

Wow!

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Last week, two high-profile female TDs announced they were quitting the Dáil, once again throwing the spotlight on the lack of women in politics. We spoke to prominent Cork politicians about their roles and they tell NICOLE WRAIGHT that it's like juggling for Cirque Du Soleil — although they wouldn't change it for the world



THE GOOD LIFE
Wendy Good

FROM IT bag to old bag — you know how old a woman's child is by the number of bags she has.

I left the house the other day with just my phone, wallet and daughter for the first time in three-and-a-half years.

From the time you find out you are pregnant, 'the bag' becomes all-important. That bag every woman packs for the maternity ward must be the most dithered over and exciting object ever — knowing that those white babygros you place carefully inside will come home with a new life in them.

Once they are born, there are bags for changing nappies, spare clothes, bottle bags to keep food and drinks cold or hot, bags for the childminder, the buggy and a spare for the boot of each car. You dare not venture out without a change of clothes, a teddy and an emergency rice cake.

This endless packing of bags spreads like an infectious virus to every part of your life, compartmentalising everything in sight. My handbag — formally a bastion of female excess and lip gloss — now boasts a bulging make-up bag nestled alongside a zip-lock bag of medical supplies that would do a private practice proud. I can attack a headache, sinus snuffle, or cut finger from 100 yards.

Like all mums who spend part of the day (having a break) at work in an office, 'doing the bags' becomes all-important if you are to stand any chance of getting out in the mornings on time.

I remember, before motherhood, friends talking breathlessly about their busy lives: "I had to collect the kids, do the shop, get home, do the dinner, do the bags and be back out for 7pm." Do the bags? Surely rinsing out a lunch box or rooting out dirty washing isn't worthy of a list? Ah, the innocence of it all, for I am now almost military about 'the bags' and I only have one child to worry about.

It begins on a Sunday night with much up-and-down stairs stomping, cursing, swearing and muttering. By Monday 7am, there is a line in the hall: One bag of clothes that stays at the minder's and comes homes filthy at the end of the week; one bag of food, drinks and snacks that my restricted-diet daughter needs; one school bag with spare clothes, hat, sun cream and whatever precious toy must go that day; one lunch bag; one bag of toys, books, teddies and comfort blankets that Zoe wants to bring everywhere; one bag of food for the fridge at my work; one bag of work-related stuff for me — oh and my handbag.

This chronic need to be organised has not gone unnoticed by the wily one, who has decided that she must have a handbag too — preferably my duck egg blue feathery one often used for weddings. This contains beads from a necklace that broke, a book and alabaster animals from the mantelpiece — don't ask. She looks very cute, strutting along with her handbag but invariably, I end up carrying it, looking like a right lemon in the supermarket waiting in blue feathers.

The notion of packing excites her. Three shoes boxes have been commandeered. Christened 'bitsy boxes', they are loaded up with all sorts of gems and I am forced to bring them everywhere, all of them. Bitsy boxes contain everything from her sports day medal, to pens, nail varnish and small dollies. She packs them in tight and stacks them high.

All very cute until we couldn't find the keys one morning and I spent 20 minutes wondering how we were going to leave the house. Keys duly turned up in a bitsy box, along with her brother's CAO college offers she had snaffled from the post. Nothing important then!

With the arrival of Montessori came the school bag and lunchbox. The same bag that housed nappies for playschool has suddenly become a haven for pencils, bottles of water and notes from teacher. On a good day, my cherub might also add in a sticky lolly, a work of art and some dirty socks.

So, to nip out the other day with no bag was liberating. My shoulders were very grateful. It was nice to see what the passenger seat looks like, empty. It was lovely to have both hands free to hold hers.

And then it was Sunday evening again.

DEIRDRE CLUNE, TD, FINE GAEIL, CORK SOUTH CENTRAL

"SOMETIMES I just want to collapse on a Saturday night, but the best thing is knowing I don't have to put on a suit the next day, that I can just throw on my jeans and t-shirt," says Deirdre Clune.

Finding time to fit everything in is a challenge for most of us, but for Deirdre, her diary is more loaded than Michael Flatley's



wallet. Even though she has just returned from a well-earned fortnight away in west Cork with her family, she's already back into the swing of her political life and geared up for the busiest few months of the year.

"My week starts at the Cork office around 8am, responding to my constituents, preparing briefing papers and attending meetings, before catching the night train to Dublin. Then sitting at Leinster House until Thursday, back to the Cork office on Fridays, hitting the streets talking to my constituents, attending meetings at night and finishing up on Saturday afternoon."

She says thankfully her husband is on hand at home to help with her three growing lads aged 22, 19 and 14.

"It's a busy house and the washing machine is always on! Sometimes I get home and there's nothing in the fridge and I give in and order takeaway, but mostly it's about having a routine."

And she admits she's no good to anyone without looking after her health. "To keep up your energy levels you've got to watch what you eat and you have to get some exercise. I love to take a walk around Blackrock, around the marina and up to the castle." But she says like most of us, she has her weak-

nesses. "Nothing is nicer with my morning tea or coffee than a scone, I love them!" She says the key is balance. "I try and schedule family time, and time to myself, even if I have to just say no to some things."

And her time is even more precious now with the Dáil resuming soon. "Definitely this is the busiest time of year. I'm focussing on pre-budget submissions and the parliamentary meeting next week."

Deirdre says the opening sessions are going to be dominated by fiscal policy. "It's going to be a rough few months. People are very angry because they're paying a huge burden, paying for something that wasn't their making. So they need to know when the line is going to be drawn and what do we do for the future."

Deirdre says she's focused on solutions such as job creation. "We know how bad it is, particularly for young people, and I'm really concerned about that. We need more job placement opportunities."

Top of her agenda is researching the brief she's been given on innovations and research. "I think it's very important to invest in this for our future. It must be commercialised to create jobs in the economy. Without it, it will be a very difficult time because the banking situation is on a knife-edge at the moment. The bank guarantee is due to run out at the end of September, and the question is, will that be extended? And what form will that take? We've also got the Anglo Irish Bank, which has cost the taxpayer massively, money invested is melting by the day, and they've had very bad returns again. So the line has to be drawn, we have to get to the bottom of how much this has cost the economy."

Deirdre says she faces the blood-boiling rage and heart-breaking helplessness from people in the community on a daily basis. "I have met a lot of people who are living with massive debt problems, living in houses and paying off mortgages in homes that are worth half what they paid for them and it's a huge worry for them. But what can you do, walk away? You wish you could just drop your house keys onto the bank counter and say 'here, you have it, just take it.'"

Deirdre says people must seek help, "get the best advice possible, go to your bank and negotiate interest-only payments, speak to your utility providers, speak to anyone who will listen. The Money Advice & Budgeting Services is a wonderful service for people, it's a place to start."

Deirdre is the first to admit it's difficult to be optimistic, but she's determined to play her part and promote better times ahead. "We've done it before, and we can do it again."

MARION O'SULLIVAN, SOCIALIST PARTY, CORK NORTH CENTRAL

YOU could forgive community campaigner Marion O'Sullivan for wanting to put her feet up after raising four children, working three jobs and being a full-time carer for her mentally handicapped brother. But she says the returns she receives from her political life far outweighs the sacrifices.

"It's very important for me. I feel it's my civic duty to become involved and when I help to organise public meetings or campaigns, I'm giving a voice to those who can't speak for themselves."

Now that everyone is returning back from their summer breaks, it's full steam ahead. "In truth, I don't ever really stop, whether it's caring for my family or being involved with Socialist party campaigning, all year round is busy!"

A major focus for Marion and the local Social Party is properly funded health care. "We are currently working in conjunction with the orthopaedic hospital to keep that fully operational, that's our main agenda right now."

"On September 25, we're holding a march through the city, campaigning to keep St Mary's hospital open." She admits it's not always easy to get the message across.

"People must realise the power they have, that when we come together for a common goal we can achieve great things."



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CLLR SANDRA MCLELLAN, SINN FEIN, YOUGHAL TOWN COUNCIL

ORGANISED chaos would be one way to describe Sandra McLellan's summer. "After not having a break for two years, I went to Liverpool for a few days in mid-August but I didn't have the opportunity to go anywhere else this year as I was Mayor of Youghal until the end of June."

"Then my daughter did her Leaving Certificate exams, had her grads, got her results, got her college place, then I sorted out her accommodation. And my younger daughter started secondary school."

Still, with a smile on her face, she squeezes in her political duties: "We've been working on many campaigns during the summer months such as the protest at Cork Airport in August concerning the amount of mass emigration for work. Also the protest against the introduction of university fees."

Councillors may not attend any meetings for the month of August but they still deal with queries from the public. "Today I have dealt with a housing application, three queries on different grant applications, a request from a group of residents for a lawn mower, a request to reduce the speed limit in a housing estate, a letter of complaint regarding the cost of rates, various invitations for conferences, public meetings and a launch of an event... and it's only mid-day."



KATHLEEN LYNCH, TD, LABOUR, CORK NORTH CENTRAL

"I SUPPOSE August is considered a Government holiday, but I think as a public representative, there will always be things to do, even on Christmas Day. Not that I am available on Christmas Day by the way!" says Kathleen Lynch.

Although Kathleen and her husband Bernard have just returned from a fortnight camping with two of their four children and four grandchildren, she says the last month has been full of more action than a game of *Command And Conquer*.

"I've been occupied with the normal constituency concerns, that never seem to end. I'm preparing for an important meeting with the Immigrant Council to talk about the issue of sex trafficking. I also opened an art exhibition and was also involved in a local summer camp for kids, learning about local history, reading and the environment."

To keep up her momentum, she says she divides her life into two halves. "I spend half my life in Cork and half my life in Dublin. I've been back at work since August 14 and I've been in Dublin every week since then."

"I have my Bill regarding parental guardianship, in terms of parents who are not married to each other, it is a huge hole in our legal system. You can be a sole parent and a good parent, but because you're not married, one half of that relationship — that being the father — means you've got no rights in terms of parental responsibility."

"The majority of men would like to have involvement in their child's life. That's their right, no matter how young or old. In fact, the majority of unmarried parents are not teenagers, but those in their late 20s and 30s. And we have to do something about grandparents' rights. That's very much on my list between now and Christmas."

Kathleen also wants to resurrect part of a manifesto she first became involved in back in 1997 — that no child should leave primary school without being able to read and write. "It didn't seem that far-fetched to us, even though it got strong opposition. But if 40% of our population still has literacy problems, then we are going to have to address it."

She continues: "The other thing I'd like to introduce in terms of legislation is regarding gender quotas (of female representation in parliament). Not 30% set aside in parliament, but I believe in a system where you have all the candidates, men and women on the ballot paper, side by side and then to let the people decide."

Women in parliament have been leaving en masse in recent weeks. "I don't believe that the natural progression, or the great leap forward that people expected with the election of Mary Robinson, has evaporated. There have been leaps forward, but we thought that there would be more equality for women by now."

Kathleen says women are capable of having a busy career and a family life, she's testament to that. "It's possible, you don't have to be superwoman."

"Sometimes you say to yourself, 'why the hell am I doing this?' And I say, you are doing it so that those who come behind you don't have to do it."

MARY RYDER, GREEN PARTY CHAIRPERSON, CORK SOUTH CENTRAL

THERE'S always been something about politics for Mary Ryder.

"I was involved in the Students' Union when I was in UCC and always had a great interest in current affairs. To me, the Greens had the right approach — not only to matters environmental, but across the board."

"They had a common sense set of policies regarding local democracy and planning, among other things. I was finally tempted to join when I saw how Dan Boyle conducted his business in the Council. I felt that if I believed in what he was doing, I had to help him."

Helping people in need is something Mary is passionate about. "I work as an Adult Literacy Organiser with City of Cork VEC. This service offers support to adults who want to make up ground they missed when they were at school. It's a very satisfying job, incredibly rewarding to help people reach their potential."

Mary has been flat-out organising the Adult Education Exhibition this week, which is like a shop window for all their services. She admits this time of year faces challenges.

"They don't call it the silly season for nothing. No one really wants to think about issues and politics when the sun is shining."

Still, Mary has been hard at it, managing her work, political and family commitments. "In the Green Party, there's never a quiet time! We've just had a very successful 'Meitheal' in Cork, where 30 members went on a mass canvass in Douglas and Ballinlough."

Mary's also active in the Transition Movement, "where a group of interested people examine issues to do with shaping society to live well without cheap, freely available fossil fuels."



MARY SHIELDS, FF COUNCILLOR, CORK CITY CORK SOUTH WEST

TAKING it easy is not a phrase Cllr Mary Shields would use often. "Last Monday I counselled an elderly constituent with a health crisis, sat in on a board meeting, then launched a new gym at Leisure World, after that I caught a Sam Shepard play at the Everyman Palace and then off to the pub to listen to a blues and country session."

All this after entertaining her eight grandchildren. "It's a guilty pleasure to see things like *Toy Story 3* and going to the animal farm. Twice in fact!" Mary says every week is different, but accomplishing councillor duties during summer can be more frustrating than most. "August can be a difficult time to get things done because a lot of services such as City Hall and health services are on breaks, which makes my job harder, nevertheless you do your best to help people in need."

Mary says her main focus between now and Christmas is the environment and planning issues in her area and the city generally. "I try to influence positive measures to ensure such catastrophes such as last winter's flooding crisis don't happen again."

She's also busy preparing for the Cork City Council annual budget 2011. "We have to attend many meetings over the next few months, structuring and signing off the next budget. We're in for tough times, particularly taking into consideration the decrease in fund allocation from central Government."

"Trying to strike a fair rate for our already hard-pressed local business community is something I am acutely aware of." Having been in local politics for 35 years and lived through two recessions she says she can identify with hard times. "Listening, hearing and trying to solve difficulties people have is vital to me. At the end of the day, all politics are local."



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