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IRELAND AND BRITAIN IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

EXTRACTS FROM

the Sean Lemass Memorial Lecture delivered by
Dr. Patrick J. Hillery, Vice-President of the
Commission of the European Communities, at the
University of Exeter on Monday, 1 March, 1976,
at 5.00 p.m.*

*Sean Lemass was Irish Prime Minister from 1959 to 1966.

THE IMAGE OF IRELAND:

For Ireland, as for other small countries, the best protection in a world of free trade influenced largely by the interplay of the political and economic interests of major trading blocs lies in membership of one of these blocs. Membership of the Community offered that protection - and more besides. While the Community is a massive trading power, its unique institutional arrangements ensure that the general interest of the Community must of necessity take account of any essential interest of one of its members - large or small.

In political and institutional terms Ireland has, therefore, taken to the Community like a duck to water. This was seen particularly clearly in the course of the Irish presidency of the Council of Ministers during the first half of last year. During those six months the Community saw the signing of the Lomé Convention, the completion of what the British Government called its re-negotiation, and progress in important discussions on US-Europe issues, Euro-Arab dialogue and Mediterranean problems. The Irish presidency's contribution to these advances was the subject of extensive and favourable comment.

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In addition to raising the prestige of Ireland and the Community in many parts of the world, the success of the Presidency had, I believe, a number of important but less tangible results. Firstly, from an Irish viewpoint, it gave meaning to the sense in which even the smallest member state is an equal in the Community's Council of Ministers, thus boosting the new sense of independence, which membership had brought. It had the incidental value of demonstrating the merits and potential of the Irish public service when stimulated to perform at its best.

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In a wider perspective, the success of the Presidency underlined the value to the Community, particularly in relation to dealings with Third countries, of a member which is not identified with any military alliance or with economic or financial vested interests overseas. Thus it is relatively easy for Ireland to define its national interest and to speak of the Community interest in the language of "objective" contemporary analysis. This is quite different, for example, from the concept of national interest found in the major developed countries where thinking is inevitably influenced by external commitments and defence obligations. This brings me naturally to look at the image of Britain as a member of the Community.

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THE IMAGE OF BRITAIN:

Because the psychological inter-play associated with the enlargement of the Community has not yet totally disappeared Britain is still seen by many as an awkward member of the Community. The original decision by the British Government to join the Community must have been a difficult one and although the renegotiation and Referendum process tended to underline the difficulties, it must now be said that the result has ensured a general acceptance throughout the Community of British membership as the natural and rational development of historic and contemporary relationships.

Britain's accession to the enlarged Community in 1973 seemed clearly to lack that sense of "full-hearted consent" which the then Prime Minister, Edward Heath, rightly thought to be essential to the success of such a traumatic venture. With the sweeping Referendum result, in the words of the present Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, "the historic decision has been made."

The successful realisation of this was made credible by the difficulties facing the British economy and the deteriorating economic situation generally which lent some justification to the case for an adjustment in the mechanism by which the UK's contribution to the Community's Budget is fixed. It also owed a lot to the fact that the other member states and the Community Institutions all clearly wanted Britain to remain in the Community and were prepared - even at some cost to the development of the Community - not to do or say anything that might have a negative effect on a situation which it was recognised the British Government were handling with considerable political mastery.

A factor in the Community's positive approach to British problems was the widespread belief that once the Referendum was out of the way the UK Government would be a committed member of the European Council and Council of Ministers and would adjust accordingly the rather rugged profile of its contributions there.

These are early days yet, but already some observers have expressed disappointment that the expected adjustment of the British profile has not taken place. I do not share in this surprise or disappointment. It does not tally with either my personal experience or my general view of things.

My own direct experience of meetings of the Council of Ministers to deal with social questions has been that the British Government representatives are often among the more actively progressive voices whose support the Commission has welcomed. I have also valued the trade union contribution to the employment debate. If there have been real problems elsewhere, I believe they are simply due to the fact that Britain's contribution to the Community takes account of its domestic political and economic situation in much the same way as the stance of any of the other member states does.

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The debate on devolution within the UK was clearly fuelled by the Referendum campaign. North Sea oil was another political catalyst, affecting not just the arguments for and against devolution but also assessments of Britain's economic strength or weakness and British attitudes towards energy policy - areas of debate which are crucial to EEC membership.

Agreement on arrangements for direct elections to the European Parliament - scheduled for 1978 - may also raise more fundamental arguments in Britain than in other member states. This I think is not because of reluctance or bloody-mindedness but because British Parliamentary democracy is often more virile and meaningful than elsewhere. It is going to be difficult for a Parliament involved in a debate on internal devolution to agree how best to arrange the British contribution to a Community Parliament.

One hopes nevertheless that this can be done on schedule. Direct elections will be an important catalyst for the future of the Community and the contribution of Westminster Parliamentarians to the present European Parliament has already been judged by many to be among the more important positive contributions of British membership to the Communities. ./.

Particularly bearing in mind the sequence of political and economic difficulties experienced since enlargement, I think I should also record in this section of my address the important contributions Sir Christopher Soames and George Thomson have made to the development of the Community. Despite the preoccupations caused by the worst recession since the war, Sir Christopher has played a key role in increasing the cohesion of the Community in its external relations to an extent that its reputation has never stood higher in the world arena. Mr. Thomson's achievement, in the same difficult situation, has been to pioneer a breakthrough in regional policy with the creation of two valuable Community instruments, the European Regional Development Fund and the Regional Policy Committee. The previous experience of both men enabled them to contribute a special understanding to the Commission's preparation for the negotiation of the Lomé Convention between the Community and forty-six African, Caribbean and Pacific countries which has paved the way for a new type of relationship between industrialised and developing countries.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The type of conflict we find within the Community, in Northern Ireland, seems tragically intractable. Being generally regarded as outside Community competence, it has not up to the present been given any consideration within the Community framework and I do not therefore propose to include any analysis of the problem in this particular lecture. May I, however, put on record two questions I find I ask myself?

Could the European experience of successfully transforming confrontation into conciliation find an echo in the thinking of the people of Northern Ireland? Despite many smouldering hatreds the peoples of France and Germany found it possible to work together in the post-war re-construction of Europe and the building of the Community. Can we be justified in feeling that any of today's calls for reconciliation are really confronted by a deeper intransigence than that which others have faced and overcome?

STRENGTHENING THE COMMUNITY

Although Ireland and Britain are both well on in life and are together in the Community they should not - and cannot - expect to see eye to eye on everything. In this European relationship however, I believe it is in the Community's interest, in the mutual interest of Britain and Ireland, and in their separate interests, that they should make common cause for the deepening of the Community concept laid down in the Treaties and developed by Commission initiative.

In the current debate on the future progress of the Community towards European Union, which has been stimulated by the publication of the Tindemans Report and the decision in principle to proceed with the further enlargement of the Community, there has been a strand of argument suggesting that the original Treaty objectives and evolving Community Institutions are an inadequate base for a European response to current problems.

I believe that the fundamental weakness in this argument is the implied premise that the existing framework has been pushed to the limit and found wanting. This is far from being the case.

When Ireland, Britain and Denmark acceded to the Community, everyone was quite clear that the Community had by no means completed its evolution. Indeed the most important part of the Hague Summit Communiqué of December 1969, which gave the go-ahead to the enlargement negotiations, was its definition of what would be required if the Common Market was to make the transition to the final stage of the European Community.

Enlargement itself has been among the factors inhibiting this transition - particularly because it was so long before British membership could be regarded as final. It is in recognition of this fact that the Commission has insisted in its recent Opinion on the Greek application for membership that it is "essential for the Community to make significant progress in its own internal development in the period leading up to enlargement."

A real difficulty in the Community at present is the lack of any political will to achieve that genuine transfer of resources necessary to ensure "harmonious development." Popular caricature pictures the ideal transfer of resources as a straight subsidy from German taxpayers to the unemployed of other countries. It is time to kill this caricature.

Everyone now recognises that there are transnational factors in the present recession and that many areas of unemployment can only be helped by a major re-structuring of industry and investment. I believe that the degree of interdependence between Community economies is already such that a return to real and lasting growth in any member State will depend on the Community's capacity to reduce those differences between the various regions which, if left as they are, must rule out the prospect of stable development. This process of narrowing the gaps within the Community must not be made the sole responsibility of the German taxpayer, or indeed of Community taxpayers as a group. It must flow from a common view of the future acceptable to all the member states and their peoples and be a matter of Community responsibility in which all sectors share.

Britain and Ireland, for example, who of necessity must be increasingly large recipients of Community support, will have to reciprocate by demonstrating their preparedness to use that support with energy, imagination and integrity, ^{and} by their preparedness to meet their own Community commitments. Whether member States see themselves as donors or recipients, I believe that the effort involved in working towards Community objectives in the way I have described is not only the most likely way of returning to a steady pattern of growth but that the demands of its discipline will help to create that sense of shared responsibility, between countries, and between social partners which, as I have indicated, must be another essential feature of future stability. May I add however that this sense of shared responsibility should not lead any member State to give up that sense of responsibility for its own fate which is an essential part of nationhood.

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CONCLUSION:

The realisation of its founders' objectives is still a real option for the Community. I believe it to be the option chosen by Irish and British voters in their massive vote for Europe. These voters believed in a Europe strong enough and prosperous enough to help the most needy at home/and abroad/ - and to be less dependent on the United States without reducing its capacity to face any form of external challenge.

That must continue to be the Community's aspiration and it is certainly an aspiration which Sean Lemass would have endorsed. He believed in fighting for the right to take on responsibility and that, given a measure of responsibility, it is up to oneself to make the best of it. His contribution was to move a politically independent Ireland away from the shadow of economic dependence on Britain. Ireland, as an equal with Britain, has a responsibility with Britain in helping to chase away the shadows threatening a Community experiment which deserves to be tested through all its stages before it is diluted or abandoned.

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