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The E.U. elite vs. the people

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WHEN IT COMES to the European Union, any vote to increase authority in Brussels is viewed as final. Any vote against consolidating power is treated as merely temporary. The people should beware.

In June 2008, Ireland voted to reject the Lisbon Treaty. Since the agreement requires unanimous agreement, the referendum theoretically killed the attempt to expand the E.U.'s authority. However, the European elite viewed the setback as only temporary and insisted that Ireland vote again. Dublin will hold a revote on Oct. 2.

There is a strong establishment consensus behind Lisbon. Roger Cole, head of the Irish Peace and Neutrality Alliance, argues bluntly: The E.U. 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 Swedish think tank Timbro estimates that the E.U. spends several billion dollars annually promoting an expanded E.U. Complains Lorraine Mullally, of the London-based think tank Open Europe: 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. 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. Lisbon likely would fail in about half of the E.U. member states.

No wonder former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who played a leading role in drafting the original constitution, opined about the need to avoid having referendums.

Twenty-six of 27 E.U. members 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.

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. Spanish E.U. 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 E.U. or relegating the country to associate status. Most, however, preferred to pressure Dublin to hold another poll.

To sweeten the pot, so to speak, other European governments have promised several future concessions. Yet last December Irish Foreign Minister Michael Martin stated that we will not be asking people to vote on the same proposition.

What Dublin received, however, was the promise of future action, not present amendments. Irish Socialist MEP Joe Higgins acknowledged: The guarantee process is an elaborate charade. Similarly, explains Open Europe's Mullally: Despite lengthy negotiations and lots of superficial statements about respecting the Irish no vote, not a single comma has changed.

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. If Britain's Conservatives come to power before the Lisbon process is completed, they are likely to reverse the Labor government's ratification.

Only the Europeans can decide on the E.U.'s future. Timothy Garton Ash wrote in Britain's Guardian newspaper 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.

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