

Opening Power to Diversity



Amy-Yin Zhang

Placed with Minister Joe Costello TD from February to July 2012

Biography

Originally from China, Amy first came to Ireland in the late 1990's with ambitions of developing a career in the media thanks to her mother and grandfather, both of whom worked as journalists. Now a naturalised Irish citizen, she lives in Terenure and runs a successful consultancy business. Through her business and involvement in events such as the Shanghai World Exposition in 2010, as well as the Dublin Chinese New Year Festival Committee, Amy is active in fostering relations between her native China and her adopted home. This has fuelled her interest in politics, and she hopes to help further inform and integrate her community via her participation in the Opening Power to Diversity Scheme.

Diary

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Firstly, I would like to say that I greatly appreciate this opportunity and have found the experience to date to be very interesting and beneficial. I am privileged to be able to shadow Minister Joe Costello during both his Ministerial and Constituency duties. This has enabled me to gain experience across a broad spectrum of political and governmental functions.

In my first week, I was immediately brought on board by the Minister and attended meetings in relation to Irish Aid (white paper consultation reviews). I would note that Irish Aid is a major area for which the Minister has responsibility.

The Minister also immediately involved me with several Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) meetings. In this regard, I attended a Human Rights Forum which consisted of several NGOs, various

resident ambassadors, and many government officials. At this forum I had a brief opportunity to liaise with Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore, which I found to be very encouraging.

I have subsequently attended several meetings as an observer. These meetings can be very insightful and imbue me with a deeper understanding of the issues dealt with by Minister Costello and the processes involved with same. Other meetings I have attended have focused on local issues on the ground; for example, I recently travelled to Sligo with the Minister to attend a 'White Paper Consultation Review' with comprised representatives from NGOs, academies and local civilians in order to receive broader reviews and comments.

I found the initial level of high involvement to be very motivational and have gained a great respect for the work of Minister Costello and his offices. I am made a very welcome member of the team and am relishing the work to date.

In this regard, I would note that my day to day duties thus far include providing administrative support to Minister Costello's private office and constituency office. My duties include general office administration, distribution of inward queries, dealing with general queries, drafting speeches for constituency related meetings and providing campaign assistance. I regularly attend meetings with the Minister in respect of matters relating to both offices and I also attend conferences with the Minister.

As a local TD for Dublin Central, Minister Costello is known to all his constituents as Joe. Minister Costello has an excellent relationship with his constituents who refer to him as Joe and who generally request to speak with Minister Costello himself about whatever issue they might have. Minister Costello is extremely patient and generous with his time. He listens to all complaints and problems and does his utmost to provide peace of mind for his constituents and help resolve their issues. Further, as long as there are no ministerial duties at hand, the Minister never fails to miss any of his mid-week clinics.

I am looking forward to continuing to shadow Minister Costello for the duration of the programme.

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It is almost a mission impossible to even attempt to use any singular adjective or a combination of a few adjectives together to describe my recent experiences of working with one of the busiest people in both Houses - Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade with responsibility for Trade and Development, Joe Costello TD. Well, nonetheless I am going to give it a try...

If you think multitasking at certain times of the day is a huge challenge in any workplace, then try this, switching great responsibilities in between running the government of a Country and being the voice of his people. That's right; Minister Costello's daily engagements are set out by black and red markings in his diary, black referring to ministerial involvement and red for constituency responsibilities, both spread over a 15-hours-a-day working schedule!

From meeting with the Tánaiste at a Dublin Castle NGO forum on the second day, to meeting with the former president of Ireland at her seminar the same week, I was more than just thrilled with these unexpected encounters with the most important people in the country. Every handshake, every smile and nod, every word I received filled me with sentiments of encouragement, motivation and pride for both myself and for the Chinese community at large here in Ireland. On one occasion the Minister remarked that while there are two Chinese Gardaí working here at Leinster House, I am probably the first Chinese person to ever work in both Houses of the Oireachtas, to which I replied 'thanks to you'!

Irish Aid is one of the main focuses for the Minister, therefore there are many overseas trade and development related meetings, seminars and conferences taking place on the regular basis. My reading list for the last while have involved learning about the African Strategy and the White Paper, and studying the map of the African continent including the names of all African countries, basic geographical, social and government background information, as well as familiarise myself with some main Irish affiliated Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working on the continent. So far, I have found it to be very educational, and I am interested to learn more about the Irish Aid as well as how to translate ideas and concepts into practice.

There are a number of clinics in Joe's constituency (sometimes I think it is interesting how one minute people call him Minister, and the next, they refer to him by his first name. These things just don't happen!) I have observed a few Philbsborough clinic sessions on Friday mornings, and most of the people attend these want to see and talk to Joe himself. Joe listens patiently to his constituents' queries and complaints, in person or over the phone. He treats every written letter carefully; he makes sure that all issues have been looked after in a timely manner.

All constituency issues are directly related to each individual in the area, from job seeking, hospital beds, visa application, bin collections to medical cards, housing allocation, school repairs and so on. There is no glorious moment in any of these problems. These issues can often sound simple to begin with; however on further reflection it is quickly obvious that no two queries are the same. This emphasises to me the importance of caring what people have to say at constituency level.

As people say, time flies when you are having fun... my time with the OPD program has flown by; however with still a few more months to go before my time working with Joe comes to an end, I am more ready than ever before to learn but also to contribute.



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