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PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IRELAND

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The purpose of this report is to take stock of Irish public opinion *vis à vis* the European Union in the wake of the second Lisbon referendum and in the light of the ongoing economic crisis, with a specific focus on Irish and European public opinion in autumn 2009.

The report, fieldwork for which was conducted in Ireland between 30th October and 15th November, updates previous reports in this series to autumn 2009.

The response to the economic crisis

The full extent of the impact of the economic crisis on public opinion and the contrast between the Irish and European experiences can be seen in the proportion of Irish people saying that the economic situation was “good”. In the Irish case, this crashed from 77 to three per cent between autumn 2007 and autumn 2009. The corresponding fall in the European average was from 50 to 23 per cent.

The post Celtic Tiger outlook on the economy is not, however, all Celtic gloom. The evaluation of personal or household financial situation in Ireland was very high (80 per cent or over) at the peak of the Celtic Tiger economy and has indeed fallen substantially (to 53 per cent in autumn 2009). However the fall is not catastrophic. Ireland is just 11 points adrift of the European average and seventh from the bottom of the EU ranking. Life satisfaction in Ireland dipped fractionally in autumn 2009 but is still at a highly positive 85 per cent. This is ahead of the EU average by seven percentage points.

To sum up: in the face of the worst economic crisis in more than one hundred years, the Irish public are fully cognisant of the extent of the problem. However, for many, indeed for a majority, their individual/household financial situation remains good and they seem largely unperturbed in terms of their satisfaction with the life they lead. Thus, despite the economic crisis, the underlying public opinion conditions in which the second Lisbon referendum took place may not have been as unfavourable as they might have seemed at first sight.

Attitudes to membership of the EU

Turning to basic trends in attitudes to EU membership as a good or a bad thing, the autumn 2009 figures show a slight expansion of the gap between the EU27 average and the Irish rating on the “membership good” variable. This puts Ireland third from the top of the EU ranking, making it in fact indistinguishable from the result for Luxembourg and the Netherlands

However, a question concerning the image of the EU shows a degree of convergence of Irish and EU27 attitudes. This is due mainly to a fall in positive Irish responses to this question since autumn 2007

Trust

Irish levels of trust in EU institutions (Commission, Parliament, Court, Council and ECB) are generally between 50 and 60 per cent and tend to be somewhat above the EU27 average. Trust in the national governments presents a different picture. Irish and EU27 trust in the national government tends to lie in the range of 30 to 40% rather than in the range of 50 to 60%, as is generally the case for the EU institutions. Irish trust in the national government only exceeds EU27 trust in national government up to spring 2006; thereafter, they are the same up to autumn 2008, after which Irish trust in national government falls substantially, ending up at

15 per cent in autumn 2009 and leaving the Irish level of trust in national government some 14 percentage points below the European norm.

Political commentary in Ireland, particularly in the present circumstances, tends to assume that Ireland suffers from uniquely and persistently low levels of trust in government and politics. Accordingly, it should be emphasised that Irish levels of trust were more often than not higher than, or at least equal to, levels found in the member states of the EU as a whole and that it was only in spring 2009 that Ireland began to fall below the EU27 average.

A similar observation applies to trends in trust in political parties. Yes, trust in Irish political parties is low (between 20 and 30 per cent) but the Irish level of trust has tended to be 5 to 10 percentage points higher than the EU27 average. The difference was only reversed in autumn 2009 and then only by a small margin (3 percentage points).

Support for some of the fundamental policies of the EU.

Recent trend data on Irish support for monetary union, a common foreign policy and further enlargement of the Union, show that Irish support for monetary union remained rock solid both before and during the crisis. This is in contrast with attitudes to a common foreign policy and to enlargement, which showed considerable fluctuation.

Source of effective action

At the onset of the current crisis, Irish people looked in particular to the United States, making it, at 28 per cent, the most frequently cited “institution best able to take effective action against the effects of the economic crisis”. The next most frequently cited institutions were the G20 and the EU (20 and 19 per cent respectively), with national government bringing up the rear at 11 per cent.

Autumn 2009 showed quite a different scenario—the US was down 13 points, the G20 was down 12 points and the Irish government was up 18 points. The rate of mention of the European Union was more or less unchanged (up 2)

Thus, as the debate came to focus on the design of the National Asset Management Agency as the mechanism for dealing with the banking crisis and on the December budget designed to deal with the fiscal and competitiveness issues, many among the Irish public came to recognise that there was no fairy godmother out there and that much of what had to be done had to be done by Ireland itself.

Climate Change

In common with much of the EU, Ireland gives a low priority to the environment in its list of important issues facing the country. In the circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that, at 2%, the salience of the environmental issue lags some way behind the economic situation in general (50%) and unemployment in particular (61%) in Ireland.

Increasing prioritisation of economics over the environment can be seen in the trade-off Irish respondents make between the two. In the most recent Eurobarometer surveys, there has been a sharp increase in the proportion of respondents prioritising economic growth over the environment, with a corresponding decline in the proportion favouring environmental protection over

the economy. In both cases, this shift in priority has occurred at a faster pace in Ireland than in the EU as a whole

When asked about the role of the EU in meeting global challenges such as climate change and terrorism, Irish respondents are the least enthusiastic in the Union. Only 47% of Irish respondents agreed that the EU is indispensable in meeting such challenges, a substantial distance behind Greece, Luxembourg (both 85%), Belgium, Germany, or Cyprus (all 83%).

In general, it would appear at the moment that, while there is some awareness of the challenges posed by climate change in Ireland, economic problems are of much more immediate concern, leading to a less than whole-hearted acceptance of the need for a concerted EU response to climate-change issues.

Knowledge of the EU

The political culture of European integration is not just about likes and dislikes; it is also about knowledge of the EU. The proportion of Irish people who feel they understand how the EU works hovers just below 40 per cent, below the European average by a margin of about 4 or 5 percentage points

Ranking the EU27 countries from high to low in terms of subjective knowledge puts Ireland in the same rank as the EU27 average and in about 20th position— ahead of some long-standing members of the EU (Italy, the UK, Spain, Portugal and France) but well behind some of the newer member states.

On a scale of objective knowledge of the EU, Ireland diverges significantly from the EU average, with only 31 per cent of Irish respondents being able to answer at least two of the three questions concerned.

As with the measure of subjective knowledge, there appears to be a substantial correlation between the level of objective knowledge and positive/negative images of the EU. Thus, 76 per cent of those who could answer all three questions had a positive image of the EU. This proportion fell to 47 per cent among those who could not answer any of the questions

Low levels of knowledge are also correlated with high neutral/don't know responses. This suggests that there is a real possibility that increased knowledge and understanding could have a positive effect on people's image of the EU. What seems to be at stake is moving people from a neutral to a positive attitude and not the more difficult task of moving them from negative to positive.

Determinants of the image of the EU

Looking at the matter first in terms of demographics, a number of occupational status variables are related to image of the Union. The variables in question are having a manual occupation, being unemployed, being a student or working in the home. Relative to the professional and managerial group, each of these factors contributes to the probability of having a negative image of the EU.

However, when attitudes are included in the model, it becomes apparent that the operative factors are not the demographics, all of which become statistically insignificant. Instead, the image of the EU is affected (in a negative direction) by having no trust in the Irish government and by the belief that one's current household financial situation is bad. Interestingly, personal economic situation and not the general situation of the economy is the factor that has a significant

effect on EU image. All three European factors have positive effects on EU image. A positive image is fostered by having a supportive attitude to EMU and the Euro and by having high levels of subjective and objective knowledge.