

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

---

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOMHSHAOL, CULTÚR AGUS GAELTACHT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND THE GAELTACHT

---

*Dé Máirt, 10 Márta 2015*

*Tuesday, 10 March 2015*

---

The Joint Committee met at 2.20 p.m.

---

### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy James Bannon,	Senator Terry Brennan,
Deputy Robert Dowds,	Senator Cáit Keane,
Deputy Helen McEntee,	Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú,
Deputy Michelle Mulherin,	Senator Ned O'Sullivan.
Deputy Catherine Murphy,	
Deputy Fergus O'Dowd,	
Deputy Brian Stanley,	

DEPUTY NOEL COONAN IN THE CHAIR.

Electoral Commission: Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government

**Vice Chairman:** I remind members to ensure their mobile telephones are switched off as they can cause serious problems for the broadcasting system. Apologies have been received from the Chairman, Deputy Michael McCarthy, who is unavailable. I welcome the Minister and his officials to the meeting. I thank the Minister for his attendance.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter to only qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against a person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I also advise them that any submission or opening statement made to the committee may be published on its website after the meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or persons outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I invite the Minister to make his opening statement to the joint committee.

**Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly):** Thank you, I am pleased to be in the hands of the Vice Chairman today.

**Vice Chairman:** The Minister feels safe.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Very safe.

I thank the members of the committee for inviting me to discuss this extremely important topic. This is the beginning of a very important process. We have given ourselves a significant and important task, to set up an electoral commission in Ireland. I will be brief in my opening remarks because I would be better off hearing from the members of the committee and starting the process of engagement. That would create more value from the time we have.

On 27 January last, I stood with the Chairman of this committee on the steps of Leinster House to announce the publication of the consultation paper on the establishment of an electoral commission in Ireland. I said then, and have repeated many times since this is an issue of the highest priority. I feel passionately about it because the establishment of such a commission is long overdue. I am here to listen to the views of committee members as parliamentarians and as practitioners with expertise in how the current system works. To be frank and to be fair, there is not necessarily a right and wrong answer to many of the issues here. It is about fermenting the collective view of all of us about how we should proceed, what we should proceed with and exactly what we are defining. We have to leave our political affiliations outside the door on this issue. This is about democracy and about elections, which are the ultimate tool of democracy. It makes sense to work together to bring about the reforms we all desire and need. There is a good and practical reason for the approach we are talking about today.

A key lesson from international experience is that significant changes in electoral governance ideally need to command broad political and public support. Quite frankly, there would be no point in the Government driving home an electoral commission. It would be a waste of time. Broad political and public support is needed from across the body politic. The people

have to come with us. We have to see measured improvements in what we are doing. That is why everyone has to be involved in this. For those reasons, consultation is not just desirable - it is absolutely necessary. There is a fermenting process here. Over a good period of time, we will constantly return to issues and re-evaluate positions. We will need to do that. The role of this committee is absolutely central to this process. That is why we have gone down this route. It is important that we build and maintain momentum in developing and implementing the necessary legislation. Therefore, I welcome the priority the committee has given to this consultation paper.

I was in the Seanad last week to debate a Private Members' motion on the establishment of an electoral commission. I found our good exchange of ideas and views most helpful. Some of the Members of the Seanad who were present for that debate are here now. I hope they will get a chance today to elaborate further on their views. I hope those who did not get a chance to speak last week will get a chance to do so today. It is important to hear from all members of the committee if time allows. The consultation paper sets out 11 questions. As the members of the committee have seen them, I do not need to read them out again. I will summarise the significant issues that members are being asked to examine. First, they will need to consider what functions should be assigned to an electoral commission. Some or all of the responsibilities assigned to various bodies and office holders in the current system could be assigned to the planned new structure. We need to learn from the good models that are in operation elsewhere and are examined in the consultation paper.

The paper also reviews earlier proposals from Oireachtas committees, political parties, research reports and a myriad of other sources. There is a wide range of opinion on what exactly such a body should do and how it should work. It is clear that improving the electoral register is an important driving force underpinning the desire to establish an electoral commission in Ireland. I am sure colleagues will want to discuss this. The register of electors is probably the single topic that is most frequently debated and is most prominent in all the reports and recommendations we have. Most proposals see some form of centralised system of registration being managed by the new electoral commission. For example, it could assume responsibilities from the local authorities. One option envisages the new commission overseeing the work of local authorities, which could continue to have a role.

Most of the proposals made by other bodies to date involve the transfer of the operational responsibilities of my Department in respect of elections to the electoral commission. I would like the committee's views on that. I am fairly open to this. The role that is likely to be played by the current Dáil returning officers in a new configuration has been considered to a lesser extent. What do we need to do there? What role will there be? We need to consider whether the electoral commission will take on the responsibilities currently performed by the Standards in Public Office Commission under the electoral Acts. The review of electoral boundaries and the role currently performed by the Constituency Commission are also identified as potential responsibilities. We need to do a great deal of deep thinking on this issue as the analysis shows that changes in population are going to cause issues continuously. It may be time we looked at this in a different way. Voter education appears commonly and prominently as a possible role. Another issue is whether the electoral commission would have an advisory role in respect of the Minister. I am open on this one, although I am not sure about it. The role would need to be defined, but is there a role at all? That is something we will have to debate. It is not self-evident what functions should be assigned to an electoral commission or how it should work. These are questions that we will have to answer.

Another issue is the cost of an electoral commission. A key reason for the creation of new public bodies lies in the scope to improve cost-effectiveness and efficiency in the use of public money. The costs associated with different aspects of the current system are set out in section 3 of the consultation paper. I ask members to examine them in their deliberations and consider them when they come to make recommendations. It cannot simply be assumed that economies will be achieved in setting up a new body. This is an important point. It cannot be assumed that just because we set up an electoral commission savings will be generated. We do not need to look 1 million miles back into history to know this. It is possible that net savings may not be achieved, especially if new and additional work is to be assigned to the electoral commission. Given the scale of expenditure in administering the electoral system and the cost of setting up a new body, financial considerations must be part of the debate. However, they are not the only part of it, but where do we draw the line? Is it about efficiency, democracy, or economies of scale? Of course, it is about democracy, but at what point do we say financial considerations and a more costly structure must be taken into account?

The next issue is the membership of an electoral commission. As the consultation paper shows, electoral management bodies internationally vary in their numbers of members. It has been observed, however, that those with large memberships are usually less effective. Different options are considered in the consultation paper. We could have a membership comprising various independent office holders or nominees, as we have currently with the Standards in Public Office Commission and the Constituency Commission. We could use a different model. A key issue is whether the commission should include members from a political background such as former Members of the Houses. There are very different opinions on this issue and they are set out in the consultation paper. I would really like to get the views of committee members on this point, on which I have a mixed view. I can see why one would use former politicians and practitioners, but I can also see why people might not want them on the commission. Whoever the members of the commission are, we need to ensure they will be selected or appointed in a manner that will seek to guarantee their independence as absolute.

Accountability, performance and audit are key and need to be achieved in a manner that is consistent with the independence of the electoral commission. The experience in other countries points to both the desirability and necessity of having accountability mechanisms linked with democratic institutions. These include, for example, formal reporting arrangements to a designated parliamentary committee; the identification of a specific Minister as a liaison with the electoral commission; independent audit arrangements, and the publication of documents against which performance can be assessed, including a statement of strategy, budget plan and an annual report. Do we want to replicate similar arrangements here or do we want to do something different?

I made it clear when launching the consultation paper that the task involved a significant job of work. From a timescale point of view, we need to do it as efficiently as possible, as well as doing it right. That is paramount. The establishment of an electoral commission will not take place before the next general election. It will take a number of years to establish it. The development of legislation is a necessary first step which we are now taking. Before the end of this Dáil, I intend to have the legislation in place. That is what I want to commit to. When the committee reverts with its views, I will proceed with the preparation of the heads of an electoral commission Bill and will not be found wanting in driving this work forward. I would like to discuss timescales with the Chairman here or off-site at some point. I will be guided by the members regarding the timescale for reverting to me.

The lessons from other countries are worth heeding. Significant change takes time and requires planning. It took almost four years to amalgamate the current functions of the New Zealand Electoral Commission into one body. This was done on a phased basis between 2008 and 2012. The transfer of the electoral register was handled as a specific phase. Establishing the National Register of Electors in Canada took almost four years from commencement in 1993 to full implementation in 1997. It took a further three years after implementation for the changes to bed down, and there were teething problems.

In 2008, the preliminary study on the establishment of an electoral commission, prepared by the Geary Institute in UCD on behalf of my Department, considered the phasing of the task. It envisaged a two-stage process. The principle of adopting a phased approach in establishing our electoral commission is consistent with practice that has worked elsewhere. Do we need to do it here? Is our system less complicated, more complicated or suited to phasing? We need to make decisions on which functions are to be prioritised for inclusion within the electoral commission structure from the outset.

Having regard to the complexities involved in changing the system of voter registration, there may be a case for addressing this as a stand-alone project. It is a question of determining whether the system of voter registration requires a separate body of work. We will have to consider whether we need a three-phase approach rather than a two-phase approach.

There are many issues for the committee to consider and many choices to make. This is an open process. I must state quite clearly to all members present that it is a very open process for me. It is not about a Government approach but about one that encompasses all views across the political sphere and, eventually, the public sphere to ensure we can put in place a process for an electoral commission in a sustainable way, setting out clear functions from the beginning.

I look forward to questions and the two-way conversation we are to have. At some point, either today or at another time with the Vice Chairman and the Chairman, we will talk about the timeline for the committee to revert to us with its deliberations.

**Vice Chairman:** I thank the Minister. I was intrigued to hear him say it takes four years to set up a commission. I hope he continues in his position for four years. We certainly wish him well.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I have no doubt that he does. Does the Vice Chairman know this is recorded?

**Vice Chairman:** Most Ministers for the environment in recent years have been reforming Ministers. Usually, the reforms have been to have better local government. I note the current Minister's passion for reform, to which he referred. I am glad he is not confining reform to local government because we might have second thoughts about many of the reforms that were introduced if they were introduced again.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I could not agree more.

**Vice Chairman:** Would the Government receive policy advice from the commission? At present, we have proportional representation. Is the Minister thinking of a single non-transferable vote or single-seat constituencies? Would the commission have a function in this regard?

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It depends on its functions, how we define them and the result of the committee's deliberations. I do not believe we should change the voting system. It depends on

what we set out for the commission. Its remit could cover what the Vice Chairman suggested if we wanted. It is a matter for us to discuss and on which to decide as part of the process. Personally, I would not change the voting system.

**Vice Chairman:** It might afford a Government-----

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It was tried twice by referendum and defeated.

**Vice Chairman:** The commission might be used-----

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I just caught the eye of the Senator coming in and thought of that.

**Vice Chairman:** The commission might be used by the Government to introduce a system that might not be politically popular or that could be politically dangerous.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** No. On issues such as that, there would have to be constitutional change. The commission can make recommendations but it has to be completely independent.

**Vice Chairman:** It would have to be accountable to the Government of the day and the Oireachtas.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Of course it must be accountable but it must act in an independent manner. I am open in regard to the question of the relationship between the Minister, the Department and its functions and whether these should be moved. Who the commission liaises with within the structure outlined - that is through the Minister - and how that works needs to be defined also. There are significant options included in the paper that provide a perspective in that regard.

**Vice Chairman:** Therefore, the Minister is saying it is for us to decide and that he will accept what the committee decides.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I will consider whatever recommendations the committee brings to me and we will draft legislation on that basis.

**Vice Chairman:** Is the Minister saying he will just consider it, rather than accept it?

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** To be fair, this is not like any other form of legislation I bring to a committee. This is not about the Government driving something forward or having a defined view. We need a general view and consensus of many of the issues we are discussion in this regard. How we run elections into the future is fundamental to our democracy, so we need to get consensus and general agreement on all of these issues.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the Minister and his officials to the committee to deal with this important matter. I believe the setting up of an independent commission is a great idea. Sinn Féin would certainly support it and has been calling for such a body for a long time. The Minister is right that this initiative is of such importance that it requires support across the political spectrum and that we need to build consensus. It is not in anybody's interest that any shoddy or outdated practices in regard to how we run elections or referenda continue. The independence of the body is important, but it must be seen to be independent. Therefore, how members are appointed to it is a crucial issue.

I am inclined to agree with the Minister in regard to the size of the body. The international research referred to shows that if a committee is too big and unwieldy, it does not work. At the

same time, it is important to ensure a balance of the necessary level of expertise.

I have raised the issue of the register of electors many times, particularly with the Minister's predecessor. We have huge concerns about the register. We sought reform of the register in the North and at the time, the Establishment and media raised stories about impersonation and the like. The register was reformed and there is now a better system in place. This was great for Sinn Féin, because reform stopped impersonation by other parties and our share of the vote rose immediately in the following election. This was a good outcome for Sinn Féin, but also a good outcome for democracy. Currently, we have people register twice or thrice, which is not right. Other people are missing from the register. I know it is up to each citizen to ensure he or she is registered. The current register of electors will only work if all citizens over 18 are convinced they should be actively involved and should check the register every November to ensure they are on the draft register for the coming year. If they notice a duplication of their name on the register, they should notify the local authority. We must move away from the current approach.

In the past, I have suggested the use of PPS numbers for registration, but I am aware there are issues in that regard because there are more PPS numbers than people. The Minister's predecessor told me one day that we had close to 7 million PPS numbers, far in excess of the number of people living in the State. The huge number of PPS numbers can be accounted for by emigration, immigrants returning to their countries and various other reasons. We need to look at other models and to take a new approach.

Regardless of what we do about an electoral commission, the register of electors is something that has bugged me over the last number of years. I used to get very annoyed when people who have been on the register for a number of years and are getting on in years and who, when an election was called and they went to vote, found that they were not on the register for whatever reason, even though they had not moved house. I have seen people going through that experience. Tying it to an address does not work. We must tie it to the person. The entitlement to vote must be tied to every person when they reach the age of 18 years, and we must find a mechanism to do that. I am not convinced as to how we can do it at this point, but our party is open to finding a better way of doing it.

That brings me to the timeline. We must separate the different tasks. The register of electors is the most important issue to be addressed. It is very hard to get it right. Consider the fact that there are far fewer councillors now. Whether we like it or not, councillors played a role in ensuring that the register of electors was correct. That was particularly so with town councils, where there is a great deal of mobility with people moving about. Town councillors would make it their business to know who was registered in a street, or if somebody in the street was registered twice they would not be long in bringing it to the attention of the local authority officials. There were scandalous incidents. In a recent election, 28 people in one house were registered. There was terrible things like that happening.

This is of great importance. At best, I reckon the register is 80% accurate. That 80% accuracy must be seen in the context of court cases having been held over one vote. We have seen that. In my county, County Laois, there was a court case over one vote. It involved a Labour Party candidate and a Fine Gael candidate. I believe the Fine Gael candidate ended up with the vote and the late Larry Kavanaugh lost out. That is too important to be left as it is. It is something we should have started working on last year.

With regard to the Seanad, the Government lost the referendum on its abolition. My party would have abolished it in its current form, but we want to have a reformed Seanad. Obviously,

how people get there and what their task will be when they get there are of crucial importance, but how to get there is the big issue. The election system for the Seanad is archaic and must be dealt with. The panels bear no resemblance to the Ireland of today. I am not saying there should not be sectoral panels, as they serve a purpose, but we must examine the ones we have and how people are nominated onto them.

I will conclude on the boundaries and the boundary commission. Yes, they possibly could be amalgamated. The Minister's house is now in the Offaly constituency, or very near it. If not, the constituency is getting close to his back yard.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The lake is there.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Thank God for the lake, because County Offaly is almost on the Minister's doorstep.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I know what the Deputy means.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The new Offaly constituency is almost in the Minister's back yard.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It is just outside Nenagh.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Yes. I saw it on the map, and I thought the Minister was inside it.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am inside it.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The Minister could throw a stone into it.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am not in Offaly; I am in Tipperary.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The Minister is inside the electoral area.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** No, I am in Tipperary.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Is the Minister in the new Offaly-north Tipperary constituency for Dáil elections?

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** No, I am in Tipperary.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Just about.

**Vice Chairman:** Are you proposing a motion that he should go there?

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** No, I am pointing to what was done with Laois-Offaly. It was separated into two three-seat constituencies. I know the reason is the 30,000 limit and so forth. County Laois now has a part of south Kildare with it. There are now two three-seat constituencies. We should try to have similar sized constituencies throughout the State, in so far as we can do that. It is very arbitrary that a constituency should suddenly go from five seats to three seats. There is also the situation with the Sligo-Leitrim-Cavan-and wherever else constituency. There are four counties included in that constituency. That does not sit right.

There is also the issue of how the local authority boundaries link in with Dáil constituencies. It may not always be possible to tie the two together and to base Dáil constituency boundaries on local authority ones but we should try to do so as much as possible. People elected to the new constituency covering Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan and Donegal will have to deal with four joint policing committees, four county managers, four sets of lobby groups at local authority level

and four sets of local councillors. Unless they fly around by helicopter, it will be very difficult for them to represent that constituency properly. In so far as we can, we should try to watch the county boundaries, although it will not always be possible, and local authority electoral areas.

We should try to have similar sized constituencies and have five seat or six seat constituencies. The Minister would not argue with that the next time around because it would suit his party and it would probably suit us. I would not mind about Fine Gael, it would have three seat constituencies if it had its way.

**Vice Chairman:** Do not worry about us; we will worry about ourselves.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I refer to the boundaries of the municipal areas in which this body should possibly have a role. There is one in my county that is more than 45 miles long, from Coolacree on the Offaly border to between Culahill and Johnstown in Kilkenny, which is a huge area to cover. There is one in Cork and there are some in Kerry which are 80 miles long.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Ballinskelligs to Dingle.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** That is one. The commission, or an independent body, must have a role in addressing those issues and in trying to ensure the local authority areas can be represented properly. Fewer councillors are being elected, so people should have a relatively manageable area to cover. After all, these people are doing this on a part-time basis.

The issue of Dáil boundaries and three, four, five and six seat constituencies should be put into the frame in terms of the commission. We need an independent commission which has the support of the House.

**Deputy James Bannon:** I welcome the Minister and his staff. It is imperative the Government honours its commitment to set up an electoral commission to safeguard electoral integrity and to provide an independent, well-structured and staffed office to oversee certain aspects of election functions. As the previous speaker said, Ireland's electoral register is patently incapable of being updated and maintained within the existing structure. It comes into focus at election time when we see the number of errors. In one election, there was somewhere in the region of 8,000 errors in the electoral register. That needs to be addressed to bring greater integrity to the quality of the register.

Setting up an independent electoral commission is urgent. It was promised in the past but was never delivered. There is need for a single body, similar to that in Northern Ireland which Deputy Stanley mentioned, to foster public confidence in the whole democratic process.

We all remember what happened with the e-voting machines in 2004. Approximately €54 million was squandered and 7,500 machines became obsolete. We do not want that to happen again. I hope it will not happen.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I hope there will not be any more.

**Deputy James Bannon:** The electoral commission would fill a great void created by the decentralised multi-agency approach to the register that is taking place at present. I presume the commission will be totally independent of Departments, etc., and will have its own staff independent of Government as well.

The local authorities located throughout the country have done their best to maintain the register but its care is not within their remit. The task has placed an undue burden on resources

and staff, particularly in smaller local authorities and where the rate base is very low as in counties Leitrim and Longford. Local authorities do not have the staff to compile the register. This matter should be looked at on a roll-on basis rather than having a new register every year. I hope that will be a function of the new commission.

The register has been woefully neglected. Has the Minister looked at the electoral system used in Northern Ireland? It was introduced 30 years ago and has proved successful. In that jurisdiction there is an onus on people to register and for young people to register a year before they are due to vote. There has been an uptake of between 80% and 90% in Northern Ireland. A cost may be involved. Does the Minister know how much it would cost to set up an electoral office in the Republic? I would like to know how much this whole exercise will cost.

E-voting was very contentious in this country and was introduced by the previous Government. Is there a proposal to return to e-voting? The initiative has worked successfully in Australia and other countries in the southern hemisphere. Have we looked at their systems and at how they work? I have been told that Australia is leading the way as a model of good practice for an e-voting system. Will compulsory voting be introduced in this country at some future date? It has been introduced in some parts of the world. It is important, going forward, that we foster integrity and public confidence in a new system.

I have outlined a few issues. I am sure everyone will have an opportunity to make a submission on the establishment of an electoral commission. For a long time I have felt that we needed a single body to improve the current electoral system. I hope that when the new system is introduced it will comprise a rolling register because it makes no sense to start the register from scratch every year. The reason people who have been on a register for 50 or 60 years have often found themselves omitted from voting when they arrive at a polling booth is because the current system starts from scratch each year.

Does the Minister envisage that the electoral commission will take over control of electoral expenditure from the Standards in Public Office Commission? Will the new electoral commission take over the function? There is a body in place to do such work at present. Will the electoral commission be given responsibility for such a task? Will it be given responsibility to examine electoral spending issues? Such matters are currently addressed by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government or the Standards in Public Office Commission.

**Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú:** Does the Minister agree that a meaningful reform programme relating to the electoral system and the Oireachtas should go hand in hand with the evolution of the electoral commission? It is clear that they must interact and most people agree that we do not have a reform programme currently. As a Senator, I was bewildered that the only idea, which I did not consider to be meaningful, that the Government had was a referendum to abolish one of the Houses of Parliament. That came as a surprise to many people given, at the same time, the Dáil virtually remained unchanged. The list of what are cited as reforms is minimalist and we have to go back to the drawing board again. Many areas need to be considered for radical reform.

The electoral process is the responsibility of several Departments and agencies and 31 local authorities and it is clear that it is not fit for purpose. This major issue needs to be examined. I fully agree with the Minister's comment that reform should be based on a consensus among all political parties because of the very nature of what is involved and because of how fragile the democratic process can be at times. The electoral registers that existed years ago were based on

information provided by rate collectors and they missed very few people back then. We were happy with the electoral register but nowadays the names of people who left the country years ago and so on are to be found on it and, therefore, we have a messy registration system. That plays into the results at elections and there is an urgency about this matter.

The Minister invited the committee to make recommendations. How broad will the consultative process be and how far will it go? A timetable is vital for this. There is a feeling that kicking this to touch is the way go, and this has applied to all governments, but that is wrong. We have to be serious about a definite timetable as to how this will be done. Constituencies and counties have been cannibalised. One only has to go to the local pub and speak to someone to realise how confused people have become. Deputy Stanley had to check, for instance, where Offaly starts and Tipperary ends. That is the case throughout the country. I do not question the Constituency Commission because it had exceptionally good people on it but its recommendations have not appealed to people on the ground. They build up loyalty to their counties and constituencies but when out of the blue, the commission proposes changes, the county loyalty is gone. I do not have answers to this but a root and branch examination of how these decisions come about how they fit in with the democratic process is needed. Perhaps answers are immediately available, but the man and woman in the street certainly require definite answers as to why this is happening.

It is important to look at how business is conducted, which is why I state reform and the idea of an electrical commission must go hand in hand. Nobody in the Oireachtas feels happy with the amount of material which must be examined and digested to ensure it leads to what is best for the democratic system. This may be an internal issue within the Civil Service or the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. Anybody looking at it for the first time would certainly feel it needs to be examined to see whether it is working. In my younger days I worked in a county council, and I remember experts being brought in to measure output. They monitored the work to the level of measuring how long it took to walk between a desk and a filing cabinet. The same happened with the workers on the roads; their work was measured and a bonus scheme was provided. This was done in a fundamental way at that level of administration. Here, at the pinnacle of government responsibility, it needs to be examined also. The Minister gently shook his head when I suggested there was not really any great reform taking place. We should measure this reform and outline it.

To return to consultation, the people with whom we must consult include those who have the vote. If we do not get the timetable right there will be no electoral commission and we will continue with multifaceted involvement in the electoral process from Departments, agencies and local authorities.

Nobody is fully certain that the manner in which the count system takes place is above question. It needs to be examined. We have seen cases where questions have been asked. If the issue exists now it existed 20 or 30 years ago also. I do not recommend this, but rather than pushing it to the backburner again would it be possible to take a piecemeal approach? Could the question of the register be looked at immediately? Could the accounting system and the transfer of votes be examined immediately? Could defining the constituencies be revisited without waiting? Does the Minister feel this is a five, ten or 15 year process? He will not see it in the life of the present Oireachtas, but does he envisage it definitely happening in the life of the next Oireachtas?

**Vice Chairman:** Deputy Dowds articulated some concerns about the register. He also believes that allowing those on holiday to vote should be considered as part of the reform as

nobody should be disenfranchised.

**Senator Terry Brennan:** As I do not want to be repetitive I will leave out some of the points I raised during the Seanad debate. On average, 40% of those on the electoral register, four out of ten people, do not exercise their democratic right. In fact, the figure has gone above four out of ten in recent years. This is an issue that must be addressed. I am aware of families where neither parent has ever exercised his or her vote. We should consider putting in place a mechanism, as some other countries have, for removing persons from the electoral register who do not avail of their vote on two or three occasions. It is wrong not to exercise one's right to vote. On the other hand, there are cases where people who have left home to live abroad and rear their families, in the United States, London, Glasgow and many other places, but opt to remain on the electoral register. When I questioned one such family about it, the reason I was given was that they come home on holiday for two or three weeks every year and if that holiday coincides with an election, they wish to be able to vote. That is not right.

Other speakers referred to the importance of maintaining proper voting records. When one presents at a polling station, one's name is crossed out on the register and, at the end of the day, it is possible to tot up the number of registered persons who actually voted. An electronic record should be kept of the names of those who exercise their vote. On one occasion I attended a hearing on applications to be included on the supplementary register and I happened to ask the official whether one particular applicant was a tall, curly-haired man. When this was confirmed, it became clear that the same man was on different registers in the one town and was voting at polling stations across the road from each other on the same day. Deputy Bannon referred to the situation in Northern Ireland. I overheard a conversation in a club six or seven years ago which revealed that the same individual to whom I just referred had voted 11 times at polling stations across the Border. I assure colleagues that he was not voting for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael or the Labour Party. It seems he went around all day, from Newry to Ballymena, casting his 11 votes and taking pride in doing so. The system is not right on the other side of the Border, no more than it is here. People must take responsibility in this matter, but it is also paramount that we eliminate possible abuses, whether by way of PPS numbers or some other means. That must be given serious consideration. If such abuses have gone on in the past, they will continue into the future.

Having listened to the Minister speaking in the Seanad, it is clear he is passionate about reform. I wish him well in the task and hope it will not take four years to complete the process.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I am very supportive of the establishment of an electoral commission. I take the point as to whether we should be seeking evolution or revolution. It is true that one may achieve revolution by doing things by degrees and producing a revolutionary change over time. That is possibly the way it will go in practical terms. An electoral commission will be an important part of political and institutional reform. We would all start with the electoral register because it is so much the obvious place to start. When domestic rates were in place, there was a direct relationship with voters, with calls being made to their doors on a regular basis. There was a rationale at that time for keeping the register up to date and it was known who was living in all the houses in a particular area. That relationship no longer exists and I doubt it will exist for any service in the future because so much is now done online. Positioning it with the local authorities might not necessarily lead to the greatest of results. It is the obvious place to put it, particularly in the context of where people are located. Perhaps it might be possible to analyse what happens on a daily basis or in the context of the review of the electoral register. There are different practices in different places. For example, the county in which I

live has a very high transient rate because Maynooth College is located there. This might not be the case in other places, which may have more stable populations. Different circumstances may obtain at various locations. I am of the view that a rolling register is absolutely the way to go.

People tend to miss cut-off dates. In that context, there could be a great deal more engagement in the context of allowing people to register online. I accept that there is a need to authenticate any information which is provided online but an auditing process could be put in place to facilitate that to which I refer. People now do a great deal more of their business online and I am of the view that real possibilities exist in this regard. I take the point to the effect that it is not necessarily about saving money but rather about doing things differently and achieving better outcomes.

If that which is proposed is going to represent an evolution and if it is going to be done in a sequential way, it would be useful to map out the range it should cover. There is a tendency to tick boxes and to state that something has been done when only 50% of the work has been completed and when there is a need to go significantly further. One of the absolute basic principles of any electoral commission is that it should be independent. Regardless of how it is done, putting in place a rolling register will very much depend on the mechanisms that will be available. Norway has been working on its system for the past 20 years and people there are able to do a great deal online. The collaborative approach taken in Norway has given rise to massive administrative savings. I suspect that we could work towards adopting such a model here. People in Ireland can already access Revenue's online service, which is very good. There are serious possibilities in terms of the online option.

An issue of concern is that which relates to the Standards in Public Office Commission and the fact that it does not always have the ability to carry out particular functions in the way it would like. We know, for example, that there are spending limits which apply at election time. I am aware of a number of people who have exceeded those limits - sometimes by quite a distance - at every election since they were introduced. We all exceed the limits and it is quite difficult for the powers that be to monitor what goes on at election time. There is no point in setting standards if people can bypass them without any real sanction being applied. It is necessary for audits to be carried out in order for behaviour such as that to which I refer to be detected. The people who are more likely to carry out such audits - or who have the ability to carry them out - are those who are busy during election campaigns. Perhaps audits should be performed during elections but people must have the wherewithal to carry them out in circumstances where valid complaints are made. It should not be down to, for example, an opposing candidate to make a complaint.

The limits to which I refer were put in place for a very good reason. They are generous and a great deal of money is wasted during election campaigns. As a result, there should not be a necessity for people to exceed them. If they are exceeded, then we must ask from where the money involved is coming, consider the question of influence, etc. These are the very matters with which the Minister is trying to deal. I would like some thought put into that element and how the Minister would fund it. I may well make a submission on it.

In regard to electoral funding spending, the Leaders' allowance, now the parliamentary standard allowance for Independents has been included in the remit of the Standards in Public Office Commission, an issue on which I had argued on many occasions. All that funding should be properly scrutinised and the electoral funding should be part of it. For example, 17% of the current Dáil is made up of Independents. If there were no Independents, the electoral funding pot would be the same. However, it is not reduced by 17% by virtue of the fact that the Dáil is

made up of 17% Independents. It may well be that money could be better used. When people talk about turnout at elections, part of that has to do with people seeing a relationship between voting and outcomes. There is a role for independent education, so to speak. It is fine in secondary school but when people actually get the vote it is of more value to them. I would like to see some funding made available to an independent body for the purpose of public engagement on the value of voting. I do not think I have ever come out of an election campaign where people have not asked if they have used their vote correctly. That is the kind of thing people say.

The single transferable vote is very easy to use but people tend to think it is more complicated because it is complicated to count. We all know this. Even in this there is a role for an independent body to have an ongoing programme of education in place. There are obvious issues such as the referenda and how to administer them. Sometimes there can be criticism of, say, the McKenna judgment where it is felt there is an imbalance in terms of the strength of public opinion. There may well be merit in looking at this. An independent commission would have a level of authority by virtue of the fact that it is independent. I definitely think we are all on the one page in regard to actual register about the roll programme. That is the obvious first step. It would be useful to agree on what other elements should be examined so that it is not something that is concluded and the view is that the work is done. There is much more to be done and it needs to be quite ambitious. The point I am making is that it is for the next Government to pick up where this one leaves off.

There are some very serious academics on the stakeholder paper. We probably underuse some of the academics in developing policy. Every one of those is serious in his or her own right. I would hope we would continue to look at best practice in other countries to see whether we can evolve into a political system where people will come and look at us, rather than us going to look at them. That is possible but it has to be ambitious.

**Deputy Michelle Mulherin:** I want to speak to a substantive issue as it is being discussed by the Government, that is the issue of extending the franchise outside the Republic. As Deputy Dowds said, unless we can give people who are resident here, but who go abroad to work or on holidays, the right to vote, then why are we talking about giving people that right who are outside this jurisdiction? Surely that is the first thing we should try to address, as well as the question of scrutiny. This is a big effort, yet we still have not achieved it.

People who may be away on polling day want to vote but cannot do so. Where are we going in this regard? We must be grounded in reality and if we could achieve that, maybe we could talk about the pros and cons of how and where we can extend the franchise to people who have connections with this State.

In this era, we could be accused of taking democracy for granted. Senator Brennan referred to voter apathy and low turnout. When one drills down and examines the anomalies in the electoral register, however, one can see the numbers going out to vote. While it may be different for general or local elections, the figures are still not where one would like to see them.

People talk about the confusion surrounding referendums, including the children's rights referendum, and we must listen to what they are saying. This country had been plagued by scandals affecting the care of children and many cases were cited where the law was too restrictive. It was said that we needed a referendum to change the law and firm it up to ensure that children are protected. The turnout at public meetings on that referendum was low, however, so the vote did not surprise me at all. In fact, that vote took place on a Saturday to accommodate young people. I visited as many polling stations as I could that day just to touch base, but

many presiding officers remarked on the low turnout of young people. I think therefore that something more fundamental is wrong.

Protests and civil disobedience that cross the line into criminal behaviour are a serious attack on law and order, which is the very basis of our democracy. We will not have these freedoms, including the right to walk down the street, unless we all observe the law. Whether or not we like the law, it has to be obeyed. There are democratic ways to change laws which entail a respect for differences.

We have seen the shocking situation of what happened to the Tánaiste in Jobstown. Could the people who detained her for several hours accept that she has as deeply held a conviction about the decision she was making, as they have? One does not achieve anything in a democratic fashion by intimidation. We should all take stock of our democracy, but are we taking it for granted? We should look at countries where democracy is not operating and where people do not have civil liberties. There can be chaos where a few people take control for their own betterment, and in many cases the west is supporting them. We have an awful lot going for us here, but if we lose sight of that we will be in a terrible quandary.

As regards our democratic electoral system, people may ask: "Why can't you just do this?" We are not an autocracy, but democracy is laborious and most of the time it is not glamorous. It is about conversation, whether at public meetings or with those coming into a constituency office. We listen to things with which we may not agree, but we are all citizens and it is about discussing matters.

We are examining the situation to make the electoral system more interesting to young people, but is it interesting for them? We need to look at what it means to be an Irish citizen. Citizenship ceremonies were introduced under the former Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Alan Shatter. They are a good idea because citizenship in a republic has value, rights and responsibilities. It seems, however, that we cannot talk about responsibilities in this country because we feel we have been so oppressed as a nation that it now has to be about people's rights, but there is a balance to be struck here.

We need to begin a conversation with bright, young people who have availed of significant educational opportunities and achieved many of the freedoms our forefathers sought for the nation. However, many of the citizenship programmes I have seen in schools seem to be only for those who choose to do them. I believe the Minister's job, whether we have an electoral commission or not and despite the pros or cons for it, is to ensure a more systematic approach to this issue. People must be helped to understand the power of a vote. They must understand their power, that one man or one woman equates to one vote, no matter who or what the person is. However, people feel so disenfranchised that they believe their vote is not worth anything. It is worth exactly the same as my vote or the President's vote. We need to bring that civic pride in the country back to the people. We have a democracy which is not perfect, but we strive towards excellence. We need to have these conversations, which go to the heart as opposed to the appearance of democracy and how we do things. Everybody needs to vote, no matter what. This does not mean they know the perfect vote to make or the perfect person to vote for, but that they try their best, just as politicians try their best.

We talk about electoral reform, democratic revolution and so on, but sometimes people forget that the people who have been elected pretty much represent the people who elected them and that there are all sorts of politicians and all sorts of people. Therefore, to suggest there can be a general consensus on how politicians in our democracy should operate is not entirely

honest. It has been very attractive in the period we have experienced in recent times, when we have been on an unprecedented economic roller coaster and have seen a flux in terms of politics, to think that we can decide instantly that we can bang on the table and have things the way we want them. That seems to be what many protests have been about. I fully accept people's right to protest, but we need to take stock of what is being sacrificed.

Whatever way we approach these issues, we need to get to the heart of the participation of citizens in the democratic process.

**Vice Chairman:** Our next speaker is Deputy Helen McEntee. I understand today is her first day to participate as a member of this committee and I wish her well and hope she has not been scared off by now. I wish her every success as a member of the committee.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I thank the Vice Chairman and the Minister. Much of what I intended to say has already been said and will be dealt with by the commission. In the context of boundaries, I come from a county where while one of my local councillors is a member of Meath County Council, when it comes to a general election, her constituents vote in the Louth area. I do not agree with this division. If someone is part of a particular county council, they should be part of the same area for a general election. This is an issue any commission should examine.

The register of electors is another issue. I often wonder why people are not automatically added to the register when they turn 18. Getting young people to register is a matter of getting them interacting with what is going on around them. I spend much of my time in secondary schools discussing with transition year and fifth and sixth year students the importance of voting. I try to help them understand the importance of voting and encourage interest in what happens here and how what we do relates to what they do and makes a difference. Education is a key issue and an electoral commission should focus on it.

The membership and independence of the commission is important. The Department and the Minister must take on responsibility for oversight of the commission, but the commission must maintain independence. I have read that in three out of four countries which have appointed members to a commission, they were not appointed by politicians. Who appoints them in such a case? Is the appointment made by a judge? How should we go about the process of appointment and what approach is the Minister leaning towards? What timeframe does the Minister envisage for the establishment of a commission? I know he has said he wants to push this forward as quickly as possible, but does he think it will take four years or longer or will it take a shorter time? I would welcome a commission, but it is important all the different factions come together under it.

There is also a question about the cost of establishing a commission. Many different Departments, at local and national levels, play their part and a lot of the cost has been absorbed which we do not know about. Therefore, it is important we carry out a proper cost analysis of the initiative. I look forward to participating in the continuing discussion of this matter.

**Vice Chairman:** Last but by no means least is Senator Keane. A good miner is always last.

**Senator Cáit Keane:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoir, tá sé an-cabhrach. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire go dtí an coiste. I said a lot about this matter on the last day we debated it in the Seanad.

**Vice Chairman:** I ask the Senator not to repeat it all.

**Senator Cáit Keane:** I will not do so. I am sure the Minister took notes of what everybody said on that occasion when he asked us to do a job. I presume he came here today to hear what we have come up with.

In 2008 this Oireachtas committee published a report entitled *The Future of the Electoral Register in Ireland and Related Matters*. Therefore, we do not have to reinvent the wheel and the findings of the report should be taken into consideration in the first instance. However, people's views change over time so public consultation would be good. As the Government's report indicated, Ireland is behind the curve because two thirds of jurisdictions worldwide have such a system.

Of everything that has been mentioned today, boundaries are a huge issue. If one looks at the boundary situation in this country one will discover that the Garda use different boundaries from health boards and health boards use different boundaries from local authorities. As Deputy McEntee has said, there are different electoral boundaries for Dáil elections, etc. I must state that it is difficult to get Dáil and local authority boundaries right in terms of population but boundaries should be synchronised more, particularly to aid the work of public bodies.

Voter registration should be included in the electoral commission. In terms of election spending and donations, we have seen recent newspapers reports on funding from the USA, for example, going into the North of Ireland and then making its way into the Republic. Therefore, we must outline rules and procedures that stipulate whether such funding can take place. If such funding is being availed of by one organisation then there should be rules and regulations to stipulate how such funding is raised and we must ensure there is transparency all the way through the process.

Senator Brennan mentioned the old slogan of "vote early and vote often" but it is obvious that some people are voting more than once. The recent recommendations made by the Geary Institute recommended that PPS numbers be used which is the situation that prevails in the UK. I do not see anything wrong with such a provision. There was an outcry when we tried to introduce the use of PPS numbers for water services and people rejected the suggestion. Other countries use PPS numbers and I do not know why the idea is so opposed in Ireland.

At present the management of the electoral system is spread between the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 31 local authorities, a clutch of agencies, including the Standards in Public Office Commission, the registrar of parties, the constituency commissions, the referendum commission and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. I would like to see an evaluation of the cost involved to carry out this work by all these bodies. We would save money if we put it in one little hoop. Making a saving is not the prime aim and objective, we must get it right. When the Government looks at funding I suggest every aspect is taken into consideration and we marry these.

The Geary Institute also recommended that public bodies share data information. I agree that should happen and suggest it be written into statute law somewhere. As far as I know, voting by post is allowed in the UK. The residents of the UK can vote before they go on holidays. If they can do it then why can we not do so here? One could not have a system that did not use PPS numbers because it would be wide open to fraud.

I will not comment on political engagement because it has been spoken about enough. On electronic voting, I will not talk about going into a booth to press a button because everybody loves to use a peann luaidhe to vote but I must ask the following question. If Irish people can

bank online then why do we not trust online voting? Members of the Oireachtas are bad at trusting cloud computing and we really do not avail of the option. Online voting is something that could be considered.

When we discussed the electoral commission in the Seanad I mentioned surplus votes. I do not know whether anybody has mentioned the subject here today. I would like the Boundary Commission to ban posters. I never erected posters for my first election but I never had the courage to leave them down after that occasion. We have moved on since then and now live in an electronic age. A rule should be introduced to ban posters because they litter the place, in addition to which CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have increased due to all of the corry board signs used.

**Deputy James Bannon:** The election will not be this year so there should no problem.

**Vice Chairman:** One speaker at a time, please. I urge Members to speak through the Chair.

**Senator Cáit Keane:** We will have an election at the end of this year. Political parties should also be defined by the commission because a party is a group of people joined by common policies. Is an alliance of like-minded people who agree a common policy on nine issues but not on a tenth a political party or is it a group of Independents working on every issue bar one? As political parties have changed, I would like to see a definition of what “independent” and “alliance” mean. As Deputy Catherine Murphy said, the issues of funding and so on must be examined.

**Vice Chairman:** Notwithstanding the recurring themes, a number of proposals were made. It is intriguing that while the “vote early and vote often” mantra was mentioned, nobody said, “Dead people do not talk but they do vote.”

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** There was a great overlap. There are no right or wrong answers to some of the questions asked. It is matter of coming to a consensus on many of the issues raised, drilling down to gather as much information as possible and making decisions on that basis. There is no such thing as best practice; there is just practice and there are circumstances. One can take the Kilmeaden cheese approach in that one can take the best and get rid of the rest. That is my attitude. With regard to elections, many things happen in different jurisdictions which could not and should not be replicated here. We need to adopt elements of what is done elsewhere, but the entire suite could not be replicated here because circumstances are different.

We have had a lengthy discussion about voter registration and the maintenance of the electoral register. The local authorities do it at one level, while others do it at another. Reference was made to door to door checking and different practices, but what would be acceptable? The Australian Electoral Commission reports that 91.4% of eligible voters are registered and that its target is 95%. Will we ever exceed a figure of 90% or 95%? In England the registration rate is 91.8%, while in Northern Ireland where there was an improvement following the introduction of a new system, the rate has regressed substantially to 88%. The registration rate for the Scottish referendum was one of the highest ever, at 97.8%. We need to dig into a phenomenal number of issues in this regard to ascertain what is the best thing to do.

We have to come to a consensus on what we are trying to achieve, which is to define the functions of an electoral commission. If all of the questions set out in the document are boiled down, we must establish what the functions should be. I would like this to be as ambitious as possible and concur with the member who said what it should be. I would also like it to incorporate as much as possible and that is my starting point. I would like it to incorporate every-

thing we have discussed, but I am not sure it can because there are so many layers to each issue.

We need advice from the committee on how to do this. We will set out the functions and what we want. If we are ambitious, should we do this in two or three stages or should we take out the electoral register and address it as a separate project? That might be the right way to proceed because it is a technical and specific issue.

The independence of the commission, how its members are selected and its relationship with the Government or the Minister of the day must be defined. These issues need to be addressed in the 11 questions posed. The independence of the body is paramount and it must be transparent. Those included in it must have experience and we need to examine the appointments process.

We will probably have to go down the route of using PPS numbers, despite the problems in doing this because we cannot continue in the way we are going. There are issues with PPS numbers, given the number issued compared to the number of people living here, but we need a system. In my previous life I built databases and a unique identification code is required to tag items or people in this scenario. Using PPS numbers seems to be the obvious solution. We have all heard stories about multiple voting. One's name can be on the register 400 times, 11 times or twice, but this does not mean that one must vote 400 times, 11 times or twice. Anyone who does so is breaking one of the most fundamental laws of the State.

Constituency boundaries are a bugbear of mine. We may have to consider constitutional change in tandem with this as we cannot go on much longer with how constituency boundaries are managed. I am open to debate on this issue. The draw towards conurbation in Dublin and the population pull means the limitations on the population per seat figure cannot continue. It will cause additional issues in breaking up counties. I agree with the many Deputies and Senators who have stated people who are elected must deal with multiple local authorities, HSE zones and administrative districts for various services, which is difficult. What is also very difficult is that the people of Coolbawn, from where my grandmother comes, now vote in County Offaly, even though they do not want to do so. People in other areas the Vice Chairman knows such as Terryglass and Borrisokane also vote in County Offaly. I canvassed in Shinrone during the last election and the people there did not want to vote in County Tipperary. We had a debate about the position in Moneygall because it is half and half.

Scale issues arise with regard to local electoral areas. A local electoral area in south Kerry extends from Ballinskelligs to Dingle. It is enormous. The continuous breaking of county boundaries for Dáil constituencies will cause more and more problems because of how the administration of local authority areas has been dealt with. We will have to examine how we should deal with this issue. Do we need a larger number of seats in constituencies? We possibly do in some cases, if we do not make other changes. Like the Vice Chairman, I am from County Tipperary where the local authorities have been merged and other bodies have also been amalgamated. Then part of the county was included in a constituency in County Offaly. It is not consistent.

I agree with e-voting and the use of technology but in a completely different way from how it was done previously. I am open to it on the basis of maintaining the democratic process and explaining how votes are transferred. None of us wants to get away from the thrill we get at the count centre. We will have to embrace technology, but how we do so is the issue.

The concept of compulsory voting was tried in Australia and thrown out. Given the psyche

of the Irish people, forcing them to do something in any way, shape or form would not be a very good idea. If we try to force people to vote, they will not do so. I think Deputy Catherine Murphy referred to the electoral spend. Those points have been well made.

The committee should consult far and wide. There are many good people who have much knowledge of this space. Is it evolution versus revolution? It is revolution through evolution. I do not think we can do all of this in one go. We will have to do it in stages but it is revolutionary and it should not take a long time. I will return to the time issue in a minute.

We have the postal vote. Deputy Mulherin made a very good point in that we propose to give votes to people outside the jurisdiction when people living in it, who are temporarily out of the country, may not be able to vote.

I refer to voter knowledge and education which is a bugbear of mine. Everyone of us will have had the following experience when canvassing in a referendum. People will say they do not understand the issue and know nothing about it but there will be two or three pieces of literature and advertisements from the Referendum Commission on the different points in the referendum. There is something more fundamental there, namely, the value of one's vote.

There has been quite an amount of movement in terms of education over the past number of decades but people are still disengaging. It is not that they are not listening to the radio, watching television or getting literature through their letter boxes; it is that they are choosing to disengage. That is the real issue we must address.

The last issue raised was limits on postering. There are limits on postering and I favour limiting them even more. We need to be very careful in regard to the different types of postering used. Use of electronic road signage must be banned because it has the potential to cause hazards. We need to take a fresh look that, which I will do.

We talked a bit about timelines. There are myriad issues - we could talk about this topic for a long time - in regard to the 11 questions and the different sections. In regard to timelines, I would like to be able to bring in the heads of the Bill by the end of the summer, which would mean that within three to four months, the committee's recommendations would be back to me. My preference would be three months. There is a huge amount of work in this and much consultation is required. We have presented a huge document which needs to be digested. All the issues raised here are in that document. I would be surprised if anything raised here was not in it, except the issue of postering.

It is my ambition to have this legislation drafted before I leave office with a view to the next administration implementing it. On that basis, I would like the committee to come back to me within three to four months when we can begin work on the heads of the Bill and look at drafting the legislation by late this year or early next year at the latest. That is my commitment to the committee.

**Vice Chairman:** That concludes our consideration of this topic. I thank the Minister and his officials.

The joint committee went into private session at 3.54 p.m. and adjourned at 4.12 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 24 March 2015.