

# Opinion

Does Brown ever ask: 'If only I hadn't pushed Tony out?'

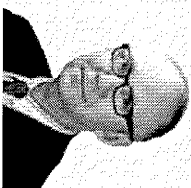
Mary Ann Sieghart, page 28



## Big earthquake in Europe: Britain undisturbed

Despite the protestations of the European elites, the Irish 'no' vote changes the whole future of the EU

Anatole Kalatsky



What will historians of the future recall as the most important event in Europe during the summer of 2008? Will it be the jump in oil prices to \$140 or the aftermath of the great financial crisis? Will it be the orderly succession to the Russian Presidency of Dmitri Medvedev? Will it be the return of 1970s-style stagflation — or maybe even the collapse of Gordon Brown's Government after a summer of discontent? Or will it be the Irish referendum on the Lisbon treaty?

Even to mention such a parochial, bureaucratic event in the same paragraph as the economic and political upheavals shaking the world this summer is to invite ridicule as a narrow-minded Euro-obsessive. That, at least, is the view of the British media and political classes, who lost all interest in the Irish "no" vote within days of this astonishing event. And surely "astounding" is a fair adjective to describe this overwhelming democratic reaction to the political direction of Europe, by three million people who have risen, in a single generation, from penury to become the Continent's wealthiest nation, as a direct result of joining the EU?

Such "ingratitude" by the Irish people towards the European political elites may strike us in Britain as perfectly natural, since it

corresponds so closely to the way most people here feel. Moreover, all three of our main political parties seem to believe they have a mutual interest in treating this as a case of "small earthquake, not many hurt".

In continental capitals, by contrast, the Irish "no" is seen as a tectonic shift that could transform the landscape of Europe for decades to come. Certainly the Irish "no" has triggered much more intense debate from Brussels, Berlin and Paris to Prague, Warsaw and Moscow than it has in London.

The continental interpretation is likely to prove more prescient than the studied indifference of the Westminster Village. First, The "no" vote presents Europe with a deeply embarrassing political dilemma.

Either the EU must abandon the trappings of statehood — a president, a diplomatic service and ultimately an army — created by the Lisbon treaty; or Europe's leaders must back away from their self-righteous pretensions to democracy by overturning a clear and unequivocal democratic judgment, on the ground that voters made the "wrong" choice.

At the very least, the Irish vote — coming after equally clear rejection of previous EU treaties or institutional initiatives, such as the euro, by referendums in France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden — will deprive the EU's continuing political development of all democratic legitimacy. Anyone who claims that the EU has any interest in reducing its "democratic deficit" will in future be laughed at.

However European leaders respond, the Irish "no" will be seen as a historic confirmation of the anti-democratic nature of the EU

project. If the EU political project is now abandoned, it will be a testament to its repeated rejection by voters across Europe. And if the project continues despite the Irish objection, it will be final proof that EU leaders don't care what voters think.

But the damage to the "European project", as it is conceived in Brussels, Berlin and Paris, will go far beyond such ideological symbolism. As a practical matter, European governments will find it almost impossible to proceed with their political designs. This is not, of course, the message being sent out to the Irish Republic and the outside world from the capitals of Europe (including London). The official line is that the other EU countries will continue to ratify the Lisbon treaty and all the institutional developments will go on. Ireland will then be left in a minority of 26 to 1 — and will be asked to think again.

If the Irish Government refuses to do so, or its people vote "no" a second time, fairly explicit threats are already being issued about expulsion from the EU. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German Foreign Minister, was quoted in *The Financial Times* this week as suggesting that "one way to implement the treaty was for Ireland to withdraw temporarily from the process of European integration".

For the German, French and EU leadership such strong-arm tactics are now the only way to achieve the political advances they seek — and it is surely right to expect such threats to intensify in the months ahead. Where the conventional wisdom seems wrong, however, is in assuming that these bullying tactics will work. The Irish are a notoriously stubborn



Guess who has a habit of seeing off bullying neighbours?

people who have withstood many generations of external bullying and they may now start to treat Europe, instead of Britain, as an overbearing colonial power.

To make matters worse, the popularity of the Irish Government, along with all the other governments of Europe, is certain to fall further in the year ahead, as the European economy declines. In Ireland's case, economists now expect the first recession since the early 1980s, hardly a propitious period in which to conduct a second referendum.

This brings us to the second reason for believing that the Irish "no" will permanently change the history of Europe: the Euro-federalists have very little time left either to reverse

the Irish "no" or to find a way of expelling Ireland from the EU. This is because of a looming deadline that does not yet seem to have been noticed in Brussels, Berlin or Paris, but which commentators and politicians in Britain should surely recognise.

If Euro-federalists cannot find a "satisfactory" solution within 18 months or so to the Irish problem, the prospects of bullying Ireland into acquiescence will completely evaporate because of a political event here in Britain — the next general election. If the Tories win it, there will no longer be any chance of isolating Ireland in a 26 to one minority. With a Conservative government in Britain a prospect by the spring of 2010, Euro-federalist efforts to isolate or threaten Ireland, would inevitably be opposed by Britain.

Any alternative "process of European integration", as Mr Steinmeier diplomatically describes the possible expulsion of recalcitrant Ireland, would have to take place without Britain — and with Britain opting out, Sweden, Denmark and several Central European countries, such as the Czech Republic, almost certainly would too. Under these circumstances bullying the Irish voters into changing their minds would result not in Ireland's expulsion, but in the break-up of the EU. That is not a price that either the Germans or the French would pay for the right to have a president of Europe.

So time is on the side of the Irish in their dispute with the Euro-federalist bullies. All the Irish have to do is stick to their guns and keep talking. Luckily the Irish are good at both.