



'November 21: quiet day after weekend away; agreed to go cap in hand to IMF'

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IT was the worst year in Ireland's economic history, yet Brian Cowen's diary was packed with constituency activity and openings.

The Taoiseach's appointments diary — released under the Freedom of Information Act — shows he managed to squeeze in official openings, private meetings and some party business during the critical week when the country was about to be bailed out.

When Ajai Chopra and his colleagues from the EU and IMF arrived at the Department of Finance on Thursday, November 18, Mr Cowen met with Jack Rosenthal and Fritz Schwarz of Atlantic Philanthropies — a charitable foundation to help the "vulnerable and disadvantaged".

He went on to have his photograph taken, followed by a meeting with executives from the employers' lobby group IBEC. Later, he addressed an "entrepreneur of the year" conference before attending a government meeting in the afternoon.

On day two of the IMF/EU's perusal of the books, the Taoiseach opened the new terminal at Dublin airport, met representatives from Citibank back in his office, and attended to some unspecified party business.

In the afternoon he had a meeting with Patrick Kennedy, the chief executive of Paddy Power, and Feargal O'Rourke. Then he flew to Donegal at 7.30pm for a weekend of canvassing in advance of the by-election. On Sunday he returned to Dublin for the now historic government meeting, after which the Taoiseach bowed to the

inevitable and conceded that Ireland needed a bailout.

On September 30, another crucial date when the Central Bank revealed that the bank bailout could cost the taxpayer €50bn, the Taoiseach opened a conference organised by IBEC and packed in three photo opportunities before lunch. He was back in the Dail in the afternoon for the Credit Institutions Bill.

But as the nation digested the mammoth bailout bill the next day, the Taoiseach dined with former US president Bill Clinton followed by a function organised by the German Chamber of Commerce. Mr Cowen's diary also shows that he had 98 engagements relating to his duties as leader of Fianna Fail, five times more than the number of meetings scheduled on Northern Ireland and "international affairs". The detail of Mr Cowen's Fianna Fail activities was withheld, however, because they relate to his functions as party leader.

The diaries also show how the Department of Finance — which has been criticised for failing to spot the overheating economy — organised a series of "in-house" seminars with some of Ireland's leading economists.

The appointments diary of Kevin Cardiff, secretary general in the Department of Finance, lists at least six seminars during the year. Professor Joe Durkan, of UCD, was pencilled in for April; while Professor John Cotter, from UCD's Michael Smurfit business school, and Jim O'Leary of NUI Maynooth were pencilled in for June.

Other economic luminaries included Professor Niamh

Moloney, of the London School of Economics, who is an expert on regulation; Professor Colm Harmon, of the Geary Institute; and Professor Karl Whelan, another UCD economist, who has argued the case for default.

Mr Cardiff's diary is curiously empty for the two weeks of activity surrounding the bailout last November. But the list of high-flying international finance experts trooping in and out of Government Buildings during the year speaks for itself.

Mike Aynsley, chief executive of Anglo Irish Bank, was pencilled in for tea; dinner in L'Ecrivain with Willie Slattery, the leading banker and vocal critic of Nama and the Croke Park deal on public sector wages; coffee with numerous foreign diplomats including the British and American ambassadors. Mr Cardiff was also pencilled in for talks with Istvan Szekely, the aide to EU Commissioner Olli Rehn, in September.

Other visitors included David Dilger, the new chairman of the Dublin Airport Authority and former director of Bank of Ireland; and Pat Farrell, of the Irish Banking Federation. The Department of Finance and the Department of the Taoiseach pointed out that the appointments diaries do not reflect all the meetings held by the Taoiseach, finance minister or secretary generals. They do not include the many unscheduled meetings.

Separately, the infamous cabinet meeting that provoked a public outcry over the cavalcade of luxury ministerial cars on show cost the taxpayer €794 in teas, coffees and over-

time. The sight of ministers being chauffeured home from Farmleigh last October after a meeting to discuss the dire state of the economy summed up the Government's excesses.

But documents reveal that the ministers consumed €220 worth of tea, coffee and sandwiches, served by a household assistant who earned €166.72 for six hours overtime. An electrician, who was also on duty for the meeting, was paid €242.83 in overtime – more than €40 an hour.

The fee should not have been lost on the Cabinet: overtime rates such as those earned by electricians are to be reviewed on the orders of the EU/IMF.



STORMY WATERS: Brian Cowen and Mary Coughlan were in Donegal when the IMF was studying the nation's finances in Dublin. Photo: Declan Doherty