

Speech by Liz O'Donnell at Women's Forum Conference University Limerick

2nd February 2007



It's a pleasure to be in Limerick, where I grew up and was educated. Here in University of Limerick – a centre of excellence in education and renowned naturally and internationally.

I will speak to you of my experience as a practicing politician of nearly 15 years. It has been first and foremost an immense privilege to represent my constituents and country in the Dáil and in Government. I regard myself as an accidental politician, persuaded by Mary Harney to cross the bridge from private life to public office. I would encourage other women to do so. So many women balk at politics, recoiling from the lifestyle, the combative nature of politics and the privacy and family issues which can come into conflict. It is true it's not for the fainthearted. But it is as rewarding and challenging a career as one can find.

Although, I came from what is loosely termed the “women's movement” with a legal background, I always disliked the term “women's issues”. The fact is all issues are women's issues. The economy, peace, foreign affairs, housing, justice – what we need is more women making policy and gradually feminising the political discourse and culture of our country.

Numbers of women in the Dáil are stuck at around 22 for the last fifteen years. This is a very poor performance by any international measure - 13% (22 women out of 166 deputies.) Cabinet representation is better proportionally with Senior and Junior Ministers – (the Four Mary's)! Though small in number we tend to be Senior in our parties and appear more plentiful than we are!

There is no resistance amongst the electorate for women to be elected. The problem lies in the first hurdle of being selected and nominated by parties to contest in the first place. That's where action is needed by parties to promote and facilitate the nomination and selection of women candidates to contest in a constituency, for a winnable seat! (Not as a sweeper for male candidates)!

My own experiences:

- As Councillor
- As TD
- As Minister
- Good Friday agreement
- Overseas Development Aid.

I would never advocate that a woman candidate receive your vote simply because she is a woman. Women politicians are a broad church! He or she should be the candidate whose views and aspirations most closely reflect yours. Policies do matter.

Similarly, for a woman entering politics and deciding which party to join - policies do matter. I did not just join politics. I joined the Progressive Democrats. A party, whose policies and approach most closely represented my own, and which had space for me personally and intellectually. In real terms what appealed was a radical credo of public interest over vested interest, and being prepared to take tough decisions. That is what my Party started by Des O'Malley has been doing for more than 20 years, and rather than tiring or shrinking away from that approach, we drive on.

The Progressive Democrats emerged twenty years ago to challenge and change the prevailing, unhealthy economic and political dynamic. The country was in a dire economic state.

There was an oppressive political climate. We had the social catastrophe of combined mass unemployment and mass emigration which had been normalised by the political establishment.

For our people there was no vehicle for the political expression of despair at what was happening. Neither was there a Party which offered a fresh approach or an alternative view. So the Progressive Democrats were formed. Small, but with sufficient electoral support to form a coalition government with Fianna Fáil and transforming the political landscape.

Our credo was a clear and unfaltering one, a relentless pursuit of economic and social policies aimed at

- Achieving full employment
- Strengthening the competitive position of the Irish economy
- Keeping taxes on labour low – rewarding enterprise
- And, focussing on the low paid, the elderly and vulnerable.

Throughout the history of this independent State, difficult issues have been passed around like proverbial 'hot potatoes'. Fear of the consequence of a decision has ruled out a decision.

In 1989 when Mary Harney was appointed Minister of State with responsibility for Environmental Protection, she set about eliminating smog in Dublin. She took a decision that no-one else would for fear of a vested interest backlash. She put public interest before vested interest. She banned the sale of bituminous coal in the city and solved the problem.

It may seem like a long time ago now, but our cities once suffered from a chronic shortage of taxis. A shortage caused by politicians in fear of street blockades by vested interests – the incumbent taxi licence holders. In the face of street demonstrations against deregulation in 2000 and 2001, Bobby Molloy and the Progressive Democrats put public interest before vested interest and solved the problem.

Our more recent political history is dotted with similar stories. Spiralling insurance costs, passive smoke in public places, prison officer overtime, the need for a Garda Reserve- all issues passed around – hot potatoes singeing the hands of politicians afraid of the backlash. Not us.

The Progressive Democrats is a minority party but with electoral support of between 4 and 12% we have been in government for most of our existence. A small Party can wield influence in a way that a larger catch-all Party cannot. In coalition it is the smaller party that sets the direction of government policy.

Falling insurance costs, the smoking ban, slashed overtime bills, and a blossoming Garda Reserve – all the proof of the Progressive Democrats putting public interest over vested interest, and being prepared to take tough decisions to the benefit of the public. The very reason I joined the Party.

I want to be clear about one point: this is not simply a question of taking an aggressive approach, of taking the tough stance; of facing people down. Sometimes it may reach a point where that is what is ultimately needed to ensure the public interest *does* come before vested interest in the common good.

That credo is as evident today in Minister Harney's plans to improve the care of patients in our health system, as it was when Bobby Molloy took on the taxi drivers.

I know many health care workers, who day in and day out deliver world-class care to Irish patients. I know consultants in my own constituency who carry out incredible work, healing patients with challenging illness. I also know many of *those same consultants* want to see change in how consultants deliver their services. They want to see reform. I do not know if they are in the minority or the majority, but they support Mary Harney in her work to improve services to patients. They know that the time for reform is now. They know there is no more time to waste.

They know that the public pay their salaries, their pensions, for the buildings, the beds, and the equipment. The public are their paymasters. The public must call the tune and come first.

I know consultants who seek the same thing Mary Harney does – a better health service for Irish patients. That is where we are now, and - as in the past - we must all support those who pursue the right thing for the right reasons.

And that is what Mary Harney does. That is why; there is grudging respect across the political divide for her efforts as Minister for Health.

We are positive and determined in our reform of the health service. The improvements are real and are enormous.

We now have cleaner hospitals.

In the past, waiting times for operations were often 2-5 years.

Now they are mostly between 2-5 months.

Our plans will deliver up to 1,000 new public beds at less than half the cost if the Exchequer built them.

Most importantly, in the life of this government, 9 out of 10 people who had hospital treatment were satisfied with that treatment and would go back to that hospital.

Every day there is a systemic hospital by hospital improvement in A&E with waiting on trolleys reduced between 40 and 50 per cent as acknowledged by the INO.

When the public interest is the credo or principle on everyone's part, from nurse to consultant to politician and citizen we can achieve a world class health service which a modern progressive Ireland deserves.

Can I return briefly to the theme of "Women in Politics" and wish all women well who cross the bridge into politics. There has never been a more important time for women to participate fully in public life in Northern Ireland. For too long the abrasive poisonous and dangerous sectarian discourse that passed for politics in Northern Ireland excluded and repulsed many women.

As the people go now to vote for the new devolved Assembly I hope that there will be plenty of choice in gender terms for the electorate. I am delighted to learn that 1/3rd of the candidates standing for the SDLP are women.

It is a momentous opportunity for women to inform and pervade the new political landscape. One of the biggest disappointments over recent years in the North has been that the Assembly and Cross Community Government envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement have only operated fitfully and are still in abeyance. It is vital that they be re-established post election and really work.

They were to be the forum for cross community governance and policy making where citizens of Northern Ireland could actually see their leaders working together for the common good of all.

Now that the war is truly over, and politics in Northern Ireland can be normalised they also need to be feminised. Women who have borne the brunt of bereavement, as widows, mothers and lovers across the divide and who toiled steadfastly in voluntary and community activity throughout the troubles can come into a new forum for their talents now.

It is a new beginning for Northern Ireland and its people. Women must be at the table with men to bed down the peace and prosperity which beckons. If women are absent when major policies are formulated and discussed our democracy is unfinished.

I wish all women well who cross the bridge into politics.

Your country needs you!