

Opening Power to Diversity



Biography

Alfred M'Sichili moved to Ireland from Zambia 10 years ago. After finishing his Masters in Political Philosophy in University College Cork, Alfred went on to complete a Doctorate in Global Political Economy and Economic Justice. Familiar with policy analysis and research, Alfred spent time with Comhlámh as a Trade Policy and Campaigns Officer where he was involved with EU trade and investment policy and lobbying policy makers at national and EU level on trade and economic justice issues. Alfred has also worked as a policy intern with European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) focusing on EU social and economic policy in the areas of growth, employment, poverty eradication and social exclusion.

Diary

'This has truly been an eye opener for me'

On September 12th 2012, I started a 6 month placement with Fine Gael TD for Wicklow & East Carlow, Deputy Andrew Doyle. Deputy Doyle is a professional farmer and is Chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food, and the Marine.

I work two days a week (Tuesday & Wednesday), and my work is focused primarily on parliamentary work, although I do occasionally attend to Constituency related work as well. In my 2nd Diary Article, I'll present "A Day in the life of a TD Intern" which will provide the reader with a greater understanding of my day-to-day work schedule. For my 1st Diary Article however I wish to answer two questions: (1) what my perceptions were before starting the internship, and (2) how these have changed (*if at all*) after a few weeks into the internship.

What were my perceptions of politics and the Irish political system before starting the placement?

My general perceptions about Irish politics had been shaped primarily by the media, and consequently I had a sceptical and cynical view about politics in general and politicians in particular. I was made to understand that Irish politicians were incompetent and corrupt and incapable of addressing national issues. In this respect Irish politicians were no different from the perceptions I had of Zambian politicians, or of Greek or Italian politicians.

I was also made to understand that Irish politicians were obsessed with local or Constituency issues and spent nearly all their time attending funerals or arranging a passport or medical card for somebody else's sweet granny. The political system I was told was broken, and that there was no leadership or political will to change it.

On migrant issues or migrant rights, I was made to understand that politicians were at best indifferent to migrant issues (since migrants did not constitute a large constituency), or at worst, hostile to migrant issues (believing migrants to be largely parasitic on society, i.e. as takers rather than givers).

Finally, Irish politics I was made to understand was a male dominated affair, largely dynastic in nature, under-represented by women, and with virtually no migrant representation.

How have these perceptions changed (*if at all*) after a few weeks into the placement?

I am glad to report that with only a few weeks into the placement, I have had to reassess most of these perceptions.

Before I started the internship, I was a bit apprehensive (being a visible migrant) about how I would be treated in the Oireachtas. I feared that I would be treated as something of an imposter, as somebody who did not belong. Even if directly hostile words are not communicated, there are a multitude of subtle ways in which one can be made to feel unwelcome.

But I am happy to report that nothing of the sort has happened. In the Oireachtas, I am treated no different than anybody else. I am given the same respect and courtesy as that accorded to anybody else, and at no point have I been made to feel as an imposter. Once you have your Oireachtas pass card and display it, people take it that you have a reason for being there and treat you accordingly.

I have also learnt just how skewed and narrow a view of politicians and politics in general the media gives us. Irish politicians are capable of dealing with national issues and they deal with them all the

time in Dail debates and particularly in Committees. What I found frustrating was just how little of this valuable work done in committees ever gets media attention, and I think the public is ill served as a result.

I also found that local constituency work is very important. It is a laudable enterprise and the best illustration of representative democracy. It helps to keep politicians grounded in reality, making them aware of the day-to-day issues affecting ordinary citizens and not merely getting stuck in to tackling big picture issues. It also empowers citizens and gives them hope knowing that there is an advocate who will take up their individual cases and address them with the appropriate authorities.

I have been amazed at the genuine time and effort taken by Deputy Doyle in dealing with individual cases and trying hard to solve them for his constituents. I found myself thinking, surely there aren't many votes in this (these cases will never receive mass publicity; some will never see publicity at all because they are private; and some are migrant issues and clearly there aren't many votes in those) – so why is he doing it? Why is he spending so much time and effort on them? If we assume the cynical view of politicians given to us by the mass media, then Deputy Doyle's actions are truly mysterious.

But I have come to realise that most politicians, like Deputy Doyle, and contrary to popular perception, do take the responsibilities of public service very seriously and make every effort behind the scenes and the glare of mass media, to tackle national issues and give the voiceless and vulnerable individual a voice and an advocate to solve their problem. This has truly been an eye opener for me.

“Helping out in this process makes me feel that I am taking part in the shaping of an important piece of legislation that will have long term implications for how future generations enjoy the nation's forests.”

One of the most common questions I'm asked whenever I tell people that I am working part time in Leinster House surprisingly is: *What interesting piece of legislation are you working on?* I say surprising because I always, perhaps unfavourably, assume that people are more interested in the drama of political infighting as it is played out in the media than in the actual mechanics of making the nation's laws. In this article, I have therefore chosen to talk about an important piece of legislation that I believe will this year exercise both public and media attention, namely the proposed sale of some of the state's forestry firm, Coillte.

As part of its bailout package with the Troika, the Irish government is required to raise between €2 billion and €5 billion through the sale of some of its state assets. The money raised would then be used to pay down debt as well as to spur economic growth. Of course, I have seen this play enacted before in Zambia, my birth country, in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the IMF came knocking. Then as now *privatisation of state assets* was an integral part of its cocktail programme for recovery. Privatisation was sold as the long awaited panacea for the country's economic malaise and sovereign debt problem. The actual sale of the mines, the country's then major state asset, was so badly handled however, that successive governments have been wrestling to undo the damage and subsequent general elections have been fought over who is most capable of reversing the sale or re-

negotiating it on better terms. This of course is not to say that privatisation is inherently bad, only that it is important that it is carefully structured and greater attention paid to the long term benefit accruing to the nation than to the best short-term price to be obtained for the sale of state assets.

As part of its oversight role, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, of which Andrew Doyle, TD Wicklow/East Carlow is Chairman, is holding a series of public hearings on the proposed sale of Coillte's harvesting rights. Coillte is a state owned forestry firm and Ireland's largest natural resources company. Recently the government agreed in principle to sell the harvesting rights to Coillte's forests for a period of 50 to 80 years. Coillte's land (as well as any minerals underground) however, will remain in state ownership. To manage the sale, a new government agency was established within the NTMA called NewERA.

In October and November of last year, I learned that the Committee heard from Coillte executives, David Gunning - Chief Executive, and Gerry Egan - Group Director, as well as from the Chairman Designate of the Coillte board, Brendan McKenna. The Committee was informed that in 2011 Coillte reported profits of €19.9 million, achieved cost savings of €4.4million, and paid a substantial amount in dividend to the state. The company has also successfully transformed its business, moving away from nearly 100% reliance on log sales to the construction industry, to the development of new business lines including wood panels, land management, and renewable energy.

On the proposed sale of Coillte's timber harvesting rights, the Committee was informed that discussion with NewERA were on-going and centered around a number of core issues including the impact to the timber processing sector and the impact on employment (including the Coillte pension fund) amongst others. The Committee was informed that a major decision would have to be made regarding the amount of conditions attachable to the sale. The dilemma is the more conditions applied to the sale (ostensibly to secure the protection for long term public interest), the less the achievable sale price, and consequently less revenue accruing to the state; while with less conditions applied to the sale, the higher the achievable sale price, and hence more revenue accruing to the state for the sale.

I have come to learn that these Committee hearings are very important as they are the only public hearings on the proposed sale of an important state asset and offer the best opportunity for stakeholders to make known their views on the proposed sale. This wide consultation is invaluable to ensure that the sale is structured in such a way that it secures the nation's long term interest rather than merely its short-term fiscal needs. And helping out in this process makes me feel that I am taking part in the shaping of an important piece of legislation that will have long term implications for how future generations enjoy the nation's forests.

On a personal level I would like to see, however the sale is structured, that the rural recreation activities and free public access to forests pioneered in Coillte's *Outdoor* programme is maintained. This is important not only for rural employment or local tourism, but also for public health reasons, as nothing is more conducive to a healthy constitution than being surrounded by beautiful landscape and forest cover and taking frequent forest walks to help ease the high stress levels so symptomatic of modern life.

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It’s been nearly a month since I finished my OPD placement in the Dáil, long enough time I think for an adequate reflection on the experience.

First, as an environment to work in, I found the Dáil quite an exciting place. It always exuded the sense of centrality and importance, and one got the sense that this was where the fate of the nation was determined. It was also easy, with all the main political figures strolling through the corridors of Leinster House for one to bask in reflected glory. So I always felt a buzz going in and leaving however heavy the day’s work load.

Second, the work itself was always exciting and varied. In the 6 months of my placement, I worked on a myriad number of bills and policy issues from obesity, forestry, children’s referendum, offshore oil exploration, farm IT, CAP reform, CFP reform, sugar beet industry, animal health and welfare, horse meat scandal, X-case / abortion legislation, credit union bill, local government reform, sugar-drink tax, agri-food industry, social welfare, unemployment, job activation, fisheries, aquaculture, to mention just a few notable ones. Given the varied nature of the issues dealt with, I found that it is essential for one to have a natural interest in a broad range of policy areas and to be quick in familiarising themselves with new policy areas.

Third, the politics. The 6 months placement was quite an eye opener in terms of how an individual or group of individuals can best campaign for policy changes. Having campaigned and advocated for policy changes in my previous career in the NGO sector, I was quite surprised how ineffectual some of our strategies were. In a typical campaign strategy, one would mail TDs or Committee members a package of evidenced based materials and follow this up with a barrage of electronic messages from sympathetic members of the public calling for specific policy changes. In most cases, if the evidenced based material sent is extensive (which sometimes it is), the TD never gets to read it, given the enormous time pressure they face. And the barrage of electronic mail never even gets opened, given its nuisance factor. It therefore came as a surprise to me that the most effective campaign tool is still the personalised hand written or typed letter sent from a concerned constituent. Relationship building, which often takes time is also key. And constant pressure, rather than the eye catching once-off public demonstration or media event, is also a vital ingredient.

Fourth, the TD. Prior to my placement, I knew very little of Andrew Doyle, other than that he was a very popular Wicklow TD, whose was well liked and highly respected by his constituents as well as by many in his party and outside. Working with him, and being able to witness first hand his dedication, his long and irregular working hours, his genuine concern for the welfare of Wicklow and the nation, as well as his love of public service, I have come to see how he more than deserves his plaudits. He is also lucky to have working for him an equally dedicated and public spirited team. It was a great privilege for me to work in his Leinster House office and to be part of his wonderful team.

Fifth, the going away lesson. My primary intention in applying to take part in the OPD scheme was to enhance my understanding of the Irish political system and to see how new communities could best

improve their participation in the nation's politics. In the end of course I was able to walk away with far more than an answer to these two aspirations. On the issue of increased participation, especially in terms of more visible representation, I discovered that new communities will need to target increased participation at local council level as well as in the respective parties. In a party parliamentary system a great deal, especially in terms of representation, is determined by the selection of candidates. In this respect, an adequate understanding of how respective parties select candidates as well as devising strategies to influence the selection process will be key to increasing political participation by new communities. An internship scheme at local council level and in the respective parties (especially in the department or section responsible for elections and candidate selection) will be an excellent place to start.

In conclusion, I found my participation in the OPD scheme very rewarding and would strongly encourage anyone considering of applying to do so without hesitation. You will never regret the decision.



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