

SPECIAL REPORT

Brezhnev in Dublin

By Doug Bandow on 8.18.09 @ 6:07AM

The so-called Brezhnev Doctrine is at work in the European Union. "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is negotiable," runs the line. When it comes to the EU, any vote to increase authority in Brussels is viewed as final. Any vote against consolidating power is treated as merely temporary.

It's the attitude towards Ireland, which in June 2008 voted to reject the Lisbon Treaty. Since the agreement requires unanimous agreement, the referendum theoretically killed the attempt to expand the EU's authority. However, the European elite viewed the setback as only temporary and insisted that Ireland vote again. Dublin will hold a revote on October 2.

The lack of obvious practical benefits of a consolidated government in Brussels for most Europeans has not prevented the development of a strong elite consensus behind Lisbon. Roger Cole, head of the Irish Peace and Neutrality Alliance, argues bluntly: "The EU political elite supports the treaty because it continues to transfer power away from the people and their own national democratic institutions to themselves and their institutions, the Council of Ministers, the European Court of Justice and the parliament."

Toward this end the Swedish think tank Timbro estimates that the EU spends several billion dollars annually promoting an expanded EU. Lorraine Mullally of the London-based think tank Open Europe explains: The European Commission increasingly "sees itself not just as 'guardian of the Treaties,' but as a political campaign group."

There are few dissenting public voices. Former Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek admitted: "This treaty is bad and we know it." But he said he felt he had no choice but to support Lisbon: "If we hadn't signed the Lisbon Treaty and had been pushed to the sidelines of the European Union we would have had no chance of promoting our national interests. That's the main reason. It was the lesser of two evils."

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are no more willing than anyone else to debate popular dissatisfaction with a consolidated government. Hans-Gert Poettering, the last president of the European Parliament (EP), even advocated locking out anti-federalists: "I think it is very important that the pro-European MEPs cooperate well so the anti-Europeans cannot make their voices heard so strongly."

The difference between popular and elite attitudes is stark. An Open Europe poll from 2007 found that roughly 75 percent of Europeans -- with a clear majority in every nation -- wanted to vote on any new treaty transferring power to Brussels. EU Internal Markets Commissioner (Ireland's representative on the European Commission) Charlie McCreevy argued, undoubtedly with some hyperbole, that European leaders "know quite well that if the question was put to their electorate by a referendum the answer in 95 percent of the countries would probably have been No as well." In fact, polls suggest that Lisbon would fail in about half of the EU members.

No wonder former French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing, who played a leading role in drafting the original constitution, opined: "Above all, it is to avoid having referendums."

Twenty-six of 27 EU member states have approved Lisbon by parliamentary vote, usually backed by both the main governing and opposition parties. In Ireland, however, the constitution required a referendum on the treaty. And last June the measure went down to defeat.

Oops.

Although the treaty theoretically was dead, supporters assumed that eventual approval was inevitable: the only question was how?

Ironically, the pro-treaty lobby, which had designed the process to eliminate public input, expressed its democratic outrage over the result. A British Labour MP complained that the Irish had "become extremely arrogant." Britain's Lord Mark Malloch-Brown grandly declared that "I am not sure whether the voters of Ireland should have a right of veto over the aspirations of all the other people of Europe. I am not sure whether that is, or is not, democracy."

Spanish EU Commissioner Joaquin Almunia claimed that it is not "very democratic" to hold a referendum on complicated issues like the Lisbon Treaty. German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaueble declared: "a few million Irish cannot decide on behalf of 495 million Europeans."

Some Treaty advocates proposed throwing Ireland out of the EU or relegating the country to associate status. Most, however, preferred to pressure Dublin to hold another poll, as it had after Irish voters turned down another treaty in 2001 before ratifying it in a second vote.

The Irish government has set a repeat vote for October 2. To sweeten the pot, so to speak, other European governments have promised several future concessions, allowing Ireland to retain its national commissioner and opt out of a European foreign policy. After the recent EU summit, Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen claimed: "We came here with two aims. Ireland wanted firm legal guarantees. We got them. We wanted a commitment to a protocol. We got that."

Well, kind of. Last December Irish Foreign Minister Micheál Martin stated that "we will not be asking people to vote on the same proposition." But what Dublin received was the promise of future action, not present amendments. Irish Socialist MEP Joe Higgins acknowledged: the guarantee process is "an elaborate charade. The so-called guarantees are simply designed to throw dust in the eyes of ordinary people in Ireland to give them the impression that something fundamental has been changed in the Lisbon Treaty," thereby making people think they will be voting on a different document when "It is exactly the same text, word by word, not even a comma has been changed."

Similarly, explains Open Europe's Lorraine Mullally: "Despite lengthy negotiations and lots of superficial statements about 'respecting' the Irish 'no' vote, not a single comma has changed -- if there were any changes at all to the Treaty, then all the other member states would have to re-ratify it. None of the statements made [at the EU summit] are binding in EU law. But even if they were, they do nothing to address Irish concerns."

Treaty advocates argue otherwise, of course. Given its difficulty in selling the treaty, the Irish government is attempting to turn the treaty referendum into a vote on membership in the EU. Jim O'Hara, CEO of Intel Ireland, added: "People don't understand the economic catastrophe that could unfold if we don't get a 'Yes' vote." But few critics of Lisbon want to leave the EU. Since the EU appears to be working as is, they simply see no reason to expand the EU's authority.

The betting is that Lisbon will carry the second time around. (If it doesn't, threatened one German Socialist MEP, Ireland will face "isolation" and "second class" status.) Still, nothing is guaranteed. British MEP Daniel Hannan writes of an Irish friend who told him: "we didn't fight off the might of the British Empire just so as to be bossed about by the Belgians."

Moreover, the Czech and Polish presidents have to yet to sign off on the agreement and if the Tories win next year's election in Britain, they might use a future treaty as an opportunity to demand their own concessions, *à la* the Irish. And if the Conservatives come to power -- which is as certain as anything in politics -- before the Lisbon process is completed, they are likely to reverse the Labour government's ratification.

Only the Europeans can decide on the EU's future. Timothy Garton Ash wrote in the *Guardian* of "the essential grandeur of this project we call the European Union, where nations born in so much blood work together freely in a commonwealth of democracies." He is right, but his argument actually works against the Lisbon Treaty, or at least the current ratification process, which excludes the people forced to live under the resulting government. Declares Roger Cole: "This referendum is not an Irish battle. It is a European battle fought on Irish soil, a battle between the peoples of Europe that support democracy and the elite of Europe that want an empire."

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics (Crossway)*.