

**To: Ceann Comhairle**

**From: Katherine Zappone, TD**

**Re: Submission to Sub-committee on Dáil Reform**

**Date: 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016**

## **Oireachtas Reform**

As an Independent Deputy, I have reviewed the various proposals on Oireachtas reform submitted by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Social Democrats and Independent Deputy Denis Naughten. I am in agreement with the principles of these submissions to initiate the implementation of ‘real political reform’, ‘empowerment of members of Dáil Éireann’, and ‘meaningful Oireachtas reforms’. The three-tiered or three stage approach of Fine Gael’s proposals are particularly helpful, as I think it is of the essence to maintain a sense of urgency on reform, and to be strategic in our approach to its implementation.

I wish to put forward proposals with regard to three areas: Groupings and Oireachtas Committees, Budgeting process (inclusive of establishment of an Oireachtas Budget and Finance Committee), and a Reformed Seanad.

### **Groupings and Oireachtas Committees**

1) Drawing on the work of Deputy Naughten, while I agree that an ideal target is to reduce threshold for formation of a group from 7 to any group of 5 members, I suggest that given the number of Independents and members of smaller parties, the number of technical groupings for the 32<sup>nd</sup> Dail is not less than three, and that Independents and smaller parties may coalesce as they deem appropriate.

2) Chairs of Oireachtas Committees will be allocated on a proportional basis using the D’Hondt system. Additionally committee chairpersons are to be elected by the committees themselves, with the proviso that at least one technical grouping returns an Independent in the chair.

## **Budgeting Process**

1) I am in agreement to establish an ‘Oireachtas Office of Policy and Economic Oversight’ (as named by FF)/’Independent Fiscal and Budget Office’ (as named by FG).

2) Such an office will work directly with the Oireachtas Budget and Finance Committee.

3) In order to empower fully all members of parliament to take a meaningful role in the budgeting process, particularly in light of the number of members who are Independents or belong to smaller parties, and even more so if there is the formation of a minority government, I propose that the budgeting process unfolds over a 12 month period and includes:

a) a specified process of achieving consensus through negotiations between political parties and Independents, both among the partners in government and with political parties and Independents outside government;

b) a specified process of achieving consensus with government partners and spending ministries as the first part of budget formulation followed by;

c) a specified parliamentary budget process inclusive of the participation of the Oireachtas budget and finance committee (plus other committees) and

d) a phase consisting of political negotiations with others that take place simultaneously, often outside the formal structures of parliament.

This type of consensus approach is utilised in Denmark, a model of successful practice of coalition minority governments. (Reference, Blondal and Ruffner, ‘Budgeting in Denmark’, OECD Journal on Budgeting – Volume 4; No. 1, 2004).

4) In the current context of efforts to form a government, a shorter time-frame inclusive of some form of all elements above, would increase significantly the potential of a stable government and a genuinely new way of doing politics.

## **A Reformed Seanad**

This is a priority that I bring with me to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Dáil from my work as a Senator in the 24<sup>th</sup> Seanad. As a leader of those who opposed the referendum to abolish the Seanad, based on a private members bill I published with Senator Feargal Quinn, I suggest that legislative work to progress a reformed Seanad begin as soon as possible.

The Manning ‘Report of the Working Group on Seanad Reform 2015’ will be the starting point for such work, inclusive of the draft ‘Seanad Bill 2015’ published by the Working Group.

Placing the topic of Seanad Reform within a citizen’s assembly would require a solid rationale to be put before the Irish people. The publication of one more report on Seanad Reform would be hugely symbolic of the old way of doing politics.