

'I'll be counted among those who tried to make a difference'
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Fueled by optimism, an unprecedented 38 immigrants are running in the local elections. Colin Murphy reports

“WE were taught to be leaders,” says Anna Rooney. “You have Communion and Confirmation. We had the same – but with a political side to it.”

Rooney, despite her Irish surname and touch of a Cavan accent, grew up in the Soviet education system, in the disputed province of Abkhazia next to Georgia. Leadership wasn't all that she learned. In 1992, war broke out between Abkhazian separatists and Georgia.

“Suddenly, we had nothing.” Her family had by then moved across the border, into Russia, and were lucky to escape the worst of the fighting. But their economic prospects were destroyed and they had to start over. That gives Rooney a distinctive perspective on the current recession.

“The worst thing is the war. When you go through the war, your eyes are opened differently. We can get through this crisis. Everybody just has to find the strength.

“Look at what's happened the last five years: we're all on the go; unless you text somebody, you can't visit them; every minute is written down. We lost our community values. Maybe we have to go back to 'community'.”

Rooney moved to Clones, Co Cavan, nine years ago, following a whirlwind romance, conducted largely online, with a local man. A translator by profession, she threw herself into local community activities, and eventually set up a company offering multilingual and integration training services. Then, a few months ago, Fianna Fáil asked her to stand for Clones Town Council. The answer was obvious.

“The people who helped me when I arrived, they all were Fianna Fáil.” She was “honoured to be asked to represent”.

The campaign, though, has brought a new awareness of her identity.

“Until about three months ago, I never felt that I was a 'foreign national'.”

Suddenly, Rooney is part of a larger trend. There are an unprecedented 38 immigrants running in these local elections, from countries as diverse as Colombia, Moldova, Pakistan and Zimbabwe.

For many of those candidates, their hope of election is a forlorn one: reliant on a vote from their own communities, they will be stifled by low voter registration among immigrants generally.

On the doorsteps in Letterkenny, Co Donegal, the reception given to each of two, rival Nigerian candidates is, indeed, impeccably polite. Stella Oladapo, a claims examiner with a multinational insurer, goes door-to-door, alone, while one of her daughters waits patiently in the car. At home, her 10-year-old daughter is minding the baby, while her husband works the late shift in another multinational.

Oladapo originally joined the Blaneys' Independent Fianna Fáil organisation, because Niall Blaney had been "so supportive" when she arrived in Letterkenny first, and she subsequently followed Blaney into the party proper.

Oladapo's campaign strategy is contained in a clutch of hand-written foolscap pages: a list of 400 names of everybody she knows in Letterkenny, "friends, and friends of friends". (The quota here in 2004 was just under 600.)

"I went street by street through the register, and if I spotted a name that I knew, I wrote it down, and visited them. The majority of the people here will give me their number-one votes."

Oladapo's rival, for the Nigerian vote at least, is Michael Abiola-Phillips, running for Fine Gael, whose most distinctive campaign innovation is a white bib, worn over his suit, with his name and logo, and matching baseball cap.

Abiola-Phillips has courted the immigrant vote, targeting the local African churches in particular. But he also appears well integrated into an unusually cohesive party strategy in the town. Most of their promotional materials give equal space to all five candidates, and the canvass is being mapped out on a large whiteboard in the Fine Gael HQ with a long list of housing estates to be canvassed in turn.

Abiola-Phillips canvasses by day; he works by night, as a mobile security guard, sleeping for two hours in the morning and two hours again before starting his nightshift. Walking through one of the local estates, mid-morning, successive doors open to give him a polite nod and take his flyer with a "thank you". He always asks for a vote or high preference, and takes people at their word when they say they'll do what they can.

"He seems a nice critter," says Veronica Gallagher as Abiola-Phillips walks on down the road. "He has a good personality. As we always said around here, a smile carries farther than a frown.

"There's only one problem: they're not here that long. They don't know the swing of things."

For Abiola-Phillips, though, the issue is as much about offering leadership to his own community as representing the indigenous one. Being elected, he says, would be "a way to set the standard for other immigrants coming behind me". In that, he echoes Paddy Maphoso in Dublin.

“At least I’ll be counted among those who tried to make a difference,” says Maphoso. “In 2009, I stood out and tried to make a change.”

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