

Big increase in understanding of the Lisbon Treaty

Independent Commission publishes research results

Thursday 30th July 2009. There has been a substantial increase in the level of understanding of the Lisbon Treaty among Irish voters, with 60 per cent saying they now have at least some understanding of it, according to research undertaken by the Referendum Commission.

This compares to 44 per cent who said they had at least some understanding of the Treaty days before polling day in June 2008, and just 21 per cent who had at least some understanding of it in April 2008, roughly the same time period before polling day last year as this latest research was taken.

Commenting on the research the Chairman of the Referendum Commission Mr Justice Frank Clarke said, "There has been a marked increase in the level of understanding of the Lisbon Treaty over the past year. This is due to the fact that it has been high on the agenda of the Irish electorate, the media and public representatives. While this is heartening, we are working to ensure that every voter understands the Lisbon Treaty before polling day."

This latest opinion poll was conducted for the Referendum Commission between July 17th and 19th. It shows that 38 per cent say they understand the Lisbon Treaty to some extent; 18 per cent say they understand it quite well and four per cent say they understand it very well. Of the remaining 39 per cent, 20 per do not understand it particularly well and finally 19 per cent do not understand it at all.

This compares to June 2008, just before polling day, when, according to themselves, 32 per cent understood the Lisbon Treaty to some extent; nine per cent understood it quite well and three per cent understood it very well. The remaining 57 per cent said they did not understand it particularly well (30 per cent) or did not understand it at all (27 per cent).

And in April 2008, roughly the same distance from polling day as this research was taken, 80 per cent said they did not understand it particularly well (18 per cent) or did not understand it at all (62 per cent). Only 20 per cent said they had some understanding; 15 per cent said they understood it to some extent; three per cent said they understood it quite well; and two per cent said they understood it very well.

The research also revealed a high propensity to vote. Ninety-one per cent of voters are extremely or quite likely to vote. Only nine per cent of voters are quite unlikely or extremely unlikely to vote.

In April 2008 as the first Lisbon Treaty campaign got underway, seventy-two per cent of voters said they were extremely or quite likely to vote and 22 per cent said they were quite unlikely or extremely unlikely to vote. Six per cent said they did not know if they were going to vote.

According to Mr Justice Clarke: "The Treaty is not an easy read. However this does not mean that the electorate couldn't understand it and to suggest so is condescending. People understand the effect of difficult documents all the time, a good example of which is the Finance Bill. None of us reads it, yet we all know what it does. It increases and decreases our taxes and makes important changes to how the Government can raise money and spend it.

"The Referendum Commission is here to help people understand, and will over the coming weeks run a substantial public information campaign to explain the Treaty. It will produce material which will explain the Treaty in a simple and straightforward way, making it easier for voters to make an informed decision," he concluded.

There are several elements to this campaign including a comprehensive website; an explanatory leaflet containing the main provisions of the Treaty and explanations of some key issues; a more substantial handbook explaining the Treaty in detail; and a major advertising campaign, including television, radio, press and online. Details of the public information campaign will be unveiled in the coming weeks. It will begin in late August.

Ends

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Note to Editors:

On Tuesday 7th July 2009 the Minister for the Environment John Gormley made an order setting up the Referendum Commission. Mr Justice Frank Clarke was appointed as chairperson of the Referendum Commission on the nomination of the Chief Justice John Murray. The other members are the Clerk of the Dáil Kieran Coughlan; the Clerk of the Seanad Deirdre Lane, the Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly and the Comptroller and Auditor General John Buckley.

Role of the Referendum Commission

The Referendum Commission is an independent body, set up by the Referendum Act 1998 as amended by the Referendum Act 2001. The role of the Referendum Commission is to explain the subject matter of referendum proposals, to promote public awareness of the referendum and to encourage the electorate to vote at the poll.

The Act of 1998 provides that the Chairman of the Commission shall be a former judge of the Supreme Court or the High Court or a judge of the High Court. The other members of the Commission shall be the Clerk of the Dáil, the Clerk of the Seanad, the Ombudsman and the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Referendum Commission is independent in its actions.

Under the Referendum Act 1998, on each occasion that a referendum falls to be held the establishment of a Referendum Commission is at the discretion of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The Referendum Commission is therefore not a standing body, but is established for the purposes of a specific referendum. Once its functions are completed, it prepares a report for the Minister within six months on the carrying out of its functions, and the Commission dissolves one month after the submission of this report.

Under the 1998 Act, Commissions were required to outline arguments for and against specific referendum proposals, and to foster debate on the proposals. The Referendum Act 2001 changed the Commission's role, and it no longer has the role of outlining the arguments for and against referendum proposals or of fostering and promoting debate and discussion on referendum proposals.

Referendum Commissions have previously been established in connection with the following referendums:

- Amsterdam Treaty and the Northern Ireland Agreements which were held on 22 May 1998;
- Constitutional Recognition for Local Government which was held on 11 June 1999;
- Abolition of the Death Penalty, the Acceptance of the Jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and the Treaty of Nice which were held on 7 June 2001;
- Abortion referendum which was held on 6 March 2002;
- Treaty of Nice which was held on 19 October 2002;
- Citizenship Referendum, which was held on 11 June 2004;
- Lisbon Treaty Referendum which was held on Thursday June 12th 2008.