



# Towards a New Republic I dTreo Poblacht Nua

*Sinn Féin Proposals for Political Reform  
Tograí Shinn Féin le haghaidh Athchóiriú Polaitiúil*

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# INTRODUCTION

Ireland's economic crisis has focused attention on serious deficiencies within the political system. Citizens have become justifiably disillusioned with a political system that has failed them. Many feel that the political system is too far removed from their everyday lives and incapable of resolving current difficulties or delivering for ordinary citizens.

The Irish state has one of the most centralised systems of government in Europe, based largely on the British system, and a weak system of local government that has been hollowed out by successive Governments. This concentrates too much power in the hands of the Executive and the two Houses of the Oireachtas, which at this point are not fit for purpose in 21st century Ireland.

The Oireachtas lacks any serious political oversight, scrutiny or democratic accountability expected of the parliament. This has created the urgent need for fundamental and real meaningful political reform of both our political culture and the political system.

In a Real Republic citizens would have rights and society would be organized around these rights on core republican and democratic values. Such a society would ensure equality for all and every sector would be regulated transparently so that all its institutions and agencies would be accountable.

This state fulfills few if any, of these criteria. The lack of regulation of our political systems, financial institutions and even the charitable sector has been exploited by a circle of greedy, corrupt and very wealthy elites who are well connected to the establishment and have enriched themselves at a huge cost, both financially and morally, to the Irish people.

In this toxic culture of corruption there is always money for the elites and none for services which some citizens are dependent on.

Sinn Féin's Proposals for Political Reform are based on the party's objective of building a New Republic on this island based on equality for all citizens.

# THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT & POLITICAL REFORM

The partition of Ireland created two conservative states with a political culture weighted against the rights of citizens. Both states have been characterised by economic failure, emigration, inequality and the failure to protect the most vulnerable citizens. If we are to tackle these issues effectively then we need to have an all-Ireland view.

The Good Friday Agreement is the most significant political development since Partition. Its impact is most obvious in the North but not so obvious in the South. None of the reforms, safeguards or checks and balances of the Agreement have been inculcated into Southern state institutions and this must be urgently addressed.

The Irish Government must actively press ahead with the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, including those aspects that directly involve the Southern state. We need to see the creation of more areas of co-operation and implementation and greater harmonization across the island; the strengthening of human rights protections, including an all-Ireland charter of rights and an all-Ireland forum for the consideration of human rights, as included in the Agreement.

In the north the political institutions are deliberately constructed by the Good Friday Agreement with checks and balances to ensure that the abuses of the past can never happen again.

These checks and balances are crucial to the successful operation of both the Assembly and Executive.

Any future changes to the number of departments, numbers of MLAs or improvements to the structures will need to be negotiated and agreed amongst the political parties in the Assembly as agreed in the Programme for Government. There can be no tampering of the political architecture of the Good Friday Agreement by the Irish or British governments.

It should also have at its core the imperative of actively seeking to fulfill the constitutional obligation of bringing about the re-unification of this island and of its people, as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Féin believes it is time for a Border Poll. Almost sixteen years on from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement it is time for the people to have their say.

## **Sinn Féin would:**

- » Extend the right to vote in Presidential elections to citizens living in the North and to Irish citizens living and working abroad, as is the norm in most modern democracies.
- » Implement the Good Friday Agreement commitment of an All-Ireland Civic and Consultative Forum as a new model of public participatory engagement which contributes and informs the development of public policy and lawmaking, with 60% membership drawn from ordinary citizens North and South and 40% membership drawn from civil society and social partners North and South.
- » Continue to press the British government to deliver a Bill of Rights in the North in accordance with their obligations as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement.
- » Introduce immediate speaking and consultative rights for Northern MPs and Assembly members in the Dáil and Seanad.
- » Expand the existing number of Implementation Bodies and Areas of Co-operation under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council, bringing about greater harmonization across the island in both the integration and delivery of services, trade, tourism and economic development.
- » Hold a referendum on Irish unity through a Border Poll North and South. The Irish Government should be pressing the British Government to set a date for a poll as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement and to commit to holding a simultaneous poll in the 26 Counties on Irish unity.

# POLITICAL REFORM

Sinn Féin strongly believe in political reform which is based on sovereignty, democracy, accountability and transparency, national unity, equality, and empowering local communities – where citizens come first. The need for reform of the Dáil, Seanad, Local Government and Údaras na Gaeltachta is overwhelming and must now be a priority for all those committed to real change moving forward.

## **Sinn Féin is committed to;**

- » Ensuring that the powers and functions vested in the president, parliament and the executive are exercised in a way which ensures they act in the national interest and the interests of citizens first and which avoids undue influence or interference from the vested interests of a powerful elite.
- » Increased parliamentary oversight including a new model of public participatory engagement which contributes and informs the development of public policy and law making which empowers both citizens' and parliament.
- » Democratic representation which fosters diversity and which is fully inclusive and reflective of modern Irish society, including our most marginalised citizens as well as those living in the North and the diaspora.
- » Devising new governance structures which can achieve a strong parliamentary democracy which is accountable to the public it serves and which proactively embraces a new culture of openness and transparency.

# SINN FÉIN WOULD DELIVER:

## BETTER DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

- » Establish an independent Electoral Commission that registers all political parties and regulates electoral standards including around financial donations and interests, that runs elections and referendums, voter registration and takes proactive measures to increase voter participation.
- » Simplify voter registration by automatically registering voters as soon as they become eligible to vote, using PPS numbers to avoid fraud. This would be complemented by an information awareness program in all schools to ensure students are aware they are registered and how to go about exercising their vote.
- » Improve the constitutional protection of the right to vote, and the responsibility of the State to take positive measures to maximise, and to not unreasonably or disproportionately restrict, exercise of the franchise.
- » Ensure a 30% gender quota in Dáil elections building incrementally towards 50%.
- » Reduce the voting age to 16.
- » Make the membership of the Dáil more diverse and representative of the population by introducing a partial list system for Dáil elections – using the list to ensure for example, the election of more women and members of under-represented groups in Irish society, while retaining the system of election by PR-STV for most seats.
- » Elect one-third of the Dáil from a closed party list system, the other two-thirds from seven-seat constituencies using PR-STV. These larger constituencies will ensure that the results reflect more accurately actual voter preference.
- » Introduce immediate speaking and consultative rights for northern MPs and Assembly members in the Dáil. Change the constitution to allow northern MPs to automatically become members of the Dáil, enabling them to exercise full rights of representation on all matters they consider to be of relevance to their constituents, subject to such reasonable parameters appropriate to their non-residence in the State as may be set out in legislation.
- » Extend the right to vote in presidential elections to citizens living in the North, and to Irish citizens living and working abroad as is the norm in most modern democracies.
- » Extend the right to vote in Dáil and Presidential elections to all adults of voting age and legally resident in the country for at least 5 years.
- » Introduce appropriate diasporic representation in the Dáil by way of reserved constituency, with voting rights subject to a valid passport and regular registration requirement.
- » Introduce a citizen 'right of initiative' (that is, a right to take legislative proposals or vetos to referendum upon production of a specified quota of verifiable petition signatures), with appropriate safeguards to ensure the protection and non-diminution of fundamental rights.
- » Implement the Good Friday Agreement commitment of an All-Ireland civic and consultative Forum, as a new model of public participatory engagement that informs the development of public policy and law making, empowering both citizens' and parliament - with 60% membership drawn from ordinary citizens north and south and 40% membership drawn from civil society and social partners north and south.

## BETTER OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

### Amongst the proposals made by Sinn Féin in autumn 2013 were;

- » Introduce a new Dáil committee which would scrutinise the Department of An Taoiseach comprising Opposition Party leaders.
- » Elect the Ceann Chomhairle through secret ballot for the Dáil term and rotate the Leas Ceann Chomhairle post annually through secret ballot using PR STV.
- » Reverse the exclusion of money bills legislation or amendments, or reference to, being tabled by Opposition TDs.
- » Give Dáil committees more power to not only scrutinise but introduce legislation by its members and to hold accessible public consultation and expert witness hearings, which includes around the country, to seek public input in this process of gathering relevant evidence to inform decisions and positions.
- » Ensure Dáil Committees use the full extent of their powers to formally summon cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State and departmental Officials to scrutinise and question departmental policy and budgetary decision-taking.
- » That Opposition TDs only, would in future occupy both Chair and Deputy Chair positions of all Dáil committees which would be allocated proportionally, based on party strength to ensure proper scrutiny, fairness and political independence. There should be no additional allowance attached to them.
- » Introduce family friendly sittings in common with modern and best parliamentary practice in other jurisdictions.
- » Standardise Dáil political groupings to include no less than five TDs who would be afforded speaking time, private members time, representation on the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, representation at party whips meeting, and legislative drafting resources from the Oireachtas.
- » Introduce Parliamentary Questions (Written) during summer recess period.
- » There should be at least a week-long Dáil sitting on the North on annual basis.
- » Reverse practice where Ministers do not answer for their state and arms-length bodies, where deferral on policy and spending would no longer be accepted before the Dáil, Committees and in response to Parliamentary Questions.
- » End use of Guillotines on legislation and debate, unless exceptional circumstances and agreed between party whips.

## BETTER GOVERNANCE

### Dáil and Executive

- » Review the Cabinet handbook and reverse the practice of cabinet committees taking executive decisions exclusively to formal meetings of the government itself, includes the four man Economic Management Council.
- » Establish a new Public Appointments Commissioner who will regulate an impartial public appointments process onto state and public bodies based on agreed criteria, that is open to the public, merit and qualifications based and free from political control or interference.
- » Cap Ministerial salaries at E100, 000; TDs salaries at E75,000.
- » Scrap the Freedom of Information fees and allow both the public and media more accessible scrutiny of public records. Enhance the constitutional protection of the right to freedom of information as a fundamental right.
- » Extend the remit of the Constitutional Convention to enable a fresh membership to consider issues including: 1) a Bill of Rights Amendment, to enhance the ability of citizens to protect themselves from the actions or inactions of the State when their human rights are infringed, and to better hold the government to account for its actions or inactions in violation of the constitution; and 2) comprehensive reform of the political institutions, their powers and functions and needed oversight mechanisms.
- » Introduce a process of participatory budgeting, which includes publishing a draft budget for full active public consultation. Also introduce Equality Impact Assessments and equality proofing into the policy and spending priorities of the President, Parliament and Executive and public bodies.
- » Further enhance the public outreach programme and information communications strategy to promote political education and the active inclusion of the public, communities and schools in the democratic process, including through more exercises in deliberative democracy.

- » Introduce social clauses into all government and Oireachtas public procurement contracts to maximise public benefit and achieve greater value for money.

### Seanad

In October 2013 the government's referendum proposal to abolish the Seanad was rejected by the people. However, all participants and parties involved in the referendum campaign were clear in saying that the Seanad in its current form is elitist, undemocratic and unacceptable. The result cannot be viewed as a vote to retain the Seanad in its present form and piecemeal reforms are not enough. It should be fundamentally redesigned to better serve the people. As a first step in this process, the matter should be referred to the Constitutional Convention, in which the citizen members have a controlling majority.

The Seanad must become a fully inclusive, representative and accountable institution.

#### This requires:

- » Direct election by way of universal franchise of all Irish citizens, on the same day as the Dáil vote.
- » Northern and diasporic representation.
- » 50% women members.
- » Representation of marginalised minority groups within Irish society.

For the Seanad to truly fulfill its potential of acting as a 'balancing' function in the Oireachtas, its powers must be increased and it must also have a distinct and complementary role and functions that do not merely replicate those of the Dáil in a weaker form. In particular, the primary role of the Seanad should be independent initial scrutiny:

- » of EU legislation from proposal stage.
- » of Statutory Instruments and Ministerial appointments.
- » to ensure equality-proofing of all legislation.

## PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS TO STATE BODIES

To best represent the general public interest, and reflect the priority of public accountability in decision-making, the Seanad should also:

- » act as a forum for dialogue between the many interests in Irish society, ensuring the inclusion of those sectors with less power and influence.
- » use public consultation and deliberative democracy for enhanced citizen participation.
- » have a specific focus on consulting with children and young people about the impact of proposed decisions directly affecting them.

In a unitary state it is right that if the electorate's political and geographic interests are represented through the lower chamber on a population basis, their social, economic and cultural interests should be represented through the upper chamber, on a sectoral basis. This is an important distinction that should not only be retained, but strengthened in a new Seanad. The Seanad should also include the representation of regional interests on a non-population basis, to redress the power imbalance for those currently marginalised by reason of residence in the North, the west, Gaeltacht areas and the diaspora.

Corruption in Irish political life has been endemic and systemic under Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fail governments. A culture of political cronyism and favouritism has prevailed for decades, allowing 'golden circles' of powerful individuals to consider themselves above the rules that apply to ordinary citizens. This has been widely evidenced over the years in terms of appointments to state boards.

A cultural shift is urgently required in order to restore public trust and confidence. Sinn Féin is committed to modernising public sector governance in the wider context of political reform. This includes corporate governance of all state bodies that are publicly funded. While we recognise the huge efforts of public servants in delivering high quality public services to the best of their ability, against a backdrop of reduced resources imposed by this government and their policy of continued austerity, there is a need for immediate change. We would ensure that all publicly funded appointments are made on the basis of merit, reflect the make-up of our diverse society and that equality is at the core of the public appointments process with opportunities to serve on public bodies promoted to the widest possible field of potential candidates and in a public manner.

Sinn Féin would:

- » Limit directorships for individuals, following the Central Bank's guidance of 5 per person
- » Implement and attain 40% gender quotas on all boards, public and private.
- » Tackle high pay of directors.
- » Apply a process of openness and transparency in all public appointments.



## BETTER LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A major transformation of local government is required. Local government has been stripped of many of its powers in recent years. Local democracy must be strengthened.

This must include the expansion of the powers and responsibilities of local authorities in areas such as education, employment, environment, housing and social services as well as the ability to raise revenue.

- » Increase, or where they have been removed, restore the powers which councillors had over planning, housing, transportation and waste management and correspondingly limit Managers powers.
- » Mayors and Cathaoirligh should be directly elected and should assume many aspects of the council management and oversight currently held by unelected Managers.
- » Sinn Féin wants to see the creation of District Councils which take in the surrounding hinterland and have powers and functions devolved to them.
- » Sinn Féin believes the local democratic deficit can be met through the establishment of District Councils and Local Area Community Committees to ensure real decision making power at a local level.

## ÚDARÁS NA GAELTACHTA

- » Aisiompú a dhéanamh ar an gcinneadh chun deireadh a chur le bord Údarás na Gaeltachta a thoghadh go daonlathach.
- » Deireadh a chur leis an gcinneadh chun oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga a chomhcheangal le hOifig an Ombudsman agus, dá bhrí sin, neamhspleáchas an Choimisinéara Teanga a chinntiú.
- » Athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla agus na h-aighneachtaí ar fad a bhaineann leis a fhoilsiú roimh díospóireachtaí i dTithe an Oireachtais.
- » Níos mó freagracht maidir le dréachtadh pleananna forbartha teanga i limistéir pleanála teanga, faoi Acht 2012, a leagan ar Údarás na Gaeltachta agus Foras na Gaeilge.
- » Straitéis a fhorbairt chun cinntiú go bhfuil gach seirbhís poiblí ar fáil as Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht agus do gach saoránach a éilíonn iad ar fud an stát.
- » Struchtúr ardleibhéil a chur le chéile, ar a bhfuil ionadaíocht ag eagraíochtaí pobail, ag an Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta, ag an gComhchoiste um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), ag Údarás na Gaeltachta, ag Foras na Gaeilge agus ag saineolaithe teanga, a mbeadh freagracht air as treoir a thabhairt don Rialtas maidir le cur chun feidhme 'Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-30.'
- » Athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an gcinneadh COGG, a bhfuil ról lárnach oideachais acu faoin Straitéis 20 Bliain, a chomhtháthú leis an gComhairle Náisiúnta Curaclam & Measúnachta.
- » Bille nua Gaeltachta a fhorbairt, i gcomhairle le príomhpháirtithe leasmhara, chun aisiompú a dhéanamh ar an damáiste a rinne Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012, agus feabhsú agus neartú a dhéanamh ar phleanáil teanga agus ar thacaí don teanga.
- » Forbairt a dhéanamh ar Phlean Gníomhaíochta Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta i gcomhairle leis na pobail Ghaeilge agus Ghaeltachta, a dhéanfaidh forbairt ar na moltaí atá sa 'Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht'.

- » Reverse the decision to abolish the democratically elected Údarás na Gaeltachta board.
- » Scrap the decision to merge the office of the Comisinéir Teanga, with the Office of the Ombudsman and therefore ensure the independence of the Language Commissioner.
- » Review the Official Languages Act and publish all the submissions in relation to that in advance of the debates in the Houses of the Oireachtas.
- » Place greater responsibility for the drafting of language development plans in language planning areas, under the 2012 Act, on Údarás na Gaeltachta and Foras na Gaeilge.
- » Develop a strategy to ensure all public services are available in Irish in Gaeltacht areas and to all citizens who request it across the State.
- » Put together a high-level structure, with representation from the community organisations, the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht, an Comhchoiste um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), Údarás na Gaeltachta, Fóras na Gaeilge and language experts, which would be responsible for giving direction to the Government regarding the of implementation of the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-30.
- » To review the merger of COGG, which has a central educational role within the 20 years strategy, with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- » Develop a new Gaeltacht Bill, in consultation with key stakeholders, to reverse the damage done by the 2012 Gaeltacht Act and improve and strengthen Language planning and supports for the language.
- » Develop an Irish language and Gaeltacht action plan in consultation with the Irish language and Gaeltacht communities, which will build on the recommendations of the 'Comprehensive Study on the Use of Irish Language'.

## CONCLUSION

Trust and confidence in the political system have been shattered as a consequence of the disastrous mismanagement of the economy, public services and state finances by the previous Fianna Fáil-led administration and the inaction of the current government in delivering on their promise of introducing political reform.

The current Fine Gael/Labour Government was elected promising significant political reform. However, in the words of its own Chief Whip, the government's record on Dáil reform has been "deplorable".

More than half of the Bills introduced to the Dáil since the Fine Gael/Labour coalition came into office in March 2011 have been rushed through or guillotined. The government promised that this practice would occur only in the most exceptional circumstances.

The Fine Gael/Labour coalition's approach to political reform has been piecemeal, minimalist. It has been all spin and no substance.

The present government has brought forward no real, positive changes. It has done nothing to rebalance power between central and local government or in the Oireachtas between the Executive and Legislature.

Instead of creating a more effective, transparent and accountable democracy, Fine Gael and Labour have cut the number of elected representatives in the Dáil and at local government level and refused to allow the Constitutional Convention to discuss the future of the Seanad. The government's referendum proposal to abolish the Seanad was rejected by the people. The result cannot be viewed as a vote to retain the Seanad in its present form. It should be fundamentally redesigned to better serve the people. As a first step in this process, Sinn Féin are proposing that the matter should be referred to the Constitutional Convention, in which the citizen members have a controlling majority and should be facilitated in continuing to play a constructive role in reforming the political process. Instead, this has been stymied by the Government, which has significantly restricted the convention's remit.

Sinn Féin's political reform proposals are based on the principles of sovereignty, democracy, accountability, transparency, national unity, equality, the empowerment local communities and the creation of a political system where citizens come first.

Sinn Féin believes that these proposals have significant potential to fulfil an urgent need and desire among citizens to bring our political system into the 21st Century. The party brings them forward in the genuine hope that they will contribute positively towards an inclusive debate about constructing a modern and genuine democracy, which is fit for purpose.

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## **About Sinn Féin**

Sinn Féin is a 32-county political party whose objective is to end partition on the island of Ireland and establish a democratic and socialist republic that reflects the core principles of unity, equality and prosperity.