

LEISURE PAGE edited by HELEN BUCKLEY

A whirlwind life for Michael Herbert, Euro-TD

THE CAPITALS of Europe are as familiar as his home at Lisnagry to County Limerick's most travelled politician, Michael Herbert, T.D., who covers 3,000 miles a week by rail, road and air.

In the average week, he attends local clinics, addresses meetings in the constituency of East Limerick, sits in the Dail and keeps Ireland's interests before the Parliament of Europe at sessions from Strasbourg to Sicily or The Hague.

For the Flanna Fail "Mr. Euro" there are few free moments and no relaxation, with heavy correspondence to get attention and detailed technical documents to be studied at all times.

But that is the role in life that the quiet-spoken politician, publican and former Limerick county hurler, Michael Herbert, accepted with his appointment to the E.E.C. Parliament 12 months ago.

Delays

It is a rough life, with little time to spend with his wife, Ereda, or family of eight at Sallymount, Lisnagry, frustrating airport delays, tedious work into the still hours of the morning . . . but it is satisfying to fair-haired Michael "because it is so relevant that the national scene in Ireland is put in a dignified way . . . and it is very interesting."

It was Saturday morning when he sat in his office and talked about the changing life of a country politician and a European Parliamentarian. A pile of letters awaited attention and the dictaphone buzzed away ready to receive the replies.

The week had started like many others since January 1, 1973.

On Monday he was in the council chamber in Limerick at noon to preside as chairman over the meeting of the county vocational education committee.

With lunch over at 3 p.m. he had just time for a few calls to various departments of the county council on constituency business before getting home for his tea and heading for clinics at Doon and Capinure.

"I was lucky to get home at midnight," he remarked lighting a cigarette, "but then I had to sort out the various items that I had met constituents on."

Meeting

At 6 o'clock on Tuesday morning the phone rang. A fixed time call from the operator meant that he was due to be on board a plane at Shannon Airport two hours later. From Shannon to Dublin, London and then Brussels was the route for the morning, arriving in the Belgian capital just in time to attend a committee meeting at 2.30 p.m. either transport or regional policy.

When the meeting ended five hours later there was an opportunity to have the first full meal of the day. He had a cup of tea served on flight between Dublin and London, but nothing on the remainder of the route.

He glanced at the diary, full of international place names mixed with the Knockaineyns and the Ahanes and Limericks.

"We met again at 9 p.m.," he recalled, "to look at some new documentation that had



Off on another European mission . . . Michael Herbert, T.D., leaving his office and home in County Limerick.

been drafted and there were a couple of Irish industries lobbying support for some decisions to be taken the following morning.

"We don't have a lot to do as yet. Occasionally, there is a bit of lobbying, but I expect that there will be more in the future," he remarked.

The Parliamentary Committee resumed at 9 a.m. on Wednesday and sat for four hours. A fast lunch and a rush for the airport to get a 4 p.m. flight was the order of the afternoon . . . touching over the illumination of Dublin Bay at 7.30 p.m.

Dail

There was still a Dail sitting to hear what had been happening at home. At 10.30 p.m. he left the Dail Chamber.

Thursday was his only opportunity of a full day in the Dail. There was considerable ground to be covered and he had to have full facts on hand to keep his special interests at home before the House, between 10.30 a.m. and 5 p.m., when he was flashed through the city in a taxi to catch the

early train to Limerick.

Arriving at Lisnagry at 9.30 p.m., he was home to three days of correspondence and phone calls.

"My wife, Erid, looks after anything that is urgent and takes the calls. She is as familiar with the business at home as I am, and people have confidence in her."

On Friday he spent the morning in the office, dictating letters and dealing with the routine business of a Dail deputy. On Friday night there were a couple of meetings to attend. There is usually an organisational one and maybe more.

On Saturday morning he had to complete most of the 150 letters a week that go out. In the afternoon he attended a clinic at Limerick, and on Saturday night met constituents at home.

Even Sunday has its firm commitments. One Sunday every month he has a clinic at Oola after 10.30 a.m. Mass, and similarly at Knockainey. On other Sundays he alternates for Masses between Castleconnell, Ahane and Monaleen.

After lunch, if there is a hurling match he likes to attend it, and on Sunday night he ensures that everything is on that dictaphone for a typist before he starts another busy week.

"It is difficult at times to keep abreast of what is happening abroad and at home, but . . ." he was just saying as the phone rang.

Five minutes later he resumed our conversation. "The pressure is on all the time. Still, it is rewarding to know that you can help to shape the future of your own country."

Michael is pleased to be on the regional committee because it is very important for this country.

The whole country has been accepted for regional fund aid and the reports of the Parliament debates show the long, constructive contributions that he has been making to strengthen Ireland's case for a larger slice of the fund.

Projects

"It is the job of the Government to put forward projects of a very high grade if they are to qualify, because the amount that Ireland can get from the fund will depend on the projects that they put up. If the projects are good enough we can get substantially more from the fund because of our unique position."

Although the meetings of the committee rotate from The Hague to Luxembourg, Sicily, Strasbourg or Brussels there is never an opportunity of seeing much of life in any of the countries with a packed schedule.

The language is also a problem. At the meetings it can be quite boring to sit for five hours with a set of headphones. French is a great asset for European communication and he is studying the language.

"It is great mental hardship listening to headphones relays for hours and the travelling is physically tiring," he admits.

It is not the kind of life that a man can stand up to over a long period and some new structure would be welcomed by Michael Herbert and many of his colleagues carrying the Irish flag into Europe.

Direct elections for the European Parliament are on the way and that might change the scene. In the present position for the Irish, delegates family life and any socialising is practically out.

Michael Herbert would like to have more time to spend with his family.

School

The eldest daughter, Blainthín, has just completed the Leaving Certificate and has been called to teacher training at Cork. The rest of the family, scaling down to four years, are still at school.

In all, what brings him the greatest satisfaction is realising that he is helping to project the Irish national scene in a dignified way and show that we are "not a nation of beggars."

Nothing annoys him more than the prolonged airport delays, the strikes, the flight diversions and the sheer "inefficiency of airlines."

It is like the direct flight booked from Shannon to Sicily that was re-routed to Manchester, Dusseldorf, Geneva, Milan and Palermo, arriving 5.00 and a half hours late.

But it is all just part of life now to Michael Herbert, T.D., and European Parliamentarian.

—Martin Ryan

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