



AMONGST MOST OF THE FEMALE TDS IS A GOOD SOLIDARITY

Holly Cairns TD speaks to **Saoirse Hanley** about her journey to politics, the causes that get her up in the morning, and the routine sexism she no longer stands for

Photography: **Claire Nash**

“I didn’t get into politics for the craic. I don’t particularly like being in Dublin four days a week – I’d much rather be in West Cork,” smiles Holly Cairns, as she reflects on the slow-moving pace at which change happens in Irish politics.

The West Cork native never planned a future in politics, and actually won her seat on Cork’s County Council in 2019 by just one vote. Her appointment to TD with the Social Democrats a

year later, then, likely came as a bit of a surprise, particularly since her “rollercoaster” career path was not one she endeavoured walking.

“I never thought that I’d be a politician – it wasn’t on my radar,” says Cairns, despite being told often that it “isn’t off the stones she licked it”. Holly’s mother, Madeline McKeever, who was not only in politics herself, but in activism too. “I’m very, very inspired by her,” Holly says when asked about her mother. “I think she’s a very strong, honest and really hard working person.”

Like many politicians, when she entered Irish politics, she also entered the public eye. After her election to the Council in 2019 Cairns suddenly became a face many of her constituents recognised, not an easy transition as her step-brother had sadly passed away around the same time. “I didn’t know if people were going to come up and say congratulations or offer their condolences.”

Having watched so many of Cairns’ viral videos of her Dáil debates, it’s interesting to see that in real life Cairns comes across just as passionate. There’s a genuine passion for making a difference that is evident when she tells you about it. And as it transpires, it is that drive for change that led her to Leinster House in the first place.

While she had canvassed for David Norris in the 2011 presidential election, and for marriage equality in 2015, she credits her work on the Repeal referendum in 2018 as a real “lightbulb moment”. It was the turning point that made her realise that “knocking on doors and asking for votes actually does affect change”.

EVERYDAY SEXISM

When I ask about the issues she cares about and strives to change, many of them are things that directly affect Ireland’s women. She recalls a HSE meeting where she was the sole voice to bring up maternity hospital restrictions or inpatient beds for eating disorders. In a male-dominated government, Cairns says it can sometimes feel like you’re not just the only woman, but the only person consistently raising women’s issues as a result. “I’m very happy to raise, and delighted to represent, women’s issues. They’ve been completely underrepresented, but you do almost feel like this stereotype for women in politics then.”

It can be an alienating facet of the job. “Most of the time you don’t think too much about it, you just keep going,” says Cairns. But ignoring the elephant in the room is harder when it rears its head. One incident in 2020, during her first year in the Dáil, grabbed headlines. A member of a state board called Cairns an ‘ignorant little girl’ in a Tweet, which another TD had to later apologise for liking.

“I kept thinking, we’re so used to this kind of everyday sexism that we just ignore it, which I did [at first].” But then she decided to face the issue head on. “A member of a state appointed board, speaking about an elected woman in that way, it’s just so inappropriate. So I was like, I’m actually just going to go call it out and invite him to a debate on the issue.”

When Cairns addressed it in Dáil, she looked around and saw there were no other female TDs present: “Luckily we have the first female Leas Cheann Comhairle, so she was in the chair. That was the only other woman in the room. But it happens all the time.”

While the sporadic appointment of female politicians could be a dividing force, Cairns says it is something that instead brings them together, despite cross-party differences in opinion. “You totally disagree on some issues, but amongst most of the female TDs is a good solidarity.”

THE HARDEST PART

I ask Cairns what the hardest topic to tackle has been, and it’s with a sudden solemnity that she tells me it’s the issue of the mother and baby institutions. “I said earlier that I wasn’t really interested in Irish politics [growing up] and I didn’t tune into it that much. And that’s true. But I remember the one time I would always tune into what was going on in Irish politics was the mother and baby homes.”

Cairns joined the Oireachtas Children’s Committee to help discover and distribute information about children in the homes and laundries, burials that had happened, and to seek justice. It’s clear that the work she does takes its toll: “I find it really heartbreaking and really tragic. And I think it’s a real shame on the country that we haven’t done anything about it. Because I feel so strongly about those issues, when I speak on them or

when I’m trying to work on them, I feel the pressure the most, because you don’t want to let people down and it’s such an important issue.”

In recent years, there have been calls for redress, reparations, and a formal acknowledgement of the country’s harrowing history. These are calls that Cairns echoes. “When you think about it, the mother and baby institutions, it was women being incarcerated and forced into labor, their children taken away from them for having sex. We’re talking about an Ireland where sex before marriage was basically illegal. There was no access to reproductive rights. So you were basically incarcerated for the so-called crime of sex. It’s such a women’s rights issue.”

UPHILL BATTLE

She intends on facing up to these issues in 2022, continuing her work with the various committees and groups working towards a fair redress. Alongside this, much of her focus is on climate action, agricultural policy, disability supports, and eating disorder treatment.

The work that needs to be done is vast and daunting, but it’s clear that that is what keeps Cairns going. A passion for the job is needed in politics, which can be dishearteningly slow-moving. “It’s the same thing over and over, so it’s really frustrating, but also, that’s the motivation to do this. You have to try and turn it into, well, that’s why we’re here. That is the point.”

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