

Women in Leadership Weekend – 17 October

Questions for Yvonne Galligan

1. Quotas:

- a. Gender equality in the Dáil and Seanad is a good idea and needs to be done. But by being too hasty and rushing, is there not a danger of some positions being filled with totally unfit candidates just to meet quotas?**
- b. Will quotas alone solve this problem?**
- c. Possibly about the introduction of gender quotas.**

The concern that unfit or unqualified candidates would be chosen at the expense of qualified candidates is common. There are a couple of aspects to this issue. One is related to stereotypes: we are so accustomed to thinking about men when we think about politics that often men are seen to be 'qualified' or 'suitable' candidates without further examination. So to have women chosen as candidates instead of men (who might have had reasonable expectation of being picked) can often be cast as an 'unqualified' person replacing a 'qualified' one. The second aspect is – what do we mean by 'qualified' when it comes to politics? It is not straightforward. Research from Spain, Sweden and Britain (and Ireland too) shows that women candidates and politicians usually have a higher level of education than their male counterparts. At a minimum, political women are no less educationally qualified than political men. Women know that they are at a disadvantage in this sphere, so have this profile of higher qualifications to help them be accepted as credible potential candidates. So if educational standard is taken as a 'qualification', then there is no basis for saying that women candidates are not qualified for politics. Politics requires other skills and experience – being able to 'represent' one's constituents being critical. The long tradition of men having access to political and professional networks that facilitate their ability to gain experience in representing people (e.g. in trade unions, business groups such as Chambers of Commerce, on Executive Committees of professional associations) gives them a skill that is immediately relatable to the usual political profile. Women's social, economic and professional experience – given our traditional expectations of women's role in society – is, and was, very different. Thus, women have significant experience advocating for community issues, founding groups and networks that respond to needs in their localities, and other experiences of 'representing' that are not hard-wired into the

networks that are directly connected to politics. Everyone knows women who are the centre of community life, with their fingers on the pulse of things in their locality. Yet, because they are women and because their civic leadership is outside of the male-dominated formal networks, their experience of 'representing' can be under-valued.

Finally, a Swedish study (2017) looked at the effect of quotas on candidate quality and found that the quality of the male candidates increased in contests where women were present in larger numbers. The authors concluded that 'Far from being at odds with meritocracy, this quota raised the competence of male politicians where it raised female representation the most. We argue that resignations of mediocre male leaders was a key driver of this effect.'
(http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69193/1/Besley_Gender%20quotas_2017.pdf)

On the timing point: this is a critical one – parties need to plan ahead and develop a political path for potential women candidates in a more structured way. The men will be informally mentored, put on relevant committees, given informal opportunities to gain the experience to be a credible candidate. Parties must start to do the same for women, and not wait until the eve of an election to begin selecting enough women to fill the quota requirement.

2. Why, in your opinion, is it taking Ireland so long to make progress on this issue?

It's a combination of our conservative political culture when it comes to seeing women as credible candidates, our still-strong preference for men as the 'normal' political representative, and the reluctance of political parties to grasp the nettle. While national leaders might be supportive, the local constituency teams are still very conservative, and don't like their 'favoured son' being displaced, especially by a woman. Interestingly, parties are behind the mood of the people in this regard, as voters support women when they are on the ballot as much as they do men.

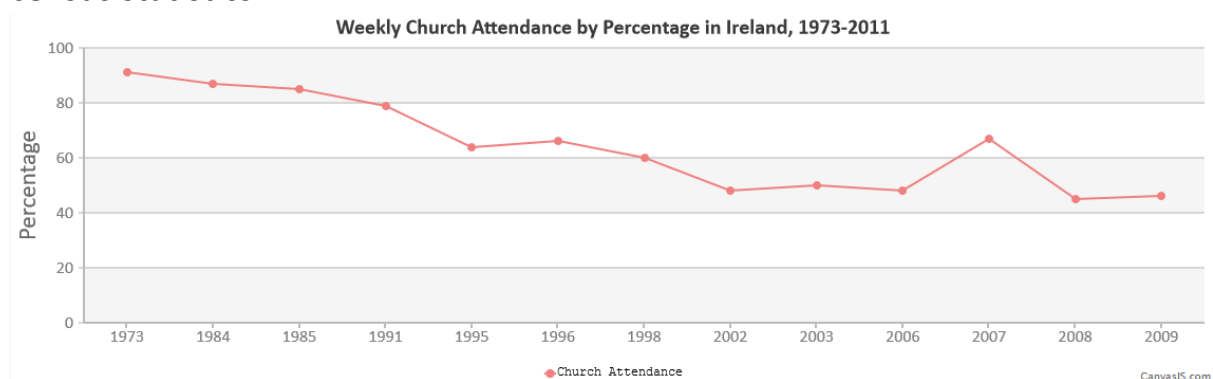
3. What do you think is the quickest way to get action that is sustainable? Given that we have legislation in place that seems to be ignored.

I think its worth while giving the quotas a chance. We've had 2 elections in which the quota requirement has been in force and parties have adhered to the minimum 30% requirement. The general research suggests that it takes at least 3 electoral cycles for quotas to begin to embed into party cultures, and it becomes strange NOT to have women on the ballot, and with a realistic chance

of election. However, the quota mechanism alone is not the solution – it needs to be one element of a package of measures that support women’s candidacies. One aspect of this package is the rules parties set for selection conventions – if they are serious about gender equality and increasing women’s representation, parties will expect that the localised selection conventions will have women before the selectors as well as men. And that goes back to my earlier point above – parties need to nurture women’s political prospects to give them credibility at the convention. And that will meet with male resistance, which is something party leaders at local and national level have to be prepared to take on board.

4. Do you think the decline in the influence of the Church in recent years will perhaps, result in a faster increase in women participation in Public Life?

The decline of church influence is one significant element in a series of social trends since the 1970s that has expanded the range of activities considered to be socially acceptable for women to engage in. The growth in women’s educational levels, and therefore their expectations of life, is also a factor. The higher participation of women in the workforce, and the decrease in family size, are other contributory factors. All these (and more) are interwoven so it’s very hard to pinpoint one single factor as being pivotal in increasing women’s political participation. And, let’s not forget that we are still talking about modest levels of representation – about a quarter of local councillors are women. In this day and age, this is a shockingly low figure at local level and it occurs at a time when Catholic Church influence on social attitudes is at an all-time low. Here’s a graph of Catholic church attendance based on various census statistics



It shows a decline in mass-going from 80% in 1991 to about 50% in 2006, where it remained, on average. This goes for the whole country. But we know that in

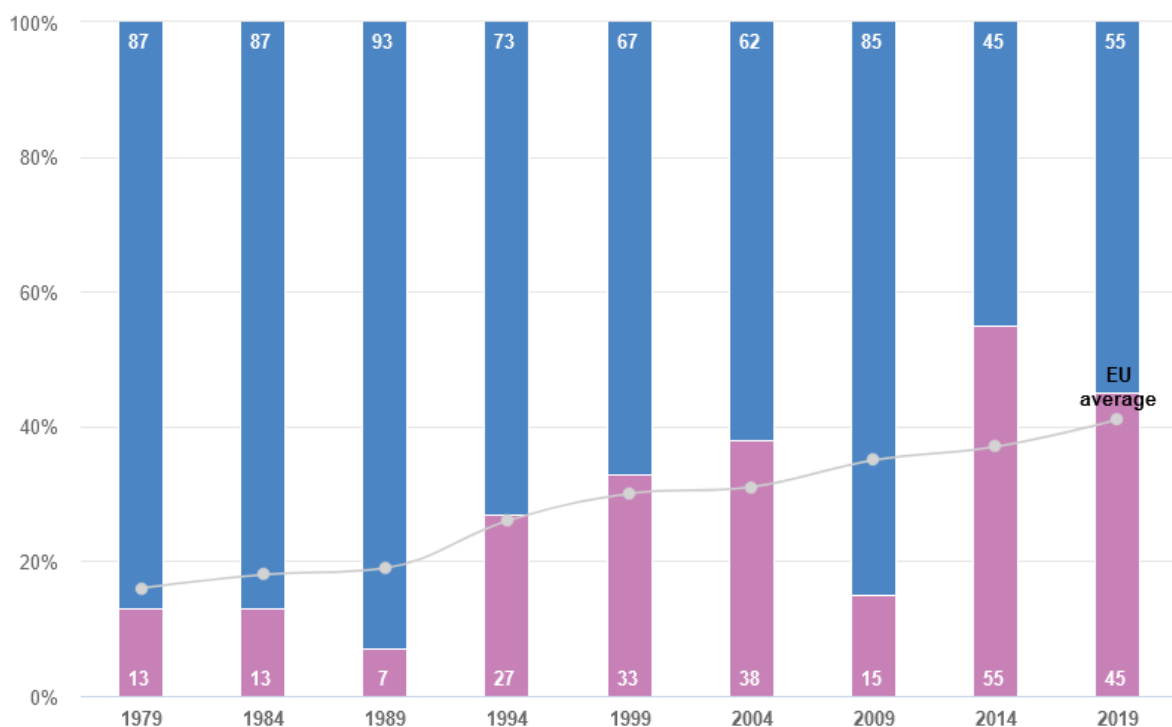
urban areas the rate of mass attendance is much lower than the national average – in 2011, the rate in Dublin was 14% (<https://faithsurvey.co.uk/irish-census.html>).

5. Why do you think that the more recent percentage levels of women’s participation has slowed or halted?

Parties have taken the 30% quota to be a maximum, by and large. And some parties have struggled to reach this level of women’s candidacies because they have not planned sufficiently for developing women as possible candidates. Until parties offer the voters more women at local and national elections, then women’s representation will be constrained. By the way, women’s success in European Parliament elections has been better than the national profile since 1994, with the exception of 2009: see the chart below

(<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/ireland/2019-2024/>)

MEP’s gender balance by year, Ireland



The point I am making here is that parties can, when they want, select strong women candidates and get them elected. In 2019, Ireland returned 5 (45%) women and 6 men to the European Parliament.

6. Mary McAleese said on BBC NI recently that 8 out of 10 women are abused, verbally/sexually? Probably bullied a lot also. This is shocking and should not be tolerated. This should be discussed more, like the Me Too movement. Would like your comments on what can be done.

This is an important point. One of the things that is turning women off putting their names forward for a political career is the inordinate level of cyber-bullying they attract (much more than their male counterparts). In addition, there are more women politicians coming forward with stories of sexual harassment and bullying in various forms. The reason why these experiences have not come to public attention is because for those political women admitting that these nasty and negative experience happened to them could be constructed as a weakness, that women were not made for the 'cut and thrust' of political life. So they had no incentive to reveal this abusive treatment. Again, this speaks to the subordinate position of women in political, and Irish cultural, life. This is an issue that is not far under the surface. With President McAleese speaking out, it's a powerful silence-breaker. Yet, unless women are treated with due respect, and as equals, and their experiences recognised as real and valid as a consequence of these revelations, then there is no reason for women in politics to come out and share these stories. All they will be doing is harming their own ambitions.

7. How long do you think equality in politics will really take as in 50-50 Dáil?

If there were real political will, it could happen in a short time. The tide of politics shows that the empathic style of politics accompanied by decisive leadership practiced by Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel for example, is more in tune with the public mood.

8. What are the current official institutional and policy mechanisms that specifically relate to promoting women's roles in Leadership and Public Life in Ireland? How well are these working? What kinds of additional supports/additional resources are needed to fast-track gender equality, and women's roles in Leadership and Public Life?

In my presentation, I tried to give an indication of the importance of the candidate gender quota for stimulating an increase in women's candidacies at national level. There is a realisation by the governing parties that further back in the pipeline – i.e. local councils – there must also be brought to put more women forward for election. Ireland has a national action plan for gender equality that includes targets for women's leadership in political and public life ([http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017 - 2020.pdf/Files/National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017 - 2020.pdf](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Strategy%20for%20Women%20and%20Girls%202017%20-%202020.pdf/Files/National%20Strategy%20for%20Women%20and%20Girls%202017%20-%202020.pdf)). That plan ends in 2020, and will be followed by another plan. This Assembly could make an important intervention to the upcoming plan. Ireland is judged by the UN Commission on the Status of Women in relation to its initiatives on gender equality. Here is the most recent statement by Ireland, in 2019 (<http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/SP19000081>). An official summary of Ireland's position on gender equality in the European Union is here ([https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/node/684 en](https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/node/684_en)). Although Ireland scores very well on many measures in the European Institute for Gender Equality index, the dimension that depresses its performance is Ireland's poor record on power (i.e. political and public leadership), see <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019/IE>

It is rather disappointing that parties treat investing in women's political and public representation as a marginal issue, in terms of expenditure. The advantage of requiring parties to spend more public funds on promoting women's political participation would ensure that parties took this issue more seriously.

In fairness, I perceive a genuine willingness among senior political leaders across all parties to see more women hold political and public leadership roles. They can be assisted in achieving this goal the more they know that the public backs their intent, and expects it from them.

I look forward to seeing the outcome of your deliberations, and wish you all the very best in coming to a consensus on the way forward in this module, and in the other areas in your remit.

Yvonne Galligan