

On the Defensive

On the eve of the recent General Election, Dara Fox canvassed the various political parties about their views on prominent defence issues.

Fine Gael

“There are some who want our Defence Forces to disengage from the international stage and remain permanently in splendid isolation on this island with no external involvements. They have, I believe, no understanding of the extent of our Forces’ involvement in the wider world or knowledge of the true benefits of our contribution to peacekeeping and conflict resolution. These benefits were clearly voiced by members of the local community who I met when on a visit to Camp Shamrock in Southern Lebanon last July,” says Alan Shatter TD, Fine Gael Spokesperson for Justice, Law Reform and Defence.

“Fine Gael is committed to our Defence Forces’ continued involvement in UN sponsored peace-keeping missions. Moreover, under a Fine Gael government, Ireland will be a full participant in the Common Foreign and Security Policy and in the development of European Security and Defence policy. We are committed to the ‘Helsinki Headline Goal’ of establishing within the European Union capabilities for undertaking the humanitarian, peace-keeping and crisis management missions known as the Petersburg Tasks, by 2003.

“It is important to note that the development of the military capabilities required to deliver on the Petersburg Tasks were expressly stated at the Laeken European Council meeting in December 2001 to ‘not imply the creation of a European army’. Fine Gael does not favour membership for Ireland of international alliances like NATO because of the mutual defence obligations of such bodies. We are committed to participation as

active players in the European arena, whilst continuing to safeguard our national sovereignty. “Our Defence Forces must possess an appropriate level of capability to properly participate in a UN or European context. Fine Gael is committed to the continuing development and modernisation of the Forces across the areas of management, manpower, equipment, training and infrastructure. We also believe it important that a credible grievance system be provided which is fair to all members of the Forces whilst at the same



Alan Shatter TD, Fine Gael Spokesperson for Justice, Law Reform and Defence

to participate in the full range of UN peace-keeping missions in as large a complement as possible. We cannot see how this role can be discharged without significant investment and further recruitment; and if in government we will seek to maintain Defence Force numbers at those levels recommended in the White Paper.

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time safeguarding operational efficiency. We are committed to ensuring that within twelve months of Fine Gael entering government, legislation providing for the establishment of a Defence Forces Ombudsman will be enacted and brought into force.”

Labour

“The Labour Party takes the position that Ireland has a duty to continue the proud tradition of military intervention in the service of peacekeeping and peace enforcement,” says Labour Defence spokesman Jack Wall TD. “We should seek, subject to invitation,

“Our objective in strengthening the Defence Forces is the promotion of one of Ireland’s key foreign policy objectives, international peace and security. Labour will seek to develop opportunities to contribute to international tasks for all branches of the military including the FCA and also for the Garda Síochána.

“Over the past years I have sought to establish a constructive dialogue and effective working relations with the representative organizations PDFORRA, RACO and ARCO, and I have also built up similar relationships with the welfare organizations



Minister for Defence, Mr Michael Smith inspecting troops.

ONE and the IUNVA. I intend to maintain and strengthen these links in the years ahead. "Labour, if in Government, will reassess defence legislation from a human rights point of view. Unpublished Defence Act regulations will be published as far as is practicable and the Statutory Instruments Act will be applied. We will also protect the employment rights of defence reservists. We want to remove the anomaly and injustice whereby personnel who left the Defence Forces prior to August 1st 1990 do not benefit from the Military Service Allowance (MSA) whereas those who left after that date get this allowance.

"It also seems to me that we have to ensure that the Defence Forces are properly enabled to continue in discharging their vital role by giving them the resources required for the job and by making a career in the Defence Forces as rewarding and fulfilling as possible."

Fianna Fáil

The Minister for Defence, Mr. Michael Smith, T.D., recently emphasised the continuation of the current rationalisation and modernisation of the Defence Forces, in the light of the Defence Estimate for 2002, which is €734.8 million. Although this figure is a decrease on 2001, the Department

maintains that it represents a net increase of 2.8% in the Defence Vote in 2002, when the front-loading of expenditure in buildings and equipment, which occurred last year, is taken into account. "The money provided for 2002 means that there will be no loss of impetus in the building and modernisation programmes which were promised in the White Paper on Defence," said the Minister.

The White Paper, published in the year 2000, has led to the largest equipment-purchasing programme since the foundation of the State, says a spokesperson at the Department. To date the Defence Forces have been equipped with new armoured personnel carriers and plans to purchase other light tactical vehicles are at an advanced stage. The Naval service has seen the purchase of two new patrol vessels and the air corps are about to embark upon a major re-equipment programme costing about €200 million. In addition, the Defence Force Training Centre is in the process of being transformed, with new accommodation blocks, dining and recreational facilities including a gym and swimming pool costing over €7million being built. A new Combat Support College and a new Combat Service Support College are also in the process of being completed.

In terms of participation in overseas peace-keeping, the present Fianna Fáil-led government has deployed troops to Kosovo, East Timor and more recently Eritrea, and it is envisaged that entry into the Partnership for Peace will bring with it new responsibilities and tasks which will lead to a better-trained professional force, according to the spokesperson.

Green Party

"The Green Party is strongly supportive of the Irish Defence Forces and of Ireland's neutrality, outside of military alliances," says John Gormley, TD. "We believe that Ireland's admirable role in UN peacekeeping will be undermined if we cooperate militarily with NATO, a divisive military alliance with a defence policy that is still premised on the use of nuclear weapons. Both NATO's Partnership for Peace and the EU's new Rapid Reaction Force are inextricably linked with NATO. NATO does not regard itself as bound by UN mandates. Neither does the PFP nor the RRF. The development of these military structures undermines the role of the United Nations in the maintenance of international security.

"The Green Party has consistently opposed this militarisation of the EU and

the elimination of Ireland's neutrality. Our Government has never admitted that this new EU Rapid Reaction Force does not see itself as requiring a UN mandate. The Government dodges this issue by replying that Irish participation requires a UN mandate. This is highly contentious as the Irish legislation cited is open to different legal interpretations. At any rate, it could be overturned by a Government majority at any time, it is not enshrined in our Constitution. The Government's about-face on joining NATO's Partnership for Peace is a clear example of how little the Government can be trusted on these issues."

The Green Party's manifesto discusses the implications of RRF and PpP for available resources. It states: "It is impossible for our Defence Forces to continue their UN role if the Government is also committing Irish troops to these NATO-linked bodies (PpP and RRF). We will ensure that our Defence Forces are properly equipped but that highly expensive military re-equipment programmes will be scrupulously examined. High levels of military expenditure would not be necessary if we withdrew from the PpP and the RRF. We will redefine the naval services as a coast guard service and update the present fleet to cope with expanding roles in drug interdiction and fishery and environmental protection. We will provide additional resources and training for the air corps, with new helicopters, in particular, being provided to assist the Naval Service in drug interdiction, search and rescue, fishery and environmental protection."

Progressive Democrats

"We in the Progressive Democrats believe that only if we support the Permanent Defence Forces with appropriate staff development, materiel and equipment will the Oireachtas be in a position to mandate their participation in international peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. This includes being in a position to take part in the EU Rapid Reaction Force, where the Oireachtas has mandated a specific action," says Councillor John Minihan, Defence spokesman and Chairman of the Progressive Democrats, and a former army officer with 21 years' experience.

"So in government we will further develop the capabilities of our Defence Forces. The present government is going in the right direction, and there has been serious investment in equipment, but we must always ask whether more needs to be done. In particular, accommodation and facilities in barracks need to be of an acceptable standard, and



John Gormley TD, Green Party Spokesman on Defence issues.

again, we're going in the right direction. For instance, in Collins Barracks in Cork, where the gym burnt down 25 years ago, there is now a new gym now being built.

"In terms of personnel numbers, it's vital to ensure that we have the critical mass available to fulfill the variety of functions carried out by the Defence Forces, to accomplish missions, conduct prisoner escorts, train men, carry out overseas missions, and meet

the local economy might be affected by barracks closure. But as we work towards the development of a rapidly deployable force, the location of barracks will become less important.

This entails however that barrack closures can only happen as investment in good equipment comes through. A case of a badly organised closure was Ballincollig in Cork, which was rightly closed, but before the

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our new commitments to the RRF and the PpP.

"We in the PDs advocate the closure of some barracks in order to generate investment, but we need to take cognisance of major garrison towns where employment and

preparation of Collins Barracks to receive Ballincollig personnel was complete. In this case there was a lack of coordination and time management."