

More Effective

- It creates a new post of High Representative for Foreign Policy who will be a Vice-President of the Commission as well as being Chair of the Council of Foreign Affairs Ministers thereby bringing greater coherence and effectiveness on international affairs. The EU can request the High Representative to speak for us on the UN Security Council.
- It provides for more qualified majority voting (QMV) by Ministers, thereby improving decision-making within Council. From 2014, a new European law must win the support of at least 15 Member States, comprising two-thirds of the EU's population, but can be vetoed by four countries. The main advantages of QMV is that it makes the Council's decisions subject to amendment and even to a veto by MEPs and ensures that all member states must engage in negotiations to achieve a result rather than use national vetoes.
- It gives the EU a 'single legal personality', which will enable it to ratify international treaties such as the European Convention on Human Rights.
- It enables the EU to develop energy, tourism, sport, and space policies.
- It makes it easier for groups of countries to agree policies among themselves (i.e. 'enhanced cooperation') if no agreement can be found among all 27 Member States. Those who disagree will not be covered by such decisions, but may join in at any time.

Not a Centralised 'Super-state'

- It specifies that Europe can only do what Member States authorise it to do, that their national identities and essential state functions must be respected, and that all Member States must be treated equally. For instance Ireland's policy on war and military neutrality cannot be overturned by the EU.
- It provides for the election of the European Council President with a 30-month term of office, thereby providing a more coherent European voice for the institution which provides political direction for the EU.
- It caps the number of Commissioners at two-thirds the number of Member States (i.e. 18), with equal rotation of Commissioners between all countries. Each country will nominate a commissioner for two out of every three five-year terms. This reform will not come into effect until 2014 at the earliest.
- The legally binding Charter of Fundamental Rights will ensure that the EU in its decision-making cannot undermine rights commonly accepted across Europe.
- Unanimity will be retained for decisions on sensitive issues such as taxation, social security, foreign policy etc.
- It facilitates the continuation of Ireland's respected role in military missions under UNO mandates and respects the application of Ireland's national 'Triple Lock' mechanism regarding such missions.
- It introduces a new procedure that allows countries to voluntarily leave the EU if they wish.

Conclusion

The Lisbon Reform Treaty provides the improvements that are needed to ensure a Europe of 27 countries works more effectively, with greater democracy and with a stronger social engagement. The new Treaty brings to an end the last seven years' of navel-gazing. It will mean a Europe that is better able to meet the challenges facing us in today's globalising world.

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YES to the Lisbon Reform Treaty ...for a better Europe

Why Europe?

As a progressive and internationalist party, Labour supports Ireland's full participation in the European Union. First and foremost, Europe provides an area of peace, stability and prosperity. It helped reconcile and rebuild the countries of Western Europe after WW2 and it consolidated the transition to democracy in the southern Mediterranean in the 1970s and in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. It is now seeking to help in the Balkans and in Turkey.

Europe has been crucial in the modernisation and transformation of Irish society over the thirty years of our membership. European funding, the Euro and open access to Europe's market, have played and continue to play a central part in Ireland's economic development and employment growth.

Europe is about working together in the Common Interest

Being a member of the European Union where all states are equal is even more essential for Ireland today if we are to cope successfully with globalisation. By working together and establishing common laws European countries can achieve what is not possible through national action alone - on climate change, regulating multinationals, working conditions, and cross-border crime etc. In clearly defined circumstances, it is in our best interests to go beyond mere cooperation and to pool our sovereignty with our European partners. In such areas it is logical that domestic law should reflect the decisions we have agreed to at European level. Obvious examples are the establishment of higher environmental standards and clean drinking water. It makes sense too for Europe to represent us all, on an agreed mandate, in the WTO negotiations. These are key distinctions between Labour and those who remain wedded to an outdated concept of absolute national sovereignty.

Why the Reform Treaty?

None of this is to suggest that the European Union is as democratic as it should be, nor as effective as it should be in protecting the well-being of all our citizens. In our work as a party in the Oireachtas and in the European Parliament, where we constantly demand reform and where we have contributed to creating a more democratic and socially engaged Europe. We were the originators of the proposal for the National Forum on Europe and for Oireachtas scrutiny of European issues. We participated fully in the European Convention process, which produced the European Constitution. The Convention on the future of Europe was established in February 2002 and consisted of 200 democratically elected parliamentarians from 27 European countries, representing nearly all of Europe's political 'families'. Meeting in public and consulting widely with civic society, the Convention was the first time such an open process had been used to draft changes to the Treaties. The Convention presented a draft Constitutional Treaty in July 2003, which was subsequently approved in 2004 by all member state governments under the Irish Presidency.

18 countries ratified that treaty, including Luxembourg and Spain by referendum. However a treaty requires ratification by all member states and it fell because two states, France and the Netherlands rejected it. This plunged the EU into a deep malaise, heightening distrust between member state governments, thereby making it difficult to carry on with day-to-day business. Following a two-year period of reflection at all levels the German Presidency, followed by the Portuguese Presidency negotiated a compromise text between the 18 states, which had already ratified the constitution, the two, which had rejected it, and the remaining seven, which either continued to support it or wanted some changes to it.

The Parliament was represented by 3 MEPs in the Inter-governmental Conference which concluded the Reform Treaty. MEP Enrique Baron-Crespo of Spain represented the Party of European Socialists. During this process they represented the citizens of Europe and ensured that the democratic, social and environmental elements of the convention texts were retained. The MEPs fought successfully to ensure that the European Charter of Fundamental Rights would be legally binding. Some symbolic elements were removed: the anthem, the flag, the title of Foreign Minister, etc. However one significant change was the removal of a reference to 'free and undistorted competition' as a goal of the Union, which the French electorate had found most objectionable. The text also confirms the unique 'confederal' nature of the Union. That is to say that 'states and people' are at the core of its decision-making.

The resulting Reform Treaty, finalised in Lisbon has to be ratified by all member states in accordance with their own constitutional requirements before it can come into effect. If these treaty reforms are rejected by any Member State there will inevitably be a deep crisis in the Union and it is difficult to see how the Union could then survive in its current form.

Labour values and objectives

Labour supports the Lisbon Reform Treaty, which replaces the now defunct Constitution. It contains the significant democratic and social policy gains, which we and our sister parties, in the Party of European Socialists, achieved in the European Convention. To reject it would leave us with the existing treaties, which are inadequate for the progressive policy agenda we wish to pursue for Ireland and Europe.

Under the Lisbon Reform Treaty:

- The progressive values upon which the Union will be based are close to Labour's values - respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including minorities, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, equality between women and men, and solidarity.
- The objectives it outlines are close to Labour's aims - to promote peace and the well-being of its peoples, to offer its citizens an area of freedom, security and justice, to work for sustainable development based on balanced economic growth, stable prices, a competitive social market economy, full employment and social progress; to promote environmental protection, the combating of social exclusion and discrimination, social justice and protection, gender equality, inter-generational solidarity, and the rights of the child; to promote balanced development and cohesion, to respect cultural and linguistic diversity and to protect Europe's cultural heritage. In its relations with the wider world, its aims are peace, security, sustainable development, solidarity and mutual respect among people, free and fair trade, the eradication of poverty, the protection of human rights, particularly the rights of the child, the strict observance and the development of the rule of law and respect for the UN Charter.

More Democratic

- The Reform Treaty gives a greater role for the Oireachtas and other national parliaments in screening new proposals. If nine parliaments believe a proposal breaches the subsidiarity principle, whereby decisions must be taken as close as possible to the citizen, the Commission must explain it further or table a redraft. If 15 have such concerns and if either half the Member States or MEPs agree, the proposal falls.
- 95% of European laws, including justice and home affairs issues for the first time, become subject to amendment or veto by MEPs ('co-decision').
- It provides for greater transparency by insisting that national ministers meeting in Council must meet in public when discussing and adopting laws.
- All EU spending, including agricultural spending for the first time, must be approved by MEPs.
- It provides for a 'Citizens Initiative' whereby one million EU citizens can request action by the EU in areas of EU competence.
- It provides for the election of the European Commission President and the appointment of the Commission by the European Parliament. EU Prime Ministers will continue to nominate the candidate for Commission President but must take account of the political balance arising from the preceding European Parliament elections (e.g. if the Socialist Group emerges as the largest group in the EP after the June 2009 elections, the next nominee for Commission President is likely to be a socialist). These changes will make it clear that the Commission is not an 'unaccountable bureaucracy' but an executive dependent on the continued confidence of MEPs, who can dismiss it.
- It ensures that small countries like Ireland will continue to enjoy a disproportionate weight within the Council and the Parliament.
- It provides for regular talks between the European level Social Partners and for a structured dialogue between the EU and civic society, including religious and non-confessional organisations.

More Socially Progressive

It makes the European Charter of Fundamental Rights legally binding for all decisions made by EU institutions and agencies and on Member States when implementing European policy. The UK has opted out of the Charter.

- It introduces new, binding cross-cutting clauses on social policy, equality, environmental protection and consumer protection, which must be taken into account when making EU laws and policies.
- It provides for the first time a clear legal basis for European laws to protect public services - a long-standing demand of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament and the European Trade Union Congress, to which the ICTU is affiliated.
- It enables the EU to ratify the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.
- It adds the fight against climate change to the EU's environmental objectives.
- It brings EU action in the field of justice and home affairs under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (from 2014) and subject to the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The new Treaty permits Ireland to opt out of, or into, judicial cooperation on criminal matters and policing cooperation, so it does not undermine our common law system.
- It ensures that national governments can continue to grant state aid to promote regional development, and employment, social and environmental objectives.