

THE IRISH CHURCHES AND THE EU REFERENDUM
A DISCUSSION PAPER

*PREPARED BY THE EUROPEAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
OF THE IRISH COUNCIL OF CHURCHES*



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— *ICC European
Affairs Committee*

This paper has been drafted by the European Affairs Committee of the Irish Council of Churches to provide members of the churches in Ireland with a range of arguments to stimulate discussion ahead of the upcoming referendum on UK membership of the EU. The committee believes that the arguments point to the desirability of the UK staying within the EU, but appreciates that many Christians hold a different view, and is keen that these issues should be comprehensively explored in the coming weeks, ahead of the vote in June.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE EU REFERENDUM ALL ABOUT?

The ‘in-out’ Referendum on UK membership of the European Union will be held on Thursday 23rd June, 2016. The pledge to hold the Referendum was contained in the Conservative Party’s 2015 General Election manifesto and was based on a proposal by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, in a speech in London in January 2013. He argued that the British people had not been given a say on successive EU Treaties with only one previous reference to the voters – in 1975 when membership was endorsed by a comfortable majority. He went on to state that his Party would seek a mandate ‘to negotiate a new settlement with our European partners’, which would be put to the people ‘with a very simple in-out choice.’ In the Referendum, UK voters will be asked to opt to ‘remain’ in the EU or to ‘leave.’

Those in favour of the ‘leave’ option to date have argued, in particular, that outside the EU the UK would be better able to control immigration, better positioned to conduct its own trade negotiations, and freed from what they believe to be unnecessary EU regulations and bureaucracy. They argue that this would lead to greater prosperity for the UK. Those in favour of remaining in the EU have, in particular, argued that leaving the EU would risk the UK’s prosperity, diminish its influence over world affairs, and result in trade barriers not only between the UK and the EU, but also between the the UK and any other trading blocs that have trade agreements with the EU.

There are many aspects to the Referendum, but it may be useful to point to some areas which would see changes if there was an exit. The decision to ‘leave’ would trigger a lengthy and difficult negotiation on the precise terms of the ‘divorce’. There would be much uncertainty about the eventual outcome which would be a matter of concern to businesses, workers and investors. Examples of some of the concerns are that:

- Some jobs linked to trade with the EU could be lost. There would certainly be less agricultural trade between the UK and the EU, unless the UK decided to continue to apply the EU’s common agricultural policy, which is improbable.
- Changes might be anticipated in many areas now covered by EU rules and regulations such as provision of refunds or other remedies for consumers: for instance, in cases involving defective products, unfair contract terms or flights that are delayed or cancelled. However, these matters would be subject to negotiation and agreement.
- Workers’ rights – in areas such as maternity and paternity leave, holiday pay and in the event of mass redundan-

cies – might be the subject of pressure from business groups to relax these long-established EU standards.

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN UNION?

It is first worth reminding ourselves what the EU is. It traces its origins to the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Economic Community (EEC), formed in 1951 and 1958 respectively by the 'Inner Six' countries of Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, alongside Jean Monnet, an advisor to the French government, led the formation of the ECSC with the Schuman Declaration in May 1950. This deal to pool coal and steel resources of the aforementioned six countries would become the foundation of the current European Union. Through this economic action the founders sought to build a strong economic and social basis which would significantly reduce the possibility of future European conflict.

Over the course of the past 60 years, the EU has grown from its six founding states – France, West Germany, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands – into its current membership of 28. This process of enlargement has taken place gradually, through a number of accessions of new member states. The first of these took place in 1973, when Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom joined. This was followed by the accession of Greece in 1981 and both Spain and Portugal in 1986. With the end of the Cold War in 1990, East Germany was welcomed into the union, as part of a reunified Germany. A few years later, in 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden joined the organisation which had, since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, become officially known as the European Union. 1st May 2004 saw a major enlargement of the EU, with the accession of eight former communist states (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lith-

uania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), as well as Cyprus and Malta. These countries were followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, and Croatia in 2013. As of January 2015, the population of the EU was about 508.2 million people.

These states agree to pool sovereignty in relation to those things mutually agreed by treaty of all member states. Core to the EU is a single market which allows free movement of goods, capital, services and people between member states. The single currency unites 19 of the 28 Member States, and requires significant co-ordination of their economic, budgetary and fiscal policies. Other key EU policies cover areas such as Agriculture, Employment and Social Policy, Trade and Commercial Policy, Common Foreign and Security Policy, Justice and Home Affairs, Energy and Climate Change, Environment, Education and Research, although the degree to which power is shared within the EU varies very significantly in the different areas.

Although member states are independent, they agree to trade and cooperate under the terms of the Treaties agreed by them. The Union system involves the interaction of permanent Institutions: the European Council of Heads of Government; the Council of Ministers; the directly elected European Parliament; the European Commission, the Union's executive; and the European Court of Justice.

CORE VALUES OF THE EU

The European Union's overall goal is based on the aim of securing economic prosperity, along with a consensus on core values, across all EU member states. The EU is thus defined as being 'founded on the values of respect for human dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the

rights of persons belonging to minorities¹, and recognising that the Member States should be characterised by ‘pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men’. Any European State wishing to become a member of the Union must respect these principles. These core values are then supplemented by a list of more detailed operational objectives:

- an area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers ;
- an internal market where competition is free and undistorted;
- sustainable development, based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment;
- the promotion of scientific and technological advance;
- the combating of social exclusion and discrimination, and the promotion of social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child;
- the promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among Member States.

It is clear that while significant advances have been made in relation to many of these operational objectives, nevertheless they must be still regarded as incomplete in several respects, and their full realisation therefore remains (and will perhaps always be) a work in progress. Those that campaign on behalf of the ‘Remain’ option would strongly argue that working to improve or reform the operation of the EU can only be done from within.

From a Christian perspective, the stated Core Values of the EU can be seen as being in line with the essential Christian belief in the equality and inherent integrity of every person, and their entitlement to equal respect and treatment. Where the churches might take issue is in relation to the details of the actual implementation of certain objectives. For example, has too much focus been given to the purely economic aspects of the market economy, and insufficient priority to the stated objective of working towards the realisation of a social market economy, not just an economic one? This can potentially lead to a lack of adequate attention to those social issues in society which churches would regard as vitally important.

It is important to acknowledge that many in the ‘Leave’ campaign are not necessarily against the values or, indeed, some of the operational objectives of the European Union. Rather, what they do oppose is the argument that the pooling of sovereignty and decision-making, in particular about the economy and currency, is the best way to achieve these, and assert that this produces too much political and economic inflexibility across European society and economy, which they believe will ultimately damage the achievement of objectives.

IMPLICATIONS OF MEMBERSHIP OF THE EU

Since the European Union is a work in progress, rather than a finished project, it therefore always needs to review and change, if necessary, in light of circumstances. Whilst news coverage tends to focus on the current difficulties of the European Union, credit for its many achievements are seldom highlighted. By contrast, suggested quick fixes from the media or vested interests for complex problems will often be to the detriment of patiently negotiated treaties. This should

1 Available at http://europa.eu/scadplus/constitution/objectives_en.htm

be borne in mind when the Union is ridiculed for its alleged bureaucracy: the rules were created by the member states precisely to protect both their own and the common interest.

Above all, the Union has contributed significantly to the peace, prosperity and stability of a continent ravaged by two world wars. Beginning with the formation of the Coal and Steel Community in 1950, which removed the threat of new arms races by placing coal and steel production under a single authority governed by treaty, the Union has grown from 6 to 28 member states, clearly demonstrating the value of EU membership to so many countries. Besides preventing war by mutual interdependence, the Union has successfully integrated the former Iron Curtain states of central and Eastern Europe within its political, legal and democratic structures – an enormous achievement. Other important developments (despite the need to improve or modify aspects) include the completion of the internal market (1993), the introduction of the Euro as a common currency in 19 member states, common agricultural policies, the European Central Bank, a common passport, free movement of citizens, goods and services, educational equivalence and exchange. On the wider international front, while the employment of the Union's 'soft power' has its limitations in international relations, nevertheless it remains a powerful (and non-violent) instrument in situations where military posturing and intervention is counter-productive at best (and of concern to Christians). The EU is also the leader in policies and funded programmes for sustainable development and poverty elimination around the world.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF AN EU WITHDRAWAL FOR THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

Given the long history of socio-cultural and economic relations between the UK and Ireland, the latter will be one of the Member States most effected in the case of a UK withdrawal from the EU.

- The biggest commercial implications could be felt in the area of trade and energy. With the UK being Ireland's largest trading partner by far (43% of Irish exports in 2012) and Ireland importing 93% of its gas and 89% of its oil products from the UK the future of the Irish economy would heavily depend on the conditions of a withdrawal agreement which would have to be signed before the UK could leave the EU.
- More pessimistic analysts expect a reduction in trade between the UK and Ireland of 20%.
- Another big concern amongst the Irish population is that a new EU-UK border between the north and south of Ireland could mean a restriction to the free movement of people between the two parts of the island, which would also mean the end of the Common Travel Area.
 - Speaking in the Dáil on 21st April, Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Charlie Flanagan noted that *'...the border's destiny would not be determined by the sole wishes of the Irish and British governments. The outcome would be the result of a wider negotiation involving all of the EU and therefore no-one can say with certainty that nothing will change with the border if the UK votes to leave.'*²

² Press Release from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 21st April 2016, accessible at <https://www.dfa.ie/news-and-media/press-releases/press-release-archive/2016/april/flanagan-concerns-border-brexit/>

- A report from the UK Cabinet Office in March 2016 stated that, as regards the current border arrangements, *‘if the UK left the EU, these arrangements could be put at risk. It is not clear that the Common Travel Area could continue to operate with the UK outside the EU, and Ireland inside, in the same way that it did before both countries joined the EU in 1973.’*³
- There could be limits to the free movement of labour as UK nationals may no longer be entitled to travel freely throughout EU countries for employment. Reciprocally, Irish citizens may also experience greater difficulties in taking up a job in the UK.

For all of these consequences, however, there might also exist a possibility to find bilateral agreements which would mitigate the listed effects. The example of Switzerland (as well as Norway and Iceland) shows that a country outside the EU can negotiate individual agreements with the EU that will finally grant the country a member-like status. However, it should be clear to UK citizens that while they can benefit from the ‘*acquis communautaire*’, they do so at the cost of no longer being part of any negotiation or decision-making on said ‘*acquis*’. The UK would move from the role of an active participant to that of a passive observer.

The biggest impact for the Republic would be the loss of a political ally in many policy areas within the EU, such as trade, taxation, justice, employment and competition. For a small country like Ireland, losing a big supporter on an issue like corporation tax would be a major blow. Indeed, Ireland would have to reassess its position within the overall EU political landscape. Perhaps even more critical

³ *Alternatives to membership: possible models for the United Kingdom outside the European Union* (UK Cabinet Office, March 2016), p.12.

is the fact that UK withdrawal from the EU could lead to a political alienation between the UK and Ireland, which could have a negative impact on the peace process in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement is predicated on both Ireland and the United Kingdom being members of the EU, and the EU has also contributed substantially to the ongoing facilitation of the peace process through its unique peace and reconciliation funding programmes.

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The committee sees the EU project as analogous to the approach of ecumenical collaboration and solidarity, which the churches have chosen over denominational exclusivism. For nearly a century, the Christian churches of Europe have remained determined to pursue a future together. Perceiving ourselves as a community of churches, we strive for fellowship by seeking a deeper understanding of one another, developing a wider dialogue and building communities rooted in peace and justice. After centuries of disagreement and even conflict, the churches have seen and benefitted from the fruits of collaboration and dialogue. As an instrument of God’s will and hope for the world, embracing the aims of the EU and equally committed to the outcomes of peace, justice and solidarity, we see commitment to dialogue, not disintegration, as the only way to address differences and disagreement that have emerged concerning the EU project.

Within the larger wider context of the economic debate that is likely to frame the discourse on the referendum, it must be emphasised that it is also important for us, as Christians, to be net contributors, as well as net beneficiaries. A key perception for some advocates of withdrawal is that the United Kingdom puts more into the European Union than it gets back, in

monetary terms. However, from a Christian perspective we must bear in mind that we spend money not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of all.

Disintegration would belie the principle, which is supported by experience and social-scientific research, and bolstered by economic realities, that it is best that we pursue a common future in peace, collaboration and unity.

CONCLUSION

The UK referendum on June 23rd, 2016 will either reinforce the role of the UK as a member and decision-making partner within the EU or will initiate a period in which the UK, as a country outside the EU, having given up all elements associated with an inside member, will make decisions without having to refer to the EU.

This leaflet was drafted by the European Affairs Committee of the Irish Council of Churches for the purpose of equipping churches with the relevant information on the key aspects of this debate and its implications. The potential consequences of the referendum have been outlined and it is hoped that we will feel confident, as Christians, to engage with the impact of the result of the upcoming referendum, whatever it may be.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Church of England and the Church of Scotland are currently running a blog as a contribution to public debate in advance of the forthcoming UK referendum on continued membership of the European Union. It can be read at <http://reimaginineurope.co.uk/>

Contributors from both sides of the debate have been invited to participate, the focus being to create a platform where people can share ideas and 'disagree well'

– building on the themes around respectful dialogue.

One aspect of this blog is a series called 'Postcards From...' where people from different European contexts write in to say how the UK referendum and the outcome of a vote looks from outside the UK.

The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), has also produced some documents that seek to inform the debate. They can be accessed at the following links:

<http://www.europe-infos.eu/to-be-in-or-not-to-be-in>

<http://www.comece.eu/site/en/ourwork/pressreleases/2012/article/7752.html>

The Irish government has made it clear that the outcome of the UK referendum will have major implications for the Republic as well as for Northern Ireland, and these implications have been given detailed study in Dáithí O'Ceallaigh and Paul Gillespie, *Britain and Europe: The endgame: an Irish perspective* (published by the Institute of International and European Affairs, Dublin, 2015).

The reasons why the European Churches have a vital role to play in discussion of the future of the European Union, especially at this time of crisis in its history, are set out in an English-language pamphlet published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (www.evl.fi/eu).

ICC EUROPEAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Dr Kenneth Milne, **Committee Convenor**

Mr Robert Cochran, **Methodist Church in Ireland**

Major Stuart Dicker, **Salvation Army (Ireland Division)**

Very Rev Canon Adrian Empey, **Church of Ireland**

Margrit Grey, **Religious Society of Friends**

Dr Markus Grimmeisen, **Lutheran Church in Ireland**

Ms Maxine Judge, **Church of Ireland**

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Rev Dr Donald Watts, **Presbyterian Church in Ireland**

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