

## *Opening Power to Diversity*



**Voltaire Bicomong**

**Placed with Aodhán Ó'Riordáin TD from September 2012 to March 2013**

### **Biography**

Prior to moving to Ireland in 2005 from the Philippines, Voltaire held various posts over a twenty year period, including Policy Enforcement Officer, within the Bureau of Local Government Finance in the Department of Finance in the Philippines. He holds a Bachelor of Science and Civil Engineering from Manila National University, along with a Bachelor of Law from Arellano Law School in Pasay City. In 2000, he passed the Bar Examinations for the Supreme Court of the Philippines. His previous experience includes time as a Civil Engineer and he has worked as a CAD Operator since moving to Ireland, and attained a certificate in AutoCAD in 2007.

## Diary

*“Every Wednesday morning when I walk through the main portal along Kildare Street of Leinster House, proudly wearing my pass card, I cannot help but feel a certain kind of transformation”*

“What is politics?” This question was asked by my little girl Alaina, 5, who has taken interest in what I have been doing lately since I told her that I am working in politics at Leinster House. I was a bit thrown off guard by this question. I better come up with a simple definition, being careful not to mention words that could trigger an endless train of questions from this curious five-year-old. This is the best I could come up with: “Politics is when important people gather together to make decisions for a brighter future for kids like you”. Her next question really threw me off. “Are you going to be important people (sic) at Leinster House, too?” I answered “Yes, maybe.” “Wow!” she exclaimed and off she went with little Aidan (3) in tow back into their own small world. Apparently, she did not realize that to be one of the ‘important people’ means that, among other things, I have to hurdle the barriers that have often discouraged people from migrant backgrounds from seeking public office.

I have always been interested in politics. For quite a number of years, I have worked in the government of my own country. During those years, politics was part of everyday life in government. When I came here in Ireland to join my wife seven years ago, I did not have any idea how a migrant like me could get involved in politics until I learned of the Opening Power for Diversity (OPD) Scheme of Crosscare Migrant Project. I applied as a volunteer. I did not expect much. I felt blessed to get through the initial stages of the selection process. My wife was even more excited than I was that word has got around my small community about my application and that I was going to work at Leinster House although a TD had yet to make a decision about it. It generated a lot of interest among them that they wanted to know more about it and I obliged them with my knowledge of the scheme limited as it is, if only to make them aware that politics affects our lives one way or another.

It was a pleasant surprise that my application got the nod from a TD of Dublin North Central. I was paired with Aodhán Ó’Riordáin TD Labour. I was given the honor to shadow Deputy Ó’Riordáin in his office at Dáil Éireann. For two days each week for the next six months, I am going to be not only observing but also working with Deputy Ó’Riordáin in his Dáil office as well as in his constituency office. I did a quick research on the issues that Deputy Ó’Riordáin was involved in to prepare myself for the task. Most notable of which was the issue of forced labour that he raised at the Dáil. Being a migrant worker myself, it is heartening to note that somebody like Deputy Ó’Riordáin can voice out the concerns and issues that migrant workers are facing today. Such a gesture shall forever be lauded by the migrant community.

The 19<sup>th</sup> of September was my first official day at the Dáil. After meeting me at the lobby, Rory, a brilliant parliamentary assistant to Deputy Ó’Riordáin, immediately showed me everything around the office that I will be working on: files, folders, internet accounts, phone calls, etc. I was quickly greeted by the TD who had a tight schedule that day as it was the second day of the opening of the Dáil sessions coming off the summer holidays. I was also introduced to other people in the Labour party working with

other TDs. Everyone I met made me feel very welcome. I felt assured that my stay in the Dáil albeit temporary will be worthwhile.

We proceeded to the Dáil chamber where the session was going on. I found a seat at the visitors' gallery and stayed there for a while since it was my first time to watch the Leader's Questions where the Taoiseach was answering questions from opposition TDs about certain government actions and policies. There was shouting and a lot of interruptions. There were bursts of laughter every time somebody injected a bit of humor in an otherwise heated discussion. This is democracy at work where everyone has the right to be heard and to speak or even shout. They may have diametrically-opposed views and opinion on certain issues but at the end of the day, I believe they will agree on two things: that they agree to disagree, i.e., leave each other to his or her view and live with it; and that they are fighting on the same side – the people of Ireland.

Later, I was asked to represent Deputy Ó'Ríordáin in the briefing about the Connacht-Ulster Alliance to be held at lunch time at Buswell's Hotel just across the road from Leinster House. It was about a new strategic partnership formed among three leading institutes of technology in Connacht and Ulster for the purpose of achieving technological status. Later that same afternoon, I was asked to attend a briefing on the so-called "Cuban 5" wherein the Cuban Ambassador made an appeal to all Irish politicians to support their campaign for a re-trial of the cases of five Cuban nationals convicted of terrorism in the US.

The foregoing all happened on my first official day at the Dáil. The issues that I was exposed to were only a small fraction of those that the TD is dealing with every single day. It is so overwhelming. By far, it is on top of my list of memorable days at the Dáil.

The succeeding days made me more relaxed as I settled into the new environment where I will be working in the next few months. Rory and Noreen, another brilliant assistant to the TD, were more than willing to answer all my questions and to help me understand the TD's work both at the Dáil Office and the constituency office.

Aodhán Ó'Ríordáin TD is vice-chair of the Dáil Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection. In the succeeding weeks, I was exposed to the issues in the education sector. To familiarize myself, I was asked to read the Children's Mental Health Coalition Submission. It made me realize about the growing problem of mental health among the students and how it can be addressed through early intervention in schools, among other proposals. Other concerns of interest included the recently announced changes to the Junior Cert Cycle and the current rankings of universities in Ireland. But to better understand all of these as I knew nothing about the educational system of Ireland, I needed to do research over the internet and ask questions as well.

At the constituency office, leaflets for public meetings on "Youth Unemployment" and "Marriage Equality" were prepared. Noreen led us around the Drumcondra area where the leaflets are to be distributed. It was a fresh experience for me as I have not done leaflet distribution before. At present, I am assisting Noreen in the creation of a database of people in the constituency with local issues that

were given attention. This is one of my favorites as I get to practice my skills in using MS software packages.

So far, it has been a learning experience for me. I wish that in the coming months I will be more involved in Deputy Ó'Ríordáin's work.

Every Wednesday morning when I walk through the main portal along Kildare Street of Leinster House, proudly wearing my pass card, I cannot help but feel a certain kind of transformation from being a 'nobody' to somebody who is connected to the Irish political system. A few months back, I did not have the slightest idea that I would be working in Leinster House. No words can ever express what I am feeling at the moment. It is just so amazing. I could only wish it will never end.

At this point, with only two (2) months into the scheme, I could say with pride that I have observed first hand Aodhán Ó'Ríordáin TD in the performance of his duties and functions which demand no less than total dedication and commitment coupled with a genuine desire to serve the public. I can only envy the sense of fulfillment he derives out of this noble task. Will I be following in his footsteps to be one of the 'important people at Leinster House' as my daughter would probably wish me to be? I have to admit that I am not made of sterner stuff to follow the path to a successful political career. I could get involved in politics in some other capacity though. But still I am keeping my options open. Maybe at the end of the OPD scheme, I will be more inspired.



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