

SEANAD REFORM

A PAPER BY THE UNION OF STUDENTS IN IRELAND

STATING THE PROBLEM & WIDER OBSERVATIONS

Ireland is at present a country where apathy and antipathy with the political system is at an all-time high, threatening to break the relationship between the governed and the parliamentary democracy. The economic crash, foregone election promises, the phenomenon of Irish Water and ongoing parochialism have combined to bring about a high degree of dissatisfaction with and disconnection from Irish politics.

The current government entered office on a platform of a democratic revolution and widespread reform of how we are governed – a platform of doing things differently, of ‘new politics’. It is fair to say that this apparent commitment to reform contributed to the electoral success of the current administration – and created a mandate for change in both senses of the word – not only has the electorate given the government a green light for change, but they have actively demanded it.

Ireland has historically been weak at assessing the impact of legislation previously passed, learning from mistakes and building on progress. USI’s proposals would see the *Seanad* empowered to review past legislation and produce evidence-based policy reports, as well as providing necessary oversight for the raft of legislation currently being produced by the European Parliament without adequate scrutiny.

Decisions being taken by a ‘Cabinet within a Cabinet’, and the elevation of unelected and therefore unaccountable advisers to a greater authority on economic decisions than ministers, is not a progressive step in a transparent democracy. In USI’s view, advice and decisions taken in government should be clearly attached to a responsible minister, and the minister should be accountable and responsible for final decisions, as is the norm in other functions of government and other administrations

Our wider proposals (outside the scope of *an Taoiseach’s* current discussions) also take a stance on many additional issues, such as Voting at 16 and less restrictive Presidential elections. We support votes at 16, partially based on the success of the pilot in the Scottish Referendum, which we believe proves the efficacy of the reform and disproves the hypothesis that younger voters cannot engage effectively in politics.

PROPOSING SOLUTIONS

The decision of the Irish electorate to retain *Seanad Éireann* in October 2013 was not in any sense a vote for ‘more of the same’. It provided a mandate for real and meaningful reform of our political structures. This paper sets out some mechanisms by which this can be achieved.

USI’s proposals for political reform would see a more open and more democratic *Seanad*, much more representative of Ireland’s whole population, including, for the first time, its youth. We propose a *Seanad* which is much more accessible to underrepresented sections of society, with a gender balance to promote the involvement of more women in Irish politics.

We propose a *Seanad* which is less a closed shop and training ground for the political machines, but a place which facilitates the inclusion of non-political expertise in our democracy.

RETAINING EXPERTISE AND APPLYING KNOWLEDGE TO LEGISLATION

To be sure, the debate function of *Seanad Éireann* is valuable to the state. Our proposals do not reject the value of the expertise brought to the second house by experts in industry and academia. But does *Seanad*

Éireann truly attract enough of the sorts of experience and knowledge to *an Oireachtas*? And is *an Seanad* valued in the process of legislation? Or is *an Seanad* simply the national debating society?

We believe that *Seanad Éireann* is not as effective as it could be in its current state. We support a reformed *Seanad Éireann* and campaigned in favour of retention and reform to *an Seanad* in the lead up to the 2013 referendum.

A MORE DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE *SEANAD ÉIREANN*

As it stands, the Upper House is not inclusive in its make up or democratic in the way its members are elected. USI believes that *Seanad Éireann* can act as a voice for minority groups in Ireland and can ensure that those on the margins of our society are represented. USI puts forward the following practical proposals on how it can be made more democratic and inclusive

- ‘One Person, One Vote’ system to be implemented which would allow all Irish citizens a vote in elections to *an Seanad*.
- All third-level Higher Education Institution graduates will be entitled to vote on a Graduate Panel. The Graduate Panel will replace the current University Panel.
- All third-level students of legal age in Higher Education Institutes will be entitled to vote on the Education and Culture Panel

TAOISEACH’S NOMINEES

Legislation would be brought forward to compel the Taoiseach of the day to nominate people on the basis of criteria to be determined by act of an Oireachtas. At the inception of this policy, USI envisages legislation requiring the Taoiseach to nominate:

TAOISEACH APPOINTED NOMINEES:

- One representative of Traveller community
- One representative of LGBT community
- One representative of people with disabilities
- One representative of the migrant community
- One representative to be under the age of 25
- One non-political external expert to each Panel
- One representative of the elderly

CHANGES TO NOMINATING BODIES

- USI, as the representative body for third level students in Ireland, would become a nominating body for the Education Panel to *an Seanad*.
- All non-resident Irish citizens abroad allowed vote
- There will be a 50:50 gender balance regarding nominees for the *Seanad*

A MORE EFFECTIVE *SEANAD ÉIREANN*

In order to keep Dáil Éireann in check and to have maximum impact, the Upper House could perform certain functions. USI proposes that *Seanad Éireann* should:

- Review past legislation and produce evidence-based policy reports
- Have direct responsibility for scrutinising EU legislation
- Monitor certain State appointments

- Conduct limited public inquiries