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A COLLECTIVE CHANGE OF HEART ENDORSES LISBON IN IRELAND

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A two-thirds 'Yes' majority in the Irish referendum brings the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty tantalisingly close. With a turnout of 59%, 67% of the Irish electorate voted in favour of the reform package, which now awaits two final signatures from the Czech and Polish leaders. In Ireland more than half a million people cast a No vote but only two constituencies in the north produced a majority against the treaty. The result marks a huge turnaround on the 2008, 53.4% rejection when only 10 of Ireland's 43 constituencies endorsed it. EU President José Manuel Barroso called Taoiseach (PM) Brian Cowen to congratulate him on the resounding victory and called Sunday a "great day for Europe and a great day for Ireland".

When the Irish electorate rejected the treaty in June 2008 they left many across the EU27 in bewilderment at the huge responsibility, and sway, the small island-nation appeared to be wielding over the bureaucratic giant in Brussels. And not for the first time, the Nice Treaty faced similar adversity when it was rejected in a referendum in 2001 and had to be put to a second vote the following year. As it was this weekend, the electorate had a change of heart in the twelve-month interim and Nice was passed when an increase in turnout produced a 60% vote in favour. The apparent repetition of history begs the question then; why does it take two attempts to garner sufficient consent on Europe among the Irish? In attempting to answer this question it is worth looking more closely at the make-up of the 'pro' and 'anti' Lisbon movements on the island.

In the sixteen months between the first Lisbon referendum and last Thursday's vote, the No movement perceptibly stepped up a gear. They were as active as ever in the run up to October's vote, and appeared to be sticking to their original arguments; the Treaty does not do enough to protect workers' rights, the environment or social equality. The Yes camp, assured somewhat by the growing support for the charter evinced in opinion polls, nonetheless displayed a sense of panic. Mr Cowen had flown directly to Brussels following the rejection in 2008 and managed to wring important compromises on securing a commissioner and sovereignty over the cherished corporate tax regime.

That the government was so surprised and indignant towards the original No vote in 2008 highlights the growing disparity between the political elite and the population in Ireland. After twelve years in power, a number of corruption tribunals and a tendency towards profligacy at the race course, hubris set in

among the cadre of the governing party, Fianna Fáil. The idea that a referendum on Europe could be used as a protest vote against the national government has always played a part in Irish society. The only ray of light then, is the virtue of the Irish towards forgiveness.

There was, nonetheless, a considerable uphill battle facing Lisbon proponents. A Eurobarometer survey carried out in the aftermath of the Lisbon rejection found that lack of information was the main factor in the decision to reject the treaty. The No camp continued to emphasise this information factor, advising people to reject the text if they didn't understand it. Be it neglect by the government to disseminate literature, or the disinterest on the part of the voters to inform themselves, lack of information is a particularly depressing reason for decision making in a democracy, but not peculiar to Ireland. Negative opinions on the EU throughout the region cite lack of information as a key problem. Furthermore, and before delving any deeper into the apparent recalcitrant mentality of the Irish case, it is worth remembering that the predecessor of the Lisbon Treaty, the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, was rejected by French and Dutch voters in 2005, begging the question whether the treaty would in fact be passed by a majority of the European population given the opportunity to decide.

The overriding sentiment responsible for the swell in the Yes vote in Ireland this time round, was the sense that the treaty is, in general terms, in Ireland's best interests. The attitude reflects the positive outlook in Irish society towards European integration overall - an attitude commonly linked to the benefits heaped on the country since it joined the EEC in 1973. But the picture is more complex. Ireland's 12.5 per cent corporate tax rate is largely considered responsible for the Celtic Tiger of the previous two decades and this generous overture to foreign investors has never been fully accepted by those pushing more conforming values in Brussels, most notably French President Nicolas Sarkozy. A fear of future pressures to adhere to a blanket European tax rate still makes many an Irish businessman shudder.

Moreover, the international crisis has hit Ireland hard. Unemployment has spiralled since the beginning of 2009, climbing to 12.4% this month. Meanwhile, debt continues to mount. Promises extracted from Brussels earlier this year that Ireland will retain control over its fiscal decisions contributed to the positive result on the weekend, but promises that the Lisbon Treaty will bring jobs will be the most difficult to keep. When the electorate were warned that a second rejection would bring years of economic stagnation as Ireland would be left to flounder on the periphery while precious EU funding was divided among the other 'more loyal' members, the message seemed to sink in. The sense of hope attached to the Yes vote is thus the key to explaining the u-turn. The electorate now looks to the EU for protection against the vagaries of the economic collapse, and waits in anticipation, for the positive effects of the volte-face on the text that will shape Europe's future.