

THE latest twist in the debate in the Republic about the future of the long-held policy of military neutrality came two weeks ago when Fianna Fail leader Bertie Ahern indicated that his party now favoured Irish defence forces being put at the disposal of the European Union "in situations of crisis management, where peacekeeping skills and resources would be required".

In the week that sees the fiftieth anniversary of a speech by Winston Churchill which sharply criticised Irish neutrality in World War II and directed a personal attack on the founder of Fianna Fail, Eamon de Valera, PHIL MacGIOLLABHAIN looks at some of the more sinister implications of what might now be in store should neutrality be abandoned.

When Irish historians in the late 21st century come to interpret our times they might well allow themselves a wry laugh at the old cliché about the Irish paying too much heed to their history.

For, if we were the nation of historians that we are alleged to be, we would currently be justifiably alarmed at what is being done in our names. This past week, for example, we would know that there are two anniversaries that should warn us of the dangers of becoming entrapped within large power blocks.

Fifty years ago this week Britain was celebrating victory in Europe. The service given to the cause of defeating Fascism in Europe by the Irish in Britain was acknowledged by Winston Churchill in his victory address on the BBC on May 13, 1945. However, the arch colonialist could not help himself: he simultaneously hit out at the Irish Free State's neutrality and Eamon de Valera personally.

"Owing to the action of the Dublin government," he said, "so much at variance with the temper and instinct of thousands of Southern Irishmen, who hastened to the battle front to prove their ancient valour, the approaches which the Southern Irish ports and airfields could so easily have guarded were closed by hostile aircraft and U-boats."

"This was indeed a deadly moment in our life and, if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland, we should have been forced to come to close quarters with Mr. de Valera or perish forever from this earth. However, with a restraint and poise to which I say history will find few parallels, His Majesty's Government never laid a violent hand upon them though at times it would have been quiet easy and quite natural."

Reply

De Valera was stung to reply to this attack on the Irish position of neutrality during the Emergency. He said the following on Radio Eireann three days later:

"Mr. Churchill makes it clear that, in certain circumstances, he would have violated our neutrality and that he would justify his action by Britain's necessity. It seems strange to me that Mr. Churchill does not see that this, if accepted, would mean that Britain's necessity would become a moral code and that, when this necessity became sufficiently great, other people's rights were not to count..."

Ireland free and neutral, neutral and free has been a real and identifiable benefit of breaking the connection with England, however incomplete and unsatisfactory the separation. Neutrality can be seen as the foreign policy triumph of the Irish state since its inception.

The Irish seat at the UN has much to make us proud. Our role in providing members of the defence force for UN peacekeeping missions and our involvement with the non-aligned movement has been laudable. All of that now seems imminently under threat.

For many in Ireland in 1973 joining the Common Market was an escape to freedom for the Irish state and the Irish people.

For 50 years, although we had the trappings of statehood, we remained England's economic vassal. The continued rate and nature of migration to England generation after generation painfully underlined this.

Joining the Common Market, it was argued, would provide new

Should we be on the defensive about neutrality?

markets for Irish goods, new opportunities for well-educated Irish youngsters and broaden the nation's cultural and political horizons.

Coupled with the grant-aid that flooded into the dying West, it was hard to fault the consensus around Leinster House that being in Europe was an unqualified good thing.

Now 20 years on the downside seems inexorably to be moving into view. The creation of a United States of Europe continues apace.

Many powerful interest groups have it as number one on their agenda — to such an extent that it almost seems pointless to try to object. But

The Dublin government's White Paper at the time of the Maastricht referendum stated that the EU would overcome age-old European rivalries by combining in an age of prosperity and harmony within Europe. However, it is clear that other members of the EU see the CFSP as the first step to a purely European NATO and that this will happen through the WEU. The Dublin White Paper also avoided discussion of Article J2 which effectively binds all member states to abide by a majority decision in matters of foreign affairs and security. At the time of the referendum, the

attended their meetings purely as observers.

A conference last November of the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers — RACO — in Co. Cavan "hoped" that Ireland would become a full member of the WEU. They saw an expanded role for the Defence Forces in a European defence arrangement after 1996. They were told that there was already £13 billion in EU funds available for navy warships, ostensibly to combat the importation of illegal drugs into Europe through Ireland. The conference was told too that the funds were awaiting a suit-

Britain and France are holding confidential meetings to discuss pooling resources to create a new European navy. Britain and France are the only two nuclear powers within the EU and the two leading naval powers. A French source hinted that the two countries might jointly build and run nuclear submarines together. The fact that France was not a member of NATO no longer presents a problem given that the WEU now provides a bridge.

Plans are now being made not only to have the EU a military union but a nuclear superpower as well.

The NATO agreement that Dick Spring, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, has said that "Ireland" may sign is called the Partnership for Peace (PfP). His signature would definitely end any pretence that Ireland is in any way neutral or outside of these armed camps. Currently Ireland and Switzerland are the only neutral European states which have not signed the PfP. Partnership it may be, but it is hardly about peace.

Orwellian

Much of the new Europe's pronouncements on "defence" have an Orwellian ring to them. It is not only doublespeak that the new Europe seems adept at.

A pan-European Big Brother was being set up only two days after the Maastricht Treaty went into effect. An anonymous and powerful group of national security officials — the K4 Committee — met in secret to inaugurate an era of unprecedented inter-governmental co-operation on internal security in the new EU. If the WEU is to be the European Union's army, K4 is to be its FBI.

One Euro MP from England, Michael Elliot (Labour, London), stated that: "There is no democratic scrutiny either at national or European level. We just don't know what's happening. We don't even know the names of the K4 committee or its sub-committees".

Jacques Delors, the former president of European Commission, in an unguarded moment forgot the Eurospeak when asked by a journalist what a Euroarmy would be needed for. "To fight the resource wars of the 21st century," he said.

This off-the-cuff comment has plagued him since, but the scenario does not require the insider's knowledge of Jacques Delors to sound believable.

Human history is littered with wars about resources — indeed it is a moot point as to whether or not there are wars about anything else.

However, this revealing gaffe might indicate the price to future generations of young Irish people pressed into military service in a European army — within the EU conscription is the norm. It is not fanciful to conceive a scenario whereby we would be brought into line with that norm.

Ireland's role in a new United States of Europe will be as a provider of military and industrial recruits and as a militarised frontier — largely the role we played as part of the United Kingdom.

We may look back on this period immediately after the fall of

the Berlin Wall as a brief window in history when Ireland's western approaches lost their strategic significance momentarily.

A state which does not secure its frontiers is, in the long run, a contradiction in terms. The current relaxation of border restrictions between EU member states is a precursor to the defining and tightening of the outer borders of the union as it forms into a coherent polity.

Within that process, Ireland's western and southern approaches would again have the strategic significance that it had bestowed upon it by the Armada, General Humbert and the backfire bomber.

Access to Ireland's sea ports and airports could again become the pre-occupation of Europe's big boys as they did in Winston Churchill's time.

What concentrates the mind on the broader issues of Ireland's position in a dangerous world is that Churchill's spleen 50 years ago was broadcast on the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Fontenoy. There Irish men "displaying their ancient valour" gave Marshal de Saxe his greatest victory over England in the War of the Austrian succession. This was another episode of the Irish "fighting every other nation's battles save their own". The famous Irish brigade in the service of France suffered roughly half a million Irishmen killed in the century 1692-1792.

Doubtless Eamon de Valera, the scholar statesman, would have been aware of the significance of the anniversary of Irishmen dying in European wars. De Valera's statesmanship saved a generation of Irishmen from a similar fate during the Emergency by keeping Ireland neutral.

Goal

The concept of a United States of Europe acting on the world's stage as a superpower has been a long-standing goal for many in Europe. Even in the depths of World War II, Churchill, the arch little Englander and Europhobe, wrote to his war cabinet in October 1942:

"Hard as it is to say now, I trust that the European family may act unitedly as one under a Council of Europe. I look forward to a United States of Europe."

In a speech on September 19, 1946 at the University of Zurich he declared that: "We must build a kind of United States of Europe".

It is hard to conceive that the Irish would be anything other than second-class Europeans within Churchill's "family".

The war-planners of the WEU are currently in bullish mood as they outmanoeuvre our politicians. Last year, after Ireland declined to send soldiers to a WEU exercise in Spain, a WEU official said:

"If you are serious about the European concept, you should be a member of the Western European Union. If you signed Maastricht you should do everything with the twelve (EU member states) and not like now..."

Two centuries and a half after Fontenoy, the big boys of Europe want more Wild Geese. We really should pay more attention to our history.



Winston Churchill: attacked Ireland's neutrality during World War II.



Dick Spring: Ireland may now sign the NATO agreement, Partnership For Peace.

the price of going with the Euroflow now seems unacceptably high.

The emergence of the dormant Western European Union (WEU), as the embryonic military wing of the post-Maastricht European Union, could have dire consequences for Ireland in the next century. Since 1992 Ireland has been granted official observer status — although the Irish government found itself pushing at an open door: full membership was, and is, very much there for the taking. Ireland is now referred to in WEU memos as "a hitherto neutral country".

The Maastricht Treaty effectively ensnared Ireland into a set of relationships that spells the end of the historic Irish realpolitik of minding our own business. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is at the heart of the Maastricht Treaty and central to the threat to Ireland's neutrality.

It states that the objectives of the EU are to: "assert its identity on the international scene, in particular through the implementation of a common foreign and security policy, including the eventual framing of a common defence policy".

government said that Irish neutrality would be saved by the fact that the state was not a member of the WEU. Despite this assurance, as the Maastricht Treaty currently stands, the state would be linked to all military decisions taken by the EU.

The White Paper also did not examine in any detail the declaration in the treaty regarding majority voting. The treaty states:

"The conference agrees that, with regard to council decisions requiring unanimity, member states will, to the extent possible avoid preventing a unanimous decision where a qualified majority exists in favour of that decision".

Provisions

The Irish government has stated that the negotiation on a common defence policy will not begin until 1996 or beyond, but the Maastricht Treaty contains the necessary provisions now to form a common defence policy with or without Irish approval.

The possibility of playing soldiers on a lavish pan-European scale was seized with glee by the Irish generals who have been staring budget cuts in the face.

A planning group was set up in 1992 within the Defence Forces with a priority of examining the implications of a "developing relationship" with the WEU. An internal Defence Force document leaked to the media in 1992 stated that a "strategic planning cell" had been set up with this organisation specifically in mind. This leak came embarrassingly soon after Albert Reynolds had delivered a speech in May 1992 that "Ireland does not intend to become a member of the WEU".

He did concede in that speech that it might be useful if Ireland

able application from the Irish government — an open door indeed.

Not all Irish military men, however, think that becoming part of a European army is good news for the Irish military.

Commandant Dermot Donnelly, of the Aer Corps at Baldonnell, for instance, argued at the conference that Ireland could be drawn into conflicts like the Gulf War. He asked his comrades: "Do we want to be responsible for children in Iraq at present having operations without anaesthetics and dying for want of cheap and readily available drugs?"

He continued: "Had we been in a European army we would share some of the responsibility for these obscenities."

The conference was also told that Irish involvement in a European army could jeopardise Ireland's honourable reputation in peacekeeping operations with the UN.

In 1992 the WEU changed its own procedures and for the first time allowed itself a genuine operational capacity, by planning to set up armed forces drawn from member states but "answerable to the WEU". The terms "peacekeeping" and "peacemaking" were at times inter-changed. After its 1992 conference a French official was more precise: "Peacemaking is clear. It means war".

After this meeting, full WEU membership was offered to Ireland.

A consequence of the WEU's change in procedures was that plans emerged for a new Franco-German "Eurocorps" of 35,000 soldiers to be set up and placed at the WEU's disposal. This unit, in essence, would be the European superstate's first military formation.

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