



# The Opposition View

**Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny and Fine Gael Defence Spokesperson Billy Timmins speak to SIGNAL Magazine.**



It's been almost eight years since Billy Timmins entered the corridors of power in Dail Éireann following a successful career in the Defence Forces. "My time as an officer in the Defence Forces taught me some things about analysing and solving problems, organisational effectiveness and personal discipline that have all stood me in good stead." Party leader Enda Kenny has also joined SIGNAL briefly and his opinion of the Defence Forces is clear. "Fine Gael has the utmost respect and admiration for the work which our military personnel do; but unfortunately I don't believe they are best served by the policies of this Fianna Fail – PD alliance."

### The Triple-Lock

Fine Gael has been amongst the most outspoken opponents of Ireland's so called 'triple-lock' system which governs the deployment of Irish troops overseas. This



Fine Gael Defence Spokesperson Billy Timmins TD and Party Leader Enda Kenny TD visiting a medical centre in a Serb enclave in the village of Donje, Gusterica, Kosovo.

concept requires in the first instance that the authorisation of the United Nations Security Council is required in the form of a mandate before the Irish Government can consider deploying Irish Defence Forces personnel overseas. Secondly, the deployment must be approved by the Government, and finally it must also be approved by Dail Éireann. Both Enda Kenny and Billy Timmins believe that this places unnecessary caveats on Irish sovereignty and defence policy.

"The current guidelines which the Dail must adhere to in order to deploy the Defence Forces are outdated and in need of reform," said Enda Kenny. "The concept of the triple-lock mechanism may be fine in theory but in practice it's rarely workable.

There are frequent difficulties at UN Security Council level in attaining the necessary consensus required to establish an international peacekeeping force. Sometimes these difficulties may have little to do with the conflict in question and more to do with the self-interests of certain members of the UN Security Council. This is exemplified in the case of the recent peacekeeping deployment in Macedonia in which Ireland couldn't participate as it was an EU peacekeeping mission and was not governed by a UN mandate. This situation arose because the UN Security Council was blocked from mandating a peacekeeping force due to Chinese opposition, which had the consequential implications from an Irish perspective that our own Government, because of its own triple-lock rule, could not sanction participation in this mission to Macedonia. For a sovereign state, it is an unacceptable situation that Chinese foreign

policy can dictate when the Irish Government deploy its own troops. The triple-lock restriction de facto gives certain member states of the United Nations the ability to pre-empt our decision-making as a sovereign nation."

Fine Gael has, in the past, sought to amend the triple-lock system. At their 2004 Ard Fheis, Gay Mitchell and Dinny McGinley published the International Peace Missions Deployment Bill 2003. This was a Private Members Bill, which set out to reform the triple-lock system. The Bill is intended to allow for continued participation in an international UN force but would also allow the Irish Government to sanction participation in other peacekeeping missions, such as the Macedonia deployment."

Billy Timmins believes that the triple-lock is of little service to anybody. "The triple-lock theoretically compromises Ireland's own national sovereign in that it places aspects of our sovereignty subservient to the whims of some self-serving nations on the Security Council. So in order to perpetuate the long, proud and distinguished traditions of the Defence Forces in peacekeeping and peace enforcement, reform of the triple-lock is especially critical."

### Neutrality

Billy Timmins is unequivocal about his stance on the issue of Irish neutrality. "Fine Gael believes that Ireland's policy of neutrality does not suit us as a people. We are a people who seek to resolve issues in a forthright and direct way. Military neutrality does not play to our nation's strengths, and therefore our supposed policy of neutrality is becoming increasingly defunct. The Defence Forces are currently participating in a military peace-enforcing mission under the NATO flag in Kosovo and the Government continues to grant the use of Shannon airport as a stopover for the American military going to and from their operations in the Iraq region.

"This Minister for Defence has done nothing to alleviate this ongoing duplicity by continuing to pledge to upgrade the equipment levels of the Defence Forces yet at the same time allowing their operational status to remain in limbo." Along with the 'triple-lock', Billy Timmins believes that neutrality compromises Ireland's ability to make sovereign decisions.

"That said, the Irish people should be very proud of the achievements of the Defence Forces internationally. For example, Liberia is an extremely difficult peace-enforcement deployment in a highly volatile environment. The Defence Forces makes up the largest European contingent there."





Pictured at the KFOR HQ in Pristina, Kosovo during the recent visit of a Fine Gael delegation were Lt Col Tom Doyle, Enda Kenny TD, Leader of Fine Gael, Frederic Mathieu, Political Advisor to KFOR, Lt Col Andrew Kilfeather, Billy Timmins TD, Fine Gael Defence Spokesperson and Col Michael Cleary.

Along with Billy Timmins, party leader Enda Kenny recently paid a visit to Irish troops serving in Kosovo as part of KFOR. Both men were highly impressed by what they observed. "I think the Kosovo deployment is another excellent representation of the work of the Defence Forces. They are maintaining the peace between two adversarial communities, and they are doing an excellent job," said Enda Kenny.

### Equipment & Infrastructure

While there have been improvements over the past six to eight years in both equipment and infrastructure, Fine Gael is adamant that this improvement must be continued. "The equipment we saw in Kosovo was indicative of a confident organisation, which the Defence Forces unmistakably is," said Enda Kenny. Billy Timmins said that while the Defence Forces' equipment has undergone much-needed improvement in recent years it should be borne in mind that it was done on monies generated from within the Defence Forces arising from a reduction over the last 10 years of more than 20% of the Forces, as well as the sale of a substantial amount of military property.

"That said, the equipment levels must constantly be appraised and improved into the future. Judging from what I personally saw in Kosovo, the levels of infrastructure

have also vastly improved and this is to the great credit of the organisation."

On the home front, Billy Timmins believes the Naval Service and the Air Corps do not get the credit he believes they richly deserve. "I think the fact that Naval Headquarters is situated in Haulbowline in Cork means that they are somewhat removed from public recognition. Of course this doesn't mean that they seek recognition for what they do, but they certainly deserve it. They provide a tremendous service; they aren't endowed with fabulous physical resources but they do have the benefit of excellent personnel."

While the Air Corps has recently received the welcome boost of new training aircraft as well as the imminent acquisition

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of the AB139's, Billy Timmins believes that operational taskings remain one of the Corps' greatest challenges but believes that it has been let down badly by the current government. "The Air Corps has fulfilled Search and Rescue (SAR) responsibilities with courage, honour and success for many decades. Not only has the Air Corps been on hand in crisis Search and Rescue situations, they have also undertaken humanitarian trips to island communities when necessary, provided air ambulance facilities, conducted maritime patrolling as well as a variety of other roles. However, the removal by this Government of the Search and Rescue function from the Air Corps coupled with the subsequent privatisation of this service is just another prime example of the cavalier disregard that this Government has displayed to some of its most loyal and courageous servants."

Whether Fine Gael will return to government any time soon is anybody's guess, but in the meantime the party says it remains committed to improving conditions for the Defence Forces. Shortly after speaking to SIGNAL, Billy Timmins published a private members bill, the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2005, which, if passed, he says will enable members of the Defence Forces to engage in joint training exercises with other troops from other EU member states.