

Mireille Ndikumagenge was placed with Martin Heydon TD from February to July 2015

Biography

Now an Irish citizen Mireille is originally from Burundi. Mireille has extensive experience (13 years) of working in the development aid sector. She worked for Oxfam GB in Liberia and Senegal before working as the Desk Officer for GOAL in Sudan. She then accumulated significant lobbying experience in her 7 years working for Concern Worldwide in Ireland. She currently works with SPIRASI in Dublin as a psychotherapist. Mireille has a Masters in International Humanitarian Assistance from UCD. Mireille lives in Dublin 6.

Diary

Part 1

The process of recruitment for internship was interesting as I didn't expect the type of questions I would be answering to be given a chance to work with a TD. The interview with the TD was more a chat than grilling interview. It portrayed the spirit of the team. I was glad also to be given an opportunity to get exposure into Irish politics as a woman, from Burundi, Africa.

I had lot of expectations when I joined the Kildare south team. I had to learn all that a TD is involved in, research topics, understand how the TD makes decisions, what priorities to look at from a constituency level, national and European level, what issues are driven by the party and what is personal. As a leader, the TD has to consider what things people look at to elect them, what knowledge they need, their character, value of integrity, being approachable, etc. I wanted to know what their personal growth is in politics, how much do they take on during a campaign financially, personally and mentally.

My first day was in the constituency in Newbridge, Co. Kildare. The staff were very welcoming, I got a sense that I had been working with them for a while as they put you at ease, give you a task, and introduce you to the world of a member of the government with honesty. I got a chance to go for lunch, do some administrative work and plan some work for the next week.

My day in Leinster house was surreal; I had been in Leinster house at a Concern presentation on issues in Uganda with one of the committees but I never got to enter the building as staff. The intern pass allows you access the building as political staff with no denomination that you are different

from other staff. What is striking are the smiles inside the government building, you would not expect that in the midst of protest and public arousal. People have time to speak to you and my favourites are the ushers who always lend a hand when you are lost or can't find your way or need to meet someone.

I got a chance to be part of a Dáil vote on the Garda amendment bill and witness how people vote, the protocols in place when people enter the Dáil chambers, closing of curtains, locking the door, votes and screen display. The minute taking still amazes me and the time it takes for people to access that information and to be also accessible in the public domain. From an African point of view, this is accountability. My tour of Leinster House was funny and enriching as you get to know the history of the building itself, the tri-colour, the paintings, chambers, and the proclamation of the Irish nation. This is a good start in Leinster House as it gives you a bearing and teaches you things you will never learn outside. You also feel the spirit of leaders that fought for various things, independence, woman's right etc. My security tour was also informative and gave me a sense of safety.

My work has been focussed on drawing up an area profile of Kildare, reviewing Parliamentary Questions, and the agenda of the day to familiarise myself with the work involved when the TD is in Leinster House. I review both other TD's questions and the Ministers' responses. I looked at responses for any relevance to our constituency and what responses were needed for local members. I was involved also in writing canvassing letters, making a review list of primary school principals, sending letters to Departments on the response to housing issues raised by members and reviewing a briefing on the Child and Family bill on childcare. I drew up a summary paper showing issues debated on, government contribution and what would be relevant for Kildare south. Both issues are interesting for me given current debates in the media, to witness how TDs and the current Government in general take things on and act on national issues that affect Irish citizens. The Child and Family Bill is controversial and **I was amazed to see a TD leave their party because they didn't agree with elements of the bill. For me, this is democracy and also a sign that as leader you have to have integrity in what you believe in, and also for the party to pursue their values and agenda they set in place during Office.** This is something you don't often see in Africa.

The TD's schedule is hectic, the phone rings constantly, he has lots of paperwork related to committees work, the constituency, the party, the external party, colleagues and making time after all that to be with his family. At local level, he meets with the local council, canvasses, and responds to people's queries on minor to major issues in the community or nationally. The TD and staff work tirelessly, investing time and knowledge in answering constituent questions. They have knowledge

of the area, provide advice with wisdom, maturity, and seek advice where necessary. The matters are taken seriously as you seek for a link between members of the constituency's questions in the PQs. The PQs are evidence the questions are asked on behalf of the constituency members, the TD does what is asked of them. They are creative in how they communicate to the constituency i.e. press releases, newsletters, letters, canvassing, social media and phone. All show they work hard to represent people at various government meetings whilst managing the country's affairs and being a family member.

There seems to be collaboration between party members, sharing information before the Dáil or committee meetings. TDs attend an AGM locally which is a platform to share agendas. The TD also receives an achievement statement on research policy which is useful to assess where things are at as per the FG and labour manifesto.

The first month is going well, meeting people that I have seen on TV, meeting some party staff deputies, PA's with other interns, research policy staff, and communications staff.

The place that is most alive and where you can network is the busy restaurant. You get a chance to talk about the internship and realise the big opportunity you have to witness live decisions that are made for the future of your adopted country, your life and your wider community.

Part 2

This term has been a continuation of previous work. My work has been around drawing up a list of businesses in Kildare south as discussion develop on new funding available for small and medium businesses. I continue to review Parliamentary Questions and look for responses from the Minister. The latter provides insight on issues people are struggling with, delays in payment, national issues that affect the public etc.

I was involved also in the Fine Gael AGM which was a great opportunity to witness the sheer workload the TD is involved in, the demands place on TD, collaboration and support the TD provides to local councillors. It was also an opportunity to hear local councillor's updates and party administrative issues (fundraising opportunity, election of chair, secretary etc.). All members were very welcoming and happy to share their experiences. The plans for the year were also discussed. One could see the link between the Fine Gael national annual AGM and the local AGM, linked by agenda.

I looked at the Climate change action bill and drew up a summary on current issues at stake, (including concerns that I had been involved in working on in the past with a humanitarian INGO), the impact of climate change on farmers, new market for beef and if farmers can keep up with International and national demands in beef. I also looked at the EU vs Irish legislation and what current Government introduced in legislation. I was involved in writing letters to farmers on upcoming meeting in Kildare on their rights organized by Minister.

There was an elder's group that came for a tour in the Dáil. This was an opportunity for members of the constituency to learn about the history of Leinster House and for the TD to get to hear from his members. It was well organized. We are planning a visit for Spirasi students to visit the Dáil in May and to meet with the TD.

I am still amazed by the TD's management of a hectic schedule. At a local level, plans are ongoing on the by-elections in Carlow/Kilkenny for a local councillor, canvassing plans are ongoing and the TD's support is required. I learned that for any campaigns the Party appoints a campaign leader that will be representing and speaking to the media on issues.

I am half way through the internship, things are going well and I continue to meet various staff of Leinster House and Party staff.

Part 3

This term has been a continuation of previous work. My work involved continuing to draw up a list of businesses in Kildare south and new registered electorates. I continued to review parliamentary Questions, and looked for responses by Minister's. The latter activity provided insight on current issues constituency members are struggling with, delays in payment for various public, housing, medical, Defence force services issues and lack of services. It gives an overview of what is affecting the Irish and migrant communities.

I attended a briefing session by the Department of Social Protection on issues with the water grant, the new back to work family dividend, and update on the 2015 back to school clothing and footwear scheme. The rent supplement flexibility is an issue that affect people in Kildare South (it has been the majority of housing issues) and also affects people that become refugees. I had a chance to clarify a few things and the staff of the Department were approachable and happy to facilitate more support. All members were very welcoming and happy to share their experiences. I drew up a summary on issues discussed, what schemes were covered and shared it with Spirasi staff. I

reviewed a case on Adoption for a member of the constituency that has been rejected and I drafted a letter that will go to Minister of Children and Youth Affairs. I reviewed a survey on the Curragh plains, compiled feedback and printed information that fed into a report to go to Minister. I was involved in writing letters to constituency members regarding responses TD received regarding their cases from the Department of Social Protection. I looked at press releases to be sent to the constituency on the TD's work in their area. With the staff, we discussed information on social media coverage.

The Spirasi students and teachers came for a tour in the Dáil. This was an opportunity for members of constituent to learn about the history of Leinster House and for the TD to get to hear from migrant members. It was well organized.

At local level, plans are ongoing for the referendum, the message from the party on the appointment of the campaign leader, and posters are being distributed on the 'Yes' campaign. I witnessed engagement by the party on their position on the 'Yes' campaign on marriage equality. The TD is accessible, people feel welcome to speak to staff by their first name which shows they trust the services offered and that they are cared for. The TD at times will contact members directly to inform them of feedback he receives which is good way to maintain the relationship between the constituency and political staff.

I am at end of the internship, things went well for me, **I have been exposed to so much in a short period of time than I could have imagined.** I feel I have an understanding of Irish politics. I received regular positive feedback on the work I have done. **I could also see where my work went and how I contributed. I have also been kindly asked to continue supporting them.**

I thank TD Martin Heydon and his staff (Rosemary and Mary) for their openness to me learning, responding to all my questions and allowing me to be involved in many activities. I am forever indebted for their support, knowledge and wisdom on the work in politics. My thanks to Crosscare for selecting me for this internship, to Joe for his mentoring, sending us reminders and being there for support and clarifying things.