

# DIVERSITY SHOULD BECOME IRELAND'S STRENGTH

Ireland has become a diverse country with approximately one in eight of us now coming from a migrant background. Despite this opportunity, an appraisal of our elected representatives shows that the dynamism and diversity of Ireland's population is not adequately reflected in local or national politics, reports Lorraine Courtney.

**T**he fact that we have not sufficiently tapped into the potential provided by the immigrant communities here in Ireland is borne out of statistics which reveal that just three out of 949 current local councillors are from a migrant background, according to the Department of Equality, Immigration and Integration.

"Global migration trends indicate that Ireland will continue to experience inward migration in the years to come and that Ireland will remain culturally diverse for the foreseeable future," David Staunton, Minister of State for Equality, Immigration and Integration, has recently noted.

"It's important that the diversity of our political landscape reflects the diversity of our population. All non-Irish nationals have a right to vote and run in local elections. However, the level of migrant representation at the local level is not reflective of the estimated 12% of the population that are non-Irish nationals," he added.

At the first event to promote migrant participation in politics, held in March this year, there was almost unanimous agreement among political representatives that their parties could, and should, do more to encourage migrants to register to vote and to run for election, either as a member of a party or an independent,



## MIGRANTS AND LOCAL POLITICS

according to Minister Staunton.

Brian Killoran, CEO of the Immigrant Council of Ireland, said it's essential for our elected representatives to reflect the communities they serve.

"Not only does this ensure that policies and procedures reflect the needs of the whole community, it is also essential for young people from a migrant background to see people who look like them in positions of authority. This ensures they know they belong here as well as providing potential role models," he told 'Council Review'.

### MIGRANT COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

"The need to encourage migrants to use their right to vote is also an important factor. Ireland has one of the most progressive policies in the world when it comes to migrant access to and participation in local elections. All people resident in Ireland regardless of their nationality can vote and run in local elections."

The Immigrant Council of Ireland is involved in a large number of ongoing projects to promote political participation among migrant communities. "We run outreach workshops with migrant communities, providing information about the Irish political system and encouraging people to register, vote and also run in local elections. We also offer a support service to those migrants who are considering running for local election.

"We are coming to the end of an innovative internship scheme, whereby five migrants interned for four months with one of their local councillors. The placements have been in Louth, Longford, Fingal, Wicklow and Cork City. One of these interns has decided to run for local election next year and the independent councillor with whom she interned is supporting her."

Earlier this year the Immigrant Council of Ireland organised a conference – 'Promoting Political Engagement of Migrants 2018' – in partnership with seven other migrant organisations: Akidwa, Cairde, the International Organisation for Migration, Forum Polonia, New Communities Partnership, Places of Sanctuary Ireland and Wezesha.

Killoran pointed out that the event brought together more than 100 migrant community leaders to identify the barriers people from migrant backgrounds and to develop solutions to encourage greater participation.

### CONDUCTING OUTREACH EXERCISES

The biggest barrier, according to Killoran, is in new arrivals not



*The Immigrant Council of Ireland encourages all political parties to conduct outreach exercises with migrants and migrant groups in their area, according to CEO Brian Killoran.*

realising they have a right to vote. "Action 58 of the National Migrant Integration Strategy states that 'political parties will encourage migrants to participate in local and national politics to the extent that these areas are legally open to them'.

"We would encourage all political parties to conduct outreach exercises with migrants and migrant groups in their area and ask them (at minimum) to register to vote, to make public the percentage of their members who are not Irish citizens and publicly support the idea of one of the next Taoiseach's nominees to the Seanad coming from the migrant community in Ireland."

The Office for Promotion of Migrant Integration in the Department of Justice and Equality has been working with groups of migrant NGOs to bring leaders from within various migrant communities across Ireland into contact with representatives of political parties to educate migrant leaders about the local elections and discuss measures that might increase migrant participation in politics in general.

The first of three such events was co-hosted by the Department and an alliance of migrant NGOs in the Department's offices in Dublin in March. The event saw 100 community leaders meet with representatives from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, Labour, the Green Party, the Social Democrats and Renua. Two more similar events are planned.

## MIGRANTS AND LOCAL POLITICS

### BRIDGING ASIAN DIVERSITY GAP

Speaking to 'Council Review', Green Party Representative for Blackrock, Hazel Chu, said her parents first came to Ireland 40-odd years ago from Hong Kong. "My parents met here in Ireland, both didn't have the language at all and worked in the service industry. Dad was a dishwasher in a kitchen and mum was a bar staff," she added.

They worked hard and got promoted over the years and saved up enough to buy their own chip van in the 1980s. Unfortunately the van was vandalised by individuals who didn't really want Asians in the community. "From the van they then opened their first take away and then a restaurant was followed by four more. I worked in each one from childhood to college," said Chu.

Chu studied Politics and History in UCD followed by Law in Kings Inns. She was the first Chinese individual to be called to the Irish Bar. She received a Smurfit Fellowship from UCD and subsequently worked and studied in the United States.

"Upon my return I worked in the Office of the Chief Scientific Adviser followed by heading up the Crisis Management and Communication for Diageo. It was at this time I managed the local election campaign for first-time candidate Patrick Costello in Rathgar/ Rathmines. And he thankfully topped the poll.

"I became involved more and more in politics since I noticed a distinct lack of diversity within the political sphere. Women made up a minority of the Dáil and even with quotas it was still a minority. Worse still there were no women from an Asian background."

Chu began playing a more active role within the Green Party, firstly getting elected onto their Executive, then becoming Chair of their Women's Group Mná Glasa, and this year she became Chair of their Executive and National Co-ordinator of the party.

"I was elected after shortly giving birth to my first child and for me a large part of going for the role was that my daughter, who is Irish-born Chinese, would grow up in a more politically-inclusive Ireland."

### HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

While on maternity leave Hazel Chu had her daughter with her while canvassing for Repeal, when attending events of Women for Election and while marching for Gay Pride.



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"When I was growing up my parents knew nothing of the Irish political system or parties involved in it and as a result myself and my brother knew very little of how Irish politics work," she says.

"I would like my daughter and other first or second generation migrant children to grow up knowing how the political system works, and be engaged in the political process so that they can be represented properly. It's why I think it's crucial to have individuals from various backgrounds and ethnicities running for positions."

### VOTER REGISTRATION CAMPAIGN FOR FOREIGN WORKERS IN CORK CITY

**Cork City Council recently launched its voter registration campaign, targeting foreign workers and immigrants new to the city. The 'Shape Your City – Use Your Vote' initiative aims to highlight their voting rights, how they can register for voting in the local and European elections and to outline the benefits of becoming active participants in civic life.**

Cork City Council's Community & Enterprise Department initiative follows a request from business, education and community representatives in Cork Chamber, Cork Business Association, IBEC, UCC, CIT, the Public Participation Network, and Cork Sanctuary City to better support the inclusion of people who are new to Cork City so they can contribute actively to civic life and influence how the city operates.

Speaking at the launch in the offices of multinational company Voxpro in Mahon in August, Lord Mayor of Cork, Cllr Mick Finn, said the city will benefit from newer citizens taking an active role in its development. "I think people who are new to the city – whether they are working with multinationals, like Voxpro, for a couple of years, or looking to make a permanent home here – make up an integral part of the multicultural nature of life in Cork City." He said the aim of the city council's campaign is to make it clear that the first step in greater involvement in Cork City is registering to vote.

Minister of State for Equality, Immigration and Integration, David Stanton TD, said that it was great to see local government, businesses and community groups collaborating



Pictured (l-r): Dan Kiely, CEO of Voxpro; Ini Usanga, Co-ordinator of Love and Care for People; Ado Mazombe, Director of Love and Care for People; and Cllr Mick Finn, Lord Mayor of Cork, following the event launch at Voxpro in Mahon, Cork. (Pic: Michael O'Sullivan/OSM Photo).

to encourage voter registration and promote interest in local politics. "Both of these are highlighted in the Migrant Integration Strategy which I launched last year as vital to improving political participation in modern democracies," he added.

"People who are new to a city such as Cork should feel that they are part of every facet of city life including sport, education, community and cultural events as well as full participation in civic life. That begins with voting to elect new councillors to the City Council in the local elections in 2019," noted the Minister.

Outlining what was being achieved by the 'Shape Your City – Use Your Vote' voter registration campaign, Stephen Murphy, Cork City Council's Social Inclusion Development Worker, said the aim is to support a more politically engaged immigrant community.

"We hope to increase the number of new voter registrations and to create an interest in local politics within new communities and amongst immigrants."

He said that immigrants who are now living in Cork for more than six months have the right to register to vote and he pointed out that they can avail of "expert guidance from the Franchise Office in Cork City Council to do just that".



Ann Doherty, Chief Executive of Cork City Council, and Minister for State David Stanton TD, pictured (centre) with representatives of Cork City Council, Love and Care for People, and Irish and International Voxpro Team members at the 'Shape Your City – Use Your Vote' event, hosted by Cork City Council and Voxpro at Voxpro in Mahon, Cork on 27 August. (Pic: Michael O'Sullivan/OSM Photo)