

Opening Power to Diversity



Adelita Monteiro

Placed with Luke Ming Flanagan TD from September 2012 to March 2013

Biography

Originally from Brazil, Adelita Monteiro now resides in Glasnevin Co. Dublin with her husband and daughter. Adelita has extensive experience in the area of Social and Community development both in Brazil and Ireland. She has worked as a Community Development Worker with rural families in the countryside of Brazil, as a Manager of a house for 20 children from the streets of São Paulo and as a Youth worker in Dublin's inner city. Following on from her Masters in Equality Studies from UCD; Adelita spent time lecturing on Equality Studies for the Higher Certificate in Advocacy Studies at Sligo Institute of Technology and started working with the traveller community in Tipperary in 2010. She currently works with Blanchardstown Traveller Development Group, and is also a tutor and organiser of the Leadership Training for traveller women.

Diary

"I have realised that politics is not as 'scary' and complicated as we might think. It is right there and in fact, very accessible."

Up to a week before the start of the OPD Scheme internship I was not sure if I would be able to do it. I really wanted to, but family responsibilities made me doubt if this was the right thing to do. My baby Leela was 4 months and I had decided to breastfeed in order to give her the best start. However, breastfeeding proved to be a huge challenge, requiring a lot of time, patience, energy and dedication. To make things more difficult, Leela did not accept a soother or a bottle, which made her completely dependent on me. Still so small and vulnerable, how could I leave her?

I felt completely torn between my mother's instinct telling me "it is not time yet, she needs you" and my more 'career orientated' side telling me: "She will be fine, this is a unique opportunity". I think that most moms would just give up and stay home. The challenges are too many and the incentives too few. This made me sad, and more conscious of the reasons why we don't have more women in politics. But it also made me think that we need more women there to change things and for that reason, I should not give up. Thankfully, both Crosscare and my allocated TD were very supportive and I felt more confident that I would find a solution, without having to neglect my baby. I have arranged a crèche nearby for Leela and I go there to feed her twice a day. I was delighted to see it was working out and Leela was settling in well.

I have been working with Deputy Luke Ming Flanagan and his Parliamentary Assistant Pat Fitzpatrick and I have learned so much in the last 4 weeks. I have realised, just as I saw in other intern articles, that politics is not as 'scary' and complicated as we might think. It is right there and in fact, very accessible. I could see any issues that were brought either by an individual or by an organisation were dealt with. There is follow up. The least a TD can do is to write a Parliamentary Question (PQ) asking the Minister what she or he has done or is going to do about it. And I discovered how much I enjoyed this aspect of the work. I can see the 'PQs' coming and going and I can see some level of accountability.

I felt I had power. I felt anyone could have power. If anyone thinks there is an injustice done, they can contact us, and they can send a question to us, and we will try to make the ones in charge accountable. They will have to give us an answer and if it is not good enough we will keep asking. Of course there is much more that can be done beyond the PQs, but I think they are a great start in the sense of giving a voice to people and thus putting democracy into practice. If people were more aware of this system and how accessible it is, I am sure the TDs would have an awful lot more work to do. Every Dáil day, a Question Paper is released and it contains all the questions asked for that week. It is interesting to read them and learn about the main issues being dealt with by the government.

During these weeks I have also met other TDs and learned a bit about the work they are doing. I get to see what issues they are more involved with through the PQs they ask. It feels great to talk to them in the morning and then see them on the news in the evening. I've been to other meetings representing Luke, these are mostly briefings on new laws or schemes that organisations are

campaigning for. It is very interesting to learn firsthand about issues that will soon be in the media such as legislation on prostitution in Ireland and a new scheme for regularisation of undocumented migrants.

I have also helped Luke with administrative tasks such as sorting posts, checking and replying to emails, adding events or appointments to his diary, organising folders and new files, summarizing documents, researching on specific topics, highlighting PQs and sending PQ replies to the people concerned.

It has been a pleasure to work with Luke and Pat. They have made me feel very welcome and were very understanding of the fact that it would be a difficult start for me with such a young baby. This made me feel at ease in the office and helped me to get on with the job at hand. It has been a great start and I am looking forward to what is to come in the next 5 months.

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This time, I am glad to say I have a lot more to talk about. My baby has settled happily in the crèche so I have more time to focus on work, with a little more understanding of what is going on.

There was so much going on in the months coming up to Christmas: Cannabis legalised in 2 states in America, investigation on Lowry’s assets, Budget talks, the Savita case, legislation on Abortion, etc. By being in Leinster House you get first hand news on these issues, just as they are released in the press, and everyone is talking about them. It feels good to be aware of so many urgent issues that need to be dealt with; to be right there where they are boiling, where they need to be resolved.

I have met many Irish politicians and it’s very exciting to think that I’m so close to these powerful people and to the law making process. If I have the right knowledge and if I make the right contacts, I could actually make a difference: fight for good causes, and help people in need. I have submitted two parliamentary questions and this was rewarding because it allowed me to become familiar with parliamentary work whilst ensuring that those in charge are accountable.

I had the chance to work on a petition that Luke had organised to revoke the Town Trust in Castlerea Co. Roscommon. This trust is responsible for managing the town demesne, which is a recreational amenity park. It is formed by appointed members that are not answerable to anyone. Luke is campaigning for a democratically elected board so the people of Castlerea can have a say on decisions related to their park which is public property. I found this a very interesting issue to be involved with, and I went to Luke’s constituency in Castlerea to talk to the constituents about this matter.

I also enjoyed walking alongside Luke in the protest ‘Disability Against Cuts’. A lot of people came to take pictures and talk to Luke, and it was nice to see that he is popular and that a lot of people like him. In one of the conversations it came up that he gives up half of his salary as a TD. I thought that was a brave and admirable attitude and it felt rewarding to see that I am not working with an

ordinary politician but with one who seems to have strong beliefs and is not afraid of standing up for them.

I had a very interesting experience meeting women survivors of prostitution who were talking about their life experiences in a briefing I went to representing Luke. Their testimonials were shocking and very powerful and for sure had an impact on the views of the politicians that were present. They were asking for support to legislate on the criminalisation of prostitution in Ireland. I felt privileged to be there and it also feels great to be so welcomed as a TD's representative. I could see that it was very important for them that someone was there, in the case that the TD could not attend.

Another exciting part of my internship experience in the last few months was when I had the opportunity to write a press release for Luke. It was just after the day that the budget was announced. I was at home and saw a discussion on TV about a debate in the Dáil. Luke was trying to make his point about dress codes and the fact that the Ceann Comhairle criticized his dress in the media. There was a lot of confusion in the chamber and the other politicians would not let him speak. I was outraged about so much attention being drawn to Luke's clothes when there were so many more important things happening. I had actually done some research on the issue of dress codes and thought: I need to do something; I need to put together some good arguments to help Luke make his point. That 'the decisions we make are far more important than the way we look'. And so I did, I spent that weekend writing and re-writing, trying to make good points that would be convincing, and it felt great to be able to contribute in a more significant way. Luke liked the piece but did not want to release it yet as he wanted to focus on other things, but he said this issue will come back and hopefully my little input will be useful at some stage. It was good fun to put it together and a great boost to my confidence.

There are challenges for sure. It seems so difficult to understand how the political system works, but I think this will only come with time and experience. As an assistant to a politician, I think it is very important to be able to gather the right information that will be useful in backing up the TD's views and their position on certain issues. This is not easy work and you need to be constantly reading the papers, researching online and be very tuned in to the news.

There are also a lot of things happening outside working hours that I would love to take part in but unfortunately I am not able to due to being a mom. I love this work and I would love to be able to dedicate more time to it. There is so much to learn and understand, and I feel there is a long way to go, but I need more time and energy. This is scarce when you have a family and other people to care for. Now more than ever I understand how time is a valuable resource. I wish I had this opportunity even a year ago and I would have been able to dedicate so much more time, but reality is different now and the time I can dedicate to this work is pretty much the 8 hours I am doing on each of the 2 days. These 16 hours fly by so fast and when I realise its Wednesday afternoon I ask myself what have I done? 16 hours is definitely a limited time when you love and have great passion for what you are doing.

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My new year started and I had a very busy first day. In the morning all of the Crosscare interns had a meeting with a media reporter and we had a good laugh when I told him how I showed up to the Crosscare interview for the internship with a huge bump 2 days to my due date. I think at least I got some points for my determination.

Back to the office I was assigned to do some research on bills for legalisation of cannabis that were introduced in other countries, and also on the waste management issue in Ireland and Europe. On waste management, I was surprised to see how Ireland fared poorly compared to other EU countries as it ranked last on the average performance. That means Ireland still relies heavily on landfill and there are poor waste treatment and prevention strategies.

In the afternoon I went to a Committee meeting again on the issue of criminalisation of purchase of prostitution (the Swedish model). The issue is quite controversial and there were representatives from Women’s Aid, Feminist Network and the Sex Workers Alliance (SWA). I heard all of them and although I completely agree with the reps from Women’s Aid and the Feminist Network that women’s bodies are not a commodity and should not be available for purchase, I have to say, that the representative from the SWA, who was against the criminalisation, made a very good presentation and I could see how she was able to ‘turn the tables’ through her persuasive arguments. This made me think, it’s not only about the fair cause you have, how you present it makes a huge difference. I could see how the SWA’s representative was more confident and prepared and how politicians looked more convinced by her words and questioned her more.

When we received a draft of this Bill in our office (which is actually called Criminal Law Sexual offences- amendment) Bill, I realised that it was actually introduced by Thomas Pringle, who is also an independent TD and his office is just beside mine, in the Agricultural building. I went there to congratulate him for such a brave and admirable initiative to bring more equality and dignity for women in Ireland. This is my personal opinion, of course, but I am entitled to it!

Well, this was only my first day! The next day I got on with my research, contacting Library Research Services to send me whatever papers they had on the issues, and they are always very helpful. They usually have a lot of resources, be it on government reports or European articles and published research. All you need to do is ring them or send an email and they will send you all they have, including readers digest papers, where they summarize the whole issue in discussion. I think politicians have it very handy!

During the last months of my internship, there were a lot of things I enjoyed doing, like walking with Luke in public protests, attending briefings and watching the Dáil sessions. But the most interesting experiences I had were when I attended the committee meetings. A lot of controversial issues are discussed in the committee meetings with the presence of experts and high profile people involved in the issues. I attended committee meetings on the issue of abortion, sexual offences law (criminalisation of purchase of prostitution), tackling child obesity, tackling childhood poverty, online safety, the Magnitsky case (human rights abuses), etc. All the issues discussed were of extreme

importance and some very controversial. The information provided there and subsequent discussions were highly educative as the presentations had to be objective and persuasive. Presenters had only a few minutes to address their main concerns and to 'make their case'. I felt really excited and privileged to be there.

One day Pat asked me to summarize an article about the "the remarkable William Brooke O'Shaughnessy" and I enjoyed reading about this amazing multi-tasking scientist from the 1800s. He developed pioneering work in cannabis therapy, cholera treatment, pharmacology, chemistry, water engineering, the telegraphic system, etc. It was interesting to see how, in those times (and through his research), cannabis came to be considered a 'wonder drug' with medicinal properties 'to treat some of the most awful medical conditions of the 19th century'. This summary was posted on Luke's Facebook page.

In the same week, I also had the exciting task of attending a meeting in the EU Commission House representing Crosscare Migrant Project. The meeting was about the continuation/future of the European Integration Fund, which funds our current scheme. All projects that are supported under this fund made their presentations and in the end I was able to say that in order for all of them to be strengthened, migrants will need to be more active in politics. With political participation we can have a stronger influence in decision making and on the allocation of EU funding. I think everybody agreed with me!

On the 14th of February I went to a committee meeting on Health: Tackling Obesity. The crew from the "Operation Transformation" programme was there and it was very interesting to hear their views on health and how to tackle obesity. They intend to launch a major campaign on healthy eating but need the support from the government. Dr Eva Osmond made some very good points such as: an overweight person is using more health resources, drugs for diabetes and cholesterol are the most-used prescription drugs, the importance of having health education and fitness programmes in, the high levels of bariatric surgery in Ireland and how this reflects the health levels of a country, the crucial role of the family and the need to educate parents, the lack of knowledge on better health choices, etc.

The politicians present also raised their concerns around how time is used as an excuse to not eat healthily, how women are often scrutinised on their appearance (and how this could be a strong factor preventing more women from entering into politics) and how parents need training and tools to be able to educate their children. Many TDs mentioned they never took part in team sports, although they would have liked to. Sweating, consciousness of one's body weight and competitiveness were precluding factors. The focus is always on winning and not in taking part. This meeting was very informative and I was delighted to be attending. I made a summary of my notes and sent to Luke, I know health is an issue he has a particular interest in.

On the 20th of February Luke invited me to follow him to a High Court hearing on the promissory notes case, this was a different experience for me. It was interesting to be in that atmosphere where power and knowledge seem to be so obvious. I saw barristers and judges in their wigs and bands and I thought how dress codes are still so prevalent as symbols of power.

Catherine Murphy and Joan Collins, independent TDs were also there. The TDs were asking to join David Hall's case against the state, but this was not allowed by the judges and if they want, they will have to open a court case on their own. Back in the office I read the judgement paper released and highlighted the main points to Luke. Later on this day I went to the library where a member of staff showed me how to use the Orlas system and Factiva research tool, which are online systems to check previous and current bills and the latest papers released.

The second week of March was a very busy and troubled week. It all started with an article in the Independent paper saying that Luke had his penalty points wiped off. Luke had joined Clare Daly, Mick Wallace and Joan Collins in a case against the Gardaí for wiping off penalty points of well-known public figures. Luke went on the Vincent Browne TV show and was questioned about this. Vincent Browne as usual, was hard-hitting. Luke admitted being caught talking on his mobile phone but alleged he was not fully aware that his points were being removed when a council official rang him saying that he would "sort out the issue". On a second occasion, he was again caught talking on his phone, but this time he was advised by a sergeant to write a letter explaining he was on Dáil business and his charges would be withdrawn. In other words, he had made use of his position and status to avoid paying fines and getting penalty points, which was the very same thing he was against. That did not look good for Luke, it brought a lot of media attention and criticism from his constituents and the public in general. There were a lot of abusive phone calls and the atmosphere was far from pleasant in the office.

I understand the sergeant and councillor were trying to help Luke and I felt sorry for the negative attention and stress this would have brought to them. However, I hope this will be a lesson on favouritism: rules should be applied equally to all citizens and people should not be advantaged because of their social position or influential contacts. In relation to Luke, it was a lesson too. Politicians are role models, and so they must live by what they preach. In my view, it was political immaturity. He is only new to this business and full of energy to fight for his causes and give support to his colleagues, but now I am sure he will be more careful. In fairness to Luke, he never denied anything, and he admitted being corrupt and hypocritical, and that was a brave thing to do.

This was an entertaining week, to say the least. I watched mesmerised, how events unravelled: how a confident politician, without realising, can put his passion and whole career at risk for a few penalty points, how citizens are quick to judge and condemn others of hypocrisy and how the media is able to manipulate people's attention to irrelevant issues.

I would have a lot more to talk about, but I think this is enough for now. I have been through an amazing learning curve during the last 6 months and I think this is evident since my first diary article. I am glad I got involved in this internship. I expected it to be a unique and valuable experience and it was. It feels amazing to be in Leinster House, to meet and chat to politicians during the day and later see them on TV. It's very exciting to think that I was so close to these powerful people and to the law making process. Being among them certainly boosted my confidence.

Being closer to the political system also made me more aware of the importance of political participation and of always being honest and accountable. It did make me consider becoming a politician, and I never thought about this before. I didn't feel I would be brave enough, but now I do.

It also changed my mind about politicians, they are down to earth people, with families and problems and the same issues as all of us.

I will certainly share my learning with the Brazilian community and encourage everyone to get more involved in Irish politics promoting the rights of migrant people living here. This has been an interesting and fulfilling experience and I thoroughly enjoyed my six months in the Dáil.



migrant project