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HEADLINE: THE TREATY CON

(1) Leaked email reveals Government plans to hoodwink voters (2) Treaty may march us into European army

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BODY:

THE Government has hatched an elaborate plan to deceive voters over the forthcoming EU treaty referendum, the Irish Daily Mail can today reveal.

A leaked email shows that ministers are planning a deliberate campaign of misinformation to ensure that the Lisbon Treaty vote is passed when it is put to the public as required by the Constitution.

Foreign Affairs Minister Dermot Ahern has even been personally assured that the European Commission will tone down or delay any announcements from Brussels that might be unhelpful.

Alarming, the email says that ministers ruled out an October referendum, which would have been better procedurally, because they feared unhelpful developments during the French presidency particularly related to EU defence.

This suggestion will raise grave fears that the State's constitutional commitment to military neutrality could be undermined by the treaty a rehashed version of the failed EU constitution.

The memo was sent to the British government by Elizabeth Green, a senior UK diplomat in Dublin, following a briefing from Dan Mulhall, a top official in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Its aim was to relay to her political masters in London the lengths to which the Government here was going to in its bid to ensure a Yes vote in the referendum.

Ireland is the only EU state which is allowing voters a say on the treaty, and European heads of state are terrified that they will reject it.

Campaigners have warned that the new treaty could remove Ireland's powers to decide its own tax rates and social policies.

However, the most controversial aspect is the likelihood that it will be used to advance the concept of a European army, which would violate the principle of neutrality that has long been a foundation-stone of the State.

France is particularly keen to advance the notion of an EU force, which critics fear could be ordered into action over Irish objections by a majority vote of EU heads of state.

Already concerns have been raised that soldiers who are part of the Irish peacekeeping force being sent to Chad could be compromised by French political and military objectives in the area.

The leaked email admits that this is one of the issues which needs to be kept from voters, saying that the possibility of the French speaking out on this issue meant that the referendum could not be delayed until the autumn. It states: Mulhall said a date in October would have been easier from a procedural point of view.

But the risk of unhelpful developments during the French presidency particularly related to EU defence were just too great. (Nicola) Sarkozy was completely unpredictable.

The Irish official was also worried that the latest World Trade Organisation talks, which have already aroused the fury of farmers, could turn the voters against the new treaty. Farmers and suppliers are planning a one-day shutdown this week to protest at the tack being taken by EU trade commissioner Peter Mandelson.

The email said that Mulhall was concerned about a WTO deal based on agricultural concessions that could lead the powerful farming association to withdraw its support. However, Government ministers appear to be basing their hopes on the fact that the treaty cannot be read or understood by most voters and that launching a quick referendum would stop them from doing so.

Most people would not have time to study the text and would go with the politicians they trusted, it said.

And it pointed out that the Government plans to keep people from analysing the details, saying the aim is to focus the campaign on overall benefits of the EU rather than the treaty itself.

It goes on to explain the details of the Referendum Bill, which it says, was agreed following lengthy consultation with Government lawyers and with the political parties.

However, it admits that the bill is largely incomprehensible to the lay reader.

The memo refers to plans to fool campaigners over the date and states: Irish have picked 29 May for voting but will delay an announcement to keep the No camp guessing.

The Taoiseach and (Dermot) Ahern saw a slight advantage in keeping the No camp guessing.

It has since been stated that the referendum will be held on June 12 although it is not clear from the email whether this is the correct date or whether the May 29 option is still being considered as a possibility in order to destabilise the No campaign.

The email adds that the EC was doing its best to keep any bad news from the Irish voters and that Mr Mulhall had maintained that other partners including the commission were playing a helpful, low-profile role.

It added that during a trip to Dublin, Vice-President Margot Wallstrom had told Dermot Ahern that the commission was willing to tone down or delay messages that might be unhelpful.

The leaked message also points out that most Irish media have been supine on the issue, saying: Mulhall remarked that the media had been relatively quiet on the ratification process so far. We would need to remain in close touch, given the media crossover.

A Government spokesman refused to comment on the leaked email last night merely saying: The date is as set by the Taoiseach, there is no change in that.

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GRAPHIC: Ahern: Was given assurances Sarkozy: Too unpredictable

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