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EU presidents working on plan for a new euro-zone parliament

And the coalition sits idly by

Handelsblatt, the leading German-language business newspaper, reports that a plan being developed by the president of the EU Council, Herman van Rompuy, the president of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, the president of the Euro Group, Jean-Claude Juncker, and the president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, would see the creation of a new "euro-zone parliament."

The new parliament, in which both MEPs and national parliamentarians would sit, would have powers over euro-zone members' fiscal and economic policy.

Other proposals include a stronger role for the European Commission in vetoing national spending plans. The far-reaching proposals would require changes to the EU treaties.

Handelsblatt further reports that the euro zone is considering introducing a minimum corporate tax, to discourage "unfair" tax competition within the monetary union, something that the German government has suggested on a number of occasions. No doubt Enda Kenny will "resist," as the continued viability of Ireland's money-laundering facility, the IFSC, depends on our low corporate tax rate.

Foreign direct investment accounts for a total of 250,000 jobs—one in every seven jobs—and the withdrawal of any significant proportion of those companies without an alternative jobs strategy would have a catastrophic effect.

The imminent introduction of a common consolidated tax base, and Kenny's promise to the EU Council of "co-operation" in its introduction, is another looming threat.

The government's existing jobs strategy is not producing the goods; the government prefers to rely instead on transnational companies, which created more than 13,000 jobs in Ireland in 2011.

The government should at least produce an effective economic policy that combines infrastructural investment with job creation, in order to stimulate growth. Both Forfás and the National Competitiveness Council continue to identify serious deficits in our infrastructure. At present 40 per cent of those on the live register of unemployment are from craft, construction-related and other mainly manual occupations, while 80 per cent of all funds invested in infrastructure are spent on home-produced goods and services. Both the European Investment Bank and occupational pension funds have indicated a willingness to invest in sustainable infrastructural projects; but the coalition has been inactive on the issue.

The government should expand its present modest investment programme to meet an objective expenditure of €3 billion a year, which would significantly offset the effects of the austerity programme. Alternative indigenous job-creation strategies should be a priority, and the further atomising of our already diminished commercial state sector, at the behest of the "troika," should be resisted. A reformed commercial state sector is essential in the present threatening environment to provide support to our indigenous economic recovery.

Next up: **18–19 October:** Interim report on finalising the economic and monetary union to be presented at EU summit in Brussels, and **13–14 December:** Final report and "roadmap" for further economic and monetary union to be adopted by EU leaders at Brussels summit.

The fundamental dividing line

In the last two years of the 1990s President Mary McAleese and the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, were trotted around the countries of eastern Europe as star propagandists for the EU. On official visits to those countries they extolled the "Celtic tiger" economy as proof of how well small states can do in the EU.

While the populations of most of these countries were uncertain about EU membership, their governments had no doubts and had applications for EU membership in process.

So an uncertain local population was fed the line: If we join the EU, we too can have a boom like Ireland's.

Now the role has drastically changed. "We are not like Greece," pleads Messrs Kenny and Noonan as they seek the approval of their euro-zone "partners" for their zeal in pursuing the ECB-EU-IMF austerity programme and seem to bask in the country's dubious role as the "poster-boy of austerity."

Two years previously their mantra had been "We are not like Iceland." Now Iceland is doing well, having kept its own currency, letting its insolvent banks go bust, avoiding the tutelage of the ECB, and maintaining its political independence.

It's a humiliating defeat for the Irish champions of the "European project," prompting an *Irish Times* editorial (29 November 2010) to describe the EU-IMF loan and the conditions attached to it as a "defeat for the State which has turned us, in the blink of an eye, from European success story to a people at the mercy of the benevolence of others. It is notable that the announcement was made in Brussels and only after that was the Government able to hold its press conference in Dublin."

Yet the very same *Irish Times* refused to acknowledge its own central role in championing the "ever-closer EU integration" that led to this "loss of economic sovereignty."

An objective outside observer would be justified in wondering why the "fighting Irish" have remained so politically quiescent in the face of what has gone on over the last few years. True, last year's general election saw one of the country's main parties bite the dust. Fianna Fáil—which supported the Maastricht Treaty (1992), which abolished the Irish pound, the Lisbon Treaty (2009), the blanket bank bail-out, the EU-IMF deal, and every other step towards EU integration over decades—was electorally wiped out in February 2011. Now Fine Gael and the Labour Party are carrying on exactly the same policies as Fianna Fáil and the Green Party before them.

Whether Fine Gael and the Labour Party are made to pay a similar price for acting as the local administrators of EU-IMF austerity depends on the willingness and capacity of those forces, both within existing political parties and outside them, that contributed to securing a No majority in both the Nice and Lisbon referendums to develop a campaign based on the principle that it is best for the people of this country not to have to obey laws made mainly by others and in effect be ruled by others.

This has many aspects.

The EU now makes well over half the laws for its member-states. This means that the parliaments and citizens of the member-states no longer make most of the laws they must obey. It is the EU, not their own national governments, that decides their basic economic, social and foreign policies. Thus the national democracy and national independence that the people of this country, among others, have often struggled for historically is hollowed out and made meaningless.

On joining the EU countries surrender control of their fundamental economic, social and foreign policies, for these are now decided at the supranational, not the national, level. EU laws nowadays touch every area of life. There are more than 100,000 pages of EU laws, every one of which must be accepted and enforced by any new member-state: accession negotiations relate only to the timetable for doing this—usually five years or so.

EU member-states are all legally obliged to abolish their national currency and adopt the euro after a period—the only exceptions under the treaties being Britain and Denmark. Abolishing its national currency means that a state no longer has any control over its rate of interest, the cost of capital, or its exchange rate, which is normally crucial for its economic competitiveness.

These are two most important economic instruments that any independent state possesses for advancing the economic welfare of its people. Sea fisheries must be shared with the other EU countries.

The fundamental dividing line in Irish politics is between those who support and those who oppose this country ceasing to be a sovereign state and effectually being turned into a regional or provincial state in what is now constitutionally a supranational EU federation, whose key policies are decided by its big member-states, in their own interests. Surely there can be no compromise on this issue?

The urgent question of taxing resource exploitation

An Bord Gáis has been cleared by the Energy Regulator to increase its prices by $8\frac{1}{2}$ per cent, following a 20 per cent increase over the last year. The ESB and other suppliers can expect to be allowed similar price increases. Petrol prices have exceeded €1.70 per litre, and a survey by the National Consumer Agency has found that 1,000 litres of home heating oil will cost buyers an average of €964.

Many factors influence these price increases; but if we had our own supplies of oil and gas to exploit, or on which to claim royalties for the benefit of the Irish people, then the outlook might not be so glum. Well, the point is that we *do* possess such resources, but Ireland's royalty take is 19.2 per cent, surpassing only that of Cameroon, at 10.8 per cent (based on US government figures). This situation demands that immediate action be taken. The British take is 52 per cent and Australia's is 60 per cent—so what is the government afraid of?

Last week Providence Resources (in which Tony O'Reilly's family is the controlling shareholder) made the latest in a series of announcements that even more oil—1.6 billion barrels—has been discovered at its Barryroe field off the coast of Co. Cork. Chinese investors are showing a keen interest.

Comparisons between Barryroe and North Sea fields are being made, with one Providence person quoted recently about producing 20,000 barrels of oil each day. North Sea oil finds provided enormous benefits for both Scotland and Norway, providing both taxes and well-paid jobs.

The recent report of a joint Oireachtas committee recommended that the state should double its tax for large oil and gas finds and should initiate a "transparent" system of public consultation in exploiting new finds. The committee found that 40 per cent should be the general "minimum" tax for future licences and said that the profit resource rent tax should increase on a sliding scale, from 40 per cent for small and 60 per cent for medium discoveries to 80 per cent for very large commercial discoveries. It also demanded that the state review terms before each new licensing round, and that it explore ways of controlling production volumes as part of resource management.

However, this committee advised against "retrospective changes" to the terms of existing agreements for the Corrib gas field and the Providence finds.

As it happens, Providence Resources last month was offered a new licensing option on five blocks, covering an area of 500 square kilometres to the north and west of the Barryroe field. Barryroe is one of six sites being prospected by Providence around the coast over the next two years, including an area near Dalkey Island in Dublin Bay.

So there is an urgency surrounding the introduction of a realistic resource tax more closely resembling that of Norway's, at 76 per cent. This should be followed by the setting up of a national resources exploration and exploitation company, as a prelude to the full nationalisation of our indigenous resources for the benefit of all Irish people.

Another new EU treaty?

Germany is pressing for negotiations by the end of the year on a new treaty to drive European integration and to announce a date for the opening of a new European convention to debate its contents.

For a new treaty to be drafted, a convention comprising representatives of national governments and parliaments, the European Parliament and the European Commission has to agree on a final text.

Merkel's push is in line with her demand for a true political union, in return for debt being pooled in the euro zone. But this latest attempt to reopen EU treaties has met with a lukewarm response from member-states, which feel it would reshape the EU in Germany's image. Ireland in particular is not enthusiastic about any treaty changes that would require ratification by referendum.

The issue of changes to the treaties is likely to dominate the autumn agenda of the EU, but Merkel is supported by the president of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, who says that "Europe and the principles of the Treaty need to be renewed. We need more integration. The crisis has made it clear that we must not only complete the economic and monetary union, but also pursue greater economic integration." A few days later Barroso confirmed that he believes there is a need for "further political and institutional integration" and a consolidation of "a truly political union" through a change of the EU treaty.

Barroso is expected to present a proposal for an economic and monetary union at the EU summit meeting on 18–19 October, along with the president of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, the president of the Euro Group, Jean-Claude Juncker, and the president of the ECB, Mario Draghi.

A final report and "roadmap" are expected to be adopted by at the EU summit meeting of 13 December. The four presidents presented an initial report, *Towards a Genuine Economic and Monetary Union,* at the June EU summit and were given the task of continuing their work.

A new EU Constitution

Meanwhile the German foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, has become the latest in a line of politicians calling for a referendum on handing over more powers to Brussels as part of a new EU constitution. "I hope that we have a real European constitution, and that there will also be a referendum on it," he said.

The idea of holding a referendum on what Angela Merkel sees as the only way out of the crisis—the formation of a true "political union"—has gained momentum in Germany. "We need a political union," she said late last month. "That means we have to give up further competences to Europe, step by step, in an ongoing process."

More bad news for workers

And a new proposal from the EU Commission, known as the Monti II Regulation, on the right of union members to go on strike could lead to the right being undermined—probably in contravention of ILO conventions. The rationale behind these proposals was supposedly repairing the damage done by the Laval, Viking and Rüffert judgements from the European Court of Judgements.

The aim was to provide for binding legislation to ensure that "economic freedoms" respected fundamental social rights, such as the right to strike. However, the Commission's regulation would undermine this right by according priority to economic freedoms and competition rules over fundamental social rights.

The EU Court of Justice ruled in the Laval and Viking cases in favour of limiting the right to strike, arguing that the free movement of goods and services is more important. European trade unions have disagreed with these rulings, which undermined the use of collective action to protect the pay, conditions and jobs of workers.

The proposed EU regulation is designed to protect the interests of employers and makes the right to strike less effective. Commission documents emphasise that it never had any intention of correcting the negative consequences of the ECJ rulings. It believes that the freedom to provide services and the freedom of establishment represent a higher value than the rights of workers.

So much for "Social Europe" and the Charter of Fundamental Rights!

Banking union and single market 2 on the way

France and Germany have agreed to form a working group to draw up plans for a euro-zone banking and fiscal union. The finance ministers of the two countries will meet every two weeks to progress the issue.

"We want to take joint decisions," the German of finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, said. The French minister, Pierre Moscovici, a member of the French Socialist Party, said the countries needed to "deepen our consultations." Schäuble said the group would look at preparing joint proposals for the Euro Group meetings of finance ministers, strengthening the fiscal and currency union.

Meanwhile legislation to establish a banking union for the euro zone will be tabled in Brussels this week. The president of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, described the step, which is expected to see the ECB given extensive powers to supervise and intervene in the EU banking system, as "the next concrete and immediate deliverable of our vision to generate confidence in the future of the euro area."

A spokesperson for the Commission confirmed that "the banking union will be for the seventeen." However, the passing of the legislation is far from clear. Angela Merkel has come under domestic pressure from her own party, the Christian Democratic

Union, and from the president of the Bundesbank to block an expansion of powers for the ECB.

This puts non-euro states in a difficult position, as they do not want to endorse a two-speed Europe. EU ambassadors from Britain, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Sweden have met in Brussels to share concerns regarding the Commission's plan for a banking union. The ten non-euro states each have a veto over the plan, as they will require unanimity in the EU Council of Ministers for it to pass.

Barroso also revealed a plan to overhaul the EU's single-market legislation, commenting that the Commission would prepare a "Single Market 2" in the coming weeks. He said the reforms would "build on the momentum" of the twelve bills making up the Single Market Act, now being discussed by members of the European Parliament and governments.

Permanent austerity ahead!

The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has insisted that no actions by the European Central Bank can take the place of fiscal reform among crisis-hit euro-zone members but gave indirect support for the announcement by the European Central Bank that it would buy unlimited quantities of debt from indebted member-states.

The bank has placed no limits on the amount of debt it might buy, and it will not specify the bond yields, which might trigger purchases, or a target yield that its interventions will aim to achieve.

At the same time the ECB insists that governments that want the bank to buy their bonds must apply for aid from Europe's bail-out funds, and adhere to strict conditions, in return for such aid. The involvement of the International Monetary Fund will be sought when such programmes are being constructed and monitored.

Mario Draghi said that the activation of such purchases would be accompanied by "strict and effective conditionality in line with established guidelines." The bank will terminate the purchases in the event of any failure to keep to the policy conditions.

"Conditionality" means that countries whose bonds are bought by the ECB will have to apply formally. Once they have done so they will have to commit themselves to conditions and be subject to the same sort of supervision faced by countries already receiving bail-out funds—in other words, a continuation of the present austerity measures, reinforced by the involvement of the IMF.

This sort of scenario, which is likely to tighten the straitjacket of the terms of the Austerity Treaty, will probably be applied to Ireland, as purchases of Irish bonds by the ECB seem to be envisaged at the point where "Ireland returns to the markets" in order to encourage private investors who would view the ECB holdings as a backstop, especially as the new plan dispenses with the ECB's priority.

If this is the case we might "return to the markets" but not regain the "economic sovereignty" often referred to by Enda Kenny. Instead we would face into an indeterminate period of austerity and, of course, we would have to pay back the ECB at a premium yet to be determined.

Of course this aspect may pale into relative insignificance if the other plans being hatched in Brussels and Berlin should come to fruition. Then our absolute sovereignty will disappear and with it our remaining independence and democracy.

EU study sparks debate over "high-risk" shale gas

Tough new regulations could be slapped on the shale gas industry if the EU acts on legislative and environmental failings identified in its most comprehensive analysis yet of the industry.

Drilling for shale gas poses a "high risk" to human health and the environment that is worse than that posed by other fossil fuels, according to a 300-page report prepared by the EU's environment directorate. It is also at present unregulated. The study identifies eight areas of high risk caused by the cumulative effect of multiple shale wells, including the contamination and depletion of ground and surface water and the degradation of biodiversity, land, air quality, and seismic conditions.

The new report will add fresh fuel to a backstage battle now raging over two reports on shale gas by the European Parliament that are due to be approved later this month.

Water contamination is considered a high risk because of the industry's hydraulic fracturing (or "fracking") technique. It involves drilling horizontally to shale deposits at depths of up to 3 km, then pumping in large amounts of water, sand and chemical lubricants at high pressure to shatter the brittle rocks. The sand fills geological pores, preventing the well from collapsing, while the gas migrates upwards, along with some water contaminated by fracking chemicals and other pollutants, including low levels of naturally radioactive material.

Because of the health and environmental risks, the study recommends that fracking should be allowed only under strict conditions, and not yet on an industrial scale. None should be allowed in areas where water is being used for drinking.

The report identifies the Water Framework Directive, for example, which, while it is responsible for the introduction of water charges in Ireland, does not allow the injection of "pollutants" into groundwater reserves, which the report says may occur in shale wells, depending on their geological character.

Equally, the report's authors believe that under the Mining Waste Directive, flow-back fluids—the liquid containing toxic chemicals that returns to the surface after shale drills—could fall foul of the Mining Waste Directive.

And, believe it or not, shale gas operations would now be under no obligation to produce the impact assessments demanded by the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive! However, the study recommends that environmental impact assessments should be made mandatory for proposed shale gas operations.

The EU's energy directorate favours a soft regulatory touch, exemplified by a report earlier this year by the Belgian law firm Philippe and Partners, which concluded that no further European legislation was needed.

But officials within the EU's environment and climate directorates are more cautious about giving the green light to an industry that faces prohibition in some EU countries because of its environmental implications, which have even been linked to earthquakes.

Extraordinary November summit on long-term EU budget

An extraordinary summit meeting of EU heads of state and heads of government in November will consider the EU budget for 2014–2020, it emerged following a meeting of European affairs ministers held in Nicosia.

Member-states were divided on such issues as the need to reduce the Commission's proposed budget (with net contributors, such as Britain and Germany, calling for a reduction of around €100 billion), potential new EU taxes, including a common corporate tax base, and funding levels for the common agricultural policy and the structural funds.

The EU budget commissioner, Janusz Lewandowski, commented that "so much money today flows into the structural funds to the South, and it doesn't help to improve our competitiveness." Somebody should tell him about the stated objective of structural funds, which, according to the Commission's web site, are ". . . to support regional growth agendas and to stimulate job creation. 82% of the total amount will be concentrated on the 'Convergence' objective, under which the poorest Member States and regions are eligible."

Or is one of the few remaining vestiges of "Social Europe" about to slip out the back door?

Brussels plenary chamber shut

The EU and euro showing cracks

The plenary chamber of the European Parliament in Brussels has been shut, in case it caves in. This became necessary after the discovery of cracks in three of the wooden beams carrying the roof of the chamber.

The causes of the cracks could not be determined. Perhaps this closure of the EU Parliament chamber is a metaphor for the structural weaknesses of the EU. Both the European Union and the euro are both showing cracks. Part of the roof of Strasbourg chamber caved in during 2008. It's a sign—as Monty Python would have it!

The situation was underlined last week by the president of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, who conceded that the EU faces a "crisis of confidence." Addressing a conference in Brussels, Barroso said that the economic downturn was "not just a financial crisis but also a crisis of confidence in our future [and] credibility and of respect for our values." Many people, he said, were looking to the future with "great uncertainty," rather than the "expectation of a better life."

Reality

We paid a €600 million (that's €600,000,000) unsecured Anglo-Irish bond on Monday 3 September and we will pay a €1 billion (€1,000,000,000) AIB bond on 1 October, a €0.5 billion EBS bond on 23 November, and €0.5 billion and €0.57 billion Bank of Ireland bonds on 22 October—but not a word about it in our national media.

Meanwhile the Fine Gael minister Phil Hogan claims that cuts in services are due to the nonpayment of a household charge that would net about €150,000,000. Yet between now and budget time the Irish people will pay about €3,000,000,000 to rescue the banks. The total bill for 2012 is €19,000,000,000.

This debt is not the Irish people’s debt, nor their responsibility. The elderly, the sick and the poor are paying a heavy price. Isn’t it time we had a real debate on the alternatives to debt bondage and the consequences of implementing them?

Details of recent and pending payments may be found at http://bondwatchireland.blogspot.ie.

Leaving the euro: A practical guide

Winner of the Wolfson Economics Prize

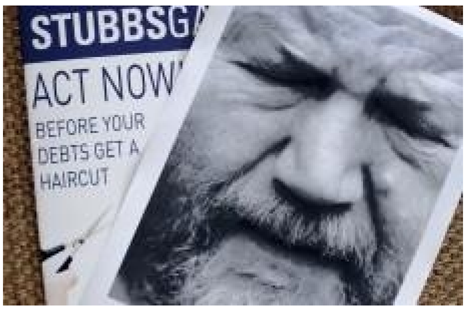
Lead author: Roger Bootle. “If member states leave the Economic and Monetary Union, what is the best way for the economic process to be managed to provide the soundest foundation for the future growth and prosperity of the current membership?” ■ www.policyexchange.org.uk.

Those who wield the axe

Our minister for health, one of those individuals who is fond of the phrase “everyone will have to share in the pain,” claimed expenses of close to €17,500 over a recent period of slightly more than ten months. In fact Reilly submitted the largest expense claim for a single month when his expenses amounted to €8,444.

The personal rate of job-seeker’s allowance is €188 per week for over-25s—that’s €9,776 per annum.

But it’s difficult to determine exactly how much the minister has claimed in additional expenses, allowances, and tax, on top of his basic annual salary of €170,000—five times the average industrial wage. In April this year it was revealed that Reilly claimed approximately €1,600 in toll charges, more than €1,200 of which related to tolls for the Port Tunnel, which is close to his home in Lusk, Co. Dublin. He claimed almost €12,000 in tax-free mileage in 2011.



The *Irish Times* reported earlier this year that the minister spent €15,000 of his secretarial allowance on personal PR advice from Terry Prone’s Communications Clinic—which seems to have lost its touch, if Reilly’s recent performance is anything to go by.

Of course these claims are perfectly legal, but what’s sauce for the goose . . . and Reilly does have a particular predilection for paring the meagre assistance available to the most needy in our society.

Did somebody mention the road to Damascus?

“It’s not just the countries in deepest trouble that have a problem. I wonder if politicians knew then what they know now if the euro would ever have happened?”—Brigid Laffan, professor of European politics at UCD and ardent promoter of the Lisbon, Nice and Maastricht Treaties.

Laffan vehemently extolled the economic and political benefits of this state adopting the euro when the majority of Irish economists at the time held the view that it would be foolish of this state to join the euro zone without the British when we did (as we still do) the greater part of our trade outside the euro zone. And there were other good reasons for not abolishing the national currency.

But then, people are entitled to change their minds in the light of experience!

Poland and Bulgaria put on the brakes

Bulgaria has halted its plan to join the euro in the latest public setback for the beleaguered currency union. The Bulgarian prime minister, Boyko Borisov, says the country has indefinitely frozen its plan to join the single currency, and that the decision was the result of the debt crisis and the double-dip recession facing the euro zone, along with rising public opposition. “The momentum has shifted in our thinking and among the public. Right now, I don’t see any benefits of entering the euro zone, only costs,” he Borisov said.

Bulgaria already fulfils the economic criteria for joining the euro, having reduced its budget deficit to 2.1 per cent in 2011, comfortably below the 3 per cent limit laid down in the Stability and Growth Pact. The country's $17\frac{1}{2}$ per cent debt burden is also one of the lowest in the EU.

Meanwhile the Polish foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski, announced that Poland is also shelving a plan to join the currency bloc. Poland is the third-fastest-growing EU country and one of the few EU countries to avoided recession since the global financial crisis broke in 2008.

Trichet doesn't want threatening letters published!

The *Irish Independent* reports that the former head of the European Central Bank, Jean-Claude Trichet, does not want the letters he wrote to the Irish government in 2010 to be published. The letters are thought to contain threats aimed at making Ireland accept a "bail-out." Both the Department of Finance and the ECB's freedom of information units have declined to release the letters.

Michael Noonan has said that he read what he described as a "threatening" letter, and that this should now be released. He added that it will probably feature in the next banking inquiry.

The late Brian Lenihan told a BBC Radio 4 documentary that the ECB had threatened him, both orally and by correspondence, about what would happen if he refused. He did not provide specifics. However, the *Irish Times* claims to have seen three letters that culminate in an insistence that Ireland should apply for a bail-out or risk the country's banks being cut off from access to support.

The decisive exchange of views took place in a phone call between the two men on Friday 12 November 2010, more than a week before the formal application for a bail-out was made. On 4 November, Trichet wrote a letter to Lenihan that pointedly said that the ECB was monitoring the government's commitment to its four-year plan, still in preparation, and that continuing ECB support was contingent on the plan being implemented.

On the same day Lenihan announced a targeted adjustment of €15 billion over four years, with €6 billion of that coming in 2011. The full detail of the four-year plan was to follow at the end of the month.

The final letter from Trichet, urging Lenihan to accept the bail-out, was sent on 19 November. However, by that time the governor of the Central Bank of Ireland, Patrick Honohan, had publicly said that a bail-out was necessary. The Trichet letter of 19 November urged Lenihan and his government colleagues to accept the necessity for a bail-out and agree to a programme with the troika.

The following Sunday, 20 November, Lenihan and his colleagues formally applied for an EU-IMF programme; and German, French and other bankers heaved a sigh of relief.

24th Desmond Greaves Weekend School

14–16 September 2012

The 24th Desmond Greaves Weekend School opens on Friday the 14th and ends on Sunday the 16th. The meetings are held in the Pearse Centre, 27 Pearse Street, Dublin. This year's theme is "Ninety years of the Irish state: Sovereignty and democracy in the Republic. The programme for Saturday is shown below; the full programme may be viewed at www.greavesschool.com.

Saturday 15 September, 11 a.m.
Sovereignty and interdependence

"Sovereignty in a global world." Speaker: Andy Storey (lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations at UCD and chairperson of Afri.

Corporations and sovereignty. Speaker: Sheila Killian (head of department and senior lecturer, accounting and finance, University of Limerick).

The future of Europe (not the EU). Speaker: Mick O'Reilly (president of Dublin Council of Trade Unions, former regional secretary of Unite). Chairperson: Patricia McKenna (former MEP).

Saturday 15 September, 2:30 p.m.
Towards genuine political democracy

"Clientelism and patronage." Speaker: Frank Connolly (former executive director of the Centre for Public Inquiry, now head of communications with SIPTU).

"Beyond representative democracy. Speaker: Bernadette McAliskey (MP for Mid-Ulster, 1969–1974, now co-ordinator of the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme).

"The government's reform agenda." Speaker: Catherine Murphy TD (independent deputy for Kildare North). Chairperson: Maureen O'Sullivan TD.

Listening to citizens!

"The European Union is made of its citizens and for its citizens!" proclaims the European Commission. There is even a €215 million "Europe for Citizens" kitty for projects that will "give the citizen a key role in the development of the European Union." But if citizens try to question the Commission's decisions, the hand of generosity is withdrawn.

Just before the summer holidays the Commission quietly decided to appeal a ruling of the EU Court of Justice that found that the Commission was wrong to deny citizens and citizens' groups the right to ask for a review of its decisions on environmental issues. These rights are enshrined in an international treaty, the Aarhus Convention, which the European Union ratified in 2005 but then wrongly implemented, according to the court.

Under the Commission's interpretation of the convention, organisations that are directly affected by its environmental decisions can ask for a review, but those that are indirectly affected cannot. Usually this means that, for example, if the Commission decides not to approve a pesticide, the company that makes the pesticide can question the decision. But if an environmentally dubious pesticide does get the Commission's rubber stamp, individuals or environmental groups cannot request a review.

Client Earth, a group of activist lawyers committed to securing a healthy planet, one of the environmental groups that secured the court ruling, which related specifically to pesticides in food and air quality standards, said the appeal was "pure hypocrisy" and "anti-democratic." Even the Commission's environmental directorate-general believes the appeal will be lost and that the exercise will be a drawn-out waste of taxpayers' money.

But others within the Commission have never let such considerations bother them before and are not about to start now. In mid-July the Commission said that 2013 will be the "European Year of Citizens," but presumably only if they are seen and not heard. The EU Council, which represents member-state governments, is also joining the appeal. So is the supposed bastion of EU democracy, the European Parliament.

Client Earth has now said it has "officially requested the European Commission to drop its appeal." Did they ask the Directorate-General for Environment or the Directorate-General for Enterprise? We wait to see if the Commission has a change of heart—in favour of the all-important citizens.

■ This is a brief update to an article published at www.euro-correspondent.com.