

Final Days at the 'Office'



Grace with the Civil Engagement Group

Waterford MEP Reflects on Leaving Seanad for New Position

As I pack to get ready for my first official day as an MEP, I'm trying to make a bit of space for contemplation. It's been a whirlwind since that fantastic day when the people of Waterford (and the other twelve counties of Ireland South) put their trust in me to represent them in Europe. I will never stop being grateful for that support, and I'm still moved when I stop to think about the sense of honour and duty I feel.

By the time this week's Munster Express goes to print, I will be in Strasbourg. The European Parliament sits between the two locations of Brussels and Strasbourg. For three weeks a month it is located in Brussels, in Belgium, and for the fourth week everyone ups sticks and heads to Strasbourg, in France, close to the German border. It's an unwieldy and impractical set-up that has its roots in the European Treaty of the late 90s. It's controversial for many reasons (including, of course, the environmental impact of this unnecessary travel), and attempts have been made to remedy it, but for the time being I'm stuck with it and as you read my words I'll no doubt be trying to get my head around the complexities of yet another location. I've been over to Brussels twice so far and let me tell you - I'm on a steep learning curve. Watch this space for updates!

Thursday last was a particularly emotional day for me. It was when I had my last day in the Seanad. After three very intense years, there was a real sense of 'leaving home' about the whole occasion.

Over the past three years I've worked closely with my colleagues in the Seanad and the Green Party. I've formed close working relationships and friendships across the board. From my colleagues in the Green Party office, to my fellow Senators and to the people who rarely get a mention - people like the ushers, catering and cleaning staff, I've met many, many fantastic individuals who will remain my friends.

I was given the opportunity to speak in the Seanad on Thursday, and while it was hard to sum up my thoughts at that time, I spoke of the transformational impact that my still new political career has had on my life. I've been working as an environmental activist for over thirty years now, and when I moved into politics, it was with a very clear objective: to continue my life's work of highlighting environmental issues and, ultimately, play my part in creating the change needed for planet Earth to survive for our children and future generations.

I reminisced on some of the work I've been involved in over my time in the Seanad. In particular, I reflected on the first piece of legislation I introduced around microbeads and microplastics. This and other legislation I introduced, including the Derelict and Vacant Sites Bill, were, I know, instrumental in raising issues which are absolutely fundamental to the well being of Ireland's environment and people. I take great pride in the part I played in raising awareness and opening up national and international debate and conversations.

The Microbeads and Microplastics Bill is a potent example of this. When I first introduced the Bill people had never even heard of microplastics. Now there is a huge awareness of the detrimental impacts of microplastics on our water and food supplies and marine life in general. We've seen the growing global movements sounding public outcry and calling on leaders throughout the world to wake up and consider the environment in every single aspect of political decision-making.

I have been something of an outlier for my working life, and my role in the sphere of politics continues to be as something of an agitator, a teacher, a person who uses the platform she is given to inspire ground-up change.

On the subject of ground-up change, I'll finish by saying I took great pride and pleasure in being involved with the Civil Engagement Group in the Seanad. I suppose you could describe us as a bit of a Tribe of outliers. Senators Alice-Mary Higgins, Lynn Ruane, Frances Black, Colette Kelleher, John Dolan and myself successfully worked together, tirelessly, to instigate positive change. It was a Bill introduced by Senator John Dolan last week, that was to be the last piece of legislation we supported, together.

Last year Ireland finally signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We ratified it, but to Senator John Dolan, that was not good enough. As an advocate for disability rights, and working from the personal experience of living with disability, John Dolan introduced a progressive Bill to make the convention more directly meaningful for people with disabilities.

I'm the mother of a daughter with disability, and to me this bill is a beautiful piece of legislation, demanding practical things that give basic rights and dignity to people with disabilities: things like access to toilet and changing facilities; equal access for children with disabilities to parks and play areas; public transport access. With the support of his proud Civil Engagement Group colleagues, John introduced the Community Participation (Disability) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. I'm very pleased to say that it received full cross-party support in the Seanad.

I felt a wonderful sense of achievement for my close colleague, and great pride in having been involved in bringing a bill so close to my heart to the first step of its journey towards creating change for people. It was a fitting end to my time with the Civil Engagement Group and my time as a member of Seanad Éireann.

I was genuinely sad to say goodbye to people who have become a big part of my life in the past few years. Like with any good friendships though, of course goodbyes are temporary. They haven't seen the back of me yet, as, even though I'll be based in Europe, I will continue to contribute to political discourse in Ireland at a local and national level.