

# Promising Participation: Fine Gael Pledges Changes in Defence

*SIGNAL talks to TD Billy Timmins about Fine Gael's plans for security and defence should the forthcoming election return them to power.*

**W**icklow T.D. and general election candidate, Billy Timmins was formerly a commissioned officer with the Irish Defence Forces and a member of RACO. He served in Galway, Donegal and Kilkenny and also with the United Nations on peacekeeping duties in the Lebanon (UNIFIL) and Cyprus (UNFICYP) and retired in 1997 in the rank of Captain.

Billy was first elected to the Dáil in 1997 and was appointed Fine Gael spokesperson on Defence and Peace Keeping and Humanitarian Relief; a position he held until 2000. He was spokesperson on Housing from June 2000 to February 2001, deputy spokesperson on Justice and Defence from February 2001 to June 2002.

Re-elected to the Dáil in May 2002 he was appointed Front Bench Spokesperson on Defence in October 2004, having been the spokesperson on Agriculture and Food.

He retains a deep interest in the Irish Defence Forces and issues pertaining to defence and international relations; he believes that a Fine Gael led government will lead to greater fluidity, autonomy and effectiveness for the Defence Forces. "In Government, this party will invest time and expense in developing the role and capacity of our Defence Forces to fulfil security tasks at home and to play a full part in the international peace support role which Ireland will actively develop in cooperation

with the European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN).

Some of the core tenets of Fine Gael's policies on defence include positions which would radically overhaul the current status quo. For instance, the party does not believe that neutrality is an inherently noble concept in every situation. In an interview in SIGNAL in 2005 he said that Fine Gael "believes that Ireland's policy of neutrality does not suit us as a people....military neutrality does not play to our nation's strengths and therefore our supposed policy of neutrality is becoming increasingly defunct." Today, Fine Gael believes that Ireland should be a full participant in an EU security and defence arrangement, even if that means an overhaul of our current defence arrangements. "We have always supported the concept of European Battlegroups and we fully support the full integration of our troops into these arrangements." The oft-discussed 'triple-lock' approval system necessary to send Irish troops overseas (UN mandate, government approval and Dáil approval) is something which Billy Timmins believes is unnecessary and stifles our national sovereignty. "In government, Fine Gael will reform the triple-lock system and allow full national sovereignty for this country in all areas, including defence. This would ensure that a situation such as that which occurred in Macedonia in 1999, when China vetoed our participation in a European mission, would not happen again. We are mature enough to make our own decisions in relation to foreign policy,"

On home soil, he also believes that the Defence Forces' have not been well served by the current government over the last ten years. "As a public service organisation which has downsized so much when all others have been expanding and radically reinvented itself in the process, I don't think they have received the net gain for all the sacrifices they have made." As an example, he points to the sale of Defence Forces' properties, equipment and lands over recent years. "Although the lands have, in some instances, been put to good public use, it is still the Defence Forces who are losing in the end. I think that the Defence Forces can be seen as a soft touch if land needs to be sold and funds raised; they can't complain, they can't strike, and they aren't allowed to comment in the media. "We

will ensure that the funding obtained from the disposal or sale of Defence Forces land will be invested in the Defence Forces.”

### **Other key points of their defence manifesto include:**

Fine Gael will permit the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) to achieve a strength of 10,500 plus 250 in training. This will allow the PDF to reach a maximum total strength on 10,750 which would include personnel in training.

- The approach to emergency planning will be streamlined and legislation will be introduced to underpin Ireland’s preparedness and capacity to cope with emergencies, whether from terrorism or environmental and natural disasters.
- Expand the remit of the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) to allow for overseas service and review labour law to allow for this change.
- Encourage the use of electronic surveillance equipment to ease the burden of regimental duties.
- Develop the Air Corps capability to provide a 24 hour Air Ambulance service and so that the Air Corps has the ability to tender for the provision of Search and Rescue (SAR) duties.
- The facilities available to the Naval Service at Haulbowline, County Cork, will be expanded and improved and that three new naval vessels will be purchased to replace the oldest vessels in the fleet. At least one of these three new vessels will be equipped for humanitarian/medical purposes, e.g an offshore hospital ship.

Billy Timmins also says that he has long advocated the development of a Rapid Response Corps, consisting of personnel from the public and private sector and designed to enhance Ireland’s response to humanitarian disasters. “This concept has since been adopted by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern and while I welcome the idea being moved forward it is something which Fine Gael originally conceived and we believe that it should be run under the auspices of the Minister for Defence using the expertise of the Defence Forces gained over five decades in international crisis management.”

Billy Timmins is aware of recent headlines referring to his idea of the Defence Forces establishing rehabilitation facilities for young offenders being quite unpopular initially



*Billy Timmins TD.*

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within the broader Defence community. However, he wishes to clarify that the damage was mainly done by the unfortunate ‘boot camp’ tag which newspapers attached to the concept. “At no time did I use the term ‘boot camp’. I simply think that the input of perhaps 20 Defence Forces’ personnel in rehabilitation projects for young offenders could seriously benefit society. At the moment the system for young offenders in this country is a mess and I seriously believe that the Defence Forces could have a positive impact on it. By way of comparison, a similar programme in England was set up by members of their army and it has been an enormous success.”

On the subject of national duties, he believes that Aid to the Civil Power (ATCP)

tasks are part and parcel of the work of the army here but, while it is common for politicians to call on the private sector to bear a greater burden of the financial tasks for deploying the army on duties such as cash protection, Billy Timmins disagrees: “I think the current Minister for Justice is mistaken when he boasts of squeezing greater financing from the banks to part fund the protection afforded to their cash in transit consignments by the Defence forces and the Gardaí.

I think it is the duty of government to provide a safe and secure economic environment for people to be able to do business and if that requires the input of the Defence Forces then so be it.”

As Lieutenant General Jim Sreenan prepares to step down as Chief of Staff (COS), Billy Timmins and Fine Gael wish him well. “I believe he was an excellent Chief of Staff who endeavoured to raise national and international awareness of the great skills and experience that the Defence Forces has to offer; I wish him well in his retirement.” However, in a reference to the publicly aired admonition of the Chief by the Minister for Defence over an innocuous interview printed in The Irish Times Deputy Timmins stated that he believes that “the opinions of senior army officers, such as General Sreenan, should and need to be respected and they should be free to air them to the public - they are the defence professionals.”

As Fine Gael prepare for the coming election battle, Timmins is pragmatic when it comes to his party’s stance on defence. “We are the only party who has held firm on the side of the defence forces on many major issues, such as Battlegroups, and we believe that the achievements of those in the Defence Forces should be recognised and rewarded.”