

—referendum—

Joe Fahy, RTE's Political Correspondent, looks at the Referendum and the campaigns at present in progress for and against entering the European Economic Communities. Voting is on May 10.

AFTER MORE than a decade of preparation, political set-backs and international negotiations, the people of Ireland are now on the threshold of Europe, and are being asked in the Referendum on May 10, to decide whether or not the country is to accept full membership of the European Economic Communities.

While there are deep divisions of opinion on the question of going in or staying out, it is accepted that the decision of the people on May 10 will have fundamental effects for many years ahead.

Ireland first applied for membership of the EEC in 1961, when the late Mr. Sean Lemass presented our application in Brussels. That bid, and a later one, foundered on the rock of French objections to Britain's entry. In the meantime, the Anglo-Irish Free Trade (Area) Agreement came into operation, providing for a gradual dismantling of tariffs on British industrial goods. And, at home, industry was urged to adapt itself to meet free trade conditions. All of this was in preparation for eventual entry to the wider economic community in Europe.

In 1971, negotiations were opened between the Six and the four applicant countries — Ireland, Britain, Denmark and Norway. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Hillery, led the Irish negotiating team and agreement was reached in time to allow the Treaty of Accession to be signed in Brussels last January.

Although the Taoiseach and Dr. Hillery have signed the Treaty of Accession on behalf of Ireland, the final decision now rests with the people on May 10. In its simplest form, what the people are being asked to do is to approve of the addition of a sub-section to the Constitution which will enable changes to be made in our law, necessitated by membership of the European Economic Community, the Euratom community and the European Coal and Steel Community.

The political campaign in connection with the Referendum has been going on for some time, but really got into its stride after Easter. Fine Gael, which also supported the original application for membership, will be urging its members to vote for entry; so, for the first time since the establishment of the State, the two biggest political parties are working side by side on a major issue of national policy. Leading the campaign against entry is the Labour Party, which favours some form of association agreement with the EEC rather than full membership. Many other groups are also involved — the farmers' organisations are in favour of going in, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is opposed. And the smaller political groups, both wings of Sinn Fein and Aontacht Eireann, are also campaigning against entry.

The arguments in a campaign such as this inevitably become repetitive. The principal issues being discussed are the effects of membership on employment, prices, national sovereignty, and agriculture. Regional development policy, land purchase, fisheries and general cultural matters, including the position of the Irish language, are also involved. There is much crystal-ball gazing on all sides, particularly in relation to Ireland's position if the people opt to stay out of a community which Britain has decided to join.

All political parties are hoping that a short, sharp campaign will bring out the voters in large numbers on Referendum Day; when all is said and done, the final choice rests with the people.

Television: Sunday and Thursday

Radio: Thursday

