

Anti-Austerity Alliance - People before Profit Dáil reform proposals

Recognition of groups

1. In recognition of the changed political landscape which has seen the election of smaller parties and groups as well as a larger number of independents we believe the rules on the recognition of groups need to be reformed. We propose a reduction in the number of TDs mentioned in Standing Order 120 to allow any party or group that is registered in the Register of Political Parties which attains four or more TDs at a General Election (or as a result of a subsequent bye-election) to be recognised as a group. Deputies from registered groups or parties who attain less than four members must be able to participate in all aspects of Dáil business and be facilitated with new rules including the ability to form multiple technical groups.

Dáil business

2. Currently the various stages of legislation can be rushed which results in less time for research, consultation with interested groups and more scrutiny from the public in general. The time between stages in legislation should be extended. Except in demonstrably exceptional circumstances, a timeline that should be considered is a minimum of two weeks between pre legislative scrutiny and 2nd stage, and then a minimum of a week between other stages.
3. The Dáil schedule for any given week is published on the previous Thursday. This allows very little time for preparation for opposition TDs and groups. It also allows little time for interested groups and the public generally to contact TDs about upcoming legislation. The agenda should be drafted further in advance in consultation with the opposition. The Constitutional Convention recommended a Dáil Business Management Committee headed by the Ceann Comhairle and made up of the various whips to set the Dáil agenda; we support this proposal. This Committee should meet in public or have its minutes published.
4. In line with the proposal regarding the Dáil Business Management Committee, it is the Dáil that should be able to set its agenda; the Taoiseach should not have as much power as currently exists in standing orders. Order of Business should be reformed to allow for amendments to the Order of Business to be proposed and voted on by the Dáil and not just amendments on the timing of sittings. There should also be the ability to ask about the provision of time for a debate on a matter of importance and not just on pending legislation.
5. All items on the government legislative programme should have a target time for consideration in the Oireachtas.

6. Late sittings of the Dáil are not family friendly for elected representatives or Oireachtas staff. With appropriate provision for genuinely exceptional cases, late sittings should not take place.
7. There should be no guillotines on legislation unless in demonstrably exceptional situations.
8. There should be the ability for TDs (other than Ministers) to put amendments that bring a charge on the state.
9. The use of software to facilitate and ease the writing and submitting of amendments should be explored.

Committees

10. More resources need to be put into the committees, with agendas decided in advance to allow sufficient time for preparation, research for TDs, interest groups and the public. Committee meetings clashing with the plenary session is a major difficulty. We propose a regular 'committee week' where committees would meet. However we believe it is important that the government still answer Oral parliamentary questions, Taoiseach's Questions, Leaders' Questions and that PMB time is taken in those weeks.
11. We support the allocation of committee chairs by the D'Hondt or another similarly proportional system.
12. Ministers should appear before their relevant committee on a regular basis.
13. Bills should normally commence in Committee. However this mechanism should not be allowed to prevent opposition Bills from then later progressing to 2nd stage in a plenary session.
14. If PMB legislation is passed at 2nd Stage the government should not be able to prevent the legislation from progressing further.
15. In recognition that many smaller groups and independents may not have representation on all committees there should be a mechanism to allow for amendments to be put at report stage without the issue contained in the amendment necessarily having to have arisen at committee stage.

Voting

16. There are often complex pieces of legislation, motions and amendments that cannot always be voted on with a straightforward yes or no vote. We propose allowing for abstentions.

17. We propose that there should be the facility for 'written explanations of vote' which would allow TDs/Groups to explain and to put on the public record the reasons they voted in a particular way on a given vote. This is a facility that exists in other parliaments. It is particularly important for TDs from smaller parties and independents that may not get an opportunity to intervene in a debate to explain their position.
18. The practice of calling divisions at any time and votes then been taken directly can lead to TDs missing votes. It is also disruptive to committee meetings, meetings with constituents and other parliamentary work. It also forces long days on TDs and Oireachtas staff which is not family friendly. We propose that all divisions should be taken in block at a set time in the day. This is done for divisions that are called on Friday sittings.
19. Currently TDs must be in the chamber in order to call a division. This can mean that if the Dáil schedule is progressing slower or more quickly than anticipated that TDs can find it difficult to be in the chamber for divisions they wish to call. There should be provision to allow for the calling of divisions in advance.

Leaders' Questions and PQs

20. The current way in which Taoiseach's questions is organised is resulting in a huge delay in having questions answered. Often questions are replied to many weeks or even months after they were submitted. This results in many of the replies to questions no longer being topical or relevant to the current situation. There should be consideration given to changing the format of Taoiseach's Questions to ensure the questions are dealt with more quickly, including having more time allocated to Taoiseach's Questions and time limits on the replies.
21. The practice of referring parliamentary questions to state agencies who then in turn write directly to TDs rather than answering on the public record needs to end. Ministers should reply to all Parliamentary Questions. Where there needs to be a more detailed reply from a government agency then this reply should be put on the public record.
22. Parliamentary Questions seeking information should have the same weight as a Freedom of Information Requests.
23. The Chair should require a Minister or Taoiseach to answer a direct question of fact.
24. In order that Oral Parliamentary Questions are more topical, we propose that the deadline for the submission of priority oral questions to be moved to 2 days rather than 6 days.
25. Time for Oral Parliamentary Questions should be extended to an hour and a half.

Topical Issues

26. The Minister responsible for the issue raised should be the Minister that takes topical issues.
27. There should be a better balance between local and national issues in topical issues debates. There should be a consideration given to a minimum and/or maximum number of local or national issues to be taken on a given day.

Private Members' Business (PMB)

28. End the practice of the government voting down a PMB motion with an amendment rather than having to vote on the motion itself. This could be done by preventing the government from putting amendments to PMB motions.

Prayer

29. We believe that there should no longer be a prayer at the beginning of the day in the Dáil. This would be an important change which would represent a move towards a secular society, with the real separation of church and state.