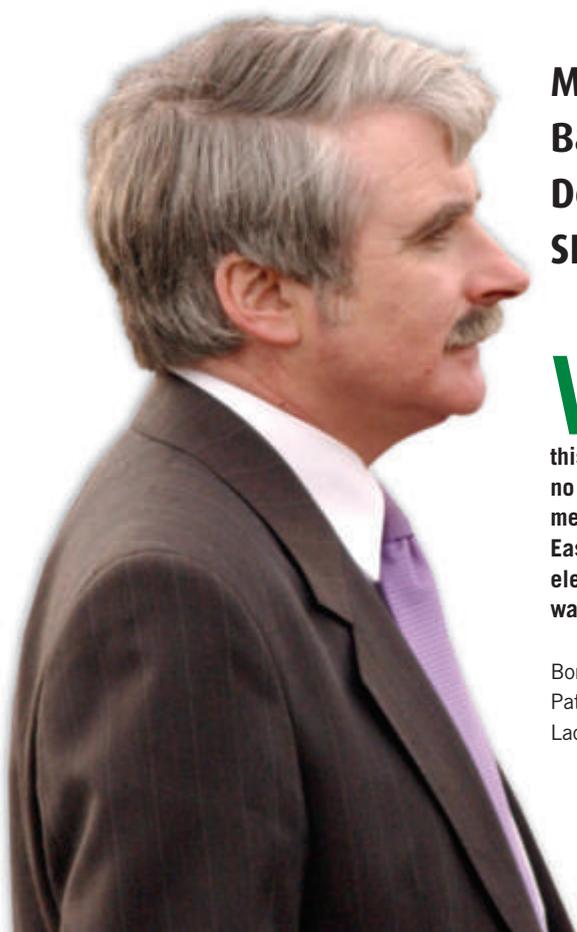




FROM THE CABINET TABLE



Minister for Defence Willie O'Dea TD talks about Battlegroups, budgets and the future of the Defence Forces, in his first interview with SIGNAL magazine. Dick O'Brien reports.

Willie O'Dea was appointed Minister for Defence on September 29th 2004. Although this is his first full ministerial post, he is no stranger to national politics. A member of Dáil Éireann for the Limerick East constituency, Willie O'Dea was first elected to the Dáil in February 1982 and was returned in each subsequent election.

Born in Limerick, he was educated at the Patrician Brothers College, Ballyfin, Co Laois; University College Dublin; the Kings

Inns; and the Institute of Certified Accountants. Prior to becoming a full time politician, he worked as a barrister and accountant and has also lectured at University College Dublin and the University of Limerick. He is married to Geraldine Kennedy.

Before his appointment to Cabinet, Minister O'Dea had served from June 2002 as Minister of State at Dept of Justice, Equality & Law Reform with special responsibility for Equality Issues.

He has also served in a number of



Departments as a Minister of State, including Department of Justice 1992-1993; Department of Health and Justice 1993-1994 and Department of Education 1997-2002.

We interviewed the Chief of Staff in the last issue of SIGNAL and he pointed out that the share of GNP allocated to defence has pretty much halved in the last ten years. He remarked that the percentage of the government's budget devoted to defence is dropping as well. Are you happy with the level of funding that the Defence Forces get and, if not, how would you propose to increase it?

We are spending over €1 billion this year on Defence. That's a lot of money. The important thing for me is that the Defence Forces has the resources that it needs to do the job required of them. And I'm happy because what has happened is that GNP has increased enormously in recent years. You'll find that across a whole range of government departments, expenditure has increased in real terms, but reduced as a percentage of GNP. The bottom line is that €200 million has been spent in capital investments, between 1997 and 2004. Another €33 million is down for allocation this year. In real terms there's been massive increases in expenditure, both on equipment and training and on barracks. We've seen some very substantial increases.

But many of the new investments in the Defence Forces have come through cost cutting elsewhere. For example, they lost a lot of personnel, barracks were closed and obviously you can't pursue that kind of strategy indefinitely?

No – there's an end to that now – the Defence Forces strength has been set and there will be no more barrack closures. That

stuff is over. But often people think that a health system or an army or any other area of public expenditure is best served by spending higher percentage of GNP. That's meaningless, as I said. Secondly, in relation to an army, it's not just a question of size, it's also a question of capability: how well trained people are, how well equipped they are, and also the age profile. The age profile has a significant impact on the kind of army you have and how capable they are for the tasks allocated to them and we've improved that enormously in recent years. And the equipment and infrastructure programmes that we have will continue.

So next time around, when new equipment is needed, is funding going to increase?

Absolutely. I'm totally committed to making the Irish Defence Forces among the best equipped and trained in the entire world. Our role in internal security has dropped somewhat, which is welcome. However, we have a very significant role in peacekeeping and our commitment to peacekeeping internationally remains undiminished.

Speaking of peacekeeping, the other crucial issue is the question of the triple lock mechanism and Battlegroups. They're designed to be mobilised very quickly, but we're going to be waiting a long time for a UN Security Council resolution. How are we going to get around this problem?

Well, there are a couple of points to be made. First of all, the United Nations is in the process of reforming itself. That's under discussion at the moment. Certain proposals have been put forward and it may be that when the discussion process comes to an end, this problem may solve itself and the UN Security Council may be in a position to react more rapidly than heretofore.



The second point is that we would like to play our part. Kofi Annan told me that he supports the EU approach to Battlegroups and we appreciate the necessity for them. In principle we would like to participate and, with or without us, Battlegroups will happen. The issue is that we are also committed to the triple lock and any participation has to be within the parameters of the triple lock. Now, I have established three working groups to look at different aspects of this issue: the legislative aspect, the operational aspect and the cost aspect and I hope they'll be reporting to me in the next few months. Their brief is to tell us if we can participate and to what extent we can participate and what we have to do first to enable us to participate. That does not mean we're going to change the triple lock in any way, but short of doing that, if there's any positive proposals which enable us to participate, their brief is to tell me that and if they come up with suggestions we'll certainly take them on board.

The final thing of course is that rapid



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reaction is only one small element of peacekeeping, important though it may be. The whole way this thing is structured is that the rapid reaction force will move in for maybe a thirty-day period. It may be extended to sixty or ninety days to prevent an immediate catastrophe. But after that, the United Nations has to move in under the aegis of a regional organisation or under a blue helmet arrangement and maintain the peace. Our commitment to that remains undiminished. We're one of the largest contributors in the world to United Nations peacekeeping efforts. Whether or not we'll be able to participate in rapid reaction Battlegroups, or whether we're able to participate fully, our commitment to the major task of peacekeeping won't diminish in any way.

Are you concerned that we're somewhat beholden to the United Nations on this front? For example, Battlegroups come in the aftermath of the Balkans conflict and nobody wants something like Srebrenica to happen again. If conflict erupted again in

the next year, are we going to be waiting for the United Nations to give us the all clear?

Each country must take its own decisions in this regard. The fact is that Battlegroups formed by single nations will be in place this year. Multinational Battlegroups will then be formed over another two or three years. So the Battlegroups will be there.

I think the first task in a scenario like you mentioned will be to go in and stabilise the situation. But the major task will be the follow up and we'll be contributing to that. As regards being "beholden to the United Nations" - we're a small neutral country and basically I think the best position to be in is to operate under the aegis of the major recognised international organisation.

So you're confident that while we have our own issues, there will be other countries involved that could assume the rapid reaction role if it happens that we can't participate?

Indeed, but we will be participating in peacekeeping anyway because a more

permanent force will be needed once the situation is stabilised. It would be most unusual if you had a situation whereby the Battlegroup alone will solve the problem and it will all go away in thirty days.

Regarding the Tsunami disaster in South East Asia, RACO said Irish troops could go at a moment's notice, but you felt a UN resolution was needed?

I didn't say that. We just had to get clarification on the matter. The position is that with a natural disaster like that, troops who aren't going out under arms can volunteer to go and that has happened on a number of occasions in the past and we've always allowed anyone who volunteered to go, once we've decided in principle that we should intervene.

Has the disaster prompted any strategic thinking within the Department? Have you formulated an action plan in the event of something on a similar scale happening again?

Well the difficulty with these things,



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particularly from our perspective, is that we can't just sit down and unilaterally decide to send troops into some disaster area after a disaster happens. We have to be asked. At least we must discuss the matter with the government of the country in question.

What if a government is amenable to Irish troops being sent to assist?

Well I would argue that the provision is already in place. There are plenty of precedents whereby officers, specialists and troops within the Defence Forces can volunteer for service like that and if the government then decides, having discussed the matter with the country affected, these people will be available and they can go.

Another issue is training abroad. You've said we might have to look at the Defence Act and change the legislation to allow Irish troops to go abroad in numbers for training. Is that going to go ahead?

We have a committee examining this issue and I wouldn't like to pre-empt the committee's work. We've asked people who are experts in the area to look at it to see what has to be done. If, while preserving the triple lock in its present form, I can do anything to enable us to participate in training exercises, I'd be only too delighted to do that.

If we're going to change the Defence Act with regard to training, are you inclined

towards taking a comprehensive look at military law?

Well, we have some people in the Department who are looking at that at the moment and they'll be coming out with some observations later in the year. However, just from what I've seen, I might disagree with the assessment that the Defence Act needs to be comprehensively and radically reviewed. However, there are certainly a number of areas that would need to be updated.

Do you think the Defence Forces have a role to play in guarding cash transits and if so, are we going to get the banks to fully fund it?

Well the answer to the first part of the question is yes; of course they have a role to play. Up to about ten or twelve years ago, armed raids on security vans were a fairly common feature of crime. Now this seems to have come back into vogue and obviously it's not in the interests of the State to allow criminals to get their hands on large consignments of money to setup more drug gangs. The front line department here is Justice and there's an arrangement that if sums more than a certain amount are being transferred that they must look for a Garda escort. Now sometimes the Gardaí request the Army as backup. It is a fact that never has there been a successful hijack of a cash transit when the Army was involved. I don't think there's even been one attempted to the best of my knowledge. If this is to be a feature of crime, if this is something we have to confront, then obviously the need

for the Army is self-evident. And I think we have the troops and we have the training now to be able to deal with it.

Long negotiations have taken place, which hopefully may be culminating shortly. From 1978 until 1992, the State carried the full cost for providing these escorts. In 1992, the then Minister for Finance Bertie Ahern decided that the banks should make a contribution. That contribution was upped in 1995 and amounted to 72% of the total cost in terms of man-hours to us. Now that amount has remained static since 1995 but of course the costs to us have gone up. So now it's down to around 42%. Bear in mind that not all cash transits are related to banks, only about 80% of them are. The other organisations involved would be the Post Office, Credit Unions, the Central Bank etc. For that 80%, we're trying to recover the full costs. I don't think that's unreasonable. And I'm fairly confident that we can get them to agree to that.

(Shortly after this interview was conducted Minister O'Dea announced that he had reached an agreement with the Irish Bankers Federation. The agreement, which is for a 5-year period, provides that the banks will pay the total actual costs incurred by the Defence Forces in the provision of cash escorts. The Banks currently pay €2.86 million per annum. The effect of the agreement is that the banks will pay €3.86 million in 2005 and, based on current estimates of the number of escorts, nearly €6 million in 2006.)



"I'm totally committed to making the Defence Forces one of the best equipped and trained in the entire world".

There has been continuous reorganisation of the Defence Forces over the past fifteen years. Now we're implementing the White Paper which came out in 2000. This is meant to be a ten-year plan. Are we going to see a period of stability for the foreseeable future?

Yes. That would be my intention. The broad parameters have been set and we will continue to work within them. Obviously we will continue to look for operational efficiencies and obtaining value for money. For the actual Permanent Defence Forces, much of the reorganisation has taken place. There are some other issues that are still outstanding, but they'll be only taken care of after consultations with RACO and PDFORRA have taken place. Now there's a comprehensive plan for the reorganisation of the Reserve Defence Forces, which I think everybody, not least the Reserve Defence Forces themselves think is a great idea. And that's going to be rolled out over the next five or six years. But again it will be done in consultation with the local units of the Reserve Defence Forces.

That's also an issue with decentralisation whereby it is planned that Defence Forces headquarters and the Department of Defence are relocated to separate locations. What are the strategic benefits of this separation? Obviously a decision was made, but why was it decided that this was the right way to go?

The Efficiency Audit Group looked at this

topic during the early 1990s and, as a result of that, the matter was discussed quite extensively both within the Department and with a number of outside bodies and they decided in their wisdom at that stage that the present system should prevail, namely a dual structure, military and civilian.

Now there have been a number of developments where there's been much closer co-operation. You could look at it as kind of a joint operation in many cases. A typical example would be Emergency Planning, where the military and civilians work together in one unit.

Circumstances have changed somewhat since the 1990s and I'm prepared to look at what other areas of integrated management we can bring about – that was one of the things I was referring to when I said there were a number of outstanding issues in the area of reorganisation of the Defence Forces.

So you'll be seeking to reverse the trend?

I'll be looking at the extent to which it's relevant to the circumstances of today.

Sudan is one issue that's come up in the past few weeks. The UN has been looking for people to participate?

While we're very sympathetic to situation in Sudan, we're very close to our ceiling in

terms of the number of troops we can have abroad at any onetime. In fairness though, I think we've been one of the most generous nations in terms of the percentage of our forces deployed on peacekeeping operations. And there are a number of other situations where we might have to allocate personnel.

Also bear in mind that there's no specific request from the United Nations as yet. The UN special representative in Sudan, Jan Prok has simply announced that he was looking for 250 troops from Europe. They haven't come with specifics yet. Of course the position is that if they make a specific request, the government has to consider that. I'd then have to take that the cabinet table.

(Since this interview was conducted, the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO) has invited Ireland to contribute a small number of Defence Forces personnel to act as UN Military Observers (UNMOs) with the recently established United Nations Mission in the Sudan. Assessment of this request needs to take into account the numbers of PDF personnel available for overseas service at present. There are currently have 770 troops serving abroad.)

Minister, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to SIGNAL.

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.