

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Opening statement to be delivered to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs by the Chief Executive of An Coimisiún Toghcháin, Mr. Art O’Leary.**

**Wednesday 21 February 2024 1:30pm – 3:30pm. The meeting will take place in Committee Room 4, LH 2000, Leinster House.**

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My thanks, Chair, Members,

I am joined here today by Tim Carey, Head of Electoral Operations at An Coimisiún Toghcháin and Brian Dawson, Head of Communications and public engagement.

This is the first appearance before this Committee by An Coimisiún Toghcháin, Ireland’s independent electoral commission but you will no doubt be aware of the role we have already played in shaping the forthcoming European Parliament elections with the revision of the constituency boundaries to accommodate an additional seat for Ireland.

14 MEPs are due to be elected in this country in 107 days’ time, so today’s meeting is a timely one.

**An Coimisiún Toghcháin**

As a relatively new independent public body, may I first take a moment to outline our work and functions. An Coimisiún Toghcháin has taken on a range of pre-existing electoral functions, along with new functions as set out in the Electoral Reform Act 2022.

The pre-existing functions include the carrying out of constituency reviews for local, Dáil and European Parliament elections; the

registration of Ireland's political parties; the role and work on referendums previously held by the Referendum Commission.

Our newly established functions include the conduct of research and provision of advice on electoral policy and procedure; building awareness of our democratic processes through education, information and public engagement and oversight of Ireland's electoral register.

We also have functions associated with the regulation of political advertising online and online misinformation and disinformation during election campaign periods. As legislators, you will already be aware that in the context of today's discussion, these functions, set out in Parts 4 and 5 of our founding legislation, have not yet been commenced.

Significantly, we have also been tasked after every electoral event to prepare an independent report on how those events were administered.

## European Elections

The democratic mandate of the European Union, delivered largely through its directly elected Parliament is a pillar which must hold the weight of a continent.

Many Irish figures across the political spectrum and in the public service have played key roles in the European Union since our accession in the early 1970's. Following his sad passing recently, much has been spoken about former Taoiseach, John Bruton's commitment to the EU and its institutions.

After the 2008 Lisbon vote, as EU Ambassador John Bruton, addressed the Oireachtas Sub-Committee on the future of Ireland in the EU<sup>1</sup> – in his address he pointed out the EU’s unique democratic make-up.

<sup>1</sup> Address by John Bruton on the negative referendum (30 October 2008) (cvce.eu)

*“Even as it stands, the European Union is a unique historical achievement, it is the only multi-state democracy in the world. The European Parliament is the world’s only directly-elected multi-national parliament. It makes legislation that is binding in all the countries whose directly elected representatives sit in the Parliament. In other international organisations, the decision-making is exclusively inter-governmental or diplomatic, rather than democratic.”*

Between the 6 and 9<sup>th</sup> June, across the EU’s Member States, EU Citizens will come together to ballot boxes of various designs; to ballot papers of various languages, and to electoral systems using numerous variations of PR, but for one shared goal – to elect the 720 MEPs who will be their public representatives.

Here in Ireland to be eligible to vote in European elections, you must be a citizen of the European Union, be 18 years of age and be listed in the Register of Electors.

### **Giving people access to factual information**

It is internationally accepted that disinformation and manipulative online behaviour pose a potential threat to electoral integrity (including for example by the United Nations, the European Union, global technology companies and leading international advocates for democracy).

In addition, comparative international research commissioned by International IDEA (the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) on online disinformation during national elections between 2016 and 2021 identified electoral disinformation in 92% of 53 countries studied.

Although Ireland was not a specific focus of this particular research there is no reason to think Ireland would be uniquely exempt from such activity.

Just to give a flavour of what can be involved here, it is not always as technical as AI or hacking: International IDEA cite one case in Germany where some voters were told that they could win a prize if they wrote their name on the ballot paper.

As I mentioned earlier, An Coimisiún do not currently have legislative or regulatory powers in relation to online electoral dis and misinformation. However, as the independent electoral commission and a trusted source of information during elections and referendums, we are committed to ensuring that voters are well informed about how to exercise their democratic vote. We want to encourage them to use their vote and ensure their voice is heard whether in referendums or elections.

Just last week we launched a public information campaign which seeks to engage with people directly on some of the platforms where the quality of information about elections is most contested.

And what we are saying to people is simple...there's a day each year when each of us questions the headlines and is critical of everything we hear and read – and that day is... ..April Fool's Day.

So to fight false information, during election campaigns, we need to treat every day like its April 1<sup>st</sup> and to question headlines and to ask ourselves:

- Who is telling me this?
- How do I know it's true?
- And are there other trusted sources?

Attempts to distract, dissuade and disorientate voters are as old as democracy itself, but the methods to do so are growing in their sophistication and complexity. Our watchword must be vigilance, and each of us must be our own fact-checkers.

An Coimisiún is here to help during electoral periods by providing independent and factual information on the votes and electoral processes, through our website, publications, media campaigns and other communications outputs.

## **Conclusion**

As An Coimisiún Toghcháin, we have been established to provide people with a confidence in the integrity of elections, so that they can trust every part of the electoral process from registration to result.

After each and every electoral event, including the European Elections we will be publishing a detailed review of those elections.

These post-election reports will document what we saw, what we didn't see, how things worked well and where things didn't work and need improvement. I hope that these reports will make a valuable contribution to the debate on further electoral reform.

I would welcome the opportunity at that point once our report is published to again address this committee on its recommendations.

Míle buíochas - I am happy now to address any questions you may have.