

By KIM BIELENBERG

**H**élène Conway-Mouret enjoyed a spectacular rise in French politics after a career as an academic in Dublin.

She was appointed as a Minister in the government of President Francois Hollande soon after her election to the French Senate in 2011.

As a Minister of State in the Foreign Ministry, she was given responsibility for the French abroad.

It was Ms Conway-Mouret who suggested to Eamon Gilmore when he was Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs that it would be a good idea to have a Minister for the Irish Diaspora in our own government. This led to the appointment of Jimmy Deenihan as the first minister in the role. "I felt there was so much potential for the Irish abroad to have an input, because it is much larger than the French diaspora.

"What Ireland did went far beyond what we were able to achieve in France and I think the diaspora played an active part in the Irish recovery."

Ms Conway-Mouret lived for three decades in Dublin, and maintains strong Irish links. Her son was born in Ireland and still lives here.

She has spent most of her life here. She admits that during the recent France-Ireland rugby international in Paris she sometimes found herself cheering for Ireland.

Before her return to France to pursue her full-time political career, she served as head of the school of languages at Dublin Institute of Technology.

She was involved in plans to move the campus of DIT to its new site in Grangegorman on the Northside of Dublin.

"I was very enthusiastic about the project and its role in rehabilitating that part of the Northside of Dublin."

The academic, who joined Hollande's Socialist Party in 1997, started in politics as a representative of the French community in Ireland and Britain, before her election to the senate to represent the French global community of 2.5m people.

Ms Conway-Mouret is a member of the honorary board of the Thomas F. Meagher Foundation, and welcomes its work promoting pride and respect for the Irish flag.

On a visit to Ireland as part of a French delegation she was presented with an Irish flag by Senator Mark Daly.

"Bringing back an Irish flag to France had real meaning for me, because I spent so much of my life in Ireland.

"The flag is a very important symbol, given what we are going through in France at the moment.

"Those symbols mean something to



Conway-Mouret: a Trinity graduate and DIT head of languages

people. It's part of the pride and respect of the country that nourishes them.

"People are more attached to the flag in France now. When I was at the France-Ireland rugby match, small French flags were given out to the crowd.

"When the crowd was happy, they waved their flags. People wouldn't have done that a few years ago, because they thought it was old-fashioned, but now it actually means something."

The senator believes it is a good idea to distribute Irish flags to schools.

"It's a very good thing. I look at what happens in the United States, where they raise the flag in the morning.

"It might seem from a distance to be

something that you smile at.

"But then when you feel the significance of the flag and all the symbols that are linked to our history, you realise that it is not something to smile at. People are proud of it and it's part of what they are.

"It's a way for people to be together. In France, we call it 'Vivre Ensemble' (live together).

"That means we have the same symbols and abide by the same rules. We are able to respect our differences, but at the same time there are rules imposed on us that help us to be together."

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Initially, she stayed on in Ireland, flying between Dublin and Paris.

"I was only nine months in the senate before I was appointed a minister. I had no preparation.

"Moving back to France was a big change - I was learning to live in a country that I had left as a student and I went back as a senator.

"I am not a Parisian. It was difficult at first. The Parisians are not always easy. In Ireland people are different - generous and good fun."

Ms Conway-Mouret was born in Algeria, and grew up in Lyon.

She came to Ireland as a student to learn English and worked as an au pair in Dublin.

After completing her undergraduate studies in France, she returned to Ireland to study for a Higher Diploma in Education at Trinity College.

"I loved my time in Trinity and I believe it is a fantastic university. I would always be a big defender of Ireland and have strong sentimental links with the country."

She started her career in DIT in 1984 before eventually being appointed as Head of the School of Languages. She served as Minister for the French Abroad from June 2012 to March 2014, before resuming her role as a senator.

She says the past few months in Paris have been difficult after the terrorist attacks of November 13.

"For a time afterwards, the streets were almost deserted. It was very strange.

"It was like a ghost city, but people have gradually got back to a certain normality. Nobody will ever forget what happened, but people have to live their life."

Having served under Francois Hollande, she believes he has grown in stature since the terrorist attacks.

"He has done well during the awful times we have gone through. He has been able to prove that he has the stature of a leader, and led his country through the crisis.

"The economic times are very difficult in France. France has not pulled out of the crisis in the same way as Ireland."