



Unionists that the **IRA** cannot be equated in any way with Southern mainstream politics.

An essential ingredient of the Dublin olive branch has been a candid willingness to face up to prejudiced views on its own doorstep. In an outspoken interview launching his campaign to reform the Irish constitution and smooth relations with the North, Garret Fitzgerald said: 'There has been created a state which is unacceptable to Northern Unionists. Were I a Protestant I would find it difficult to want to join with it.' He also hit out at the laws, practices and attitudes that reflect a 'majority ethos', such as the Family Planning Act passed by the last administration which allows contraception for married couples only.

Fitzgerald is keen to destroy the belief that Catholic doctrine should somehow have a determining influence over social policy. It is this alleged bias that is behind his assertion that Ireland is a 'sectarian state.'

The specific areas he has identified for reform are the constitutional clauses claiming jurisdiction over the North and banning divorce. He has intimated that a referendum will be held on his proposals to reform these clauses after a full debate has taken place, and presumably when he feels his support is secure. That time may not be so far away: a recent opinion poll published in a Dublin daily paper revealed that 48% of Irish people questioned across the whole of the Republic favoured changes in the claim over the six counties, while only 30% opposed them.

Opposition leaders mounted a vigorous rearguard action against the 'crusade', though Charles Haughey, the Fianna Fail leader and Taoiseach (prime minister) till last June, sounded less than convincing in his statement that some reform might be desirable in the future but was out of the question now.

Haughey draws his support firstly from banging the drum of traditional republican rhetoric and secondly from identifying closely with Catholic doctrine. Along with Catholic bishops he has set himself firmly against changes in divorce laws. Other Fianna Fail politicians, such as the fervently nationalistic Sile de Valera, grand-daughter of the state's founder, have sought to make the claim over the North an issue of great political principle.

Support for the constitutional crusade seems to transcend class boundaries. One of the legacies of Irish history is a political system based less on a Left/Right cleavage than the split in the republican movement at the time of partition. As a consequence both main parties have an inter-class social base.

The banner of the small Irish Left in the

### FITZGERALD'S CRUSADE

The recent escalation of tension in Northern Ireland has dimmed for the foreseeable future the hopes raised by Garret Fitzgerald's constitutional crusade for a gradual reconciliation of the two opposed religious and political traditions.

The decisive factor in starting the present crisis was not just the murder of the Rev Robert Bradford MP. That was only one, albeit more dramatic, example of a larger switch in IRA tactics from attacking British Army personnel to slowly and deliberately picking off UDR, UDA and RUC members. But if Protestant anger was already intense, the Bradford killing pushed it up to boiling point. As a direct result Fitzgerald's political initiative — at first welcomed by some Official Unionist leaders — was summarily shoved off the Northern political agenda.

This has been accompanied by a major

shift in attitudes to the IRA south of the border. During their flirtation with a humanitarian and more conventional political image at the time of the hunger strike they secured a significant electoral foothold, winning two seats in the Dail (Parliament) one of which they still hold.

That support is now being submerged beneath bitter criticism of them in the South for stoking the fires of Protestant hostility. The tension they generated during the hunger strike is also blamed for the collapse of the lucrative Irish tourist industry, the second biggest after farming. In 1981, for the first time in decades, more was spent by Irish abroad than by visitors to the country.

But the present turmoil is unlikely to permanently defeat the Irish government's attempt to bury the sectarian hatchet. In fact it appears to be the only ray of hope around, in that it clearly signals to the Northern

Dail is carried by the moderate Labour Party, now weaker than at any time since the fifties, and three socialist TDs (MPs) — two independent and one representing Sinn Fein - The Workers Party (SFWP). Support for Fitzgerald's secularisation of the state has been warm to enthusiastic from this quarter.

While not directly involved in political decision-making, Catholic bishops still make their presence felt in the debate. The church in the past has tended to define the parameters of change it will accept. Politicians, afraid of the influence it holds at the grass roots, try not to offend it. Related to this is the strong emotional tie many Irish still feel to the Catholic Church.

Though the independents gave the Fine—Gael/Labour coalition only till this month (January) to prove itself, the probability is that it will survive long enough to push through constitutional changes. After the covert behaviour of the Haughey government, Fitzgerald has won respect for his honest and open approach. It seems unlikely therefore that the independents will wish to unseat him now. Relying on a slim majority, Fitzgerald has been careful not to alienate them, notably by not pushing through a tough incomes policy.

To an extent there is also an ideological

accord with the Left — Fitzgerald represents the Social Democratic Left in Fine Gael and is respected for his emphasis on campaigning against poverty.

The coalition will face a stern test when a by-election is held for the constituency of the dead hunger striker Kieran Doherty. The Cavan-Monaghan seat could well go to Fianna Fail leaving the Coalition with a wafer-thin majority.

However a fourth independent, the Speaker, Dr John O'Connell, has blocked the by-election temporarily on a technicality. In the long term the survival of a Fitzgerald government will be an asset to Northern Ireland Secretary James Prior's attempts to defuse sectarian tension in the North.