

THE GENDER AGENDA

GARETH CHANEY/COLLINS

With the number of female TDs and senators continually growing, a women's caucus is better placed than ever to shake up Leinster House, writes Justine McCarthy

W

hen Joan Burton, the former Labour Party leader, was first elected to the Dail in 1992, only two female portraits hung on the wall of Leinster House that otherwise creaked with portraits of the grand old men of Irish politics. Both were small drawings of Lady Emily Lennox who, at the age of 15, married the first Duke of Kildare in the 18th century. Leinster House was her husband's ducal palace. The drawings were before-and-after illustrations of Emily, first as a young bride and later as the mother of 19.

"The male wags used to remark when they passed by that she looked better after having her 19 children," said Burton.

An increase in women TDs from 13 (7.8% of the total) to 20 (12%) after the 1992 election led to the formation of a cross-party women's group in Leinster House. "It was a friendly point of contact," Burton recalled. "Mary O'Rourke [of Fianna Fail] was involved and my Labour colleagues Niamh Bhreathnach, Róisín Shortall and Eithne FitzGerald, though, as I recall, Mary Harney [a future leader of the Progressive Democrats] wanted nothing to do with it."

One of the group's most tangible achievements, before it "fizzled out", was the installation on the stairway leading to the Seanad chamber of a portrait of Constance Markievicz, the first woman in the world appointed a government minister.

Catherine Martin, the deputy leader of the Green Party, says she has taken inspiration from Markievicz's portrait since she was elected as a TD for Dublin Rathdown last February.

"I was expecting Leinster House to be dominated by men, even though 22% [the current female representation] is fantastic. When I walked through the lobbies to vote for a taoiseach, before the electronic voting was set up, I felt I was drowning in a sea of suits," said Martin.

She decided to take action. Last Tuesday, she hosted a meeting in Leinster House to propose setting up a women's caucus to coincide with next year's centenary of women's suffrage. The consensus among the seven TDs and two senators who turned up was to forge ahead and establish it. Other female Oireachtas members, represented by parliamentary staff at the meeting, sent messages of support. The inaugural meeting is being planned for next month.

Since Tuesday, four cabinet members — Frances Fitzgerald, the taoiseach; Heather Humphreys, the arts and heritage minister; Katherine Zappone, the children's minister; and Mary Mitchell O'Connor, the jobs minister — have said they will join. So have Regina Doherty, the government chief whip, and Mary Lou McDonald, Sinn Féin's deputy leader.

Women's presence is growing in the corridors of power. A gender quota making parties' state funding conditional on at least 30% of their candidates being female was introduced at last year's general election. The proportion of women in the Dail has increased to 22%. One of the first questions put to Tuesday's meeting was, with the current female complement of 35 TDs and 18 senators — the biggest number yet — is there even any need for a women's alliance?

The answer, TDs and senators agreed, was a resounding yes. Martin pointed to "the threat hanging over equality internationally" following Donald Trump's presidential inauguration in America, prompting women's protest marches worldwide last weekend.



Female TDs and senators put aside political differences to face the camera in 2014. The Green Party deputy leader Catherine Martin, inset below, is now forming a cross-party women's caucus at Leinster House

The leaders of three of Northern Ireland's main political parties are women: Arlene Foster of the DUP; Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Féin; and Naomi Long of Alliance. So are the first ministers in Edinburgh and Belfast and the prime minister in London. Despite the narrowing gender gap on Kildare Street, Ireland only ranks 17th of 27 EU member states for female representation.

"I resisted caucuses in the past because there was not enough [party political] diversity," said Shortall, a Social Democrat TD and the longest continuously-serving woman in the Dail. "We have the critical mass of diversity for it now."

So far, two women TDs have said they do not intend joining the caucus. Ruth Coppinger, an Anti-Austerity Alliance (AAA) TD for Dublin West, declined the invitation to attend Tuesday's meeting, saying she did not wish "to be in a forum with women like Frances Fitzgerald and Joan Burton who have imposed austerity on other



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women". Catherine Connolly, an Independents 4 Change TD for Galway West, asked Martin to send her information about the proposed caucus but has now told The Sunday Times she will not join.

"Women's issues should be dealt with in the Dail by women with strong voices," said Connolly. "I don't think we need a caucus to address issues like domestic violence or housing. Do we need a women's caucus to tell us about the eighth amendment or that it's unacceptable to have people on [hospital] trolleys or that there are 5,000 to 7,000 premature deaths every year from poverty or that we need a mental health policy?"

Brid Smith, Coppinger's colleague in the AAA-People Before Profit alliance, says she intends signing up for the caucus. Among the issues she wants it to address is the suspension of local authority payments to elected members while they are on maternity leave. Hazel de Nortiún, who replaced Smith on Dublin city council after she was elected to the Dail last year, is pregnant. According to Smith, de Nortiún has no other job and is dependent on the €16,500 annual councillors' payment, plus up to €5,000 expenses a year.

"The women's caucus could be useful for demanding equality," she said.

Smith is a TD for Dublin South Central, Ireland's most female-friendly constituency, with three women holding four of its seats. There are

women's caucuses in 87 parliaments around the world, including 18 in Europe. Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Britain have them. Michelle O'Donnell Keating of Women for Election (WE), a not-for-profit political training agency, has been invited to address the US House of Representatives' caucus on February 7.

"The Washington group are keen to come over here," Niamh Gallagher, a founder of WE, told Tuesday's gathering in Leinster House. In the audience were several WE training graduates, including Martin, the Fianna Fail TD Lisa Chambers and the independent senator Frances Black.

The first items the parliamentarians must decide are what to call themselves, how to get funding, whether to invite their male colleagues to join as associate members, and what to talk about.

In addresses to the meeting last week, Gallagher and Orla O'Connor, the director of the National Women's Council of Ireland, advised the members to concentrate on issues concerning women that would not polarise them along party lines. Domestic violence, maternity leave, gender-sensitive budgets and party candidate selections were mentioned as possible examples.

"It seems nonsensical to set up a group that doesn't cover controversial issues, but that happens in politics anyway," said Catherine Noone, a Fine Gael senator. "I'm a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and there's an English man on it who's really keen to cover the abortion issue. I've heard a couple of my male colleagues advising him quietly to stay away from it."

Claire McGing of NUI Maynooth, who has published research on women's political representation, said a women's caucus could adopt agreed positions on public controversies.

"You remember Lapgate?" she asked, referring to a night in July 2013 when, during an interval in a Dail abortion debate, Tom Barry, a Fine Gael TD, pulled his colleague Aine Collins onto his lap. Both lost their seats in the last election. "In a case like that, a caucus could issue a press statement that called it out as sexism," said McGing.

She also had ideas about how to source funding for research that women could use for debates within their own parliamentary parties.

McGing checked the most recent annual report of the Standards in Public Office Commission (Sipo) and found that parties spent relatively small amounts of their statutory funding on women's representation, despite an explicit requirement in the Electoral Act for "the promotion of participation by women and younger persons".

In 2015, Sinn Féin led the way, spending €55,000 of its €720,000 allocation. Fianna Fail, despite dispelling its "male, pale and stale" image by going from zero to six female TDs in the last election, spent the least — just €26,000 of its €1.168m share. Fine Gael spent €76,000 of its €2.281m and Labour spent €60,000 of €1.287m.

If there are critics of the burgeoning caucus among the 175 male TDs and senators, they are not saying so publicly. "I wouldn't say they're anti-man. They're entitled to have their group if they want to," said Mattie McGrath, an independent TD for Tipperary.

McGrath is a member of an Oireachtas cross-party group called Human Dignity, which is against abortion availability and numbers among its members Rónán Mullen, an independent senator, as well as the Fianna Fail TDs Eamon Scanlon and Kevin O'Keefe.

McGrath points out that the group raises its own funds. It gives an annual award to

community works, with the presentation being made by the ceann comhairle.

On the thorny question of whether male Oireachtas members should be allowed to join the women's caucus as associate members, McGrath said: "I don't see why they'd want to have men in it."

However, several women TDs and senators are in favour. According to Gemma Hussey, a former Fine Gael minister for education, her taoiseach and party leader Garret FitzGerald was "a natural born feminist".

"There were only about 12 of us women in the Dail when I was there," Hussey said, referring to the 1980s. "I was almost the only woman who didn't have connections to a deceased husband or father who had been a TD. I was the only woman in the cabinet room for five years."

"At that time, the men had loos everywhere but I had to go down two floors. Nuala Fennell [another Fine Gael TD and the first women's affairs minister] got us decent loos."

Hussey said she is "not convinced"

a caucus is "as necessary now" as it was then.

Burton, one of the founders of the 1992 women's group, says there is still a need for a caucus to address inequalities such as the gender pay gap, and to promote a living wage to lift women, the biggest casualties of austerity economics, out of poverty.

Besides, the objective of the group Burton formed 25 years ago, to achieve a 50:50 balance of male and female parliamentarians, has yet to be achieved.



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