

Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust

Debating Europe: Challenges and Opportunities Over the Next Decade

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Dr Lee McGowan (School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy, Queen's University Belfast): Good afternoon, everyone. It is a pleasure to welcome you to the third in this series on "Debating Europe". This series has been designed to get us all thinking more about Europe: what it means to us; how we engage with it; and some of the key issues facing us and other member states of the European Union over the next decade. All the themes are topical, of course, but today's is probably one of the most topical and may be one of the most urgent. We can explore that a bit later in the question-and-answer session. It concerns the whole idea of connecting with the European Union and and the European Union connecting with its citizens.

The series brings together policymakers, politicians, business organisations and representatives of the public and voluntary sectors, as well as all other interested parties that may be engaged with the whole idea of the European Union. Our speaker today is one of my colleagues from the school of politics, Dr John Garry. He will talk about this whole idea of connecting. How do we connect? Who connects and with whom? He will tell you about the Irish experience and look at the referenda. We will perhaps then take the debate further in the question-and-answer session later and think about how we insert the idea of connecting with the European Union in the context of the UK, as it moves towards a referendum in the near future. Without further ado, I pass you to Dr John Garry.

Dr John Garry (School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy, Queen's University Belfast): No drum roll? I usually get a drum roll when I stand up. That is a joke.

Thank you very much, Lee, and thanks to everybody for coming along. Reconnecting with the public is the theme of this series, and, as you can see from the huge numbers of people in the audience, we are off to a flying start. Perhaps the term should be "connecting" rather than "reconnecting", but I will put a little question mark beside that.

As Lee said, I will talk about the notion of connecting or reconnecting in the context of referendums and having referendums on issues related to the European Union and European Union integration. Because this is such an important topic, I did a little homework this morning on the whole notion of referendums. As we walked in the rain to school, I asked my seven-year-old son, Arthur, the following question: "Imagine if there was the possibility that, instead of your school uniform being blue, it was going to be a different colour — maybe grey — and the decision could be made in a number of different ways: you could just get the headmaster to make the decision about keeping your uniform as it is or we will change it; or you could get all the teachers in the school together and they could have a chat and decide whether it would be good to change the uniform or keep it the way it is; or, maybe, all the parents of the boys and girls could get together and have a chat and think about whether it is fine the way it is or they will change it; or — the fourth and final option — all the boys and girls in the school decide on whether to keep the uniform blue or change it to grey. Which one do you think would be the best?". Straight away, he said, "Well, the children should make this decision. That would be great. The children are forced to go to school. They didn't decide which school to go to, so It should be the children". Silence descended along with some more rain, and we trudged along. Then he said, "Oh, hang on a minute. I think I might change my mind. I think it might be the teachers who should decide". I asked why that was and he said, "Because they might have a reason". There was silence for a few seconds. "What kind of a reason?". "Well, I don't know, maybe hygiene or something.

Maybe one uniform would be cleaner than another or something". I said, "Well, wouldn't the children have a reason?". He said, "No, no, no. They wouldn't have a reason; they would just go for the cool one". "And that is not a reason?". "No, no, no, no". Then, silence. He thought a little bit more and said, "Actually, I think the headmaster really is the best person to make this decision because he knows loads of stuff, and it will be a good decision". He then thought about that and said, "No, wait a minute. He will be just making that decision all on his own. So, is it OK if the headmaster and the teachers get together and have a chat about it and make a decision?". I said, "Yes, that is fine. Do not worry, it is not actually going to happen, but that is allowable. We can think of that as a nice suggestion." Then I said, "Imagine if they got together and decided to keep the uniform as it was and not go for the other option of, say, red. What would you say to one of the boys or girls who was a bit disappointed with that decision and asked why they could not choose to make it red?". He thought for a few seconds and said, "Well, could we not give them an extra special treat on Fridays and they may forget about it?". I thought that was sublimely incisive as a summary of how the European Union operates.

One interpretation of how the European Union operates is that it is democratic in an elitist interpretation of democracy. If people are unhappy with it, you throw them a few grants and keep them quiet. I am not saying that I agree with that, but it is an interpretation consistent with that example. One other thing that Arthur said was that, as well as the children going for the cool option, they might just follow the most popular person in the class. If that person made a particular suggestion, everyone else might just copy them. Those sets of reasons in that general, simple example clearly map onto the academic debates about how collectively binding decisions ought to be made. It maps neatly onto whether or not we should have referendums and their pros and cons.

I will put my cards on the table a little: I am a big fan of referendums. They are great fun, and referendum campaigns are a bit of a lark. Something mad usually happens in a referendum campaign. People get very agitated, and it is a bit of excitement. If you like politics, referendums are great. If you like a particular interpretation of democracy, referendums are great. If you interpret democracy in terms of direct democracy and think that democracy is the will of the people and that, if you want to make a decision, it is the people who will be affected by that decision who should make it, if that is your interpretation of democracy, you probably should like referendums because, in theory at least, they facilitate the people to make the decision that will have an effect on them. Accordingly, despite my seven-year-old's concerns about the quality of such a decision-making device, you could see referendums as examples of high-quality democracy. If a country has a referendum on the European Union, it facilitates people, at least in theory, in reflecting their views of the European Union; considering various perspectives on the European Union; and reflecting calmly on the evidence that the pro- or anti-European side may offer. On foot of calm, reasoned reflection and taking all the evidence and perspectives into account, people can vote in a referendum in favour of or against the particular EU proposition. So, referendums allow for direct democracy and allow people to have a direct say. What could be wrong with that?

Everything could be wrong with that, in line with what Arthur told me this morning. Two things could be wrong with it. The first is that, a little like the children who would go for the cool uniform just because it is cool, whereas the teachers would go for the uniform for a reason, some people have a deep suspicion of their fellow men and women. Essentially, they have a deep suspicion of democracy because they think that ordinary people do not have high-quality, good reasons when they vote. They believe that they are not able and should not be let out or trusted to make important decisions that have consequences for the men and women with whom they share their country. They may just go for the cool option rather than have a good reason for going for one option rather than another. In other words, it is quite an elitist interpretation of democracy that some people who are basically cleverer than others will have a better grasp of the details, perspectives and evidence so that they can make a good decision. Ordinary people will not be able to make a high-quality democratic decision, will not understand things properly and will not have enough knowledge. Particularly, they will not vote on the basis of what they are supposed to be voting on. In other words, you can have a referendum on something to do with the European Union, but the people may not vote on the basis of the particular issue that they are supposed to be voting on. That is the concern. They may vote on some other kind of issue. Particularly, they may use a referendum simply as a device to protest against their domestic Government. Stuff to do with domestic party politics may take over rather than things that are to do with what they are supposed to be voting about. They just go for the cool option, or they go for what the most popular boy or girl in the class says. In other words, they will be driven by what certain people advocate. If their favoured political party advocates that they vote yes or no, people may just blindly follow party lines.

If you take these interpretations seriously, you would be concerned about having referendums on anything, and particularly, given this example, you would be concerned about having referendums on aspects of the European Union. You would not see it as an example of high-quality democracy, because, if it was, people would not just vote to protest against their Government or follow the party line but would engage in deliberation on the particular issues at play.

I have been involved in research projects over the past few years that have tried to identify which of those two contrasting interpretations is more consistent with the evidence regarding what motivates people when they vote at referendum time. Which of the two interpretations is correct?

I have looked at the case of the Republic of Ireland, which is great fun to look at, because it has lots of referendums on stuff to do with Europe. They often come up with the wrong answer. They vote no when they are supposed to vote yes, and we have to keep asking them until they vote yes. It is great fun, and there are loads of referendums. I have been involved in studies of three referendums in recent times: on the Nice treaty, the Lisbon treaty and, most recently, the fiscal compact treaty. I want to summarise briefly what lessons we may learn from an examination of the motivations of voters in those three cases and what light that can shed on the two interpretations that I started out with.

The Nice treaty was rejected in the first referendum and then passed in the second referendum. The important point to note about those two referendum campaigns is that the second campaign was very different from the first one, not just because the answer was different — from a no vote to a yes vote — but because the nature of the campaign itself was different. The first campaign was characterised — correctly, I think — as a very lacklustre and sleepy campaign in which not much happened at all. The media were not interested, the politicians were not interested, and everyone felt that they were sleepwalking into an inevitable yes vote. There was none of the rough and tumble argy-bargy of a usual, good fun referendum campaign with both sides engaged in a great battle.

The second campaign — Nice II — was, relative to the first, a very intense campaign, evidenced by the fact that senior politicians got out and actively campaigned and the media became much more interested. On the basis of survey evidence, people had a lot more knowledge in Nice II than they had in Nice I. They certainly responded in surveys to say that they found media coverage to be much more helpful to them in understanding the issues in the second campaign than it was during the first one. That had an important effect on my evaluation of the relative strengths of the two interpretations that I started out with. On the basis of analysing survey evidence for Nice I and Nice II, I found that one interpretation was stronger than the other at both time points. In other words, people's views on substantive issues relating to the EU were very strong predictors of how they voted. So, if you were pro-European and had a pro-European view on the relevant issues in the campaign, you would vote accordingly, and, if you had a contrary set of beliefs, you would vote against. There was evidence for the other type of interpretation: if you hated the Government, you voted no to give them a black eye. There was also evidence of people voting in line simply with party preferences. There was evidence for both those interpretations at two time points. However, strikingly, with Nice II, there was an awful lot of evidence for the substantive issues interpretation. The fact that the campaign was of high intensity made issues relating to the European Union the main thing that drove people's voting. In other words, the point is that you cannot really blame voters if they do not vote properly on the basis of EU issues. It is difficult for them to do so unless an incredibly vibrant campaign is waged by politicians and the media. That raises the salience or relative importance of substantive issues, relative to the other interpretation, which is just voting for the cool option, as a protest vote or in line with your party.

My point is that intense campaigning is important. If politicians or the policy community are worried about voters voting properly — i.e. voting on the basis of European issues in a European referendum — one way to make that happen is to make sure that the campaign works properly and is actually about those issues. Only when people make an effort to have a vibrant campaign on the relevant issues will the potency or salience of the reasons for voting in the first place be raised.

The second referendum that I want to talk about is the referendum on the Lisbon treaty. One of the aspects that I looked at was trying to unpack what is meant by "voting properly". We say that voting properly in an EU referendum is voting on the basis of EU-related issues, but what does that actually mean? One way to unpack that is to talk about EU issues as consisting of two levels. The first is fundamental ideological disposition towards the European Union: in other words, you are fundamentally opposed to the dilution of your state's sovereignty and, therefore, do not like the European Union because it is all about the pooling of sovereignty, or you are fundamentally in agreement with the pooling of sovereignty because you think that important decisions that affect us all at an international level should be made at an international level. There is a fundamental ideological

interpretation. As distinct from that, you can talk about precise individual issues that will be of relevance in a particular campaign. In Ireland or anywhere, that could take the form of particular economic issues, such as those to do with taxation, or particular cultural issues, such as the impact on the law on homosexuality or abortion in Ireland, or defence issues, such as whether your county is going to be more militarised or whatever. In other words, there are particular issues relating to the particular EU campaign, and those should be seen differently from fundamental attitudes towards the regional integration project.

One thing to consider is whether you view one interpretation of issue voting as more democratic than another. Do you think voting on the basis of a fundamental ideological disposition towards the European Union is what should happen in a referendum campaign, or do you think that your fundamental ideological disposition is not what is really important and what should be really important are the precise EU-related issues that are relevant and pertinent to that particular campaign? In other words, some people can have a suspicion of ideological voting, because, if you simply vote ideologically on the basis of a fundamental belief system, you could be seen as dodging your responsibility to engage in the precise and particular issues at play in a given referendum campaign context. Accordingly, other people would say that you have to grapple with the precise issues. In an EU referendum campaign, like any referendum campaign, typically you are not voting on a fundamental issue: you are voting on a particular treaty or on a particular way of changing your relationship with the European Union.

When studying voting on the Lisbon treaty — part I and part II — I tried to unpack what was of relative importance in the minds of voters when they were voting. In so far as they voted properly — on substantive issue grounds — was their voting a function of their ideological view about Europe or of their view of a precise set of distinct issues that were relevant to the particular campaign? What did I find? Lee would not let me put up any regression table, so I didn't. You will just have to believe me that this is true. The papers, which are very long, tedious and boring and are full of numbers, are on my web page if anyone is interested. The Lisbon treaty like the Nice treaty was rejected the first time around in Ireland and passed the second time around. In the survey evidence that I analysed from a survey that was commissioned directly after each referendum, I assessed the relative importance of ideological motivation and specific issue-related motivation. The answer was that specific issues were more important than fundamental ideological disposition. What does one make of that, if one wants to live in a high-quality democracy? One could say, on foot of that, that, first, it seems to suggest that voters vote on the basis of substantive issues rather than protest voting or simply following the party line. Secondly, not only do they vote on the basis of substantive issues, but they do not seem to primarily rely on a fundamental ideological knee-jerk reaction and rather engage with and vote on the basis of their position on the specific issues relating to the particular referendum campaign at the time. You might think that that is evidence in favour of the argument that having referendums on the EU work and are consistent with the particular view of what a high-quality democracy in action should be.

I wanted to unpack these motivations a little bit more in a further study of how Irish people voted in the referendum on the fiscal treaty most recently. As is fairly well known, Ireland is bankrupt and had to get a bailout from the EU and other people who had bags of money and were happy to give it. So, there was a financial crisis in Ireland, and one of the ways of alleviating not only the Irish crisis but the financial mess in Europe was the fiscal compact treaty, which I will come on to in a minute, because it is not on the slide; one should always talk about what is on one's slide. In relation to a study on the fiscal compact treaty, I am going to test the following interpretation of the conditions under which people vote on substantive grounds or non-substantive grounds.

My opening argument was that there are two interpretations of voting. One is the high-quality one on the basis of substantive issues and another is a low-quality one on the basis of protest voting or following the party line. One could ask, "Under what conditions are people likely to do one thing or another thing?". One could imagine that one could be one kind of voter or another kind of voter, depending on one's mood. There is increasing interest in the study of political behaviour in the relationship between emotions and cognition — between rationality and feeling. Typically, those things are seen as distinct and contradictory. It is thought that feelings and emotions get in the way of calm reflection and deliberation and there is a contrast between the two. However, a lot of recent work in political psychology has tried to figure out the emotional conditions under which people are most likely to deliberate; in other words, what kind of mood do you have to be in in order to behave properly as a democrat? What kind of emotional state triggers or facilitates people to calmly reflect on the evidence during a campaign and vote accordingly?

One group of scholars has tried to disentangle the consequences of two distinct negative emotions — anger and fear — and have argued that, essentially, anxious people make good democrats and angry people make bad democrats. I am caricaturing a little bit, but you get the point. If you are anxious, scared or fearful, the argument is that anxiety and fear are a function of you somehow identifying a novel threat in your environment. If you perceive subconsciously, somehow or other, that there is some threat to your security and well-being in your environment, you become scared. Once you become scared, something happens in your head — I am not going to go into the technical biological details — and the usual way that you behave stops. The usual way that we behave is on the basis of habit. We do the same thing repeatedly. We behave today the same way as we behaved yesterday. If you are scared, you stop doing that, because, in order to survive, once you become scared you have to deal with a perceived novel threat in your environment that could do you great harm, so you go into learning mode. You seek new information and calmly reflect on it, because your top priority is to use all available information in order to minimise the threat to you from the new threat in your environment. So, if you make people scared, they will behave like proper democrats. What do proper democrats do? They gather up relevant information and rationally make decisions on the basis of that information to avoid negative consequences and attain positive consequences. The opposite happens if you make people angry. Anger is said to trigger past-oriented thinking rather than future-oriented thinking and threat avoidance. If you make people angry, they go into a moral mode, apparently, and they want to apportion blame and to punish.

If you map that distinction onto what happens in a referendum on the European Union, the departure hypothesis is that, if you have a referendum on the European Union under conditions of crisis, lots of voters will perceive themselves to be in an unusual position and will see the referendum or the EU treaty as a potential threat or rejection of the treaty as a potential threat. In other words, an unusual crisis-like situation is likely to spark an awful lot of fear and anxiety. That is exactly the situation that was at play in the Irish referendum on the fiscal compact treaty. Ireland was in a really bad way — basically bankrupt — and not terribly far away from having no money in the ATMs and no salaries to pay nurses, not far away at all. It was very credible and plausible that that situation could have been coming down the line.

The argument of the people in favour of passing that European Union treaty was "You'd better do this, or the future will be awful". They were scaring people. The people who were campaigning against it were saying, "Look at the mess that the political parties left us in. You need to get angry, and you need to blame them. Once you blame people for the mess, you need to punish them. How do you punish them? You go out and vote against this thing, because they want you to pass it. All the baddies want you to vote yes. You need to be angry at them and reject it". The other pro people were saying, "You need to be really scared about rejecting this, because the future will be terrible. You need to reflect calmly on the consequences of this".

Again, I will not show any tables, so you will just have to believe me on this. When you analyse evidence from surveys that were conducted after the fiscal compact treaty, you see an interaction between emotional trait and motivation for voting. In other words, it was indeed the case that scared people voted on the basis of issues relating to the treaty and angry people did not. Angry people voted simply on the basis of protesting against the Government and voting along their party lines. The question then becomes not whether people will vote according to theory A or according to theory B but rather this: under what conditions will people vote properly on the basis of issues, and under what conditions will people vote not properly, i.e. on the basis of simply blaming the Government or running along party lines? One's emotional trait at the time has a lot of potential to drive that. The implication of that for people running campaigns is that, rather than trying to get people to vote in a certain way on the basis of certain issues or directly blaming the Government, if they can manipulate people's emotion state, that will trigger a desire to blame and punish or a desire to learn. So, the slightly counterintuitive conclusion from this is that it is OK to scare people because that will make them good democrats: anxious voters are democrats, but angry voters are not. That is not necessarily my interpretation, but it is consistent with what I have just said. I am not advocating that people go out scare the life out of everyone. I probably would, if there were not a camera in front of me, but there is a camera in front of me, so I will not.

What has all this got to do with Northern Ireland? My basic departure question could well be asked in relation to Northern Ireland. If there were a referendum on the EU or EU-related matters in Northern Ireland, would it be a good thing? Would it facilitate or encourage high-quality democratic engagement? In other words, would people think about the relevant issues and vote accordingly, or would they simply vote to protest against the Government or vote along party lines? A slightly different way to ask that in relation to Northern Ireland is as follows: would people vote properly on the

basis of consideration of the issues, or would they just vote the way that they always do? Would people in Northern Ireland vote on ethnonational lines, the usual reasons for voting?

If you are advocating having a referendum in Northern Ireland on EU issues, you might say, "We will not do that because, whenever you give people a chance to vote in Northern Ireland, they just vote on the basis of whether they are unionist or nationalist or Catholic or Protestant. They will not even think about the EU issue. It is a waste of time. The ethnonational distinction is so firmly embedded that you cannot overcome that with referendums on anything". I would caution against that interpretation. I was involved in a study that analysed how people in Northern Ireland voted in the 2004 European Parliament election. What emerged from that was that Northern Ireland citizens did in fact rely on their disposition towards the European Union and European Union integration when they were voting. The big caveat is that that was only Catholics, not Protestants. That is an important caveat, because it was only in the nationalist party competition that the two parties offered a clear choice in relation to the European issue. Sinn Féin is very different from the SDLP on matters relating to the European Union. The SDLP likes Europe; Sinn Féin is very sceptical. In contrast, in the unionist bloc, there is not a whole bunch of difference between the DUP and the UUP.

One would imagine that, in a European Parliament election, if it were to work properly, stuff to do with Europe should drive voting. It does, in relation to Catholics' choice between the SDLP and Sinn Féin. What is important there is that that suggests that voters will vote on the basis of Europe, if parties offer a choice. Nationalist parties offered voters the choice between a pro-Europe party and an anti-Europe party. The unionist parties did not offer people a real choice, because there was not much difference between them. That cautions against blaming voters for not doing things properly. What you have to get right is the choice that voters are offered. In that European Parliament election, when voters were offered a choice and the issue of the EU was made salient by it being a European Parliament campaign, rather than a Northern Ireland Assembly campaign, people did vote properly, in the sense that they voted on the basis of EU issues. The implication of that for having an EU referendum in Northern Ireland and wondering whether it would be consistent with high-quality democratic engagement is that there is at least some scope for it to play a distinct and independent role, as evidenced by the European Parliament study that I just mentioned, particularly when the context makes it important and a clear choice is provided. Arguably, following what I said earlier, in an EU referendum, the more vibrant the campaign, the more likely it is that matters relating to the substantive issue — Europe — would actually become potent and be talked about by politicians, covered by the media and, therefore, understood and reflected on by voters. If the choice were clear, as it probably would be in a referendum — it is either yea or nay — I would, on balance, if I had to bet on it, suggest that it would probably be a good idea and would lead to voters being motivated to behave on foot of their substantive beliefs rather than simply doing what they usually do, which is to vote on ethnonational lines.

I will leave it there.

Dr McGowan: Thank you very much, John.