

## THE NEW IRELAND FORUM

To the British viewer of 'News at Ten' John Hume and Irish premier Garrett Fitzgerald's relentless promotion of the New Ireland Forum may seem a little perplexing. A talking shop of party leaders spending eight days a month soaking up speeches of everyone from cassocked clerics to barristers and economists is not, on the face of it, banner headline material.

A certain amount of bafflement is understandable — indeed, part of the Irish population shares it. But to the coalition cabinet and opposition in Dublin the matter is genuinely of the greatest urgency. When government TDs (MPs) were despatched recently to the US and Europe for St Patrick's Day celebrations each carried a speech ramming this home. Every opportunity to get the point across on American, European and British media has been gratefully accepted. Even breaks in the EEC battles over the CAP and contributions saw Euro heads of state learning of the very unfunny things that may happen on the way from the Forum if its work is ignored.

The Forum's sessions have taken place in the knowledge that the North, and by extension the whole island, faces a watershed. Either some initiative involving Dublin and London breathes life (or artificial respiration, according to one's pessimism) into constitutional nationalism in the SDLP, or Sinn Fein will assume leadership of Northern Catholics. Thereafter the talking ceases.

The fact is that mule-headed exclusion of the SDLP by Northern unionists has played directly into the Provisionals' hands, leaving John Hume's battered machine with nowhere to go. As one Derry journalist tersely commented recently: All Gerry Adams has to do is not get killed and he can't lose.' Superficially, the position now may compare with that at the time of Sunningdale a decade ago. In reality, many options have disappeared since then — power sharing has been scuppered, and blind 'security policy', the official military solution, has not, despite endless predictions, defeated the paramilitaries.

The Forum sessions themselves have responded to this with a comprehensive review of economic, religious and political aspects of the national question. Thorny questions like the status of the Catholic Church in a united or federal Ireland, and economic gaps between North and South, have been confronted unflinchingly. Posing possibilities (unitary state, joint sovereignty



*Three of the bishops who made a submission together with (left to right) Dick Spring, leader of the Labour Party; Charles Haughey, leader of Fianna Fail; and Dr Garret Fitzgerald*

between Dublin and London, or a federal Ireland), rather than a single position, deliberately prepares the way for an open-minded rapprochement with the British. Significantly the UDA (who envisage an independent Ulster) was among northern groups who prepared submissions to the Forum — it was not formally delivered because of the Darkley Hall massacre.

Escalating paramilitary activity south of the border has also bolstered commitment of parties in the Republic to the initiative. The last 12 months have seen a spate of kidnappings, by the Provisionals in the South, including that of businessman Don Tidey. When he was freed two members of Irish security forces died as the Provos broke a previous convention of not firing on Gardai or defence forces.

But perhaps the greatest fear for the Republic's parties is the spread of the Belfast bushfire of Sinn Fein's electoral momentum. Already predictions of an SF vote in the six counties in excess of 100,000 are being made. The vote south of the border will be a nervously-awaited acid test of the volatility of traditional parties' support there.

For the other youthful rugby-loving Labour leader, Neil Kinnock's Irish counterpart Dick Spring, the Sinn Fein advance is particularly ominous. He has unhappily witnessed the hard Left, in the shape of the Workers Party, biting chunks off Labour's urban vote; and now Sinn

Fein threaten to do it again on an even larger scale. A by-election in Dublin Central last year confirmed the growing clout of Sinn Fein in deprived working class ghettos of the capital.

This was before the Dublin anti-heroin movement attained its present strength — displayed in round the clock street patrols in various parts of the city, and in a major demonstration in February. Though the Sinn Fein involvement in the 'Concerned Parents against Drugs' campaign is widely exaggerated by its opponents, it could assist at least one SF candidate in the coming Euro elections.

With Irish unemployment among the highest in the EEC, a move by disillusioned jobless towards Sinn Fein will concern the coalition, who fear that visible political instability will discourage the flow of foreign and particularly US capital into the country (promoted abroad as offering 'the highest return on investment in the world', according to official US figures).

Fianna Fail, the country's largest party is also vulnerable. Though possessing a massive election and fund-raising machine (its campaigns resemble US more than UK styles) its ideology is anachronistic, its economic positions constantly reversed, and its leadership largely bereft of intellectuals. It stands to lose votes to SF in areas such as the west and border regions traditionally strong on Republicanism, and in Dublin corporation estates and tenement blocks where it bears much responsibility

for dismal social and recreational facilities.

The coalition parties led by Fitzgerald's moderate Fine Gael have for their part been meeting the SF challenge with conspicuous gestures to exclude it from the constitutional process — largely a signal to London. Cabinet ministers in Dublin now turn away Sinn Fein councillors in local authority delegations to routine meetings as they arrive at the gates of the Dail. Pressure from Dublin stopped Prior's ministers from meeting Sinn Fein councillors in Belfast on constituency housing matters. The fear that London will capriciously go over the heads of the SDLP and Dublin and talk direct (as under Whitelaw and Wilson) with the Provos is ever-present in cabinet minds.

For Thatcher the meeting of minds of the three main Dail parties on a collective Forum report is one of the most telling signposts on which to reflect. Hume in particular successfully stifled gut urges in FF (and the Mallon wing of the SDLP) to back only the united Ireland option. Relations between the coalition partners and FF's Charles Haughey are normally vitriolic — their agreement now is a shared conviction that vital initiatives cannot be delayed any longer. Even anti-Haughey FF TDs say his commitment to the Forum is total.

His recent FF Ard Fheis (party conference) address stopped short of the usual 'Nation Once Again' climax. He normally bangs the green drum there with the same predictability as 'Land of Hope and Glory' closing the Tories' annual jamboree. This time there was a veiled but significant 'historic compromise' of his own: 'It is our aim,' he said, 'that the Forum should re-establish today the powerful nationalist unity of the past in support of the legitimate and democratically founded right of all the Irish people to live in a united Ireland'. The 'nationalist unity' reference has been taken to mean the collective thrust of the Dail parties.

But as the Adams leadership consolidates its move into dynamic populist involvement (the other target of the hard liners behind the Harrods bombing was growing SF electoralism), experienced Northerners doubt chances of reversing SF's gains — facilitated in the first place by Thatcher's miscalculated handling of the hunger strikes. Having lost out on a joint approach during and after 1981, London and Dublin face the unsavoury prospect of attempting such an approach now, with SF holding an apparently solid mass base of support.

*Alan Murdoch*