

Good Morning

What an enormous privilege it is for me on behalf of the 5050 Group to be here today and to have the opportunity to sit and listen and to be inspired by the moving words of our honoured guest – Madame Michelle Bachelet.

We would like to thank Orla and the NWCI for organising and hosting today's event and to Minister Lynch for chairing this event and for the amazing support that she gives on an ongoing basis to 5050.

Over the next few minutes I want to tell you the story of the 5050 Group.

Many of you already know 5050 in fact many of you are members up and down the country. But for those of you who may not have heard of us. The 5050 Group is a single issue national advocacy group dedicated to achieving equal representation in Irish politics. Last year we successfully campaigned for the introduction of gender quotas which will increase the electoral choice on our ballot papers at the next general election.

As our name would suggest we are motivated by a sense of fairness and inclusiveness. We are politically non-aligned and we are fully inclusive, welcoming both women and men as members.

We came together nearly three years ago when the former Minister and passionate advocate of women's rights, Gemma Hussey challenged us to channel what she termed the *sparkling anger* that we shared.

We had been frustrated by the fact that there was no dedicated voice coming from civil society on the abysmal state of female political representation in this country.

We were frustrated speaking to older women about female representation who said we are still talking about the same things we were talking about 25 years ago. Dail Eireann they told us has always been at least 85% male.

We shared a common view that the time for tea and sympathy was over. We wanted action, we wanted change – and we wanted it urgently.

In terms of the context we had two great things going for us – TIMING AND TALENT.

The first point was the mood and atmosphere in Ireland at that time. It may not seem such a long time ago but it was a time of great change in Ireland. The old reliable pillars of our society - the Church, the State, the banks, our very economic system, the political elite were all collapsing around us. There was a general feeling that the old guard had let us down and that it was time for a new type of politics in Ireland – there was a sense that we had an opportunity to rebuild our society along different lines. So it didn't seem so far-fetched that a group of passionatas from Cork could establish a new group dedicated to increasing the number of female politicians.

The second point was that the group was infused with some brilliant academics – some of them are here today Fiona Buckley, Professor Yvonne Galligan and Claire McGing. They and others were able to give us chapter and verse on this topic - the stats for Ireland and the experience from abroad.

And their statistics truly shocked us: - After almost 100 years of suffrage only 15% of the seats in our national parliament are held by women. At local government it's not much better – only 16% of local authorities are women. A worrying statistic when you think that local government provides a significant pipeline of candidates for the national parliament.

When you put our 15% female representation in an international context we rank 109<sup>th</sup> out of 190 countries in a global league of women's parliamentary representation. And we're slipping all the time. When I first started looking at these numbers three years ago we were ranked 79<sup>th</sup> which means that other countries are improving and we are standing still. Amongst our EU partners we rank 23<sup>rd</sup> out of EU 27.

So we could see there were structural problems, there were cultural problems and there were pipeline problems. All of which needed to be addressed urgently.

So we spent 3 months figuring out which parts of this enormous elephant we would choose to focus on. We started with who we were, what we wanted to achieve and how we would go about it. We set out our vision as 50:50 by 2020. This you may think is overly ambitious in scale

“You’ll never get the Dail to 5050 men and women and you certainly won’t get there by 2020,” the naysayers said. We think that without an ambitious target that we simply will not make any real impact. We weren’t really concerned about that, we knew the symbolism of the name and the vision was a powerful message in itself.

As a group of dedicated volunteers, we work at a national level and at a grassroots level. At national level we lobby for legislative changes that will help break down the structural barriers to female representation. And equally important we work at community level to raise awareness and to get women talking about big P politics.

We are convinced that it is this bottom up and top down approach to the issue that is gaining traction.

We are constantly amazed at the interest in this issue at local level. We now have local branches in Cork, Dublin, Sligo, Donegal, Kerry, Meath and most recently County Monaghan. These are self-organising locally driven groups who hold public meetings, local fund-raisers and generally increase the awareness of the local community in the issue of more balanced political representation.

As I mentioned earlier, last year we successfully campaigned for the introduction of gender quotas. The Act which was signed into law on 21 July by President Higgins is an opportunity quota. Political parties must run at least 30% female candidates or risk losing their state funding. The 5050 Group lobbied for this because we knew

that something needed to be done to kick start the numbers out of stasis and we know that quotas do that. In fact they have worked in over 100 countries worldwide.

Our opportunity quota will give the electorate better choice. We are very conscious of this when we reflect that in the last election only 86 (or 15%) of 564 candidates were female. That figure translated exactly into the number of women who were elected. We now have 24 female TDs out of 166 or 15%.

With gender quotas adopted, the focus for the 5050 Group, at local and national level, now turns to ensuring that they are effectively implemented. Political parties must fully embrace the spirit of the law and support women's candidacies. We won't accept the excuse from parties that they can't find the women. We will be fulfilling a watchdog role at national and local level to ensure that party conventions are giving women the opportunity to get their name on the ticket.

Our local branches are now looking to the local elections of 2014 to seek out, support and encourage women to move from small p politics to big P politics and getting them to run. We believe that the communities in which we live and work are full of women in leadership positions. Political parties must find them and they must ask them to run.

These are the people who run local groups, raise money for all sorts of charities, they lobby for local hospitals, children, schools, facilities etc. What is wrong with our politics that it is so unattractive to talented women who have exactly the skills that our country needs in politics today? Why can't politics be an aspiration for any woman? I would acknowledge the great work being done by Women for Election to train women and to give them the confidence to take that next step and become a role model for other women.

With gender quotas adopted, we have to turn our attention now to the other barriers that remain. The issue of 'Care' is especially significant not just to women but to men also and needs to be addressed through legislation as a matter of priority. We

will be working with other groups including the NWCi on this issue over the coming months.

Finally, as women we must be emboldened. We have to use our *sparkling anger* to move from influencing politics to being a political decision maker.

Personally I know I will look back on today and say I was enthused and encouraged, that a fire was lit in my belly from the inspiring words of our honoured guest Madame Bachelet.

Thank you