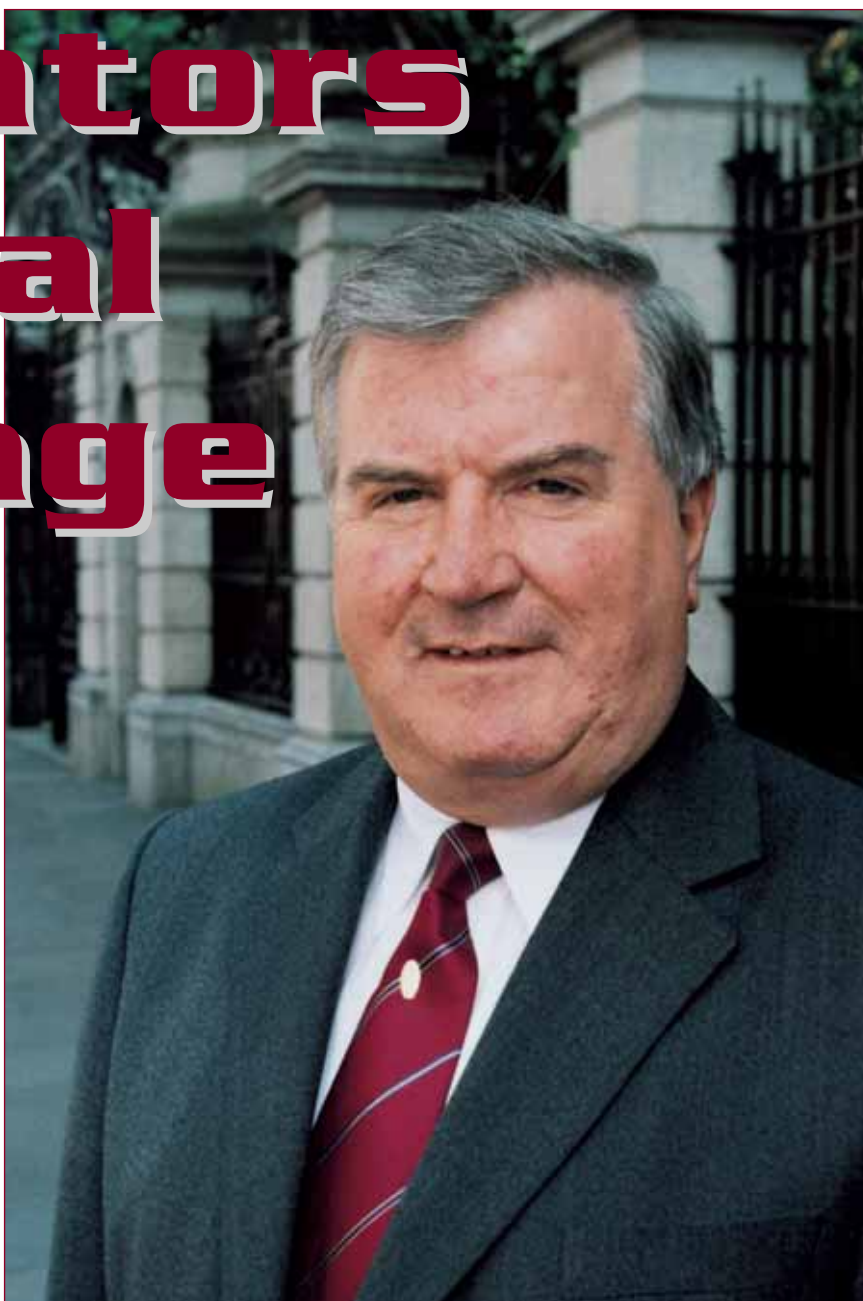


Senators Signal Change

SIGNAL canvassed a number of the newly-elected Senators for their views on the Defence Forces, the challenges it faces and how they hoped to sway defence policy in the Seanad.

The Irish Conference of Professional and Service Associations (ICPSA) was set up to promote and protect the interests of trade unions and staff associations not affiliated to the ICTU (by choice or by legislation forbidding such affiliation). Founded in 1946, it is the second largest trade union confederation, with an affiliated membership of almost 45,000 in nine separate trade unions or associations including the three main Garda representative bodies and the Defence Forces representative associations. The association's proposals have led to the formulation of government policy, an example of which is the establishment of the VHI.

The ICPSA also has the right to nominate up to seven candidates to the Labour section in elections to the Seanad. This presents the organisation with an invaluable opportunity to influence policy at the highest



Senator Terry Leyden.

level and is of major benefit to RACO as an affiliate, which has a major say in the nomination of candidates it feels will further the aims of the organisation and influence defence policy.

Senator Terry Leyden

Senator Terry Leyden has had a lengthy political career holding numerous Ministerial portfolios from Trade and Marketing to Industry and Commerce and Minister of State at the Department of Health. He has served on a number of State bodies and worked as an election monitor with the OSCE in Bosnia-Herzegovina where he met many officers from the Irish Defence Forces. He is the current front bench spokesman in

the Seanad for Fianna Fáil on Trade and Enterprise. Closer to home, his nephew is currently serving on the Patriot Missile programme in Texas, USA.

He is indebted to RACO and the ICPSA for their role in his re-election. He displays a more thorough understanding of defence issues than most having witnessed first-hand the work of the Defence Forces abroad while in the former Yugoslavia with the OSCE.

"I'm delighted to be a nominee of RACO and all the different ranks of the Defence Forces," says Sen Leyden. "I was in Bosnia Herzegovina with APSO/OSCE as an election monitor some years ago and I worked with officers who were on leave there. I was very

impressed by their whole training and how well they compared with any of the other military personnel that were there.”

After the completion of his work in the Balkans, and inspired by the humanitarian work carried out by the Irish Defence personnel, Sen Leyden returned to Ireland and

“I regard myself as a lobbyist for them [RACO],” he says emphatically when asked on his likelihood of influencing defence policy in the Seanad.

“I think it is important to highlight the quality of the military we have,” he says, “and what they’re doing. I am particularly keen on

parcel of any peacekeeping force, UN or otherwise.”

He points out the loss suffered by the forces up to recent times while on peacekeeping duties abroad.

“They lost 84 personnel in missions abroad,” says Sen Leyden, “and I believe those people gave their lives for Ireland just like those who died in 1916. These figures also demonstrate the risks involved in peacekeeping duties abroad. When in Bosnia I witnessed the work of the Irish Defence Forces through SFOR and the great humanitarian work they carried out there re-building houses and schools which you hear very little of. I have indicated an interest in visiting the Defence Forces there again now I’m Senator and highlighting their work.”

He believes the Irish Defence Forces interest in this part of the world is crucial in such a politically and historically complicated region.

“Ireland’s neutrality has played an important part in their efforts,” he points out, “as they are considered as honest brokers with no agenda. I would look on the Balkans as

“Though we very much reinforced the neutrality side of the Nice Treaty, the fact is that clearly we would be part and parcel of any peacekeeping force, UN or otherwise.”
- Sen Terry Leyden

in 1999 established Kosovo Refugee Aid in Roscommon which was responsible for raising and delivering over €2m worth of aid to those displaced in the region due to the conflict.

peacekeeping and peace enforcement abroad. That’s one area where I feel they have a very big role. Even though we very much reinforced the neutrality side of the Nice Treaty, the fact is that clearly we would be part and



Senator Terry Leyden with Minister for Defence Michael Smith outside the Dáil.

providing the opportunity for the Defence Forces to station a full battalion there to replace the one in the Lebanon. There is no doubt that there is strength in numbers in a volatile region like the former Yugoslavia and a full compliment battalion in the region would aid the Irish in their peacekeeping duties and I will be raising this with the Minister.”

He does point however that an increase in the numbers of Irish troops serving on peacekeeping missions abroad must ultimately come from the UN.

On the issue of the downsizing of the Defence Forces, Sen Leyden believes there should now be consolidation and turning the 10,500 troops into a well-equipped force. “I wouldn’t support any further downsizing,” he says, “it’s time to tighten ship and I see Kosovo/Bosnia filling the role of the battalion abroad eventually.”

Senator John Minihan

Senator John Minihan is chairman of the Progressive Democrats and has had a lengthy career in the Defence Forces and brings first hand experience to the Seanad.

He was been involved in the negotiations for the programme for government and successfully argued for 100% capital re-investment in the Defence Forces. He makes it quite clear that the military should be the first to pre-empt any change within the Defence Forces before it is foisted upon them.

“One of the biggest and unique responsibilities I feel I have,” explains Sen Minihan, “is to educate politicians about the Defence Forces.”

Since he became involved in politics, he has found there exists a total lack of awareness of the Defence Forces and defence issues.

“Senior politicians who don’t understand that the Chief of Staff,” he says giving one example, “is the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and not just the army alone. It may sound a little silly but contrast that with a comment a politician made to me on their return from Lebanon who said ‘this is the best kept secret from the Irish people.’”

He sees it as his mission to bring these two attitudes closer together.

“I see myself as someone who moves between these two barometers to try to get it to a more acceptable level. I see that as my major challenge. That is why I chose in my maiden speech in the Seanad to concentrate so much on the militarisation side. I felt that there was a lack of understanding amongst politicians about military neutrality and what



Senator John Minihan: Defence Forces should initiate change before it is forced on them.

the Defence Forces do.”

Forty out of the 60 Senators, he points out, would have stood up and spoke about the economy.

“My voice adding to that forty was not contributing to the educational process. I started out as I intend to continue and every time I get an opportunity, I will educate

putting a military force in there,” he explains, “the refugees came back. I saw deserted villages and once we took them over, people came back and settled in them. Where are displaced refugees going to come? They’re going to come Ireland and everywhere else. But if we can go in and pre-empt it with a Rapid Reaction Force, we can prevent dis-

“One of the biggest and unique responsibilities I feel I have is to educate politicians about the Defence Forces.” - Sen John Minihan

politicians and make them understand the military.”

Sen Minihan argues that most people are missing a crucial point with regard to the proposed EU Rapid Reaction Force and the displacement of refugees.

“In south Lebanon we proved that by

placement taking place and give stability to the region.”

Sen John Minihan believes there are two ways of thinking on the recently implemented cutbacks in the military.

“Back in the early 90s,” he recalls, “I wrote a position paper, in which I said we

should initiate change before change was imposed upon us. The reality was that I felt we needed to re-organise, we needed to re-group, we needed, actually to close barracks but we decided not to do it. We decided to wait for civil servants and politicians to make decisions; decisions that weren't made on a sound understanding. So we are somewhat negligent there."

He believes that some barrack closures were necessary but was not overly impressed with the context in which those closures were made.

"If you close down a barracks and move everybody somewhere else," he explains, "you have to have the facilities in place. We were doing it in reverse, we were moving them and then playing catch-up with the facilities."

"I'm happy that we secured the 100% re-investment," he says, "for the Defence Forces. I believe the Defence Forces have to be invested in but I don't fully accept that we sold off the family jewels during the good times. I genuinely feel there was a need for a re-evaluation and re-assessment of assets. A best practice review had to take place."

There are, however, questions to be asked, he ventures.

Has the Defence Forces benefited from that review?

Are they getting the equipment, the facilities and are they getting a better Defence Forces?

While he points out the reality of having to work through a system, he maintains that "at the end of the day, the exchequer are the funders and there is as much a responsibility on the Defence Forces to present their case and to be seen to be operating to the principles of best practice as well. My message to the Defence Forces is that they should be big enough to see this and put forward their views on it rather than having it been imposed on them."

However, if there were decisions being made that were not in the best interests of the Defence Forces, he would speak out against it.

"At the time of the White Paper," he says, "I felt the numbers were going below what I deemed to be the critical mass necessary to honour our commitments, I spoke out and opposed it. I would continue to insist on that issue; there is a critical mass, there is a critical level of equipment to honour one's commitments."

He allows that from an operational perspective it's ideal to have a major force overseas because "it brings to fruition all your

training as we are trained in groups in the Defence Forces."

"Running in tandem with that," John Minihan points out, "is our commitment to the Rapid Reaction Force and I believe we have a commitment to a standby force for the UN. It's grand to say that we'd love to have a battalion overseas all the time but we have to be realistic about our commitments. What happens if the RRF is implemented? Can we staff it? That again is a re-adjustment of our tasks and the military have a responsibility to respond to that."

From a political perspective, he says, the

other than what has been outlined in the White Paper on Defence."

She expresses the hope that the government is a long way down the road in adhering to what the White Paper proposed.

"When it was launched it was going to be the blueprint for the next ten or fifteen years," she points out. "Money has been spent. The money received for the sale of the six barracks is being ploughed directly back into it. One hundred per cent funding has been secured. I know that at one stage there was a question mark over how much was going back in but I am aware 100% of the capital is being re-

I would be certainly of the view that there is a huge need for a modern, effective and efficient force." - Sen Geraldine Feeney

responsibility is to respond to the request for troops.

"That request will vary as situations vary. Just because there's a change in emphasis in what we've traditionally had in Lebanon, it's no harm to broaden our experiences and to see the different challenges and I think the Defence Forces will benefit from that. I firmly believe the RRF is the way forward."

Senator Geraldine Feeney

Senator Geraldine Feeney also sits on the Medical Council and is the first layperson to chair that body's Ethics Committee. She believes the Defence Forces are a very hard working group of people and has the height of regard for them.

"I think they do a very good job," says Sen Feeney, "sometimes with very poor backup and under very difficult circumstances. As a member of the parliamentary party, first and foremost, I would be there as a very strong voice for them. I would be certainly of the view that there is a huge need for a modern, effective and efficient force. I'm not quite clear where that stands at the moment

invested. I know money has been spent on naval equipment with two ships."

She does however express concern over the treatment of the Air Corps in terms of the financing being made available.

"I would be a little worried in relation to the Air Corps," she admits, "and I'm not sure that it is getting the



Senator Geraldine Feeney



Senator Maurice Cummins

same level of input financially as its two counterparts. One part of an equation must get the same fuel as the other. I would certainly like to see that resolved to everybody's satisfaction."

Feeney. "I do support the Minister and the Department and I see the new policies taking shape in the bright new recruitment campaign for instance. It certainly would say to me that it's a very modern view what type of a force we need. There certainly is modernisation on the agenda. I would not favour any cutbacks but if it's a type of a paring down to facilitate a better system than I would say yes let's have a look at it and see what they plan to do. I suppose the core of all this and it applies to all of our lives is change. We don't embrace change. You get used to a system. It might be only mediocre but it's better than the unknown. But once you do change, you find yourself saying you never want to go back."

Senator Maurice Cummins

Senator Maurice Cummins has been a member of Waterford City Council since 1979 and served as Mayor of Waterford from 1995-1996 and fulfils a number of roles on key state bodies.

"Firstly I'd like to acknowledge the contribution of the Defence Forces," says Sen Cummins, "both in the protection of the State and in the protection of our fishery stocks. I think the country and the people

the claims for deafness for which they are going back to the courts. You also have a €40m of a €900m budget cut with the cancelling of the new helicopter deal as well as the barracks closures. People are beginning to ask, 'are the Defence Forces the soft touch?' There are so many cutbacks in that particular department. For instance on the barracks closures, where is the money made on the sale of the barracks is going? Is it being ploughed back into the Defence Forces as was promised or what is the situation on it?

The White Paper on Defence that was introduced in 2000 I believe is going to be updated. We all need more information rather than just press statements. We need more beef on what we're being told."

Sen Cummins disagrees with the current Irish defence policy of not having a fully operational battalion overseas and instead pursuing a much smaller presence at company level and below in a variety of locations around the world.

"I honestly believe that the Defence Forces themselves are the best qualified to decide on the need for a battalion overseas. It has been proven to be the right policy in the past particularly in relation to the profile they hold in within the UN for their work in the past. That should be the policy that should be pursued and I think the Minister is wrong in this instance."

"I think there is a void there in terms of medium range and search and rescue helicopters. We need more helicopters. There is no question about that. I have a personal interest in it, in that I have a nephew-in-law who has just qualified as a pilot from the aviation school. I certainly think we should keep all the pilots that we have and give them all the expertise and equipment that's necessary for medium range search and rescue especially."

He feels there is need for a greater awareness of the work of the Defence Forces.

"This goes back to the representative bodies," he says, "and there is probably a need there to do more lobbying on its behalf and notify people of the issues affecting their work. I'm only in the door of the Seanad but I'm delighted to be here and I can assure you that I will be a friend of RACO because part of them gave me their nomination to allow me to contest the Seanad elections.

There is a need there to raise the morale in the Defence Forces because I think morale is at a low enough ebb at the present time in the Defence Forces because we have so much to be proud of in that area."

"I honestly believe that the Defence Forces themselves are the best qualified to decide on the need for a battalion overseas."
- Sen Maurice Cummins

When told how the Air Corps have not only had to make do with antiquated equipment but have on many occasions been forced to re-tool parts that are now obsolete, the Senator expresses her concern over the safety of such practices.

"When you say something like that to me," says Ger Feeney, "I say to myself how safe is all of this? I'm taking my hat off to them but I have to raise the question of safety in all of this."

Sen Feeney re-affirms her commitment to the Defence Forces and envisages liaising with the military on a bi-monthly basis.

"I am available to listen to their concerns and be a strong voice for them at parliamentary level," says Sen Feeney.

"Nobody likes to see cutbacks," says Ger

have a lot to be thankful for the contribution of the Defence Forces. Secondly, everybody recognises their peacekeeping efforts outside the country in many diverse places. There is a recognition that the Irish forces are held in high esteem abroad due to these efforts and it speaks volumes of their work."

He assures all members of the Defence Forces that any debate on defence that comes before the Seanad will do so with his active participation.

"I will be a contributor to the debates," he says, "and I will make regular contact with the representative bodies as well to get their view on it the relevant issue."

"There is a whole series of events there in relation to cutbacks in the Defence Forces. There has been a saving of €5m already on