

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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BACKGROUND NOTE

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IRELAND HOLDS COUNCIL PRESIDENCY FOR FIRST TIME

Ireland is taking its first turn at the helm of the European Community Council of Ministers. On New Year's Day, Irish Foreign Minister Dr. Garret FitzGerald assumed the Council presidency for the first half of 1975. The office rotates between the nine EC member governments every six months, in alphabetical order. Ireland is the second of the new member states to hold office. Denmark did so during the second half of 1973. Britain's term starts January 1, 1977.

For a small country like Ireland, whose diplomatic corps numbers less than 200, the undertaking is enormous. About 40 council meetings are held annually. While Ireland holds office, FitzGerald (or other Irish ministers in their respective fields) will preside over these meetings. The Committee of Permanent Representatives to the Community, which helps prepare much of the Council's work, is to be chaired by Ireland as will be the 190 specialist committees and working groups meeting in Brussels.

Political cooperation meetings between the nine EC foreign ministers will also be chaired, organized, and hosted by the country in office. They are held at least twice during each presidential term in that country's capital, in this case Dublin.

In the international arena, the President acts as a spokesman for the Community in many of its relations with the rest of the world. He will also, for instance, represent the Council at occasions such as the signature of the association of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific states. Irish ambassadors could be called on to represent the Community. Ireland will also have to supply chairmen for coordinating committees of the Nine -- such as prior to United Nations (UN) meetings or at international gatherings like the UN law of the seas conference.

Ireland has already begun to provide new impetus and style to the workings of the Community under FitzGerald's leadership. Over the past two years, the Irish Government has boosted the size of its diplomatic corps by one third and trained the needed civil servants for chairing the various specialist committees and working groups.

A confirmed believer in European unity, FitzGerald is moving quickly to strengthen the Community's internal and external relations.

On January 8, he will meet with U.S. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger in Washington. The talks will highlight matters of common interest to the Community and the United States as well as US-Irish bilateral questions.

To ensure closer coordination of work of the Commission and the Council, he took the rare initiative of arranging several meetings with the Commission before and during the early weeks of the Irish presidency. FitzGerald has gained an informal and continuous dialogue with the European Parliament and plans to spend more time there than his predecessors did. He has also begun building an improved information network to better inform Europeans of the workings of EC institutions. Accordingly, he meets frequently with journalists, promises more complete press briefings before and after Council meetings, and expects to speak throughout Europe on EC developments.

A barrister, FitzGerald was born in Dublin February 9, 1926. He was a member of the Irish Senate from 1965 to 1969 and has sat in the Irish Parliament since 1969. He is Vice President and former Chairman of the Irish Council of the European Movement, and Governor of the Atlantic Institute of International Relations, Paris .