

Deaglán de Bréadún, Political Reporter, delivers term reports on the members of the Government

Good, very good and could do better

JOHN BRUTON



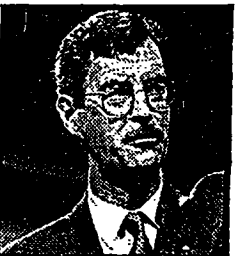
THE man from Meath became Taoiseach almost by accident. His image in opposition was so bad that little was expected when he took over. Four months on, it's a pleasant surprise to many that the peace process is still trundling along...

PROINSIAS DE ROSSA



AFTER years of "hard left" opposition it must be a shock to get into government, but Proinsias is looking more like a Minister every day. Imagine the scorn and obloquy Democratic Left would heap on any other régime which gave a 2 1/2 per cent increase in social welfare...

DICK SPRING



THE Kerryman came off worst in his recent joust with Mary Robinson. Try slugging-off Mother Teresa next time, Dick. His work on the peace process has not received the recognition his supporters feel he deserves...

RUAIRI QUINN



AS LABOUR'S first Minister for Finance, he has at least ensured his paragraph in the history books. Given current economic orthodoxy, he is more likely to be judged for his impact on public expenditure than any reduction in unemployment...

MICHAEL NOONAN

AS MINISTER for Health, Noonan was given the poisoned chalice of abortion-information legislation. He drank it with gusto and, instead of withering away, actually thrived on the potion. But he was fortunate that Fianna Fail imploded on the issue...



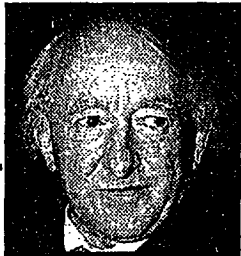
NORA OWEN

SHE had a hellish baptism as Minister for Justice and most observers agree the gardai did her no favours, either at the time of the Brink's-Allied robbery or the Lansdowne Road riot. Admirers say she's effective and courageous and has been helpful in the peace process...

MICHAEL LOWRY

A MAJOR player inside Fine Gael but still a relatively unknown quantity on the broader political stage. He "talks a good game" with the assistance of public relations adviser Bill O'Hearty. But he can underestimate the power of entrenched interests...

MICHAEL D. HIGGINS



DES O'MALLEY of the PDs predicted Michael D. would "go mad" in government. Instead, he positively bloomed under the rays of power: his ministerial demeanour has been described as "sacerdotal". This "abstract intellectual" is no slouch when it comes to getting what he wants...

IVAN YATES

HIS irrepressible cheerfulness makes him the male counterpart of Nora Owen: nothing seems to faze the guy. As Minister for Agriculture, his biggest test will be to tackle the continuing fall-out from the beef tribunal. Critics say he has been excessively protective of his Department...

BRENDAN HOWLIN

IN THE last administration, he took to the Health portfolio like a duck to water but friends and foes alike say he hasn't settled in yet at the even more disparate Department of the Environment. Nevertheless, he successfully defused the drink-driving controversy...

MERVYN TAYLOR

THE Quiet Man of the Cabinet. There were initial problems as his Equality and Law Reform department strove to establish its identity under the last administration. He has set up a task force on travellers and a commission on people with disabilities, but critics say he is not good at taking potentially unpopular decisions...

ENDA KENNY

HE HAD a political windfall in the recent Budget when Westport and Achill, in his own constituency, were included in the new scheme giving tax incentives to "traditional seaside resorts". Westport is a lovely place to visit but not exactly bucket-and-spade country. Kenny's laid-back, non-pushy exterior masks a sharp sense of grassroots politics...

NIAMH BHREATHNACH

VERY much the face in the news, with her White Paper on Education and appearances at teacher conferences. Best-known achievement so far has been the undertaking to abolish fees in third-level colleges. This was secured in the teeth of strong resistance, even from her Coalition colleagues...

RICHARD BRUTON

VERY good brain; lacks political skills" was one Opposition comment. The Taoiseach's little brother is in an important economic ministry, where life is just one crisis after another. Packard, Sunbeam, Irish Steel and now the Competition Authority's recommendation that he should take High Court action to prohibit continued involvement by Independent Newspapers in the Irish Press group...

HUGH COVENEY

FIANNA FAIL'S David Andrews called "Fish and Ships". This throwaway remark understated the importance of the Marine brief in particular. After a long absence from the Dail, Coveney was immediately plunged into delicate negotiations on fishing rights in his first week and the general perception is that he did well. There is a negative view that he "copped-out" on necessary cuts in the Defence Forces...

PAT RABBITTE

POACHER turned gamekeeper: the star of the Opposition benches has had to soften his cough since he started attending Cabinet meetings with speaking, but not voting, rights. "He's gone to ground... what's his game?" was a Fianna Fail type. Taunted after the Budget as "Rabbitte Banker's Friend", he slapped a €25,000 charge on the banks for every time they put up their charges...

Canada's strong resistance is a lesson for Ireland

"THE Canadian flag became the symbol of conservation..." said Royce Firth, an upbeat Canadian high commissioner, in London yesterday, following an agreement with the European Union on the north-west Atlantic fish dispute. Speaking on BBC Radio Four's The World This Weekend yesterday, the high commissioner denied that his government had been "conned"...

If monitoring and enforcement are central to the resolution of the EU-Canadian fish dispute, "friendly" international agreements have failed. Lorna Siggins, Marine Correspondent, reports

A "total enforcement regime" had been Canada's "bottom-line concern", the Canadian fisheries minister, Mr Brian Tobin, said in Ottawa on Saturday.

The main elements of the new monitoring agreement include the provision of independent, full-time observers on board vessels at all times; enhanced surveillance by satellite tracking; an increase in inspections and quick reporting of infractions; verification of gear and catch records; "timely and significant" penalties to deter violations; new minimum fish size limits; and improved quayside monitoring.

As to whether Canada and Spain can now put this dispute behind them, much will depend on the practical application of this new system. Canada's fishery-protection service is not only better equipped than its counterpart here; control measures will receive full political support.

"It's these enforcement details that we'll be watching with interest here," Mr Joey Murrin, chief executive of the Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation, said yesterday. There was similar cautious reaction in Castletownbere, Co Cork, where fishing skippers ignored advice from the Garda to take down the Canadian flags...

Two issues emerge clearly: fisheries management has reached a crisis level, given the fact that a so-called "gentleman's agreement" on controlling catches within international waters—the North-West Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (NAFO)—now needs "teeth". Only an estimated 10 per cent of the world's commercial fish stocks lie in international waters. Thus, "fish wars" may fuel more territorial disputes in time to come.

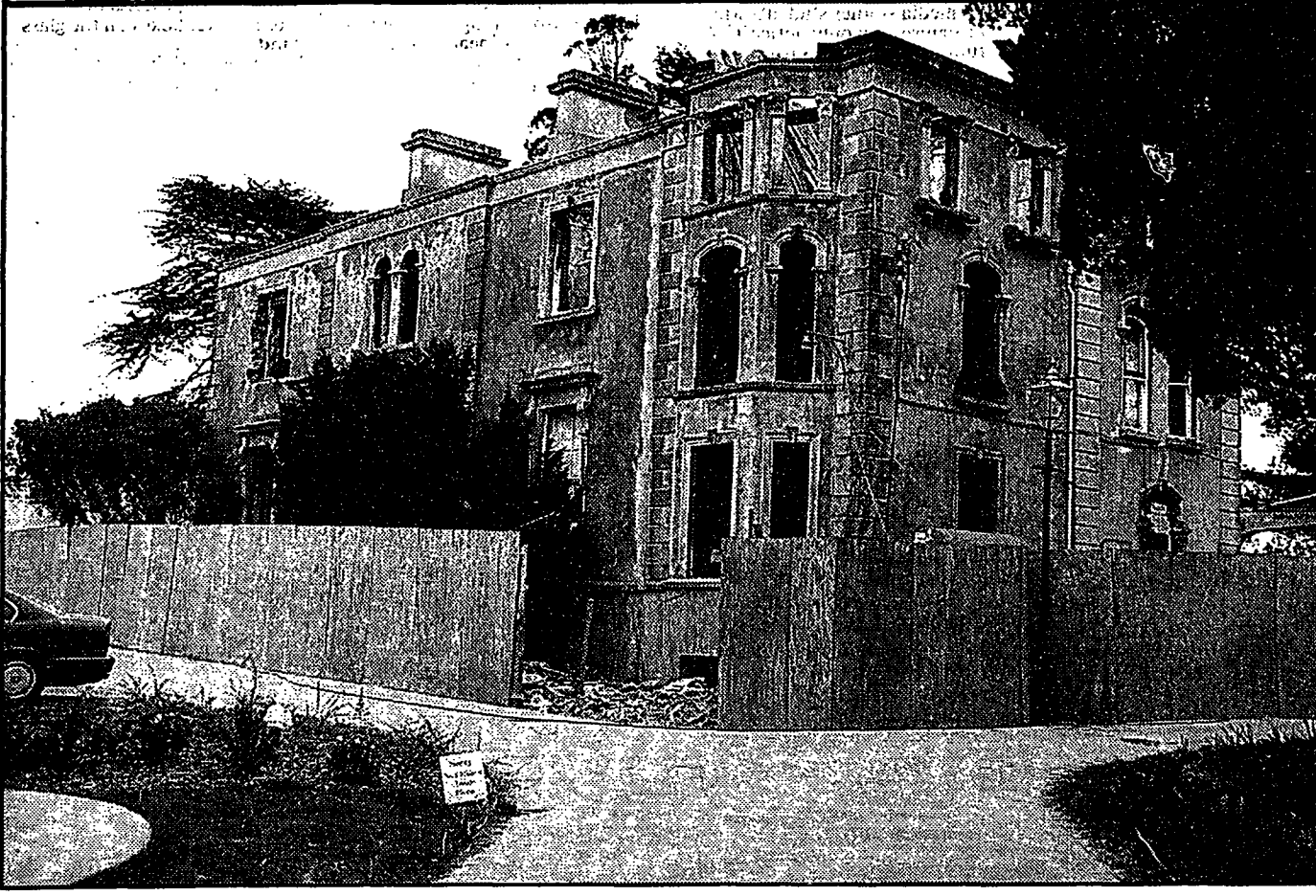
"did not go down well in Iveagh House". Since then, Ireland has fought hard to limit the effect of full Spanish and Portuguese accession to Irish waters from 1996.

Efforts to secure support among fellow EU member states last December were hampered by Spain's threat to block ratification of EU membership for Austria, Finland and Sweden. The deal, as eventually agreed, resulted in increased monitoring and control measures, including a system of entry and exit reporting from 1996, and catch reporting to the Irish authorities from 1998.

Also for the first time, the EU agreed to subvert the operating— as distinct from capital—costs of fishery protection by the Naval Service and Air Corps. A commitment to strict monitoring and control measures is central to the EU agreement with Canada now. Under the agreement, Canada will harvest 10,000 tonnes of Greenland halibut or turbot, while the EU will limit further catches by its vessels...

Such was the speed of the EU response to Canada's arrest of the Spanish factory trawler, Estai, outside its 200-mile limit early last month, that it sent a clear message to those not familiar with the workings of the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). Europe's foreign policy on fish reflected the interests of Madrid. Only belatedly did this Government express sympathy for the Canadian position in spite of direct experience off this coastline over the last nine years of the Spanish record on conservation of marine resources within the European pond. While consistently condemning Canada's arrest of the Estai in international waters, the Government defended the EU stance.

The argument that support for Canada now might compromise Ireland's position at a later date—should it decide to take Spain to court over continued fishing infringements or should Irish vessels be harassed by Spanish patrol ships on tuna grounds—was greeted with much laughter around the coastline. Memories may be short, but not that short. In December, 1993, the former Minister for Defence and the Marine, Mr David Andrews, had threatened to go to the European Court if the EU fisheries council decided to grant Spain and Portugal unrestricted access to Irish waters from 1996. Mr Andrews said he had received Cabinet backing for a legal challenge, if there was no other option. However, a decision in Brussels was deferred, access was granted subsequently under the Treaty of Rome, and the subject of Irish legal challenges was quietly dropped. In the words of one official at the time, such talk



Roebuck house in Clonskeagh, Dublin where a demolition attempt was halted yesterday. Photograph: David Sleanor

Planning officials halt attempted demolition of Victorian mansion

By Peter Thompson AN ATTEMPT to demolish the remains of Roebuck Park House, a large Victorian mansion in Clonskeagh, Dublin, was halted yesterday after intervention by officials of the planning department of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown county council. The house has been derelict for several years after the death of its last resident. An area immediately surrounding the house has been developed into an estate of expensive detached houses by the Cunningham Group, but it is not clear if that firm is the legal owner of the house. The Cunningham Group was refused permission in August last

year by Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Council to demolish the house and replace it with a four-storey block containing one three-bedroom apartment and 20 two-bedroom units, to be built over basement car parking. Attempts to contact both Moorview Developments or Cunningham Bros last night were unsuccessful. There is no telephone listing for Moorview, and the Cunningham Group's number is ex-directory. The notice is placed just inside the new development at waist height behind a steel fence. It is small and not easily noticed. It does not give the address of Moorview Developments. Workers at the site yesterday, when questioned, said they were not working for Cunningham Bros, and would not say who was paying them for their work.

It is not clear if ownership of the house has been transferred to this firm. Their foreman, who did not wish to be identified, said the house was in a dangerous condition and that there were rats in the basement which were a hazard to local children. A resident of one of the new houses, who also declined to give his name, said residents of the new estate regarded the house as "dangerous and wanted it gone". However, the chairman of a residents' association, which claims to represent the views of approximately 350 householders in the area immediately surrounding the Roebuck Park House development, said yesterday that there had been several fires in the house and he claimed it had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Dr Brendan O'Reilly, chairman of the Roebuck Park Residents' Association, said the attempt yesterday to demolish the house was a "flagrant" breach of the law. "We feel that there is no point in having a planning authority if they (the authority) can't implement the planning laws."

Dr O'Reilly added: "There doesn't seem to be any way that this maverick behaviour can be stopped." In its decision rejecting the Cunningham Group's appeal against permission to demolish the house, an Bord Pleanála said the group's proposed development would "be contrary to the proper planning and development of the area".

New study looks for genetic clues to spina bifida

By Mary Mulvihill EVERY year, about 100 infants are born in Ireland with spina bifida or a related defect, and a new Irish study into the causes of these disorders has just begun. The survey, directed by Dr Julianne Byrne, of the Boyne Research Centre in Drogheda, Co Louth, is part of an international study that also involves teams in Italy and Washington DC. The aim, according to Dr Byrne, who specialises in birth defects, is to try to identify any genetic factors that might be associated with spina

bifida and other similar disorders which are associated with "neural tube defects" (NTDs). These disorders arise if the embryo's neural tube, which later develops into the brain and spinal cord, fails to close. The severity of the condition varies considerably, but the majority of affected infants die at birth. Dr Byrne said that "the prognosis has improved greatly in recent years, with advances in surgery and medicine", but she stressed that "it is still a very serious condition, requiring life-long care".

The causes of spina bifida are not understood. Although British research in the 1980s found that 75 per cent of NTDs could be prevented if the mother was taking a folic acid supplement at the time of conception. The crucial stage in the embryo's development is at day 28, before most women realise they are pregnant, hence there is an international move to supplement staple foods, such as cereals, to ensure that all women of child-bearing age receive additional folic acid. This supplementation may ac-

count for the decline in the incidence of NTDs internationally in recent years. In Ireland, only 1.5 births in 1,000 are now affected (compared with 6.8 cases 20 years ago), though even this is still high relative to other European countries. According to Dr Byrne, dietary supplements are vital, but there may also be a genetic factor. In general, women who have had one affected child are 10 times more likely to have another one. Irish research published last year implicated a particular enzyme, suggest-

ing a possible genetic association with the disorder. The new study hopes to identify the possible genetic factors by interviewing families with at least one affected child or pregnancy. The survey, which will concentrate on the Louth/Meath area, is funded by the Jones Foundation in the US and by local firms. Dr Byrne has appealed for parents in the area who have had an NTD pregnancy to take part in the study. The Boyne centre can be contacted at 041-36041.

Gorse fires in Co Dublin spreading

DUBLIN Fire Brigade requested the assistance of the Army in the early hours of this morning to combat a forest fire half-a-mile wide on Three Rock Mountain. The brigade sent three units to tackle the fire yesterday evening and supplemented these with two more units after midnight. The RTE transmitter on the mountain was not in danger, the fire brigade said, nor were any homes, but fire fighters were "praying for rain", according to one officer. The Three Rock Mountain was the 50th reported rural fire in the Co Dublin area over the weekend. The blaze could be seen in Ballybrigan, nearly 30 miles away. A fire officer said that he believed some of the fires had been started by children.

60% in favour of divorce Bill

A new poll shows that 60 per cent of voters favour the introduction of divorce legislation. Among urban voters the majority rises to 65 per cent, compared with 54 per cent in rural areas. In Dublin 66 per cent of voters would vote to remove the constitutional ban on divorce, in the rest of Leinster 62 per cent, in Munster 57 per cent and in Connaught/Ulster 53 per cent. The figures are given in an IPS poll conducted for the Irish Independent last Wednesday and represents a four per cent rise in the numbers supporting the removal of the constitutional ban on divorce since a similar poll was conducted last November. The highest level of support for lifting the ban on divorce was among Democratic Left supporters (96 per cent), followed by Greens (85 per cent), Progressive Democrats (82 per cent), Labour (66 per cent), Fine Gael (57 per cent) and Fianna Fail (54 per cent).

Bullying victim's home attacked

The family at the centre of a bullying dispute in Waterford had a breeze block wrapped in an Irish rugby shirt thrown through their kitchen window in the early hours of Saturday morning, according to Mr Ian Swan. In February the Swans' 10-year-old son Ian was hospitalised for six days after being beaten up on his way home from school. Their eight-year-old son, Christopher, was also attacked. Some reports suggested that they were attacked because they had been wearing Welsh rugby shirts. Waterford gardai confirmed that the attack took place, and they said that they would be patrolling the estate as usual. Since last month the authorities have been compiling a file for the Director of Public Prosecutions.