

## Women in Leadership Weekend – 17 October

### Questions for Alison Cowzer

#### **1. Alison; you advocate a short, sharp, shock approach with the imposition of quotas. Why not a voluntarist, incremental change model?**

In reality, the voluntarist, incremental change model has been in place in this country since the foundation of the state, and it hasn't worked. While the desire to see an increase in the proportion of women in representative politics has been articulated and advocated for many years, the pace of change has been glacial. Only 24% of our councillors are women, only 23% of our TDs are women.

Our political system, its structures and culture were created at a time when women were precluded or deemed dis-interested in political life, yet those systems, structures and culture remain in place today, forming significant barriers to women entering and succeeding in politics. Quotas are a practical, pragmatic way of overcoming some of those barriers with pace.

Many in positions of power have articulated the need for change, but have not followed through in introducing the systemic changes and supports that are needed to bring down the barriers that prevent women from entering and succeeding in Irish politics.

So often we see internal party structures and policies actively work against the changes needed to support gender balance, clinging to the status quo and resisting the need to make decisions that will make real change happen.

The introduction of quotas in Ireland in 2012 saw a 90% increase in the number of women running in the general election, demonstrating that there are plenty of women willing and able to run for election, a fact previously denied by many parties who suggested a lack of interest in women in politics. The % of women in Dáil Eireann increased from 17% to 22% in one election, a signal that change will begin to happen if quotas are continued, but the pace of change needs to increase.

The quota system compels political parties not just to put gender balance on the agenda, but to actively support women to enter the political process. In addition, the sanction of losing government funding for political parties, with financial implications for the parties (they forfeit 50% of govt funding if they do not hit the quota), has ensured that gender balance is now addressed more seriously.

Quotas, by themselves will not deliver gender balance in Irish politics, they must be accompanied by supports for women at every stage of the political journey, breaking down the barriers and enabling women to succeed in politics.

The political system in this country has demonstrated that voluntary codes, targets, aspirations, good intentions and kind words do not deliver improved gender balance. Quotas have demonstrated that they deliver real change, and their introduction throughout the political system, at local elections and Seanad election will begin to deliver that change quickly.

## **2. I would like to ask Alison Cowzer, how can gender quotas be considered non-discriminatory?**

Quotas for women in political life do not discriminate, but compensates for the significant barriers that prevent women from entering and succeeding in politics.

Women make up 51% of our population, yet are hugely under-represented at the highest level of decision making in our country.

International research shows us that better decisions are made at every level when there is a diversity of voices and experiences around the table.

Those better decisions will benefit not just the women who are elected, but also the men, women and children who they serve, making decisions that benefit society by recognising the diverse needs of that society.

## Questions directed at the panel as a whole:

### **1. How specifically can we support minority groups in greater representation? How should career guidance be restructured to overcome gender inequality?**

Minority groups need a variety of supports to ensure they can participate in the political process.

It starts with information and education, presenting politics as relevant to the life experiences of minority groups, and showing how participating in the political process can have genuine positive impacts on their community and on the wider society.

Bespoke training and information targeted at minority groups can be particularly useful in creating a “safe space”, where members of the group can share experiences, concerns and develop strategies that address their specific needs. Women for Election have carried out bespoke training sessions in association with minority groups including the National Traveller Women’s Forum, which deal with the particular challenges they face as they seek to enter politics.

Many women and men of minority groups do not see any representation or manifestation of themselves in the political process. The importance of role models, and the need to amplify their journey and success in the political process is crucial.

### **2. Do the speakers feel that we will just get quotas filled so we can tick the box and say well we have done that, got the quota filled but have we got the people we need to carry out the tasks?**

This is an important question, the objective of our democracy is clearly to elect a cohort of politicians with the skills to carry out the important task of leading our political institutions both local and national. The question is whether women and men have equal qualifications and life experiences that equip them to succeed in politics? That raises the question what qualifies a candidate to be an effective politician?

Research carried out by at the Queen Mary University of London ‘*What Makes a Good Politician? Reassessing the Criteria Used for Political Recruitment*’  
Rainbow Murray, Queen Mary University of London 2014

*Concludes that the ideal candidate is someone with excellent interpersonal skills, who is able to fight for a cause and influence others while also being able to listen to others and negotiate compromises. He/she should also be an authentic representative with a genuine and demonstrable understanding of, and commitment to resolving, the concerns and problems faced by citizens. The job requires someone personable, with high levels of integrity and who can therefore earn the trust of the represented. Political nous is advantageous, but a strong background within politics is not a prerequisite. More important are the powers of communication and persuasion.*

I conclude that all of the criteria listed above are equally attributable to men and women, the question is not about qualification, but access to the political process, and supports needed to navigate a process that has been designed, developed and cultivated for a time when the society believed that only men were deserving or interested in political life.

### **3. What do they believe is required at grass roots level to increase female participation and how do they see this being supported by the population as a whole?**

Many women are already doing “politics” at local level, running community organisations, leading on local initiatives, driving change in their localities, but they often do not recognise this as “Political”. Recognising the importance of that grass roots work, and using it as a channel to further elected office is crucial to propel women on their political careers. Running for election to local councils can showcase the valuable work that women are doing in and for their communities.

Education programmes in secondary schools and universities are a tangible way to sow the seeds of female participation in politics. Government funding is needed to develop and support these programmes so they become part of the curriculum, and are delivered to both young women and young men.

**4. Not sure who to address this to, how to ensure greater participation in leadership in public and private life (e.g politics and sport)....providing opportunity and supporting access is one thing (e.g. targets, quotas etc), but women remain on the 'lower' participation levels once they're in (as explained in the Women in Sport and Women for Election presentations). Do funding-linked quotas exist where they progressively track women's participation and leadership over time and throughout the organisation? e.g. if a NGB of a sporting organisation achieves the 30% or 40% Board participation level for women; can the quota-linked funding contract be altered to move women from coaching at amateur levels to elite levels? Would something like this be possible for all publicly-funded orgs?**

This is a very useful suggestion. There is a need to address the retention of women in politics, not just to facilitate an entry point into politics. Retaining more women in politics will require a change to the political culture, which was built for a time when women were largely invisible in the political landscape, it has developed as a male bastion, driven by male norms of behaviour, with little or no regard for the female approach. Family or caring responsibilities are largely ignored, confrontation rather than collaboration are often the default tactics which all contributes to a culture that does not encourage women to opt for long careers in politics, moving on up to leadership positions.

International research, particularly in Scandinavian region indicates that a level of 30% female representation is the tipping point, at that level the political culture and norms begin to change, influencing how politics works. Getting to that level of representation is the best route to changing the culture from within, thereby creating a more equal political ecosystem better suited to gender balanced representation.