



STRATEGIES FOR A SMALL STATE IN A LARGE UNION

by

Brendan Halligan

Chairman, IIEA

iiea.com
Sharing Ideas
Shaping Policy



The Institute of International and European Affairs
8 North Great Georges Street,
Dublin 1,
Ireland

Tel: (353) 1-874 6756 : Fax: (353) 1- 878 6880
www.iiea.com
e-mail: reception@iiea.com

Dr. Garret FitzGerald Lecture to members of the Institute of International and European Affairs, Europe Day, 9 May 2013

Contribution by
Brendan Halligan
Chairman
Institute of International and European Affairs
on the theme of

“Strategies for a Small State in a Large Union”

As an independent forum, the Institute of International and European Affairs does not express opinions of its own. The views expressed in its publications are solely the responsibility of the authors.

The Institute of International and European Affairs grants permission for the reproduction of quotations from this text provided such quotations do not exceed 400 words in length, that they provide the reader with a fair context, and that due acknowledgment of the source is made.

Paper designed by Brian Martin, Creative Director, IIEA
Cover image photo © Fine Gael

Strategies for a Small State in a Large Union

Dr. Garret FitzGerald Lecture
to members of the Institute of International and European Affairs,
Europe Day, 9 May 2013

by
Brendan Halligan
Chairman, IIEA

Introduction

Forty years ago to this day, on 9 May 1973, Europe Day, Garret FitzGerald rose to his feet in the ministerial benches to present his statement on foreign affairs to Dáil Éireann which, after debate, unanimously endorsed it as the policy of the state. In terms of its broad thrust and orientation it remains in place to this day.

In a piece of good fortune rare in Irish history, Garret FitzGerald became Foreign Minister at the moment Ireland joined the European Community. It was a new world, a new government and a new Minister. He was, as a consequence, able to fashion and implement the policy Ireland should, from the outset, pursue in Europe. Looking back twenty years later he said ‘I was conscious of my great good fortune in the opportunity thus offered to me’.

It was our collective good fortune, due in great part to the Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, who had appointed him – at the time a surprise, in retrospect a stroke of genius. ‘It just seemed the right thing to do’, he explained once. Indeed it was.

Structure of the Paper

This paper analyses the formulation and implementation of the policy Garret FitzGerald fashioned forty years ago. Its primary focus is statecraft, the business of managing the affairs of a nation in its relations with the outside world. It is not a biography of Garret FitzGerald. Neither is it a review of his involvement in domestic politics. Rather, it is a short treatise on his European policy. It is one of his great legacies to modern Ireland, ranking in importance with his contributions on Northern Ireland, the constitutional crusade and his rescue of the economy in the eighties.

It is appropriate that on Europe Day his contribution should be commemorated by recalling his thoughts and actions and reflecting on them for their relevance to the present and

to the future. This lecture in his memory draws on two lectures he gave on the theme of a small state in a large union, the first to the Royal Irish Academy in 1975, two and a half years after taking office as Minister for Foreign Affairs, the second to this Institute in 1993 after he had retired from politics and had been asked to reflect on the first twenty years of Irish membership of the European Community.

It also draws on his two autobiographies and his two volumes of reflections on the Irish state and its role in the world, as well as his first ministerial speech on Foreign Affairs in Dáil Éireann, a subsequent speech over a decade later in the Seanad when Taoiseach and, indeed, on memories of numerous conversations and discussions over a period of fifty years.

Basic Insights

From this volume of material three phrases stand out. The first appeared in an Irish Times article in the late sixties to the effect that membership of the European Community would be a psychological liberation for this country, a liberation from what he described as its ‘neurotic relationship with Britain’.

The second appeared four decades later, again in the Irish Times, in which he said the European Union was the friend Ireland had always been looking for, a judgement which sprang from his familiarity with Irish history.

The third is the reference in his speech twenty years ago that Ireland was self evidently a small state with a very limited capacity to get its own way and hence the imperative in European affairs was to be smart. “*An té nach bhfuil láidir ní folair dó bheith glic*” would be the watchword for statecraft.

These three insights, of release from domination, of having allies at last and being small in a big world,

are key to understanding the policy he created with typical speed in his first weeks as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The Nature of International Affairs

His starting point was that membership of the European Community represented a complete break with the past.

Traditionally, international affairs consisted of bilateral relations between states, occasional engagements in alliances and voluntary membership of international bodies. In virtually all of these cases the participants engaged in a zero-sum game; they were protagonists; there were winners and losers. Win-win relationships arose only in the face of a common enemy and were just as quickly abandoned when the threat, real or potential, had been removed.

The conduct of international affairs was, especially among the great powers, a series of shifting alliances. It was a bleak world given over to the pursuit of self interest, a world best summed up by Palmerston's dictum that, in international affairs, nations had no permanent friends or allies, only permanent interests. The European Community stood that on its head. It presented a world in which nations undertook to be permanent friends and allies for, after all, the Rome Treaty, on which it was founded, declared itself to be a treaty in perpetuity. It was neither limited in time nor, for that matter, in ambition. Its first aim was to create an "ever closer union" among the peoples of Europe, an ambition that was undefined and unbounded.

Indeed, the national sovereignty that had been so hard-won in most cases, and prized by all, was to be shared with other nations and exercised by common institutions in accordance with law. A new legal order was being established in which the Member States undertook to be bound by collective decisions, even if they had been outvoted on an

issue. This was unprecedented in international affairs and it meant that the word "European" took on a new meaning. It was no longer just a geographical or cultural expression; it was now invested with real political and economic content which affected the conduct of everyday domestic affairs.

Statecraft

This called for a new form of statecraft, which is usually defined as the management by a state of its relations with other states, a process usually conducted by foreign ministers and diplomats. Essentially, it involves an objective understanding of the world in which a state finds itself geographically and politically and then consists of the translation of that understanding into national policy objectives.

The Cumann na nGael Government, which created the State in 1922, focused statecraft on transforming Ireland from a dominion within the British Empire, as determined by the Anglo Irish Treaty of 1921, into a sovereign state within the British Commonwealth. This they achieved with the Statute of Westminster in 1931, a success in which Desmond FitzGerald, father of Garret, played a central role as Minister for External Affairs.

Mr. De Valera, acted as his own Foreign Minister from the moment he became Taoiseach in 1932 until he was replaced in 1948 and during those sixteen years reshaped Irish statecraft by focusing it first on dissolving the constitutional links with Britain and then creating and implementing a policy of military neutrality throughout the Second World War as a concrete expression of the State's independence.

Europe

Up to this point, Irish foreign policy was almost exclusively Anglo-centric, for good reasons let it be said. But the Fianna Fáil government of Seán Lemass shifted the focus of statecraft by recognising that the 1957 Rome Treaty marked a new beginning for Europe and that Ireland had to be part of it. The specter haunting him was that Ireland would be left out of this new movement towards a united Europe. His fear was one of isolation, which would condemn Ireland to poverty and deny it access to the emerging European economy.

He had no illusion about Ireland's independence of action in applying for EEC membership, there was none. He was quite clear that if Britain applied to join then Ireland had no alternative but to do likewise and furthermore to ensure it was admitted as a member. This became Fianna Fáil government policy from 1961 onwards, one that succeeded with entry into the Community in 1973 alongside Britain and in the company of Denmark, which had come to the same conclusion as Lemass.

Having arrived in this new Europe, the context for the conduct of Irish statecraft changed utterly; it was at this point that Garret FitzGerald became Foreign Minister and constructed a new foreign policy for Ireland within which or, more accurately perhaps, in parallel with which, he devised a policy on Europe. He had to do so *de novo*, there were no precedents to follow, no models to copy.

In drawing up the new policy he had three major advantages. First of all, the Department of External Affairs was staffed by diplomats of the highest calibre whose understanding of the European project and of the issues at stake were demonstrated in a remarkable series of White Papers published from 1961 to 1972.

Second, he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the European Communities. Among other things he was Chairman of the Irish Council of the European Movement, a frequent visitor to Brussels, a lecturer

on European Affairs in UCD and a prolific commentator on both the Communities and the Irish economy. He had, after all, conceived the idea of the Committee on Industrial Organisation and then worked on it for the decade prior to membership. More importantly, he was a historian, fascinated by the complex history of the continent, a Francophile, who spoke idiomatic French.

Third, he was given a free hand in developing Irish foreign policy and in shaping it to his preferences. Liam Cosgrave ran that sort of Government. Besides, Garret FitzGerald's prestige and standing were so great at this stage that nobody within cabinet was going to question his choices. Most of them were too busy to notice anyway, as he shrewdly observed, and those who did, supported him.

But the obstacles were formidable.

Culturally, politically and economically, Ireland had been separated from continental Europe for over a century and a half. Ireland belonged to the anglophone world and had little contact with the countries conventionally described as "the continent". There was little experience of European politics and in a sense we were the forgotten people of Europe.

But, the problem, as an American diplomat observed at the time, was that membership of the European Community was teaching Europeans how to talk to each other. This meant a country had to know what to say and to have people to say it. Ireland was ill equipped for this state of constant conversation. In terms of diplomatic resources, Ireland had a tiny foreign service, with only twenty-one embassies abroad, Denmark having twice that number. The Oireachtas had no foreign affairs committee and little or no expertise in European affairs, apart from a desultory relationship with the Council of Europe. Linguistic skills were in short supply for conversing in what was then a francophone world.

But the most deep-seated obstacles arose from the nature of Ireland itself and consisted of the size, poverty and peripherality of the country. By any criterion, Ireland was a small country and if statecraft is the projection of power in international affairs, it is far more difficult if there is little power to project, either economic or military; more difficult still if the country is demonstrably poor and geographically peripheral, as Ireland was.

The intellectual challenge posed by these realities was to work out a strategy enabling Ireland to overcome its fundamental weaknesses. Faced with the absence of any vestige of hard power in terms of population size, economic strength or military capability, Garret FitzGerald sought to offset that disadvantage by developing soft power, essentially by making Ireland politically central, a strategy which also compensated for being geographically peripheral, and by making it a player in the big ideas, which compensated for being small. That meant being relevant to the enterprise as a whole and engaged in all its affairs, as well as making a political contribution that was unique to Ireland but valuable to the Union. It also meant being willing, and having the capacity, to play on the large stage.

The Foundation

The foundation on which everything rested was Garret FitzGerald's recognition from the outset that the new Europe was a joint enterprise by France and Germany intended to effect permanent reconciliation between them by replacing a century and a half of repeated warfare with a permanent peace. The project was, after all, the brainchild of a Frenchman, Jean Monnet, and had been publicly launched by another Frenchman, France's Foreign Minister, Maurice Faure, and immediately accepted by a German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. In a sense, all other European countries in the European Union are guests of the French and Germans. At the time of its formation there was no compulsion on any country to join

the Community and none now to join the Union.

But if a country elects to join then it does so in the full knowledge that France and Germany are at the core of the project and largely determine the pace and direction of its progress, as well as the manner of its responses to political and economic challenges as they emerge. The first tenets of sound statecraft are to recognise the obvious and accept the inevitable, more difficult that it seems for politicians. Garret FitzGerald complied with both in recognising and accepting France and Germany as the cornerstone of Europe, and did so without complaint and without trying to undermine their joint achievements or frustrate their ambitions.

For the Ireland of Garret FitzGerald this meant replacing London with Paris and Bonn as the centre of Irish foreign policy.

First Task

In these circumstances, he saw that his immediate task was 'to convince the Germans of our commitment to European integration and the French of our independence of British influence'. This was more difficult than it seems in retrospect as, at the time, very little was known of Ireland in Germany, apart from Heinrich Boll's romantic account on his stay in Achill and John Ford's film, 'The Quiet Man', while the French suspected us of being a British satellite, not least because we spoke English.

Thus, among the many tasks to be accomplished in the first years of membership, rebranding Ireland was one of the most urgent because a small state has to establish itself as an independent actor and positive participant if it is to have any influence on the policies of a large union. Within the special world of European diplomacy the rebranding was achieved almost immediately due largely to Garret FitzGerald's capacity to project himself on his interlocutors.

The Germans were impressed with his grasp of economics and his commitment to the removing trade barriers while the French were enchanted by what he himself called his idiomatic but ungrammatical command of their language.

On a continuous basis it meant Ireland investing disproportionate resources in the study of French and German politics, policy formation, economics, political parties and personalities, so as to have an informed understanding of how each state functioned and, of vital importance, how the Franco-German alliance worked.

Britain

So, if getting out from under the shadow of Britain was an immediate task then re-engineering the relationship with that large neighbour was equally urgent. The relationship had always been tricky due to the disparity in population and economic strength and, of course, due to the legacy of history whereby one party in the relationship felt itself superior to the other, and behaved accordingly.

But the challenge facing Ireland was managing the shift in the relationship from the exclusively bilateral and claustrophobic, to the multilateral and expansive. The character of the relationship was now changed by virtue of the two countries sitting as formal equals at the Council table in Brussels but, while it would be absurd to claim it had been turned overnight into one of political equals, a subtle psychological change had nevertheless taken place. Irish economic prospects were no longer solely dependent on the goodwill of Whitehall and the psychological liberation Garret FitzGerald had forecast began to happen. Indeed, it proceeded quicker than anyone anticipated. When the British government decided in 1975 to hold a referendum on UK membership of the Community, the Irish Government informally concluded that were Britain to leave then Ireland would stay put.

Still, the British would expect, simply out of a habit of mind, that at the Council table Ireland would support them as a matter of course and, in extremis, would do their bidding. This introduced a new tension into the relationship because, on the one hand, the two countries had opposing economic interests, which would pit them against each other in the Council of Ministers on some of the great agenda issues, such as on the Common Agriculture Policy and the Community Budget.

On the other hand, Northern Ireland was drawing them closer together in the common endeavour to defeat the IRA. Cooperation with the British Government had never been so strong – or so necessary – and was growing stronger. The obvious point here is that geography plays a dominant, sometimes, *the* dominant, role in international affairs. When asked, ‘How do you become rich?’ Oscar Wilde answered, ‘Choose your parents with great care’, but you can no more pick your geographic neighbours than you can your parents. In both cases you are stuck with them.

For a small state within the Union this means that, in addition to managing its relations with France and Germany, it must simultaneously manage its affairs with its large neighbours in such a way that binary choices are avoided, that is to say that “either or” choices are kept off the agenda as between France and Germany on the one hand and the big neighbour, or neighbours, on the other.

The task is to sail between Scylla and Charybdis, as serenely as possible. Sometimes a choice is unavoidable and in those painful circumstances the decision to be made must be pre-ordained, as it were, by being consistent with the State’s basic policy stance on European integration. This introduced the task of defining it with clarity and firmness.

The Crucial Issue

Garret FitzGerald understood that the crucial issue for Ireland was the stance to be taken on economic and political integration. The question for resolution was, he said, whether that stance should be minimalist or maximalist. The other two new Member States, the UK and Denmark, had opted for a minimalist stance but to him the arguments for a contrary approach seemed to be compelling.

‘Our immediate concern’, he told the Dáil in that first speech ‘must be to define our attitude to the question of Community supranationality and the development of the Community institutions and to relate this to the Community’s progress towards economic and monetary union and the question of European Union’.

He reasoned that Ireland would fare best in a supranational structure within which the larger countries would be constrained from exercising their sovereignty at the expense of smaller countries. He had Britain in mind, of course, particularly in regard to the low prices it paid for Irish agricultural produce. By virtue of its size, he said, Ireland had no equivalent opportunity to exercise its sovereignty to its own advantage and at the expense of other states. He concluded that, in terms of real as distinct from nominal sovereignty, Ireland was bound to be a net beneficiary in a system designed for sharing sovereignty. Hence, it followed that Ireland should support moves towards more integration.

The paradox was that by sharing sovereignty it was automatically enhanced. Shared sovereignty would stimulate economic growth; the more the economy grew the greater the degree of economic independence; and the greater the degree of economic independence, the greater the extent of political independence.

He also reasoned that the further economic integration developed the more it was bound to involve a growing transfer of resources through the

Community budget from which, he said, Ireland would particularly benefit. Furthermore, because Ireland would gain from the Common Agricultural Policy, it would emerge as a major beneficiary of Community monetary transfers. Hence, economic integration should be supported.

This brought another reason into play and it was purely political. In circumstances where this country became a major net beneficiary of transfers he foresaw a danger of Ireland being perceived negatively by its partners, and as ‘a drag on and burden to the Community’. Moreover, this danger would be accentuated by the fact that Ireland would be making no contribution to European defence for a long time ahead, if ever. Hence, he believed that a positive and constructive approach to the future development of the Community, which was clearly distinguishable from those of the UK and Denmark, would safeguard Ireland’s position as a net beneficiary.

In the words George Bernard Shaw put into the mouth of Alfred Doolittle in his play, ‘Pygmalion’, Ireland would become part of “the deserving poor” rather than “the undeserving poor”.

The Veto

In the 1975 speech he expressed this rationale in dramatic terms. ‘The nature of our economic interests dictates a very positive attitude towards the institutional development of the Community and a strengthening of its decision-making structures’. In practical terms, this ‘very positive attitude’ meant that Ireland would favour movement away from making Council decisions by unanimity, which put the use of the veto at the heart of the process, to making decisions by majority vote, which automatically eliminated its use.

His judgment on the utility of the veto was entirely pragmatic. Large states were relatively immune from backlash when they used it, but small states had to face the fact that there was a limit on their

use. ‘In this matter’, he said, ‘it is realistic to recognise that some are more equal than others’, an application of George Orwell’s ‘Animal Farm’ in which it was said that while all animals were equal some were more equal than others. He added, somewhat laconically, that we had to learn to take the rough with the smooth.

In fact, Ireland has never used the veto, although Garret FitzGerald appeared ready to do so on the question of milk quotas when, as Taoiseach, he walked out of a European Council meeting in March 1984 because of what he called the obduracy of his opponents. The walk-out was sufficient to produce a satisfactory solution, at the behest of France and the support of Germany be it said, an instructive example of how his general strategy worked.

Psychological Insider

As a consequence of his reasoning Ireland became, and remains, what is best described as a “psychological insider” within the European Union. By this is meant a Member State, which as a matter of course is part of the general consensus on the governance and policies of the Union and routinely supports the deepening of the integration process whenever circumstances so demand. The spontaneous reaction to any proposal from the Commission or European Council is affirmative, contrasting with the psychological outsider where the spontaneous response to new proposals is the reverse.

The starting points could hardly be further apart, one being positive, even enthusiastic, the other negative, even dismissive.

Three examples of Ireland acting as a psychological insider are the decisions by Jack Lynch to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1979, by Garrett Fitzgerald to support the calling of an Intergovernmental Conference at the Milan European Council meeting in 1985 and by Albert

Reynolds committing Ireland to the Treaty on European Union at Maastricht in 1992. To these could be added the decision of Taoiseach Enda Kenny at the European Council in December 2011 to sign up for the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, also known as the Fiscal Compact.

Jack Lynch’s decision gave credibility to the ERM and set Ireland on the path to EMU membership. Its more immediate effect was to break the “one for one” fixed exchange rate between the Irish and British pounds which had obtained since 1826.

The context for Garret FitzGerald’s decision was the joint determination of President Mitterrand of France and Chancellor Kohl of Germany to deepen integration in the face of economic sclerosis in Europe. This was to be done by going beyond the common market established by the Rome Treaty and creating an internal market, a step recommended by a committee of the personal representatives of the Heads of State and Government, chaired, significantly, by Professor Jim Dooge, the Foreign Minister in Garret FitzGerald’s first Government. The Dooge Report, as it became known, was essentially a Franco-Irish production, being co-authored by Professor Dooge and Maurice Faure, President Mitterrand’s representative.

Although she had reluctantly agreed to the establishment of the Dooge Committee at the Fontainebleau Council in June the previous year, Mrs. Thatcher resisted the idea of implementing its recommendations by way of amendments to the Rome Treaty. To start that process an Intergovernmental Conference was required and when Mitterrand and Kohl sought a vote on the matter at the Milan Council Mrs. Thatcher reacted with fury. A brief break was called and she stormed up the room saying, ‘Garret, I hope you’re going to oppose this: remember our negotiations on Northern Ireland’, referring to a difficult meeting held earlier that morning on the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Some recall him describing her intervention as ‘Garret, you can’t do this to me’.

The politics of that Council meeting were simple. There were ten leaders in the room. Six represented the founder Member States, of which all were in favour of calling the IGC.

Four leaders represented the new Member States of which the UK, Denmark and Greece were opposed. Ireland was the swing vote. If it sided with the new members there would be a schism between the old and the new, perhaps with irreparable and irreversible consequences. Faced with this choice between the old and the new or, alternatively expressed, between national priorities on Europe and those on Northern Ireland, Garret FitzGerald unhesitatingly chose Europe and elected to vote with the original six members.

‘I was, in fact’, he said in the 1993 lecture ‘delighted to show in the most definitive way where Ireland stood’. Indeed he had. In fact, he had laid out his position in a long speech to the Senate two days earlier; as a former Senator he took that body seriously and appeared before it quite frequently.

Milan Decision

The significance of the Milan decision, taken on his own initiative, was at least fourfold.

It confirmed Ireland’s strategic positioning as a psychological insider, one which could be relied upon to be part of the pioneering group of states, even in circumstances where opting for that role put other national objectives at risk.

Next, it prevented a clear-cut division between the old and new Member States that might otherwise have led to the emergence of two opposing camps within the Union. This contribution was widely appreciated at the time, especially by President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl, and added immeasurably to Ireland’s reputation with both. Ireland was not a drag on the Community, indeed the opposite.

It also communicated a toughness of mind to Mrs. Thatcher that probably worked to his advantage in dealing with her on Northern Ireland.

Finally, it opened the door to the IGC, which went on to produce the Single European Act establishing the Single or Internal Market, a development Ireland strongly supported. The two key innovations in the Single European Act were the amendment of Article 100 of the Rome Treaty by introducing Qualified Majority Voting, QMV as it is known, on measures intended to produce a functioning Internal Market and, secondly, by conferring new legislative powers on the European Parliament.

The first innovation made the Internal Market possible by eliminating the veto when Member States voted on a certain class of economic directives, a measure Garret FitzGerald had always favored. The second opened up the way for the European Parliament to become a co-legislator with the Council, something he had favored from that initial policy statement of 1973.

But the creation of the Internal or Single Market, introducing the free movement of capital and eliminating non-tariff barriers to trade, led logically towards the creation of an Economic and Monetary Union, which he had outlined as a goal in 1975. This sequence of events, which was inherent in the nature of integration process, is precisely what happened. Many will recall his delight at having set that process in train.

The significance of Garret FitzGerald’s decision at the Milan Council can hardly be exaggerated, nor can his role within it. From the perspective of a small state it demonstrated that being a psychological insider multiplied its influence, that having a clear set of priorities, properly ordered, led to the right strategic choices, even under intense pressure.

His Milan decision has a further lesson for small states. He was later able to strengthen the cohesion provisions of the Single European Act as it was being drafted and to write the provisions on

security as applied to a neutral state like Ireland. In one case, the national interest was advanced, in the other it was defended, proof that the best way to do both is to position the State as a pro-active partner in the task of deepening interdependence.

Paradox

This was the paradox that Garret FitzGerald understood and it determined his choice at Milan, a decision that serves as a fundamental lesson in statecraft for all small states. He had argued from the outset that, for a small state like Ireland, a narrow defence of the national interest without regard for the common European interest would be self-defeating and ultimately counterproductive. He was proven right. The Cohesion Funds later offered to Ireland proved substantial and the scale of the transfers during the nineties proved a key factor in modernising the economy and launching the Celtic Tiger.

Adopting the role of the psychological insider solved two problems; how to avoid appearing as ‘a drag on and a burden to’ the other Member States and simultaneously how to advance or defend national interests, knowing that a small state has few opportunities of accomplishing either and that in an ever-enlarging Union those opportunities become correspondingly fewer.

The role of the “*demandeur*” in international affairs, or “demander”, is never easy for a small state but in the European Union requests, however pressing, have to fit in with the need of the Union as a whole to reconcile competing national interests. In these circumstances, the intelligent strategy is to be both a demander and a contributor. The rule is to be a contributor all of the time and a demander some of the time, indeed, keeping demands to the very minimum.

‘The goodwill we have always enjoyed in the Community – and which I should say has brought us so many tangible benefits – has been enhanced’,

he explained to the Senate in 1985, ‘by our positive stance on so many... issues’.

The Institutions

It followed logically that if Ireland were going to be a positive insider then it would make sense to work with and become an ally of the common institutions.

This was in recognition of the reality that the decision-making process laid down in the Rome Treaty was *sui generis*, literally speaking, it was one of a kind for which there was no analogue. He followed the logic, a rare enough event in politics.

He reckoned that understanding the dynamics of the Union’s decision-making process was essential and recognised that the pitfall to be avoided lay in confusing Union institutions with those of a state; the Commission is not a government and the Council is not an executive, nor is the Parliament the ultimate source of authority. A small state has to develop a sophisticated understanding of this triangular relationship, especially as it is one which constantly evolves. Indeed, decision making now involves a quadrangular relationship in the light of the role being played by the European Council.

The legacy Garret FitzGerald has left behind in respect of the institutions has been to position Ireland as an ally of the Commission, a supporter of the Parliament and an opponent of any attempts to create a *Directoire* within the Council, a framework to be commended to any small state.

In respect of the Commission, he was instrumental in securing the appointment of Jacques Delors as President and developed strong personal and institutional bonds with him and his Commission, which has positively influenced subsequent dealings between Irish governments and the Commission.

In his relationship with the Parliament he favoured the extension of its powers as a legislator and the expansion of its role as the institutional

expression of the peoples of Europe. During the first Irish Presidency of 1975, for example, he attended and reported to all seven plenary sessions and introduced the Irish style of parliamentary questions, two innovations that have endured. As President of the European Council he appeared before the plenary session in 1984 to report on its conclusions, the first Prime Minister to have done so. Now that the Parliament is a co-legislator with the Council, this inheritance grows more valuable since working with the Parliament has become a *sine qua non* of intelligent statecraft for all states, and especially for small ones, like Ireland.

The good working relationship with the Commission and Parliament were the direct result of the strategy he devised for the first Irish Presidency in 1975 (which emerged from a think-in with friends while on holiday at Denis Corboy's rented accommodation in France). Its distinctive feature, he said later, would be 'style and procedural innovation', perfect examples of the concept of soft power. The style was particularly characterised by managerial efficiency mixed with informality but with scrupulous regard for procedures and competences, and a generous helping of good humour. Procedural innovation applied not only to the Parliament but to the Council and Commission as well.

Use of Assets

But for a small state to prosper within a large Union it must, as said earlier, contribute something special to the capacity of the Union to function internally and operate externally. In the case of Ireland there are at least five national assets of value to the Union as a whole.

The first relates to the UK.

Here, Ireland is seen by the other Member States as an informed source of advice on Britain's European policy and an expert analyst of British politics. On occasion Ireland has acted as a catalyst in resolving

major disputes between Britain and the rest, such as Harold Wilson's and Margaret Thatcher's problems with the scale of the British contribution to the Community budget, which Garret FitzGerald twice helped resolve with great skill. Such a role can be invaluable to the rest of the Union in managing a "difficult" partner, as one academic has described Britain, but it carries the danger of impinging on Ireland's independence and reviving French fears of Ireland being no more than a British satellite. It carries particular danger now that Britain is trying to "repatriate" EU competences. Yet it is inevitable that Ireland will be engaged in this delicate exercise and will, no doubt, also be called to interpret developments regarding Scotland and to evaluate the repercussions of Scottish independence, should it arise.

The second asset is Ireland's special relationship, to coin a phrase, with the United States. Ireland's inside knowledge of American politics and its access to the White House and Congress are unmatched. Suffice it to say that the use of Irish personnel in the EU mission in Washington is an intelligent use of Irish strengths to the advantage of the Union.

The third asset arises from Ireland's past as a colonised country, in contrast to those Member States who were colonisers. This inheritance can be of positive value to the Union when dealing with former European colonies and was put to its best use in the negotiations on the Lomé Conventions; first time round it was Garret Fitzgerald himself who led the European side to universal acclaim.

The fourth asset also arises directly from the past. From the outset of its UN membership Ireland became a peacekeeper and has in the interim built up formidable expertise in peacekeeping operations, which is not only being put to use by the EU but is growing in value, as demonstrated in Chad in 2007 and 2008.

The fifth is cultural. The Irish have a natural talent for politics and have most of the skill sets that make for political success, particularly in the search for compromises or, better still, consensus.

This special strength is best brought into play during a Presidency whenever the Union has need of a catalyst to resolve differences or to broker a solution. When German reunification needed to be formally accepted as a *fait accompli* by the rest of the Community in early 1990 the then Taoiseach, Charlie Haughey, convened a special European Council meeting in Dublin at the behest of the other leaders and, with great aplomb, secured unanimous assent to the incorporation of a united Germany into the Community. This achievement, still remembered by German political leaders, is an example of how a small state can rise to the big occasion rather than being overwhelmed by it.

Indeed, the manner in which Bertie Ahearn, on taking over the Presidency in 2004, overcame intense squabbling on the text of a “European Constitution” and secured agreement on a complete text is another example of this talent at work. The fact that the Constitution was later aborted was not due to any fault of the Irish Presidency but to those national governments that failed to have it endorsed by their electorates.

Garret FitzGerald repeatedly demonstrated this ability to broker deals within the Council and, indeed, to work out agreements with the United States when it might otherwise have proven impossible, such as on Portugal in 1984. The breakthrough from dictatorship to democracy was secured, as the autobiographies record, with the active help of the Community and the passive acquiescence of the US, which accepting his credentials as an honest councilor, acted on his advice and didn't interfere. It is doubtful if any other European state could have secured such an outcome. Although opportunities to play this sort of role are rare, they put Ireland centre stage at crucial moments in the Union's history and are invariably handled with success.

These five assets add up to a significant and uniquely Irish contribution to the combined assets of the Union. Handled intelligently they can place Ireland centre stage when Europe is dealing with certain sensitive issues. ‘We should

have no illusions’, said Garret FitzGerald in the Dáil speech, ‘that our contribution can be more than a modest one’, but at least there is one to be made and it ensures that, when done properly, the problems of peripherality and size are minimised, if not eliminated.

The Use of People

There is, of course, a sixth asset: people. Intelligent statecraft would ensure that only the brightest and the best were sent out to the common institutions and that a conscious effort would be made to put them in positions where they could enhance the country's reputation, defend its interests and contribute to the general welfare of Europe.

Starting with the European Commission, where the Government itself has responsibility for choosing the Irish member, it should be expected that the appointment would represent a conscious exercise in statecraft. The positive impact of some of our Commissioners has been significant and underlines the point that a small state should not use the Commission as a rest home for the redundant, a dumping ground for the difficult or a nursing home for nonentities.

Remembering Oscar Wilde's admission that he could resist anything except temptation, it would seem sensible to avoid that fate by constructing a selection process in which the best candidate on offer is chosen. The penalty for sending out the wrong one can be severe and, if for no other reason, small state governments should restrict their choice of Commissioners to their best and brightest.

On the other hand, the people choose their representatives in the European Parliament. When the issue of direct elections to the European Parliament arose in the 1970s, the National Coalition government decided to extend the use of the Single Transferable Vote to European elections, thereby multiplying the manifest disadvantages of

that system in promoting the best and the brightest as MEPs.

Admittedly, the system did produce a President of the Parliament, but where a country only has twelve members out of a total of 736 then quality is at a premium. Furthermore, the Parliament is now a co-legislator with the Council on most matters, thereby adding to the requirement for quality. Revisiting the decision on the use of STV and examining the list system as an alternative would be consistent with the principles of sound statecraft.

Peopling the Institutions

Finally, there is the broader question of peopling the institutions. While Ireland has been successful in providing two Secretaries General of the Commission, there is no general strategy for promoting the concept of a career in the European institutions, introducing interchangeability between the national and European administrations or targeting the number and type of positions that would ensure a critical mass of Irish functionaries across the system. At present, there is a sense of impending crisis about Ireland's presence in the institutions, which may well be misplaced but it should be addressed for the matter is of perennial interest for a small state.

Garret Fitzgerald had a deep interest in public administration and an appropriate way of commemorating him would be use the Institute of Public Administration, the Institute for Ireland in Leuven and the Irish College in Paris to train high level public servants in European affairs and, indeed, to create an Irish equivalent of ENA, the *École nationale d'administration* in Paris.

It is disturbing that we in Ireland have no way of retaining institutional memory in statecraft and public service or of transmitting it between the generations. A small state that was “*glic*”, or street smart, would have had that as a high priority.

Concluding Remarks

That reminder about being street smart brings this brings the memorial lecture towards its close. If the primary requirement of a small state is to be “*glic*” then in the words of the Boy Scout motto, *Bí Ullambh*, it must always be ready for the future, to be constantly assessing what is likely to happen in the Union. Informed foresight ensures optimum strategic positioning and avoids costly mistakes caused by being caught off guard.

Garret FitzGerald understood the teleological nature of the European project, that is to say, the inner purpose and design of the process, where teleology is sometimes defined as purposeful development towards an end. He foresaw, for example, that a common market led to an internal market, which necessitated a monetary union, which in turn required an economic union and led to a political union. On this line of reasoning, the euro is not going to implode; banking, fiscal and economic unions will be created because of the necessity for sectoral federalism, which will, in turn, require a form of political union to confer democratic legitimacy on the European project and to ensure consent among the electorates.

In practical terms, the Eurozone will become the core of the Union, a core which will get progressively larger. Those outside the core will constitute a new form of Union membership as yet undefined, with Britain as its most prominent, perhaps its only, member.

As a psychological insider, Ireland has chosen to be part of the Eurozone but membership will raise two sets of difficulties in the next five to ten years: a growing separation from Britain, which will have to be managed with great care, and deeper integration with the other Member States affecting taxation, economic governance, internal affairs and external security, developments which will have to be managed with extraordinary skill.

We can anticipate there will be further referenda. On each occasion our membership of the core Europe will be on the line. As is now widely accepted we can only vote ‘No’ once on any new Treaty; twice would be a definitive rejection of the next move to deepen integration and a parting of the ways with the core.

Each referendum puts Ireland’s membership of the European Union at risk. If lost, it would unravel the achievements of Irish statecraft as pursued from 1961 onwards by all governments irrespective of their party complexion. Being the realist he was, Garret FitzGerald understood this existential threat to Ireland’s future. That is why, despite his advancing years, and many competing demands on his time, he campaigned for a ‘Yes’ vote in all the European referenda up to his last days.

But neither he nor his contemporaries intended that Ireland would become a referendum country when it came to deciding whether the latest treaty on integration should be ratified or not. Whatever the merits of direct democracy, it is at odds with the demands of managing the interests of a small state in the complex world of a large Union. One course of action would be to enshrine membership of the European Union as a permanent feature of the constitution; that was the intent of the Oireachtas and the path chosen by the people in the referendum in 1972, or so they thought. It is, at least, worthy of some reflection.

The “FitzGerald Principles”

At the conclusion of this short treatise on Garret FitzGerald’s thoughts and actions as Foreign Minister and as Taoiseach on European policy it is possible to draw up a series of guiding principles for a small state in a large Union.

Without being too fanciful, they might be called the “FitzGerald Principles”.

1. Accept that the European Union is essentially

a Franco-German enterprise, that they set the direction, content and pace of the integration process, and operate accordingly.

2. Do not become a satellite of another Member State; create and sustain a national brand for independence of mind and action.

3. Be politically central to the life of the Union by working closely with France and Germany.

4. Manage the relationship with large neighbours so as to avoid binary choices between them and France and Germany, but if a choice has to be made, then decide in favour of the Franco German alliance.

5. Maintain a positive working relationship with each of the common institutions and adapt to their agenda so that they adopt yours.

6. Become a psychological insider and use that strategic positioning to advance the national interest as part of the overall European agenda.

7. Support moves towards enhancing the supranationality of the Union so as to enlarge rather than diminish national sovereignty.

8. Be selective in the choice and frequency of demands on other Member States i.e. hesitate before becoming a *demandeur*.

9. Position demands within a general framework designed to produce win-win outcomes for the whole of the Union.

10. Identify the national assets that can be brought to the service of the Union and make them available as and when required.

11. People the administrations of the common institutions with high calibre functionaries.

12. Think big, be relevant, be street smart – and be fun to be with.

Conclusion

On this Europe Day, it is proper to recall there were other influences at work in the mind of Garret Fitzgerald when he devoted much of his energies to advancing the cause of Ireland in Europe. He was also motivated by a deep Christian conviction that Europe had a moral dimension more important than economics. ‘Europe is for us not merely a matter of national interest’, he told the Senate, ‘it is also an ideal, and an imperative’. But the examination of those ideas is for another day. Today has, instead, been devoted to an examination of statecraft, to the role of a small Member State in a large union and to the strategies that are essential for success.

In the sphere of statecraft, Garret FitzGerald made a singular contribution which would on its own be sufficient to elevate him into the Pantheon of Great Irish Leaders. Forty years ago to this day he set this country on a course of action which conferred such benefit on his own generation and which will continue to benefit the generations to come.

There can be no statecraft without statesmen. Strategies alone are not sufficient. Small states need big individuals, with a big presence and big ideas, ready to play a big role on the big stage when the need arises. By any standards, Garret FitzGerald was a big man and Ireland was the bigger because of him.

It was, indeed, one of those rare strokes of good fortune in Irish history that he was appointed Foreign Minister forty years ago on this day, Europe Day.

iea.com
Sharing Ideas
Shaping Policy