

EUROPE

## Don't know? Vote no!

BY ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Ireland's "no" vote had little to do with the EU. But one way or another the Treaty will be enacted

The Irish referendum result—like the French and Dutch results in 2005—was not a rejection of the treaty of Lisbon. The outcome tells us almost nothing about views of Europe. Instead, it tells us a lot about referendums.

Polling evidence suggests that the Irish public, as in France and the Netherlands, overwhelmingly support the substantive content of the Lisbon treaty. (The only real controversy in Ireland was over small-country "voice" in voting weights and the number of commissioners.) This is why every political party in Ireland, except for one wing of Sinn Féin, supported it.

The treaty essentially ratified the status quo. It contained no grand ideas—nothing like the single currency underlying Maastricht in 1991 or the single market that preceded it in 1986. The major elements were a slightly strengthened co-ordinating apparatus for foreign policy, a rebalancing of voting weights, an elected president to replace the revolving one and carefully circumscribed majority voting in a few areas like sport and energy.

So why did the Irish reject the treaty? Referendums are poor indicators of public sentiment—particularly on issues of secondary concern to voters. They are easily captured by small groups armed with cash, a website and intensely committed supporters. In every European country, this core of Eurosceptic opposition to the treaty is found on the extremist fringes of the right and the left. To win referendums, however, such extremists must capture centrist voters. To do that, they have to

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direct debate away from, in this case, the treaty of Lisbon's banal content. Three tactics assure their success.

*Exploit voter ignorance.* Nearly a third of Irish "no" voters told pollsters that they opposed the treaty because they were ignorant of its content. One popular slogan ran: "If you don't know, vote no!" The very modesty of the Lisbon treaty's content worked against its passage. It is quite rational for the average person to know and care little about Europe. Just compare the importance of Kosovo recognition or chemical industry standards with bread and butter national issues like tax, education, health and immigration. Even in Britain, only 4 per cent of citizens consider anything connected with Europe an "important" issue.

*Spread misinformation.* In a context of ignorance, opponents can misstate the content of the treaty faster than their misstatements can be refuted. The major Irish instrument was Libertas, an anti-treaty group funded by anti-tax millionaire Declan Ganley. (Ganley, a militant opponent of the common agri-

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cultural policy, posed as a friend to Irish farmers long enough to secure half their votes for his campaign.) Libertas and other such groups specialise in spreading untruths by internet: that the EU would be able to imprison three-year olds for educational purposes, reinstate the death penalty, legalise abortion, conscript Irish into a European army, impose taxes by majority vote, force in floods of immigrants, undermine worker's rights—all hogwash, of course.

Consider foreign and defence policy. Opponents of Lisbon skilfully made it seem as if nearly a century of Dublin's neutrality was threatened. In fact, the treaty simply seconded a small subset of national diplomats into a modest European diplomatic corps, permitted some very circumscribed voting and consolidated the existing EU bureaucracy under a single co-ordinating position worthy of Tony Blair rather than Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy

chief. Any EU defence decision would remain unanimous, and would have to be pursued using coalitions of willing national forces rather than any "EU army." (Were that not enough, Ireland received an additional legal opt-out, explicitly recognising its constitutional provision on neutrality.) And since neither defence nor foreign policy is an "exclusive" EU matter, member states remain free to pursue unilateral policies, even contrary to EU goals.

*Make the most of political discontent.* The main thing working to the advantage of opponents is that, in the absence of genuine public concern about Europe, voters use EU referendums to vent their frustration with national issues. We do not yet have detailed data on the Irish vote, but in the 2005 French and Dutch referendums, not only did no one vote on anything to do with the EU constitution but less than a third voted on any concrete issue to do with the EU at all. The fact that the sitting Irish government was undergoing an embarrassing leadership transition, with Bertie Ahern stepping down to avoid corruption charges, surely damaged pro-treaty forces.

The irony of the Irish backlash is that it takes place at a time when Europe has never been more successful and secure. Over the past decade, the EU has expanded from 15 to 27 members, introduced a single currency, acted in a unified manner to help resolve disputes in places from Lebanon to Kosovo, extended the Schengen border-free zone to much of eastern Europe and rekindled its economic growth. EU enlargement has emerged as the most cost-effective tool for spreading peace and security in the western world. One need only glance at Iraq to see Europe's relative virtues.

The current impasse is the result of a decision taken in 2001 to cast minor institutional reforms as a grand constitutional document. The invocation of idealistic Euro-constitutional rhetoric straight out of the 1950s federalist movement led only to disinterest, disbelief and eventually distrust among voters—who couldn't understand why such a fuss was being made about modest proposals. The resulting PR disaster was a self-inflicted wound by European politicians.

But sooner or later the modest content of the treaty will be enacted, one way or another. Euro-pragmatists have the upper hand in every capital. They are already speaking of various complex legal expedients. Eighteen members have already ratified the document and the other eight, even Britain, are likely to do so. They will then move ahead on foreign policy co-operation and institutional reform, with or without the Irish. It will not be as clean as it might have been with Dublin's support, but as the process of enlargement demonstrates, the EU succeeds by muddling through.

**TERRORISM**

## Is Bin Laden losing?

BY JASON BURKE

Al Qaeda has not experienced a sudden slump in support. It has been in decline for many years

In May, two articles by western experts on al Qaeda suggested that Bin Laden's terrorist organisation might be in sharp decline. Both were meticulously researched and received wide attention. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, research fellows at New York University, and Lawrence Wright of the *New Yorker* are all authoritative observers of Islamic militancy. The article by the former pair, in the *New Republic*, focused on disillusion among ex-militants with the strategy adopted over the last ten years by the al Qaeda leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. This discontent, they said, was the result partly of the strategy's failure to achieve its aims and partly the appalling effects of the violence it has entailed, and they linked it to a broader decline in the popularity of al Qaeda and its ideology across both the Islamic world and immigrant communities in the west.

Wright's article focused more

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closely on Egypt, which continues to provide a disproportionate number of the key figures of the al Qaeda leadership. Wright told the back story to the recent rejection of violent jihad by one of al Qaeda's original strategists, the imprisoned Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, aka Dr al-Fadl. Al-Fadl, from his cell, has written a book explaining why his previous works were misguided.

All three writers are right to speak of the divisions within al Qaeda and a decline in its popularity. But some of the excitement about the two articles has been based on the false idea that al Qaeda has suddenly split or that there has been a recent slump in its appeal. In fact, the various elements of the al Qaeda phenomenon—the hardcore leadership, a network of networks, the autonomous “home-grown” actors and the ideology—have never been very unified. Al Qaeda's bid to raise the “Islamic masses” in a general revolt against what they see as apostate powers in the middle east and the west has been losing momentum for many years.

This lack of unity has been evident since the foundation of al Qaeda in the late 1980s. Ending this disunity was in fact one of the main aims of the founders. Afghan veterans of the period enjoy relating the various spats that divided the “Arabs,” and al-Fadl was a bitter enemy of al-Zawahiri even 30 years ago. Things failed to get much better in the 1990s. Groups from Algeria to Indonesia rejected Bin Laden's offers of logistical aid in return for allegiance, focusing instead on local struggles. In 1999 in Afghanistan, I obtained a fatwa that Bin Laden himself had got from Abu Qatada, a radical scholar then based in London (and who has recently been released from custody in Britain), to defend himself against a rival's unlikely criticism that he was insufficiently radical. And then there was 9/11, which was deeply controversial, even among the dozen or so leaders of al Qaeda. In the aftermath, the ranks closed behind Bin Laden, but not for long. The brutal Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq had a rancorous and competitive relationship with the older and better-known Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. The Taliban have also maintained their distance from the “Arabs,” despite some overlap.

What is striking in al-Fadl's doctrinal rethinking is not so much the technicalities of how to behave as a guest in an “enemy nation,” but rather the simple realism. The fight in Afghanistan should be continued, he argues, while the one in Iraq should be dropped because only the former will succeed. But a realist strand in radical thinking has been growing for some time too. In his most recent work, *Terreur et Martyr*, the French scholar Gilles Kepel describes how the Spanish/Syrian thinker and jihadi activist known as Abu Musab al-Suri (now in American custody) started questioning al-Zawahiri's strategy long ago, arguing that far from launching militants on the path to eventual victory, attacking the “far enemy” of the west rather than the “near enemy” of despotic, apostate local middle eastern regimes meant that he and his kind now have their backs to

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the wall, hunted all over the world.

Which brings us to Muslim public opinion. Bergen/Cruickshank and Wright are almost certainly right that there has been a recent further drop in support for the core al Qaeda leadership among even militant Muslims. Yet the past extent of that support has often been exaggerated. I have travelled frequently through the middle east and southwest Asia in the last five years, and it is clear to me that most people, despite deep-rooted anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism and anti-semitism—and a profound distrust of corrupt local governments—have not heeded the al Qaeda call to arms. As Bergen and Cruickshank stress, the reason for this is simple: the package offered by militants is not attractive. Living under sharia is at best the least bad alternative, as it was for the Afghans who welcomed the Taliban in the early 1990s after years of war and anarchy. And there is a clear correlation between exposure to the reality of violence and a drop in support for violence. The most fiery militants I have interviewed have usually been those