

# VOX POLL

In light of the current modernisation of the Defence Forces, Dara Fox and Robyn Hessinger ask several TDs with major defence centres in their constituencies about their record of representing defence issues.



Minister for Public Enterprise, Mary O'Rourke

## **Sean Power TD, Fianna Fáil, Kildare South**

"Kildare South is a relatively new constituency and has as its bedrock the country's equine industry, and also the largest concentration of defence force personnel in any of the electoral constituencies. The Defence Forces are one of the largest employers in the constituency and altogether upwards of 10,000 people would rely on the income derived from service in the Defence Forces. In addition, many of those employed in the services sector are indirectly reliant on the Defence Forces for their livelihood.

"As a Dáil deputy for some years I have been acutely aware of the problems with the reform process, which was ongoing during the 1990s, and I was concerned that the process appeared intent on delivering only the negative aspects of reform. Many of the representations that I received outlined the fact that a white paper on defence was urgently required to develop a policy framework within which the reform process could grow and develop. In addition, I was persuaded of the necessity for the appointment of an Ombudsman for the Defence Forces to oversee the grievance procedures.

"Following consultations with both representative associations RACO & PDFORRA, my colleague Michael Smith TD and I produced a Fianna Fáil election manifesto on defence in time for the 1997 general election. Over the past five years in Government Fianna Fáil has delivered on the promises made, including the preparation of a White Paper on Defence complete with a programme of reform to be implemented over a 10-year period, and the purchase of armoured personnel carriers.

"Notwithstanding the frantic pace of reform I am aware that change of this magnitude does impact on those serving in the Forces. In addition I am aware of the fact that key personnel are being poached by the private sector and that pay levels have fallen behind. Managing change of this magnitude must be rewarded and consequently the importance of a fair and equitable outcome to the public service benchmarking cannot be overemphasised.

"At local level I am anxious that where spare capacity exists within the military organisation that it be fully utilised where practicable by the local community. The new gymnasium and swimming pool provide a

good example whereby members of the local area could avail of the facility at times of low military use."

## **Senator John Dardis, Progressive Democrats, Kildare South**

"I am in the Senate now for nearly 13 years, and I have participated in all of the debates on Defence Force issues, including sending peace enforcement units to Somalia and elsewhere. I have been involved in some of the Defence Acts which have been passed during that period. I have also been involved in the negotiations on the reorganization of the Defence Forces, on the result of the White Paper; I would have been involved in some of the talks that went on subsequent to that. I liaised with RACO during the period that the White Paper was being actively debated and have of course attended RACO conferences.

"I would be in favour of being in Partnership for Peace and being part of the Rapid Reaction Force. I think apart from our UN service, which is a very important dimension of Defence Forces' activity, now with the phasing out of our presence in

Lebanon, I think we need alternative places to contribute to world peace and I would like to see our Defence Forces continue to be involved on the international stage in peace-keeping and peace enforcement. The other aspect is that we have had a reasonable amount of investment in the buildings and the equipment in the Curragh, but there is more to do to ensure that we have a modern, properly equipped army that can hold its own when it goes abroad on these missions. But I am definitely in favour of the Defence Forces headquarters being located in the Curragh.

"The other issue is in regard to benchmarking; benchmarking is something that I would support. In regards to retired personnel and this matter of the military service allowance not being reckonable for pension purposes for personnel who retired prior to 1990; in my view it should be included in their pension and I have argued that case at parliamentary party level and with the Tánaiste. I will continue to press on that."

**Mary O'Rourke TD,**  
**Minister for Public Enterprise,**  
**Fianna Fáil, Westmeath**

"As a public representative for Westmeath, a constituency with two Defence Forces barracks in Athlone and Mullingar, I have remained in close contact with Defence Minister Michael Smith in relation to the welfare of personnel and their families, progress on modern facilities and equipment, and the need to ensure that personnel numbers are expanded.



*Councillor Willie Penrose, Labour.*



*Mary Coughlan TD, Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, Fianna Fáil.*

Since 1997, I am pleased that this government has recruited 3,000 personnel into the Defence Forces and, under the White Paper published in 2000, has earmarked an unprecedented €320 million investment programme, including new equipment and facilities. Over €120 million has been spent so far on new equipment. Under a Fianna Fáil-led government, this investment programme will continue, thereby ensuring that our Defence Forces personnel have unrivalled facilities, training and equipment to allow them to carry out the vital role they play both at home and abroad.

"Throughout my period in public life, I have continued to maintain close links with Defence Forces' representatives bodies, reflecting the strong and enduring ties which my family has enjoyed with such organisations and the personnel they represent."

**Cllr Willie Penrose**  
**Labour, Westmeath**

"Having two large military barracks in Westmeath - Athlone, headquarters of the Western Command, and Columb Barracks in Mullingar, which by the way is the only remaining artillery barracks left in the country, means that we have a tremendous tradition of military service here in Westmeath. Over the years in my role as public representative I've highlighted concerns of the military personnel and other issues such as getting monies to upgrade facilities, particularly at Columb Barracks. I have to acknowledge

that considerable monies were spent in the area of telecommunications, and upgrading and refurbishing buildings there.

"My major concern is to ensure that we are being vocal in advocating the protection of the two existing military installations in the county. Obviously Custume Barracks is the headquarters in Athlone and that barracks will always have to remain as that headquarters. It is absolutely vital that Columb Barracks is not allowed to run down in terms of numbers, and so we will certainly be seeking and continually highlighting the need for increased numbers of recruits. There are a tremendous number of young people from the area who want to join the permanent Defence Forces.

"I feel that Mullingar has a very important role to play because of its geographical location. It's vital from the perspective of military requirements such as training for overseas missions. And indeed, as the base for the 9th Field Artillery.

"In the two towns of Athlone and Mullingar there are a significant number of pensioners, and they have been in contact with us in relation to the pension scheme as they feel they have been deprived. I will continue to highlight the issue of the military service allowance, for there are a number of personnel who should have received that.

"In economic terms, the contribution both in terms of wages, pensions, and the purchase of ancillary services by the military in both Athlone and Mullingar is phenome-

nal - they make a vital contribution to the local economy. I want to also emphasize the participation of army personnel in the various activities and community projects, as they make a vital contribution to the community.”

**Mary Coughlan TD,  
Minister of State at the  
Department of Arts, Heritage,  
Gaeltacht and the Islands,  
Fianna Fáil, Donegal South-West**

“Finner Camp is in my constituency, and Lifford and Rockhill, although outside it, employ many of my constituents. Throughout a lot of the south of the county there are many people connected with the Defence Forces, so it’s very important for me to keep in touch, and to act when important issues are brought to my attention.

“I met the Minister in recent weeks and received assurances that there is no question of Finner closing, and also an assurance that there will be no amalgamation of Finner and Lifford.

“A lot of work has been done in the last couple of years renovating Finner. There’s still more to be done, including the renovation of the old barracks, transforming it into a small museum, and my role is to push the agenda and get it expedited, as I did when I helped get a fire tender organised for the camp.

“While Finner won’t be closed there is a problem in getting new recruits, and the age profile there has increased. There’s a tentative agreement to recruit over the next number of years, and it’s right and proper to keep this on the political agenda.

“Many in the Defence Forces are dubious about civilianisation, and I feel it’s better done by agreement, and confined to limited types of area. More important is the need for greater access onto courses and training. Currently there is a lot of competition for few places, so more training and greater opportunities are important, and worth working towards, as I will be.”

**Seamus Rodgers TD,  
Labour, Donegal South-West**

“I am very close to the Finner Camp. I would be a strong advocate of retaining the military presence in the area, given that apart from its significance in relation to security, it is a source of employment and any income generated for this region is bound to be beneficial. The fact that Finner is the base for the air sea rescue service and that is very important



*Dan Wallace TD, Minister of State at the Department of the Environment and Local Government, Fianna Fáil.*

for us in the North West and for the fishing fleet and other seafarers and if an accident did occur, on sea, land, or even in mountainous regions, they are rescuing people and providing a great service.

“I appreciate and support the efforts of the army personnel and their peacekeeping duties overseas under the flag of the United Nations, and would encourage ongoing participation in such efforts.”

**James White TD,  
Fine Gael, Donegal South-West**

“I was a spokesman for Fine Gael for Defence 20 years ago. And when I was spokesman, I visited most of the barracks all around Ireland looking at that time at the bad conditions that they had. I raised lots of questions in the Dail about these unsatisfactory conditions, because the facilities at that time were not what they should have been. And I would like to think that because I pushed for better facilities, that a lot of the good facilities that they have now in the different camps are because of what I saw when I went around.

“I am based in Ballyshannon, only four miles from Finner. Certainly Finner Camp from the outside has improved dramatically. All the old corrugated, sheeted huts have been replaced. Another thing that I pushed for and achieved in the early 1970s was

Finner Camp was made a permanent army base camp, with improved facilities.

“We have got to try to achieve a modern army, as small as we can. For a modern army they need to be given the right equipment, they need to be housed in the right accommodation, and everything needs to be brought up to modern standards. And of course I would support this.”

**Dan Wallace TD,  
Minister of State at the  
Department of the Environment  
and Local Government,  
Fianna Fáil, Cork North-Central**

“I have an extremely close relationship with Collins Barracks here in the constituency, and with many commissioned officers. It has long needed upgrading, and in recent years a substantial amount of capital has been spent on facilities such as a new NCO’s mess, costing over €1.7m, and storage facilities, worth over €3m. And in 2001 money came through for further work. If and when other facilities are needed I’ll follow it up with the Minister for Defence.

“Collins Barracks is benefiting from some of the recommendations in the White Paper, which in my view is proceeding successfully. It’s important however to remember that change, however necessary, is never easy, and we have to marry the various emphasis of the White Paper on equipment, salaries, and facilities together in a balanced way.

“I’m also interested in the role of our Defence Forces internationally. I’ve represented the Minister for Foreign Affairs a number of times in the past 12 to 18 months, including at the joint forum of the EU and the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC). The conference was concerned with the fallout from September 11, and was an opportunity to dialogue in relation to the future.

If one thing struck home it was the fact that the world is a smaller, more interdependent place than ever, and that the future participation of our Defence Forces in UN-mandated cooperative operations is vital.”

**Deirdre Clune TD,  
Fine Gael, Cork South Central**

“I would be very supportive of the naval base in my constituency. And I think the Maritime College is a wonderful addition to the community. I will continue to support the development of the Naval Maritime College and the Naval Station at Haulbowline.