

As a rule I am in favour of less politicians as they have long since abandoned their representative roles in exchange for a cosy coalition of partisan elites. It's clear too that in all walks of life we are grossly over governed. Here in Northern Ireland we have one hundred and eight representatives for approximately 1.7 million people. To put that in context Greater Manchester has 2.68 million people.

Soon our grand Norn Iron council will debate the reform of local government which is less about reform and more about a sectarian carve up, but such a debate in a place so small, that only focuses on one aspect of government reform is unlikely to see any direct improvement in the provision of local services or indeed local accountability and transparency.

At the moment we have to drag public information on public expenditure from very unwilling and uncooperative public bodies and public representatives via the cumbersome and costly freedom of information process. Politicians who pay family members from the public purse somehow feel immune to public scrutiny. At each election a simple leaflet should be dropped through the door of every constituency telling us exactly what political nepotism costs us.

Yet there is a fashion for arrogance in Irish politics at the moment that transcends the border. Gifting a large majority to any single party is fraught with danger.

The Irish electorate wisely avoided doing so for over thirty years. Ministers in such governments can become magisterial in their pronouncements and Prime Ministers become almost monarchical.

Such is the nature of the government currently blighting the Republic of Ireland. The Taoiseach Enda Kenny has learned much from his one time nemesis, Bertie Ahern. He assiduously avoids media interface unless its at a jobs announcement, rubbing shoulders with a foreign dignitary or climbing Croagh Patrick with Trappatoni. He is a copious student of the sound byte over substance. In the run up to the last General election he got a spur of the moment 'big idea' -something not always greeted with enthusiasm by political handlers trying to win an election. Enda's spurt of ill defined genius was that his incoming government would abolish Seanad Eireann.

Now it's true that the Irish Senate thanks to the actions of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments has long since lost its mojo. Indeed both main parties and the Labour Party stuffed the place with aspirant political wannabes and electoral rejects. It's also true that to have a second chamber with long outdated panels of election and a significant number of appointees at the partisan whim of a 'dear' leader is embarrassing and antiquated; yet for all its faults it is still better than no second chamber at all.

It's amazing, even bizarre that as we approach the hundred anniversary of the Irish Proclamation with its high minded guarantees of 'religious and civil liberty for all'- that an Irish government led by people who are torch- bearers to signatories of that Proclamation and political successors to the every creators of the first pluralist Irish senate; would dismantle an important part of a bicameral political system in a multi-cultural and diverse nation, that protects minority rights and those marginalised.

Activist and past member of the Seanad, Kathleen Clarke, wife of Thomas Clarke, first signatory to the Irish Proclamation must be turning in her grave. The Seanad for all its shortcomings gave Ireland two outstanding and unifying Presidents- Douglas Hyde and Mary Robinson. It possibly also gave the current incumbent, a life line that had he lost could have meant he only got to the Aras as a visitor.

Whether its been WB Yeats, David Norris, Feargal Quinn, Ivana Bacik, or even Pearse Doherty, the Seanad has given diverse and unrepresentative audiences an voice. In an all island context too, Ireland would have been a poorer place without the critical voices of senators Seamus Mallon, Maurice Hayes, Gordon Wilson, Sam Mcaughtery, Brid Rodgers and John Robb. A country is truly enriched when it can harness the independent minds and talents of all its people.

Perhaps more importantly we need checks and balances in a democracy. Imagine Charles Haughey's Fianna Fáil with unbridled authority in Leinster House or what if there were no dissenting voices to the rise of a would be Mussolini such as Fine Gael's own spectre - Eoin O' Duffy? The Seanad needs reformed not abolished; because once its gone who will be left to apply the brakes to the threat of absolute majoritarian rule ?