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Reports: RON KIRWAN and MARTIN BYRNES



Harney leads the praise for 'the best Taoiseach we never had'

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now is the next thing. I don't know why but I think we will do well in the election," he said.

"It's very successful and one of the biggest conferences and biggest crowds we've had in a while," said Damian O'Dwyer from Dromkeen.

"There is a huge crowd here and I think it will reflect very well on the canvass. There is good support out there for us. The people wouldn't be here otherwise," he said. Rita English from Raheen doesn't travel much to conferences but enjoys them when they are in Limerick.

"I attended a lot of the speeches and enjoyed them all," Ms English said.

TANAISTE Mary Harney led the praise for PD founder member Des O'Malley, who is retiring from public life at the next election.

The party leader presented Deputy O'Malley with a silver salver to mark his sterling work in political life over 34 years - and for being "the best Taoiseach this country never had."

Ms Harney had a warm welcome for the 600 Progressive Democrats and their guests who sat down to dinner, and a special welcome for former PD deputy Peadar Clohessy.

The party decided to hold its conference in Limerick because this is the last conference which Deputy O'Malley can attend as a member of the parliamentary party and Dail Eireann, the Tanaiste said.

"The Progressive Democrats could not be in being if it were not for Des O'Malley. This party would never have happened, this party would never have succeeded," she said.

"It's often been said that he is the best Taoiseach this country never had, that's a cliché but I certainly agree with it."

"His integrity, his intellect and his determination knows no bounds. In fact his passion and determination and his unerring instinct for what's right and for doing what is right is exemplary. Des has always put principle before pragmatism. He is overlain with a passion for what he believes to be right," she said.

"In the parliamentary party I'll certainly miss him. We'll all miss his advice, his guidance, his



Family portrait: Fiona, Des and Pat O'Malley

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wisdom. We'll miss his steely determination," said Ms Harney.

She said that it was going to take two O'Malleys to replace him in the next parliamentary party.

"I've no doubt that the tradition will be continued with Fiona, his daughter who is running for us in Dun Laoghaire, and Tim, his cousin who is running here in Limerick East. It will take both of them to make up for Des when we lose him from the parliamentary party this summer."

"I know we will continue to have his support, his loyalty and his friendship. This party is a shining example of what Des O'Malley has achieved in Irish politics."

"He has genuinely broken the mould and contributed an enormous public service to the people of this country."

"It would have been easier for him to have followed different options, but his courage, his integrity, his determination and his love of this country meant that he chose a different one and for that Des we are all eternally grateful to you," she said.

Ms Harney presented Des and Pat O'Malley with a holiday voucher worth €2,500, jokingly pointing out that it was in

a light brown envelope.

Deputy O'Malley later returned the voucher, saying that he did not feel right taking it.

She also presented Des with an inscribed solid silver salver which read "With appreciation, respect and admiration, for a life of outstanding public service. Presented on behalf of the entire membership of the Progressive Democrats to its founder, Des O'Malley, 8th February, 2002."

"I'm a bit overwhelmed," Des O'Malley responded. "Thank you very much. I'm very grateful for this. I've been over the last quite a number of years overwhelmed by thanks and presentations for not very much," he said.

"I recall a friend of mine who led a larger party and led the country and he did a hell of a lot more than I did. He never got a presentation. Happily we live in different times now and in a different situation. I'm very grateful to all of you."

He said he was absolutely delighted with the huge number of people at the dinner and felt it augured very well for the forthcoming general election.

"I was delighted to meet people here tonight for the first time and to meet

old friends also. And I think that augurs well too."

"I am reminded of a thing that started in Limerick - now you see it all over the country John 3:7. Let us rejoice ladies and gentlemen. There are many here tonight who are reborn," he said.

He recalled that Frank Hogan, the owner of the John 3:7 sign was at a final in which Limerick was playing against Cork and that someone was cute enough to go behind him with a sign that said Cork 3:9.

On a more serious note, he said the first part of the history of his party "in a sense was negative because we were dominated by what we were against. I'm delighted that the second part of it has been the positive part, where we could implement what we were for."

"And that's the part that has made the difference. And that's the half that has benefited Ireland and has achieved what we set out to do. And that's the half that was led by Mary Harney," he said.

"I want to say how grateful I am to the people of Limerick particularly to the people in this organisation in Limerick that stood by me and helped me for 34 years," he said.

Mary Harney



Denis O'Keefe



Cllr Tim O'McParadise

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PROGRESSIVE Democrat leader Harney was accused of hypocrisy by th



James Finucane

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tics. The reversion to what we endured in the past: mass unemployment, emigration and economic deprivation," she said.

The Tanaiste was scathing of Sinn Féin ideologies and said: "This country doesn't need balacava economics either. There are some that say there are no differences between the political parties."