

Women and politics in Ireland since 1918

Yvonne Galligan

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This year marks the centenary of women achieving the right to vote and stand in parliamentary elections in Britain and Ireland. The Representation of the People Act, which became law on 6 February 1918, introduced universal male suffrage (over 21) and enfranchised women over the age of 30 subject to a minimal property qualification.

Additional legislation – the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act – given royal assent on 21st November 1918, extended the right to stand for parliament to women of 21 years of age. It was a very short Act, with only one substantive provision stating simply that women were not disqualified by sex or marriage from sitting or voting as members of the House of Commons.² This created an anomaly, as a female candidate under the age of 30 could not cast a vote for herself. Later, the 1922 Free State constitution, in Articles 14 and 15, rectified that anomaly and set the voting age as well as the age of candidacy, to 21.³

But back to 1918. In the subsequent December general election, seventeen women stood for election to the House of Commons, including two for Irish constituencies. Sinn Féin's Winifred Carney lost heavily in the solidly working-class unionist constituency of Belfast Victoria. Constance Markievicz's election for Dublin City St Patrick's marked the first election of a woman to the British House of Commons. However, as a member of Sinn Fein, she did not take her seat in Westminster.⁴

Promise unfulfilled

Markievicz's election, and subsequent appointment as Minister for Labour in the revolutionary first Dáil Éireann, and the extension of universal suffrage in 1922, did not usher in a golden age for women in Irish parliamentary politics. In the 100 years since women won the vote, only 114 women in total have been elected to the Dáil – one woman for every year of the 100 years of suffrage.

There was a 60-year gap before the Irish government had a second female minister after Markievicz, when Charles Haughey appointed Máire Geoghegan-Quinn as Minister for the Gaeltacht in 1979. In all, only 19 women, including Markievicz, have held cabinet office.

The women who were elected were often not staunch supporters of women's issues. The vote for the 1929 Censorship of Publications bill, which, among other provisions, banned the publication, sale and distribution of publications advocating birth control, saw Margaret Collins-O'Driscoll – sister of Michael Collins – vote in favour of the bill.⁵ In her own words:

¹ Some factual amendments re numbers and percentages made on 14 September 2020.

² <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/parliamentary-collections/nancy-astor/parliament-qualification-of-women-act/>

³ <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/E900003-004/text002.html>

⁴ M. Coleman and Y. Galligan 'Women and politics in Ireland since 1918', *Eolas*, 3 April 2018

<http://www.eolasmagazine.ie/women-and-politics-in-ireland-since-1918/>

⁵ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1929/act/21/section/16/enacted/en/html#sec16;>

In rising to welcome this Bill and to congratulate the Minister on its introduction, I wish to express the hope that when it has gone through its various stages and will appear on the Statute Book, it will be an efficient instrument in combating those evils that everybody in this House so rightly deplures. One very gratifying and satisfactory feature of this debate has been that the fears which a certain section of the Press expressed about this Bill, and those expressed by another section, that I might describe as highbrows, have found no echo here...[I only intend to say that] no vote I have ever given here, or will ever give, will be given with more satisfaction than the vote I will register in favour of this Bill.⁶

An opportunity to increase women's representation rose in 1936 when the Seanad in its 1922 form was abolished. The Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers seized the moment to advocate for equal representation. The Joint Committee proposed a requirement that at least one woman be on the ballot in every electoral area, believing that women voters would 'do the rest' as they were so keen to increase women's presence in politics. They also sought nominating committees for the Seanad to include issues of healthcare, social welfare and primary education – arguing that the representation of these areas would give women's interests a voice in parliament, if not actual representation.⁷ Their petition was received in a lukewarm manner by the Commission on the Second House of the Oireachtas and this early gender quota proposal was rejected.

Policy discrimination

Although the 1922 Free State constitution advanced women's equality with men by providing equal citizenship (Article 3), full voting and other political rights, the document was silent on the Easter Rising Proclamation's promise of equal opportunities.⁸ Indeed, policy and law in the 1920s and 1930s eroded women's status as equal citizens, with women's jury service made discretionary, birth control outlawed, and women's employment opportunities restricted.⁹ The promise and hope of advancement in women's opportunities that had occurred prior to independence was quickly eroded by nationalist governments in the new State in the face of opposition from elected and civil society feminists.¹⁰ The re-inscription of a conservative gender order culminated in the majority public support for the 1937 Constitution which banned divorce (Article 41.3.2), confined women's citizenship to the home (Article 41.2.1), constitutionally restricted women's employment opportunities (Article 41.2.2) and enabled laws to take into account differences of capacity and social function (Article 40.1). The only dent women's activism could make in this restrictive gender regime was in securing recognition of women's right to equal citizenship with men (Articles 9 and 16).

A new promise

However, indications of change emerged in 1977. In that election, six women were returned to Dáil Éireann, an outcome that had been last achieved in 1921. It reflected a modernising Irish society, a pattern of change which began in the 1960s, as the economy transitioned from a reliance on

⁶ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1928-10-19/2/>

⁷ M. Lee, *Redefining Éireann: The decline of women's rights in the era of Irish nationalism 1916-1937*, published MA thesis (Department of History, University of Michigan, 2015) pp. 74-76

⁸ Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) Act 1922.

⁹ C Beaumont, 'Women, Citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948' *Women's History Review*, 6, 2015, 569-73.

¹⁰ M O'Neill, *From Parnell to De Valera: A Biography of Jennie Wyse Power 1858-1941* (Dublin, Blackwater Press, 1991) pp. 164-65.

agriculture to service provision, Vatican II reformed Catholic teaching, the spread of television brought alternative views and experiences into households, and a new generation of young, educated women sought to shape a different lifestyle to that of their mothers.

Looking outwards after decades of introspection, the Irish economy moved from protectionism to being highly globalised, with the European Union playing a vital role in the social and economic modernisation of the country. With these developments came a rise in women's social and economic ambitions, and a general loosening, over time, of the bond between personal identity and Catholicism.

Women began mobilising for change and during the 1970s, and a plethora of new women's and feminist organisations emerged.¹¹ Among them was the Women's Political Association (WPA), formed in 1971, to campaign for women's election to parliament. Further attention to this issue came through the Commission on the Status of Women, whose report in 1973 highlighted the dearth of women in politics and public life among other inequalities and discriminations.

The proportion of women elected to Dáil Éireann gradually began to rise, increasing from 6 (4.1 per cent) in 1977 to 14 (8.4 per cent) in 1987. In 1990, the election of feminist lawyer and senator, Mary Robinson, as President of Ireland was a tangible indication that a modern, pluralist, Ireland was coming of age.¹²

The mobilisation of women in support of Mary Robinson's presidential campaign did not go unnoticed by the political parties. Leveraging this 'women's vote', political parties, for the first time in their histories, took the issue of women's candidacy seriously. In the 1992 general election there was a 71 per cent increase in female candidacy, up from 52 women candidates in 1989 to 89 in 1992. With more women on the ballot paper, the number of women elected increased by 54 per cent, up from 13 women TDs in 1989 to 20 in 1992. It seemed that Mary Robinson's election as president was the much-needed catalyst for change in Irish political party candidate selection processes. However, this change proved short-lived. In the five general elections between 1992 and 2011, women's candidacy was subject to reversals, and the number of women elected increased only marginally to 25 (15 per cent).

At the same time, underlying socio-economic patterns during this period point to a country experiencing major change, a factor usually associated with women's increased access to public life. In 1971, before the lifting of the marriage bar on women's employment, there were 247,675 women in paid employment, constituting a female employment rate of 27 per cent. Of these 39,214 were married, only 13.5% of the female workforce.¹³ In the years that followed, the female employment rate increased steadily to 42 per cent in 1997 and 61 per cent in 2007 before reducing to 56 per cent in 2014 as a result of the economic recession. In 2018, it had surpassed the 2007 figure to 62.7%, though still lagged behind Portugal, the UK, New Zealand, and Iceland.¹⁴

¹¹ L Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Y Galligan, *Women and Politics in Contemporary Ireland: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (London, Pinter, 1998).

¹² Y Galligan, 'Transforming the Irish Presidency: Activist Presidents and Gender Politics 1990-2011' *Irish Political Studies*, 27 (2012) p. 596.

¹³ https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/census1971results/volume5/C_1971_VOL_5_T1.pdf (author's calculations)

¹⁴ European Commission Representation in Ireland, 'The EU and Irish Women' 2018 https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/node/684_en; Central Statistics Office, *Women and Men in Ireland 2013 2014*

In 1970, the fertility rate was 3.85. By 1990, it stood at 2.11, decreased further to 2.05 by 2010, and to 1.93 by 2017, indicating an ageing population.¹⁵

The future

Máire Geoghegan Quinn's ministerial appointment four decades ago ushered in an era of growth for women in politics in the Republic. Since then there have also been two female presidents, six female party leaders¹⁶, four female Tánaiste, but as yet no woman has held the offices of Taoiseach, Minister for Finance or Minister for Foreign Affairs.

To this day, progress in women's political representation in Ireland is slow. Women make up only 36 (22.5 per cent) of members elected to Dáil Éireann compared the House of Commons (32 per cent), Welsh Assembly (42 per cent) and Scottish Parliament (35 per cent). At local government level this falls to 24 per cent (2019 elections).

Political parties have long blamed the reluctance of women to come forward to stand for election as being the cause of female under-representation. However, the reality is that parties have only recently indicated that they are actually receptive to female candidates. This new openness has been accelerated by the 2012 Electoral Amendment (Political Funding) Act, which requires parties to select at least 30% candidates of each sex, or suffer financial penalties. That quota will rise to 40% from 2023.

The effect of this quota – which applied during the 2016 general election – led to a 90% increase in female candidacies (from 86 in 2011 to 163) and a 40% increase in female members of parliament (from 25 in 2011 to 35). This is far from the equality envisaged by suffragists but at least reflects changes in social attitudes. The public now expects to see male and female candidates on the ballot paper. In the 2016 election, only one of the 40 multi-member constituencies had an all-male candidate slate.

In a speech on 12 August 2018, then Culture Minister Josepha Madigan chafed at the under-representation of women in political life. Ms Madigan said the timeframe to reach the 40 per cent gender candidate threshold, required to be achieved by 2023, should be speeded up.

She said political parties should aim for a 50:50 split in terms of candidate selection naturally, but if that does not happen "serious consideration" should be given to increasingly the existing quota threshold from 30 to 50 per cent.¹⁷ Her view echoes the demands of the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers over eight decades ago.

www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2013/employmentlist/employment/. <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm> ; OECD, Employment rate (indicator) (2018). doi: 10.1787/1de68a9b-en

¹⁵World Bank, *Fertility Rate*

www.google.ie/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9 &met_y=sp_dyn_tfrt_in&hl=en&dl=en#!ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=sp_dyn_tfrt_in&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=country&idim=country:IRL&ifdim=country&hl=en_US&dl=en&ind=false
<https://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=ei&v=31>

¹⁶ Mary Harney (PD); Roisin Shortall and Catherine Murphy (SD); Mary Lou McDonald (SF); Lucinda Creighton (Renua); Joan Burton (Lab)

¹⁷ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/higher-election-gender-quotas-need-to-be-considered-urgently-minister-says-1.3593773>

Women parliamentarians, learning lessons from the feminist movement, are developing their own networks. Set up in 2017 and chaired by Catherine Martin TD, the Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus addresses issues affecting women both inside and outside Leinster House.

The Caucus works across party lines to discuss proposed laws, and raise issues affecting women's lives. Recently, made representations to the Minister for Justice, Charles Flanagan TD on the proposed referendum on Article 41.2 – women's place in the home. It is working with the Ceann Comhairle's Office on a dignity and respect policy for the Oireachtas and is planning a survey on harassment and bullying in the parliamentary workplace.¹⁸ In so doing, it is following the practice in Westminster, the Swedish Rikstad, the Canadian parliament and many others as the awareness of parliament as a gendered workplace takes hold.¹⁹ In September, this group is host to a gathering of women's parliamentary caucuses, the first of its kind in the world.

As part of recognising our slim heritage on women's contribution to politics, and in the context of the centenary anniversary of women's suffrage, Countess Markievicz finally made it to the Palace of Westminster, when a copy of her portrait was presented last month by Ceann Comhairle Sean O Foighil, along with Senator Ivana Bacik and Catherine Martin TD, to the Speaker of the House of Commons.²⁰ The original, painted by Polish artist Boleslaw Szankowski in 1901, hangs in the Hugh Lane Gallery.

A century after suffrage, the goal of gender equality in representative politics on the island of Ireland has advanced, but has not been achieved. The 2016 elections point to a defining moment, but there is plenty of room for progress.

End

¹⁸ <https://www.rte.ie/news/politics/2018/0720/980035-dublin-female-parliamentarians/>

¹⁹ <http://www.oecd.org/gender/data/gender-sensitive-parliaments-integrating-a-gender-lens-in-parliamentary-work.htm>

²⁰ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/uk/constance-markievicz-honoured-in-westminster-event-1.3569019>