

I would like to start by thanking everyone present for offering me the opportunity to speak before you all today. For those of you who do not know me, my name is Gabe Cronnelly. I am married to a wonderful woman and of course my better-half, Raphael. I am a father to three teenage boys and live in a remote and rural part of Galway. I have been an active member of my local community for over four decades and have worked in both the private and public sector. Since 2014, I have been a serving Member of Galway County Council for the Athenry-Oranmore municipal district. These are just some of the proudest milestones I've achieved in life thus far.

However, it has not all been plain-sailing...11 years ago I suffered a life-changing injury that resulted in the amputation of my left leg. An accidental discharge of a firearm by a friend during a cold winter's day, left me in a pool of my own blood out in the middle of a bog in Athenry. There were 13 operations to save my leg. The 14th was to amputate ... For many weeks and months after, I was in total despair. I could no longer work at what I used to do ... I felt as if I would be a burden on my family for the rest of my life. Every type of negative thought you could imagine had entered my mind during those early days.

However, through the support of family, friends, and kind strangers, I found the strength to see the positives in my life. I began to see the opportunities as a disabled person to get more involved in local community groups, disability organisations, charities, and fundraisers. As a person with a disability, I decided that I was not going to allow my disability to hold me back, yet rather, spur me on. I turned my disability into my ability to get things done. I became a member of the Irish Wheelchair Association, got involved in Paralympic shooting competitions, became more deeply involved in my local community sports clubs to further encourage and support young people with disabilities. I joined Embrace, a survivors' network for those who suffered death and disability through farm related accidents, and I devoted more time to groups such as the Athenry Men's Shed and the Galway Parkinson's' Association. All of this helped me to become fit and healthy again ... both mentally and physically.

When I look back over the last decade of my life, two things really stick out for me. The first is a sense of belonging. Having support groups and various organisations to contribute to, but also to lean on in times of need, I feel, really helped me through some of the hardest times of my life. The second ... remember when I spoke about strength ... I had to muster up the strength to try and live an independent life.

Independent living for people in the disability community is for too many a distant dream and untenable prospect. And that is not okay. For too long our disabled brothers and sisters have been neglected and pushed aside by our broken political institutions. At present, disabled people make up 13.5% of the population and that is expected to increase to around 20% by 2026. Our voices must be heard. At a local level and at a national level.

Presently only one member of the Houses of the Oireachtas has a visible impairment. We have gender quotas in place, and I would like to see quotas extended to disabilities to achieve a sense of belonging for disabled people. We too should have a reserved place at the decision-making table.

The micro-aggressions by the State are constant in relation to the inadequacies of our public transport for disabled people, the inaccessibility of many buildings and footpaths, the disproportionate levels of poverty affecting people with disabilities, and the major challenges facing disabled people in terms of access to voting.

The right to vote should extend to everyone, including people with disabilities like myself. There are serious concerns that people with disabilities are being challenged in the polling booths when presenting alongside their assistant or carer. There have also been concerns raised in relation to inaccessible entrances to polling stations for wheelchair users which has created a sense of further exclusion for disabled persons. Serious changes need to be made to ensure people with a disability are not disenfranchised from exercising their democratic right at every opportunity.

My experience of living with a disability has opened my eyes to other types of marginalisation and I regularly work with Traveller and migrant groups in my councillor role. It is through this exposure to people who are different from myself, that I have become a mentor with the Migrant Councillor Internship scheme.

I would like to see such a scheme put in place for disabled people. We need to make space for everyone who has a desire to be involved in local and national government. The political representation of disabled people has not improved substantially since the foundation of this State. Disabled people are left wondering whether the policies that affect them could be a little different if they had more of a say. Indeed, such an internship scheme could and should be extended to all marginalised groups to achieve a Dáil or Seanad chambers that looks a whole lot more like the society it governs.

There are a multitude of issues that are discouraging or downright preventative for a political candidate in my position; the difficulty in trying to knock on 2000 doors during local elections with a disability, the need to get up and down ladders while posterising, attending functions that are not always disability friendly, planning to get to and from meetings with insufficient public transport. In addition to quotas, and internship schemes, funding should be made available to remove these barriers to people with disabilities standing as political candidates.

It can be hard for people with disabilities who have entered politics both here and in Britain to get their voices heard. There is a lot of patronisation and general belief that only the needs of disabled people are being considered. This is a huge loss to the system because political parties, council chambers, the Seanad and Dáil are all missing out on the experience of including disabled people. This would be valuable to them in terms of policy making. People with impairments bring solutions to their own difficulties therefore not to involve them is a massive loss to us all.

The party whip system further prevents many disabled people from speaking their truth when they disagree with policies that affect them. Impaired people and disabled campaigners therefore can fear they will get 'lost' in the party system with no avenue to ensure their perspective is fully considered. We need to ensure that diversity and inclusion are at the very core of all decisions being made.

I came here today to share my story with you so you can learn from my experiences. I experience my day-to-day life as an amputee, and I am here to rally against the marginalisation and micro aggressions that the state forces on me every day. I want to raise up the voices of people just like me, and other marginalised groups so that we too can have a seat at the decision-making table. I believe true change can only come from changing the system and the system has so far failed to meet my needs as a disabled man. If we are to meet the needs of people like me in the future, then we need to take progressive steps to realise this change.

Thank you for your time.