose the ability to chose and pursue her own political and economic pathways. The Single European Act signed in 1987 provides for weighted voting and denies any country the power of veto except on employee rights and tax issues. In effect, although the Act addresses the undoubted paralysis of decision-making associated with the veto, it also continues to circumscribe those forces that would inhibit the realisation of political union. The real implications of the SEA were identified in Ireland by the Supreme Court. They were ultimately ignored by a population convinced that the country would face financial ruin if the Act were amended.

After 1992, this country's political and economic future will become increasingly controlled by external forces. This situation has rarely received direct acknowledgement in Ireland. On the contrary, existing State policies in the field of economic development have actively assisted the transfer of control of the economy to external forces whose 'modus operandi' is not determined by the needs or aspirations of the Irish people. There

is a moral and legal obligation upon the State to retain powers that will allow it to act for the good of the people. Successive administrations have engaged in political and economic initiatives that have increasingly inhibited the State's ability to act in this manner.

These Statements must not be taken as a rather harsh critique of the European Community. On the contrary, they implicitly recognise the right of the Commission as guardian of the Treaties of Rome to further before all else the cause of European Union. On the other hand, the Statements should be seen as explicit criticism of Ireland's equivocal attitude to European Union. The European Community has been good to Ireland but for its own purposes. Has Ireland, however, been good to Europe and to itself by avoiding an open and candid examination of its political and economic future within the 'New Europe'?

In Ireland, one is continually frustrated by the pretence of being a sovereign, independent, neutral nation-State and a card carrying fully paid member of the European Community. We talk incessantly about 'sense of place' and 'national' identity and yet pursue pathways that transform with frightening rapidity all that surrounds us. We are a member of a Community but have never asked why? To a great degree we are "pretend Europeans" and possess a superficial understanding of our Stated commitment to a Union of the States of Europe.

This situation must be reviewed and remedied if we are to develop from within the Community. Ireland joined the Community because it was weak. A stagnant industrial base, dependance on Britain for our exports, the adoption of liberal trading principles and a new commitment to foreign direct investment compelled us to enter. For its time the decision to join was a brave one and one clearly motivated by complex forces that reflected the country's strengths and weaknesses, conflicts and contradictions. Economic necessity pushed us into Europe. Financial transfers and the strong irreversibility that surrounds the process of integration have kept us there since.

Today, however, conditions have changed. The present Community is one in which political forces and political objectives have become more explicit. The desire to create a strong, unified, Pan European homeland has become more intense. This desire has spawned a new, less ambivalent 'philosophy' of integration in Europe where the final objectives are no longer concealed from view but openly expressed. There is a new unity of thought and action, word and deed.

In Ireland things are different. Seventeen years of membership do not seem to have resulted in the creation of a new 'philosophy' of membership.

The real political and economic consequences of our membership remain neglected for short-term financial gain. We have retained a strong interest in the 'economics' of integration while ignoring their instrumental function. As Alain Minc has pointed out "our passion for Europe has all the symptoms of a psychoanalytical transfer. We expect a European miracle will save us from making needed national efforts " Minc.1988). Ireland's passion for Europe and 1992 remains narrow and undiscerning, a hostage to structural funds and sheep grants.

The so-called 'realists' among you will doubtless condemn this paper as naive, an argument for closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. You may well be right! Worrying about Ireland's 'philosophy' of membership may be superfluous. I hope not. If anything, this paper is an expression of regret. Regret that stems from the growing realisation that membership of the Community may have provided safe anchorage for the old sins and the old sinners and sorrow that the country is not trying to fashion for itself a new sense of purpose, identity and direction from within the Community. Regrettably Ireland is slowly committing itself to a Europe that will allow it to preserve the consensus to do nothing about its past, its present or its future?

REFERENCES

Hallstein, W. EEC Commission Press Release, May 22, 1961

Holland, S. Uncommon Market, The Macmillan Press Ltd., London, 1980.