

*Eoghan Murphy, MacGill Summer School Speech, Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2013*

## **BRINGING REFORM TO THE BACKROOM OF POLITICS**

I have been invited here this morning to give a view of our political system and democracy from the backbenches. The title of my address to you today is “Show up and Shut up” – sub-titled: “The Button Pusher, a Cautionary Tale of a Backbench TD”. Author, irrelevant.

It’s not an address at all actually, but rather I’m going to read to you a short story – the Story of a ‘Backbencher’, a newly elected TD to the main party in government. He is about 6’2”, with dark hair, represents Dublin South-East, and has an awfully high opinion of himself.

Of course, any resemblance to the person standing before you here now is accidental.

It is two years since the election of March 2011 when we meet Backbencher for the first time, two years since his election to Dáil Éireann as a new TD – new both to politics and to the parliament. He is sitting in his office in the basement of Leinster House 2000.

Our story begins:

Backbencher was feeling frustrated. He had just spent twenty minutes on the phone to Mary Murphy as she complained to him about the pothole in her road. She knew this wasn’t his responsibility, she professed, but her emails to the Council were going unanswered and the problem was only getting worse. “I will see what I can do”, he said, as he finished the call.

But what could he do? He had absolutely no responsibility in this area. Well, no official responsibility. He could call up the Council’s local area office – he knew a guy – and put a bit of heat on. But he’d always told himself he wouldn’t be that kind of politician, that he’d be brave and tell people that he was their national parliamentarian and that such work was for the Council, and the very best of luck et cetera et cetera.

But, Mary had voted for him. She was in the local tennis club, she knew his mother, she had told him he was great. And, she had a genuine concern about her road and was getting lost in the labyrinth of the local council’s communications system. He could help.

He picked up the phone. As he called John in the local area office he stared at the paper on his desk: ‘Personal Insolvency Bill 2012’ was written on the cover. He sighed. He knew it was an important piece of legislation but when was he going to get the chance to read it? And what was the point? And why wasn’t anyone answering the phone? The bells began to ring. Bong, Bong, Bong, Bong.

A vote. “On what”, he wondered. Who knew? He shouted in to the adjoining office “Add John from the Council to my call sheet”. His parliamentary assistant shouted back: “I have two degrees you know.” Yes, he did know. She was frustrated too and who could blame her?

Out of his office he went and off to the chamber. As he made his way, he thought, as he always did, of the Eloi (in HG Wells’ *Time Machine*) marching passively to their underground doom at the hands of the Morlocks. Bong. Bong. And he thought, as he always did, that this was a very clever comparison to make.

Much bustle in the chamber. TDs passing letters to Ministers, or sitting down with them for a chat. Small groups sharing the latest gossip from the four corners of the counties. “What’s the vote on?” Backbencher asked a colleague. “Not sure” came the reply – “a motion on Europe I think”; “Something to do with the banks maybe?” said another. The chamber was called to order.

Backbencher went to his seat on the back row to cast his vote. He looked at the large screen above the Ceann Comhairle, with all the bright green lights. "Got it" he said, and pushed the green button. Job well done. Another law enacted.

The chamber emptied but Backbencher remained. There was a full yellow folder of email correspondence on his desk but he really didn't feel like doing any work. He would relax and take a break, and so stay in the chamber for the debate.

It was report stage on a financial measure of some sort and the opposition spokespeople were objecting to everything. Backbencher had a list in front of him of a dozen amendments, practically undoing everything in the Bill. "What a waste of time", he thought to himself. The amendments could never pass because the government, by necessity, had the majority in the parliament. And its party members had to vote in accordance with the government. The opposition knew this so why were they bothering? "Is it all a big charade?" he asked himself. "Are we just going through the motions?"

He wondered though: If the opposition thought it could get support for its amendments, would it really put down such irresponsible ones? If the parliament was master of its own affairs – if there was no whip on certain issues or certain stages of a bill, say – would the opposition behave differently? Would they perhaps behave more responsibly?

Backbencher remembered his days on the Council. There, they actually debated and you had to understand the issues and you had to stand by your vote yourself, no excuses. And he remembered some great debates where his vote was actually swayed by the passionate contributions of others. When you honestly didn't know what way to go and so you listened and you spoke and you were moved to a decision by the powerful words of others. Where good people came together and achieved as a group for their communities and their city what none of them could achieve individually...it was probably a debate about speed limits or something.

But this, this was important stuff, happening here in the chamber of Dáil Éireann and he was a part of it. The great debates of decades past and decades to come. Backbencher corrected his posture. Some colleagues came in to contribute, were called on by the Ceann Comhairle, rose and read their scripts diligently, and left. Thanks very much.

Backbencher would do the same at five minutes past nine that evening, as per his instructions from the Whip's office. Yes! The post-9pm slot, reserved for the best and brightest. Backbencher was going to give a ripping speech – congratulating and welcoming the Minister's Bill – in equal measure. A speech for the ages! Well, searchable on the Oireachtas website anyway.

Backbencher rose and bowed, and headed in the direction of the Members' Bar. The three deputies left in the chamber watched him go.

In the back corner of the bar four of his closer colleagues sat in animated conversation over their cups of tea.

"It's a disgrace", one said.

"Total abuse", the other replied.

"What's happening?" enquired Backbencher.

“They’re guillotining the debate on the new health legislation”.

“To how long?”

“Two hours”

“Two hours!” exclaimed Backbencher. “But this is big legislation – it’s a big deal to a lot of people. You can’t scrutinise 100 pages of detailed legislation in public in only two hours”

“Well, we’re going to”, came the swift reply.

The group were not happy. “This isn’t how parliament is meant to work” one of them fulminated. “We’re meant to be the check and balance on this sort of behaviour, the public scrutiny, the breaks. This is exactly the kind of crap that got us in to trouble in the first place”.

“So what, you’ll vote against it?” another asked.

“I don’t want to vote against it”, he replied, “But shouldn’t I have a right – shouldn’t we as a parliament have a right to at least say, hold on folks, let’s take a bit of time with this. Three, maybe four, hours at least. I mean we can’t even order our own business for Christ’s sake”.

“Maybe we should vote against it then” one of them said resolutely. They all laughed.

“So, what are our options?” asked Backbencher.

“Go up and raise it at the Parliamentary Party meeting” replied one.

“And be brandished as trouble makers” followed another.

Another pot of tea and more bitching and moaning. They were an unhappy lot these new TDs, now two years in. They just wanted to do their jobs. Upstairs in the parliamentary party meeting another rant was raging. About one thing, but the sub-text was really another. And that was fine. The back room politics had to be played somewhere. But did everything have to be played there? Backbencher wasn’t going near it.

He walked back over to his office with his coffee and a yellow Snack bar – the one with six individual pieces, because you get more.

On his chair was the new Environment bill with a yellow sticky on the cover from his assistant who had long since gone home for the evening. Backbencher had a system of priority levels in his office, where his assistant could leave things for him; on his laptop was most important, then his chair, then the desk, then the couch chair beside his desk, then the floor.

He flicked to page 12 of the Bill. Yep, as he had suspected, the Minister had not included the piece he had requested. Backbencher picked up the phone and called one of his senior colleagues.

“I want to put down an amendment on the Environment bill. It’s a small thing and non-contentious”, he said.

“Did you raise it with the Minister and his civil servants?” asked his senior colleague.

“I did but it’s not in there”.

“Then it’s not going to be in there” he replied.

“Look, can’t I at least put it down in committee, say, just to make my case publicly, just to show people that I care, that I’m working?” he protested.

“You can”, came the reply, “on my arse”.

Backbencher put down the phone. “What’s the bloody point” he said to himself.

He looked on his laptop and the printed call-sheet that had been left there for him. Priority Number 1. It was too late to call John in the Council. Next on the list was Aidan, who, according to the sheet, wanted to give out to him about the new property tax. Backbencher sighed, and picked up the phone. The day would end soon he assured himself. And begin again tomorrow.

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Folks, this is just a story. A bit of fun and a cynical take on the life of a backbencher. It’s not all like this.

For my own sake, I sit on the Public Accounts Committee – and every week we do real and important work. I lead the Oireachtas delegation to the OSCE and as a result have monitored elections in Russia and led the monitoring mission in Bulgaria. That’s important stuff. I’ve even taken a bill – my own bill on tax transparency – for a full debate at second stage in the Dáil chamber. Only a handful can say they have done that.

Many of my colleagues enjoy similar important work. So maybe I really shouldn’t be complaining.

Only, we failed as a nation. We came to a point where we could no longer manage our own affairs – we failed. And we just didn’t fail during the week of the bailout in 2010 or on the night of the guarantee in 2008. Our failure was much older and much deeper than that.

In addressing the question of what went wrong in our country, we in Fine Gael blame the politicians and the political system that was in place: politicians bred of a dysfunctional parliament, who went on to take executive power, leaving a dysfunctional parliament in place to act as their counterweight. And it did not work.

So why are we continuing to make the same mistakes? Yes, this government’s record on Dáil reform is better than the previous one’s. But the previous government’s performance is not a benchmark I am interested in. And initiatives like sitting longer, while a welcome change, are not reform, they’re just a change in existing practices. We need to get rid of existing practices and bring in new ones.

Last March I produced a short pamphlet – and I have it here for distribution – containing 30 simple reforms that could radically improve Dáil Éireann. None of the ideas are original. None are that radical. Yet the difference they could make to the country: making leaders of politicians again, not just the Taoiseach or his Ministers, but every single person elected to Dáil Éireann.

Real debate in the chamber, with no scripts, big audiences, robust questioning of the Taoiseach and Ministers. Reforms that would empower members of the Dáil, making them actual legislators again and freeing them from the party whip at committee stage so that they would have to be involved in the process and not just bystanders to it. Putting parliamentarians in charge of the parliament again.

Reforms that would bring much of the backroom of politics, but not all of it, out in to the open.

We need to rebuild politics in the people's eyes and we cannot do that behind closed doors. The times demand greater transparency than that.

None of these Dáil reforms require new laws or changes to the constitution to be enacted, just political will.

I'm still not sure what we're waiting for. But I'm not sure how much longer new TDs can wait. And I know that the public will not wait.