

Seanad Éireann Renewal

Gerry Molumby



Seanad Éireann reform proposed by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, although constrained by the worded boundaries of the Constitution, is brave and inclusive of the Irish Diaspora

The fledgling Irish Free State did not seem to want to emulate the British Upper House in any form but in time the format of Seanad Éireann was established as an independent revising chamber, by the Constitution of Ireland in 1937. We know that the State and Church were 'hand in glove' for most of the last century and the new system of Vocational Panels used to nominate candidates for the Seanad was inspired by Roman Catholic social teaching of the 1930s. Particular influence came from Quadragesimo Anno, in this document Pope Pius XI argued that the Marxist concept of class conflict should be replaced with a vision of social order based on the co-operation and interdependence of society's various vocational /panel, groups.

This feature/letter is about the opportunity for Irish Abroad representation being finally (along with Presidential Elections from 2025) enhanced in the Oireachtas; but some recent legislative history is needed. Previous Taoiseach Enda Kenny called a referendum in 2013 to abolish the Seanad. It lost by a small majority (48.3% voting in favour of abolition, with 51.7% against) and giving a message of 'Reform needed'. Enda tasked Maurice Manning, who along with his seven colleagues produced **Report of the working group of Seanad Reform 2015**. They set out to find the Seanad's 'Popular Legitimacy'. Full report here.

<https://www.merriestreet.ie/en/ImageLibrary/20150413SeanadReformFinal1.pdf>

Some groups amongst the Irish Abroad have called for 'Diaspora Panels', as indicated earlier this would mean hosting a Referendum to amend the constitution. The Manning Report throughout advocates for one person one vote and on the Diaspora said **The Working Group believes that the principle of one person one**

vote be extended to include Irish citizens in Northern Ireland and to holders of Irish passports living overseas (pg 28-30)

The report further states ***That Irish citizens with current passports living abroad be eligible to register and vote on the Panel of their choice.*** Panels are vocational interests; namely, Culture and Education, Agriculture, Labour, Industry and Commerce and Public Administration. Other senators are elected by the universities (proposed changes to include all third level education and not the restrictive Dublin universities) and the 11 nominations by the Taoiseach.

On February 1st 2018 in his first speech in the Seanad since he became Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar said a new Oireachtas committee would be tasked with considering the Manning Report and to develop specific proposals to legislate for reform. He reiterated the central recommendations of the Manning Report on the potential changes which are likely to include giving the vote to all Irish citizens, wherever they reside; universal suffrage using the panel system; and allowing for online registration of voters and downloading of ballot papers.

From my layman reading to date and maybe it is going to be made clear from the Oireachtas committee (with an eight-month mandate to consider the Manning report) how?

How? An Irish person living abroad can 'stand' for election to the various panels? Other than Irish Universities being the Alma Mater of a minority of us and our status and influence is not enhance fully to wait for a Taoiseach nomination; I am keen to know how we can engage and present our mandate from the Irish Abroad within the various panels .

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