



# OFFICIAL Observations

## Interview with Department of Defence Secretary General Mr David O'Callaghan By Andrew Lynch

**T**he Department of Defence is a sombre place today. The news came through just a few hours ago: an Irish soldier, Sgt Derek Mooney of the Army Ranger Wing, has been killed in a road accident in Liberia.

Sitting at his office desk, General Secretary David O'Callaghan is busy making arrangements to visit the dead man's parents in Blackrock. "It's difficult to know what to say in these circumstances," he says sadly.

O'Callaghan freely admits that he had little or no experience of Defence when he first arrived here as Assistant Secretary in 1993, having already served nearly three decades in the Revenue Commissioners.

### The Key Issues

"I was asked at the time what I knew about the area, and all I could think of was that I'd been a private in the FCA for two years, from fifteen to seventeen," he recalls. "Like everyone else back then I lied about my age, which meant that I left at the time you were supposed to join!"

His rise within Defence was swift and by 1995 he had succeeded Sean Brosnan as Secretary General. After an eventful eight years in that post, he is now scheduled to retire in June 2004. What does he see as his main achievements in that time?

"It's been a time of modernisation," he says. "I believe that my key achievement has been to oversee the Defence sector's move from the analysis phase marked by the Gleason, Efficiency Audit Group and Price Waterhouse reports, through to the design and implementation of the Review Implementation Plan. After that, to oversee the continuing modernisation of the sector as outlined in the White Paper on Defence. We've moved beyond the reports, we're now beginning to implement their recommendations and the SMI/DBG initiatives.

"Tackling the hearing loss issue successfully has also been a key achievement. It was a huge distraction and very costly, but it's largely resolved now and frankly I think it could have been a lot worse. Had we not been able to do what we did, I have

no doubt that we would have been forced to cut numbers and reduce our equipment and infrastructure budgets, simply to meet hearing loss cases.

### Pain & Professionalism

"Of course there has been pain in the last few years, there's no question about it. We did reduce numbers and sold barracks and other surplus properties – but not as a way of reducing hearing loss costs. It was a deliberate policy of rebalancing resources and creating a new, better equipped organisation. Even our most grudging critics would have to accept that 100% of the savings made have been reinvested, and the evidence is there for all to see in terms of our new equipment and better infrastructure.

"The outcome which gives me the most professional satisfaction is that the whole Defence organisation, civil and military, has changed for the better. I am not taking the credit for this: a lot of my colleagues, civil and military, have worked hard to bring this

about, and we have had the support of a very committed Minister for Defence as well as the government.

"I believe that there is a more professional approach to many of the issues we have to deal with. Especially in the way we use the resources entrusted to us, on the Human Resources side and in terms of equipment and infrastructural planning issues such as accommodation. There will inevitably be tensions between the military and civilian sides on occasion, but I strongly believe we now have the arrangements to deal with these issues much better than we used to."

He cites the army deafness issue as a classic example of these new, improved arrangements.

### Setbacks & Modernisation

"The system at the time let us down," he admits. "No-one would argue that a soldier who has been deafened deserves compensation. But the huge sums of money being dished out were ridiculous and for a while it threatened to ruin us. It got to the stage where the number of claims outnumbered the number of soldiers in the Defence Forces. "We didn't have the health and safety regulations in place that we have now. I don't believe that such a problem could arise today."

Looking to the future, O'Callaghan identifies a number of key challenges which his successor will have to deal with.

"The main challenge will be to keep up the momentum of the modernisation process," he says. "This is particularly true now that money is getting tighter. There is still a lot of work to be done on organisational and HR issues, both on the civil and military sides, and in terms of completing the reorganisation of the Reserve. This will pose major challenges, not just for my successor but for the Defence Forces also."

### Overseas Missions & Future Challenges

"The developing area of European security and defence policy is also likely to create new challenges. Defence is an important item on the agenda in Europe, and I'm not sure that we in Ireland have woken up to that yet. We have to keep pace with our colleagues, particularly in the area of equipment."

"We have the famous triple lock at the moment – UN mandate, government decision, Dail approval before the Defence Forces can take place in a military mission overseas. But it's not inconceivable that in the future an EU operation will have a UN mandate, because the UN will be looking to



The Department of Defence, Infirmary Road, Dublin.

regional associations to carry out peace-keeping operations. We may well have to play a part in that."

O'Callaghan firmly believes that the partial delegation of financial authority to the Defence Forces has been a success. He does not envisage, however, that the Chief of Staff might perform the function of accounting officer in the near future.

"I think that the delegation has worked quite well," he says. "In particular, it has allowed the Department to step back from detailed involvement in routine matters and allowed it to concentrate on the bigger

representation had arisen shortly before O'Callaghan was appointed as Assistant Secretary in the Department. His time there has convinced him that it has been a positive addition, and he is enthusiastic about the scope for further developments in this area."

### Representation

"I come from a background – the Revenue Commissioners - where representation was the norm," he says. "So I was very used to dealing with top people in the unions, and I was a supporter of the concept in Defence

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strategic issues. It has also given the Defence Forces management more freedom and flexibility, and an opportunity to ensure better value for money.

"As regards the accounting officer issue, successive governments have endorsed the current arrangements. It was last decided in 2000 that the status quo would remain. I see no change in policy on this in the near future, I think the present arrangements work well." The issue of

from my earliest days here. In fact, as Assistant Secretary I remember very well the first Conciliation Council meeting back in 1993.

"Representation was a huge step for Defence to take, and the negotiations leading to the agreement of the scheme and that first Council meeting took a long time. We had to design a scheme which allowed for representation, while taking due account of the unique characteristics

of a military organisation. We also had to recognise that representation needed time to settle down.

"I think we have got the balance right, and I think that representation is beginning to mature. It's become the norm now and the partnership structures are working very well.

"Looking to the future, I do not see the basic model of representation changing. However, as we deal with the big issues set

"Of course the army is unique in that it cannot actually go on strike. But that means that other people have a responsibility not to exploit that fact."

The issue of civil-military integration was also a live one during O'Callaghan's tenure as Secretary General. He believes that the Office of Emergency Planning has been a successful example of this, but is cautious about predicting the integration of other management functions.

both civil and military. They're all very dedicated people, they were determined to make the new approach work, and they have succeeded.

"If these conditions could be replicated in other functional areas, and if it could be shown that the work could be done better in this way, I would be supportive of more integration. However, even if those tests were met, certain practical difficulties would have to be addressed, in particular those of ensuring job continuity and cost effectiveness.

"For career development reasons, and because of the way in which new demands arise – for example new missions – military people are rotated in and out of appointments more often than their civil counterparts. For integration to work properly, that rotation issue would have to be addressed. People would have to be left long enough in the particular appointment to make a real contribution, say about three years in the case of Brussels-based personnel.

"The cost effectiveness issue is also important. There is no question that most administrative or clerical work can be done more cost effectively by civil servants or

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out in the Modernisation Agenda such as enlistment conditions and promotion, and as partnership beds down, I expect to see the emergence of a less adversarial approach to business. This will take time, but it will certainly happen.

"The Office of Emergency Planning has worked well," he says, "mainly because there has been from the start a set policy, a common objective and agreement on the ways and means of achieving that. It is also a tribute to the people in the Office,



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civilian employees. It's just a fact of life that military people are more expensive. In my view, any integration which increased those costs would be difficult to justify.

"I don't believe that these tests are currently present in the case of Conciliation & Arbitration business, and the rotation and cost effectiveness issues are also problematical. Still, who knows what the future will bring? It's a question of treating each case on its merits.

"I think it's important not to get too hung up on the notion of physical integration. It's more important to ensure that we get plenty of work done on a joint or co-operative basis, working closely together but not necessarily with physical integration. I'm thinking in particular of the procurement of the new ships for the Naval Service, the APC programme and trainer aircraft. There are many other good examples of this."

### Training & Civilian Roles

In the past, a number of aspiring senior civil servants have attended the Command and Staff course in the DFTC. With the recent addition to the C&S course of the MA in Leadership, Management and Defence Studies, does O'Callaghan envisage that future C&S courses might be integrated?

"I would like to see such a development," he says cautiously. "It's a very good course and it would be great to have civil servants on it. But I can't see it happening to any great degree without a major re-design of the C&S syllabus to cater for the differing types and needs of civil and military students, and a changeover to modular delivery. That's particularly important, given the fact that in a relatively small Department such as Defence we simply could not release people for lengthy periods away from their jobs, because their work would, by and large, have to be picked up by others."

At present, countries who take part in UN-mandated peacekeeping operations under an EU or NATO flag are required to pay fully for their own expenses. How does O'Callaghan see this requirement shaping future deployments of the Defence Forces overseas?

"Well, in Chapter 6 of the White Paper on Defence, we make it clear that the Defence Forces will, subject to domestic security requirements, continue to contribute to peace support activities overseas," he says. "It goes on to set out the factors that come into play in making any particular decision on participation. Cost is just one such factor -not necessarily a dominant one - and



David O'Callaghan, Secretary General, Department of Defence.

I can't recall any request in recent years where a decision not to participate was based on considerations of cost.

"For example, our peacekeeping mission in Liberia will cost about €12 or

their point of view - I think at the time they were afraid they were going to take a lot of pain without any gain. But I think time has shown there were plenty of gains, that the savings have been re-invested in the

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€14 million per annum. But that's a UN mission and we'll recoup most of that. So cost wasn't a major consideration."

Finally, how has O'Callaghan found working with RACO over the years?

"I've always found RACO to be a very professional organisation," he says. "I think they do a good job for their members and I have a lot of respect for them. Of course they had to find their feet in the early 90s, no more than ourselves. I think they have matured since then. There's no denying that relations became a bit fraught during the discussions on the White Paper. I could see

Defence Forces. The Defence Forces is a much better organisation now than ten years ago." On that positive note, it's time for O'Callaghan to leave for Blackrock top visit Sgt Mooney's parents. Before he goes, he offers some final thoughts about his Department's public image.

"Defence isn't always a newsworthy area," he says. "The public tends to only think of the army when there's a parade or a tragedy abroad. It doesn't make the headlines like health or education. But it's just as important as any of those things, and anyone who works in the area will know that."