

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



**Peter Ozonyia**

**Placed with Ann Phelan TD from April 2013 to December 2013**

### **Biography**

Peter is from Nigeria and now lives in Dublin. He is currently completing a PhD in Sociology from Trinity College Dublin which focuses on issues of active citizenship, social justice and social inclusion of minority groups. Peter also has an MSoSc in Sociology from University College Dublin and a Higher Diploma in Sociology from UCD. In addition, he has completed a Postgrad. Dip. and MEd in Adult and Community Education from NUI Maynooth. Peter is currently working as a teaching assistant as part of his PhD studies in the Department of Sociology in Trinity and is also a tutor/facilitator at Hartstown Community School in Clonsilla, Co. Dublin.

### **Diary**

*'I am increasingly developing the confidence that I believe could turn me into a politician in the future'.*

Prior to being selected as one of the successful OPD interns, I have always had very strong feelings for becoming a political officeholder in order to help to enact and implement effective legislative laws and governmental policies that can solve societal problems. However, my serious lack of

experience and training in politics makes me feel like it was a dream that may be very hard to realise or achieve. But as I can see today my OPD internship is about to change this phantasm from a mere 'pipe dream' into a concrete 'fact' of life, someday in the near future. I am increasingly developing the confidence that I believe could turn me into a politician in the future. Being placed with Deputy Ann Phelan of the Labour party representing the Carlow-Kilkenny constituency has been a very humbling experience and highly rewarding and educative so far. Because I love politicians who actually get things done for society in 'representative democracy', I was very eager and keen to understand through first-hand experience and observation how elected politicians conduct their duties of policymaking and politicking on a day-to-day basis. This is partly due to my interest as a Political Sociology doctoral research student currently studying the politics and policies of citizenship in Ireland. It is also due to the fact that I have always had a feel for politics, and would love to hold political office in order to help solve societal problems through effective governmental policymaking and implementation. I have never had such an opportunity before now. So participating in the OPD scheme has provided me with this chance of a life-time.

### **My First Day in Leinster House**

My one month experience so far inside Leinster House has been beyond my expectations and imagination. I came here without any prior experience and training, yet I was immediately assigned important tasks straight away from day one, such as attending Committee and Joint Committee meetings on behalf of Deputy Phelan as well as being tasked with researching important issues and drafting brief reports and sensitive letters with international reach. More recently, I have also been busy helping to organise and tidy the constituency's database that houses postal mailing lists.

My first day in Leinster House remains a day I will never forget. I officially started my placement on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2013 and, on that same day, I was surprisingly asked by Deputy Phelan to go and represent her in three different Committee meetings. The first one was a Committee briefing lobbied by an Irish NGO (Clean Clothes Campaign Ireland) about the recent Bangladesh industrial disaster and the need for the Irish Government and parliamentarians to put strong political pressure on Bangladeshi Government authorities to implement proper industrial safeguards in their country's booming 'Sweat Shop' factories. This briefing started around 9.30am. Deputy Phelan was interested in attending but could not because she had to attend another important Select Committee hearing at 10am, so she asked me to go and represent her instead. Because I came a little bit late to that Bangladeshi briefing, I had to ask the NGO lobbyists for some clarifications regarding the issue they had been presenting and surprisingly they responded to me as if I was one of the TD's. That was what freaked me out big time as I was flabbergasted with overwhelming feelings of importance and a sense of power.

That experience is one that I will never forget. At that moment I felt so powerful and like a very important person who was seen as capable of making things happen for these lobbyists. It was so overwhelming and very empowering to be sitting in a Committee briefing with other TD's, listening and questioning lobbyists on the issue they were presenting. After my first meeting, I was also asked to attend another Committee briefing on the Omagh bombing and, again later in the afternoon, I was sent to a Joint Committee briefing on the proposed Prostitution Bill. All these three briefings served as an eye-opener for me into how parliamentarians are being lobbied formally to support a bill, or vote against it becoming a priority for Government. It was a big learning curve for me.

### **Have I learned anything so far?**

Yes, I have been learning and will continue to learn. Working as a member of staff inside Ireland's political powerhouse is very educating and empowering to foreign-born immigrants like me who have little or no knowledge of Irish politics and political culture. So far I have been privileged to meet a few interesting TD's who I would have normally seen only on the TV. Nowadays, whenever I watch the news with my children I always tell them that I know that TD and that I was actually talking with him that same day. One day, my eldest son who is 11 years said to me: "Daddy since you know all these important politicians on TV and are actually working with them inside Leinster House and even having lunch with them, when am I also going to appear on the TV?" My daughter quickly added that that would be very cool and that very soon daddy will also be appearing on the TV. I have also used this opportunity of working in Leinster House to teach my children who are all Irish-born citizens about Irish politics and the kind of work I do as an intern for a TD.

The fact that Deputy Phelan provided an office table for me inside her main office has also given me the best learning opportunity, not only through my daily direct observations of her behaviour as a politician but also by sometimes sitting in on important meetings with different clients from time to time inside her office. It is also worthy to mention that she has taken me to lunch in the Leinster House restaurant on more than three occasions. Very importantly also, more than twice now since I started my placement, Deputy Phelan has asked me whether I am learning anything. I humbly replied to her that I have learnt so much in a very short time. Apart from my first day experience of attending Committee and Joint Committee meetings, I have been learning many things from her. For example, I have been very privileged to see how she attends to her duties as a parliamentarian on a daily basis, especially how she tries to solve the problems of the members in her constituency. I am glad to be placed with a politician who wants to see things happen in politics and who is actually going the extra mile to make those things happen for ordinary men and women. I now see my Deputy as a role model to me for whom I will proudly owe a very strong gratitude to. She is truly an amazing woman who is not just devoted to her constituency but who is also very generous and kind-hearted towards her two key Personal Assistants as well as to me.



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