

Opening Power to Diversity



Evans Shirihuru

Placed with Maureen O’Sullivan TD from January to June 2012

Biography

As a journalist and political sceptic, for Evans, this experience is about gaining an insight into the Irish political system. Originally from Zimbabwe, he is acutely aware of the impact political decisions have on the everyday lives of people. Having resided in Ireland since 2007, he believes there is a necessity for increased dialogue between migrants and policy makers, as while the majority of the electorate only interact with the political system during elections, those without voting rights do so even less. Settled in Navan with his family, he has written on a freelance basis for Meath Post and Metro Éireann. As a participant of Near FM’s intercultural project he has also presented a number of radio programmes on the subject of interculturalism.

Diary

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It is not every day that you see your dreams fulfilled. In fact sometimes it is easier to convince yourself that it will never happen. I could not quite believe it when I successfully passed the selection process. Later, after some initial trepidation over my ID card, I worried the TD I had been paired with might change her mind at the last minute!

My first day was almost like my first day at school, but I need not have worried as everyone was very welcoming and supportive. I had to contain my excitement as I was shown into the Dáil chamber to observe the Tánaiste in the hot seat! To someone such as me it was like magic and I now ritually watch the debates for half an hour once a week.

Twice a week I make my way to Leinster House and smile as I walk straight through security thanks to my badge. Most of my time is spent helping with research. This is more important than it may first seem as it informs much of the content of the Dáil debates. All the information must be carefully collected from reputable sources and there is no room for error. I take this task very seriously; it is highly rewarding when I listen to the debates and know that I have contributed in my own small way. In addition to this I have expanded my own knowledge in the various areas including Animal Welfare, and Humanitarian Aid.

In conjunction with my day to day work, I have also attended a number of conferences including the YPAR (Young People at Risk) Conference at Clonliffe College in Dublin. Maureen O'Sullivan TD was Chair of the session on Education and it was eye opening for me as I was not aware of many of the difficulties faced by young people. Some of their stories were especially emotive and I was struck by the number of different groups dedicated to supporting vulnerable young people in Ireland.

Another of my favourite activities involves attending Committee Meetings and it is fascinating to see officials responding to public scrutiny. The importance of this is not lost on me as each policy that is discussed has a bearing on our lives and I have resolved to take time to participate in such initiatives.

When it comes to politics I would have labelled myself a cynic yet my impression of the TD's I have encountered to date is one of integrity and hard work. It amazes me that they are involved in everything from constituency work to complex issues such as housing and social welfare. I have grown to appreciate how strenuous their workload is. This opportunity has challenged my preconceptions about how removed politicians are from us, the public, and I have come to appreciate that the vast majority are dedicated to making a difference in our everyday lives.

"I am now more aware than ever before of the importance of partaking in the political process"

Recently, someone I know asked me if I had 'sold my soul yet?' This remark made me reflect on how for people struggling to make ends meet, those involved in politics are often considered removed from the real world. The shouting and heckling in the Dáil may appear chaotic but that is democracy. In some countries there is not the opportunity for such debates to take place, with the government left unaccountable to its citizens as a result.

Sitting in the balcony of the esteemed house of Oireachtas watching these debates and listening to the people who make decisions on behalf of the rest of us, it has become clear to me how essential it is to have a voice in a democracy. I have experienced first-hand how much TD's engage with their constituents, and how they ask tough questions to ministers on behalf of the electorate. Ministers are then obliged to answer those questions, providing the public with a chance to air their concerns. Without a voice, or representation it is easy to become disillusioned with the process and it can be

difficult to change people's attitudes as to what can be achieved. Without increased involvement by the migrant community there can be no true representation of their interests at policy making level.

Working in such close proximity to a TD is something most people do not get to experience and during my short time at Leinster House I have really come to feel at home. This is due in part to how welcoming my co-workers have been, as despite their busy schedules they have really ensured that I enjoy myself and have a worthwhile experience. Ironically now that I have started to become familiar with how politics work, my time on the programme is ending. While I may not run for independent for the foreseeable future, this is certainly not the end of my interest in the political sphere and if anything I am now more aware than ever before of the importance of partaking in the political process.

"I will certainly miss the people I worked with. They were the kindest people I ever met."

As I gazed through the office window digesting the concept of my internship coming to an end, I couldn't resist feeling sorry for myself. Saying goodbye to something is hard, especially if you like it. I didn't know how I was going to feel when I started the internship. I had mixed feelings about it but it all changed once I became settled.

I realised it was an opportunity to evaluate myself and to achieve what I want in my life. To me this was a great opportunity and I cherished every minute of it. Someone asked me if I was sad that I was going to leave the seat of power in Ireland. Another wanted to know if I will decide to go into politics fulltime. My answer has and will always be a firm no. Most people do not realise how demanding it is being a public servant, especially in the world of Facebook and Twitter. People now more than ever want their problems solved on the spot. At some level, I think it is good for democracy but it makes public service much more difficult.

The hectic nature of the job and the dedication of the staff is certainly something I will miss. I will miss interactions with people who called to the office every day. I felt I was part of something, I felt I was a force for good. I will miss the warmth of the people I met in corridors, be they TD's or members of staff. I will certainly miss the people I worked with. They were the kindest people I ever met. They did everything to make me feel comfortable. Overall I will certainly miss my boss Maureen. She gave me an opportunity which I think will enrich me in all my future plans.

My last day was the most memorable of them all. Everyone in the office made that day very enjoyable. If I had superpowers I would have dragged it maybe till to today. To me this didn't feel like a goodbye day, instead it felt like 'a see you later pal'. I have so many memories which I can't put in this article but will serve as a reminder to me on how good public service is. I will certainly not enter politics but to those who have the stamina I say go for it.



migrant project