

# NAUGHTEN ON KENNY DRAMA

## 'The hardest decision I have ever had to make'

**As a dramatic week in the history of Fine Gael continues on its unpredictable course, Roscommon/South Leitrim TD Denis Naughten finally broke his silence on the party's leadership crisis when he spoke at length to Roscommon People Editor Paul Healy on Tuesday. After keeping his counsel over the course of last weekend – as speculation mounted about a possible challenge to Enda Kenny's leadership by then Deputy leader Richard Bruton – Naughten emerged on Tuesday as one of the driving forces behind a dramatic front bench revolt against the Fine Gael leader. It was clear that Naughten, a long-time 'Kenny loyalist', had only taken the stance he has now adopted after much anguish and soul-searching. In this frank interview Denis Naughten outlines the thinking behind the gamble that saw him withdraw his support from Enda Kenny and very publicly identify himself as an advocate of change – a rebel, some would say – and a potential king-maker for a new Fine Gael leader.**



**PH: Denis, firstly can I take you back a few months to the time of George Lee's departure from Fine Gael. Were you approached by anyone then about a challenge to Enda Kenny? Take me through what has gone on over recent months and at what point you began to grow disillusioned with Enda Kenny's leadership....**

DN: Well firstly I wasn't approached by anyone....I felt after the 2007 General Election that Enda had succeeded in re-building the party and had done that phase of work successfully and that what was needed then was for him to change his style and focus on the challenge of re-building the country – and on connecting with the electorate and maximising support for the party. I went to see Enda Kenny in July of 2008 to tell him of my concerns....

**PH: Where did you meet him and were you on your own?**

DN: Yes, I met him on my own, in Leinster House. I sat down with him and gave him my views about his leadership style. I said he needed to make changes and he agreed with me. The next front bench meeting was at the Fine Gael think-in in September of that year and he (Enda) spoke at that meeting and I could see that he referred to some of the changes I had suggested.... it looked like they were going to be implemented. However the problem was that there was no follow-through. I spoke to him a number of times since. At front bench meetings we had open and frank discussions, and we told him that if you don't make changes there will be consequences. It wasn't all about him; you're not going to change 'the individual', but there were a number of structural

things that could have been done. He agreed to take those points on board. We said if he didn't, there would eventually be an opinion poll that would precipitate a leadership challenge. It wasn't a threat, just reality. I was a Kenny loyalist all along.

**PH: So he has been on borrowed time over recent months?**

DN: Well, you could put it like that I suppose. But we have all tried to roll up our sleeves.

**PH: Over this period, did your personal relationship with him suffer?**

DN: No, I had a pint with him about a week ago.

**PH: There has been a perception that Enda Kenny demoted you within the front bench. Do you agree and if so did it affect your relationship?**

DN: No, I didn't feel that it was a demotion and it didn't affect our relationship. I have been friendly with him and had a friendly chat with him last week; as far as I am concerned that (friendship) should continue.

**PH: Since the Irish Times poll (that led to Richard Bruton's withdrawal of support for his leader) you have had a huge decision to make, with regard to where your support would lie. How difficult have recent days been and what happened over the course of them?**

DN: It has been a hugely difficult decision. I received phonecalls from both Enda Kenny and Richard Bruton on Saturday. I kept my own counsel and spent Sunday thinking it through. I came to a conclusion on Sunday evening. I decided that it was time for Enda to hand on the baton. I didn't want to make my decision known until I spoke to him. I rang him on Monday morning and left a message on his phone. He didn't call back. I spoke to Richard (Bruton) on Monday night after he had been relieved of his duties by Enda. I met with Richard and others on Tuesday morning. I tried to seek a resolution to all of this before the front bench meeting (later on Tuesday).

**PH: As a matter of interest, why do you think Enda Kenny didn't call you back on Monday?**

DN: I don't know.

**PH: Did you receive calls from grassroots Fine Gael members in Roscommon, elected or otherwise, or did you consult with 'Fine Gael people' in Roscommon before deciding to support Bruton?**

DN: No. Look, at every branch meeting that we have gone to locally the issue of Enda's leadership has come up. People have mixed views. There were some people I spoke to (locally) on Monday who liked Enda....but once they realised that Richard Bruton was not to be part of our team they felt they had to withdraw (support for Enda).

**PH: What do you say to Fine**



CHANGE FOR THE BETTER? ... A poster pictured on the window of Constituency Office of Deputy Denis Naughten at Abbey Street, Roscommon. Picture: Andrew Fox.

**Gael people in Roscommon who will say that Enda Kenny was virtually certain to be our next Taoiseach and that you have now effectively abandoned a West of Ireland Taoiseach?**

DN: Some people will say that, I know. It is an issue. But I haven't considered my own career in all of this. I have considered what's in the best interests of the country, and what's in the best interests of Fine Gael. I know I have taken a

gamble. I will be on the losing side on Thursday but I had to act in accordance with my conscience.

**PH: You will be on the losing side?**

DN: Well, I think Enda will win the vote but there's no wrong time to make a right decision.

**PH: So presumably you feel that Richard Bruton may lose on Thursday but that ultimately he**

**will prevail and take over from Kenny a while later? What about the carnage in the meantime... is this a 'necessary pain' that Fine Gael have to go through?**

DN: I think it is a necessary pain, unfortunately.

**PH: Will Richard Bruton take over in a few months...as Kenny weakens? Is that what you foresee?**

DN: I don't know. We will have to reassess things (after Thursday).

**PH: Fine Gael is in turmoil as a result of this. Is this very upsetting for you?**

DN: Absolutely. It's the hardest decision I have ever had to make. I felt I had to make this decision. I had been loyal for nine and a half years. I have found this very, very hard.

**PH: But Enda Kenny was odds-on to be Taoiseach.....?**

DN: Up to this juncture he was, but the Labour Party are now going so well....if Enda leads us into the next election he may only be Tanaiste. Bringing a Tanaiste only to the West of Ireland....I don't know....

**PH: Is your strategy that if Kenny wins on Thursday you will support and promote another quick leadership challenge by Bruton, within months?**

DN: Oh I think we need a decision one way or another on Thursday. I don't want a rolling maul (of challenges). If Enda comes through this on Thursday he will have my support...from the backbenches.

**PH: You accept that you won't be involved on the front bench under Enda Kenny?**

DN: Oh we're disbanded as a front bench as of this morning (Tuesday).

**PH: What happened at that meeting?**

DN: Enda came in, he spoke, then he disbanded the front bench.

**PH: Before front bench members got a chance to speak?**

DN: Yes.

**PH: Are you disappointed with how he handled that?**

DN: I am disappointed in him.

**PH: Finally Denis, what's your message to the thousands of Fine Gael supporters in Roscommon/South Leitrim who will be reading this?**

DN: At the end of the day I have tried to do what I believe is in the best interests of Fine Gael and what's best for the future of this country. I hope I have made the right decision....I know I have. I hope people will support me.

**PH: Quite apart from your concerns about Enda, you obviously feel Richard is the right man to lead Fine Gael and the country?**

DN: Absolutely, 110%.

**PH: Can you sum up the last couple of days?**

DN: Horrendous.