

Scrap the Seanad? No, we need a new, revamped one more than ever



Enda Kenny is toying with the fate of the Seanad

NEXT week the Government publishes the legislation that paves the way for a referendum on abolition of the Seanad later this year.

Last week the same Government supported a proposal from independent Senators not to abolish the Seanad but to reform it.

So how can they advocate two such contrary positions within two weeks of each other?

The answer is simple – abolition is not as simple and straightforward as originally thought. It does not mean just rubbing out a few words in the Constitution: it will require about 75 individual amendments.

The origin of all of this is a Fine Gael knees-up back in October 2009. That is where Enda Kenny made the surprise announcement that he planned

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to scrap the Seanad. His new policy came as a surprise, as only three months earlier his policy was that it be given greater powers and become a forum on European issues.

So what happened over those summer months, when neither the Dail nor Senate were sitting, to change Enda's mind?

Nothing it seems, apart from being upstaged by Eamon Gilmore and growing criticism

within Fine Gael of his leadership.

Enda needed a soft target – and the slow, lumbering Seanad obligingly painted a nice big unmissable bull's eye on its own backside.

FAULTS

While it is difficult to present an argument for retaining the Seanad as it is, with most of its members elected just by TDs and councillors, that is not the same as saying that we do not need some form of a second house of parliament.

Despite its faults, the Seanad has served the country well. It has been a champion of reform and minority rights in a way the Dail has often not.

To quote the President, Michael D Higgins, from a 2009 Dail debate: "Historically, the

Seanad has been the place where there has been legislative innovation."

Indeed it has, even with its antiquated system of having six seats elected by university graduates and the Taoiseach nominating 11 members.

It has allowed many voices and views from outside the political mainstream not only to be heard but to have a say – from WB Yeats to Seamus Mallon to Eamon de Buitléar to David Norris.

The value of having a second chamber to revise laws and give proposals further scrutiny can be demonstrated with one simple statistic.

Since 2011, the Seanad has made 529 amendments to 14 different laws passed by the Dail with inadequate scrutiny.

Without a Seanad or second

chamber those laws may have passed on to the statute book without improvement.

In today's Ireland we need more scrutiny and oversight – not less.

Abolition strengthens the old system. It means fewer new voices. The answer lies in reform, not abolition. Open up the system, don't close it down.

EMIGRATION

We need a reformed Seanad that makes those in power accountable. We need a reformed Seanad that has a gender balance.

One where all of us, not just an elite, get a vote, including people in the North and those forced into emigration.

These basic, but effective, reforms could be made without a referendum and major constitutional change.

All that is required is a Government that has the will to make that change.

Enda Kenny is doing the wrong way around. We should learn from the Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper, who told his people "...that our country, as it stands today, must change... or vanish."

We should be given the opportunity of change.

Instead, the Government spends millions on a referendum that only offers a sham choice between keeping something we know is not working as it is and handing its powers and resources over to a system that has proved itself less capable of holding government to account.

Have we learned nothing from the crisis? Do we want to fix the system or merely consolidate it?

How can parents know

Does