

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOMHSHAOL, CULTÚR AGUS GAELTACHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND THE GAELTACHT

Dé Máirt, 7 Iúil 2015

Tuesday, 7 July 2015

The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Noel Coonan,	Senator Cáit Keane,
Deputy Robert Dowds,	Senator Denis Landy,
Deputy Helen McEntee,	Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú.
Deputy Tony McLoughlin,	
Deputy Brian Stanley,	

In attendance: Deputy Michael McNamara and Senator Sean D. Barrett.

DEPUTY MICHAEL MCCARTHY IN THE CHAIR.

Electoral Commission in Ireland: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile telephones as they interfere with the technology. We have received apologies from Deputy Catherine Murphy and Senator Fiach Mac Conghail. This meeting has been convened for the purpose of the consideration by the committee of matters pertaining to the consultation paper on the establishment of an electoral commission in Ireland. The committee will now discuss this matter. Is that agreed? Agreed.

It is proposed that this part of our meeting will conclude at 5.30 p.m. unless previously concluded. At the conclusion of public business, we will go into private session to discuss some EU matters. We will then go back into public session to formally decide the EU matters. We will then go back into private session for the remainder of private business. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I apologise to the witnesses for our late start. We had two votes which delayed us. I thank the witnesses for their patience and understanding. I welcome Ms Anne O'Donnell, head of citizen participation at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Mr. Ian Power, president of the National Youth Council of Ireland, Mr. James Doorley, deputy director of the National Youth Council of Ireland, Mr. Brian Killoran, chief executive officer of the Immigrant Council of Ireland, and Mr. Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne, president of Trinity College Dublin students union.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that 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 they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a 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 they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. 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 outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

It is proposed that all opening statements and any other documents the witnesses and others have submitted to the committee may be published on the committee website after the meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

This is the fifth of six planned meetings that the committee is holding on the question of an electoral commission for Ireland. We heard from the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, followed by academics, officeholders, political scientists, local and national agencies and various experts. Today's meeting will deal specifically with the concerns of young people, immigrants and students as the joint committee continues its examination of the issues surrounding the establishment of an independent electoral commission. We look forward to engaging with the witnesses and assure them that their deliberations will assist us in producing a report which will go to the Department and to the Minister.

I suggest that witnesses limit their contributions to five or six minutes. If they wish to submit further materials to the committee they are welcome to do so and we can circulate them.

I call Ms O'Donnell to make her opening statement.

Ms Anne O'Donnell: I thank the committee for inviting me here today. As other witnesses will speak about older young people, I will confine my comments to children and young people under the age of 18 and the importance of their capacity to engage in decision-making on issues that affect their lives.

I hope committee members are aware that two weeks ago, we launched the national strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making. We are the first country in Europe and, very likely, the first in the world to have developed such a strategy. It is very heavily influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the EU convention and other conventions. The purpose of the strategy is to ensure children have an opportunity in their individual and collective lives to have a say in everything that affects them. No country knows better than ours what happened in bygone and not-so-bygone days when children were not listened to. All the major abuse scandals in Ireland have one thing in common, which is that no one listened to children. It is a very important step that the Government recognises the need to leave that past behind and to listen to and act on the voices of children and young people.

Empowering children is as important as protecting them. That is one of the most important aspects of Article 12 of the UN convention, which is about the rights of the child. Children have a right to be heard, to be listened to, and to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. There is virtually nothing in Irish society that does not affect the lives of children. I challenge the committee members to think of any policy or decision that would not do so in some way. In the Department's citizen participation unit, we oversee structures like Comhairle na nÓg, local child and youth councils and Dáil na nÓg. We do vast numbers of consultations with children and young people and engage in all forms of dialogue. We have a support team that ensures we spread this work as far as we can.

I wish to highlight a number of issues of relevance to children's voices and their eventual participation in civic engagement and in voting. In page 7 of the document I have given to members, they will see evidence from research all over the world which suggests that enabling children to have a voice in decision-making supports their active citizenship from an early age. That is critical to our discussion today. It makes absolutely no sense to think that a young person is going to wake up on his or her 18th birthday and suddenly feel like civically engaging. If young people have not been engaged before that age and do not feel that having a voice in some way makes them an active citizen with some kind of influence in their everyday lives, why would they want to bother engaging with society? There is no light bulb moment at 18. There is ample evidence on this matter, with which Mr. Doorley will be very familiar, particularly from Maurice Devlin, who has stated, "citizenship practice is learned through the lived experience of belonging and participating, of listening and speaking, of being valued and included". That is backed up by any amount of research on the matter.

In preparing for the national strategy, the Department commissioned a number of pieces of research, one of which measured the impact of participation and decision-making among children and young people who had taken part in projects such as Comhairle na nÓg and different consultations on mental health and on topical issues such as alcohol. The findings indicate that even though young people often feel disconnected from political debate, they are interested in playing a part in decision-making and in society. Just because they are not interested in voting does not mean they are not interested in taking part in decision-making. The two things are not necessarily the same. It is important for a commission such as this one to take that into account. If more young people are to be encouraged to vote, people need to listen to them and hear why

they are not voting.

Another important issue is the self-realisation of children and young people. In order that children and young people feel engaged and part of society when they are young, we need to stop seeing them as the adults of tomorrow and start seeing them as the citizens of today. We need to stop focusing on what they will be like when they are adults and starting looking at what their lives are like and how they can participate today. Children have a huge amount to contribute and need to feel that what they contribute today is valued. There are many good examples of that.

Research from Martin Geoghegan in UCC interestingly showed that although many of the current participants in Comhairle na nÓg said they did not have much interest in politics or voting, 86% of past participants - young people now aged about 20 or 21 - rated being involved in decision-making when they were younger as having a positive impact on their understanding of the political system, while 81% said they felt their experience would have a positive impact on them voting. That is very good news for building a stronger civic society. These findings concur with research conducted in the UK, where there was a very low participation rate among young voters. The UK research indicated that involving young people in decision-making makes them much more likely to feel they might eventually vote.

Another issue that arises a lot in our consultations with young people is the fact that they feel stereotyped by the adult world. The adult world frequently comments that young people are disengaged and have no interest in being engaged. The evidence is not there to back that up, however. Young people themselves are interested in engaging. If one looks at social media, they are actively engaging all the time in campaigns and expressing their views. The recent referendum is a strong example whereby young people, both under 18 and over, were very engaged in campaigning. The vote itself proved how, when young people get involved, they do make a difference to the eventual outcome.

In a consultation we conducted for a youth structure dialogue, another key theme was that young people commented on the fact that they feel stereotyped by adults. They also said that they do not feel they are listened to by Deputies and councillors. They do not feel that politicians are interested in listening to their views. It is important, therefore, for the political system to recognise that. Politicians are the spokespeople for the political system. Young people are telling us they need to feel they are listened to by politicians. That will help them to feel they are valued and that it is worth their while taking part in decision making.

Our experience of working actively with young people and children on a regular basis is that they are interested in topics and issues of social concern. They are particularly interested in a fairer society, so I would urge the political system and the commission to take heed of that. They should try to find ways of linking into what it is that makes children and young people engage in their own worlds as a way of making them more interested in engaging in civic society when they reach voting age.

Mr. Ian Power: On behalf of the National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, I want to thank the committee for the invitation to discuss the establishment of an electoral commission. We have addressed a number of issues in our submission but given the time constraints I will focus primarily on our priority areas, namely, the role of an electoral commission in managing voter registration and promoting turnout, especially among young people.

The NYCI has and will continue to promote active citizenship among young people and to

empower our peers to participate in our democracy. Many of our member organisations have, over time, consistently organised campaigns to encourage and support young people to have their voices heard and to turn out in elections and referendums.

We particularly welcome the fact voter turnout among people aged 18-25 years has increased significantly since 2002. In 2002, turnout among this cohort was around 50%, while in 2011 it was 62%. Given the obstacles that young people face in registering and in travelling home from places of learning to vote, it is remarkable that this cohort's participation rate is only 8% below the national average for all age groups. When one considers that, it is clear that young people are engaging in politics, although that is sometimes lost sight of in discussing young people.

Similarly, we warmly welcome the participation of young people in the recent marriage equality referendum. One of the many positive aspects to emerge from that was the engagement of young people not only in the discussions and campaigns beforehand, but also on polling day. Given the number of young people registering on the supplementary register and voting on the day, it is certainly the case that young people do want to take part. We would particularly like to pay tribute to Laura Harmon, the former president of USI for her efforts, and that of USI, for getting out that vote during the campaign.

The NYCI supports the establishment of an electoral commission. As outlined in our submission, we believe many aspects of the electoral system currently function well. Most importantly, they have the confidence and trust of the people. However, we are concerned about the current voter registration system. We are of the view that it is not fit for purpose, as it is under-resourced, inconsistent and inaccurate. Reforming the process will be an urgent priority for the new body. It was designed at a time when the vast majority of the population were born, raised and lived all their lives in the one area. That does not speak to the current population of young people, who are highly mobile.

Our analysis suggests that the means by which the register is currently compiled is leading to the exclusion of greater numbers of young people. In autumn 2014, we commissioned Red C to conduct a poll of young people relating to electoral matters, and particularly voter registration. The poll found that 30% of young people aged 18-25 years were not registered at that time, which is more than double the 14% rate recorded by a similar poll commissioned by the NYCI in 1999. From our perspective, democracy is diminished and undermined when so many young citizens are excluded.

As referenced in a report by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service, entitled Electoral Commission: Overview of the Policy Rationale, evidence from the US suggests that eliminating registration barriers can raise voter participation rates by between 7% and 10%. It also suggests that barriers to young people moving around decreases their participation rate by 17%. It is therefore a major issue for young people. The current annual cycle whereby the revised register is revised and closed annually, requires those seeking to be added to the register during this period to go through a cumbersome process of applying to the supplementary register.

The establishment of an electoral commission would also facilitate the development of a centralised system for online voter registration. While it is currently possible to check if one is registered online, many young people cannot understand why it is not possible to register online. This would not only assist those seeking to register for the first time but would also allow those voters who wish to change the address to which their vote is registered. An online process would reduce the administrative burden on the electoral commission and local authorities.

The establishment of an electoral commission will not solve all these problems unless it is properly resourced. We note from the Department's consultation document that just over €4.84 million was allocated to local authorities to maintain the electoral register in 2014. We contacted the Electoral Commission in New Zealand to find out how much it invests in its voter registration system as New Zealand has a similar number of electors at 3.1 million, compared to our figure of 3.3 million. Their annual spend on the electoral register is NZ\$20.5 million or the equivalent of €12.5 million, which is two and a half times what we spend on maintaining our electoral register. If we want an accurate, complete and user-friendly voter registration system we need to invest in it by employing innovative strategies to maintain it.

We also believe an electoral commission has the potential to play a leading role in research on voter registration and mobilisation. Based on our experience to date, we are of the view that an electoral commission should be empowered to fund campaigns by non-governmental and non-partisan bodies, which are solely concerned with promoting voter participation.

While any reform of the electoral system should, as we outlined in our submission, be progressed in a careful and considered fashion, we ultimately need action. An electoral commission was first promised in 2007 and, as stated by the Government, will not be in place for the upcoming general election. We would like to see a commitment that an electoral commission will be established by 2017 and that such a body is given the powers, resources and time to oversee the next local and European elections in 2019.

I again thank the joint committee for the invitation to attend this meeting. We look forward to having a discussion with the committee members.

Mr. Brian Killoran: I thank the Cathaoirleach and other members of the joint committee for the opportunity to speak on the important issue of an electoral commission in Ireland. I am the chief executive of the Immigrant Council of Ireland, which is an NGO and law centre that has worked in the area of immigration and integration for a number of years.

In all our work over the years, and particularly in our integration work, we have always sought to link people from a migrant background in Ireland to the political process and we see voting and promoting their enfranchisement as a crucial and necessary step to ensure the continuation of a healthy democracy here. We must be mindful that the Ireland of 2015 has changed significantly to include a wide and diverse array of new communities, many of whom can vote in local and European elections. Many of them are now citizens of the State and will be able to vote in general elections and referendums for the first time.

People from migrant backgrounds are often viewed as not being listened to in the political process. I am struck by the crossover between how young people and migrants are sometimes regarded as not being interested in the political process. We find the opposite to be true. Migrants themselves comprise a diverse group and have diverse issues and interests, but our interest is in political enfranchisement which is an essential part of what should be done by an electoral commission when it is established.

I will focus my comments on the migrant community today. Starting in a general sense, we in the Immigrant Council of Ireland support the establishment of an electoral commission. The Immigrant Council of Ireland supports the establishment of an electoral commission and believes it will play an important co-ordinating role in future voting and electoral processes. A number of advantages exist to the establishment of such a body, most prominent among them increased transparency and efficiency. However, in looking at determining how the functions

of the commission will work and to draw upon the elements we believe are of particular relevance to people from a migrant background, we feel that the co-ordinating, compiling and maintaining of the electoral register will provide welcome oversight and reform to the process, not just in administrative terms but also in promoting the registration process to migrant communities. The promotion of education and awareness functions is a key and needed role in the functions of the commission. We realise that there will be cost implications but the long-term implications of the failure to inform and enfranchise migrant communities as to their voting rights will have a greater cost, in societal as well as financial terms.

The commission needs to play a role in the oversight of polling stations and in training and guidelines for local staff involved in administering voting at stations. This is of particular relevance to migrant voters as, at every election or voting opportunity, small numbers of isolated incidents arise where people of a migrant background are subject to inappropriate comments at polling stations and insinuations as to their ability to vote and whether they have citizenship. These comments are sometimes based on skin colour and, while they are isolated incidents, they show the need for clearer training and guidelines at polling stations.

The commission should also play an important role, either in its own capacity or in partnership with bodies such as the ESRI, the CSO, NGOs working in the area or academic institutions, in researching trends in voter registration and voting generally. This should include information relating to migrants as there is a dearth of information and data in that area. It exists in other areas and is crucial information to have.

Other countries and electoral commissions have taken on similar tasks. In Australia, the commission is explicitly responsible for promoting public awareness and for conducting education and information sessions. It participates in community and multicultural events and even goes so far as to provide language support and classes. Between 2009 and 2011, of 152 community events 98 were targeted towards migrant communities, which shows a strong reach out to migrant communities. The additional efforts in Australia have resulted in a huge increase in migrant voter registrations, numbering into the hundreds of thousands. In the UK the electoral commission regularly monitors trends in voter registration and carries out surveys and research within the UK's black and ethnic minority communities, something we also believe is crucial.

A comprehensive plan and central management function is needed, not just for voting processes for migrant communities but overall. The commission must take on this role not only in an administrative or oversight capacity but in education, training, promotion and research. Ample opportunity exists in such aspects as the positive spectacle of citizenship ceremonies, which at the moment include information about voter registration but have the potential to go much further. In our experience, information is one thing but reaching out to communities to explain things to them face to face, offering translation services and assisting people in filling out forms are the crucial extra step to get people to register and cross the line into political participation. We will provide any further assistance we can.

Mr. Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne: Until last week I was president of Trinity College Dublin students union and, over the course of the last year, I acquired more experience of the voter registration process in Ireland than I ever thought I would. I echo the recommendations of previous speakers to set up an electoral commission and make a significant improvement in the way we register people to vote in this country. I will speed through my paper, which I wrote last week and which sets out most of what I think on the matter. I am speaking in a personal capacity as someone who is interested in the democratic process but also as a young person and student.

This year was an exceptionally positive year for students and young people and for many it was the first time they had engaged in the democratic process. I have read a number of articles about how to transfer this energy and I fear that may not happen unless we capitalise on it and not let it dissipate. I see two reasons why this level of civic engagement might not necessarily transfer into the future and to future elections. First, young people are very mobile. The USI has registered 27,000 people to vote this year but most of those 27,000 will have moved house before the next election as a lot of students move house every single year. Second, the marriage equality referendum was a binary civil rights issue which easily resonated with people whereas the same, unfortunately, cannot be said of general elections. We need to spur ourselves on in this area.

I am interested in voter registration although if an electoral commission were to be set up it would have many other responsibilities. I will talk through seven problems which I believe exist with voter registration. The first is that the system is entirely decentralised and there are gaping differences between the system on paper and the system on the ground. In theory a decentralised, devolved system has advantages in giving people with local expertise the responsibility to pick the polling stations and go door to door but in reality it does not happen. In theory, a decentralised system prevents double voting and stops someone from casting a vote in Dublin then getting a bus home to Bray, where I live, and casting another but unless a council happens to telephone Wicklow County Council to ask if a Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne is on its register there is no way to prevent double voting. In this respect the decentralised nature of the system seriously encourages rather than averts manipulation.

The second problem is that the available information is confusing and contradictory on many different resources and it deters non-traditional voters, by which I mean the people represented on this committee today. I telephoned a person on a county council and was left with the impression that a poorly literate person, a homeless person, somebody too busy with financial or personal pressures or just not interested in reading the dense prose that one currently has to traverse to go through the guidelines would be excluded from the process. Ideally, information available on how to register would have the user in mind. Just before this session I went halfway through the process of registering to vote in the UK using my telephone. I was asked what I would like to do, whether I wanted to register to vote or to read about something, etc. The information available is very inward facing.

The third problem is that the primary RFA form, which people use to register, pertains to households and not individuals. This is a serious problem. As the previous speaker said, the current system was designed when the vast majority of people in this country lived in the same place for their whole lives and there was an assumed family structure. This does not apply to students. Last October, at the start of the year, we did some door-to-door registration at Trinity Hall in Dartry in Rathmines. Some 42 people lived in one address, namely, Cunningham House in Trinity Hall, Dartry. There are six spaces on the RFA form and one person asked me how they would all fit on the form. The answer was they would not. Thinking in terms of households instead of individuals does not work and does not reflect the change that has happened in recent decades.

Bizarre problems can arise with the RFA form. Let us say John and Mary live in the same house. John is going to vote "Yes" and Mary is going to vote "No". John could print off an RFA form, give his address as John Murphy, 1 Main Street and send it off. Mary could then print off the same form and write "Mary Murphy, 1 Main Street", omitting John's name. If the current system is applied strictly the council will receive that form in the post and conclude that

John has moved out and Mary has moved in. In theory, then, somebody who knows they are going to vote a different way from somebody who lives with them could manipulate the system in that way.

The fourth problem is that *www.checktheregister.ie* does not work. If a person is cursed with a fada, a hyphen or a double-barrelled name, all of which I am cursed with, it does not work and unless one inputs one's details precisely as the person in the county council inputted them, one will not come up on the register. This year people came to me every day, vaguely remembering that we had registered them, to check if they were on the register and I advised them not to use *www.checktheregister.ie* because more often than not it is misleading. The only way to get a definitive answer is to go to one's local library or ring the franchise section of the council. The overall problem with the website, apart from the local annoyances, is that it is nobody's express responsibility to maintain a decent online modality.

The next problem is that there is no clarity regarding the dates of referendums. All the student registration efforts this year were predicated on two assumptions, namely, that the two referendums would happen on a weekday and that they would happen before the end of the academic year. One of those assumptions was correct as it happened on a Friday. Unfortunately, by 22 May this year the vast majority of students had already gone home to Donegal or wherever so, having been registered to vote in Dublin, they had to change their details, which is a cumbersome process, or get a bus down to Dublin. Despite the high turnout, many people did not do this. Somebody suggested a constitution day, a specific date on which referendums would happen. The fact there is no clarity regarding the dates of referendums is a problem that often goes unnoticed.

The second last problem is that the postal vote system in Ireland is obsolete. The process is so cumbersome that I would love to have the figures for how many successful postal votes were processed this year in Ireland. Seven students managed to get almost all the way through the process because we helped them but, as far as I am aware, not one Trinity College student actually managed to register successfully for a postal vote. The home to vote trend on Twitter, with the images of people flying home from Australia, China and other places to vote, was inspiring but surely it was also totally unnecessary and inefficient and the fact that there is no outlet for citizens abroad to vote is bizarre, particularly in the context of the emigration of the past decade.

The final and overarching problem with the current voter registration system is that it is no one body's express responsibility. On several occasions when I asked questions about how to register someone, and what the right form was, it was asserted to me that registering people to vote is not the students union's responsibility. I would ask whose responsibility it is. In Scotland, for the referendum, there was a turnout of 85% and there was 98% voter registration. If every single Irish citizen who is not registered simultaneously became civically engaged tomorrow and sent off a registration form, the current system does not have the capacity to handle it. It is a serious problem and we do not invest as much as we should in these things.

I have not included any reference to votes at 16 years of age or the difficulties in finding out one's polling station within a constituency, but I have broadly outlined the problems. I thank members again.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the panel for sharing their views with us on this important matter. I brought forward a Bill in the Dáil to reduce the voting age to 16 because Sinn Féin believes young people should be included. We looked very carefully at what happened in Scot-

land recently, which has not been extended to general elections in Britain but it is hoped it will be.

Can Ms O'Donnell speak about how the Department intends to engage young people? She made a very good point when she said one does not wake up on one's 18th birthday and decide to engage civically. At any rate I do not remember waking up in that way on my 18th birthday. One of the difficulties is that at second level there is a superficial attempt to engage young people with civil and political education, but my own children and others in second level education have told me how people from other political parties came into school to talk to them about engaging in the political process and about politics generally, yet I have never been asked nor have many of my colleagues, despite the fact I have been a public representative for 16 years. I am not saying we should be any different from the others but we are not actually asked and that is the difference. I find it curious and wonder if the panel has any views on that. It seems that parties of the centre or centre right are asked in, but it would encourage young people to engage if they heard different views such as those of ourselves, a left of centre party. Does the panel think that would help? Should schools invite a broader range of political opinion to address young people? When I inquired about that I did not get a straight answer. I heard on the grapevine that it depended on the political allegiance of the principal or the class teacher. To get young people to think about politics, it has to happen before they are 16 and there has to be a discussion about the relevance of politics and how politics affect young people's lives. The starting point is local government.

Mr. Power spoke about the number of young people who registered in the recent referendum, which was brilliant. The level of engagement and the turnout were fantastic, regardless of whichever way they voted. What can be done to sustain that? He mentioned some of the problems, such as the fact the referendum was on one issue and that people will very soon vote on the 158 people to attend the Dáil and deal with a range of issues which are equally important. They will make decisions on behalf of the electorate and it is a bit more convoluted than the referendum. The referendum was direct democracy and a question of whether one voted for or against gay marriage, whereas in a general election, the voters elect someone to make decisions on their behalf or to represent their views. How might we carry that over into the general election and, indeed, future city and county council elections?

I read Mr. Ian Power's interesting paper earlier which said that New Zealand spent two and half or three times more on an electoral commission than we spend here on the electoral process. How should it be spent? There are probably a range of things, but does one specific aspect stand out which requires expenditure?

The vexed question of household registration was dealt with at length by Mr. McGlacken-Byrne. I came across a house where there were seven people registered but only two people were living there. There are many stories like that around the country. It is not confined to any one area; it happens in a number of places. We should all have an interest in trying to stamp that out, but what system should we replace it with? We have discussed this matter many times before in the Chamber and outside it with the previous Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Commissioner Phil Hogan. The PPS number was suggested by our party. The system in the North involves a rolling registration process, which does not close like it does here. Would that suffice in place of the current system without going to individual registration?

One of the problems highlighted to me is that some 6.5 million PPS numbers have been issued. That can be explained by people in the graveyard, those returning to Poland, or Irish

people in New Zealand, Canada, Australia or elsewhere.

There have been recommendations concerning citizens in the Six Counties being allowed to vote in presidential or Seanad elections. There have been some suggestions of having a separate panel of people from the North, whereby people in the North could have some voice. We have had such Senators in the past, including Séamus Mallon and Gordon Wilson. There were various people from the North who had useful and important things to say. What are the panel's views on that question concerning that section of our citizenry, given the fact that constitutionally, they are Irish citizens?

The Constitutional Convention made recommendations about Northern voters being able to vote for Uachtaráin na hÉireann. Mary McAleese was a very good President, as is President Michael D. Higgins. The fact that Mrs. McAleese's family could not vote for her shows how skewed things are.

Chairman: That was nearly eight minutes and a couple of issues were raised there. I will ask Mr. Power to comment first.

Mr. Ian Power: As regards how the money in New Zealand is spent, the New Zealand Electoral Commission has 25 permanent staff and the majority of the budget is related to enrolment services. It outsources updating of the electoral register to the postal service in New Zealand. The 25 permanent staff make up one-third of its budget, which is around NZ\$6 million.

From our perspective, we would see the electoral commission investing a sizeable proportion of its budget in information technology, seeking to streamline the registration process online. For a start, that might include uploading scanned documents online so that people can get the form, fill it out and upload it. That is what the New Zealand Electoral Commission does for its citizens abroad. That is one of the innovations available.

In New Zealand, they also have something called "real me" whereby a person can verify their identity online for a range of public services. We currently do not have that but it has to start somewhere. Through the electoral commission, we could potentially start that process of being able to verify one's identity online for use in a variety of ways for public services.

A huge spend would be needed on engaging with marginalised or target groups, particularly young people and those from migrant communities. As my colleague from TCD students' union, Mr. McGlacken-Byrne, said, it is hard to assess the effect of the youth vote on sustaining the marriage equality referendum, given that the referendum was about an issue which people could connect to in their lives. That potentially differentiated it from previous referendums which were about Oireachtas inquiries and judges' pay, matters that are not particularly interesting for, or relevant to, young people. From a politician's perspective the challenge will be to relate to young people, speak to their issues, address their concerns, and ensure that election promises are kept. That is very important to young people.

The National Youth Council of Ireland has done a lot of work on supporting votes at 16 years of age. We support the idea that young people should get involved in the civic process earlier. We view CSP as quite a superficial treatment of civic education. There is no argument against 16-year-olds engaging in the civic process.

Chairman: Does Mr. McGlacken-Byrne wish to respond to those issues before we move on?

Mr. Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne: Yes. As regards the question on households, due to time constraints on my opening remarks, I cited problems but no solutions. There are a few solutions. First, the ideal one is the most obvious, which is automatic registration. I have never heard a good reason why a person should not automatically be added to an electoral register when they turn 16 or 18. I was told at the start of the year that voting is important, which implied that one has to jump through a few hoops to merit a vote. Paying taxes is important as well, however, and I did not have to sign up to do that. I have never heard a reason why automatic registration would not work.

Second, if for some reason that is not viable, online voter registration would make a lot of sense. It would remove the problem of deceased people, or those who are no longer resident at an address, being registered. As I said before, I registered to vote in the UK through online registration, which took about five minutes.

The third absolute baseline solution would be to have an individual-centric system, rather than being based on where one lives or who one lives with. An online, centralised register makes so much sense that I cannot believe it does not already exist. If everyone at every polling station had access to the same online database it would prevent double voting.

Surprisingly, it also alludes to the question about spending. People will not jump at anything that requires money but so many changes could be made to improve the efficiency of the process and remove or reduce the number of man-hours required. For example, this year a number of local councils have not accepted forms in bulk, although some do. That means there must be one form in one envelope.

Dublin City Council does not accept forms in bulk, which means I had to enlist ten student union colleagues to spend a full day packing 1,500 envelopes and send them off in the post. Presumably, Dublin City Council staff had to spend a full day opening them. Replacing that rigid and laborious system would reduce the need for the financial resources required at the moment.

There are certainly many solutions to the household problem.

Deputy Brian Stanley: May I comment, Chairman?

Chairman: Yes. The Deputy might conclude on this please.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Does the panel consider it is important that young people are exposed to various political views - left, right and centre?

Chairman: I ask Mr. McGlacken-Byrne to conclude on this please.

Mr. Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne: That goes back to the question of how we transfer the energy from this referendum to future issues. This was very direct and tangible. People do not connect in the same way with political parties. A basic step would be the provision of some explanation in schooling and education, and on websites, of the parties' stances on particular issues and the political meaning of left, right and centre. Many vote the way their parents vote or for the nicest looking poster. I would not be an ignoramus but only this year did I get a real comprehension of the stances, for example, what left and centre left mean. An impartial resource could be provided listing political beliefs and the parties that match them.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: It was interesting to hear the comments because over the past

few weeks we have been listening to some of the experts speaking about the electoral commission. Mr. McGlacken-Byrne is quite right about the recent marriage equality referendum. I met with the Union of Students in Ireland recently and it informed me that 28,000 students voted in the referendum. It was an issue that resonated with many people who may not vote in the next local or general elections. We need to get more young people involved and to vote and be interested. Only recently I met with a group of young people in Sligo, the Youth Café, which has sent a submission to the committee. They would not be prepared to vote at 15 years of age but we also talked about reducing the voting age to 16. Some of them felt that young people do not have the maturity to vote or the interest in voting. How do we overcome this? There are many organisations such as Comhairle na nÓg, Dáil na nÓg and others, that are informed on what is happening.

It is very hard to engage and involve people in politics. The most frustrating thing for us as politicians is that, come election time, people are not registered. The consensus over the past few weeks was that the personal public service, PPS, number could be used as a starting point. What are the witnesses' views on that because that concerns every politician? When we go to a house where a person is not registered, we must get the person to fill out the form, which a garda must sign, before it goes to the local authority and the name goes on a draft register for the next election. It is a very slow and cumbersome way of registering people to vote. As the witnesses said, young people who are at college during the week head home on a Friday for one commitment or another, which makes it difficult for them. In other EU countries and worldwide, elections are held on weekend days, for example, Sunday. What is the witnesses' view of that?

Chairman: Who is the Deputy addressing?

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Mr. Power and Mr. McGlacken-Byrne and Ms O'Donnell on the young voters.

Chairman: I will endeavour to bring the other witnesses in on the next round of questioning.

Mr. Ian Power: The main issue in respect of the Deputy's frustration at people not being registered is the fact that it is not owned by anybody. Every year, more than 50,000 people turn 18 and it is nobody's job to ensure they are registered. It is their job but they are not necessarily made aware of the necessity or the process of registering. Similarly, because the register closes at a particular point every year, it does not allow young people who turn 18 in the intervening period to register easily, particularly if there is an election or referendum called and they must get a garda's signature. That is quite a cumbersome and potentially intimidating process for a young person to have to go through in order to register to vote. Online registration will have a huge impact on the registration of young people because it will make it simple for a generation which is digitally native and for whom doing things online is the norm. The marriage equality referendum was their first engagement with the system and anecdotally they could not believe they could not register online.

If a vote is to take place during term time, a Saturday is the ideal day for young people, particularly students who may need to travel back to wherever they live or their vote is assigned. If we had online registration making it easy to change their address they could change it to somewhere close to their place of learning. Simplification of the process will address the problem.

Mr. Brian Killoran: I want to add a caveat in respect of automatic registration. It should not make the assumption that everybody is a citizen. One does not have to be a citizen to vote in

local and European elections or to get a PPS number. Automatic registration or a similar model would need to be backed up by a very fluid way of amending the information so that a person can opt in to stating nationality or citizenship and learning what voting rights attach to that. That can change if somebody becomes a citizen. A more fluid way of registering is absolutely needed but it needs to take into account that not everybody voting is a citizen.

Mr. Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne: The first question was how to transmit the energy generated this year. Having an online modality is very obvious and urgent and I echo the comment that there was absolute bafflement that it could not be done online. That makes very little sense for someone who is digitally native. The Electoral Act was passed before I was born, before the advent of the Internet and before third level education levels ballooned as they have over the past two decades. We need to update our system to reflect the times.

In response to the question about the date of a referendum, there are pros and cons to having it on a Friday or Saturday, for example, many people go home on a Saturday, if they study in Trinity. I go home every weekend to work but I live in Wicklow. The key is consistency and telling people the referendum will be on a Friday and they should be where they need to be.

As a throwaway remark, if there was an online centralised register, people could vote anywhere. There would be problems to tease out but it is strange that a person cannot walk into a polling station with a passport, state his or her name and citizenship and ask to vote there. The mass exodus of people going home reminded me of Herod's census in the Bible. Surely there is a more efficient way than having thousands of people moving around the country on referendum day. Maybe that is not feasible but the key issue is a consistent date.

Deputy Noel Coonan: I apologise for being late and missing the presentation. While I welcome all our guests who came to brief us this afternoon, I welcome in particular my neighbour and fellow Roscrea, Tipperaryman, Mr. Killoran. I wish him well in the post he recently took up and wish him every success in it. I know he is very committed and able and will no doubt make a success of the post.

We are talking about the establishment of a proposed electoral commission. We have heard many good suggestions this afternoon. One of the most important aspects of the electoral system is the public's confidence. As has been articulated here today, there are numerous faults and failings with the system we have at the moment. When we tamper with it, we need to make sure we maintain or strengthen the confidence of the general public in it. Do the witnesses think the proposed electoral commission will solve many of the issues that have been raised here? Does it represent the way forward? Mr. McGlacken-Byrne spoke about someone turning up at a polling station with his or her passport. It is important that voters know the candidates they are voting for and are familiar with the problems and the issues in the constituency. A person who walks into a polling station in Roscrea from Timbuktu and says, "I have a passport here and I wish to vote here", will not know what effect that will have on the local people, the people of the county and the people of that area. It is not quite as simple as it might seem.

Some of the issues that arose when previous presentations were made at this committee have arisen again today. I refer to the education of the electorate, for example. Somebody said at the last meeting that there were 20,000 spoiled votes in the last election. The opposite point that can be made, on the basis of an average turnout of approximately 70,000, is that it would make a significant difference in a constituency if the 30,000 people who do not turn out to vote were to do so. Would an electoral commission be in a position to inspire confidence among the public that it would solve all of these matters? Do the witnesses think we should have compul-

sory voting? Do they think everybody should have to vote? What impact would that have? The point I am making, and I would like the witnesses to address, is that confidence in the electoral system, which is fairly high at the moment, needs to be maintained. We need to be credible in what we do. The other general point I would like them to address is the question of whether the proposed electoral commission represents the proper way forward.

I would like to raise one more issue. It might be of particular interest to Mr. Killoran because he deals with it. How can the diaspora be registered to vote? Should they be entitled to vote? I spoke originally about the effect it might have on a constituency if people living away from it were allowed to vote. Would they be aware of what is happening? Would they know what impact their decisions would have on the general public?

Senator Cáit Keane: I apologise for not being in attendance earlier when I was in the Seanad. I have a question on this paper. Reference was made to research that was conducted among young people in which participants were asked how important certain issues are for them. They obviously said that careers and education is their top priority. When they were asked about voting and having an active involvement in politics, they gave mainly neutral or negative responses. As I am only reading this now, I do not know whether any follow-up was done to ascertain why that might be the case. I can guess why because I have read extensively on this issue, including in the report under discussion. It is obvious that young people are turned off by politics.

I was a member of South Dublin County Council when the very first Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg were set up. I think the names might have come from a proposal I made at South Dublin County Council. Dáil na nÓg was first and it was followed by Comhairle na nÓg. South Dublin County Council was very active in this area. It developed a toolkit to get the youth of the area involved. There is no point in putting people's names on the register if they do not actually vote. That is where adults should be ashamed of themselves. Young people could teach adults in this regard. According to the last survey I looked at, when young people register to vote, 53% of them turn out and do so.

I would like to speak about the issue of automatic registration. I am aware that Hillary Clinton made a proposal in this regard last month. One state in America - Oregon - already automatically registers people to vote when they reach the age of 18, if the people in question have driving licences. I do not know why the driving licence requirement was included. Lots of people cannot drive, but they should be eligible to vote. That is the way they did it.

As we know from the debate about RSI numbers, identification is an issue in this country. Until we have a system that actually talks to the computers and links to everybody, like the "who are you" facility that is used in New Zealand, we will not be able to identify people. The last time this matter was discussed at this forum, a Senator spoke about a person being registered to vote and voting 12 times in an election. We need to safeguard against that.

Deputy Noel Coonan: Vote early, vote often.

Senator Cáit Keane: We know how IT hackers are-----

Chairman: Senator Keane, without interruption.

Senator Cáit Keane: Yes. I would like to speak about the possibility of automatically changing from household registration of voting to individualised registration of voting. It was found in a survey in the UK that 78% of voters could be transferred over automatically with

the touch of a button. I am sure it would be the same if a survey were done here, but I do not think that has been done. The only people who would lose out under an automatic household transfer system would be young people who are renting and frequently change their addresses. Obviously, a way has to be found because I think this is how we should proceed. Most of the participants we have listened to here over the past four weeks while we have been discussing the possible establishment of a commission have recommended individualisation rather than household registration.

I would like to ask a question about the participation subgroups. Reference has been made to the importance of local participation and local authorities in getting voting done. As I have said previously, there is no point in throwing out the baby with the bath water. We should not centralise everything because local authorities are the best places to do certain things. A person from South Dublin County Council called to my house in Templeogue last night for the purposes of registration. The person in question asked me how many people at my address are on the register. Someone suggested that the local authorities are not involved in this kind of activity, but they are. Obviously, they do not maintain this presence all the time. They might not get the co-operation they need, which means their work might not always be very accurate. Bulk forms are accepted in many councils. Some councils ask people to come in with a councillor or someone like that in order to identify themselves. This is another issue that has to be examined. We need to make it easy for people who want to register to do so.

We will not be at the races until we have a good-quality data matching system. I absolutely think this should be done online. Everybody is going online for everything. I said here the last day that we trust online banking, but someone else said, "No, we do not". Maybe those involved in banking are the last people we should trust.

Senator Sean D. Barrett: €64 billion.

Senator Cáit Keane: The online voting system is a bit like the kidney donor system - it should be a question of opting out rather than opting in. That should be a way to look at and focus on our system of voting. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Sin é an méid atá le rá agam.

Ms Anne O'Donnell: We were asked about the research. We pulled out just one page of data from that very big study, which is available on the website of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. I am present here to comment on the establishment of an electoral commission. If such a body is established, it needs to play a part in this national strategy and it needs to listen to and get the views of children and young people under the age of 18, even though they are not yet of voting age. If children and young people are not actively engaged in decision making, they will not feel a sense of engagement when they become adults. It is clear from the evidence - both the research and what children and young people say - that they want to be involved in making decisions. They want to be engaged. They want to be asked what they think. That can be facilitated at all ages in many ways, obviously appropriate to the age level of the child or young person in question.

Mr. Ian Power: We would totally agree with Deputy Coonan's point about people having trust in the electoral system at present, with the exception of the electoral register. We would have a perception that people have trust in polling day and in the result, but not necessarily in the electoral register process. We would not be in favour of compulsory voting. I would respond to his point about the number of people spoiling their ballots by suggesting that many of the people in question believe they are sending a message to the political system. The message in question is to be digested in whatever way one desires. People use ballot-spoiling as a means

of engaging with the system without necessarily expressing a preference.

We would support any proposal to allow the diaspora to vote in Presidential elections. We understand there are constitutional complexities and practicalities in relation to the Constitution and how that is done. It is certainly something we would support.

Senator Keane spoke about voter turn-out among young people, which was 62% at the last general election as compared to an average of 70% across all age cohorts. With regard to validating identity online, *lotto.ie* can validate people's identities using submissions of passports and passport scans. If a body such as that is able to verify people's identification for that purpose-----

Senator Cáit Keane: By using a passport.

Mr. Ian Power: -----then we should be able to develop a process too. We need to start the process somewhere, which is something that is often put off. It is thought that compiling databases and so on is too big a job. We need to start engaging with that job, and it is something that the Electoral Commission can definitely do.

Household surveys were mentioned. At the moment, that is the only way we can maintain the electoral register, but it is hugely costly and not cost-efficient. New Zealand spends two thirds of its budget doing such work. An online system, which would allow us to maintain our records ourselves and whereby it is up to the individual to update his or her own record, would be much more cost-effective for the new body.

Mr. Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne: A good few issues have been raised. In terms of the first issue of confidence in the electoral system, I very much echo what has just been said. People believe the results are very robust, but I personally have had a lot of experience of it and I have a very low level of confidence in how we put the register together. When one uses the word "tampering" online, in a sentence to do with voting, people think of e-voting and immediately say, "Oh no." Online voting is very different from including the online option in the process leading up to voting. Multiple voting hurts confidence in the system as well.

Compulsory voting was mentioned. Call me radical, but I think it is a great idea. In Australia a person can be fined \$20 for not voting and one can choose to spoil it if one wants, but perhaps that is a discussion for a different day. Compulsory voting is a cracking idea. If nothing else, voter registration as an opt-out makes infinite sense. In 2008, the Geary Institute compiled a report on this issue which circled the drain and eventually came back to the need for an ID number. There are issues with using PPS numbers and there are issues with using driver licences, obviously. The institute wondered whether an ID number would impinge on people's privacy and whether we were ready for that step, which I think is a bit silly. Taxes and lots of things impinge on one's privacy. A centralised ID number is, unfortunately, something that must be considered very seriously.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank our guests for their contributions. I do not have too many questions, because a lot has been said, many questions have been answered and we are here to have a general discussion. We have had quite a few interesting weeks and heard interesting comments.

I congratulate Ms O'Donnell and her Department on the strategy that it has launched. The strategy is fantastic and is something that I wholeheartedly agree with. I have been surprised, and even more so since being elected, at the amount of engagement. I have learned that when

one engages with young people that they, in turn, engage. I am talking not just about young people in secondary schools but about those in primary schools as well, whether they are here in the Dáil with a Member or in their schools. Therefore, it is very important to engage with them at a younger age, and this aspect raises the question of whether it is necessary to lower the voting age. I wonder whether we need to start engaging at a younger age while leaving the voting age at 18 years. Mr. Power has already addressed this matter. I would like to know the views of the remaining witnesses on lowering the voting age. Do they think it needs to be examined? Do they think we need to engage more with younger people?

I agree with a lot of what has been said today and shall touch on something my colleague has said. I noted that Mr. McGlacken-Byrne said in his submission: “I would hope that the democratically positive experience of the high turnout seen in the May referendums would not act as a disincentive to enact much needed change.” If anything, I think the turnout has done the opposite. A Carlow-Kilkenny by-election took place at the same time as the referendum and the number of spoiled votes was between 3% and 4% higher than the normal rate for a local or general election. There are problems with registrations. People made an effort to register, travel home and go into a voting booth, but many chose to vote in the referendum and not in the by-election. That shows that a more serious question needs to be answered. Why did people who went to the trouble of coming home to vote in the referendum choose not to vote in the by-election? That highlights the need for education and engagement in terms of voting. How do the witnesses view this matter? We touched on the subject last week when we spoke to one of our guests, Dr. Liam Weeks, who replied that education was key, but I feel that if young people are saying that politicians do not engage with them, we are the ones who need to be educated. Perhaps we should start engaging with people more. I would like to hear the views of the witnesses on these matters.

Mr. Ian Power: The council believes we should lower the voting age to 16. Voting is something of a gateway drug. By that I mean that once a person votes, he or she tends to vote every time afterwards.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Not always.

Mr. Ian Power: Voting tends to be a process on which one follows through for the rest of one’s life. It is not something that people tend to stop doing after the first time if they are engaged by the system while young.

There is EUROSTAT research which found that there are a couple of reasons young people do not vote. First, it may be because they are not registered, which is a matter we have discussed at length. Second, they do not feel that politicians engage with them and their issues. As rightly pointed out by the Deputy, when young people are engaged with, they return that engagement. Therefore, it is up to us as adults and politicians to engage with young people and try to bring them into the political process. Education is key, but we all know that experiential learning is much more effective than anything else. Certainly, it would be better if politicians were seen to speak about the issues that are relevant to young people, follow up on them and act upon them. Young people can definitely see through hollow statements and gestures. At the weekend, the council held a consultation, and one speaker spoke in a condescending manner on a particular issue. It was quite clear that he or she had attended for validation purposes and not for anything else. Young people can see through such activity straight away. Therefore, politicians must have a meaningful engagement with young people.

In terms of education, we believe that the Electoral Commission will be unable to do such

work. It will need to set up funds for organisations that work with young people in order for them to do that type of education piece. It will need to be able to put together strategies that will engage people with the electoral and political systems. We need organisations that already operate on the ground and engage with young people to come up with strategies and deliver on them. Such an initiative make most sense. It will be the most effective and best way to spend taxpayer's money in that regard.

Mr. Domhnall McGlacken-Byrne: Deputy McEntee mentioned part of my document. I said, in that section, that the high turnout and fantastic images need to act as an incentive.

The Deputy asked why people spoil their votes. As I have already said, the questions on the ballot paper for the marriage referendum were binary and simple. The question was: Do you want gay people to be able to marry or not? If a greater effort or resource was established whereby, as in the Carlow-Kilkenny by-election, one could vote for a person based on his or her stance on a certain issue, then there would be a greater and clearer cause-and-effect relationship when one votes for one party or another. As Deputy Stanley said before he left, it would be useful to make a resource available that would clarify what voting for one person versus voting for another person actually entails. All of this information would go some way to generating the same clear relationship that was established in the marriage referendum, which I think led to the brilliant turnout.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I wish to make a point about education. As Ms O'Donnell pointed out earlier, in terms of every single decision made, there is not any piece of legislation that does not affect a young person. How does one educate young people to ensure they know that the person they elect will make decisions that will affect them? Young people might not think that is the case but those decisions will have an effect. We must close the gap in understanding, join the dots and prove that to young people, but all of that comes about through engagement.

Chairman: And debate.

Mr. Brian Killoran: There is an important crossover, to a certain extent, with people from a migrant background in terms of what is relevant. There is a perception that people from a migrant background only vote or are only interested in issues that are relevant to them, but that is not the case. Everybody who lives in Ireland has kids in school, they are involved in local communities and, therefore, they are involved in all of those issues.

Confidence in the voting system and how to make it more relevant have been mentioned. It is about reaching out and if we talk to people and engage with them, they will tell us what they are interested in. There is often a broad unanimity of interests. The same applies in our work with migrant communities. It is not just that migrants have particular interests, they are interested in everything and have diverse views across the political spectrum on every issue. That is an important point.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their attendance. As I said at the beginning of the meeting, this is the fifth of six hearings on this very important topic and the committee's deliberations with the witnesses today will inform its report to the Minister. We will now allow the witnesses to withdraw and will then go into private session.

The joint committee went into private session at 6.05 p.m. and resumed in public session at 6.10 p.m.

SCRUTINY OF EU LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS

Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals

Chairman: We will continue our consideration of COM (2015) 186, which is the proposal for a Council decision on the position to be adopted, on behalf of the European Union, in the EEA joint committee concerning an amendment to Annex II (Technical regulations, standards, testing and certification) to the EEA Agreement (Batteries and Accumulators). It is proposed that this proposal does not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

On the “green card” for food waste, it is proposed that the committee agrees to lend its support to a draft House of Lords proposal to be submitted to the European Commission regarding food waste policy. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I propose that we now go into private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 6.10 p.m. and adjourned at 6.15 p.m. until 2.20 p.m. on Tuesday, 14 July 2015.