

EXPERIENCE OF A FIRST TIME TD IN DÁIL EIREANN

Michael Colreavy TD Sligo/North Leitrim

WHILE I KNEW we would secure a very good vote on 25th February 2011, I felt it would be very difficult to win a seat. We were up against strong opposition candidates and, most of all, we were acutely aware of just how difficult it is for a candidate living in the politically divided county of Leitrim to win a seat. And yet, thanks to an outstanding campaign team and a voting population who wanted real change, we won the seat against the odds.

The count was a tense, exciting affair. Commentators who felt our vote would not hold strong in Sligo were surprised at the level of support we received from Sligo town and county. I was not surprised; although originally from Leitrim, I was reared, educated and worked in Sligo, and my brothers, sister, nephews and nieces live in the town and county.

I did not and do not regard myself as a politician. I regard myself as a community representative. I never had envisaged myself as a TD and was quite content to continue my work representing the people on Leitrim County Council. When the early morning count declaration announced that I had been elected a TD, I felt a range of emotions; the main one was a sense of profound honour that so many people had placed so

much trust in me, to protect and promote their interests for the next five years.

On Wednesday 9th March 2011 my family, campaign team, and many supporters first joined the other 13 Sinn Féin TDs as we entered Dáil Eireann. I was acutely aware of the burden of expectation placed on the shoulders of this Dáil team by a population desperate for change. However, I did not feel in any way over-awed.

Leinster House itself is a massive labyrinth of rooms, offices, stairs and corridors. For the first three days each new TD is assigned a Liaison Officer—an Oireachtas official who meets and guides TDs through the physical layout and the protocols governing Dáil and Committee debates, including how to get matters down for debate. The Liaison Officers are priceless, I referred to mine as my Leinster House Guardian Angel! We were also given information packs regarding the Business of the Dáil and Committee meetings; lists of TD/Ministerial offices and phones etc. Sinn Féin also assigned 2 or 3 TDs to sitting TDs (in my case, Pearse Doherty TD), to act as a mentor for my first couple of weeks. His assistance, advice and support was invaluable.

There is also a "One-Stop Shop" for TDs open 9am to 5pm Monday to

Friday; staffed by Oireachtas staff and offering advice to TDs regarding the place, its functions and protocols.

There is an excellent Library and Research facility—again staffed by Oireachtas staff—who carry out research and produce relevant reports to help TDs as we debate topics.

Since my first arrival in Dáil Eireann as an elected representative, I have been learning the business. For the first six weeks I had no office or Parliamentary Assistant. I spent a lot of time in the Dáil chamber observing proceedings and my car boot was my office. Despite this, I still managed to put down questions for debate regarding breast cancer services at Sligo General, and the splitting of Leitrim for electoral purposes, in my first two weeks. Unfortunately the debate has not resulted in the changes I requested—yet! Thankfully I now have an office, a Parliamentary Assistant and a Constituency Assistant so the work is much better organised.

I have been appointed the party spokesperson on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I have spoken several times in the Dáil on matters of local and national importance. As well as the important questions mentioned above I have also spoken on the need to stop



penalising ordinary men, women and children for the greed and incompetence of bankers, developers, and their golden circle politicians. I have argued that taxation should be progressive—those who can afford to pay most should be billed most. Like all Sinn Féin TDs I draw down only the average industrial wage, using the balance to staff and operate constituency offices in Sligo and Manorhamilton. I have also commenced a programme of clinics the length and breadth of the constituency, to ensure people can access their representative.

Some people have asked me whether the work is enjoyable. The job is not family-friendly; the hours are long; there is a big impact on family life; there are long days and nights away from home, but I would not change a thing. I don't

think I would describe it as enjoyable but it certainly is challenging.

I find that I do not think like a politician. Far from being a disadvantage, this is a distinct advantage because I am not predictable when dealing with the political system and with the civil service. I hold and will always hold the deep sense of privilege and honour to represent so many people. I cannot think of anything more important I could be doing right now.

There is a huge sense of responsibility in trying to meet the hopes and expectations of those who supported and voted for me. I will try my very best to help ensure life and living are better for those I represent and that, in five years time, people will say their faith and confidence in me was a good investment.

New Leitrím TD, Michael Colravay with his family and his supporters outside the Dáil

LEITRIM GETS CLOSER TO THE SAM MAGUIRE!



Julie Harvey Clontarf, Photographed with the Sam Maguire Cup when the Dublin team recently visited St Declan's Secondary School, Cabra where she teaches. Julie is the daughter of Brendan Harvey, 2011 Leitrím Guardian Person of the Year, from Aughnasheelin.