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GERMANY'S LEADERS face a crucial choice between saving and developing the euro zone to protect their economic interests in the single currency or doing away with it altogether, according to the country's leading philosopher and social theorist Jurgen Habermas.

Mr Habermas believes German chancellor Angela Merkel has in recent weeks "squandered much of the capital of trust accumulated by her predecessors over four decades".

In an interview with The Irish Times today ahead of his visit to University College Dublin next week, where he is to receive the Ulysses Medal on Bloomsday, Prof Habermas is scathing about the "sweeping change in mentalities" among Germany's political elite since the time of Helmut Kohl and the country's reunification. This elite enjoys Germany's return to normality as a nation-state, and shies away "from far-sighted goals and constructive political projects, let alone an undertaking like European unification". Domestic politics and tabloid nationalism restricts their vision, he said.

Mr Habermas believes the pivotal political question from a German perspective is "whether the Federal Republic is ready to change its European policy before it is too late, and then whether it is also able to co-operate with France in leading the other EU countries in that direction". If European leaders opt for closer co-operation in the fields of fiscal and economic policy, a convergence in other policy fields, including foreign policy, would have to follow.

Habermas, who is 80 this year, still plays a prominent role as a public intellectual in Germany, based on his lifetime's philosophical work on language, communicative reason and discourse in the public sphere.

He says "we should all wake up to the fact that the disappearance of an argumentative press represents an extremely acute danger for democracy". Since media audiences were composed of citizens as well as consumers, this was not simply a matter of economic rationalisation but of a breakdown of public discourse.

In recent years Habermas has written extensively about the revived public role of religion in western secularised societies and the demands this places on established systems of toleration and political pluralism. "Secularly minded people should recognise religion as a contemporary intellectual formation," he says in this rare newspaper interview. The recent child sex

abuse scandals in the Catholic Church have nothing to do with this position - indeed "their insensitivity cries out to heaven".

On James Joyce, Habermas said Ulysses combines "a highly self-reflective, aesthetically uncompromising modern novel . . . with an unmistakable, though by no means uncritical, attachment to the all-pervasive ethos of his Irish native country".