

Opening Power to Diversity



Erica Birch-Abban

Placed with Senator Averil Power from January to June 2012

Biography

Since coming to Ireland almost a decade ago from Ghana, Erica has been involved in various community based organisations committed to promoting integration, diversity and multi-culturalism in both Donegal and Dublin. Erica is currently completing a Masters in Development Studies in KDSC and working as a Community Health worker with Cairde. During her time in Donegal she presented a programme on Highland radio called 'Voice of Africa' and graduated from Letterkenny Institute of Technology with a BA (Hons) in Community Studies. Erica is currently a member of the European Integration Forum held in Brussels and has recently been elected as Vice Chair of the South Dublin Migrant Integration Forum. Her interest in raising awareness of cultural diversity and promoting social inclusion of minority groups prompted her to become involved in the Opening Power to Diversity scheme.

Diary

"Senator Averil Power is friendly and down to earth with an impressive resume and strong convictions"

Thursday 19th January - the wait is over, I have officially started my placement at Leinster House. During my tour of the Houses of the Oireachtas, I cannot help but be filled with awe. Captivated by

the grandeur of the buildings, I reflect on the humble beginnings of Irish politics. Senator Averil Power is friendly and down to earth with an impressive resume and strong convictions. It speaks volumes that the first two events I accompany her to are a protest against DEIS cutbacks organised by various schools, and the Launch of Children's Rights Alliance Report Card 2012 at the European Parliament Office. She is relaxed yet engaging at both and this reminds me of how crucial it is for a politician to be aware of current affairs.

When I am not with Averil, I assist with administrative and constituency level work along with her secretary Orlagh. This enables me to gain a varied perspective of the behind the scenes work that is involved in a Senators office.

In early March, I am fortunate to attend the Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis as an observer. With over 4500 people there, the atmosphere is electric with the main focus of the day, the introduction of Gender Quota's by the party, debated at great length. The statement made by a panel member that "*we've been voting for mediocre men for so long so why can't we vote for mediocre women*" gets me thinking about what women need to do before they can be accepted in the so called 'man's world'. If Irish women have to struggle to be prominent politics, what is the fate of non-Irish women? Averil is in her element, her enthusiasm is infectious and as the day draws to a close I admire her propensity to keep smiling throughout!

My esteem for her grows over the next few weeks, and it is during the interesting 'Women for Election' launch that I come to the conclusion that the implications of having your name on a ballot paper are significant and that 'ordinary people' can also rise through the ranks to be an achiever. In the brief period of my placement to date, I have come to think highly of Senator Power and for what she stands for. An article I read charting the Senator's rise from a family of five in a small council house in Shankill demonstrates that politics is not only the preserve of political dynasties but to all who believe in making a difference in bringing about social justice. Averil's story is a true inspiration and I intend to ask my boys to read her story to inspire them.

"My internship journey at the Leinster House has ended after 6 months and the question I ask myself is, why so soon?"

I can't believe how time flies. It seems like only yesterday when I was buzzing with energy and enthusiasm, looking forward to starting my internship with Senator Averil Power. However, as the saying goes, "everything that has a beginning also has an end". My internship journey at the Leinster House has ended after 6 months and the question I ask myself is, why so soon?

The experience is rich and fully packed with insights. Politics is not as dirty as I thought it to be after all – at least, not the vast majority. Politics is a serious business that requires a high level of alertness, tact or sensitivity, commitment, inner strength, toughness and a sense of humour at the same time. My experience in the Leinster House has taught me that a genuine politician is one that has the people's interests at heart (genuinely). Whether they are making decisions that are perceived in the short term to be too harsh but will benefit the people in the long term, or joining the people to protest against decisions that will have detrimental effects on Irish citizens. One has to relate to the people at the grassroots level in order to know what their real issues are; a skill that

Averil masters in. She never ceased to amaze me with the ease with which she related to everyone she came into contact with, whether they were known or unknown to her. Networking, teamwork, excellent communication skills, etc. are all essential components of politics and politicians.

Looking back now, I realise that my administrative skills have been sharpened through working in such a fast-paced, dynamic environment where one has to be on top of matters arising. Tasks included anything from updating the constituents' database, arranging meetings and dealing with Local Authorities, advocating on behalf of constituents for social welfare entitlements, liaising with community welfare officers, hospitals, medical cards, housing allocations, bin collections, etc. This came naturally to me as advocacy work is what I do. Nevertheless, I have come to realise that as hard as politicians work to solve the people's problems quickly, there is no 'magic formula' for resolving certain issues. Some issues just have to take their course no matter how much a politician tries to intervene and speed up the process. Every problem is unique and must be dealt with on individual merits and with much sensitivity. During my time in Averil's office, I saw how supportive most constituents can be, but how mean and even abusive a small percentage can be. I observed with great admiration, how Averil dealt with such unpleasantness and realised that, you cannot allow yourself to be emotionally affected by these issues as a politician.

The OPD Scheme has given me the opportunity to work and meet with many politicians and their parliamentary assistants. If I thought before that my work was very busy, I retract that statement because now, I have had the experience of working in one of the busiest environments on the Island of Ireland. It was an experience that I will cherish forever, from researching and gathering materials for press releases and briefings, drafting letters, dealing with correspondence, arranging meetings, dealing with telephone queries and general queries, providing general administrative assistance, attending functions with Averil, working on campaign materials or any other duties that I was required to do.

As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. puts it, *"a mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions"*. Thank you so much! If I had my way, I would do it all over again, and in case you are wondering if I would be interested in pursuing politics? The answer is an emphatic yes! It might take some time to set the ball rolling but this experience has definitely given me more confidence, skills and insight that I could utilise in serving this nation – our nation Ireland. Once again, I say THANK YOU! For those starting the next round, I say kudos; be proactive, confident, courageous, enthusiastic, hardworking a team-worker, but above all, enjoy the experience – it is priceless!



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