



"That's an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it."

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1981 TD Nora Owen

Teachta Dála for Dublin North
1981-1982, 1982-1982,
1982-1987, 1989-1992,
1992-1997, 1997-2002

First female Deputy Leader
of Fine Gael 1993

Minister for Justice 1994-1997

Chair of the Joint Committee
on Cooperation with
Developing Countries 1986

Vice-Chair of the Foreign
Affairs Committee

Nora Owen was deeply involved in her community and busy raising three children when the local branch of Fine Gael approached her to run for a seat in the local elections of 1979. As a councillor Nora quickly established a reputation as a “go-to” person around local issues. One of her very first campaigns was about the impact of the venomous “Malahide Mosquito”, a public health issue which was adversely affecting people’s lives in the area at the time.

At that stage, despite a lineage that included having two TDs in the family (her uncle Sean and her grandaunt Margaret Collins-O’Driscoll), as well as being the grandniece of Michael Collins, Nora hadn’t considered getting involved in national politics. Then in 1981 a general election was called and the addition of twenty-one new seats resulted in a concerted effort to get new people elected. Nora was first returned to the Dáil in 1981, successfully retaining her seat in a second election in February 1982, and then again in November 1982. Having lost her seat in 1987, she returned to the Dáil in 1989, and continued to be returned until losing her seat in the general election of 2002. Highlights of her political career include representing her constituency for almost two decades, becoming Deputy Leader of Fine Gael in 1993 and serving as Minister for Justice from 1994 - 1997. She is the sister of former Fine Gael MEP Mary Banotti.

The year I was first elected coincided with the breakthrough of women in Irish politics. Up until 1981 the majority of women in the Dáil were widows or daughters of deceased or former members and between the various elections of the early 1980s we got people like Monica Barnes, Nuala Fennell and Gemma Hussey elected for Fine Gael. That was Garret’s influence I think, and also good management by the Secretary General of the Party Peter Prendergast. By 1987 there were campaigns like “Why not a woman?” but while there was a good voice

for women in the parliamentary party we also had quite a right-wing section. The debate on the 1983 amendment was very fraught, particularly after we got Peter Sutherland's advice on the wording. At that time about twenty-one of us were adamantly against it and we were able to abstain in the Dáil. Only Alan Shatter and Monica Barnes broke the whip.

I remember nearly all the women spoke in favour of the decriminalisation of homosexuality, because we were used to being discriminated against. There was a time when a woman over forty couldn't get a permanent teaching job, as my own mother discovered when my father died. There were other things too, like the fact that a man could get a tax allowance to hire a woman to mind the children if his wife died, whereas a woman who had been widowed couldn't. We had to open doors, there's no two ways about it.

For a long time, the Party Chair was always a man and as a minority in the room you had to make sure you got heard. I remember keeping a cartoon of a meeting pinned to my noticeboard. In it there were a number of men and one woman around a table and the caption read; "Well Miss Triggs, that was a very good suggestion. Now perhaps one of the men would like to make it." That experience was quite typical. At meetings you could often be ignored until somebody else brought the same thing up, so you had to be quite assertive. Then, of course, you'd get called bossy and have things like "Oh for God's sake!" being said to you.

That first election to the Dáil was very tough. All through the campaign I was listening to the radio and they'd be saying things like; "We hear that the second Fine Gael candidate seems to be doing well." They never gave my name and I used to shout; "Say my name please!" It was the same when I attended the election count at Ballymun Comprehensive School with my sister Mary. They never referred to me as Nora; it was always "she" or "our second candidate". One of the journalists said, rather rudely, "It looks like you're going to get elected and we don't seem to have very much information about you." I said, "Well I suppose it's time you began to learn."

We won the seat by a handful of votes. It hadn't been factored in, but it ended up being the one that got us into government. Shortly afterwards one of the journalists was overheard ringing his paper reading out his piece; "An anonymous suburban housewife has just had a surprise victory in Dublin North." One of my workers was passing and he said, "She's not anonymous!" and the poor fellow got very flustered. Essentially though, I was an anonymous suburban housewife who hadn't been in the reckoning at all, so I feel I was elected in my own right.

There is no training course to be a TD. You bring your life's experience and you learn on-the-job and I would say to any woman who is interested, take the opportunities. You will be scared, you'll want to go to the bathroom three times before you stand up at a public meeting or speak in the Dáil, but then suddenly you'll find your voice. The other thing that women TDs with children have to do is arrange to have them minded. My husband Brian did the lion's share of that for most of the time I was in the Dáil, but I also hired a full-time housekeeper.

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I was able to do the school run in the morning and knowing that Esther was with the boys when they came in from school meant that I didn't have to worry. There's always an interest in what women are wearing and how they look tends to be criticised more than how a man looks. I used to get my makeup done professionally when I was a minister, particularly if I was going to Brussels at 6am and while it sounds vain, it's really about your own confidence, so women need to be aware of these things.

I think women's antagonism to politics is around the adversarial side of it. When I was Minister for Justice I got some tough times from my opposite number John O'Donoghue, but I used to use a bit of humour and I'd say, "Well John that was one of your poorer efforts; four out of ten" and it would stop him. I remember meeting him in the Dáil canteen one day, and he said; "My God, you remind me of my mother, she could really take it." His mother was a councillor and he was kind of giving me a compliment, even if he did still keep giving me all the flack!

When I was the Chair of the Development Aid Committee my two colleagues in that were Michael D. Higgins and Niall Andrews. It's a small thing, but when Bob Geldof's Live Aid record came out, there was VAT on it and I approached Garret about it. He suggested finding out how many records had been sold and what the VAT was, so I took myself round every record company in Dublin, discovered that it came to something like £200,000 and, as a result, Garret arranged for an extra £200,000 to go into the development aid budget. He was terrific.

John Bruton made me his Deputy Leader in 1993 and then in December '94 I became a minister literally overnight. Being involved in the Northern talks was a big highlight of my time as Minister for Justice and then the introduction of the Criminal Assets Bureau was enormous. It came about because of the murders of Veronica Guerin and Jerry McCabe. I had visited Veronica in hospital after the first time she was shot, I knew her family and I was heartbroken. I remember at her funeral a man outside the church shouted; "What are you doing here? You're responsible for her death." Mark Costigan stood between us and said, "It's not her fault, this was a criminal who did this." I could kind of understand the anger, but as a minister in any role, while you are responsible for making sure there's laws there and proper sentencing, you can't be held responsible if a criminal shoots somebody dead. We brought in the legislation in the shortest time ever, it was the Dáil and Senate working absolutely as it should. There were lots of other things, but the Criminal Assets Bureau has stood the test of time and I was really glad to have been part of the team that introduced the Criminal Assets Bureau.