

GENERATION APATHY – WHAT CAUSES IT? WHO CAN SOLVE IT?

Speech by Cllr. Kate Feeney, Uachtarán Ógra Fhianna Fáil to the MacGill Summer School - Thursday, 24th July 2014

By right, according to statistics and studies – I, firstly, as a young person, and secondly, as a woman should probably not be here today addressing you as an elected county councillor.

Some may say I am a rare breed who should be stuffed and mounted and others may just want me stuffed and mounted. But I will let you make up your own minds on that.

When I was contacted to speak today it set my mind back to how I ended up where I am, what drove me to get involved in politics and more so to seek elected office.

This was not a road I had always planned to go down, nor was it, one where the odds of success were stacked in my favour.

But as an enthusiastic fresher in NUI Galway, I decided to join Ógra Fianna Fáil. Of course, I had grown up around politics, my mother being Senator. Of course, many will say that because of this the path I have taken was an easy path and that I was always going this way. In ways there is some truth in this and in other ways this could not be further from the truth.

The truth is that politics was always around when I was growing up. I was exposed to it from a very young age. It was discussed in the house, at the dinner table, on the phone. However, it really wasn't a forgone conclusion that I would become politically active.

Fast forward to just over 2 years ago when I got the notion that I wanted to run for the County Council. My mum, having been down this road before, spent almost two weeks trying to talk me out of it. But, one of the traits we share is having a stubborn streak. She knew that once my mind was made up she wasn't going to talk me out of it.

I, like many of my peers, had become increasingly disillusioned with the political system, hearing friends and colleagues question the value of voting, thinking that they could not trust the political system or those in it.

I believe that the more citizens who are involved in the democratic process, the better it will work. So, the thought that my own friends didn't want to vote, didn't see anyone out there worth voting for, was not good enough.

But I was not naïve enough to think that one county councillor could change this. However, I did see a changing landscape within my own party, and in other parties, with a strong wave of first time candidates coming forward, and thought that the opportunity could be there to change things.

Of course this is my story, and not everyone at 28 years of age wants to run in a local election. There is a bigger issue as to why young people are not engaging with politics.

However, it should be noted that Garry and I were certainly not the only young candidates who ran last May. Far from it. Nearly one in eight candidates who contested the local elections was under 35. And the young candidates who got the opportunity to run they fared very well, the electorate liked them.

Collectively young candidates won twice as many first preference votes as the Labour Party.

So this begs the question: why are we not running more young candidates? This is a trend I think we will see changing. Over 90% of the Sinn Féin candidates under 35 were elected. Fianna Fáil ran more young candidates than any other party and 65% of these candidates were elected. These are figures that the parties cannot ignore and will be keen to capitalise on.

The challenge for us, is to get young people interested in and excited about politics. Of course, the simplest way to be politically active is to cast a ballot on polling day.

But you can't cast a vote unless you are registered to vote, and its interesting to note that numerous studies have shown that the number one reason for young people not voting is that they are not registered to vote. However, there have been no moves to upgrade or modernise our cumbersome registration system.

By simply moving to system of automatic registration when a citizen turns 18, linked to their PPS number, we could remove this barrier to young people from becoming politically active.

That way being politically active isn't about being registered to vote, it's about showing up to vote.

People are motivated to vote when they see that there are issues at stake that affect them. Over the years, we have seen political parties playing to this. From promises of increasing the State Pension, no cuts to core payments, abolishing Stamp Duty, keeping hospitals open - we have heard them all.

Of course, political parties should lay out manifestos with their ideas and visions. What I am arguing is that political parties and independents alike have a responsibility to voters that the proposals they put forward should be reasonably achievable.

As a first time candidate, I received more than a few lambastings during the campaign about the actions and decisions of those who had gone before me, in my party. It took my confidence a little while to recover when I realised that my offer of shiny, new, open and transparent politics was not as well received as I had imagined.

I was painted as being the same as the rest of them. As they saw it, it wouldn't be long before I was 'lining my pockets'.

For a first time candidate, excited about running and wanting to make an impact, this hardened negative attitude was tough to take.

A CSO survey after the last general election showed that almost three-quarters of students had voted. This was a big jump from 2002 when only half of students voted.

You may remember, during the 2011 general election, that there was a well coordinated campaign by the Union of Students in Ireland on the issue of student fees.

On the back of this campaign, Ruairi Quinn signed his now infamous pledge outside the gates of Trinity College that he would not increase student fees, including the Student Contribution Charge. And we all know what happened there.

Having wooed the students during the campaign, the Student Contribution Charge has risen three times since 2011 and is set to go up again to €3,000 by 2015.

For many of these young people, general election 2011 was their first trip to a ballot box. Broken promises like these leave people twice shy about placing their faith in politics again. Who could blame them for being cynical when over the years all parties - including my own - have been guilty of this kind of conduct.

I think we need to understand that we are dealing with a new electorate and it simply doesn't make sense to sell them old politics.

So, that's my take on what causes apathy. The other question being considered this morning is 'Who can solve it?'

As the president of the youth wing of a political party, I think it would be absurd if I didn't believe that political parties have some role to play in providing the solution.

However, in reflecting honestly on the local election campaign, it would not be an exaggeration to say that being a member of a political party – ANY party – was a negative in the eyes of many voters.

The most common question I faced on the doorsteps did not relate to the big issues in my constituency like property tax, job creation or the regeneration of Blackrock village. It didn't even relate to the now infamous soap opera that unfolded in Blackrock during the campaign!

The single most common remark I encountered was:

"Fair play to you for running. It's great to see young people getting involved. But why didn't you go Independent, I'd vote for you if you were independent".

That wasn't an anti Fianna Fáil statement - although I still encountered plenty of those - but an anti-political parties statement. A plague on all our houses.

In fact, I think it would be fair to say that, on many doorsteps, we had to actively battle against the apathy of voters towards political parties for them to even talk to us, never mind give me a vote.

From my own experience on the campaign trail, and from talking to friends and colleagues, I can confidently say that the situation is much worse amongst the under 40s. In one sense, this should not be particularly surprising given that we are the generation that has broken the traditional ties between family and party loyalties.

However, the fact that independent and smaller party candidates polled better than both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and polled more than Sinn Féin and Labour COMBINED, presents fundamental questions around the very purpose of political parties within our political system. Young people are fed up with political parties patronising the electorate and putting forward manifestos based more on poll findings than leadership.

This is a young country and our independence was brought into being by young people, young leaders. The first Executive Council was primarily composed of men in their thirties. W.T. Cosgrave, who was the 'elder statesman' in that government, was only 42 – almost 30 years younger than the man widely regarded as the elder statesman of the current government.

Nobody could have accused that generation of apathy. The challenge of that generation was to bring an independent Ireland into being. While the challenges we face today are different, do we believe that our young people now are any less idealistic than the men and women of 1916, 1918 or 1922?

Frankly, there is much that we need to be idealistic about.

One in four young people in Ireland is unemployed.

Many face the bleak reality that, with little prospect of getting a job at home anytime soon, getting a job abroad is the only option.

As a nation, we have the highest suicide rate in the EU for teenage girls and the second highest rate for teenage boys.

If politicians – and political parties, in particular - are seen as incapable of providing answers to problems like these then that apathy will last long into adulthood.

It also leaves fertile ground for exploitation by extremist elements, something that we have seen happen across Europe with the growth of far right parties. Ironically, these parties have no problem turning apathy into action amongst young people.

So how do we address this?

An obvious way to start resonating with young people on their issues is to give more credence to the views of young people already within our political parties.

And I can assure you that – across the youth wings – there certainly is no shortage of views or enthusiasm for putting them forward.

Ultimately, our parties need to give these views a real voice by putting forward and supporting more young people at election time to represent these view at elected level.

The 'Class of 2014', the young councillors who won seats last May, have a serious responsibility and a great opportunity to show that not all politicians are the same.

Across all political parties, and outside of the parties, we have the opportunity - if we can think collectively - to change how politics works and happens in our young State. We can set a different standard.

Of course this is hard due to our competing interests. But we have a responsibility to do it. For the first time in a long time, the scale of numbers is there and the need is there.

We must pledge ourselves to dwell more on proposing viable solutions, rather than making political capital of failures. This is the old instinct with all parties – including my own. But it's just not acceptable anymore.

We're constantly told that we are one of the most educated countries in Europe. So why is it that at election time, political parties treat the public like fools rather than the intelligent people that they are.

I'm not going to stand here and pretend to be a self-appointed spokesperson for my entire generation.

Nor do I suggest that I have easy solutions to decades of public disengagement with politics, most acute in young people.

However, I would suggest that in attempting to do something about it, providing more of the same isn't a good place to start.

We have to radically change the way in which politics operates in this country.

A good place to start in advance of the next general election could be for politicians to decide to treat the electorate with respect and to show that politics is a force of positivity rather than campaigns that focus on cheap sound bites.

In a famous speech to a graduating class at a university in Georgia in 1932, President Franklin Roosevelt said:

"The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."

In the Ireland of 2014, we need to try something too.

ENDS
