

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



**Sheelan Yousefizadeh was placed with Marcella Corcoran Kennedy TD from February to July 2014**

### **Biography**

Sheelan was born and raised in Iran until the age of twelve and is now a naturalised Irish citizen. She studies Genetics in Trinity College Dublin, but is currently taking a year out of college and hopes to return in 2014. She has worked with the Immigrant Council of Ireland as an Ambassador for Change Representative (Mentoring Programme for Young People from Migrant Backgrounds) and for Amnesty International in a number of advocacy positions. Sheelan has demonstrated a keen interest in culture, community and cross-cultural dialogue through a number of initiatives. She is founder and festival director for Nowruz (celebration of Persian Spring New Year) and hosts her own intercultural radio show which details experiences of migrants living in Ireland today. Sheelan has also been actively involved in politics. She represented the Dublin City Comhairle na nÓg (youth parliament) at the National Executive and has met with TD's and government officials to seek support in making positive changes for young people in Ireland. Sheelan has received a number of awards for her work and academic achievements, including a senior academic award from the 2008 Bank of Ireland Student awards and an Amnesty International Ireland award for Student Activist 2011-12. In 2013 Sheelan was crowned the winner of Miss Ethnic Ireland.

### **Diary**

#### **Part 1**

My time in Leinster House over the past four weeks has been very interesting and diverse. I didn't have any particular expectations before starting my internship. I had previously been to Leinster House and had attended a couple of Joint Oireachtas Committee meetings so I was a little familiar with the sort of environment that I was going into. I was more excited and eager to start working with my TD as I was particularly interested to learn about the day to day life of a female politician in Leinster and how they manage to balance their work, constituency commitment and family life altogether.

I was particularly interested in the work of my TD, Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy, who sits on both the [Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht](#) committee and [Justice, Defence and Equality](#) committee. Deputy Corcoran Kennedy has been very supportive from my very first day in Leinster House when she took me for a personal tour of the house to make me feel more at home before I started my internship. On our way around the house I was introduced to various people from the party including Minister for Children & Youth Affairs Frances Fitzgerald. Everyone that I've met so far has been very pleasant and welcoming. It feels like everyone in Leinster House is like one big family, despite the political division between the different parties everyone shows respect to each other which is admirable.

**I really appreciated the one on one time my TD has tried to give to me over the past few weeks despite her busy schedule.** One of the most striking things for me so far has been observing how well my TD's office is run on a day to day basis and how she always seems to be on top of all of her tasks. My TD has a very strong and supportive team behind her who run the constituency office back in Offaly, which I've come to realize is very important to be able to manage everything accordingly.

On my very first day I was asked to do some research on the upcoming Down Syndrome Bill which was going to be presented at the Dáil the following day by Independent TD Finian McGrath. The bill proposed to give children with Down syndrome statutory entitlement to resource teaching hours. I was delighted to see that my TD was able to use some of the key points that I had researched in her speech the following day in support of the proposed Bill.

I spent most of my second week researching and looking into the proposed plans for the wind export project between Ireland and UK which could see the export of electricity produced by wind farms in Ireland to the UK, in order to help them reach their energy demands over the next 10-20 years. This was a project that I was not very familiar with but found quite interesting. I spent a considerable amount of time reading articles about Global Warming, Renewable Energy and the proposed plans

for offshore energy export that was being proposed in preparation for the upcoming Environmental Committee meeting on this topic.

I was able to accompany my TD to the meeting with representative from Bord na Mona, Element Power and Climate Change sceptics Turn 180. Despite being well briefed on the issues being discussed I found it quite hard to follow the discussion of the session which lasted a couple of hours. It was interesting to see that despite numerous questions from different TD's, the parties involved were able to easily avoid addressing some of the topical issues in question.

Coming up to International Women's week Marcella got me to work on a few projects related to the week which I really enjoyed. This included drafting a short piece for a "Women in Parliaments, Inspiring change" online poster campaign.

Aside from the research that I've been carrying out my day to day duties include general office administration, collection and sorting of the post, dealing with phone queries, drafting bullet points for some of her speeches and providing assistance where I can. In the meantime I also had a chance to attend a few Dáil sessions and listen in from the gallery to get a better understanding of the running order of the Dáil session and the Seanad.

Overall I've really enjoyed my first four weeks at Leinster House and I feel that through the research I have been carrying out for Marcella on different issues I have learned a lot more about the political structure in Ireland such as the different stages that Bills need to go through before they are passed, how Oireachtas Committee sessions work, how questions can be submitted and so on. Despite having no background in Politics, unlike most other interns in Leinster House, I don't feel I'm at any disadvantage, if anything I feel the work that Marcella has given me has been very much in line with my own personal interests and background.

Because my TD's office is based down in County Offaly I haven't had a chance to go down to her constituency, and therefore I'm really looking forward to getting an opportunity to do that as I'm sure that the work that is carried out is very different compared to a day in Leinster House.

## **Part 2**

It's fair to say that the past few weeks have been a very intense and interesting time in Irish politics, with the resignation of the Minister for Justice and Defence Alan Shatter and the appointment of new minister in his position. The Gardai whistle-blower case and other stories that have come to light because of it have prominently dominated Irish media and are also a topical issue in the discussions in the chamber. It's been an eye opening experience to witness how quickly things turn

around in politics. Just a few weeks ago a motion of no confidence against Alan Shatter was defeated with the support of the coalition parties, and yet prior to the launch of the Guerin report, the minister unexpectedly resigned from his role.

In parallel to this my experience over the past few weeks has been very diverse. Marcella has been kind enough to bring me along to many events and engagements. The highlight of the past few months has been the XXII Congress of the European People's Party (EPP) which took place in the Convention Centre. Hosted by EPP member party Fine Gael, this landmark Congress marked the launch the EPP's EU-wide campaign for the 2014 European elections. The event gathered more than 2,000 participants, including the leaders of EU institutions, heads of state and government, party leaders, ministers, national and European parliamentarians, and delegates from EPP member parties throughout Europe. The Congress selected the EPP's candidate for President of the European Commission, who will lead the Party's EU-wide campaign for the European elections which will take place from 22 to 25 May 2014.

Marcella signed me up as a volunteer for the congress. I was assigned to help out at one of the hotels where some of the delegates were staying, to welcome guests and direct them to the convention centre and help them with other queries. I really enjoyed engaging with the delegates at the hotel and was met with a positive response throughout the day. I was also given a pass and had the opportunity to attend the first day of the congress. **It was really a once in a lifetime opportunity to be in the same room with some most influential decision makers from all around Europe.** I was able hear from the Ambassador of Georgia and other European Countries. I was particularly amazed when I realized that Ukrainian political leader Yulia Tymoshenko was also in the room with us. This was at a particularly poignant time during the Ukrainian Russian conflict. Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who was released from prison after the overthrow of the country's former government last month, warned that if Russia was allowed to annex Crimea, the rest of Ukraine would be next. During her speech at the congresses' plenary session, she thanked the EPP members for their support, "Here, in this room, I see the strongest political family that can protect the freedom of my people".

During international Women's week Marcella and I went along to an exhibition organized by the All Party Interest Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development, to celebrate International Women's Day. This photographic exhibition was put together by members of the All Party interest group who each picked a picture in relation to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development. It was wonderful to see that some male TD such as Eric Byrne and Aodhán O'Ríordáin had also contributed to the exhibition.

Marcella also took part in a campaign run by Women in Parliaments Global Forum (WIP) for International Women's day which aimed to share as many experiences as possible from female Parliamentarians through the project "Women in Parliaments, Inspiring change." We worked together to create her statements and words of inspiration for the postcards which were then shared through social media across Europe. **It was inspiring to learn about Marcella's background and what motivated her to get involved in politics.** Having seen her day to day activity in the office, I think it's fair to say that hard working politicians from outside of Dublin have a much harder task at hand than those that represent Dublin or nearby constituencies. As we come close to the European and General Elections it's becoming particularly difficult to manage constituency, Dáil and committee responsibilities but I'm really looking forward to intense few month ahead.

Some of the other engagements this month included a showcase event for Youth Work Ireland Week. The showcase highlighted the great work of Youth Work Ireland Members across the country to deliver quality services to young people. The showcase also aimed to highlight practical ways politicians can help, at no extra costs, to support Youth Work in Ireland, such as changing the regulation for Garda Vetting to ensure that vetting is portable for a 2 year period, thus reducing waiting time and making volunteering easier. I also accompanied Marcella to an Immigrant Council of Ireland conference titled "Stop Trafficking! Tackling Demand for Sexual Services of Trafficked Women and Girls". The conference was of particular interest as it tied in with some of the work that I had been doing on the Equality and Justice Committee's Domestic & Sexual Violence Bill and recommendations. The committee is currently finalising a Report into the hearings on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

The topics of my research have been very diverse and interesting, which goes to reflect the diversity of the work of TDs and the issues they have to deal with on a day to day basis. To date I've worked on Patients and Neurological Support, Wind Turbine Regulation Bill, Restorative Justice Bill and the Children and Family Relationships Bill. I also spent a considerable amount of time this month organizing and filing various different bills so they can be easily retrieved. Sorting through hundreds of bills, I came across a few interesting ones that caught my attention, particularly one titled "Brighter Evenings Bill" under which the Minister for Justice and Equality is required to prepare and publish a report on the costs and benefits of advancing the clock by one hour. I suppose to this goes to show the level of input that government and legislation put forward by them has in our Daily lives.

With just under 3 months remaining from my internship, I hope to get more involved with some of the issues being debated in Parliament and hope I can dedicate more time to attending briefing and Joint Committee Sessions.

### **Part 3**

It's hard to believe that my internship at Leinster House has already come to an end. My journey over the past six months has been very rewarding and exciting to say the least. For me, the last 3 months of the internship were probably the most intriguing as I had the opportunity to observe a lot of critical changes that took place in the house and feel like I was a part of it all.

Things took a very interesting turn following the Easter recess and the launch of the Guerin report, which was commissioned by the government earlier this year to review allegations of Garda misconduct by whistle-blower Sgt Maurice McCabe. This was followed by the resignation of Minister of Justice, Equality & Defence Alan Shatter which put a huge spotlight on the effectiveness of Garda Síochána & Justice Reform in Ireland just before the local and European Elections. Since Marcella is a member of the Equality and Justice Joint Oireachtas Committee, I spent a good deal of time familiarising myself with this report. In order to further investigate the findings of this report, the Secretary General of the Department of Justice and Equality was invited to come before committee.

**I have to say that this Oireachtas Committee session was probably one of the most intriguing sessions I attended during my time in Leinster House. Having had done so much research into the report and some of the allegations, I was genuinely interested to learn about the other angles of the story.** Given the nature of this case and the fact that a new commission of investigation was set up to look further into some of the allegation, the Secretary General refused to answer many of the questions put to him as he believed that they would violate the terms of reference of the commission. What impressed me most during this session was how the TD's were able to question the Secretary General in different ways in order to get all the facts on record. Watching these events unfold thought me that working for the government carries a lot of responsibilities and that you could be held accountable for every little action and decision that you make.

Having seen my interest in this case and the Justice reform agenda which was now a priority for the government, Marcella encouraged me to attend a Consultation Seminar in Farmleigh House which was organized by the Department of Justice and Equality. This consultation session was attended by the Minister, Frances Fitzgerald, the acting Commissioner of the Grada Síochána, Noirin O'Sullivan and representatives from government and non-governmental agencies and charities such as Amnesty International, SIPTU and the Equality Commission, all of whom wanted to contribute to the

discussion around restoring confidence in policing, the roles and responsibilities of a new Garda Authority and the challenges facing policing in Ireland. This was one of the most rewarding events that I went to during my internship. The fact that so many different organizations and stakeholders were present at this seminar to express their ideas and solutions to some of the issues being discussed was a sign of real democracy in action.

Working in Leinster House around the time of the Local & European elections was a very interesting and busy time. For TD's like Marcella who's constituency is not based in Dublin, this was a particularly busy time, as there was now the extra responsibility of canvassing on behalf of their party or in support of a local candidate in their constituency while continuing their day to day job in Dublin. Observing these elections thought me a lot about politics in Ireland. I was finally able to distinguish between the role of local and national government and how they work together. While following the elections I started to notice how a lot of local candidates were making promises such as bringing down the water charges, increasing the number of medical cards in their election manifestos, all of which are national issues set by the national government, where local government has little say. Yet it seemed that the candidates were trying to use these topical issues to secure more votes instead of discussing real local issues such as the creation of parks & recreational facilities and park, maintenance of a clean city etc.

Coming up to the last few weeks at Leinster House before the summer recess, much of the work was focused on finalising some bills and legislations that were before the house. These included the Radiological Protection Bill which intended to merge the Radiological Protection Agency with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Irish Human Rights Equality Commission bill which saw the merger between the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

A couple of highlights of my last few weeks in Leinster House included working on Marcella's speech for an event organized by GLEN, the Gay & Lesbian Equality Network during Pride week. Much of the focus of this event was on how political parties should be working together to encourage the public to register and vote for the upcoming referendum on Marriage Equality, and the language that should be used. I also got the opportunity to meet with members of the Mixed Race Irish, a community made up of Irish people with mixed heritage, many of whom were brought up in Mother and Baby homes and later sent to industrial school in Ireland. The group were meeting and lobbying with different politicians to add their voice to that of countless others who were brought up in the Mother and Babies home. Meeting with this group really opened my eyes to the scale of the discrimination and abuse they faced in Ireland, not only being considered inferior because of being born outside of wedlock, but also because of the colour of their skin and ethnic background. But

what was most striking to me was that Ireland's immigration story goes back much further than I had expected.

I finally had a chance to spend a day in my TD's constituency office which is based down in Birr, County Offaly. The day started with a visit to Birr Theatre and Arts Centre which plays a very active role in the local community, organizing various programs and festival, including Offline Film Festival, for people of all ages. They are also involved in organising Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival and Offline Film Festival. I met with Emma the director of the theatre who was able to give us a tour of the theatre and tell me more about some of their projects. Being involved with organizing a cultural festival back in Dublin, I found this meeting with Emma to be very interesting and thought-provoking. It was great to hear all about how a small town like Birr has managed to keep the arts alive through its various festival and programs. Back in the office I met with one of Marcella's staff, Geraldine, and was given the task to work on some constituency business. These included writing two statements for the local media on two events that Marcella has attended during the week and helping Geraldine to follow up on query which required a bit of research and a parliamentary question to the Minister of Health. Although my visit to the constituency was short, it was still great to get a chance to see my TD's work and her interaction with the local people who she represents back in Dublin.

Before starting this internship I didn't know a lot about my TD. Having worked for her for six months, I've started to build a great respect for her and the work she's doing. Her dedication, passion and positive attitude towards the role is really admirable. As a woman I've learned from her as a role model in how all woman can have it all, a family and a successful role in politics while also managing other things on the side. Observing my TD's work has thought me the importance of having a strong team and support structure behind you, having everything well documented (that includes every phone call, query or correspondence with someone), while also making sure that you take care of your mental wellbeing and having some me time throughout the day (that means leaving your phone in the office during lunchtimes). While this internship has thought me a lot, it's the little opportunities that I'd remember the most, such as getting the chance to write up a proposal on a practical way that the government can encourage more political participation amongst the migrant community to the new Minister for Equality and Justice, which was very welcomed by the minister.

**The OPD scheme has changed my mind about how I thought of politics in Ireland. I now see that it's much more locally focused and much less informal that I had previously thought. Leinster house is always open to visitors and the public.** Anyone who is really interested in particular debate in parliament can get permission to enter the house and seat in the gallery. This was something that

I was not aware of before, and very different to how things are back in my home country. The scheme has made me realize that in order to successfully run for politics in Ireland you need to have strong roots and connections within your local community to have their support behind you. Even though I have lived in the same area in Dublin for almost 10 years, I've come to see that in order to build a potential career in politics I need to be much more engaged with my community than I am at the moment.

Looking back now I can happily say that this experience has been very fulfilling and rewarding. I initially applied for the OPD scheme as I wanted to enhance my understanding of the Irish Political system and to evaluate whether a job in politics was the right thing for me. In the end I was able to walk away with a lot more than I had initially expected, having had the chance to try my hands at all the different aspects of political life, from the tedious office work, to the more exciting part of contributing to my TD's work through research, to the rewarding part of seeing that research being used in a speech, a questions or a comment and in a small way contributing to the bigger decision making process. So will I consider a role in politics in the future? I think political representation of new communities is crucial in Ireland at the moment and this experience has restored my confidence in my capabilities and has reminded me of why I've always been passionate about politics. There are still a lot of challenges particularly for migrants to get involved, but maybe in a couple of years from now... who knows!



**migrant project**