

WHAT WILL TAOISEACH COWEN'S LEGACY BE?

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As the dust settles on Bertie's bombshell resignation, the most important, if rarely asked, question is what sort of Taoiseach Brian Cowen will make. Now that the Teflon Taoiseach has finally come unstuck, how will Cowen's tenure develop?

Watching Bertie Ahern's speech from the steps of Government buildings on Wednesday, it was obvious that the Taoiseach's future legacy was very much on his mind. In the Dáil later that day, he concluded his remarks with the words 'Ireland gave me the opportunity to be part of her history, and now at the end I'll submit to the verdict of history.'

Listening to this, and watching his heir apparent Brian Cowen quietly sitting beside him, biding his time, I wondered what would Taoiseach Cowen's legacy be, when the time comes for him to step down?

Brian Cowen has spent many years now as a senior Minister; in Health, in Foreign Affairs and in Finance. Yet in none of those posts has he left any lasting legacy, or any big policy achievement. He has no smoking ban to his credit; no plastic bag tax; no smokeless fuel ban or tax individualisation measure. In fact, I cannot think of a single notable initiative he has taken in any Government Department. It is true that during his time in Foreign Affairs, the focus was on the peace process in Northern Ireland, so it is perhaps not surprising that no major foreign policy initiatives were launched during that time; but he has no such excuse for the lack of any policy achievements in the other areas. Yet, the only memorable feature of his time as Health Minister is his rueful comment that being appointed to that blighted post was like being sent to 'Angola'.

Similarly, he does not seem to have made any major ideological decisions during his time as Finance Minister. Rather, his tenure in that office has largely been notable for the comparisons made with his predecessor Charlie McCreevy. Whatever one's views on McCreevy as Minister, it was clear that he had an ideological vision in Finance; one that became increasingly at odds with the rest of his parliamentary party, true, but a vision nonetheless. McCreevy stood for something – the Progressive Democrat wing of Fianna Fail perhaps - but it was a clear political stance, and he sought to further his views and develop that stance through measures adopted in successive budgets, particularly his tax individualisation policy.

It is true that, just as there are no great policy achievements, there have been no banana skins either. Cowen has not left behind any stockpiles of redundant electronic voting machines; he is not blamed for persecuting victims of contaminated blood transfusions, nor for causing any massive Government over-spends on particular projects. To date, he has avoided any of the serious slip-ups or pitfalls that have befallen so many of his colleagues. He is undoubtedly a competent manager.

Yet the problem remains that with Brian Cowen, it is impossible to say what he stands for, apart from competent management.

Joe Duffy was asking callers to Liveline earlier this week ‘What will Taoiseach Cowen be like?’ The only clear response was that he would be ‘good for Offaly’. It was difficult to get any variation on this stock answer. For instance, when Duffy asked one supporter, ‘Is he into sports?’ the answer inevitably came: ‘Well, he’s into Offaly’. No clear sense of the man’s political views or beliefs emerged, even from those callers based in Offaly who said that they know him very well and have worked with him for years.

Here’s what we do know about Brian Cowen: he is of course always described as a politician of great competence and considerable intelligence. In addition to that, he is by all accounts a very likeable person, with a gruff and tough public appearance, but a humorous and sociable private persona, a great mimic, a good ballad singer and witty company in the pub. A Fianna Fáil loyalist to the hilt, and a great warm-up act for the Taoiseach at the Party’s Ard Fheiseanna.

Here’s what we don’t know about Brian Cowen: what he stands for politically.

So what will Taoiseach Cowen’s legacy be? Will he be more or less neo-liberal than Bertie? Will he do what is sorely needed, and has not been done in eleven years of Fianna Fáil led Government – that is, put the necessary investment into public services, health, education and public transport? Will he pay more attention to the neglected and disadvantaged people in our society? Will he steer us out of an economic downturn through creative financial policy?

Nobody knows for sure, and in all the rush of senior Fianna Fáil figures to support him, nobody has asked the key question about what drives our future Taoiseach politically. What is Brian Cowen’s vision for the country? We know he will be good for Offaly, but we do not know if that will be good enough for Ireland. When we come to consider Cowen’s legacy, maybe it will be said that we replaced the Teflon Taoiseach with the Tullamore Taoiseach.