

COMMENT

For more than a decade, successive Irish governments (since 2011, all with Fine Gael in them) have promised him a referendum on extending the franchise is imminent - but it never happens. **Gerry Molumby**, a long-time campaigner for extending the right to vote in Ireland's Presidential elections to Irish people overseas, asks why the Irish government keeps 'dragging their feet'

I am disappointed by the latest missed opportunity delay to call the necessary referendum on allowing all Irish citizens to vote for the next President of the 'Global Irish Nation'.

On a visit to London before Christmas, the then Diaspora Minister Colm Brophy was asked by me about the Irish government's conspicuous reluctance to convene the referendum.

He replied: "We are dealing with that separately to engage more with the Global Irish."

I presumed he meant the pending Global Irish Civic Forum convened for Dublin Castle on 20-21 April.

I do hope that very soon after that a campaign strategy is begun and a date for the Referendum announced.

The first Irish Constitutional Convention was held ten years ago in 2013 and discussed several issues.

As a result, same sex marriage and abortion rights were put to referendums.

At that 2013 Constitutional Convention Irish people at home and abroad also engaged, positively, with the issue of extending the right to vote in future presidential elections to all Irish citizens.

Some 79 per cent of the convention's delegates supported the principle.

Yet here we are, ten years later, my worry is, facing a presidential election next year (and a general election in 2025) short term party political considerations will once again kick the matter into the long grass.

This could rumble on, and on into further delay and indecision.

The next President of Ireland may potentially serve for 14 years which, in practical terms, means I will forever be denied my right to vote for the next President of the Global Irish Nation.

The Good Friday Agreement celebrates and upholds the right of people in Northern Ireland to be Irish or British or both.

Is the Irish Government worried (should the referendum result be 'yes') about how Northern Ireland's Irish citizens would vote in a Presidential election?

Obviously, the existing electorate of the Republic, twenty-six of thirty-two counties, is crucial in deciding whether or not to the Global Irish and can never be taken for granted.

But all these delays and

Will we EVER have our say?



(BELOW) Gerry Molumby with the then-presidential hopeful Michael D. Higgins during the campaign trail at the London Irish Centre, Camden, in 2011

hesitation delaying our campaigning time.

To be able to vote in next year's presidential election means a referendum would need to be called this year.

All candidates in that election will have to be nominated by either: at least twenty members of the Oireachtas; or at least four local authorities within the Republic.

A candidate meeting that threshold will already have a (limited) mandate from many people in Ireland.

Taoiseach Enda Kenny promised the referendum in Philadelphia in 2017; it is agreed in legislation by the Oireachtas.

The current Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green coalition has no prerogative to delay it any further.

As an Irish person in Britain since 1980, I have campaigned for this for a long time.

In my experience, there is something about the emigrant experience, whether chosen or imposed by economic necessity, which focuses one's identity very clearly and quickly.

I have always taken my Irishness as a given despite living here in Britain - my sense of being Irish has always been to the fore.

The President of Ireland is a unifying head of the Irish nation at home and abroad

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and represents Ireland internationally.

Since the election of Mary Robinson the presidency has been defined as global and maintains positive cultural and business links with the diaspora — hence the pertinence of allowing Irish citizens who live outside Ireland a choice in electing the President.

Ireland will gain much by fully cherishing its "exiled children" (as per the 1916 Proclamation).

We are a powerful resource for good, by our own example we encourage Irish people (and others) to connect with Ireland.

It not only makes emotional sense, it makes good business sense for Ireland.

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That strong bond can only be enhanced by allowing Irish people abroad to vote for the head of State, a win-win situation.

For seven years prior to emigrating, I had full voting rights for my nation's president. I want vote back. This is personal for me. I believe in equality of

citizenship: one is either an Irish citizen or not.

In the words of London-born broadcaster Dermot O'Leary: "I am Irish but not living in Ireland."

President Michael D Higgins was the only candidate to canvass in the UK before he was elected in 2011.

He advised me then, 'Engage with the Citizen's Assembly'

I did, we did, and it agreed with us and concluded in favour.

Ten years and many promises later we have only confusion and 'dragging of feet'.