

Opening Power to Diversity



Ekow Agyeman Prempeh

Placed with Michael Moynihan TD from September 2012 to March 2013

Biography

Ekow Agyeman Prempeh is originally from Ghana and now lives near Blanchardstown with his wife and three children. Ekow has completed a degree in International Relations from Dublin City University and will be commencing a Masters in Development in September 2013. Founder and Chairman of the Ireland Branch of the Ghanaian political party New Patriotic Party (NPP), he has previously represented the Ireland Branch at the International Conference of the NPP in 2011. His experience includes voluntary work with Oxfam and interning with Schools without Borders, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting awareness on the realities of conflict between secondary schools in Ireland, Israel and Palestine. He is a patron of the Ghana Union in Ireland, and a member of the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy based in Berlin.

Diary

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the contents of their character”-Rev. Martin Luther King.

These prophetic, but also, emotional and thought-provoking words echoed by Dr Martin Luther King, the black American moral crusader and civil rights activist in the early part of the 1960s immediately took hold of my entire being as I carefully and pensively made my way through the security check point of Leinster House - the official seat of the Irish Government. And as my colleagues (all from

different minority persuasions) and I were patiently led through the corridors of the *Oireachtas* or, what I would rather refer to as “the corridors of power” by this impeccable and well-dressed usher that memorable afternoon, I could not help, but come to honest terms with how swift the Republic of Ireland has genuinely opened its arms to people from minority backgrounds/migrant communities. Again, what dawned on me, then and there, was the universality of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s prophesy; after many decades had gone by, more especially, its relevance to my unique experiences in the Leinster House. In fact, my initial experiences even before my internship proper began on the 20th of September, 2012 attest to H. G. Well’s dictum that “*Our true nationality is mankind*”; a test Ireland has acquitted itself through the ground breaking *Opening Power to Diversity* scheme.

As aforementioned, my internship with Mr Michael Moynihan TD for Cork North-West and spokesperson on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources officially commenced in late September; and my initial impression of him was that he is a man of few words, hardworking, reserved but warm and engaging too. I had arrived thirty minutes before my time and when he entered the office, we quickly exchanged pleasantries; and then he immediately took me through my remit as one would usually expect on the first day. I seized the opportunity during my break period (on the first day) to briefly interact with those who came within my arms way and ever since, I have been getting on well with a good number of the Fianna Fáil staff, especially Margaret Kenny, the Fianna Fail administrator, and Kevin who once took me out for lunch. Perhaps, my encounter with the European Commissioner for Energy on my first day was a privileged experience that I will cherish for a long time to come.

As a matter of fact, my understanding of Irish politics in particular and the art of politics in itself have deepened and lengthened over my more than a month’s partnership with Deputy Michael Moynihan. On a typical day, I will observe heated political exchanges and discourses within the *Dail Eireann* and I have come to appreciate the significant weight of the challenge lawmakers have had to grapple with. Besides, contrary to my long-held perception about politicians (owing to my African background) that they always appear condescending and that they represent “I am the monarch of all that I survey” mentality, my interactions with some deputies in the Leinster House (including Deputy Michael Moynihan) is beginning to conflict with this assumption. To wit, Irish politicians tend to be ordinary, jovial, good-mixers and above all down-to-earth. And like all humans they have both their good and bad days as well. All in all, the *Opening Power to Diversity* Scheme is probably, the most promising piece of volunteering work I have ever committed myself to. It is my fervent hope that its fruits shall be an invaluable asset not only to the community I represent, but to the entire Irish state and indeed to all humanity. In future, I will not be surprised if this initiative goes down in history as arguably, one of the most empowering and integrative socio-political programmes ever introduced on the Island of Ireland.

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When the political giants of yore in the likes of Messrs’ Thomas J. Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, James Connolly, Wolfe Tone, Michael Collins and of course, the father of the nation, Eamon De Valera

risked their lives so this country could emancipate itself from foreign domination, little did they envisage they were also carving a noble path and opening doors of opportunity for immigrants like me. The Republic of Ireland, in comparison to some European countries, is fast becoming acclimatised to multiculturalism, notwithstanding the occasional challenges immigrants have had to endure since this country began its open-door policy.

To date, my internship with Deputy Michael Moynihan, TD for Cork North-West and Spokesperson on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources is a little over three months through and I am already beginning to reconcile with former *Taoiseach* Sean Lemass' famous saying that, "**Patriotism, as I understand it, is a combination of love of country, pride in its history, traditions and culture, and a determination to add to its prestige and achievements**". As I pace through the corridors of Leinster House I have grown to appreciate the sacrifices and tenacity of purpose that characterises a typical Irish politician. On a typical working day, I have observed Deputy Moynihan grapple with volumes and different shades of correspondence. As a TD and Spokesperson on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, I have often been privy to Deputy Moynihan's tiresome and almost marathon involvements and engagements in numerous meetings, research and debates on burning national programmes; so much so that, I am tempted to wonder whether Irish politicians have life at all.

On a regular day, I am expected to attend to queries directed at Deputy Moynihan, conduct research on topical issues, be present in the Dail chamber to take notes on the day's proceedings, attend relevant committee meetings with Deputy Moynihan, and also, actively engage with *Fianna Fail* activities, among others. Arguably, these invaluable political pieces I have garnered this couple of months have made me think that the love most Irish politicians have for their country is second to none; and this has left a deep impression on my political psyche. Any doubts I had about the role of the Irish politician in building a society anchored on selflessness and unyielding devotion to what is right were quelled with the invitation extended to my family and I to attend the 55th Annual Sean Moylan commemoration in a small town called Kiskeam, Co. Cork couple of months ago.

Sean Moylan, the Irish Civil War hero turned politician died 55 years ago. He dedicated his entire life to fighting imperialism and global injustices, guided by the philosophy, "*Ar scath a cheile a mhaireann na daoine*"-"In the shadow of each other, the people live". For a man that Eamon De Valera aptly described as a "soul of integrity", I will forever cherish paying homage to his graveside. For me and my family, it was a pilgrimage of huge significance.

These experiences aside, my observations, engagements and tasks in the past few months have largely been characterised by picketing and demonstrations by pressure groups outside of the Leinster House, political hecklings and theatrics and drama in the *Dail Eireann* Gallery, most memorably, during the Budget Day. I have also been involved in conducting comparative research on certain areas of interests.

On November 21st, 2012, I had the privilege of accompanying Deputy Moynihan to an Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Energy. Renewable energy and "smart metering" were the agenda for the day. During the meeting, technocrats were invited to give talks on these themes, followed by a question and answer sessions with the attendees. Furthermore, last month I watched with rapt attention, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children's

debate on child obesity. Members deliberated on how it costs the Republic and Northern Ireland economies a combined 1.6 billion euro per annum on obesity related issues alone. The issue of whether or not smoking should be permitted within Leinster House premises was also discussed and voted on during that same session.

But perhaps, it was being the only black person/immigrant in the Dail Public Gallery during the budget reading early last month that will forever remain on my mind's eye. Proudly sporting my House of the Oireachtas security check card, I calmly, but confidently made my way through the somewhat heavily guarded corridors of Leinster House to hear the Finance and Public Expenditure Ministers deliver their sixth austerity measure in four years (whilst people demonstrated outside). The process spanned more than two days to allow for cross-party deliberations on the proposed budget. One TD in particular, Michael McGrath, the TD from Cork South Central, and Spokesperson on Finance caught my attention and mesmerised me with his extemporaneous mastery of economic figures, data and realities on the ground.

Needless to say, the last week before Christmas was very hectic as I had to apply myself to tying up the loose ends of my delegated tasks. This preparation did not come as easy as it entailed, unwavering dedication to duty, paying attention to details and above all, due diligence were required.

At the end of last year, I humbly asked to meet with the Leader of the *Fianna Fáil* Party, Micheál Martin. In the same measure, I intend to meet the *Taoiseach* after Christmas; first, to tap into his experiences, and second, to thank him for the rare privilege and honour accorded to me and by extension, the entire Ghanaian community. I have already been privileged to have met some Irish political giants notably, Gerry Adams, Éamon Ó'Cuív, Joan Burton, Mary Lou McDonald and the Leader of the People Before Profit, Richard Boyd Barret, just to name a few. To crown it all, I was invited to the *Fianna Fáil* End of Year Christmas party last year and one cannot imagine how elated I was to have been in the midst of it all.

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On resuming my packed duties after the yuletide recess, I was instantly greeted with a passionate front page headline of my boss' call on the Health Minister to expedite action on the recently renovated Epilepsy Monitoring Units in Cork University Hospital and Beaumont Hospital-Dublin which are presently closed. Given the urgency of the matter, and the sheer number of people still awaiting monitoring, Deputy Moynihan has asked me to delve deep into the question of epilepsy.

But a cue worth taken note of is that the month of February and a little beyond will be dominated by Ireland's Promissory Note Deal with the European Central Bank/the Troika and the emergency passage of a bill in the Dáil a couple of weeks ago which will allow for the liquidation of the toxic former Anglo Irish Bank. As one would expect, I was in the Dáil Éireann gallery when those at the other side of the political divide were virtually slugging it out with the Government Ministers and it was quite a theatre of political display at its best.

My expectations and itinerary in my remaining couple of months or so are certainly going to be loaded and sitting in the office is off the radar for the time being. To wit, there are a good number of programme line-ups that I have to be present at and the essence is to be fully baptised into the Irish mode of politics. On the 21st of February and 7th of March for instance, I should be leaving for Millstreet and Macroom respectively, both in Cork city to attend a Fianna Fáil Party Meeting; and on the 9th of March, I am expected to be present at the National Conference on the Common Agricultural Policy in Dublin.

The beginning of this year; through to date has been quite loaded for Deputy Moynihan as he has had to work round the clock in preparation for a submission of a Priority Question on An Post in Rural Ireland and a Topical Question on the bioenergy weed *Miscanthus*. As usual, I was in the Dáil gallery when Deputy Moynihan was making a passionate case for An Post overhaul in Rural Ireland whereupon, I proudly but occasionally had eye contact with my boss, as if to let him know I concurred with his submissions. There were tense and nervous moments watching my boss from the side lines, for whatever reasons, I cannot pin-point.

All in all, I am filled with pride as I report that my journey in Leinster House officially expired in March. I have been dreading the day coming; conscious of the inevitable feeling of nostalgia that will befall me; due to the strong bond I have established with Deputy Moynihan in particular, and others in the course of my stint in Dáil Éireann. But then, we must give way to other immigrants to have their fair share, and to have the rare opportunity to respond to changing times in this Republic.

In the latter part of March, as I had intimated in my previous piece, with the kind permission of Deputy Moynihan, I was present at a Fianna Fáil public meeting in Charleville. Aside very memorable ones, I reckon, this was my last official assignment in Leinster House; but it would not be the last, as I will be attending Fianna Fail's supreme Ard Fheis scheduled for April 26th; courtesy of Deputy Moynihan.

To cap it all, my very last day was quite emotional. I was in a pensive mood as I bade final good-bye to anyone I came across. Then as I sat face to face with Deputy Moynihan, the man who I consider to be one of my greatest mentors, to exchange our last pleasantries, I cannot, but equally be grateful to Crosscare, its dedicated staff, and by extension, Mr Joe O'Brien for the ground-breaking opportunity afforded to me in particular, and the immigrant community in Ireland in general. More so, I was chuffed at the heart-warming farewell dinner organised by Fianna Fáil staff; all, who for want of space, I cannot express enough gratitude.

When all had been said and done for the day, I was, at the eleventh hour, ushered into honourable Micheál Martin, the Leader of Fianna Fáil; a day I have earnestly been longing for. My regret, however, was that, I could not meet the An Taoiseach to show my appreciation, though I had seen him a good number of times in the Dáil chamber. As I descended the stairs into the open space, I turned to the Irish flag hoisted on Leinster House, stood still, and did obeisance, while Deputy Moynihan looked through the window and respectfully said to me, Slainte!



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