

**Committee on Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government**

**Thursday, 1 June @ 10am - Committee Room 1**

**Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Voting) Bill 2014**

Go raibh maith agat a Cathaoirleach,

I welcome the opportunity to speak with the members of the Committee this morning in respect of the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Voting) Bill 2014.

This Bill was referred to the Committee in March 2015 following cross-party support for the Bill at second stage, so it's very welcome to finally get the opportunity to discuss the Bill with the Committee here today and I hope that cross-party support for a measure with which we all agree can again be found.

Whilst Sinn Féin have long campaigned for Presidential voting rights to be extended to citizens in the north and in the Diaspora, and for citizens of the north to have representation in both the Dáil and the Seanad, the motivation for this Bill was the decision of the Constitutional Convention in September 2013 to endorse the position of extending voting rights in Presidential elections to citizens in the north and the Diaspora.

The result of the ballot vote at the Convention was that a clear majority of members favoured a change to the Constitution to give citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in Presidential elections - with 78% voting in favour, 21% against and 1% undecided.

On voting rights being extended to citizens in the north, there was also a clear and resounding majority, with 73% in favour, 20% against and 7% undecided.

The purpose of Bill therefore is to give effect to those recommendations of the Convention on the Constitution to allow for the Oireachtas to legislate for the provision of voting rights for citizens in Presidential elections without restrictions on residency.

I personally attended every session of the Convention except for one.

It was a very uplifting process even though the Convention that was set up by the government and did not go as far as Sinn Féin proposed.

It did propose serious constitutional changes, some of which have been enacted, such as Marriage Equality, as well as this one, which is to extend voting rights in Presidential elections to Irish citizens in the north and the Diaspora and those aged 16.

The government then chose to ignore it.

Many people in the north, some of whom spoke at the Convention, feel very let down at the failure to get to grips with this issue.

That said, I appreciate that the government have belatedly begun to move on this matter.

The announcement by the Taoiseach in Philadelphia in March that there would indeed be a referendum was welcome.

Minister Simon Coveney's consultation process in how this would all work in practice is also to be welcomed.

And this Bill does not affect any of that.

It is supplementary to that process, as any legislative mechanisms that arise from the Ministers consultation process will still require a Constitutional underpinning which this Bill sets out to do.

The proposed new text of Article 12.2.2° of the Constitution, as outlined in the Schedule to the Bill, shall allow for legislation to be enacted that would afford citizens, without disqualification due to residency, the right to vote in Presidential elections.

It would also allow for citizens who have reached the age of sixteen years to vote in Presidential elections.

They are the fundamental principles of the Bill that would be put to the people by way of referendum.

They would have the final say.

But I am confident that the people will endorse the position of extending voting rights.

Nineteen years ago, the Good Friday Agreement enshrined in law the rights and entitlements of Irish citizens across all of Ireland's thirty-two counties.

It did not seek to give partial citizenship or, indeed, second-class citizenship to the Irish citizens in the north; it gave full Irish citizenship as a birth right.

That was endorsed by the people, north and south, who recognised that the Irish nation is more than the Irish State.

And there is no reason, in my opinion, for any further unnecessary delay in extending to all citizens the right to vote for their President.

It is about extending to the millions of Irish citizens scattered throughout the world the opportunity to have a say in their country.

It is about nation building - about connecting the people of the north and the Diaspora.

It is about remedying the hurt caused by partition and reconciling the people of this nation in a practical way with one another.

For all the millions of Irish who have emigrated from these shores in the past two centuries, there has never been political representation for them at home.

This is their chance to have a voice.

We are not reinventing the wheel with such a proposal.

It has happened in many, many other countries.

More than 120 other states have legislated to allow their citizens abroad to cast their votes in elections at home.

Once again, we are out of line with the international trend.

We all know people who have come here to live and work who vote in elections in their home countries at the appropriate time.

There is no reason Ireland should be any different.

The second element to this Bill is of course the extension of the electoral franchise to include citizens who have reached the age of 16 years.

Our society will reap the rewards and profit from the inclusion of our young people.

Why should we follow the example set by Norway, Austria, Scotland and others?

It's simple.

In Scotland 75% of 16 and 17 year olds cast their vote when afforded the opportunity.

That right is now afforded them in all Scottish elections and enjoys a high level of public support.

When addressing the Seanad last year, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, reiterated her support for voting rights for those who have reached 16 and 17 years.

The voting age in Norwegian local elections was lowered to 16 years in 2011 as a trial in 21 municipalities.

Some 58% of 16 and 17 year olds cast their vote.

That number was far higher than the turnout of regular first time voters between the ages of 18 and 21.

In 2007, Austria lowered its legal voting age in all elections.

Turnout among this age group was over 65% and research into this case study shows a high level of political maturity when casting a vote for the first time.

Voter turnout is something I am sure everyone here is concerned about and, unfortunately, some of the lowest turnout levels are among young people.

A positive step in encourage voting is to develop a pattern of voting among our young.

It is a progressive step to lower the voting age in Presidential elections to 16.

So I would urge all Committee members to support this Bill.

Go raibh maith agat a Cathaoirleach.