



THE FIRST PRESIDENCY

IRELAND'S PRESIDENCY OF
THE COUNCIL, JANUARY-JUNE 1975.

by Tony Brown

PART ONE
TOWARDS THE
PRESIDENCY

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Ireland's Presidency of the Council, January-June 1975

PART ONE – TOWARDS THE PRESIDENCY

Introduction

This is the first of three papers written as Ireland holds the EU Presidency for the seventh time. They seek to tell the story of the first Irish Presidency, in the first six months of 1975, in terms of facts and figures, gleaned from a wide range of sources, including insights and commentary from those who participated in the events and from academic and media circles.

The papers cover:

1. The buildup to the Presidency in the opening years of Ireland's membership of the European Community;
2. The central event of the Presidency, the first formal meeting of the European Council; and
3. The significant events and issues over the six months of the Presidency.

A separate volume contains the texts of the key background documents from the Commission and Council and from the Presidency.

The papers are written from the personal viewpoint of someone who was closely involved in the preparation and delivery of one part of that significant period in Ireland's early experience of life in the European Community. As Special Advisor to the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Brendan Corish T.D., and to his Parliamentary Secretary, Frank Cluskey T.D. between 1973 and 1977, I devoted a large amount of my time to European issues and developments, in particular to the adoption and implementation of the 1973 Social Action Programme, introduced and promoted by the first Irish member of the European Commission, Vice President Patrick Hillery (for more information see Brown, 2013). I was actively involved in a number of aspects of the 1975 Presidency.

Dr. Garret FitzGerald

Throughout these papers the name of Garret FitzGerald appears together with many quotations from his writings and from official records. In no way is this intended to turn the text into a eulogy for someone who has been the subject of many tributes. The simple fact is that any description of the 1975 Irish Presidency must focus to a significant degree on the Foreign Minister who took a leading role in shaping, planning and delivering the six-month programme and who played a key role in many of the seminal moments of the Presidency.

Also, it is a fact that any attempt to describe and chronicle the Presidency would be seriously deficient without making use of Garret FitzGerald's extensive writings on the subject, in his memoirs and essay collections on world affairs and in his contributions to books on various aspects of Ireland's experience in Europe. From these we learn of high-level negotiations on the perennial 'British Problem' and of discussions on Palestine with Henry Kissinger but also of the dinner with friends in the South of France at which the 'style' of the Presidency was defined and of the tale of the broken spectacles in Lomé.

The Presidency Institution

In the early years of the European Community the role of rotating Presidency of the Council of Ministers was limited to setting agendas, chairing meetings, minute-taking and, interestingly, representing the Council in the European Parliament. The decision-making crisis in the mid-sixties – arising from the nationalist stance of the French Government under Charles de Gaulle – effectively 'side-lined' the Commission and confronted ministers within the Council with the task of working out compromises for themselves. This led to an increasingly active role for the Presidency which was further enhanced by the creation of the European Council in 1975 and the development of foreign policy considerations through the process of European Political Co-operation. The Presidency became the forum through which the Council's activities were initiated, co-ordinated and represented (Kirchner, 1992).

The rotating, six-monthly Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers has the task of ensuring the smooth functioning of the Council, organising and coordinating meetings and setting the agenda for the Council and for its preparatory bodies as well as chairing various EU meetings including intergovernmental conferences. The Presidency seeks to promote policy decisions, acting as an honest broker, aiming at reaching consensus among the twenty-seven Member States as well as managing crises, in a way that always supports the EU interests. As Dick Leonard, in his 'Economist Guide to the European Union' puts it:

"It is accepted that it is part of the Presidency's duty to oil the wheels of the Community and to strive to get agreement on as many issues as possible. The Presidency is therefore expected to exert itself to produce compromise solutions whenever there is a deadlock and to cajole its own national representatives as well as those of the other Member States to modify their demands."

(Leonard, 2010)

The Presidency promotes continuity and coherence in EU decision-making, building on the dossiers inherited from previous Presidencies and advancing new proposals. In this it is supported by the permanent Council Secretariat and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) in Brussels. The Secretariat – "a small, politically neutral and extremely professional body" – organises and provides administrative backup for meetings of the Council and its many working groups while also helping the Presidency

to reach decisions efficiently and effectively. COREPER – which is made up of the Permanent Representatives of the Member States – is described as the most influential preparatory committee, preparing the work of the Council through its own deliberations and those of a large number of working groups. COREPER is itself divided into two permanent bodies of the most senior national officials – Ireland is represented by two diplomats of full Ambassador status – which share the extensive workload.

The Presidency represents the Council at meetings with other EU bodies, in particular with the European Parliament and the European Commission. In this context, the Presidency is responsible for furthering initiatives aiming to promote European integration and the smooth functioning of the EU's institutions and ensuring continuity and consistency in European policy. The Presidency concludes international agreements on behalf of the Union and represents the EU at international conferences.

With the entering into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, the role of the European Parliament has been enhanced, as the ordinary legislative procedure, or co-decision, applies to the majority of the EU policy areas, making the European Parliament a co-legislator, with the Council. Close cooperation with the Parliament, in terms of ministerial attendance at plenary sessions and official participation in committees, is an imperative for a successful Presidency. Over the years, this important process has become one of the principal tasks of the Minister for European Affairs in the Presidency administration. The input of Europe Ministers such as Máire Geoghegan Quinn, Gay Mitchell and Dick Roche has been recognised and commended. Speaking to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on EU Affairs on preparations for the 2013 Presidency, the Minister for European Affairs, Lucinda Creighton T.D., commented that “given the key legislative role it now plays since the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty, I have visited the European Parliament regularly in order to strengthen our relations in the run-up to the Presidency” (Creighton, 2012).

The Council Presidency is now organised on the basis of the Trio – a group of three Member States which work together and plan the work of the Council over an eighteen-month period. The Trio helps ensure greater continuity between the six month rotating Presidencies of the Council. The current Irish Presidency is the first in this Trio with Lithuania (second half of 2013) and Greece (first half of 2014).

Commenting on the work of the first Cypriot Presidency in 2012, the European Affairs Minister, Andreas Mavroyiannis, spoke of Cyprus fulfilling “its role as an honest broker, trying to find solutions for the common European good and a common denominator among conflicting views.” Mavroyiannis saw the task of the Presidency in pragmatic terms: “Keep the flame alive. Refrain from getting involved in ideological debates on the EU's future. Leaders must find technical solutions to concrete problems, and then the future EU will take shape. Don't focus on the vision first or we risk failing to act” (Mavroyiannis, 2012).

Ireland's 2013 Presidency

On 1 January 2013, Ireland took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from Cyprus and, for the six months ending on 30 June, has responsibility for an agenda which the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, has described as “full and demanding” with the key task of “delivery...(based on) what has become known as the ‘Community Method’, the deep cooperation between the institutions, each playing its distinctive and important role” (Kenny, 2012).

The start of the 2013 Presidency coincided with the 40th anniversary of Ireland's accession to the European Communities on 1 January 1973. The experience of those forty years, described by the Taoiseach as “an era of new possibility, opportunity, indeed transformation for our country” will be commemorated and celebrated in many places and in many ways (Kenny, 2012).

In 2013 Ireland holds the Council Presidency for the seventh time, having chaired the Council in 1975, 1979, 1984, 1990, 1996 and 2004. The European Commission has commented that “through skillful negotiation and compromise, each term has seen significant developments that have had positive impacts throughout Europe.”

A budget of €63 million has been allocated for the costs of the Presidency, a reduction on the figure for the last Presidency in 2004, reflecting the current economic situation and leading to difficult decisions on holding meetings and on their location.

The Lisbon Treaty provisions mean that the rotating Presidency no longer involves chairing the European Council – now the responsibility of the permanent European Council President, Herman Van Rompuy – or the Foreign Affairs Council – now within the remit of High Representative and Commission Vice President, Catherine Ashton. Despite this change, Irish Ministers preside over all other Council formations, covering the areas of Finance and Economics; Justice and Home Affairs; Employment and Social Affairs; Competitiveness; Agriculture and Fisheries; Energy; Environment; Education and Youth Affairs; and the General Affairs Council which makes preparations for the European Council. In all, Ireland presides over nine Council configurations in both formal and informal sessions, a dozen of them in Dublin.

By the end of the Presidency, Irish officials and experts will have chaired as many as 2,000 sessions of 150 preparatory bodies and specialist committees, notably the regular COREPER meetings, which deal with the major policy questions and agenda items. The Irish Permanent Representation in Brussels has almost 200 staff in place to cover the demanding programme. Irish Ministers and officials have attended all plenary sessions of the European Parliament and many Parliamentary committee meetings in Brussels and Strasbourg, as well as participating in meetings of the representative Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions. As many as 170 Presidency events are taking place in Ireland, mostly in Dublin (Creighton, 2012).

A singular aspect of the Danish Presidency in the first half of 2012 was its designation – under International ISO20121 Standard – as a Certified Sustainable Presidency. The initiatives which brought this recognition to the Presidency ranged from environmental certification of the Danish venues for Presidency events to a ban on bottled water in conference centres and from use of public transport rather than motorcades, where possible, to sustainable office materials and PVC-free cables.

The 2013 Irish Presidency has followed the Danish example and, even before the beginning of the six-month term, was awarded double certification for event sustainability and environmental management systems in respect of the Dublin Castle headquarters. This is the first time that a Presidency of the EU has attained a double ISO certification (the Danish Presidency received just one certification). The certification sets a precedent for future Presidencies.

Ireland's approach to its seventh Presidency in 2013 builds on a strong track record of managing the responsibilities of the Presidency since 1975. In this context, it is interesting to consider Ireland's experience of its first Presidency, including the preparations in the months and years leading to the Presidency, the key actors involved, the major events of the Presidency and a number of major issues and challenges that it fell to the Irish Presidency to address. An examination of these topics can be found in the following sections and in the subsequent two papers in this series.

Ireland's Accession

The history of Ireland's journey to 1 January 1975, when its first Presidency commenced, has been detailed by many commentators. When the then Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, addressed the EEC Council of Ministers on 18 January 1962, making the case for Ireland's membership application, he spoke of:

“the energy and vision shown by the Member States in planning, creating and developing the Community leave no room for doubt that they will achieve the aims they have set themselves. As a country small in extent, population and production, Ireland would not represent, in terms of statistics, any considerable addition to the Community. We do feel, however, that we have a contribution to make to the accomplishment of the Community's design for a new European society and would wish to be given an opportunity of bringing our national qualities and potentialities to the service of this ideal in a spirit of loyal and constructive cooperation.”

(Maher, 1986)

It was very much in that spirit that the country entered the EEC in January 1973 and, at once, began planning for the first Presidency under the terms of the Accession Treaty which provided for the rotation of the office “in the alphabetical order of their names when written in their respective languages.” Thus, Denmark would be the first of the new EEC members to hold the Presidency – in the second half of 1973 – with Ireland to follow in 1975.

The first enlargement of the Community called for significant readjustments in the founding Six, in the three acceding countries and in the Community institutions as they dealt with changed political and economic relationships. For Ireland accession involved a reassessment of relations with the other eight Member States and with the rest of the world on the evolving agenda of European integration. It took time for the full implications of these developments to work their way through the political and administrative structures and for necessary changes to be identified and implemented in the country's administrative machine.

Brigid Laffan has reflected on the early days of membership:

“In the pre-accession period, political attention was focused on negotiating the Accession Treaty and on the referendum. Very little political thought was given to living with the EU system once we were in. The impact of membership on Irish politics was most keenly felt in the government and civil service in the initial phase of membership. Government ministers began to go to Brussels to attend Council meetings and Irish civil servants took up their places in Council and Commission working parties. Dr. Patrick Hillery, Ireland's first Commissioner, took up office in Brussels. The Irish mission in Brussels became the Irish Permanent Representation, a microcosm of the Irish administration. Unlike traditional embassies, the Representation drew its staff from across the Irish system. Most government departments have their people in Brussels.

“Early-morning flights to Brussels became part of the day-to-day pattern of ministers and their officials. They had just two years to learn the rules of the Brussels system before Ireland had to take responsibility for the Presidency of the Council in 1975 and the first European Council in January of that year. The public service found itself short of the staff needed to manage the administrative demands of membership. The key departments, particularly Foreign Affairs, got additional staff to cope. Notwithstanding the additional demands on ministers and civil servants, there was an openness to participation in the EU throughout the Irish public administration.

“Dr. Garret FitzGerald, the then Foreign Minister, in speeches at the time spoke of the psychological benefits of membership in the following terms: ‘For those of us who have in one way or another the task of representing Ireland's interests in the Community, there is, of course, the exhilaration of finding ourselves, at last, participating fully and on an equal footing with our partners in efforts to organise, run and develop the European Community itself’...Ireland's apprenticeship in the Union ended with the successful Presidency of the Council in 1975.”

(Laffan, 2004)

1973-1975

Ireland had only been a Member State for two years when it first took on Presidency on 1 January 1975. The sections below describe the intensive work – in terms of planning and development of relevant individual skills – undertaken in that short period, under the leadership of the Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Garret FitzGerald, to ensure that, from day one, the Irish Presidency would be focused, professional and effective.

A notable initiative in the early days of Irish membership was a conference in Iveagh House, headquarters of the Department of Foreign Affairs, involving all senior officials and ambassadors. The conference was called by the Minister, Dr. FitzGerald, “to discuss our foreign policy in the light of our very recent entry to the European Community.”

In his 2010 memoir, Dr. FitzGerald devoted almost four pages to this meeting which was the first of its kind – “I was too new in the job to know much about financial constraints or to be inhibited by a lack of precedent from organising such an event.” He described the content of the various sessions, held over three days, and gave details of what was clearly a genuine discussion with an exchange of ideas and experiences.

The subjects covered included the evolution of a closer European Union, the issues of supranationalism and democratisation of the Community, including a debate on the question: “was it more important for us to have a veto to stop things happening or to seek support from others to get things done by means of majority voting?” The possible development of a defence component to the Community was considered and attention was directed to the feasibility of an Economic and Monetary Union. The future of the European Parliament, in terms of powers and eventual direct election, was also discussed. In winding up the debate, Dr. FitzGerald “stressed the need for us to seek out issues on which we could play a constructive role, not just in the narrow interests of Ireland but in such a way as to demonstrate that we had a European philosophy and would not simply be looking for what we could get out of the system” (FitzGerald, 2010).

In the Department of Social Welfare, under Frank Cluskey, early decisions were made on staffing policy areas with European implications. In particular he charged a number of younger officials with developing responses to the important initiatives of the Irish Social Affairs Commissioner, Patrick Hillery, in the Social Action Programme. He also gave priority to ensuring the highest level of Departmental representation in the Permanent Representation in Brussels. As Special Advisor, I saw the Brussels connection as central to all activities.

The translation of that planning and development paid off in the performance of the Presidency described in detail below. Dr. FitzGerald reflected on the experience:

“The good fortune that attended us, the happy chance of being charged with a full agenda of issues capable of being brought to a successful outcome, and, above all the dedicated work of a remarkable team of civil servants both

in my Department and in others enabled Ireland to demonstrate during this first Presidency our capacity and willingness to play a full and constructive role in the life of the Community. “

Towards the Irish Presidency 1975

Denmark, Ireland and the UK became Member States of the European Communities on 1 January 1973. With just six months to find its feet in this new grouping, Denmark was faced with taking on the Presidency of the Council of Ministers from the 1 July 1973. It succeeded in carrying out the task with a display of efficiency and Nordic calm which was all the more remarkable as the impact of the first Oil Crisis was reflected dramatically in Denmark's internal politics with the Social Democrat Government led by Anker Joergensen falling in December 1973 to be replaced by Liberal Party administration headed by Poul Hartling. The fact of Denmark's early acceptance of responsibility within the EC institutional system gave a clear message to Ireland, which was scheduled to take on the Presidency from 1 January 1975 and had two years to plan and prepare.

The Foreign Minister made arrangements for Irish officials to visit Denmark to learn about the details of managing the Presidency and to observe Danish ministers and officials at work. Chairmanship training was provided for a hundred or more Irish civil servants who would have the responsibility of presiding over the whole range of committees and working groups during the Presidency. In his memoir, Garret FitzGerald describes the development of his thinking on undertaking the Presidency tasks, including his strong conviction that it was important “to ensure as far as possible that issues involving one's country's vital interests did not surface during the Presidency, thus making it possible to concentrate on solving other people's problems or problems that were general to the Community...simple efficiency in the management of business and skilful ordering of agenda items and of the order of speakers were clearly of prime importance, and here the assistance of the Council Secretariat, whose help some larger countries unwisely spurned, was crucial” (FitzGerald, 1993).

- Economic Crisis

The first Oil Crisis had its effects in every Member State of the European Community, with governments falling as unemployment and inflation undermined economic and social stability. Ireland was not insulated from the crisis. The Tánaiste and Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish T.D., told his Party's Annual Conference in Galway in October 1974, that:

“our future as a people is threatened by economic and political events without precedent or parallel in our history...the immediate danger to our prosperity, to our living standards, to the Government's programme of economic development and social reform, is that created by the world economic recession.

“The gravity of the situation is this. The world recession could create heavy unemployment in Ireland. It could damage the Government’s attack on poverty, slow down economic growth, prevent a rise in standards of living and seriously hamper our programme of social reform.”

(Corish, 1974)

The immediate impact of the Europe-wide recession was summed up in a 1975 briefing note for the Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, which stated that “the greatest problems facing the economy are unemployment which, at more than 100,000 now represents more than 11 per cent of the workforce and inflation which at an average annual rate, estimated at 24 per cent, is putting employment and investment prospects in danger” (Ferriter, 2012).

- Northern Ireland

But the economic crisis was not the only major political challenge facing the Irish Government as it prepared for the first Presidency. The Northern Ireland situation made great demands on the political leadership in Dublin, London and Belfast. The horror of ‘Bloody Sunday’ in Derry and its fall-out in the burning down of the British Embassy in Dublin had occurred in 1972. The Sunningdale Agreement, negotiated in 1973, had run into trouble and a change of government in London had seriously complicated matters with the launching of direct contacts between the new Labour Government and the Provisional IRA leadership.

Dr. Garret FitzGerald, in a memoir, recalled that “as the year 1975 dawned, bringing with it the first Irish Presidency of the European Community, my concern as Minister for Foreign Affairs about the possibility of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland prompted me to raise the issue with Henry Kissinger, on 8 January, in the margins of a meeting in Washington DC...” In June 1975, he submitted to the Cabinet secretariat “a memorandum from my department...on the three ‘worst-case scenarios’ that had been identified, viz. negotiated independence, negotiated repartition and a collapse of Northern Ireland into anarchy” (FitzGerald, 2010).

The difficult relationship with London on Northern Ireland was further complicated by the negotiations on the British issues concerning the finances of the European Communities. Thus, the financial implications of the recession and the challenges of Northern Ireland were linked in the demanding agenda of the Irish administration on the brink of the Presidency

Taking the First Steps

From the first day of Irish entry to the Community the process of integration into the shared Institutions became a priority for the Irish administration at all levels. Brigid Laffan has brilliantly described the complex, often confusing, world of European

decision-making into which Ireland entered in 1973 and the responses of the Irish system to this new political and administrative arena:

“Ireland joined the European Union on 1 January 1973 and since then thousands of dossiers have wound their way into the Irish civil service and domestic system of public policy and back again to the Brussels arena. Commission recommendations and communications, Council working party reports, instructions from Dublin to the Irish Permanent Representation, and Council and European Council agendas are part and parcel of the flow of work through the Irish system. The EU operates on a calendar basis: six-monthly presidencies, annual Commission and Council working programmes, sittings of the Parliament and multi-annual action plans are the rhythm of Irish governance and government. Day by day, month by month and year by year, Irish civil servants act as ‘boundary managers’ between Dublin and Brussels. They track developments in Brussels, determine Irish preferences and approaches and represent Ireland within the myriad committees that populate EU decision-making. They work closely with their political masters (the Taoiseach, Ministers and Ministers of State) to determine what approach should be adopted, dossier by dossier and meeting by meeting.”

(Callanan ed., 2007)

Dr. FitzGerald identified the main factors that would go to ensuring a successful occupancy of the Presidency:

“Simple efficiency in the management of business and skilful ordering of agenda items and of the order of speakers were clearly of prime importance” while it was important “to ensure as far as possible that issues involving one’s country’s vital interests did not surface during the Presidency, thus making it possible to concentrate on solving other people’s problems, or problems that were general to the Community.”

He further concluded that “the best hope of ensuring some favourable impact might well lie in the style of a Presidency and in successful procedural innovation” (FitzGerald, 1993). In a memorable passage, Garret FitzGerald describes a luncheon discussion in the South of France with three close friends – Senator Mary Robinson; Justin Keating T.D., Minister for Industry and Commerce; and Denis Corboy, Head of the Commission Office in Dublin. The *déjeuner à quatre* produced an agenda for the six months:

- Regular attendance by the President of the Council at sessions of the European Parliament together with a more informal question time;
- Closer attention to the Parliament’s recommendations;
- Greater recognition of the recommendations of the Economic and Social Committee;

- More open and relaxed interaction with the Press, involving Presidency briefing of the Press before as well as after Council meetings;
- An official visit by the President of Ireland to the Community Institutions.

Following this brainstorming, Garret FitzGerald came up with further innovative suggestions, such as a formal meeting at the beginning of the six months between the whole Commission and the Presidency. But, by far the most significant innovation was the attempt to end the unanimity practice that had come about in 1965 as part of the deep-seated conflict between the French Government of Charles de Gaulle and those of the other Member States. This was to be attempted by him at a number of Council meetings but was used in practice only once.

The Community Institutions

From 1 January 1973, Ireland took up its allocated places in the Institutions of the European Community:

- Dr. Patrick Hillery – who as Foreign Minister had handled Ireland’s accession negotiations and who, with the then Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, signed the Treaty of Accession – became the first Irish member of the Commission, as Vice President and Commissioner for Social Affairs.
- Judge Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh became the first Irish Member of the European Court of Justice.
- The European Parliament in 1973 was a nominated body although proposals for direct election were under consideration. From 1 January 1973, the ten Irish MEPs were: Dr. Conor Cruise O’Brien (Lab), Sir Anthony Esmonde (FG), Michael Herbert (FF), Michael Hilliard (FF), Justin Keating (Lab), Charles McDonald (FG), Farrell McElgunn (FF), Thomas Nolan (FF), Richie Ryan (FG), and Michael Yeats (FF).
- Nine Irish nominees – from employer, trade union and community organisations – became members of the advisory Economic and Social Committee.

In the first two years of Irish membership – 1973 and 1974 - there were 97 meetings of the Council of Ministers, in eleven configurations:

- Foreign Affairs – 31
- Agriculture – 31
- Finance – 16
- Development – 6
- Social Affairs – 4

- Euratom, Transport, Environment – 2
- Energy, Education, Justice – 1

These meetings were attended by fifteen Irish Ministers (six Fine Gael; five Fianna Fáil; four Labour) and by large numbers of civil servants and other advisors.

The Irish involvement in the Council was backed by the Permanent Representation in Brussels, headed by a senior diplomat at Ambassador level and bringing together representatives of relevant government departments. At the beginning of membership in 1973, six Dublin Departments had staff in Brussels and the total staff numbered fifteen. This number increased to twenty-five in 1975 as the first Irish Presidency began. By striking contrast the Permanent Representation today is headed by three Ambassador-level diplomats, has representatives from thirteen Departments, and has a total staff of 190 for the seventh Presidency in 2013.

Across all the Institutions the early days of membership saw Irish officials and experts taking up full time staff appointments at all levels. Relatively quickly a distinctive Irish presence in Brussels emerged with the early opening of an 'Irish Pub' just around the corner from the Commission headquarters, and with clubs and cultural or sporting centres appearing around the city. The Dublin-Brussels Aer Lingus flights soon became a form of flying club with rows of civil servants and, increasingly, representatives of various economic interests studying and discussing files and reports.

The Work Programme

In early 1974 it was agreed by the Council that the Member State taking over the Presidency should submit a Work Programme together with a time schedule for implementation. In fulfilling this commitment, the Irish authorities picked up the idea of organising a meeting between the leadership of the incoming Presidency and the full European Commission. This initiative was seen as a positive step in encouraging close cooperation between the Council, represented by the Presidency, and the Commission.

The Irish Presidency Work Programme was drawn up towards the end of 1974 and was presented to the Commission by the Minister for Foreign Affairs at a meeting in Brussels in December. The programme covered the order of priorities for the period, the timescale and how best to deal with the problems which were likely to arise (Government, 1975).

Developments in the European Communities

The European Communities Act 1972, setting out the legal basis of Irish membership, provided that the Government would produce two reports each year on developments in the European Communities. The first such report was published in May 1973 and provided an early picture of what was happening in the various areas of EC activity.

The first report provided a detailed report of the Paris Summit of 1972, which made a wide range of policy decisions of importance for the Community as it moved to its first

enlargement, most importantly the statement of the objective of transforming the Community into a European Union.

An important element of the agreements reached at Paris was an acceptance that the enlargement of the Community would put serious pressures on the decision-making procedures and functioning of the Institutions and on their staffs. It was recognised that there was a need to keep the system under review and to await the experience of the Member States of its operation following the enlargement before suggesting any changes.

The report then described the main policy decisions taken by the Community, important legislation adopted by the Community and important proposals for Community action outstanding. This was accomplished under fifteen headings, reflecting the evolving scope and scale of the Community's activity:

- External Relations and Trade
- Customs Policy
- Free Movement of Persons, Services and Capital
- Common Agricultural Policy
- Competition Policy
- Industrial Policy
- Company Law
- Technical Obstacles and Approximation of Legislation
- Policy in Regard to the Environment
- Scientific and Technological Policy and Euratom
- Economic and Monetary Policy
- Regional Policy
- Transport Policy
- ECSC and Energy Policy

In every one of these areas the Irish involvement was intense from the outset. Council working groups, expert groups working with the Commission, attendance at European Parliament committees and at the Economic and Social Committee working groups – all demanded regular attendance by well-briefed Irish representatives.

Brigid Laffan has described the system for managing European issues which was established during the first year of Irish membership:

- Responsibility for co-ordination was given to the Department of Foreign Affairs;
- The approval of the Department of Finance was needed in the case of a cost to the Irish Exchequer;
- The concept of a 'lead department' on individual dossiers was established;
- Processes and guidelines for reporting were established;
- An interdepartmental European Communities Committee of senior officials was established;
- A Cabinet Sub-Committee was established to make recommendations to Government.

Central to the system was the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Secondary Legislation of the European Communities which came into being in July 1973 with a limited role in reviewing legislative proposals on their way through the Brussels Institutions and offering views and advice to the Houses of the Oireachtas and to the Government. "The existence of the committee represented very slight progress in redressing the balance between the executive and the legislature...thus it permitted the development of some expertise in European matters among that small body of parliamentarians who made up its membership..." (Callanan, 2007).

The Fourth Report, in December 1974, contained an important statement of the aims of Irish policy as the country prepared to occupy the Presidency:

"It is now two years since the enlargement of the European Community. In that period the Community has had to face serious internal and external threats to its functioning arising in particular out of the world economic, monetary and energy crises...Ireland has pressed for a collective and co-ordinated response to these problems: unilateral action could prove detrimental to the weaker Member States and thus to the Community as a whole..."

"The principal aim of Irish Policy is the preservation of the Community and the strengthening of its unity. In the belief that the Community as a unit can better respond to the present economic crisis than the individual Member States the Government has advocated the strengthening and democratisation of the Community and had supported moves towards a democratically controlled European Union. The Government is concerned that policies should operate to the advantage of all the peoples of the Community irrespective of how far they are from the developed centres of economic growth..."

"The Government believes that membership of the Community has been and is beneficial for Ireland. It has extended the range of Ireland's participation in international economic and political affairs; we participate on an equal footing

with the other Member States in the running and development of the Economic Community...”

Conclusion

The senior Irish diplomat, Bobby McDonagh, now Ambassador in London, wrote about the immediate run-up to an Irish Presidency in his book on the Amsterdam Treaty:

“The sensation on assuming a Presidency is like walking into a sudden pool of light – the spotlight on a stage or the searchlight in a prison yard, depending on whether the giddy excitement or the cold fear predominates.

“The first tentative toe is dipped into the spotlight many months before the Presidency itself. Other delegations start turning to the incoming Presidency looking for answers. For a small Member States like Ireland the change is very perceptible. Your thoughts and priorities and plans gradually begin to attract significant interest. The number of incoming bilateral visits steps up significantly.

“Presidency preparations, which have begun several years in advance, become intense in the eight weeks before the first night. You have to start thinking like a Presidency (about the vastly complex and ultimately crucial array of questions concerning the organisation of work) and acting like a Presidency (by demonstrating an openness to the concerns of others, a neutral approach to the business at hand and a level of ambition for the Union as a whole).”

(McDonagh, 1998)

Mark Callanan of the Institute of Public Administration, in his contribution to a volume which he edited in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, wrote that:

“Ireland has had a tradition since 1975 of running successful presidencies that have been noted for high-profile successes. Ireland’s first Presidency was described by a former British Foreign Secretary (Sir Geoffrey Howe) as ‘a remarkable model of efficiency’. Certainly it appears that Irish presidencies are popular and well regarded amongst other Member States. The Irish approach tends to emphasise efficiency and getting the work done, with Irish representatives seen as constructive and good negotiators, occasionally introducing an element of pragmatism and realism into the proceedings. Equally, we may say that Ireland has brought a blend of innovation and workman-like pragmatism to the treaty-making process.

“The input of Irish individuals, whether commissioners or MEPS, ministers or officials, is often referred to as a key contribution that Ireland has made to European integration. In the words of one of the central actors in recent treaty negotiations, ‘national points of view and the effectiveness with which they are conveyed are inextricably bound up with the individuals who express

them'. If that is the case, Ireland's record attests to the quality of Irish negotiators past and present, at both political and administrative levels."

(Callanan, 2007)

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