

News Feature

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Support from Limerick members fails to keep Des O'Malley's party alive, as Progressive Democrats vote to wind down

UNITED NO MORE



MIKE DWANE

It was only 40 votes in the end. But the support of most of the 60-odd Limerick delegates wasn't enough in the end to save the Progressive Democrats as members gathered at a special party conference in Mullingar at the weekend voted to bring the curtain down on 23 years at the centre of Irish politics.

City businessman Tadhg Kearney, a former member of the national executive, was one of the members who put forward an amendment calling on the party to stay in business. But in the end, following a stirring speech by Mary Harney and a communique from founder Des O'Malley backing the stance of TDs and senators, the amendment was defeated by 201 votes to 161 and the Progressive Democrats will shortly be no more.

"Our current circumstances are such that we cannot and should not indulge in wishfully thinking that we can continue as before," Des O'Malley said in a letter read out by former senator John Dardis.

Some members said this week that were it not for the strength of this appeal from

the PD founder, the parliamentary party would have faced even greater opposition.

"There was quite a number of abstentions given there was an emotional letter from Des O'Malley read out by John Dardis and this may have helped sway people in the end," said Damien O'Dwyer, Dromkeen, a former Limerick East constituency chairman who joined the party as a student 16 years ago and was a local election candidate in 1999.

Mr O'Dwyer was, along with Cork's Theresa O'Brien and Tipperary's PJ Long, one of three members of the national executive who spoke in favour of keeping the party going.

"A lot of people disagreed with the analysis of the political party that it is unviable. A lot of things have changed in the short time they adopted that stance. Not only do we have the deterioration in the economy, where a strong free enterprise voice like the PDs has helped the country in the past, but the arithmetic of the Dail itself has also changed since with Joe Behan having found his moral courage and Finian McGrath also withdrawing his support for the Government," he said.

Mr O'Dwyer agreed with the analysis of Mr Kearney that the parliamentary party were largely the author of their own misfortunes in last year's disastrous general election campaign.

"We managed to alienate Fine Gael voters with all this talk about a slump coalition. The PD vote would have come from Fine Gael in the past and I'm sure Fine Gael will be looking for some of it back. It was always the case that when Fine Gael did badly, the PDs did well. But not only did we alien-



Pearse Wyse, Des O'Malley, Mary Harney and Bobby Molloy join hands at a Progressive Democrats meeting in the Limerick Inn in February 1986

ate Fine Gael voters before the election but we managed to do the same with Fianna Fail voters when the controversy about Bertie Ahern's finances came about," he said.

It was "a strange thing for members of the parliamentary party committed to competition to vote themselves out of existence and reduce political choice" he said.

But there was a "definite gap in the market" for a right-of-centre party but Mr O'Dwyer said he didn't "envisage myself being involved in something like that but there's nothing to stop a group of like-

minded individuals banding together before the local elections".

Ballybricken-based councillor Bridget Teefy declined to say what way she voted in Mullingar but confirmed this week that she would run in the elections next year and she would not be joining another party.

It would have taken a leader of the magnetism of Barack Obama to keep the PDs alive, she said.

The one figure who still commands respect throughout the party, Mary Harney, has signalled her intention to

become an Independent TD. She was given a standing ovation by delegates in Mullingar after an extemporaneous 15-minute speech in which she pointed out it was 23 years to the day when she was a meeting in Des O'Malley's house in Dublin on the formation of a new political grouping.

Cllr Teefy was present at many of those meetings in late 1985 when members of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael began to sign up to Des O'Malley's revolution. Charlie McCreevy attended many of those meetings and while Harney was enthusiastic to have him in,

O'Malley - still unimpressed with McCreevy's solo run in putting down a motion of no confidence in Charles Haughey three years before - was happy to leave him out.

Stephen Collins' Breaking The Mould describes how at the time Des O'Malley's wife Pat remained sceptical about the new party up to the very last minute and that she had refused to allow the plotters to meet in their house, especially after O'Malley was lucky not to be killed in an accident in Kildare that November.

"I remember all those meetings over would we or would-

n't we go and do it. But it was Des and Mary in the end who saw it through. They were very exciting times. I don't think young people today realise how interesting politics was in Ireland back then," said Cllr Teefy, who was director of elections in Limerick when the party took two seats at the first time of asking.

"We started off with a great bump winning the two seats in Limerick and we had quickly built up a fantastic organisation."

There were tough times too, Cllr Teefy said, recalling in particular the European elec-

tion that pitted O'Malley against Pat Cox in 1994. A product of Ardscoil Ris, the fact that a future president of the European parliament failed to get on the Fianna Fail ticket for local elections in Limerick illustrated a tendency to reward loyalty over talent and this cronyism rankled with the disaffected rump of Fianna Fail who deserted to the PDs.

But when Cox' ambitions to become party leader were thwarted, he decided to fight for his European seat against the PD candidate O'Malley, winning the last seat in a dramatic count.

"It was a very tough time because Pat had been there from the beginning more or less and I had been working with him for the five years when he was in Europe but I had to give my support to Des. It was one of the most difficult times," she said.

"But through all the difficult times we had a strong group of volunteers in Limerick who helped out and put in so much time, effort and energy. They are the ones I feel for most this week. It was a very emotional day for the ordinary members and since the debate began it has been very difficult and I want to thank all the volunteers who have helped me and the party in Limerick," Cllr Teefy said.

While some councillors said they will examine forming a new grouping from the ashes of the PDs, Cllr Teefy wonders where the leadership will come from. "We all hoped the party would continue. But you do need high-profile people in order to carry it on. Mary Harney was one such person of that calibre but you would really need the likes of Barack Obama at this stage," she said.

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read, simply: "I am very sad today."
He spoke for all us.

Demise of the Progressive Democrats

TWO years after the formation of the Progressive Democrats, the party became the third largest in the Dail, with 14 seats. Three of those seats were occupied by Limerick TDs. But the bete noir, Charles Haughey, was back in government and the most parliamentary damage had been done to Fine Gael. Disaffected Fine Gael voters had come out to support disaffected Fianna Fail candidates, so there was something of an identity uncertainty in the PDs from the start.

At that election of 1987, people had different ideas as to what the PDs were for. At its most simplistic, nice Des O'Malley had been thrown out of Fianna Fail by nasty Mr Haughey because Mr Haughey wouldn't resign and accept Mr O'Malley's right to lead the party and the country. The PDs were, therefore, a temporary vehicle until Mr Haughey either saw sense or was sacked.

On a more sophisticated level, the PDs were seen as representing a genuine constituency of people who recognised that the national polity was being undermined by vested interests in the public and private sectors, that leaden inertia was resisting all attempts at reform and that there was little the Fianna Fail leadership was willing to do to address the problems. But, even on that reading, the PDs were still perceived as a Fianna Fail breakaway. Des O'Malley had been in Fianna Fail until a few years before and his two fellow Limerick PD TDs, John McCoy and Peadar Clohessy, were or had been Fianna Fail county councilors.

The PDs would never have 14 TDs again, but, even reduced in size, they were to spend an amazing number of years at the centre of government, influencing policy beyond what their numbers would justify and engendering resentment among many in Fianna Fail who believed that the tail was wagging the dog.

Over the years, many PD policies have been assimilated into the core creeds of both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, particularly in the economic area. At last year's general election the people found that the PDs had little remaining to distinguish themselves as a party after an unbroken decade in cosy government with Fianna Fail.

The PDs have done the State some service, but, however sentimentally, realised at the weekend that the party is over.

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ers as well as the serious criminals need to know that they will be dealt with most severely from here on in.
DECLAN MCGRATH
CORBALLY, LIMERICK

Thanks to all who came out for my book launch

THE mellifluous McCormack Singers were established by musical maestro Paddy McCormack, 40 years ago. St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band was established back in the year 1885. But when one is fortunate enough to have both these musical institutions performing at your book launch, it is a cultural luxury one could never have envisaged.

However, such was the case on October 23 at the Absolute Hotel for the launch of my second novel, *A dubious Destiny*. Their presence I appreciated more than they will ever know. Deputy Jan O'Sullivan took time out of her ever busy schedule to come along and perform the actual launch of the book. Mayor John Gilligan, also a very busy man, sat through the entire event and offered some very worthwhile comments. Historian and folklorist Pat Power from Arklow gave an never to be forgotten rendering of the epic poem "Drunken Thady and the Bishop's Lady", all 432 lines without as much as looking at a single word, and oh, how the audience appreciated his rich Arklow accents. What a unique gift this most genial gentleman possesses!

Sean Buckley of radio fame was the ideal

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THE ban on smoking in enclosed places of work took effect on March 29, 2004. The legal draughtspeople had been putting their minds to the idea for a while before that.

Getting the right wording for the ban wasn't as easy as had at first been thought. It soon became clear that there would have to be exemptions. Exempted were prisons and Garda station detention areas. Then there were places which, however temporarily, a person might call "home". These included bedrooms in hotels, guesthouses or B&Bs, nursing homes, hospices, religious order homes, psychiatric hospitals, maternity homes and third-level residential facilities.

Limerick qualified in all those categories. These were not easily agreed because, if, say, a restaurant worker was to be given health protection in the dining room or a bank official in an office, why shouldn't a psychiatric nurse or prison officer also be given clean air to breathe?

And then there was the question of what constitutes an "outdoor area". The "outdoor area" had been of particular concern to the licensed trade, because pub business was already noticeably down, especially in smaller towns and villages, owing to the lowering of the limits regarding driving with drink and the more vigilant enforcement of the law. Taxis and hackneys, quite apart from the price of the fare, are scarce in rural areas and, whether people had taken to drinking at home or not, the bar trade was suffering. An outright smoking ban, the publicans felt, would kill the business off completely. They argued that, at a time when ersatz Irish pubs were prospering from Vancouver to Vladivostok, we were dismantling the real thing here.

So, outdoor smoking areas were permitted. There is no problem with an outdoor area which is simply that - an uncovered yard or a veranda. But that would often mean smoking in the rain. So the regulations

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