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News from Ireland

“Way back” in March, in the first of these columns, we gave a contributor’s view about how at that time a referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon could be forced on the British mainstream parties. [read] Three months later the Treaty has completed its passage through the British Parliament, and has been rejected in a referendum in the Republic of Ireland, and the possibility is revived.

Mr Brown must be hoping that the Treaty can somehow still be ratified by all 27 member states of the EU—the Irish forcefully advised to think again, as they did after their rejection of the Treaty of Nice, a protocol excluding Ireland, minor changes to the Treaty . . . —before the British general election, so that a referendum will not be an election issue. His wishes are unlikely to come true.

The British Conservative Party opposed the Treaty of Lisbon in the Commons and the Lords, but thanks to the *realpolitik* of the Liberal Democrats was unable to insert a clause requiring a referendum. In the new situation the degree of seriousness of the Conservative Party about the EU will become very clear.

If the Conservatives oppose the Treaty their most obvious move is to promise to denounce it if they are in power before the Treaty comes into force. To cancel a treaty which has been made by proper constitutional process only a couple of years earlier is a drastic measure. But the alternative, to promise a referendum, would have the same effect, though by shifting responsibility from Parliament to the electorate. So if they are really in earnest the Conservatives will promise to repeal the Act adopting the treaty if they come to power before the Treaty comes into effect. If they are half in earnest they will promise a referendum in the same circumstances. The latter would be almost as much of an embarrassment as the promise of outright repeal, for if there is actually to be a referendum the Conservatives will have to campaign for a NO vote, which one supposes they dread as a major EU upset, getting them into the black books of Merkel, Sarkozy and the rest, and with the even worse possibility of losing “credibility” at home if the answer is YES. If, as looks probable from a convenient distance, the Conservative leaders are privately relieved that the Treaty has finished its course through Parliament, and not in earnest at all about the opposition to it forced upon them by their “grass roots”, they will do nothing, with the solid support of New Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

The programme our first column offered to UKIP now looks much more practicable. The attractiveness to the Conservatives of an electoral pact with a party that can offer a million votes or so, in return for a promise of a suitably worded referendum and a clear run in a dozen seats, would be considerable *if* they are genuinely committed to opposition to the Treaty of Lisbon. And as before, the refusal of an electoral pact would allow UKIP to publicise the unseriousness of the Conservative Party at a time when votes count.

It does not follow that referendums are a good way of deciding great political questions. The real problem in this case is that the political elite has got so far from the electorate that democratic processes are putting the two at loggerheads. Practically, in this instance, a referendum looks like the only way of re-establishing any contact between governors and governed. The elites have the handy word *populist* for dealing with the ordinary people who disagree with them. A referendum is a populist measure. But if the system is democratic, maintain some link between the oligarchy and the governed, or expect the kind of steam to build up that has to be let off in a referendum. There has to be some degree of consent by the governed. Otherwise they get into the present vaguely disgruntled state of distrusting all politicians.

We shall soon know, anyway, whether to trust the Conservative Party.

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