



# THE IRISH MARITIME FORUM

## *Increasing Awareness of Ireland's Maritime Dimension*

22OCT17

Mr Leo Varadkar TD  
An Taoiseach agus an t-Aire Cosanta

Dear Taoiseach,

### **Executive Summary**

1. The White Paper on Defence calls for a change to the command structure of the Defence Forces having regard to international best practice. To date there has been no indication of any progress in this area.
2. The Flag Officer Commanding the Naval Service is due to retire in December 2017. Under the DF promotion system only one officer is eligible, by time served in the rank of Captain, to fill this appointment. The eligible candidate is a Technical Officer who has never exercised command at sea. The other Captain who is not eligible solely due to having insufficient time served in the rank of Captain is a professional mariner and has considerable operational and command experience.
3. The Irish Maritime Forum is alarmed that the commander of Ireland's Naval Forces and the advisor to the Minister for Defence on maritime and naval affairs will not be qualified to, or have had experience of, command at sea.

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As recommended by The Irish Maritime Forum (TIMARFOR) in its submission to the Department of Defence, the White Paper published in August 2015 identified a need to change the command structure of the Defence Forces. Specifically Paragraph 6.2.3 states inter alia

*“The White Paper process identified a requirement for a review of the Defence Forces high level command and control structures, particularly in the context of an increased focus on a joint approach to operations.....The Secretary General of the Department of Defence and Chief of Staff will jointly undertake a review of the current high level command and control structures in the Defence Forces having regard to international best practice on military command and control and drawing upon external expertise. This will include a review of structures for managing joint operations and intelligence. Recommendations for change will be brought forward to the Minister for Defence for consideration.”*

While TIMARFOR is concerned at the apparent lack of progress in this area, TIMARFOR is alarmed at the situation which is developing in the Navy, specifically that it is reported that only one officer is eligible to fill the appointment of Flag Officer Commanding the Naval Service (FOCNS) when the appointment becomes vacant in December 2017 and that officer has no operational command experience.

On 19 MAY 16 TIMARFOR wrote to the then Taoiseach and Minister for Defence and the Minister for State at the Department of Defence recommending the upgrading of the appointment of Commandant of the Naval College (CNC) from Commander to Captain. This would have been consistent with international best practice and Defence Force norms in having a Naval Captain/Colonel hold such an appointment. Our recommendation, which would have preempted the current situation, was not acted upon. We urge that our recommendation be reexamined with a view to preventing such an undesirable situation in the future.

Under the 'one size fits all' Defence Forces (DF) promotion system only two naval officers could be eligible to compete for the appointment of FOCNS, O/C Naval Operations Command (OCNOC) and O/C Naval Support Command (OCNSC). OCNOC is an Operations Officer and OCNSC is a Technical Officer. Operations Officers are professional mariners and gain significant operational command experience both ashore and afloat throughout their careers while Technical Officers command support units ashore and fill the appointments of Marine Engineer Officer afloat. Operations officers must have at least two years in command at sea to be appointed OCNOC. Technical Officers are not qualified to, and do not, command ships.

While the DF promotion system was designed to underpin the concept of competition for the top positions, it is our understanding that Technical Officers have never been appointed to command an Army Brigade and are precluded from so doing. Furthermore Technical Officers are precluded by Defence Force Regulations (DFR) from competing for the appointment of Deputy Chief of Staff (Operations).

In accordance with DFRs command of all naval units including naval ships is vested in FOCNS. DFRs also state that only Operations Officers may exercise command of naval ships. By being precluded by DFR from exercising command of naval ships, we contend Technical Officers are not qualified to compete for the appointment of FOCNS under the DF's own regulations.

The current OCNOC is not eligible under the existing promotion arrangements by virtue of not having served the required period of time in the rank of Captain. He has, however, considerable service in the rank of Commander, including command of the Navy's Flagship and command of the Naval College. He has twice served overseas and has served in DFHQ. He has completed third level courses in his own time.

There is precedent for promoting a Captain to FOCNS without that Captain having served two years in the rank.

It appears to TIMARFOR that the current situation arose through the pursuit of the goal of competition for all the senior appointments in the DF. However while this works in the Army which has a pool of Colonels to compete for promotion to Brigadier General, in a

small service like the Navy the opposite is the result. It could be argued that in the ideological pursuit of promotion by competition there was a failure to consider the practical requirements of the defence organisation. The system put in place to facilitate competition has clearly failed and has created a wholly undesirable and worrying situation in that an officer will likely be appointed FOCNS by coronation and not competition.

Our Navy is the most operationally focussed formation within the DF. It has ships deployed on operations on a 24/7/365 basis. It has ships deployed on operations both in home waters and overseas. It is vital that this operational focus is underpinned by a higher command structure that understands all of the implications of maritime operations in one of the most hostile marine environments in the world.

FOCNS is the advisor to the Minister, through the COS, on maritime and naval matters. We contend that the Minister will be politically exposed by not having the best possible advice readily available to him/her provided by an officer with operational command experience at sea.

The White Paper on Defence states that there would be a review of “the current high level command and control structures in the Defence Forces having regard to international best practice on military command and control and drawing upon external expertise”. We contend that allowing a Technical Officer to exercise command and control over a naval force is the antithesis of international best practice.

It is vital that the holder of the highest position within the Navy should be a professional mariner with command experience at sea, the arena in which the Navy acts on behalf of the State. TIMARFOR urges that a way be found to permit a competition to take place to choose the next FOCNS

As stated above TIMARFOR is alarmed at the current situation and accordingly intends to circulate the contents of this letter to a broad range of public representatives who have an interest in defence and in the sovereignty of our maritime domain.

On behalf of The Irish Maritime Forum,

Sincerely,

*J. A. Robinson*

Captain James Robinson DSM FNI

CC. Mr Paul Kehoe TD, Minister for State at the Department of Defence