

Tug of war between public and political elites: There is a gap ...

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Tug of war between public and political elites



KAREN DEVINE

There is a gap between what the Government thinks neutrality means and what some of the electorate think it means. Part II of this three-part examination of neutrality looks at divergent definitions of the policy, which are not unique to Ireland

DURING HIS nation’s independence struggle, Mahatma Gandhi said: “For me, every ruler is alien that defies public opinion.”

The question of whether, and in what circumstances, public opinion on foreign policy should be heeded by governments is the subject of a long-standing and evolving political and academic debate.

The previous article in this series on Irish neutrality highlighted some potential areas of conflict between government and the public, such as the transit of US troops through Shannon to the war in Iraq. This second article considers whether the Government, and indeed the governments of other neutral states in Europe, reflect or defy public opinion on neutrality against the background of the development of the European Union’s plans for a common defence.

Treaties containing proposals for deeper European integration have been put to a referendum in Ireland since the Supreme Court decision of April 9th, 1987, in the Crotty case. The court ruled that the foreign policy provisions in the Single European Act were far-reaching enough to infringe Irish sovereignty, specifically, the State’s freedom of action in foreign relations. The court ruled that the ratification of these provisions could only be achieved through an amendment to the Irish Constitution which requires the assent of the people through a referendum.

Since then, the people have rejected two referendum proposals, on the Nice and Lisbon treaties, despite vigorous campaigns in favour of the treaties by Irish governments, the three largest political parties, the broadcast and print media, business organisations, trade unions and farmers’ associations.

Post-referendum research has shown that neutrality is a consistent reason for voting against the Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon Treaties. Research published in September by the Department of Foreign Affairs showed that neutrality was the most divisive issue in the Lisbon Treaty referendum campaign. To understand the role neutrality plays in this latest divergence of opinion between the “elite” and a majority of the voting public, one needs to consider whether public and government concepts of neutrality differ, to the extent that they produce different, if not competing, foreign policy agendas.

Research based on the 2001/2002 Irish Social and Political Attitudes Survey (ISPAS) shows that the public’s concept of neutrality embodies the following characteristics: not being involved in wars, independence, impartiality, peace-promotion, non-aggression, the primacy of the UN and the confinement of State military activity to UN peacekeeping, not supporting “big powers”, and making independent foreign policy decisions, particularly in the context of “big power” pressure.

These elements reflect an “active” concept of neutrality, also known as “fundamental” or “positive” neutrality. Active neutrality constitutes a broad, normative, foreign policy agenda that is associated with a specifically “anti-realist” theoretical worldview.

This meaning of neutrality in public opinion is relatively stable over time. Surveys carried out in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s (*Irish*

Times/MRBI polls conducted in April 1985, May and June 1992 and the ISPAS 2001/2002) show that the three main elements of the public’s concept of neutrality are: (1) not getting involved in war; (2) independence/staying independent; (3) not taking sides in wars/remaining impartial.

They correlate strongly with the core elements of legal and political understandings of neutrality.

Successive Irish governments’ concept of neutrality contains just one characteristic: non-membership of a military alliance. This is referred to as “military” neutrality and is associated with a “realist” theoretical worldview.

In February 2003, the Government claimed that non-membership of military alliances is the central defining characteristic of Irish neutrality for the Irish people. However, the aforementioned surveys show that only 2 per cent of people conceive neutrality in this way.

Since Ireland joined the European Community in 1973, both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have defined Ireland’s neutrality as meaning military neutrality, although there were notable, intermittent instances when the two parties advocated active neutrality.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Fine Gael advocated a policy of fundamental neutrality through the party’s foreign affairs spokesperson Richie Ryan and argued against Ireland’s participation in a future common European defence. This party position was reversed in favour of the concept of military neutrality under Garret FitzGerald’s leadership and copperfastened with the appointment of James Dooge as minister for foreign affairs in 1982.

Fianna Fáil spoke in support of a fundamental concept of neutrality while in government during the Falkland Islands war in 1982. While in opposition, the party also appeared to advocate a positive concept of neutrality during debates on the Single European Act in 1986 and the Partnership for Peace in 1997. Shortly after regaining office, the party reverted to military neutrality.

These oscillations have weakened the credibility of political elites’ positions on neutrality compared with the public’s consistent support for active neutrality. This distinct cleavage between elite military neutrality and the broader, public-supported concept of active neutrality may reflect potentially divergent foreign policy agendas.

Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael envisaged that Ireland’s military neutrality would be waived in favour of joining a future EU common defence, differing only over the conditions under which this would happen.

However, both parties failed to impress upon the Irish public their view that membership of the European Economic Community (as the later-evolved EU was then known) and Irish neutrality were ultimately incompatible goals, possibly due to fears of a No vote in the 1973 accession referendum. In fact, debates on Irish neutrality and the security and defence policy implications of EEC membership were deliberately minimised during the 1973 referendum.

According to academic and media commentators, the issue did not play a central role in the referendum debate. In the Dáil debate on Irish membership of the EEC in March 1972, Patrick Hillery summarised: “When the taoiseach opened the debate, and I think it is clearly stated in the White Paper, he said that there are no military or defence commitments whatsoever in Ireland’s acceptance of the Treaties of Rome and Paris. Our obligations as a member of the communities will not entail such commitments.”

The Labour Party differed from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the 1970s and 1980s by advocating active neutrality and declaring that this neutrality was not negotiable and that it should be made clear to the European Community that Ireland would not give up neutrality for an eventual EC/EU common defence policy.

The comparative strength of this attachment can be understood in relation to the Labour Party’s view of active neutrality as a timeless political philosophy and policy that would always be relevant in a world dominated by great power politics.

By contrast, Fine Gael’s military neutrality was conceived solely in relation to the Cold War balance of power, which would become obsolete with the end of the Cold War.

Over the past 35 years of Ireland’s membership of the EEC, which grew, in turn, into the European Community and finally the EU, Irish parties have gradually moved from support for fundamental, active or positive neutrality to a limited military concept and



Illustration: Una Gildea

support for the development of a comprehensive European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

Fianna Fáil followed this path in the 1970s. Fine Gael converted in the 1980s. Labour took the same steps in the 1990s and, having entered into coalition government, the Green Party is approximating the same move in 2008. At present, the only party left supporting active Irish neutrality is Sinn Féin.

Parties in government have a monopoly over the interpretation and execution of a state’s concept of neutrality. A gap between the government interpretation and execution of neutrality and public policy preferences is problematic depending on whether one adheres to a maximalist or minimalist concept of democracy.

A minimalist concept provides the opportunity for the public to vote for political representatives every five years. Representatives, once elected, can follow their own policy agenda without recourse to public opinion; they simply await the verdict of the people at the next election.

The maximalist view of democracy incorporates an additional assumption of continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals. Even if elites accept the maximalist democratic concept in principle, grounds against fulfilling it in practice are put forward, for example, if public thinking on neutrality is deemed to be, as many elites see

it, “extraordinarily ill-defined”, “confused” and “emotional”.

There is an ongoing academic debate between liberal and realist thinkers over the role of public opinion and foreign policy since Kant and Bentham made their liberal-democratic argument that foreign policies of democracies are more peaceful because public opinion plays a part in constraining policy-makers.

Since the 1950s, the realist school has argued that the public are uninterested and ill-informed about foreign policy and as a consequence, the public’s responses are emotional and lack intelligence. In this view, public attitudes to foreign policy are unstable because they are not anchored in a set of explicit value and means calculations.

A new school of thought put forward the concept of the rational public in the 1990s, positing that, even though the general public may be rather poorly informed about the factual aspects of international affairs, attitudes about foreign affairs are in fact structured in moderately coherent ways.

This structure reflects underlying values and beliefs as, although people can be fuzzy about narrow, transient options, they are clear-sighted about their basic values.

Political scientists have sought to identify these high-level belief systems that are linked to a foreign policy posture or orientation (such as neutrality), which in turn orders preferences on specific foreign policy options

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(such as landings at Shannon or votes on EU defence proposals contained in the Lisbon Treaty).

Academic research published in 2008 has found that Irish people’s support for neutrality is structured according to two beliefs and values dimensions: “independence” and “patriotism”.

These results are understood in terms of the historical and cultural dynamics of Irish neutrality, which tie into the current values of anti-imperialism, non-aggression, sympathy with decolonised and developing nations, and support for UN peacekeeping in the public’s concept of active neutrality.

National identity and independence dimensions also underpin Swedish (Bjereld and Ekengren, 1999) and Austrian (Reinprecht and Latcheva in Wodak, 2003) public attitudes to neutrality. These values and beliefs relate respectively to the core of Swedish foreign policy emphasising active internationalism; support for the UN; a commitment to solidarity with the developing world; disarmament; peacekeeping and mediation; and the cornerstone of Austrian foreign policy of independence in security matters and an active peace policy, including a conflict mediation role and 40 years of participation in international peace operations.

If public opinion on neutrality is accepted as rational by academic standards, perhaps those elite assessments are better understood in the context of an agenda that sees neutrality as a problem in the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) agenda.

Perceptions of the incompatibility of active neutrality and the trajectory of the development of the ESDP explain why parties in government are accused of fudging the issue of neutrality: they are playing what political scientists call “a two-level game”.

In this “game”, parties in government attend to the “supra-state” level of the European Council and the demands from the larger member states such as France, Germany, Spain and the UK to achieve a maximalist EU defence policy agenda, and at the same time, face another set of largely incompatible demands from the “sub-state” level, stemming from the public’s active neutrality policy preferences.

Having agreed to the supra-state level

demands of ESDP, seen in the binding mutual security and defence commitments contained in the Lisbon Treaty, parties in government try to convince the sub-state constituency of public opinion that their neutrality agenda has been safeguarded through a combined strategy of minimising discussion of ESDP and reformulating concepts of military neutrality, in order to avoid punishment at the polls and to ensure EU treaty referendum amendments are passed.

These strategies, first employed by the Irish government, were adopted by the governments of other neutral states forced to play the same two-level game, caught between their constituencies of public opinion at home in favour of active neutrality and the demands at the EU level for a European common defence.

When Austrian foreign minister Alois Mock delivered his country’s application to join the EC in 1989, three-quarters of Austrians surveyed said they would not give up neutrality for the sake of accession to the EC. In a striking parallel to the Irish situation, an elite discourse attempted to reformulate the concept of neutrality to a limited military concept, so that membership of the EC and neutrality were seen as compatible.

In the run-up to the Austrian accession referendum in 1994, the terms of neutrality were left vague, or characterised as meaningless or requiring redefinition to be compatible with European security. The debate showed that understandings of neutrality differed remarkably between the people and the politicians.

The Carl Bildt-led coalition government in Sweden also undertook a redefinition of neutrality prior to Sweden’s referendum on accession to the EU.

Academics also identified discourses during the Swedish referendum on EU membership that tried to reinvent national ideals for people to identify with and to challenge the traditional understandings of Swedish identity with regard to neutrality, in efforts to turn European integration into a positive thing.

Finland had achieved global recognition through president Urho Kekkonen’s long-reigning (1956-1981) pursuit of active neutrality. In the early 1990s, membership of the EC was discussed at the elite level, although the March 1991 election was characterised by academics as a “conspiracy of silence on the EC issue”, particularly in relation to security policy implications.

Two months before the delivery of the Finnish application to join the EC in March 1992, the government redefined neutrality in a January 9th communication to parliament saying: “the core of Finnish neutrality can be characterised as military non-alignment”, at a time when surveys showed that a majority of the population did not want to abandon active neutrality and barely half were prepared to join the EC.

Although the gap in elite and public attitudes to neutrality is an issue in Ireland, Austria, Sweden and Finland, only the Irish public holds a veto card that can be played in an effort to close this gap.

The next article will examine the issue of neutrality in the public’s decision to vote against the Lisbon Treaty and consider the vexed question of whether neutrality is indeed compatible with the ESDP envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty.

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Tomorrow: Neutrality and the Lisbon Treaty

Newton Emerson has been held over for space reasons