

General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill

Pre-Legislative Scrutiny: Session 7

22 June 2021

Minister Malcom Noonan - Opening Statement

Introduction:

- Good afternoon, and thank you for your invitation to appear before you again.
- Thank you, also, for the detailed consideration that you have given the General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill.
- I have followed the pre-legislative scrutiny process over the past five months with great interest.
- The General Scheme proposes a comprehensive and far-reaching suite of changes to our electoral system. It is appropriate that it be assessed by a broad range of experts and interested parties. The points raised have been of great interest and assistance to my officials and I.
- I would like to put on the record my appreciation of the consistent support which has been expressed for the General Scheme and its aims throughout the pre-legislative scrutiny process.

- The General Scheme which was presented to you was the result of careful consideration of:
 - the 2016 JOC *Report on the Consultation on the Proposed Electoral Commission*;
 - the views of the public expressed in the 2018 public consultation processes on the establishment of the Electoral Commission and the modernisation of the registration process; and
 - the recommendations set out in the first and second reports of the Interdepartmental Group on the security of Ireland's electoral process and disinformation, having particular regard to the public consultation and Open Policy Forum held in respect of online political advertising.

- Indeed, many of the scheme's features can be linked directly to their recommendations.

The Electoral Commission:

- I had previously spoken about the need for our electoral system to evolve as our society evolves. I believe that the provisions of this General Scheme are integral to this evolution.
- The independent Electoral Commission – which we plan to have in place by the end of the year – will move a broad range of electoral functions into one specialised organisation. Electoral policy and practice will be its sole focus.
- This centralisation and specialisation will allow the Commission to look at the interactions between functions, and also improve the efficiency and effectiveness with which its functions are carried out.

- The Electoral Commission’s research and advisory role will allow it to take a cohesive view of our electoral landscape. It will help us in maintaining a strategic focus on our system, and how we meet new challenges. Fundamentally, it will guide and inform the evolution of our electoral system.

The Modernised Electoral Registration Process:

- I believe that the modernised electoral registration process – which this legislation will deliver – will facilitate greater democratic engagement, including with our young people.
- By simplifying and streamlining the process, it will align much better with how we live in Ireland today.
- By putting in place the means to ensure a more accurate register, it will support and enhance the integrity of our democratic process into the future.

The Regulation of Online Political Advertising:

- To promote greater transparency in our electoral processes and to reduce the risk of hidden influence, the General Scheme provides for the compulsory labelling of paid political advertisements commissioned for use on online platforms during electoral periods.
- This labelling will ensure an elector is aware of who is behind an advertisement, why the elector is being targeted and how much the advertisement costs.

- This will mean that the rules which currently apply to the more traditional forms of advertising will now be extended into the online eco-sphere.

Towards an Inclusive Electoral and Political System:

- An issue which has been particularly close to my heart has been the need to bring about a more inclusive and vibrant democracy for Ireland.
- In order to achieve this, we need a more informed, engaged and energised electorate. This starts with greater engagement with – and understanding of – our democratic structures and processes.
- I see the modernised electoral registration process and the Electoral Commission's voter education and participation role as absolutely critical to foster greater participation and engagement in our democracy from new voters, as well as these traditionally under-represented and marginalised groups.
- I was, therefore, particularly happy to see a full scrutiny session involving representatives of the National Youth Council of Ireland, the National Women's Council of Ireland and the Irish Traveller Movement.
- I am determined that the Electoral Commission's voter education and participation role will be significant and that this function will be well-resourced. It will have a clear emphasis on reaching out to marginalised groups, underpinning a more inclusive political system, which represents all of our citizens.

Conclusion:

- The deliberations of the Committee and its witnesses in respect of the General Scheme have been constructive and well-considered. I look forward to receiving your report and would like to assure you that it will receive careful consideration.