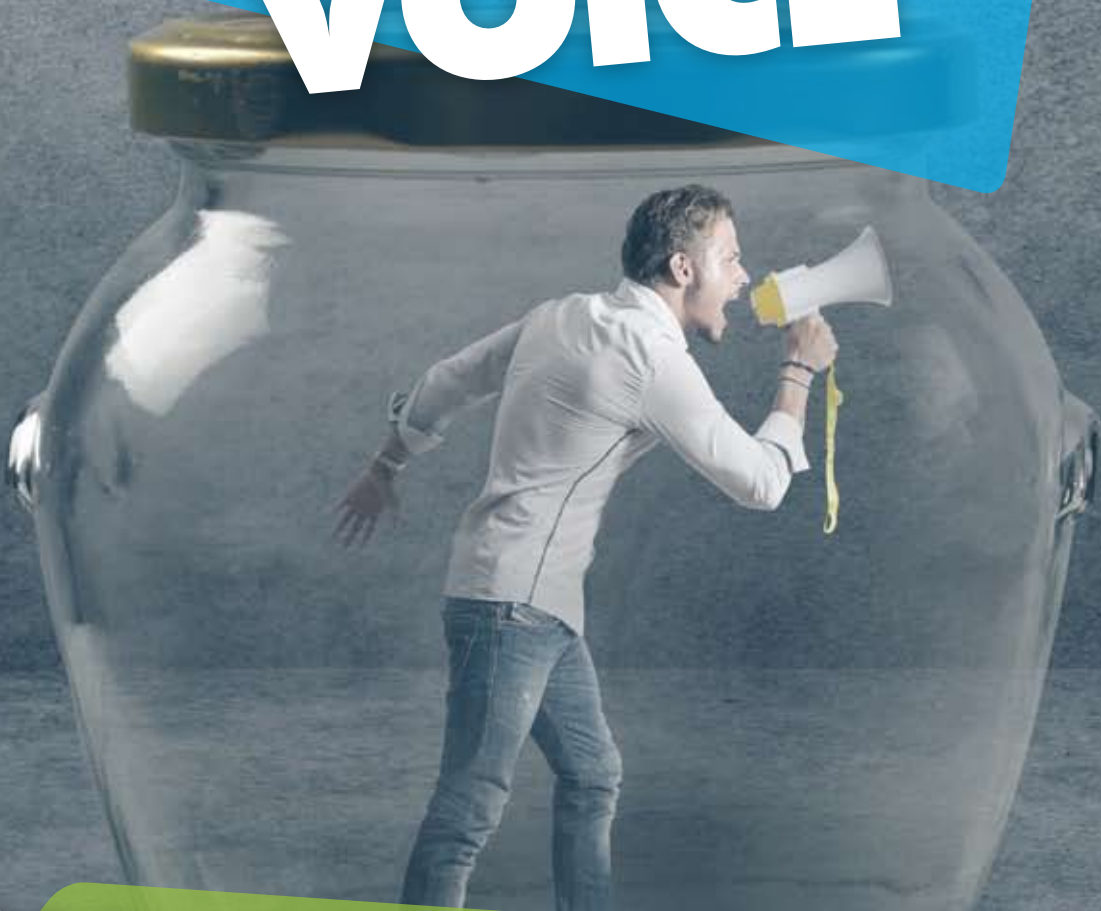




Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

FREE OUR VOICE



POLITICS FOR THE PEOPLE



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PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

A chairde,

Ireland is a country at the moment where the level of apathy with the political system is at an all-time high. The economic crash, failed election promises and ongoing parochialism have combined to bring about enormous degrees of dissatisfaction and disconnect from Irish politics. This Government entered office on a platform of political reform- Of doing things differently, of 'new politics'.

USI believes that abolition of the Seanad without offering the electorate the option of changing the way the Seanad works does not constitute real and meaningful political reform. We are halfway into the term of this Government and weeks away from the referendum, and concrete proposals as to how The Government are asking the Irish electorate to buy a pig in a poke, and there is a lack of evidence to suggest our faith would be well-placed in the absence of clarity.

These are the same Dáil committees which within the lifetime of this Government have been treated with the same old parochial contempt, with a scientist removed from the Health Committee for his views on a local hospital closure, and a banker removed from the Banking Committee for his views on abortion legislation. Arguments around cost, which appear to be greatly exaggerated, are not substantial enough to warrant the deconstruction of a fundamental organ of the State. Any money saved would likely be re-directed into resourcing beefed-up Committees and additional unelected advisers to support the extra workload for Committee members.

Our proposals of political reform would see

a more open and more democratic Seanad which is much more representative of Ireland's youth. A Seanad which is much more accessible to underrepresented sections of society. A Seanad with a gender balance to promote the involvement of more women in Irish politics. A Seanad which facilitates the inclusion of non-political expertise in our democracy. Ireland has historically been weak at assessing the impact of legislation previously passed- Of 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. Decisions being taken by a 'Cabinet within a Cabinet', and empowering unelected advisers to have a greater say on economic decisions than Government Ministers, is not a progressive step in a transparent democracy. This is why the USI believes that the Economic Management Council should be disbanded in favour of a more consultative approach.

Our proposals also take a stance on many issues under consideration by the Constitutional Convention, such as Voting at 16 and less restrictive Presidential elections. Abolishing the Seanad does not do anything to fix our broken democracy. That is why USI is urging a 'No' vote in the upcoming referendum on October 4th to provide a mandate for real and meaningful reform of our political structures.

Le meas,
Joe O'Connor





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BACKGROUND

The Union of Students in Ireland believes that there are considerable reforms that can be made to make the political system more effective, representative, open, transparent and democratic. As it stands, the system is not working to its full potential and is not inclusive or accessible enough. We believe that Seanad Éireann is not effective in its current state. We support a reformed Seanad Éireann and believe that its abolishment, without any attempt to reform it, would be a short-sighted move on the part of the Government. The document below offers practical solutions on how our political system can be improved and made more relevant to the people.

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.

- All third-level Higher Education Institution graduates will have a vote on a Graduate Panel. The Graduate Panel will replace the University Panel
- All third-level students in Higher Education Institutes will have a vote on Education Panel
 - Taoiseach appointed nominees:
 - 1) One representative of Traveller community
 - 2) One representative of LGBT community
 - 3) One representative of people with

- disabilities
- 4) One representative of the migrant community
- 5) One representative to be under the age of 25
- 6) One non-political external expert to each Panel

- USI to become a nominating body to Education Panel
- All non-resident Irish citizens abroad allowed vote on specific emigrants' panel
- 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
- Monitor certain State appointments
- Conduct limited public inquiries

MORE TRANSPARENT AND EFFECTIVE DÁIL

In the interests of transparency and effectiveness, USI recommends the following proposals. USI believes that the Economic Management Council acts as a cabinet within a cabinet and is a committee that conducts its decision making without proper consultation. Such a committee has no place in a democracy and should be disbanded. USI is in favour of an easing of the party whip system on certain bills. USI also believes that for Dáil Éireann committees to be more effective, there needs to be an increased number of non-political external experts on each one to ensure more effective, non-partisan, decision making. USI



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proposes the following:

- More democratic Dáil committees nominated on the basis of expertise
- Greater restrictions placed on the process of removing members of Dáil Committees
- Adjustments to determination of political representatives to Dáil Committees
- Non-political external experts to be nominated to Dáil Committees
- Party whip to be eased on non- Finance Bills and Private Members' Bills
- Economic Management Council to be disbanded

The following proposals are in line with USI policy mandates and have a focus on promoting youth engagement with the political system:

VOTES AT 16

The voting age for all national elections and referendums in Ireland is currently 18 years old. In line with policy (mandate 13/NA1), USI advocates that all Irish citizens to be granted the right to vote from age 16.

The Council of Europe has called upon its 47 member states to start the process towards lowering the electoral age to the age of 16. The lowering the voting age in Ireland to 16 years old could improve the interaction of students with the political system and could improve their engagement with society right from the time they begin in higher education and before then.

CREATION OF AN ELECTORAL COMMISSION TO OVERSEE ROLLING ELECTORAL REGISTER

That responsibility for compiling the electoral register lies with individual local authorities rather than a central body. While this may seem like a sensible delegation of

responsibilities, in reality the opposite is true. It has been shown that the current method of voter registration allows for:

- Varying degrees of priority afforded to maintaining data;
- Wide variety of practices among registration authorities;
- Insufficient field-workers and door-to-door visits to obtain the necessary information.

That transferring responsibility for managing the register away from the local authorities to a newly created Electoral Commission operating an individual, rolling register would greatly increase the accuracy of the electoral register. Furthermore, it would make the process of registering students in third level colleges much easier as only one authority would be involved in the registration process. This is in line with USI policy (mandate 11/NA 5).

USI also supports moves towards online voter registration to make registering to vote more accessible.

LOWERING OF VOTING AGE FOR PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

USI supports the lowering of age requirement to run for President of Ireland to 21.

USI believes that the current nomination process for persons wishing to seek election to become President of Ireland is restrictive. USI supports a mechanism whereby a prospective candidate can collect a set number signatures in order to be nominated to stand for election.

SECULAR IRISH CONSTITUTION

USI believes that the Constitutional Convention should consider amendments to the Irish Constitution to make it wholly secular. This proposal is in line with USI policy.