GERALD COLLINS TD, Ireland's new Minister for Foreign Affairs, is not a veteran of the Ministry of Justice, this week talked to the Limerick Leader.

Asked about reports of manning shortages in Gardaí, Mr. Collins said: "Unfortunately, it is a difficulty in recent times with regard to the overall strength of the force. And this is due to the Public Service emigration which has caught up the Gardaí in its sweep over the past few years."

You must remember the Gardaí were freed of the police force in 1922 and were not, in time, on the right track across the board in all sectors in 1927 because of the economic conditions which had to be cleared up. The government, recognizing the importance of the force, did try and adjust matters to such an extent that they must have sufficient manpower, decided to authorize me to recruit 1,000 new Gardaí, and this recruitment is underway at the present time.

As far as the Gardaí are concerned, we have less Gardaí here than before because of resignations and retirements and the fact that there were not enough who had recruitment to sustain. And until such time as the new recruits come in, from the present time Flannan Force will be reduced. But having said that, it is the prerogative of the Commissioner to use his manpower as he thinks fit."

In most parts of the country, the Gardaí are at the limit or beyond it. Undoubtedly, there was an increase in Dublin in 1986, but it is not the norm. In the last six months of this year there was a marked decrease already in the Gardaí. It has come to the notice of the Garda Commissioner in conjunction with his chief superintendents that there is a decrease, in comparison to other countries, we are relatively high.

There are areas where there are difficulties, certain areas have a certain level of concern in this constant attention and this is being given to them."

There was a difficult time in Northern Ireland which inevitably was a serious controversy within the country in the early 1970s and also in recent times. We do believe that large amounts of gain were made when our own status was increased at that time. The view is generally held that there is still a very significant problem in the border region and exploitations in the hands of the subversives.

Mr. Collins: "There is a great deal of difficulty and attitudes towards subversives had worsened recently.

I asked Mr. Collins, if in view of the decision of the Northern authorities to indicate that certain long-term deals, including the case of Mr. O'Dowd, were to be dealt with by the British authorities, would he have a viewpoint on this issue?

He said: "I have a viewpoint, friendly, working relations with Geoffrey Howe, I think we understand each other and each other's point of view. In short, we have had occasions when we agree but we do not agree in a reasonable, manner and generally facilitate the two governments in the work we do together."

He said: "There is a very good community in Ireland as a result of that which took place between both prime ministers. It is the case that they have a very good understanding and worthwhile meeting, and this is something we all welcome."

The concept of a coalition has received a mixed reaction from some political analysts. Do you think this will persist or will political analysts come back? Mr. Collins said: "There was no coal with a great sense of approval of coalition because we did not have an overall majority and secondly because the Government in office at that time was a coalition government."

But having had the matter fully explained publicly, I think there is general acceptance that the end result was inevitable. And the unity of the country which demand stability of government have been met, and that we can continue the programmes of recovery which we started out two and a half years ago." Given that he has not attended an overall political meeting of the United Nations and has not held an overall position of Charles J. Haughey within Fianna Fáil now. He is not the undoubted leader of the Fianna Fáil. And we must remember in this regard that no person will ever lead the party as a whole. It is practically impossible to say who should be the party leader in the next five elections. It is practically impossible to say who would be the person to move the party to achieve as overall majority,"

Mr. Collins said that, while he was strong as it has been, there is no question whatsoever of my challenge to his leadership."

What is the mood within the Parliamentary party as you see it?"

The Parliamentary party stood very happily with Charlie Haughey at all times and indeed gave him every support and encouragement in the organisation which existed to help him. That is what provide a government with the Progressive Democrat Group.

The parliamentary party gave them that support practically unanimously did the National Executive. Of course the preference would have been for a party of the Fianna Fáil but that wasn't on, and that was understood, that with the help of the Progressive Democrats we would do better in the general election."

Your woman, Hillary is an independent-minded person. Does she make her own views, her own decisions on an important issue? Does she play a significant role in the formulation of the decisions of the first lady to be faced by many families. My wife is a very important support of me, as wife, as wife and as household relationship, comment on it. I would certainly hope that Hillary O'Dea will play a major role in Irish political life."

"God-given common sense. I worked with a man and woman, and a man and a woman that I was involved, it is a ministry that requires a personal involvement and a personal relationship."

We had a wonderful team in the Department and a wonderful team in the Gardaí, and we were serving and serving and we were serving unceasingly, "I was in my second year as Minister for Justice. A number of previous Ministers in the Department lost their seats, because of the particular type of work that has to be undertaken, I think, of course, that to have served successfully in that Department, and I am pleased that I have a new challenge in a totally different area and a challenge I am very much looking forward to in 1987."

As a TD, you pay a lot of time consuming attendance to the Constituencies. Do you pay much time, across your more important responsibilities as a TD, to the constituency work, to the areas that are not so important?

"I can never, ever afford to forget that I am a public representative, for the whole time I am a public representative, but I recognize that I am prepared to do that and will continue to do it as long as I am able to do so."

You have been spoken of as a possible future leader of Fianna Fáil. If a new leader were to emerge, what kind of person would you offer yourself for that position?

"I believe that I am an administrator on, for obvious reasons of good sense and political correctness that I am entitled to play a part in the future, but it may not be possible tomorrow. The fact is the future is uncertain and beyond the value."

Any particular problem you would like to take up immediately, that you have a commitment to solve?

"One comes to mind immediately: the large number of students who are having difficulties with regard to work that the Taoiseach has already said is an issue and they are a minority, it is the issue of the future."

We saw the day of the expulsion when we had to invite the then Taoiseach to the House of Commons and house of Ard-Mór where the students who were expelled from the University College Cork."

We have a special relationship with the Taoiseach. In my relationship with the Taoiseach, we have a very strong working relationship and very personal working relationship."

That I had, because he must be kept aware of the situation at all times. When you are a Minister for Foreign Affairs, I know a lot about a similar personal interest in Foreign Affairs himself."

He said that he had involvement of the Department, but he would have to give him a chance to maintain the proper relationship with the Taoiseach and be sure that he is also involved in the Department.

You have already published a National Plan for Ireland but there is still a necessity to do structural measures in Ireland over the next five years. What will you do to ensure that the National Plan is implemented?

"We have already published a National Plan for Ireland by the institution of a number of committees and other organisations. It is an important mutual and trust commitment in each other to develop the National Plan in the future."

We have not the National Plan in Brussels to meet the other plan and the other plan."

We have an intensive series of discussions with the Commission, with the EC on implementation of the National Plan.

"We sent the National Plan to Brussels in Brussels this year. Since the Plan was published, we have had a number of meetings and I am confident that the various programmes will be launched within the next five years. The strategy for the development of the National Plan has four key requirements."

Knowledge-based enterprise embracing in particular new technology industry, innovation, a knowledge-based enterprise, relies on our indigenous assets in the agricultural and food sector, tourism, aquaculture and timber products."

Infrastructure, investment in roads, transport links, marine and port facilities and the environment in general."

Human resources, encompassing education and training is a key area of the programmes and technological support by the third level education, research and development."

"The primary purpose of the national plan is to ensure that local representatives and interests cooperate effectively in the implementation of the programmes in each sub-region. As set out in the Programme for Government, Groups at regional and sub-regional level will be fully informed of the plan. It is envisaged that the plan will be reviewed twice a year to review progress in that region. We have given instructions to the representatives of local authorities, state agencies, industry and business to fund and engage regularly to co-operate with programmes, projects and initiatives."

What is your view of the current system of voting for the EU?

"As you know, the Fianna Fáil Governments made a commitment to the 1975 referendum and again in 1980, to alter our present system. The purpose of those two attempts was to ensure stable and fair elections and a voting system which would not be unduly influenced by any kind of ideological background. When Fianna Fáil proposed those changes in the past we did it in the sincere belief that we were acting, as we will have to act in the future, for the people of this country's future. We saw the day of the black and white, we saw the day of the good and the day of the bad."

We have a special relationship with the Taoiseach. In my relationship with the Taoiseach, we have a very strong working relationship and very personal working relationship."