

Toward a New Ireland

Garrett FitzGerald, Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland, will be visiting the United States this week, meeting with the Irish-American communities in New York and Washington and lunching in the White House with the nation's most prominent Irish-American. It has become something of a ritual for officials of the Dublin Government to visit the United States in the week before St. Patrick's Day, and one part of their message has also become something of a ritual. As his predecessors and he have done on other occasions, Dr. FitzGerald will urge Irish-Americans not to contribute to organizations in this country that channel such support to the paramilitary activities of the Irish Republican Army.

It is a sound, if familiar, warning. However well-intentioned, such support does not effectively advance the cause of Irish unity, which can only be secured if peace and stability are established in Ireland. The terrorist tactics of the I.R.A., who seek to gain by bombs what they have never succeeded in winning by ballots, serve only to deepen the divisions that must be overcome if Ireland is ever to be one free nation. In the words of Cahal Daly, Bishop of Down and Connor, "Violence must, after a cruel 15 years' experience, be pronounced morally and politically bankrupt."

This year, though, Dr. FitzGerald will also bring a new message, one that carries an unexpected measure of hope that a peaceful solution to the crisis in Northern Ireland may eventually be found. Since last May, all three major political parties of the Republic of Ireland (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Labor) have been meeting with the nationalist party of Northern Ireland (Social Democratic and Labor Party) to explore the possibilities of new political structures that could resolve the crisis of Northern Ireland. All four of the parties involved are committed to the unification of the six counties of the North with the rest of Ireland, but they recognize that such a unification cannot be imposed on the Unionist citizens of Northern Ireland by force. As Dr. FitzGerald has pointed out, at the heart of the conflict in Northern Ireland is the existence of two identities: "the Irish/Irish sense of identity of the Nationalist minority and the British/Irish identity of the Unionist majority." The challenge that confronts the New Ireland Forum, in Dr. FitzGerald's words, is to find "structures that would accommodate both these senses of identity and thus secure peace and stability."

The dream of a united Ireland strikes deep emotional

resonances in the Irish consciousness, and it has provided a powerful theme for politicians in Ireland and on the other side of the Atlantic. It is a theme that can be cruelly exploited by those who are more impressed with its emotional appeal to their constituents than they are concerned with the pragmatic decisions that must be made in order to bring that dream closer to reality. The New Ireland Forum is significant because it represents the first time that all four nationalist political parties in Ireland have come together to search for a consensus on what the shape of a "new Ireland" could be. They have invested considerable time and energy in the process. Since last May, over 300 written submissions have been discussed in lengthy hearings that have ranged over the various constitutional, religious, economic and ideological issues that complicate the journey to a unified Ireland. By all accounts, the hearings for the most part have been characterized by a seriousness of purpose and a candor that are rarely present in meetings of longstanding political rivals.

The final report of the forum is expected within weeks. If a proposal could be developed that was unanimously supported by all four parties, who represent four out of every five people on the entire island, it would obviously be a powerful rallying point for the Irish people and a challenge to the British Government. Thus far, Britain's policy toward Northern Ireland has consisted of insisting on the right of the Unionist majority to determine their own national identity, a perfectly valid principle in itself but hardly a comprehensive view of the roots of the conflict there.

Unanimity concerning the forum's conclusions may not prove possible. Still, the report will review the different constitutional options for a new Ireland—a unitary state, a federal Ireland or joint sovereignty with Britain over Northern Ireland—in the hope that they could constitute the agenda for talks between Britain and Ireland and, eventually, between the Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland. Whatever its final form, though, the report will focus on a "new Ireland," one freed from the paralysis of the past and the exhausted stalemate that keeps the children of Ireland hostage to a legacy of hatred and bitterness. The future cannot be surrendered to the myths of death; it must belong to the living.

