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Ambassador's Corner

WEEKLY MESSAGE FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN BRUTON May 22, 2007 Exercising the Franchise

Today I am going back for a day to Ireland to cast my vote in Dunboyne National School in the 2007 Irish General Election. This will have been the first Irish national election in over forty years in which I will not have been an active campaigner. My first outing was in the 1966 Presidential Election when I addressed emerging church-goers in county Meath without the aid of a microphone.

Much has changed in that time. Like everything else, politics has become more expensive. When I started out on the road myself in 1969, a candidate needed little resources. Volunteer effort by party members and a few party posters were the main communicators of the message. All I needed was a small car and a full tank of gasoline. Nowadays not only do national and local parties have to raise large sums, but individual candidates within parties feel they too have to have their individual fundraising operations – something quite unknown until the 1980's.

There is still one big difference from the United States. Because paid political advertising on television and radio is banned in Ireland, the biggest political expense of all is saved.

The Irish and American Supreme Courts have different interpretations of the constitutional requirements for free speech. Paid political TV and radio advertisements are not considered to be among the constitutionally required forms of free speech in Ireland. When I read what it costs to run even a modest political campaign here, I sometimes wonder whether the US Supreme Court will be interested in Irish jurisprudence on this matter. There will be one big change in the life of the person elected Taoiseach of Ireland after this week's Irish election. Unlike every predecessor since 1965, he will not have to devote 50% of his time to Northern Ireland.

That is the proportion of my time I spent on that subject as Taoiseach between 1994 and 1997, but now, thanks to conclusion of a powersharing agreement similar in many respects to the one agreed at Sunningdale back in 1974, the internal governance of Northern Ireland will be primarily the concern of politicians elected in Northern Ireland itself.

I hope that some of the additional time the Taoiseach of the day will now have available will be devoted to the European Union, where so much work is now done by the twenty-seven-member European Council, where heads of Government meet twice a year. As the membership of the Council has enlarged, behind the scenes work between meetings has become much more important. That is when coalitions are built and ideas developed. Building relations on a daily or weekly basis with the other 26 members and with the European Commission is now a huge part of the daily work of any EU Head of Government.

The tools of Modern Diplomacy

The European Union proved its value to Member States and the wider international community last week when [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel [far left] and [European Commission President] José Manuel Barroso [far right, with Russian President Vladimir Putin in center] conveyed a clear message of EU solidarity with Poland, Lithuania and Estonia in their current arguments with the Russian federation.

While a military alliance can deploy a limited range of methods of persuasion, the European Union is a multidimensional institution, which can use cultural, economic, trade and other resources as well as the more traditional methods in a coordinated way. Positive incentives can be used, such as the very welcome visa facilitation arrangement entered into with Serbia last week in response to the formation of Government in Belgrade committed to integrating Serbia with its neighbours and with the European Union.

Globalisation – Good or Bad?

Last week [EU Economic and Monetary Affairs] Commissioner Joaquín Almunia made an interesting speech in Vienna on globalisation. He said that the benefit of globalisation outweighed its costs, but that we could do more than we do to help those adversely affected.

He identified the importance of education in determining whether one is a winner or a loser in globalisation.

In the European Union, 83% of those with high skills are in employment, 69% of those with medium skills have a job, but only 46% of those with low skills are at work. Education is the key here. It is not just a matter of how much one spends on education. Commissioner Almunia pointed out that Austria, Finland and Portugal each spend 5.6% of their GDP on education, but these three countries achieve radically different results in the PISA tests, which compare

competence in maths, reading and science. It is all about how well the money is spent, and about the motivation of students, parents and teachers.

I believe 100% literacy by the age of eight should be a goal of every educational system. If children cannot read properly by that age, it will be really difficult for them to catch up to a level where they could get one of the skills that would give them a chance of steady employment in later life. The years between five and eight are crucial, and I think that is where educational resources should be concentrated.

We should also have a look at whether employers sometimes use university degrees as an artificial means of screening out candidates from interviews, even when a university degree might have little relevance to the work to be done. After all, some of the greatest intellectual breakthroughs came from people who were self-taught and who had no "letters" at all after their name.

We should not forget that institutions of education can have interests of their own, which will not always be the same as those of society. External auditing of educational systems and constant questioning of educational assumptions are very important. We need to know what works and what does not work. We need to know what system of certification of skills is essential and what simply serves particular interests.

Getting the Law right – at last

The European Council of Ministers and the European Parliament reached agreement last week on common rules for settling civil disputes, which arise when a citizen of one EU country has a road accident in another EU state or when he or she buys a product--which was produced in another EU state and, perhaps, was bought in a shop in yet a third EU country--that causes injuries. The proposed agreement will determine which set of national laws will apply, and in which court the case should be heard.

All this is so commonsensical that it is disappointing to note that the EU has been trying to reach an agreement on these questions since 1972!

The trouble may be that this is an issue in the category that had to be agreed by unanimity by all twenty-seven countries. It is interesting that agreement was at last reached among twenty-seven states, even though it did not prove possible when there were only ten members in the EU!

These sorts of legal issues would be subject to majority voting if treaty changes proposed in the EU Constitution were to come with effect. That would speed things up.

Jean-David Levitte

It was a very pleasant surprise for me to learn that President Sarkozy has called upon my friend and colleague Ambassador Jean-David Levitte [UN photo, left] to serve as his National Security Advisor. During his time here since December 2002, Jean-David has been a very strong force in favour of development of close US-EU ties, and as such a huge help to the community of EU Member States Ambassadors and in particular to myself, upon my joining the club in November 2004. He also managed to maintain exceedingly positive, if always candid, relations with the highest US authorities, in Government and Congress, notwithstanding the very difficult period Franco - US relations went through in 2003-2004, about the war in Iraq. Jean-David has already left for Paris to help the French President set up his new security and foreign policy team at the Elysée, but will be back in DC in June. I sincerely hope to be able to express my appreciation to him personally then. Please send me your comments about this or any of my weekly messages or other EU matters. I look forward to hearing from you!