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'Shannon and Militarism'

Jeremy Corbyn MP



Last Saturday night I walked into the departure lounge at Shannon Airport and it felt like Baghdad.

The whole place was heaving with American soldiers, in battle fatigues, who were relaxing between flights as they transited from the USA to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ireland has always prided itself on its neutrality, non membership of NATO and as such has enjoyed a uniquely powerful moral position in the world as the least militaristic of any European country.

However, Shannon undermines that. Not only do US troops use the airport in huge numbers there are also mysterious un-marked but apparently US planes with no side windows on the remote runways and extraordinary levels of security surrounding the whole airport.

There has never been any satisfactory explanation in response to concerns that the airport was used for extraordinary rendition flights from Bagram in Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay.

Shannon Watch, a group of peace activists who monitor movements there have suffered harassment and extraordinary pressure in trying to protect Irish neutrality.

The sights at the airport were the culmination of a one day conference on the militarisation of Ireland that was organized as part of the "No to Lisbon" campaign ahead of the referendum on October 2nd.

The European Constitution was famously rejected in France and the Netherlands and all British political parties pledged a referendum on it in the 2005 General Election.

Facing Euro wide rejection of the centralization of powers, marketisation of public services and common EU foreign and defence policies the European leaders deftly re-arranged the paragraphs in the Constitution and re-branded it the Lisbon Treaty. This was easily accepted by all Governments and in Britain the House of Commons voted to reject the referendum (which every single MP had been elected pledging to hold on the Constitution) and endorse the Lisbon treaty.

The Irish famously rejected the Lisbon treaty at the first referendum and were bluntly told to hold another.

To save the blushes of the Irish Government a “protocol” was offered which claimed to respect Irish neutrality and non membership or cooperation with NATO. Whilst this has easily satisfied the Irish Government and most of the political establishment it does not really alter the bald facts of the Lisbon Treaty.

If endorsed Lisbon will establish a common foreign policy, there will be a defence policy based on NATO, there will be an EU President with quite extraordinary powers and the neutrality of any member state will, to say the very least, be compromised.

The Conference, in the Park Airport Hotel in Shannon heard some disturbing information about US military personnel being stationed there, “to assist flights”, and the levels of secrecy surrounding the whole operation. Some of the delegates took the view that there was no operational need to use Shannon but it was an effective way of softening Irish opposition to NATO.

As with all campaigns to do with issues surrounding Europe there is an extraordinary mismatch of information and funding.

The yes campaign deftly assert that Ireland would be worse off without Lisbon and that all the successes of the Irish economy, before the crunch, would be at risk from this vote. They cleverly suggest that a vote against Lisbon is tantamount to leaving the EU altogether, which it is not.

Supporting this view are the Government and the richest and most powerful business people in the Republic. Michael O’Leary, owner of Ryanair has threatened to pump millions of Euros into the Yes campaign and join in the general disinformation that rejecting Lisbon will cost thousands of jobs and the livelihood of all the Irish people.

In reality not just the neutrality of Ireland is put at risk but also job protection and social justice as the whole continent moves assertively towards a free market economy, not in the direction of a socially just continent.