



Input to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the topic of the General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill. The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM)

Good morning, Chairperson, Deputies and Senators, the Irish Traveller Movement welcome the opportunity to present to the Committee on the matters related to the Electoral Reform Bill.

We refer to our submission to the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament and related recommendations, which may have meaning here to. We also note the current Government led Interim Report of the Anti-Racism Committee and any actions and recommendations arising there.

The establishment of an Electoral Commission and provisions connected to that, can make way for broader engagement of Travellers, minority and underrepresented groups in political democracy, and ensure those are upheld in a non-discriminatory way, a principle objective of The Durban Programme of Action.

Travellers encounter many obstacles to participating fully in political democracy, from low voting, lack of political awareness and apathy to the political system which as a duty bearer, has underserved Traveller need and dented trust, in many settings.

This is coupled with a lack of sanction for running candidates and elected representatives who have over many years articulated anti-Traveller sentiment in electioneering matters and often housing decisions, some of whom openly canvassed against Travellers as a vote getting strategy.

Structural obstacles are a problem too where there is no universality. Right now, there are 45,000 to 57,000 Travellers resident in the Republic, 60% are under 25 and just 3% over 65 years. Given our population size and age - our political system of proportional representation statistically disadvantages us when competing with non-Travellers in elections. A more successful gateway for some Travellers was election to town councils, unfortunately abolished now.

Other obstacles to achieve presence in constituency settings through the normal pathways to politics, such as through social and civil engagement, sporting and cultural arenas, are also a restrictive barrier.

And even after all those obstacles are overcome to get onto a ballot paper, Travellers encounter residual and deeply ingrained prejudice across every setting, including nominations by political parties and groups.

Notwithstanding that, in the 2019 Local and European Elections 5 Traveller candidates ran, the most significant number to date, and there's hope future years will see more candidates. However, the reality is competing in an environment of anti-Traveller sentiment is challenging and limits success.

But there is much which can be done:

Improving Traveller visibility, where we are participants in, national and local political structures in mainstream politics, would support integration and inclusion. Traveller-led articulation would not only promote a Can See it Can be approach, but it would also mainstream our identity, beyond a stereotype.

Encouraging greater Traveller voter participation, requires proof the system will deliver for Travellers, and that we are engaged in discussions and decisions of national importance. That means, when national policy decisions are made, Travellers should be part of how democracy happens. For example: the function of **The Citizens Assembly** is to inform legislation and public policy, where Members of the Assembly are currently selected at random from the electoral register. Travellers are not always on the Register and unlikely to be included in the Assemblies so far. It's difficult to see that it is true to its remit, "in reflecting Irish society".

We must also be included in **National Government Planning Strategies**, which are not comprehensively inclusive in design and Travellers are not factored into Ireland's broader plan across cultural, social, community and environmental strategies, as a matter of fact. Consultation on those matters assume Travellers are included in broader public cohorts, so too across all **national engagement strategies**.

The Seanad and Presidential election systems by their design, disadvantage Travellers, and other underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, and should be broadened at their entry level.

The likelihood for a Traveller as President is remote, worsened by obstacles in the first stage where a candidate must be endorsed by either twenty members of the Oireachtas or four local authorities.

Up to now the Oireachtas has not created a minority panel system. In that context but not exclusive to it, there is an immediate opportunity within the Seanad, a proposal which has also been supported by some political groups.

And finally, representation in political decision-making has been recognised by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination CERD in 2005, 2011, 2016 and 2019, saying that the *'State party take effective measures, including special measures, to improve the representation of ethnic minority groups in political and public life, including by implementing the goal of ensuring that 1 per cent of the civil service workforce are from ethnic minorities'*, of which Travellers should now be included.

And that *'the State party collect and provide updated statistics on the ethnic composition of its population based on self-identification, including in political life'*.

We would be happy to address any of these matters further and can reply by submission also.

Thank you.