

Muhammad takes the Dail by storm

By RAYMOND SMITH

"IF you wish, Mr. Premier I can get this fight over in a hurry, cracked Muhammad Ali in Leinster House yesterday when he met the Taoiseach in his room. And Mr. Lynch told the boxing star he would be taking time off from the mid-Cork by-election campaign to attend the big fight in Croke Park on Wednesday night.

Muhammad took Leinster House by storm. Not since President Kennedy addressed both Houses of the Oireachtas has the visit of one celebrity engendered such spontaneous excitement. Protocol was forgotten more than once during this whirlwind visit—and it seemed to me that Muhammad must have shaken the hand of every member of the Cabinet as he made his way down the corridor to the Taoiseach's room, and later the hand of every leading member of the Opposition as he went through two steaks in the

restaurant ("this is my first meal since morning and I will not eat again until this time tomorrow evening," he told me).

He had a coke with his meal—he never takes alcoholic drinks and never eats chips with a steak. "Steak and plenty of vegetables," that is his essential diet, according to trainer Angelo Dundee.

Muhammad was in serious mood for most of the time he spent with Mr. Lynch. He said it was a great honour for him to be received by the Prime Minister of the Country. Ireland was the first European country to pay him this honour. "I have been to Britain, Germany and Switzerland but they did not honour me like this," said Muhammad.

He told the Taoiseach he wanted to publicly compliment the Irish people "on their proud history of struggle." The Irish were a people who had shown they were prepared to stand up and fight for civil rights and justice and he knew what their struggle meant because "my people, too, have been underdogs for a long time."

He grew very serious as he pointed out that every day in the U.S. he was reading about trouble in Belfast and in the North generally. He had one question to put to Mr. Lynch: "What is this struggle all about?"

The Taoiseach gave the ex-world champion a potted history. Then Ali gave an insight into how he had come to identify himself with the struggle of his people.

"I can never forget how when I was a little black boy in Kentucky, thinking of civil rights, the mayor of the city was a giant figure to me. Now here I am today sitting beside the Prime Minister of this country. I am just an athlete and a boxer."

Then Muhammad added simply: "I would love to be a leader of people some day — helping people."

The Taoiseach told Ali he had a fight ahead on his hands in Mid-Cork adding jocosely: "Perhaps you would come down and be a candidate for us."

Later someone suggested to Ali in another

room that if he stayed around long enough he might even be invited to be President.

Before he signed the Visitor's Book and looked in for a while at the Dail proceeding from the Distinguished Visitors' gallery Muhammad sat down to his meal in the restaurant with his party.

He signed autographs for the restaurant staff and when someone rang home to say he would be delayed, and put his wife on to Ali, the former champion said on the line: "Your husband is with the greatest boxer in the world. Now you just don't go whippin' him tonight, cause he's with the champion . . ."

"Muhammad loves people," said Angelo Dundee in between sips of his Gaelic coffee. "This Irish coffee is good—you have something goin' for you in this," he added.

Angelo's wife (nee Helen Bolton) and his daughter, Terri, are arriving for the fight. "I believe you have a Bolton Street in Dublin," Angelo said. "My wife will be pleased to hear that. She is of Irish descent on both sides of her family."