

APPENDIX H

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES

CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMISSION

SIGRISWIL, SWITZERLAND, 24-8 APRIL 2002

1. The Church and Society Commission of CEC comprises representatives of the Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Churches, together with several councils of churches. The Irish Council of Churches has observer status.
2. The annual plenary meeting of the commission took place at Sigriswil, near Thun, in Switzerland, from 24-8 April and was held in the shadow of the results of the first round of the French presidential election. Those present, not least the members of French churches, were much concerned both at the low level of turn-out and the size of the Le Pen vote, which topped the poll in some electoral areas. The French churches issued a strongly-worded statement expressing their hurt at the fact that so many of their fellow citizens had voted for a candidate who stood for a real denial of the most basic Republican values. This situation gave added urgency to the Commission's determination to address the dangers posed by the ever-widening gap between the political classes and the citizens in member states of the Union. This gap, the 'democratic deficit', influences in particular the citizens' perception of the institutions of the EU.
3. The part to be played by the so-called 'civil society' in bringing the Union closer to the citizens was much discussed. No clear definition of 'civil society' emerged, but it was clearly taken to include the churches, as was their role at a time when enlargement of the Union by about ten states seems imminent. Such enlargement within the next year or so will call for a considerable re-thinking of the structures of the Union if it is to operate effectively. At present, a European Convention, representative of the member states, and headed by the former French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, is formulating proposals for such changes.
4. The rejection of the Nice Treaty by Ireland last June introduced an element of uncertainty into the enlargement process, particularly in the case of the post-communist applicant states, who have worked assiduously to meet the political and social criteria required for membership. It was clear from the CSC meeting, where both present and applicant members of the Union were represented, that enlargement is anticipated. Of course, the implications of enlargement for the existing member states are considerable. In simple terms, resources will have to be made available to the new members (many of whom are economically weak) to assist them to achieve, as Ireland has done, economics comparable to the level of the existing members. There are also very considerable steps to be taken as the borders of the EU move outwards, and the issue of migration looms large.

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5. Following the rejection of Nice the Irish government established a National Forum on Europe, which has a ‘third pillar’ that includes church representatives. The purpose of the Forum is to explore issues relating to Irish membership of the EU, including those, such as sovereignty, neutrality and security, which appear to have contributed to last June’s rejection. While re-negotiation of the Nice Treaty is ruled out, there may be some procedures possible that will meet the concerns of some of the ‘no to Nice’ groups, and these will be conveyed to the government, which, in turn, is making an input to the Convention.
6. While only Ireland rejected Nice (being the only member state whose citizens were given the opportunity to do so) there seems little doubt but that many citizens of other states are disenchanted with the workings of the EU. An important factor is the aforementioned ‘democratic deficit’, which is sometimes seen as a threat to national identity and values. The Church and Society Commission is deeply concerned about this issue, and is working towards achieving a relationship with the EU that will provide for effective consultation between the Union and the churches and other faith communities.

The recent plenary meeting was the last to be guided by the present director, Keith Jenkins, who, has always shown a sympathetic interest in the Irish involvement, even to the extent of travelling to Dublin on the eve of the last Irish presidency of the European Commission for a meeting with the then Taoiseach, Mr John Bruton. Keith Jenkins's successor-designate is Rüdiger Noll, presently Executive Secretary, Geneva.