

By Viktor Posudnevsky

LIFE-LONG Fine Gael supporter Jim D’Arcy has been a Dundalk county councilor for the last 10 years and also contested the 2007 general elections. The experienced politician sounds like he’s got every- thing planned out.

“Considering the quality of herself as a candidate,” he says of his running mate, Benedicta Attoh, “and taking into account the dynamics of this election, there is a realistic chance of taking two seats. It would be a disappointment to lose this opportunity.”

Nigerian-born Attoh is D’Arcy’s running mate on the Fine Gael ticket in the Dundalk South constituency. With Fianna Fáil expected to fare badly, Attoh now looks almost certain to win a seat on the back of transfer votes from D’Arcy, who is highly popular in the area. But there are potential pitfalls ahead.

“It’s very important that she gets a lot of first preference votes,” says D’Arcy. The worry is that if Attoh doesn’t get enough first preference votes, she might fall out of the race too early and fail to capitalise on the transfer vote from D’Arcy, who is poised to win by a big margin.

D’Arcy says only “around six per cent” of registered voters in Dundalk South are immigrants. “I’ve got this number from studying the latest register of voters,” he explains. “There are many more immigrants living in the area, no doubt. But a lot of them are not registered, and then there’s a lot of mobility as well.”

Even if all six per cent were to support Attoh unanimously, victory for her would not be realistic, he says. “There’s a good chance of getting elected, but Benedicta also has to reach out to the Irish community.”

Attoh herself realises that she must act as a representative for the whole community. “I am not an ‘immigrant’ candidate,” she says. “I will represent all, and the support I’m getting is across the board.”

In order to secure an even number of first preference votes, the two have devised a canvassing strategy. D’Arcy is taking in the rural areas of the constituency, while Attoh competes for voters in town. When D’Arcy is not busy campaigning on his own behalf, he helps the Nigerian in trying to persuade as many people as possible to vote for her.

“I was impressed by Benedicta’s abilities, talents and her grasp of issues,” says D’Arcy, explaining his choice of running mate. “I see her as a Dundalk person who happens to be born in Nigeria.”

In 2004 Attoh ran in the local elections as an independent, after finding out she could be a candidate just three weeks before polling day. She didn't get the seat, but was approached by several political parties, finally choosing Fine Gael.

"I am determined to win and so is Jim D'Arcy," says Attoh. "I'm putting in hard work, commitment and perseverance. Having taken part in elections before, this time I am positive."

The Nigerian activist says she sees her future in politics. "Politics is a call to service and I want to build a political career in Ireland," she enthuses.

D'Arcy also sees brighter things ahead for his running mate: "I don't think she'll stop at local elections."

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