

Government will build on bedrock of Anglo-Irish Agreement

THE DISCUSSIONS on the future of Northern Ireland, which get under way next week, may prove to be the most significant and far-reaching to have addressed relations between these islands and between the parties in the North since the Treaty negotiations of 1921.

An historic settlement achieved by the Northern constitutional parties and the Irish and British Governments would address the three strands of relations which fall to be resolved: within the North, between North and South and between the two islands.

The parties to the discussions have acknowledged, with varying degrees of emphasis, that the potential now exists for the creation of new structures, forming an entirely new framework in which political and perhaps constitutional relations could be addressed.

The negotiations are scheduled to last 10 weeks, within a prearranged "gap" in meetings of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, but provision will almost certainly be made for an extension of time if the talks promise success at a late stage.

Direct involvement by the Government will take place on a signal from the Northern Secretary of State, Mr Brooke, after about five weeks, when the North-South strand of negotiations is addressed. The first round of discussions will involve the Northern Ireland political parties, under the chairmanship of Mr Brooke, and matters of British-Irish relations will be tackled last.

Details of any settlement will be placed before the people of

Northern Ireland for endorsement in a referendum, and a similar course of action is likely to be followed in the South, even though the Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, declined to give an undertaking to that effect in the Dail last week.

'We must intensify our efforts within the framework of a new Europe in which the unity of peoples is the major theme'

The meeting of Government Ministers and unionist politicians, in negotiations concerning the establishment of new links and relationships between North and South, is hugely significant and symbolic — even if the unionists regard themselves as part of a United Kingdom team led by Mr Brooke. And they are expected to press strongly for the modification or abandonment of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution in return for concessions from their side.

The presence of the leader of the Progressive Democrats and Minister for Industry and Commerce, Mr O'Malley, on the Government's negotiating team is to be expected. But the Taoiseach has insisted that the format will involve a Government negotiating team, following Government policy, under his personal direction and control.

That direction has been indicated by the Taoiseach on a number of recent occasions, but nowhere more clearly than at Bodenstown, in October, 1990, when he said:

"The challenge is to evolve structures that enable both unionists and nationalists to maintain the links and traditions that are dear to them in a new arrangement that would encompass the totality of relations involved. . . . The European Community offers us an

entirely new context in which to seek political progress in Ireland. In trying to chart a new path which will soften and eventually eliminate the divisions of the past on this island, we must intensify our efforts within the framework of a new Europe in which the unity of peoples is the major theme."

That presentation suggests that while the Forum Report and the wish of the constitutional nationalist parties will have a strong influence on the Government's initial submission, the bedrock position from which it hopes to move forward will be the Anglo-Irish Agreement. And, of course, if the talks fail, the Anglo-Irish Agreement will remain in place.

The Forum Report, completed in 1984, is still thumbed by Mr Haughey when the question of long-term aspirations is raised. Time and again, in the Dail, at Ard-fheiseanna or abroad, he has quoted the preferred option of the parties: "The particular structure of political unity which the Forum

would wish to see established is a unitary state, achieved by agreement and consent, embracing the whole island of Ireland and providing irrevocable guarantees for the protection and preservation of both the unionist and nationalist identities."

Mr Haughey does not mention the other models of government dealt with in that report, such as federalism and confederalism. But then he has also stopped talking in recent years of his "misgivings" and "reservations" concerning the Anglo-Irish Agreement and has sought, instead, an arrangement with the unionists that would transcend it.

The Government wants talks at which no political matter is excluded, either a united Ireland or devolved government, and it is approaching them in a constructive, rather than an adversarial, fashion. Given its recognition of the status of Northern Ireland under Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement — where no change can come about without majority consent — it would seem that the unionists could expect no less under any new arrangement.

But how to fit the "failed political entity" of Northern Ireland into an agreement which would embrace the two islands and yet address the aspirations of both nationalists and unionists?

Both the British and Irish Governments agree that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is the bedrock, the starting point. That agreement is, after all, only a framework providing for certain institutional and political developments which were stillborn because of unionist opposition.

The involvement of unionists

would change all that. Of course there would have to be an agreement between the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland on a form of devolved government acceptable to both communities. And there would have to be action in relation to the sort of cross-Border co-operation envisaged by Article 10 which speaks of the need for "machinery to be established by the responsible authorities in the North and South for practical co-operation in respect of cross-Border aspects of these (economic and social development) issues."

In that regard, there has been an increasing level of involvement by Irish Ministers in the workings of the Intergovernmental Conference in recent months, with five Ministers taking part.

Much of that work has been linked with Ireland and Britain's membership of the EC and the funding for projects has invariably been largely provided by the Community. This linkage may provide one of the more fertile areas of political accommodation as unionist politicians have already publicly recognised the comparative successes of the Irish Government in tapping into EC Social and Structural Funds. Farmers, too, recognise an affinity of interests which isn't articulated by a British Government which is more interested in retaining low inflation rates and cheap food prices.

Mr Haughey spoke last week of the difficulty in structuring the negotiations because of the involvement of the constitutional parties in the North. In saying that, he may have reflected the Government's own frustration at

being excluded from direct involvement in the first strand of talks — that between the constitutional parties, under the chairmanship of Mr Peter Brooke. The Government will, of course, be kept informed. In his statement to the House of Commons, last

'Nothing will be fit strand until every the talks as a wh

month, Mr Brooke spoke of an arrangement for liaison between the different strands of the complex discussions and the Government expects to be kept fully informed of developments on internal structures through the Secretariat at Maryfield. There will also be continuing contact with the SDLP.

The Government's input into these deliberations may be reflected through its support of the SDLP but it also holds a powerful veto in the form of an agreement between all the parties that "nothing will be finally agreed in any strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole."

The review of the workings of the Anglo-Irish Conference hinted at the form an acceptable arrangement might be held when both Governments declared it to be their policy to "encourage progress towards the devolution of responsibility for certain powers in Northern Ireland" and in that regard they recognise "the right of each tradition to pursue its aspirations by peaceful and constitutional means".

April 1991

April 1991

Irish
Government

The issues of power-sharing, responsibility-sharing, or some other political arrangement will be for the constitutional parties to confront and overcome.

The North-South negotiations will bring the Government to the table in about five weeks. The

inally agreed in any
thing is agreed in
ole'

unionists will regard themselves as part of the United Kingdom team in those talks and will be formally associated with Mr Brooke. But with the SDLP and Alliance parties playing a full role, it is difficult to see how that facade can be maintained.

Here the Government will come under pressure to amend or abandon Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution in return for cross-Border arrangements involving new institutions. Agreement by the unionists to take their reserved seats on the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body would not be regarded as a very significant move, although it would be welcomed. As for changes in the Constitution, particularly in relation to Articles 2 and 3, Mr Haughey is on record as saying that an agreement covering the island as a whole would certainly require a new constitution, or an amendment to it.

In seeking an end to violence the Government has echoed the words of Mr Brooke, that a role could be found for Sinn Fein within a new arrangement if there

was a permanent cessation of violence. That role did not specifically include a place at the negotiating table.

In the event of violence continuing, the issue of security, a function likely to be retained by the British Government, could form the main topic of discussion in the Irish-British strand. Extradition, and the need for revised legislation, has strained relations for some time and will probably be addressed.

Whatever happens, both Governments are convinced of the value of the Anglo-Irish Conference and are likely to retain it and most of its trappings, even if under a different guise. It has minimised "megaphone diplomacy" and encouraged the form of contact and dialogue which has gone far to eradicate suspicion between France and Germany in Europe.

Officials see "no great problems" emerging in the third strand of talks between the two Governments, in spite of the overhanging issue of extradition and other security matters, and they are likely to start last.

The possibilities of a new beginning, when the people of the island could initiate the process of growing together at their own pace, have only gradually emerged as the "talks-about-talks" ground ponderously on. Now that historic opportunity beckons, however, the Government is determined that its response will fit the occasion.

Tomorrow: Mark Brennock on the SDLP