

First Man Standing

By *John Quinn MSc IT*, Published on January 21th, 2010

The recent calamitous spell of weather in which we experienced the great flood of November and the big chill of December is an ideal metaphor for the career of Brian Cowen as Taoiseach. On any given night in December, the elements battered us with wind, rain, sleet, snow and ice or in politics this was just another week in the life of our beleaguered Taoiseach. An earthquake on the scale of Haiti and a Tsunami seem the only misfortunes to escape his watch but then we are only nineteen months into his leadership and what on earth and in the heavens could happen between now and the General Election of 2012? For his sake and the country's sake, we can only hope that in common with established weather patterns, there will be a political calm after the storm.

In May 2008, things had begun on a high note as Taoiseach elect Brian Cowen flanked by his supporters and with chants of the 'Offaly Rover' ringing in his ears; relished his promotion to the top job. Meanwhile, trouble was brewing as the economy was in serious decline since 2007 during which time his predecessor Bertie Ahern was in denial preferring instead to match his daughter's gift for fiction by wondering aloud why some of the more straight talking economists wouldn't consider committing suicide. Bertie beware because one of these suicide merchants could soon be running the country and he is no lover of lavish offices and inflated pensions for ex Taoisigh.

The storm clouds began to gather when he failed his first big political test with the electorate's rejection of The Lisbon Treaty referendum of June 2008. The No side put in a much more focused and spirited effort. In contrast, the government and main opposition parties on the Yes side were lethargic and fragmented preferring instead to patronise or to exploit the occasion for self promotion. A fondness for bullying by some of our EU partners didn't help the Yes side either. It was no great surprise that the Treaty was rejected and Brian Cowen suffered his first major setback as Taoiseach.

On that fraught night of September 30th 2008, lightning was about to strike as the Irish banking system faced meltdown. The government was bounced into providing a bank guarantee scheme to safeguard all banking deposits.

Whether or not this decision was the correct one in the circumstances is debatable but there is no doubt whatever that this was yet another crisis to beset an unfortunate Taoiseach.

The FAS expenses debacle of November 2008 where €643,000 was squandered on first class flights, foreign junkets, gourmet meals, 4-star hotels and other extravagances reflected badly on the political judgment of Tánaiste Mary Coughlan and ultimately Brian Cowen. FAS director Roddy Molloy as part of his resignation managed without any sanction and with the blessing of the Tánaiste and Taoiseach to extort full pension entitlements and a dubious lump sum payment. The Taoiseach would however, be relieved that a disastrous 2008 had finally petered out.

2009 would be no better with the publication in May of the Ryan report into the widespread abuse of children in the Dublin Archdiocese. The Taoiseach's observance of diplomatic niceties on the Vatican's failure to cooperate with the Dublin diocesan commission established to investigate this abuse was an insult to the victims. This was mitigated somewhat by the belated dispatch to the Vatican of the Minister of Foreign affairs to impress upon them the seriousness of the matter. The Pope in response did not apologise to the victims but some of the language used from his 'mental reservations' lexicon was as good as it as it was going to get for the victims.

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The October 2009 revelation that Ceann Comhairle John O'Donoghue claimed in excess of €200,000 expenses as Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism in the space of just two years was another unwelcome intrusion into the Taoiseach's priorities for 2009. At a time when the general population were trying desperately to cope with the fallout from a severe economic recession; news of €900 per night hotels, €7,500 on airport pick-ups and €80 tips reflected badly on a government who seemed completely out of touch with the electorate. The insinuation by the Ceann Comhairle that all politicians are equally culpable was not a credible defence for his largesse. Cowen somehow allowed the situation to drift and it was only through a piece of political opportunism masquerading as principle on the part of Labour leader Eamon Gilmore that O'Donoghue's fate was finally sealed.

Despite this, a battered Taoiseach had managed to weather all political storms to set out his immediate government priorities. From here on in; The Lisbon Treaty, the renegotiation of the Programme for government with the Greens, NAMA and the Budget would define his leadership.

It is generally accepted that the Taoiseach had deliberated long and hard on the lessons learned from the failure of Lisbon 1 and he was determined that his political creditability would not be eroded further by a second referendum defeat. The successful negotiation of a legally binding EU protocol to protect Ireland's neutrality and to maintain control over tax and family law with other labour and social guarantees was the first in a series of strategic measures aimed at a successful outcome to Lisbon 2. The EU would also accede to the Irish demand for the retention of an EU commissioner, Cowen's ability to mobilise all pro-Lisbon parties and civic organisations to the Yes cause would be the final measure needed for an overwhelming endorsement of Lisbon 2.

His affable but accident prone Tánaiste were she to be taken seriously almost scuppered this joint effort by accusing the major opposition party Fine Gael of a lackluster pro-Lisbon effort. Nevertheless, the Taoiseach had passed the first major hurdle and maybe his luck was changing for the better.

The successful renegotiation of the programme for government with the Green party in October was business-like and good humoured. Its subsequent endorsement at a potentially tricky Green party conference was another plus for the Taoiseach and he was now on a political as opposed to a thunder roll.

The NAMA legislation despite its potential for economic ruin and legislative complexity managed to get underwritten by the European Central Bank and subsequently passed through both houses of the Oireachtas in November. A new political star would emerge in the shape of Brian Lenihan, the Minister for Finance who in the public mind was dominating the political limelight formerly the exclusive preserve of the incumbent Taoiseach. The recent confirmation of the Finance Minister's serious illness would however, restrict his appearances in public but this potentially debilitating condition could add to the Taoiseach's string of misfortune were he to lose the services of his most able minister.

Finally in December, his government managed to deliver the most severe budget in years with cuts in politically explosive areas of Social Welfare rates and Public Sector pay. However, there will be major political hurdles in the future to be overcome arising from these decisions. It was heartening to witness the Fianna Fail backbenchers getting exercised over a real issue when they revolted over the Taoiseach's plans for time off instead of pay cuts in the public sector. They are a peculiar bunch having previously ignored the best medical and safety advice in opposing the lowering of the drink driving limit.

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Could it be that an increasing powerful Department of Finance to the detriment of the Department of the Taoiseach successfully persuaded them to scupper that piece of social engineering madness?

Our 'First Man' is still standing and has managed to weather the political storm. Who knows what the future holds for an unfortunate but resilient Taoiseach who now finds himself more in the calmer waters of routine government business and less in the maelstrom of political crisis. In the immediate term, he needs to design and deliver a credible Banking Enquiry to ensure that the Greens and public are kept on board. In the medium term, the latest ESRI forecast is extremely encouraging and the economic recovery might be strong enough to raise all boats. When the General Election comes, the Taoiseach and his party may be in a much stronger position than anyone imagined. Fine Gael and Labour beware because that great beast of Irish Politics, Fianna Fail could Phoenix-like arise from the ashes to fashion an incredible political comeback. Were the Taoiseach to lead this supreme effort, he in common with Notus the god of wet and stormy wind would herald the month of summer.