

FINE GAEL
OIREACHTAS
REFORM
PROGRAMME

March 2016

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Fine Gael's reform programme is driven by commitments made in the Fine Gael General Election manifesto. Our programme sets out a three-tiered proposal for achieving further meaningful reform of the Oireachtas within an ambitious timeframe.

The first tier of this proposal, outlined here in section one, contains **24 priority reforms that Fine Gael will support in good faith prior to any future vote on the election of An Taoiseach** and the formation of Government. We believe that there is already consensus support around these proposals.

We request that the newly elected Ceann Comhairle, in his role as Chairperson of the sub-Committee on Dáil Reform, prioritise these reforms and the necessary changes to Standing Orders for agreement on the sitting of Dáil Éireann on 6 April.

The second tier of our proposal, outlined here in section two, lists **9 necessary reforms that Fine Gael will in principle support, following further detailed examination and agreement**. These reforms are broadly shared by other parties and groupings.

Fine Gael asks that the newly elected Ceann Comhairle, upon the election of An Taoiseach and the formation of Government, proceed with a designated Oireachtas Committee to reach agreement on the manner of their implementation. We believe that this should happen according to a recommended timeframe of no more than 100 days, with the costed recommendations of the Committee to be voted upon by Dáil Éireann.

The third tier of our proposal, outlined in section three, details further reform proposals that we would like to see taken up by both a new Government and a newly reformed Oireachtas.

1. The Fine Gael Parliamentary Party supports the following Oireachtas reforms as a priority and will support their introduction prior to any future vote on the election of An Taoiseach and the formation of Government.

CONDUCT OF BUSINESS

1. All parties and groups to work to relax the application of the party whip.
2. Provision to be made for the establishment of more technical groups to facilitate the smaller parties and independents playing a fuller role in the Dáil and on Oireachtas Committees (with proportional allocation of speaking time).
3. A Dáil Business Management Committee will be established, chaired by the Ceann Comhairle with representatives from each Political Party and Group to meet and agree the Dáil's weekly agenda, as recommended by the Constitutional Convention.
4. Each bill will be given a Programme for Enactment setting out a timeline for the passage of the bill through the Oireachtas when the bill is introduced and avoiding the use of the guillotine.
5. Any future proposal to guillotine a debate on a bill will automatically trigger a Dáil vote.

QUESTION TIME

6. Leaders' Questions will be formally extended to provide additional time for opposition leaders.
7. Ministerial Questions in the Dáil will be extended to 90 minutes with a set 30 minutes for priority questions from opposition spokespeople and 60 minutes for questions

from backbench TDs, selected by draw. The TDs asking the question will continue to be required to be in the Chamber for the question to be taken.

8. Taoiseach's Questions will be overhauled to make it more relevant and topical by giving party leaders' priority questions and not allowing questions to become out of date.

OIREACTHAS COMMITTEE SYSTEM

9. Committee Independence & Resources Chairs of Oireachtas Committees will be allocated on a proportional basis using the D'Hondt system.
10. Working with all parties and groups, the whip system will be relaxed in committees, except on budget matters.

COMMITTEE STRUCTURES

11. The Oireachtas Committee system will be restructured to create stronger committees, including an Oireachtas Budget and Finance Committee.
12. The size of committees will be reduced so they have fewer members.
13. Each TD will be assigned to only one Oireachtas Committee so they can give due attention to committee work.
14. A Dáil Committee of Selection will be established, like that which exists in the Seanad, with the parties coming together to agree on the selection process.

COMMITTEE RESPONSIBILITIES

15. The Taoiseach will appear before the Working Group of Committee Chairpersons twice a year to discuss matters of public policy.
16. All government ministers will appear before their relevant Oireachtas Committee on a quarterly basis at a minimum.
17. To further strengthen pre-legislative scrutiny, new bills will commence in Oireachtas Committees. Ministers will be required to seek the approval of the Working Group of Committee Chairpersons to bypass this pre-legislative stage.
18. With each new bill, the relevant Oireachtas Committee will take evidence from members of the public and interest groups.
19. Post-legislative scrutiny will be conducted by Oireachtas Committee, rather than government minister, one year after the enactment of an Act.
20. Chairs/Vice Chairs of Oireachtas Committees will be allowed to appear before the Seanad (as ministers do) to participate in debates on committee reports.
21. More reports will be debated in the Dáil and Seanad and time will be allocated by the Dáil for the Committee Chair and members to debate the contents of reports and their recommendations.

PRIVATE MEMBERS BILLS & MOTIONS

22. The structure for Private Members Bills will be reformed to allow those bills proposed by TDs and passed in Dáil to undergo a pre-legislative style hearing at an Oireachtas Committee before a full Committee Stage.
23. Private Members Motions will not be open to amendment but instead be voted upon as drafted.

REFORM REVIEW MECHANISM

24. Upon the adoption by Dáil Éireann of a budget each October for the following year, the Ceann Comhairle working with the Committee on Procedures and Privileges will undertake a review of Standing Orders to assess the degree to which new reforms have been successful, as well as the need for any further reforms.

As part of this process, any TD can submit a new proposal for changing the Standing Orders, provided the proposal is supported by the signature of no fewer than seven other members. The Ceann Comhairle with the CPP will then review any such proposals and make recommendations to the Parliament.

The Ceann Comhairle will conclude this process and report at the beginning of the first Dáil term of the following year.

2. The Fine Gael Parliamentary Party supports in principle the following reforms and asks that the newly elected Ceann Comhairle, upon the election of An Taoiseach and the formation of Government, proceed with a designated Oireachtas Committee to reach agreement on the manner of their implementation – to a recommended timeframe of no more than 100 days, with the costed recommendations of the Committee to be voted upon by Dáil Éireann.

1. An Independent Fiscal and Budget Office will be established.*
2. Panels of relevant external experts will be drawn up to advise and work with each Oireachtas Committee.
3. A Parliamentary Investigations Unit will be established, as recommended by the Banking Inquiry.**
4. The Office of Independent Legal Advisor to the Oireachtas will be strengthened; independent opinions will be published where the AG's is not available.
5. A Committee Week will be established where the Dáil only sits for Leader's Questions & Ministers Questions to allow committees greater time for the enhanced role they will be required to play in the next Dáil.
6. Oireachtas Committees will have a greater role in appointments to State Boards and Chairpersons of State Boards will appear on an annual basis before Oireachtas Committees.
7. Oireachtas Committees will review their respective line Department's work based on research undertaken by the Independent Fiscal and Budget Office.
8. The Order of Business will be restructured to make it more responsive to the work of the Dáil, involve government ministers and allow questions on legislation be taken by ministers from the Department concerned.
9. The Ceann Comhairle and the Oireachtas will consider the introduction of family friendly hours for the Dáil following a review of how other parliaments address this issue and a consultation process with all members as to how it would work in our Parliament.

***FINE GAEL'S VISION FOR AN INDEPENDENT FISCAL AND BUDGET OFFICE**

The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council (IFAC) established in 2011 has emerged as a credible independent institution, fulfilling its mandate and increasing transparency on fiscal matters.

The role of the IFAC will be enhanced, transforming it in to an Independent Fiscal and Budget Office (IFBO), which will work directly with a new Oireachtas Budget and Finance Committee. In addition to fulfilling its current function, the new IFBO will be available to cost election manifestos and budget proposals for all political parties. This will go beyond the costing of individual proposals which

is already done by the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform and look at the overall impact of a package of proposals. IFBO will also be mandated to have an increased focus on long-term fiscal issues. Furthermore, IFBO will engage with members of the Oireachtas on important fiscal issues through presentations and written output. IFBO will have a strong statutory right to obtain information covering relevant public sector authorities as recommended for independent fiscal institutions by the OECD.

****FINE GAEL'S VISION FOR A PARLIAMENTARY INVESTIGATIONS UNIT**

Independent of Government, headed by an Office of the Parliamentary Investigator. It will conduct the investigative phase as part of any Oireachtas Committee of Inquiry; carry out feasibility studies on matters requested by the Oireachtas; carry out preliminary investigations in advance of the Oireachtas establishing a Commission of Inquiry.

3. The Fine Gael Parliamentary Party believes there to be a responsibility on any new Government working together with a newly reformed Oireachtas to progress the following initiatives.

A. CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

Unlike the Constitutional Convention, the Assembly would be composed solely of randomly selected citizens and would be asked to undertake a detailed review of a limited number of key issues over an extended time period, including:

- Seanad Reform
- Climate Change
- The 8th Amendment of the Constitution
- A review of the power of Oireachtas Committees to conduct inquiries on foot of the recommendations of the Banking Inquiry and consider whether there should be a new Constitutional Referendum to strengthen these powers.
- As part of the plans to mark the centenary of the 1916 rebellion, the Assembly will also be asked to examine how we should, as a republic, best respond to both the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population.

A range of specific propositions would be set before the Assembly by the Government for the former's consideration, while the IFBO could be asked to provide the Assembly with the necessary technical expertise. All of the Assembly's proposals would be referred to the appropriate Oireachtas Committee for review, and then forwarded to Government for its consideration and response.

B. ELECTORAL COMMISSION

An Electoral Commission should be established, taking into account the Oireachtas Committee's Report on their consultation process, published in January 2016. Such a Commission could oversee voter registration, promote voter education and seek to increase voter turnout. The Commission could also assume the role of Registrar of Political Parties, regulate political funding and election expenditure and allow the Referendum Commission to become a separate section within it. New automatic online voter registration for citizens once they reach 18 could also be introduced.

The Electoral Commission would be independent of Government and accountable directly to the Oireachtas.

C. CONSTITUTIONAL STANDING FOR CEANN COMHAIRLE AND OIREACHTAS COMMITTEES

Consideration should be given to holding a referendum to give the Office of the Ceann Comhairle and Oireachtas Committees constitutional standing as recommended by the Constitutional Convention.

D. A DIGITAL DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

A Digital Democracy Commission should be established through the Oireachtas to examine how new technology could further open up politics and allow greater citizen participation in the political process.

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