

## ***Opening Power to Diversity***



**Jing Farrelly was placed with Denis Naughten TD from February to July 2014**

Jing is a Chinese national living in Kells, Co Meath. Jing has a wide range of experience and qualifications. Jing is a registered nurse but before she came to Ireland she also worked as a graphic designer, internet café manager and English teacher in China. While in Singapore she worked as a nurse but also as an IT professional. Jing has worked for 8 years in Ireland as a line manager and nurse with the Sisters of Charity. Jing has a Masters in Health Informatics from TCD and has a particular interest in disability issues.

### **Diary**

#### **Part 1**

It has been one month since I started my internship with Mr Denis Naughten TD. Coming from a non-political background, it was a last minute decision to send my application for the OPD intern program after its deadline. Fortunately, I was still included in the candidates' panel. In fact, my interview with Deputy Naughten was my first time to meet an Irish politician. A week later, while I was walking into Leinster House for my first working day, I still could not believe it was happening. As I was preparing for my interview, I searched the media on Deputy Naughten. I was curious about

his journey from Fine Gael Front Bench TD to Independent and how he made his decision during the closing down period of Roscommon Hospital A&E department.

Luckily, my curiosity didn't last long on the arrival of Dr Liam Week on my first working day. Deputy Naughten was interviewed by Dr Liam Week, who is a politics lecturer from UCC. Dr Week is writing a book on independents in Irish Democracy. During the interview, Dr Liam asked in-depth questions and Deputy Naughten's answers gave me a great insight of his story, especially the hard decision he made to vote NO against the closing of Roscommon A&E department. The incident itself had a huge impact on his political career, a decision which I can only describe as brave.

The first two weeks flew. Deputy Naughten organized some administrative tasks for me to do, such as typing, updating the database for his new constituency, responding to constituent's enquiries and replying to them either by email or by post, and researching topics on open disclosure policy. **Working with Deputy Naughten is really eye-opening;** I had first-hand experience of seeing him been interviewed by radio stations, watching him debating in the Dáil, attending briefings with him or on behalf of him, participating in the protest, and observing how NGOs lobby him. I even had a chance to attend committee meeting with the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa (AWEPA) with Deputy Naughten and sat on the same table with the Chinese Ambassador to Ireland, Mr Jianguo Xu, during the discussion of China's Policies in Africa.

It is interesting to observe how the Irish political system works. Though Irish politics is democratic to a certain extent, there are huge differences in political influences between the major parties, small parties and Independents in the parliament, with the major parties' voice much stronger and powerful. As an intern, I have the opportunity to observe Deputy Naughten at work, however, I cannot help from associating him and other Independents to the novel "the Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway, which I think has some similarities.

## **Part 2**

Time flies. It has been two and half months since I started my internship with Deputy Denis Naughten TD in Leinster House. **It is going to be the most valuable and influential six months in my life.** Deputy Naughten did not give me many prescribed working tasks to do; instead, he gave me a lot of freedom to explore different areas of interest to me and of benefit to him. For example, I had the opportunity to attend meetings and briefings with him, as well as choose to attend other committee meetings on issues that I am interested in myself. I learnt to carry a notebook with me all the time and take notes whenever there was new information and whenever sparkling ideas were generated. Deputy Naughten and I had a discussion after I referenced Independent Parliamentarians

to the novel "the Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway. He suggested that I look at the example of the sole trader with both internal and external support. I found this very interesting and realise that every Parliamentarian's circumstances, path and decision to become an independent or leave independent status is very varied.

Apart from that, it has been a great experience to learn how to gather information from news and current affairs in both international and national level and then to reflect and utilize it to pinpoint issues at constituency level, and vice versa. One of the most interesting aspects of my job was observing Deputy Naughten doing his job. A good example is the Irish Water clinics I attended with him. It was amazing to watch him getting the most out of those clinics by preparing and researching water related issues in advance, finding the problems, asking the right questions and putting forward possible solutions to solve constituency water issues. From him I learned how to quickly listen and process information, then to make a disadvantage become an advantage, and how to raise the right questions at the best possible time. I saw how quickly he built up relationships with different parties and people from different backgrounds and saw his skills in rising or easing the mood in the room, leading the trend of the conversation while at all times, making everyone comfortable. **If this is what politics is all about, politics would be a beautiful piece of art, not just still life, but a great working piece of art.** Unfortunately, we live in a world of reality.

Bearing that in mind, I started to ask questions. I asked questions about the National Dementia Strategy during the Alzheimer Society of Ireland briefing, which I attended on behalf of Deputy Naughten; I also asked questions about data protection and broadband speed issues during a telemedicine meeting I attended with Deputy Naughten. Having practiced asking questions, **I began to think about questions beyond "asking questions"**. For example, early last month, I attended a Transport Committee meeting regarding Bus Eireann's announcement of further cuts to rural services. Shortly after a Roscommon local TD gave an emotional speech to criticize Bus Eireann's short-sighted decision to cut route No. 21 west Ireland bus service, Deputy Naughten spoke about the same issue. Bus Eireann initially proposed to cut services on route No. 21 due to reduced passengers and un-profitability, however, this news was strongly criticized by people in the West and local politicians. As a result, Bus Eireann postponed the deadline of cutting the bus service to the end of summer, subject to further review. It also campaigned to "use it, or lose it!". This happened at the same time that some of the rural social welfare clinics were closed in County Roscommon.

It is relatively easy to ask questions, the opposition or anyone not in current government can easily accuse the government of having done something wrong, or claim that policies can be improved. The current government can always blame the opposition for blockage, or blame a previous

government what they did wrong; even if it was five or ten years ago. A public representative can patiently listen to and represent the constituents' interests and pass on the problems to other authorities to solve. However, to find a real solution to the issues is the most difficult part. A solution doesn't mean simply asking for more money or paying less tax, a better solution is to utilize whatever budget and resources are available through reform, and look for more investment outside the current regime. Other options could include bringing actions from local Government level to national level, fostering co-operation and support from communities, encouraging collaboration from industries and academics, and most importantly more "Joined-up thinking" across all department and state agencies.

### Part 3

The six months internship finally reached an end on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2015. My last week's work was fully loaded. On Tuesday, I accompanied Deputy Denis Naughten to the Agriculture House to meet graphic designer to finalize the details of his new campaign card. On the way back, Deputy Naughten greeted and chatted with everyone he met on the corridor as usual, he had to explain to everyone that the reason he appeared in Agriculture House was not because he was going to join the new party led by Independent TDs. It is like a duty of candour for him to reinstate his independent status whenever there is a new political party formed. The exercise of re-declaration of independent finally reached a pause after the launch of new Social Democrats Party the next day.

On my last working day, I photographed the launch of College Matters at Trinity College Dublin. It is an information booklet issued by Deputy Naughten for parents on financing the cost of going to college. We met a group of old age pensioners from Boyle, the eldest of which was a lady of 91 years of age. They enjoyed visiting Leinster House and watching Dáil & Seanad debate in live. One of the ladies told me how she participated in water protest in Co. Roscommon with her friends; all of them are above 70 years of age. That was some 'craic'. Back at the office, I tidied my desk for the last time. I went through the paperwork that I accumulated over the past six months. **I was surprised at the amount and range of the topics that passed through my fingers.** Some I encountered as an observer, some I spent time on researching, some I put in my own thought. Starting from the Health Disclosure Bill, the list went on to agriculture scheme penalties, Children and Family Relationship Bill, national ambulance service, national dementia strategy, fair deal nursing home scheme and elderly community living, telemedicine, Irish Water, policy-making, student grant, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill, Activity Based Funding for mental health service, closing down of post offices in rural Ireland, beef data and genomics scheme, SFI funding for basic science, minimal wage and living wage dilemmas, Consumer Protection Bill... The list goes on.

But those topics are only a small portion of what Deputy Naughten was dealing with; it makes me wonder how he manages to be familiar with all those current and non-current affair topics. He can answer my queries most of the time, other times he can point me to the right person or right resource. Like Rome was not built in one day, I believe it took him a lot of effort to acquire such an enormous amount of knowledge. Having a look at the debates in both the Dáil and the Seanad in the past six months, more than often we heard answers of “this is not the issue of my department” or “this issue belongs to someone else”. But isn’t it only one Ireland that we are trying to improve for a better future? Six months ago, I came to learn how politics works in Ireland, how law and policies are being made, how we can better improve the quality of life of people with disabilities and people from minority groups such as the Chinese community. Six months later, I left with frustration.



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