

coverstar

After the recent resignation of Olwyn Enright from politics, the question of women in positions of power has once again been making headlines. In this special one-off feature, Liz O'Donnell, former Minister for State and one of the few women in our history to serve in cabinet, writes for *Irish Tatler* on women in public life and how the battle has only begun in their gaining real influence on Irish society.

Photography by Barry McCall  
Styling by Sarah Rickard

Metallic dress (€495) and metallic jacket (€320) by Joanne Hynes @ Brown Thomas





# “the status of women is transformed. But there is unfinished business”

Irish society is currently dusting itself down in the wake of economic and financial collapse. This means rebuilding our disgraced and degraded institutions such as banks, boards and regulatory and financial authorities. Much of what passed for ‘public life’ has been diminished by revelations of bad governance and downright corruption. People are crying out not only for leadership, but for new ethical standards in the private and the public sector. Institutions, which for generations had enjoyed the respect and compliance of the Irish people, like the Catholic church, the Gardaí, the Oireachtas and the centre of democratic power itself, the Cabinet, have all suffered reputational damage following scandals; trust is in short supply and cynicism is rife.

However, as we rebuild, there is an opportunity to factor in a greater role for women in the new distribution of power. While it may be provocative to say, women are noticeably absent from the

and perspectives between men and women. It is what we spend our time bemoaning and it is the stuff of discord in personal relationships. Women’s life experience is also different to that of men. A society, therefore, that excludes women’s perspective from its governance is diminished and unrepresentative. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the world of politics and power. After fifty years of dismantling the legacy of discrimination, the status of women is transformed. But there is unfinished business.

When I went into politics in 1991 as a young lawyer and mother of two, I did so with considerable trepidation. With no family background in party politics, I was a reluctant politician. My only experience had been as a volunteer on Mary Robinson’s campaign and then as a member of the Women’s Political Association. But a chance meeting with Mary Harney, who was then a Minister, changed all that. She persuaded me to join a party that had space for me

It is tailor made for men, either single or married with supportive spouses. Despite all this, for me it was a hugely rewarding and meaningful period of my life. I served as a TD for fifteen years over three successive general elections and was honoured to serve as a Minister for five of those years. I am as rare as a unicorn. Only 11 women have served in the Cabinet since the foundation of the State.

In terms of female participation in politics, Ireland ranks low for a developed country, well below the European average. Only 16 per cent of councillors are women, 21 per cent of Senators and 13 per cent of TDs. Ireland ranks 82nd in the world league table for women’s participation in politics. And the figures are getting worse, not better! The high point was 1992 when 22 women were elected and the figure has been stubbornly more or less the same since.

So, what can be done? Some favour positive discrimination, or quotas. This has certainly worked wonders in other European countries, where numbers are much healthier.

A recent poll of female TDs, however, revealed a surprising resistance to such a move. The majority view was that women should be elected on ‘their own ability’ and not as quota candidates. This argument



**MELANIE VERWOERD, PRESIDENT OF UNICEF IRELAND AND YOUNGEST WOMAN EVER TO BE ELECTED TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN PARLIAMENT**

“You have to take some concrete steps to make it easier for women to not only enter politics, but to win, and then also to stay in politics. Ireland has been a great example in leading the world with two female presidents, it has had very successful female ministers and TDs and so on, but yet, it seems that the critical mass is not there to make change happen. I feel that I was part of a process that changed the whole political arena for women [in South Africa] so that my daughter would find it much easier when she comes around. It has to change; we are more than 50 per cent of the population. Women contribute differently, but completely validly. We bring something to the table and politics and public life in general is worse off without us.”

cast of players implicated in our national bankruptcy. Was this because there were no women at the top of failed institutions, or are males more likely to be corrupt? Was there a gender aspect to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger?

If women had nothing to do with it, it begs the question ‘Why not?’ And if we want to learn from the mistakes of the past and build a better Ireland is it not reasonable to take steps to ensure power is more equally shared between men and women?

We all know there are different qualities

(The Progressive Democrats). I ran in the local elections and was elected to Dublin City Council.

The decision to cross the bridge from private to public life is not for the fainthearted.

It is a harsh, male-dominated working environment. It is competitive and aggressive and can take its toll on your health and relationships. It is, however, well paid and pensionable, which in these days of high unemployment should be an attraction. It is not family friendly.



**FRANCES FITZGERALD, FINE GAEL LEADER SEANAD ÉIREANN**

“Anybody who knows anything about what’s happened to women in politics around the world knows that you have to have strong targets and quotas if you want to make a difference in the short term and by that I mean 10 to 15 years. The way politics is done would be different if we had more women in it, and there is evidence from Sweden, you get more focus on social issues – just look at the focus we have had on economic issues – you get a different type of debate. It’s meant to be a representative democracy, but it isn’t.”

Navy dress (€595) by Tadashi @ Costume; bracelet (€280) @ Swarovski



**SENATOR FIDELMA HEALY EAMES**

“Once you decide you are interested in politics, you can’t drop the ball. I am a conviction politician, I really believe in it. But there are things that can be done to improve how things are run to make it easier for women or parents. Video conferencing is one, and in extenuating circumstances, remote voting, if for some reason, say for instance a family emergency, that you can’t physically be there. But one thing is for sure, I could not do what I do without the major support of my partner, who has made sacrifices for me to be able to do what I do.”

misses the point. Quotas do not force women on the electorate. They simply ensure that voters have a choice of men and women to vote for in elections, something denied to voters in the most recent 2007 election when only 17 per cent of candidates were women and 60 per cent of constituencies fielded no female candidates.

“Women are noticeably absent from the cast of players implicated in our national bankruptcy”

Rather than take an ideological position against quotas it is more helpful to look at the figures. The facts don’t lie. There are 24 women in a Dáil Chamber of 166 TDs with no evidence of improvement over the last twenty years. Change will not happen by chance. To build a critical mass of women in politics will need some intervention.

A recent Select Committee of the Oireachtas looked into the poor participation rates of women in politics and identified challenges in five main areas (the ‘five Cs’) Childcare, Cash, Confidence, Culture and Candidate selection procedures. The report made recommendations to address these obstacles and came down in favour of quotas to overcome historic discrimination in candidate selection.

It is not as if women are not qualified for or able for political life; far from it. After thirty years of equality of access to education, women actually do better in exams than men and until challenges of motherhood arise, they perform equally with their male



**MARGARET HAYES, FORMER SECRETARY GENERAL OF THREE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS**

THE SECOND EVER WOMAN TO BE APPOINTED SECRETARY GENERAL (IN 1995) SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE STATE. SHE HAS SINCE BEEN APPOINTED ON FOOT OF A NOMINATION FROM GOVERNMENT TO THE BOARD OF IRISH LIFE & PERMANENT.

“I would attribute the dearth of women at high levels in the civil service at the time to the marriage ban, which was only removed in 1973. It would take twenty years to overcome the legacy of that ban on the upward mobility of women in the civil service. The other development which changed opportunities for advancement for women was the TLAC, the Top Level Appointments Commission which introduced a welcome independence and transparency to the promotions process for civil servants.

“Another development which was a major contribution to the advancement of women was maternity leave and career breaks, which facilitated career planning.”

colleagues in business and professional roles. We have seen a huge increase in female participation in third level education with more women participating in recent years than men. In 2003, the gender ratio for full time students at third level was 54 per cent female to 46 per cent male. At post-grad qualification level in 1993 females counted for 46 per cent of such qualifications and by 2003 this had risen to 63 per cent. Equality legislation ensures women workers cannot be discriminated against on grounds of gender or child-bearing.

The thorny issue of childcare is a major influence on female mobility upwards in the workforce. Ironically, given the importance of women in the workforce, childcare is now seen as a key issue of the economy, the workforce and the proper functioning of families.

So, why is it that, despite an equal cohort of highly educated men and women, women still lag behind in terms of power? Women

dominate in healthcare and education sectors. They are visibly present across business, academia, medicine and law but when it comes to the public sphere, i.e. politics and positions of corporate power, women are always a minority.

Just four per cent of Irish chief executive positions are held by women. Only 11 per cent of senior civil servant positions are held by women. The percentage of women appointed to State boards has rarely if ever reached the 40 per cent target set by successive governments since the 1990s.

The one sector which is dominated by women is the voluntary and community sector, where their work is highly regarded and largely (but not always) unpaid. Society is the major beneficiary of this with women making up for inadequate public services. It makes for a massive bank of unpaid labour. This work, though hugely valued by those who benefit, often goes disregarded by the State. Small wonder few men work in this unpaid sector. Golf seems a better option.

There is also a relatively new sector called Social Entrepreneurship, which appears hugely attractive to many professional women, as are philanthropy and the NGO/charity sector, perhaps for the ethical context of the work.

There is a tendency by some young women to take for granted the freedom they now enjoy thanks to the pioneering feminists of the sixties and seventies. Scorned as lesbians and men haters, theirs was a hefty political agenda. Only fifty years ago, if a woman was married she had to give up her job. There was no access to contraception of any kind. There was no legislation to protect women from battery by their husbands. There was no right to a share in the family home. There were no

refuges. If you had a child outside marriage, you were shunned and a disgrace to your family. In the absence of support the only option was adoption or a lonely boat trip. There was no divorce so women had to stay in abusive and unhappy relationships.

As recently as 1992, when I was first elected as a TD, a raped 14-year-old was prevented by the State from travelling to the UK for an abortion with her parents. The Dail had to legislate to allow women the right to travel and get information on this substantive issue, which remains parked and legally unresolved until the next legal/medical crisis. When as a TD, I spoke out against the hierarchy for covering up sexual abuse of children by priests, and the undue deference shown by the State to the church authorities, I received excrement in the post and hate-mail that would stop a clock. In due course, the truth emerged and victims for so long disbelieved were vindicated. It was female politicians who slowly extracted the truth about the Hepatitis C and Anti-D scandal, when it was covered up by the State. It was a woman Minister of Justice who finally introduced legislation decriminalising homosexuality as recently as the mid-nineties.

It falls now to the present generation of women to play their part. The struggle for equality is about power. Having it and exercising it ethically is a challenge and an opportunity that can emerge from our current crisis. Are women up for it? Are men ready to let it go?

The next General Election will be the most crucial in our generation as we elect those who will navigate us out of the current shambles. If you agree that this cannot be left to the failed political status quo, write to political leaders and demand a choice of men and women on the ticket next time. ■



**EMILY O'REILLY, OMBUDSMAN AND INFORMATION COMMISSIONER**

**FORMER POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT WITH PROMINENT PRINT AND BROADCASTING MEDIA**

“There are very few levels in public life that haven't been fulfilled by a woman bar Taoiseach, which arguably is quite an important office, and the Attorney General. We have women ministers, women judges, women ombudsmen, yet it is quite remarkable how few women there are in Leinster House.

After you discount the women who have managed to get into senior positions like myself there can be a bit of a desert. I think culturally women continue to view the worlds of politics, finance or law as a male domain. And while there are an increasing number of role models in high positions, perhaps there are simply not enough for women to see it as a normal development. If you have most of the ground left to the men, that in itself creates networks, and so many positions are secured still through the network. There is also the lifestyle of politics. When I was a political journalist I would have hated to be a TD as a woman. There is too much uncertainty in relation to time off. It still surprises me that after so many decades of liberation and women doing extremely well academically that something isn't unlocking that arena for women. In terms of quotas it may be worth giving it a whirl as the other elements don't seem to be working. Flexibility is absolutely huge. We have to be less rigid about the workplace. The single biggest asset a woman has in forging a career and keeping family life on the go is flexibility.”



**TINA ROCHE, CEO THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR IRELAND, ON BECOMING AN ORGANISATION LEADER**

“It was by chance that I got interested in philanthropy. My main interest for a long time was and is human rights, corporate responsibility and community activism. In 1994 a friend saw an advert for a position in the National Gallery of

Ireland for a Head of Development whose role was to raise enough funds to build the Millennium Wing extension. I am passionately interested in art and used to drag my pals to look at exhibitions. I often complained about the lack of space to accommodate major exhibitions in Ireland. So now I had the chance to do something about it. It was a huge challenge but great fun. People were generous. Families who donated to the Gallery were far seeing in the impact their gift would have and anyone who has visited the Millennium Wing will tell you how beautiful it is. Philanthropists have the opportunity to make real social changes in Ireland and abroad and it can be as absorbing as any business or passion, and fun too. So it was with great delight that I had the opportunity to get further involved through launching and managing The Community Foundation for Ireland.

As everyone knows there is very little representation of women in public life. What is more, change is happening at a snail's pace. Up to recently I was against quotas but now I think it is essential that we bring them in. We should look at the Norwegian experience. In a report *Women on Board*, it found that Norway was the first country to introduce a quota for women on company boards. Since its introduction in 2003, the number of women on boards has reached 40 per cent as required by law. The Norwegian experience reveals that a quota is the key to a successful implementation. Not only does it create the pressure needed for fundamental change but it also triggers a public debate at the core of which are questions of gender equality in wider society.”





Green dress (€150) to hire by Albertra Feretti @ Covet

Photographer: Barry McCall  
 Styled by: Sarah Rickard  
 Hair: Dylan Bradshaw [dylanbradshaw.com](http://dylanbradshaw.com)  
 Makeup: Paula Callan O'Keeffe for Brown Sugar [brownsugar.ie](http://brownsugar.ie)



**IMELDA REYNOLDS, PARTNER BEAUCHAMPS LAW FIRM AND INCOMING**

**PRESIDENT OF THE DUBLIN CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE 2011**

“I used to disagree completely with the idea of quotas; everybody, of course, would like to think that they are there on the basis of merit. I’ve come to the conclusion in recent years that if we want to affect this change within a realistic time frame, it could be necessary, not to have a quota within the Daíl as such, but to encourage parties to put up a certain number of candidates. At the moment people have the freedom to vote for whoever they want, but do they really have the choice?”

The formative years, as such, in politics are often missed out by women, as it is a time when family takes priority. We either have to accept that, and continue as we are, or accommodate it. We could encourage people to return to politics after this time and make sure it is not seen as an impediment that they stepped out for that time.

“The Dublin Chamber of Commerce has actually had three or four women presidents over the last number of years, which is great. It took hundreds of years for the first to appear, but once it did, it made a real impact.

I hate talking about gender in this particular context, especially in business, as one would expect to be chosen on merit. It becomes irrelevant, because it’s performance related - I don’t wake up in the morning thinking ‘I’m a woman’ before I start my day, no more than a man does, and there are many, many women in Ireland making a huge contribution to business.”

**HOW DO WE COMPARE?**

On a world stage, Ireland ranks 82nd out of all the world’s democracies when it comes to female representation in parliament. Just 13 per cent of the TDs in our current Daíl are women, and this represents one of the highest percentages in our history. Below are the top ten democracies of the world with the highest percentages of representation of women in parliament, and whether or not they use a gender quota system.

RANK	COUNTRY	WOMEN MPS (PER CENT)	GENDER QUOTA
1	Sweden	46.4	Yes
2	S Africa	44.5	Yes
3	Iceland	42.9	Yes
4	Netherlands	40.7	Yes
5	Finland	40.0	No
6	Norway	39.6	Yes
7	Belgium	39.3	Yes
8	Costa Rica	38.6	Yes
9	Argentina	38.5	Yes
10	Denmark	38.0	No

Source: Interparliamentary Union; International IDEA. Published Irish Times in an article by Prof David Farrell. School of Politics and International Relations UCD.

*Liz O'Donnell was the Progressive Democrat TD for Dublin South from 1992 to 2007. She served as Minister of State at the Dept of Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 2002 and was a member of the Government Negotiating Team in the Multi Party Talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement. On retiring from politics in 2007, O'Donnell was Deputy Leader of her Party and the only female member of the Commission of the Houses of the Oireachtas. She now works in media and public affairs consultancy.*

*Irish Tatler's nominated charity for 2010 is The Women's Fund for Ireland, which aims in part to encourage more women into public life roles. To learn more or to donate, log on to [communityfoundation.ie](http://communityfoundation.ie) or call Niall O'Sullivan on 01 8747354.*