

APPENDIX F**NATIONAL FORUM ON EUROPE****REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS TO DATE**

The National Forum on Europe was established by the Irish government in October 2001, with a mandate to ‘facilitate a broad discussion of issues relevant to Ireland’s membership of an enlarging Union and to consider the range of topics arising in the context of the debate on the Future of Europe’.

The Forum comprises political parties (other than Fine Gael, which has not sent a delegation), MEPs, north and south, and, in the Special Observer Pillar, organisations representative of civil society, including the churches. I represent the Church of Ireland on the Special Observer Pillar, with Canon Adrian Empey as accredited alternate, and while there is great pressure on the time for verbal and written submissions allotted to all participants in the forum, the Special Observer Pillar sits with the other Forum members, and appears to be able to participate fully in the deliberations. Copy of the Church of Ireland submission, made both orally and in writing, is appended.

The forum meets weekly, usually in Dublin Castle, though meetings have been held in Cork (with the emphasis on topics relating to agriculture) and in Galway. Mini-fora were held throughout the country, and these provided an opportunity for a wide range of interests to express their views.

The main theme of the Forum deliberations so far has been enlargement of the Union, the complexity of which has become clear to all. It is anticipated that, if changes to existing structures are made, at least a further ten countries will be eligible for membership by 2004 at the latest. The structural changes envisaged by the Nice Treaty, relating, inter alia, to the number of commissioners, and voting regulations, are seen by supporters of Nice as imperative if enlargement is to proceed, though some participants in the forum question this. Opponents of Nice, while generally supportive of enlargement, base much of their opposition to Nice on what they perceive to be an unacceptable further pooling of Irish sovereignty. They also express considerable apprehension over the involvement of Ireland in the Rapid Reaction Force and other mechanisms for military co-operation, seeing this as the creation of a European army by stealth, and detrimental to Ireland’s traditional policy of neutrality. They are not, as yet, reassured by the fact that Ireland’s participation in peace-making and peace-keeping will be subject to UN and Oireachtas approval. They point to the fact that the Taoiseach had promised a referendum on Ireland’s participation in such activities, and that no such referendum was held.

Advocates of the Treaty claim that Ireland gains in effective influence by pooling sovereignty. While asserting that the Rapid Reaction Force has, in fact, nothing to do with the Treaty of Nice, they argue that if the EU were to refuse to take part in peace-keeping roles, then all decisions relative to European peace and security would be left in the hands of the USA.

The Forum now proceeds to deliberate on a cluster of related issues:

balances between member states,
legitimacy, accountability and transparency
and concerns over sovereignty.

Issues related to the future shape of Europe form the agenda for the European Convention, established as a result of the Laeken summit, and of which the former president of France, M. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was appointed President. It is expected that the views expressed through the forum will form part of the Irish input to the Convention. It will be noted that in the Church of Ireland submission we have requested that, like the Forum, the convention should make provision for submissions from 'civil society', including religious bodies, and I have made the point at a meeting of the Special Observer Pillar with the chairman, Senator Maurice Hayes, that such contributions should not be made entirely by 'Brussels-based' institutions, but should somehow provide for access from the member states. Otherwise, the accusations of remoteness and lack of transparency so frequently levelled at the EU will be given further credibility. It would already seem to be the case that, as a result of what has been said at the forum and the local mini-fora, some Irish politicians have taken on board the need for much greater public debate of EU affairs through the Oireachtas.

Proceedings of the forum will cease in the run-up to the general election, and Senator Hayes has made it clear that the future of the body will depend on the policy of the incoming government.

Dr Kenneth Milne
March 2002

**CHURCH OF IRELAND SUBMISSION
TO THE
NATIONAL FORUM ON EUROPE**

Friday 1 February 2002, at Dublin Castle

The Church of Ireland is glad to have been invited to join the special observer pillar of the National Forum and much appreciates the opportunity this affords us to contribute to the Forum's deliberations.

We welcome the fact that the deliberations of this Forum to date have been largely concerned with the enlargement project, as we welcome the prospect of enlargement of the Union itself, believing that the more widely we share the vision of the founding fathers, such as Monnet, Schumann and others, the more do we enhance the prospects for peace on this continent, and, indeed, for prosperity.

With enlargement will come an intensified religious diversification. The Orthodox churches already have a considerable presence in the European Union, as, indeed, they have in the city of Dublin, and that presence is growing. Islam is very much in our midst in Ireland, and will be an increasing presence in an enlarged Union.

Those of us from the western Christian tradition need to recognise that while we share much with the Orthodox, we have a very different past, and inherit very different folk memories – the importance of which ought not to be underestimated in Ireland, where folk memory can still inhibit reconciliation between Christians brought up in the western tradition. It behoves us to remember, for instance, that the Orthodox, like Moslems, have unhappy and deeply-rooted memories of the medieval crusades which so many of us in the west were taught to regard as heroic.

To some extent, the process of European integration mirrors the ecumenical movement. While the Charter of Fundamental Rights engages the attention of the member states of the Union, the churches are working on a 'Carta Oecumenica', which will likewise seek to safeguard diversity in unity. And some of us have had to learn that western assumptions in the matter of human rights may not necessarily be identical with concepts held with integrity by other Christians.

As a church, we envisage our role in the development of the European Union as twofold. We can, on the one hand, endeavour to promote among our membership greater understanding of what the Union is about, that it is more than a free trade area, and try to discern where it may be heading. We should draw inspiration from former president Jacques Delors's challenge to the churches to 'give a soul to Europe'. We need to explore the means necessary to achieve such objectives, and try to dispel any misconceptions that there may be, taking into account that attitudes to the Union among Church of Ireland members, north and south, are as varied as those held by the total population of the island.

More prosaically, we can do our bit, through our central and diocesan communications network, to interpret the Union and its workings to the people in the parishes, while at the same time attempting to articulate their concerns. And we can endeavour to enlist their

support for the work of this Forum as a mechanism for ‘inclusive and broadly-based debate on Ireland’s participation in the European Union and on its overall functioning and future development’ – to quote the Forum’s terms of reference.

Already, we detect a wish to have European matters far more comprehensively addressed at parliamentary level than has heretofore been the case, so that at least the public is aware of policy and of the part that our public representatives have played in formulating it. Contributions made at the recent local meetings of the forum would suggest that this wish to see the deliberations of our own parliaments on European issues given a higher profile has been taken on board by some politicians.

The Church of Ireland is a member of the Conference of European Churches. Like the other members of that Conference, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant, we welcome the recent establishment of the Convention. We hope that the convention will take a leaf out of this forum’s book, and will similarly develop a structured dialogue with the organisations of civil society and with churches and religious communities.