

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOMHSHAOL, CULTÚR AGUS GAELTACHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND THE GAELTACHT

Dé Máirt, 14 Iúil 2015

Tuesday, 14 July 2015

The Joint Committee met at 2.20 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Ruth Coppinger,	Senator Terry Brennan,
Deputy Barry Cowen,	Senator Cáit Keane,
Deputy Robert Dowds,	Senator Denis Landy,
Deputy Helen McEntee	Senator Fiach Mac Conghail,
Deputy Michelle Mulherin,	Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú.
Deputy Fergus O'Dowd,	
Deputy Brian Stanley,	

In attendance: Deputy Martin Heydon..

DEPUTY MICHAEL MCCARTHY IN THE CHAIR.

Electoral Commission in Ireland: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Catherine Murphy and Senator Ned O’Sullivan. This meeting has been convened to consider matters relating to the consultation paper on the establishment of an electoral commission in Ireland. We will now discuss this subject. It is proposed that this part of our meeting will conclude at 4.30 p.m., unless previously concluded, and that at the conclusion of public business, we will go into private session to discuss other committee business. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I welcome the following witnesses to the meeting: Ms Helen Dixon, Data Protection Commissioner; Mr. Tim Duggan, assistant secretary, and Ms Michelle O’Donnell, assistant principal, client identity services, at the Department of Social Protection; Dr. Adrian Kavanagh, lecturer in geography, NUI Maynooth; Mr. Seán Donnelly, political analyst; and Mr. Liam Kenny, director of the Association of Irish Local Government. I invite Mr. Kenny introduce his four colleagues.

Mr. Liam Kenny: The four elected representatives present are Councillor Aidan Davitt from Westmeath County Council, who will introduce our short presentation; Councillor Damien Geoghegan from Waterford County Council; Councillor Christy Hyland from Mayo County Council and west Mayo municipal district; and Councillor Peter McVitty from Cavan County Council.

Chairman: Councillor Davitt is to make the opening presentation on behalf of the Association of Irish Local Government. 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 so do, 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 have submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

After the presentations, I will call members to make their opening remarks and ask questions. Their contributions are to be limited to approximately ten minutes. There are many witnesses in attendance and not everyone will get to speak. If members exceed the time I allow them, it will eat into the remaining time in which witnesses may answer questions. Members should be mindful of this. I will ask whoever is in possession to conclude at the end of each ten-minute slot and then proceed to the next questioner.

This is the last of six meetings the joint committee has planned on the proposal to establish an electoral commission for Ireland. We have heard from the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, and also academics, officeholders, representatives of local government, national agencies and bodies, and various experts. During

the course of our hearings, numerous witnesses told us there are 31 electoral registers in Ireland and that the absence of a unique identifier, such as the PPS number, is causing considerable difficulties with updating them. This will feature strongly in our deliberations. Today we will have questions on this matter and take into account the views of those involved in elections. We are to produce a report on this in September. The views of analysts and individuals involved in elections are very important to our work on making a proposal for the Minister regarding the electoral commission.

I call the witnesses to make their opening statements, beginning with the Data Protection Commissioner, Ms Helen Dixon.

Ms Helen Dixon: I thank the committee for this opportunity to engage with it on the important data protection considerations that might arise in regard to any reform of the electoral registration process. As the Chairman has outlined, the committee is interested in considering whether the PPS number would be a solution to accuracy, omission and duplication issues affecting the register. I am well aware the committee has been informed by various witnesses that the use of the PPS number would, of course, be no trivial matter.

In the statement I submitted to the committee in advance of the meeting, I set out some of the specific considerations concerning security risks that can arise through over-reliance in the State on one identifier and the ability that could be created to link, potentially unlawfully, across a variety of Government databases. What is at issue is striking a balance between the fundamental right of individuals to have their personal data protected and the public interest in democratic legitimacy through having an accurate voter register. To strike that balance correctly, the Oireachtas will need to ensure the very specific context in which additional personal data are processed is detailed and analysed.

In data protection terms, the devil can often be in the detail of implementation. Consider the example of a registration system involving a centralised verification service within a Department through which local authorities and new individuals who wanted to register electronically could submit their applications and have them validated. A system that did not retain the PPS numbers once it completed a validation exercise would be very different from a system with a centralised electoral register run by one State body and under which the PPS numbers would be permanently retained. Therefore, we need to understand in detail what we mean by use of the PPSN to resolve the issues with the electoral register. It is important we outline precisely for what, in what circumstances, by whom and how the PPSN would be used in any proposal.

Equally, however, it would be preferable to start examining a range of solutions to the issues identified with the register and testing the solutions to determine whether they resolve the issues that have been identified. The committee heard previously that there are potentially more PPS numbers than persons eligible to vote and, conceivably, persons eligible to vote who do not have a PPS number. A range of solutions would need to be identified to deal with these issues. Solutions would also need to be assessed so that they did not cause further issues beyond those that are sought to be resolved. Ultimately, for any final proposal, a thorough privacy impact assessment would need to be carried out on the proposed solution to ensure that the implementation delivers the best protection of personal data as well as the most effective and efficient process for dealing with personal data.

Mr. Tim Duggan: I thank the Chairman for the invitation to appear before the committee today. I have responsibility in the Department of Social Protection for client identity services, which manage the PPS number and associated public services identity dataset, as well as the

public services card currently in roll-out. We support the use of all three of these elements across the entire public service. I will briefly describe each of them to the committee, so members can understand them and their relationship with each other. I will then give a brief view on the part they might be able to play in an electoral register.

The PPS number, as members will know, is an individual's unique reference number for all dealings with Government Departments and public bodies. How it is governed is set out in the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005. Only those Departments or public bodies authorised by that legislation or their agents can use the PPS number as a personal identifier. A body that is so authorised is usually referred to as a specified body.

A PPS number is automatically issued in the case of children born in Ireland. In other cases, PPS numbers are issued in accordance with a controlled procedure following a personal attendance at one of the Department's dedicated PPS number registration centres, submission of a completed application, the capture of a photograph and signature, the submission of appropriate identity documents and proof of address, as well as the capture of additional data such as answers to security questions, which we use subsequently to ensure the future integrity of that data, in other words, that someone else cannot change it. We publish the information on that process in a whole load of places, including our own offices, citizen information centres, embassies, immigration advice centres and so on. As a result, people who attend our offices to get a PPS number are usually well informed and have all the necessary documentation. It is only in very rare circumstances that somebody would have to attend more than once to be allocated a PPS number.

Associated with that number is a full identity dataset, known as the public service identity dataset. That itself is also set out in the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2002. Currently, that dataset consists of the PPS number, a person's surname, forename, date of birth, place of birth, sex, address, nationality, photograph, signature, any former surnames the person may have had, any former surnames his or her mother may have had, the date of death in the case of a deceased person, and any other information that the Minister may prescribe as necessary to validate and authenticate an identity. That last provision has not been used to date.

In addition to the PPS number and public service identity dataset, there is the public services card, which more and more people getting, particularly if they are customers of any kind of the Department of Social Protection. The purpose of the public services card is to provide people with a robust token of identity to enable them to gain access to public services more efficiently and with a minimum of duplication of effort, while at the same time preserving their privacy to the maximum extent possible. It is designed to replace other cards which people currently use in the public sector, such as the free travel pass and social services card. It has the potential to replace a great number of other cards as well. Those possibilities are currently being examined.

Considerable progress has already been made on the roll-out of the public services card. Over 1.46 million cards have been issued up to yesterday, including 464,000 free travel versions of it. Face to face registration for the card is taking place countrywide in 97 offices of the Department. Some customers whose identities are regularly authenticated in a face to face process can avail of an easier postal registration process. Registration is now required for individual adult applicants for a PPS number and for those applying for or in receipt of social protection payments or benefits. In other words, it is no longer possible to get a PPS number without also registering for a public services card.

In order to ensure that a person receives only one PPS number and the public services card is

allocated on the basis of information that is accurate and verified, certain operational procedures are prescribed for registration personnel who are dealing with applications. It is necessary to have effective controls around the process to guard against fraud and protect the integrity of the data. Evidence of identity is a vital element of the process. Once the identity of an individual is verified, his or her relevant identity data is entered on our records and a batch process is run each night to allocate the PPS number itself. A number of system validation checks are part of this process, to prevent multiple numbers being issued to the same person. The accuracy of the information gathered from the individual is therefore critically important.

The face to face process for someone who already has a number involves the capture of his or her photograph and signature, the verification of his or her identity through documentation and checks of back-end databases, and his or her current address through documentation, as well as the capture of some security questions. As part of the roll-out, we have invested in facial recognition software which ensures that multiple or fraudulent identities can be detected at the point of registration. In other words, if someone is already registered and seeks to register again under a different identity set, the facial image recognition technology we use will prevent that from occurring, in the main. During the course of the process, the software searches for photographs which we already have in our database against that scanned in for the individual applicant. Only when all of those checks are completed will a public services card issue to a person. Today, that is the only means by which a PPS number can be issued as well. As a result, a public services card now provides a very substantial assurance of the identity of its holder.

We transfer our identity data to a system called the single customer view, which is operated by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on our behalf. This provides a central repository of identity data - that which is in the public service identity dataset - and can be used by other public bodies to do two things. First, it can be used to verify the public service identity data presented by somebody coming to the public body and, second, to provide the public body with assurance on the verification status of a person's identity. I can go into detail on that if the committee wishes.

To sum up, the public services card registration process is by far the most robust system of identity verification in the State today. In this context, we understand the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade has decided that, in future, new applicants for passports will have to undergo public services card registration before they can receive a passport. In addition, we understand that the Road Safety Authority is upgrading its national driver licence service application process so that it is compatible with our registration process. Therefore, somebody who applies for and gets a driver's licence will get a public services card as part of the same registration process. The committee may also wish to note that Statutory Instrument No. 35/2014 provides that the public services card is specified as an identification document acceptable in the electoral process. A person can prove his or her identity at a polling station using just a public services card.

On the electoral register, the Department considers that the PPS number, the public services identity dataset and the public services card could have a role to play in the establishment of the electoral register and its subsequent maintenance, and in checking against it. In that regard, we would be more than willing to discuss the implications of the PPSN being used as the unique identifier for those purposes. If this proposal is being seriously considered there is no point in using the number just for setting up the register. That data would need to be maintained and this would require, in our view, regular exchanges of data, most likely through that single customer view system that I mentioned earlier. Accordingly, the Department's view is that this could best be facilitated through a single register, to avoid duplicate entries across multiple registers,

although we take the Data Protection Commissioner's point that there may be an alternative central verification mechanism through which this could be done. In this context, there may be a need to look at the legislation and data protection memorandum of agreement so that data can be legitimately exchanged between the relevant public bodies. The Department would not be in favour of making the PPS number publicly available along with other register data that is made publicly available.

The Department thinks that it may be feasible to consider the public services card as the means by which a person could prove his or her identity at a polling station, as it would provide both a physical check in terms of the name and photograph on the card but also a system check using the PPS number on the card against the register.

It is worth noting that just because a person has a PPS number, that does not confer any rights of any kind on the person. It simply means that the person has registered his or her identity to a very high level with the Department of Social Protection. It confers no right and in particular, does not confer any right to vote.

The Department is clear that the decision on who has the right to vote would be outside its remit in this regard but we are more than happy to discuss this with the relevant Departments if it wishes to explore the issue further. I will do my best to answer any questions from members.

Dr. Adrian Kavanagh: I thank the Chairman and the committee for inviting me to attend. The committee has heard from a number of political science academics. My specialty is geography so I will not be giving the same level of detail as people like Dr. Theresa Reidy or Professor David Farrell offered. I have put together a few ideas about what I regard as important for the proposed electoral commission. I have grouped them under the headings of Reform, Independence, Information, Value for Money and Administration-Organisation.

Under the heading of reform I would argue that the main driver or function of the proposed commission - its *raison d'être* - should be to focus on a reform. There is a lot of talk about the importance of a commission in terms of improving the quality of the electorate register but in my view the commission could be most valuable in the area of electoral reform which could involve looking at various innovations for improving electoral practice or the sharing of electoral information and also as a body that is able to learn from international precedents of good practice. It should also be able to learn from good ideas about elections or improving the electoral process that it gains from the Irish public or from experts in the field, be they academics, experts in the area of elections, such as Mr. Sean Donnelly, for example, or people who are petitioners in the field, such as people who work in the area of electoral administration or politicians themselves.

An electoral commission would be important because, as the past few years have shown, in instances or accusations of partisan bias it can be very difficult to get certain electoral reform ideas across or passed. I refer to what has happened in the past few years such as the Seanad referendum which failed for different reasons. Most recently we had the collapse of the referendum to reduce the age of presidential election candidates. In part I would argue the main problem in that case was that these were represented or misrepresented sometimes, as trying to get too much power for the Dáil, for example. However, ideas put forward by an independent body, in theory at least, those concerns about partisan bias should be able to be overcome that might otherwise nix good ideas about electoral reform.

The electoral commission would also be able to drive certain reform efforts from an organi-

sational perspective, in the way that other bodies might not be able to do. One area that I suspect will become a major issue will be a focus on the area of voting rights for the Irish diaspora. I was talking to the European affairs committee about this topic a few months ago. I suspect this issue may become fairly significant with regard to electoral reform in the future. Certain electoral reform efforts may require a centralised independent body to push them through over and above what can be done by a body that is more tied in to the Government or to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government or the local authorities or local bodies.

The next heading relates to the independence of a commission. An independent commission should, in theory, be better placed to drive or push a reform agenda and get public acceptance for it than might be the case if it were seen to be a policy pushed by certain politicians or by the Government. If it is decided to go down the route of having an electoral officer or an elections ombudsman or elections Czar to head up this body, the main aspect to ensure the independence of the commission is that the leadership should be, in so far as practical, drawn from outside the political sector or the administrative elite.

There are two significant issues relating to independence and it is a question of how can a commission's ideas become policy. All a commission can do in driving new ideas for improving electoral practice is to put forward proposals. It will require some thought as to how to turn proposals into policy. Generally, I suspect, that the best model is that proposals from the commission should go before the Seanad and the Dáil for decision, with the scope that these can be rejected because I would suspect there may be certain proposals from the commission that might not work when they are examined. However, these should only be rejected when there is very good reason to do so.

The briefing document raised the question of engagement with politicians, whether politicians should be involved in the commission. I would argue that there is a place for politicians or people from the general political sector in the commission but perhaps in the form of an advisory panel instead of having politicians on the commission. An advisory panel of politicians could debate and discuss issues with the commission. Certain expert knowledge can only be had from politicians, whether Deputies, Senators or councillors or local party workers. People working in politics have certain in-depth expert information that others do not have and certainly academics do not have it. This would be a very good scope to draw on the political knowledge. I suggest an advisory panel made up of politicians or people from party headquarters.

I refer to the importance of accountability. It was suggested that the commission should produce reports. A precedent in New Zealand was referred to where the commission must always produce a report on the administration of elections within months of an election taking place.

Information is an important element. Dr. Theresa Reidy, who appeared before the committee on an earlier occasion, spoke about the possibility of an electoral commission being established before the next election. There are certain things a new commission could not do in a short period of time but one thing it could do quickly is to work on getting electoral information out to people. I had a quick look at the British electoral commission's webpage yesterday and it gives details on how to register on the front of its webpage. If one wanted to get that information in Ireland, one would need to go to a number of websites, including the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government website, the Standards in Public Office Commission website, a local authority website, a political party website and so on. Getting that information out would be an important function for an electoral commission. The commission

could work on that very early in the day.

One of the first things a commission could do would be have a one-stop-shop with information on the electoral process and important statistics on elections to hand so that the public could quickly access it. That is being done on websites, such as Mr. Seán Donnelly's *electionsireland.org*, and my own website. This would probably take away all our business but it is probably for the best.

As regards other aspects relating to information, the commission should be involved in carrying out research into better electoral practice and so on and there may be scope for funding PhD scholarships for such research. Importantly, the commission should also be involved in voter education programmes with the funding directed at voter education programmes, focusing particularly on areas or groups which tend to have low turnouts either for specific elections, for example, in Donegal for a referendum, or generally, such as inner city populations, younger voters and so on.

I would like to make two further brief points as there are others here with better opinions on this subject. With regard to value for money, centralisation and economies of scale may work. On the other hand, as we have seen in the past, new initiatives have often produced false economies of scale and the possibility of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I would be careful about and would argue against a new electoral commission trying to reinvent the wheel from stage one. The best practice is probably to see what is already there and examine how a new commission could link with these different bodies.

On administration, the best model might be an electoral commission body. Instead of the Standards in Public Office Commission and the Referendum Commission, the new electoral commission should be an umbrella grouping tying together these different bodies with the main role of the chief electoral officer or electoral Ombudsman being to link up with the different bodies involved in different parts of electoral practice.

Chairman: Thank you, Dr. Kavanagh. I call Mr. Seán Donnelly.

Mr. Seán Donnelly: I thank the Chairman for the invitation to appear before the committee. People like me are often referred to psephologists. The word comes from the Greek word *psephos*, pronounced with a silent P, which means pebble because in ancient Greece they used to vote by casting pebbles - they may be using something else in the next few weeks in Greece. Psephology is a branch of political science that deals with the study and scientific analysis of elections.

I have a fair bit of experience of our elections. I have written ten books since 1991 on all of our elections from general elections, by-elections, European elections, Presidential elections to referenda. I will give a few figures on our elections. There have been 31 general elections in this State since 1922, which was the first proportional representation, PR, election. There have been 131 by-elections, 28 Seanad elections, eight European elections, seven Presidential elections, 39 referenda and 24 local elections. In all there have been 268 elections, so we have a fair bit of experience of the electoral process.

I will refer to my experience in this area over the last 30 years. I have encountered four problems, in particular. One is the lack of overall control. No one is in charge of the overall system. There is no consistency and the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing and is not particularly interested. The Internet ethos of sharing information has not permeated to these

bodies. The information is power ethos overrides the transparency aspiration. The register of electors is probably the most talked about item at this committee. It is well documented in the committee's hearings and I will come back to it. It is obviously a big item. The election results, because of the attitude that prevails, are very deficient. The system relies on people like myself and others to come up with election results, but that is not good enough.

I will move on to some possible solutions to these problems. Regarding the lack of transparency and lack of overall control, the establishment of an electoral commission will solve that problem overnight. On the second item, the sharing of information, that requires a cultural change and I do not think it can happen. That is why we need an electoral commission. I have dealt a good deal with the councils in regard to the register. Any time I want information, it takes up to 34 telephone calls to get it, or many more than that by the time I eventually get it. The first response I get to a request for information is, "What do you want that for?" When I telephone the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the staff there cannot do enough for me. It is that cultural change that needs to take place. One item of information I look for is the breakdown of the electoral register - the way the books are structured, for example. When I telephone to ask for that information, the response I get is, "No. We do not have that." When I say they should have it, they say that they do not have it. When I say they used to sell the register, or parts of the register, and, therefore, they must have a list of the books with the number of voters on it, the response is, "Is that what you are talking about? No, we do not have that." When I say they have enumerators who update the register and who are paid on the basis of the number of people on the register and that they must have lists of them, the response is, "Is that what you are talking about?" There is an issue in that they do not know what I and others want and they are not particularly interested in helping us.

Moving on to the register of electors, there are three items to consider, the boundary report for elections, the register of electors and the census of population, for which the Central Statistics Office has responsibility. The latest census was in 2011 when there were 4,588,252 people in Ireland. The building block of the census is the electoral division. The building block of the boundary report is also the electoral division. The register of electors is now in the hands of three city councils and 28 county councils. They deal with the electorate. Their building block is the polling district and I have not been able to find out how it came about or what it means. We have a Tower of Babel with the electoral division as the building block of the census and of the Boundary Commission, which forms the boundaries for the elections, and then with having something different in the register of electors. We cannot get the two to co-ordinate.

There is also the lack of an overarching body. Two city councils, Dublin City Council and Cork City Council, do it right but the others councils do not. It is a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. It creates a problem when it comes to doing any analysis, because it is a Tower of Babel, and there is no need for it.

I gave an example in my submission of how one can compare the electorate and break it down into these small electoral divisions, EDs, but even taking a local electoral area, and I have used the example of Dublin Bay South for the next election, it is possible to compare data. I also included the number who are able to vote, the number who are Irish and the number who are over the age of 18. The figure comes out at about 70%, which means 30% cannot vote. One could use the figure, working down to the electoral divisions, EDs, and it would immediately show where there are too many voters registered and all sorts of issues which I have found over the years. For example, if one applies it to the last census, the percentage comes out at 71%. In Dublin city, it is 61% and in Ulster, it is as high as 77%.

The population and the census are the same thing and there should not be a discrepancy between the two. The CSO is an excellent body, which produces excellent reports and is very helpful. Such an organisation could take over the electoral register. The CSO has the expertise to overcome the problem of PPS numbers. We will have a census next year and it would be convenient if there was a note from the Government asking the CSO to form the census so as to ascertain the number of people who should be eligible to vote. The census has a grouping of ages zero to 19. We would like a grouping of people aged zero to 18. Why is it 19? What does 19 mean? I do not know. It has no significance, whereas the age of 18 has the significance that one can vote. This information is available from the CSO on payment of €50. The model is there, the CSO is there and the census is there with all the details we need. I can leave the duplication problem to other experts.

Another major gap in the system is election results, which are difficult to get. They do not see it as part of trying to get election results. During general elections in Italy, results are displayed on a big screen in the local piazza as it is happening. One would be lucky to get the information from the councils six months after the event. We have not got the local election results yet. We are in the Internet age and it has changed everything else, but the Internet has not changed our electoral system. It has had no effect. When I started out, information was posted out. When I tried to get the local election results, I was told they only had the big sheets that were displayed at the election count and they would have to post them to me. That was the system.

During the Presidential election I spoke on the radio at lunch time on the Saturday complaining about the system. Claire Byrne said she had to go over to one of the Dublin counts in the new Convention Centre. The RTE reporter said they could not get the fax machine working. Claire Byrne told the reporter she was having to restrain Seán Donnelly and that I was about to fall off the chair. It is typical. We are in an age when everything is about statistics and analysis. We see it in American football, rugby and GAA. A statistic was given that Michael Murphy of my county, Donegal, had touched the ball 50 times. Is it good or bad? Paul O'Connell, playing for Ireland, made 16 tackles. Is it good or bad? Sporting people know it is very good. However, if the turnout in Kerry at 6 p.m. on the day of voting in the last election was 40%, is it good or bad? We do not know because we have nothing to compare it with. Statistical analysis is being used everywhere.

A few years ago, I came across a book entitled *Slater's National Commercial Directory of Ireland*. It broke down the country into baronies, parishes, statute acres, annual value, population, families, population per family and education. I thought it must be very recent, but it was produced in 1846 in Manchester. It puts us in the shade. It provided the pre-Famine figures, when the population was 8.175 million. I did an analysis of it, and an average family had 5.6 people. In the last census, there were 2.8 people per family. If we returned to 5.6 people per family, we would return to the pre-Famine population. One could argue that contraception had as significant an effect on our population as the Famine had.

The tally holds a revered position in Irish politics, although it is over-rated. Counting votes is not rocket science and it is no big deal that the result is produced a few hours before the official result. In 1994, I set the task of doing a full European tally in Dublin. People said it could not be done. It was before Microsoft Windows 95 and the Internet. There were approximately 1,300 boxes and to put them into a computer would take approximately 22 hours, whereas we had approximately four. The obvious solution was to get a number of computers. I drove around Dublin and got 12 computers and we had one master computer and the old floppy disks.

Every hour we stopped the count and produced a tally. There was a photocopier for the parties. All the media received it and it worked like a charm. This was 30 years ago.

In 2005, there were two by-elections, one in Kildare for Charlie McCreevy's seat and one in Meath for John Bruton's seat. We decided to go one better and see if we could put the tally on the Internet. We put it on the Internet and on people's mobile phones as it was happening. All the parties decided to do their own tallies and they passed them on to me. They hardly differed. One has to go to two decimal places to get any differences. The Fianna Fáil tally for the Fine Gael candidate was 33.98%, whereas the Fine Gael tally was 34%, Sinn Féin 33.95%, my tally was 34.05% and the final result was 34.13%. The difference was less than 0.1%. It shows what individual people can do. What could be done with the powers of the State supporting it? I feel passionate about the electoral commission. Given that election day is a slow news day, RTE sends correspondents all over the country to check in on polling stations and ask how many ballot papers have been given out. One phone call from each polling station to an Internet site would provide hourly updates on every polling station. Compare what was achieved in 1846 with what we are doing now.

Electronic voting is the elephant in the room. I was one of the few who publicly supported it. All the political parties supported it in the Dáil. While electronic voting was not a problem, electronic counting became a problem. Everybody found the voting machines worked well. Had there been an electoral commission, the debacle would not have ensued, it would not have become a political issue and we would have saved ourselves over €50 million. These matters are important. The validity of the arguments raised by the computer buffs could easily have been checked during the following election by selecting a few constituencies and feeding all the ballot papers into the electronic voting machines to see if it differed hugely. If one entered three to five complete ballots, it would have come close. We are not sure of the present system. I have never seen a recount produce the exact same figures as the original count. It became a political football and nobody wants to touch it. I believe it will be touched.

I have outlined the main deficiencies in our electoral management system and the necessity of establishing an electoral commission. Some people say these things are not important. The last referendum was supposed to be the 34th amendment to the Constitution, but it was the 29th. Before it, only 28 referenda had been passed by the people. Previously, if a referendum was not passed, the number was brought forward, for example, there were two attempts to pass the third and fourth amendment. Then there were the eleventh and twelfth amendments and there were three amendments on the one day, two of which were passed. There was another amendment about judges and calling them to heel which did not actually pass through the Dáil. Therefore, in the next referendum, whenever it is held, it will be on the thirty-sixth amendment, but it would actually be the thirtieth amendment to be passed. That is sloppy. Imagine the Americans pleading the fifth amendment and wondering whether it was the sixth, the seventh or the eight amendment. Perhaps somebody might make a case against this sometime.

There are four recommendations; an electoral commission should be established with responsibility for all aspects of the electoral system, including voter and party registration; there should be reviews of boundary divisions; there should be the organisation and running of various elections and referenda; and there should be the publication of results and analysis. A national register of electors should be set up based on electoral divisions as per the census and boundary reviews rather than polling districts as occurs at present. The 2006 census form should be altered to allow for calculation of the proportion of the population allowed to vote. This is not available at present but could be. The register should be the responsibility of the

electoral commission but could be contracted out to a body such as the CSO which carries out summary work in compiling the census every five years. There will be a census next year. It would also have the expertise to tackle the ongoing problem of voter duplication. A comprehensive website should be set up containing all relevant data associated with the electoral process, including the register of electors and real-time election results, rather than being provided six months later. It should include all historical results. In other words, it should contain the data contained in my ten books on the *ElectionsIreland.org* website. The issue of electronic voting should be revisited which, as happened in the case of a few recent referenda, might get through at the second attempt. It would bring us into the Internet age of instant and much more detailed results. It would bring to an end the tally which has been overrated.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Donnelly for a very interesting contribution. It is now the turn of Mr. Davitt from the Association of Irish Local Government.

Mr. Aidan Davitt: I feel passionate after listening to Mr. Sean Donnelly; his presentation was very inspiring.

We represent the AILG, the Association of Irish Local Government, and are delighted to have been asked to make a submission. We represent 949 councillors throughout Ireland. Our submission was put together after much discussion at plenary and executive committee meetings. It is detailed, very broad and deals with all aspects, from registration to logistics on the day and boundary commissions, as well as, of course, the diaspora which has been mentioned by some of the other contributors.

I will briefly give our opinion on the establishment of an electoral commission. County and city councils have, in law, a valuable mandate to: “Promote interest among young people in democracy and local government and in community and civic affairs, generally”. This was included in the Local Government Act 2001. Many local authorities are active in this manner, including in hosting local meetings of Dáil na nÓg and other educational activities such as facilitating groups of youths to visit council chambers and arranging visits of mayors to schools. The capacity of local government to organise and administer elections is intertwined with its mandate to educate and interest young people and the community generally in democracy. That is one of our main topics and one of the issues about which we feel exceptionally strongly.

Mr. Peter McVitty: There are a number of issues about the current features of the electoral system. I will make a few points about the current system of electoral administration, working from the bottom up, to include the following: local talliers who have multiple responsibilities in the election process, including for local elections; the administration, organisation and maintenance of the register of electors; making polling schemes; for the logistics of elections; for providing assistance for the county registrar in the organisation of elections and formal and informal provision for providing personal assistance during elections. They also maintain the register on spending by parties and candidates in local elections.

The county registrar who is independent functions within the remit of the Courts Service of the Department of Justice and Equality. The county registrar has many other responsibilities through court administration, for example, shadow functions. County registrars are also returning officers in general elections and sub-returning officers for presidential, Dáil and European parliamentary elections and referenda.

The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government franchise unit drafts and monitors policy and the legislation regarding the electoral system.

The Referendum Commission is a temporary commission which is activated in the weeks preceding a referendum and then lapses after it. Its main role is to give impartial information on the referendum issues in question.

Boundary committees are established from time to time to redraw separately constituency boundaries, parliamentary constituencies and local electoral areas. Such committees are temporary in nature.

The Standards in Public Office Commission has functions that relate mainly to the explanation of spending by parties and candidates in a general election, the maintenance of the register and lobbyists.

Mr. Damien Geoghegan: We have also put together a critique of the savings claimed in the establishment of a commission. The proponents of a single electoral commission argue that by centralising some or all of the functions in a central organisation there would be cost and efficiency savings. It is also argued that a body with a remit focused on electoral administration would do the job more effectively than county councils or county registrars, for whom electoral administration is only a part of their overall responsibilities. To assess the usefulness of such claims, the following should be taken into account.

On the savings claimed, we make the following points. The local authorities would continue in existence performing all other functions; therefore, we would see the savings on the franchise side as minimal. Similarly, county registrars, for court purposes, would continue in existence; therefore, savings in terms of their time involved in election administration would also be small.

On the franchise unit of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, it is certain that even if a one-stop electoral commission were to be set up, the Department would still need an office dealing with broad policy and the drafting of electoral legislation. A transfer of functions to a new electoral commission could, in time, lead to a duplication of work.

On the Standards in Public Office Commission and the administration of election spending, it is true that the commission and the local authorities operate parallel systems for different cohorts of elected members. Some savings may be possible in developing a common template for such returns. However, on integrating the SIPO with an electoral commission, there is an argument that the standards in public office body should stand alone, given its very specific role in maintaining propriety and standards.

The approach to the Referendum Commission is essentially *ad hoc*, with a commission being called into office as a referendum is called. There have been complaints that the short period in office of a commission does not allow it to sufficiently convey information in advance of a referendum. This is one area where integration with a more continuous body could help in conveying information to the public and enhancing voter turnout. That said, the experience of the May 2015 same sex marriage referendum showed that the existing system operated by the county councils was able to cope with a surge of new registrations within a matter of weeks before the referendum.

Taking all of the above into account, there is a question as to whether a single body, as proposed, would, in fact, deliver appreciable savings, which would be at the cost of losing local knowledge and involvement.

Mr. Christy Hyland: I am from the municipal district of west Mayo and thank the joint

committee for its invitation. As most of the areas have been covered by my colleagues, I will be brief as I am conscious of the time.

I want it to be recognised that the input of local authorities into electoral arrangements and registers must never be diluted because they have been a valuable source of local knowledge and their role should never be interfered with. At times we make a mess of the register. We have a population of only 4.5 million people, yet time and again, as each election takes place, we can never get it right with the register. One system we put forward for consideration is that the moment a citizen reaches the age of 18 years, the Department of Social Protection will notify him or her to register to vote. It is very simple and not rocket science. That is the opinion of the Association of Irish Local Government.

Another issue about which we feel very strongly is that on election day, when each of us wants to exercise our constitutional right and cast our vote, the first people we meet are the polling clerks or the presiding officer. Some 99% of them are in full-time employment as public servants, working perhaps for the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Justice and Equality or the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. We feel strongly that qualified young people such as third level students in full-time education who perhaps are studying politics are the ones who should be employed on the day of the count. It is worth between €400 and €500, which to a third level student could be very important. Time and again we hear about who was employed in polling stations, but we still have not got it right and the association believes it is time to call a halt to serving public servants taking annual leave on the day of an election to work in a polling station. It is a crying shame and has to stop. There are 949 of us throughout the country and we get this every day.

A polling card is not an identification card, which can be one's driving licence or passport. People do not even have to bring their polling card to cast a vote.

Mr. Aidan Davitt: Our members have told us that they have been hearing a strong message on the doorsteps that the diaspora has to be accommodated. I thank the Chairman for hearing our submission.

Chairman: I have a couple of points to make to the Department of Social Protection. Perhaps the Data Protection Commissioner might comment too.

To what extent does the Department of Social Protection share PPSN information? I presume it liaises with Revenue on PPS numbers, but to what extent does it happen? With how many other public bodies does the Department interact on the issue of PPSN information? We have many organs of State which collate a lot of similar information. Some already have it, while others go to extreme lengths to get information that is already in the possession of another public sector organ. It is like a dog chasing its own tail. Is there interaction between the Department of Social Protection and local authorities and if not, why not? It is the one Department that knows everyone's date of birth and date of death when survivors apply for bereavement grants. Why does it not happen when local authorities compile the electoral register?

Can Mr. Donnelly and Mr. Kavanagh answer one question for me? I am intrigued about opinion polls. The standard of political writing in the newspapers nowadays is absolutely appalling and a lot of the stuff online is just clickbait and deals with aspects of politics that I do not find in the least bit interesting. One of the features newspapers use to sell copy is opinion polls, which are now front page news. Most of those present will be exercised by the *Sunday Business Post* Red C poll which is the only tracking poll of its kind. There are other polls which

can vary greatly, with one newspaper publishing a poll which reflects a difference of five or six points from another. They cannot both possibly be correct.

There have been two recent significant events. One was the polls before the UK general election. I was surprised to learn there was a polling commission in the United Kingdom which had launched an inquiry into why the polling companies had got it wrong. Either the polling companies or the people got it wrong and I would conclude that the polling companies got it wrong. Can they be held to account in any way on these matters? There is no way of knowing how scientific or accurate the data they use are and it is all done to drive the sales of newspapers.

I campaigned against the abolition of the Seanad as I thought it was appalling that any Government would want to move from a bicameral to a unicameral system. The word on the street and the feedback from canvassers was that the people would reject the proposal, but *The Irish Times* carried a poll that week that suggested the Seanad would go and that it was a foregone conclusion. It got it horribly wrong, but there were no consequences and no one was held to account. If a Minister had made a statement in the course of a plebiscite that was deemed to be grossly inaccurate, one would have heard about it until the cows came home. Should there be a role for polling in the electoral commission? If and when the commission is up and running, should it have a remit to monitor this behaviour? Polls can sometimes influence voters in an unhealthy way. The Administration of 1997 to 2002 tried to bring forward legislation in 2001 to ban opinion polls, but after it had passed through the Dáil and while it was in the final stages in the Seanad, a Senator spotted an anomaly and it was abandoned. Does an electoral commission need to have a remit which covers polling? There is wide inconsistency in the way information from polls is fed to us and questions need to be asked as to why it is fed to us.

Perhaps Mr. Duggan might answer the questions on the Department of Social Protection. If Ms Dixon wants to respond, she may do so. I will then go to Mr. Donnelly and Mr. Kavanagh.

Mr. Tim Duggan: The Chairman asked about interaction with other Departments. In my opening statement I said the PPS number was available to bodies known as “specified bodies”. They are specified by being included in the Schedule to the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005. The Chairman can see that the list runs to over two pages. He will also see that No. 2 on the list is local authorities and that, accordingly, they have the legislative power to collect and use PPS numbers, as do Revenue and any other Department.

We put together the public service identity dataset, including all those things I listed such as name, address, date of birth, place of birth and PPS number. These are made available through a system called the “single customer view”. Local authorities have an entitlement to access that system to verify the data. We also have a death event notification system which takes death information registered with the GRO and disseminates it through the single customer view infrastructure to any public body, including local authorities, that is entitled to the information and subscribes to the system. Local authorities have the ability to check and validate PPS numbers and all public service identities offered to them by an individual and can check if people have died and have been registered as such.

Ms Helen Dixon: The Chairman asked why the data from the Department of Social Protection for people who had reached the age of 18 years were not shared automatically with the local authorities. It is because there is no legal basis in primary legislation for this to happen. For data of this type to be shared, it would have to be underpinned by specific primary legislation.

Mr. Sean Donnelly: Looking at the polls that were published in the lead-up to the last gen-

eral election, the exit poll was very close to the actual outcome. Indeed, that poll showed Fine Gael on 36.1%, which is exactly what it got. The poll underestimated the Fianna Fáil vote by two percentage points. We have to bear in mind that voters are allowed to change their mind coming up to election day, as often happens in referenda. Just because a person tells a pollster two weeks before the election date that he or she will vote for Fianna Fáil, there is no obligation on the person to follow through on it. People have free agency in this regard.

There have been problems with the reliability of poll findings. The main polling companies, including those which conduct polls for *The Irish Times*, *The Sunday Business Post* and so on, have an excellent record. However, rogue polls are published and we must be very wary of them. Before the last election, the *Sunday Independent* published a series of constituency polls which seemed to have been done on the back of an envelope. They were absolute rubbish. That type of thing should not be allowed because it gives everybody a bad name.

I am wary of suggestions that an electoral commission might have a role in making decisions around polling. In France, a decision was taken to suspend polling in the last week of campaigns, and there was a similar proposal here. Poll findings can work either for or against a party. When leaked poll data showed that Bertie Ahern, as then leader of Fianna Fáil, was heading for an overall majority in the 2002 election, Michael McDowell climbed up a lamp post in Ranelagh and everything changed. As I said, it can work both ways. People may get frightened at the prospect of a particular party winning an overall majority, which can lead to a rowing back of support for that party. If one is in the game, one has to go with it.

In general, the polls produced in Ireland over the years have been pretty good. Everybody is talking about how the polls in Britain did not reflect the actual outcome of the recent general election. I do not know enough about that matter to give a view.

Dr. Adrian Kavanagh: In general, I agree with everything Mr. Donnelly said. In regard to the British election, looking at the poll of polls taken on the day of the election, the main issue was that the Labour Party's actual share of the vote turned out to be two or three percentage points lower than expected. The results for all the other parties, however, were pretty much bang on. The poll of polls predicted the UKIP, for instance, would be at 13% or 14%, which is where it finished. The Green Party, as predicted, secured about 4% of the vote. The problem was in translating those poll figures into seat numbers. A lot of people did not take account of the fact that the UK uses a first-past-the-post electoral system, which is a factor. In addition, there was the knock-on effect of the large swing to the SNP in Scotland, which was always going to result in a drastic reduction in the number of Labour Party seats. The latter would probably have had to be above the Conservative Party in percentage terms to have had a chance of winning more seats than it.

It is often the case that the main issue in regard to polls is probably the question of how to translate the data they provide into seat numbers. We have a proportional representation electoral system in this country, but that does not mean the seat outcome is exactly proportionate. For instance, until 2009, Fianna Fáil generally won a seat bonus at every local and general election. In 2011, however, the party won 17% of the vote but only 12% of the seats. There is no neat relationship between actual percentage share of the vote and seat numbers. Another issue to note is that there is a margin of error associated with polls. Most polls tend to have approximately 1,000 respondents and the margin of error is around 3%. If, say, Fine Gael is at 25%, it is feasible that one poll might have the party at 22% while another puts it at 28%. That is another factor to take into account.

In the case of the Seanad referendum, probably one of the most important issues was turnout. Where turnout is low, as is often the case in referenda, opinion polls are less reliable than would be the case in a general election where, generally, turnout levels tend to be much higher. The polls before the Seanad referendum were probably not as inaccurate as they seemed to be. The issue may have been that not enough of those who intended to vote “Yes” actually turned out on the day. In other words, it may have been that the “No” voters were simply more likely to turn out.

Mr. Donnelly made a very good point regarding constituency polls. I agree that most of our national polls are generally quite consistent and accurate, but there is a problem with constituency polls. In the case of the latter, the number of respondents is usually much lower. If, for example, the sample is only 200, the reliability of the data is reduced. The smaller the number of respondents, the greater the margin of error. In addition, there is a name recognition factor with constituency polls. I recall that one particular poll in Laois-Offaly, for example, had Brian Cowen at 33%. Candidates with greater name recognition, which is usually the candidates who are sitting Deputies, tend to have higher poll ratings. However, after an election campaign, other candidates may catch up. Constituency polls are perhaps the most problematic of all polls for the reasons we have outlined.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses. Before calling Deputy Brian Stanley, I ask members to address any questions they have for a particular delegate directly to that delegate. Otherwise, we will be going around in circles.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the witnesses for attending, particularly Mr. Kenny and his colleagues from the Association of Irish Local Government. I thank Dr. Kennedy for the good news that sitting Deputies have a name recognition advantage. Sometimes that works out and sometimes it does not.

Ms Dixon mentioned there is an over-reliance on one identifier, namely, PPS numbers. Does she have any suggestions as to what other identifiers might be used?

Regarding the IALG presentation, I have a natural bias, as Mr. Kenny and his colleagues know, towards local government taking on as many responsibilities as possible. Do the IALG delegates have any suggestions for dealing with the address-based registration problems we are seeing? Young people, for example, often have two separate addresses, namely, their home address and the address at which they are studying or working. They might live with a boyfriend or girlfriend for a time before returning home to live. Some 300,000 households are in private rented accommodation, which is transient by nature, as opposed to local authority rented accommodation, which tends to be much more long-term. How do the delegates see these issues being dealt with? There is also a cross-boundary issue. In the case of Laois-Offaly, for instance, people might be registered at an address in both counties.

I am mindful of the local information to which local authorities have access and how useful that can be. However, as we have often noted in this committee, that information-gathering capacity has broken down to some extent in a context where we no longer have rate collectors and 700 town councillors are gone. That weakens the process of local intelligence gathering. In addition, political parties do not have the same on-the-ground membership they had 40 or 50 years ago, where there was somebody at every crossroads. How do we deal with the issue of multiple registrations? I accept that some of the benefits of local intelligence are still there as a result of the efforts of local authority staff and the 949 members of local authorities. However, capacity in this regard has been compromised.

Dr. Kavanagh referred to the staffing and management of the electoral commission. Who does he envisage heading the body up and how should that person be selected? The *ad hoc* boundary commissions do not always deal us the hand we would like. In the case of Laois-Offaly, we have inherited a piece of south Kildare that has no relationship to Laois. Some people have asked whether there is bias there and how those decisions are made. Oireachtas Members from Laois-Offaly discovered the changes in the constituency when they found a map in their pigeon holes one day. I have no idea how the decisions in regard to my constituency were arrived at, because there is no accountability. Who should be included in these commissions, including the boundary commission and the SIPO, and how should they be selected?

Ms Helen Dixon: The Deputy has asked a difficult question and, while I want to be as helpful to the committee as I can, it is worth making the point that it is not up to the Data Protection Commissioner to make suggestions on what the solution should be. We can, however, assist in assessing the data protection and privacy implications of any solution that might be proposed. In terms of suggestions that could potentially be considered by any executive body examining this area, it might perhaps involve an enhanced version of the current registration system. What issues arise with the current system in terms of duplication and fraud and could it be enhanced without using additional personal data to improve the system and eliminate some of the problems? While I do not suggest they offer more viable or less privacy invasive solutions, other jurisdictions have, for example, investigated biometric data measures. Another alternative could be using different identity data such as a passport and a copy of a bill from the voter's current address. There is no doubt that the PPS number would come into the mix. The new UK individual electoral registration system has most recently used that country's national insurance number. The PPS number would need to be considered as a viable solution, but we must also adhere to data minimisation principles. The PPS number solution would require voters who are validly on the current register to re-register with their PPS numbers or, alternatively, a data matching exercise could be carried out with the social protection database to clear a certain percentage of those already on the register, thereby avoiding the need for them to provide their PPS numbers. Only new registrants and those for whom data matches were not found would be required to re-register. The details of how the PPS number is used would dictate the data protection issues arising. I hope that is helpful.

Deputy Brian Stanley: My other question was directed to the Association of Irish Local Government delegation in regard to preventing multiple registrations within a local authority or two separate local authorities. I am not sure the proposals would address the problems with the address based systems, given that people are now more transient and that local intelligence can be lacking.

Mr. Adrian Devitt: The Deputy has made two very good points. The fact that people are so mobile nowadays creates a big problem for us. That is why it is important that local councils continue to have an input. They would be aware of people's history and different movement types. Tying people to PPS numbers would probably be helpful, but the issue is quite complicated in general. Voters are required to get a Garda stamp to complete form RFA3 to change their address. It is an onerous form to complete. Voters might register twice without bothering to inform the local authority. Unless the council official notices the anomaly, it will not be fixed. Sometimes good staff will notice the anomaly and remove the individual from the register after checking his or her date of birth, but much of the time that does not happen. The bigger sin is that the voter is removed from the register and, therefore, cannot vote. The register numbers are inaccurate because people are on multiple registers, as we can see as politicians on the ground. We definitely have to consider tying registration to the PPS number.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask Dr. Kavanagh to address my question on who would head an electoral commission and who would appoint members.

Chairman: We might ask Mr. Donnelly to respond also.

Dr. Adrian Kavanagh: It is an interesting question. In regard to the constituency commission, the last report on local election boundaries was prepared by a commission comprising five or six people who were given six months to redraw boundaries across the country. I was on one of the two previous committees for the 2008 redrawing of local election boundaries. We had the same amount of time. The committee with which I was involved was only examining Dublin and the cities. From my experience, we had sufficient time for our examination, but we still made mistakes. There is more scope to review the proposals made by the two local election committees and the constituency commission. Perhaps we should consider the model used in the United Kingdom, whereby instead of the commission or committee of committees producing a final report, at some stage early in the process, even before public submissions are invited, two or three options are set out in a draft report. If, for example, there is a proposal to merge County Offaly with part of north Tipperary, there would be an opportunity to respond.

The other problem with the commission and the committees is that, either because of the number of voters or the level of work involved, it becomes a numbers game when it comes to local elections. There might not be sufficient people in County Laois for a three seat constituency and, therefore, the constituency would simply be expanded to include the additional numbers. This is something that might require further thought. The current guideline is that every constituency should have a population per Deputy that is within 5% of the national average, although in practice that figure has varied as high as 9% in Mayo East in 1983. This is something that probably has not been given sufficient thought. My sense of the constituency commission is that it puts greater emphasis on proportionality over continuity of place based on county based elements. I understand the current general election boundaries breach 15 or 16 county boundaries. Perhaps we need to discuss the extent to which proportionality should be seen as more important than maintaining county boundaries. Perhaps there is more scope to preserve county boundaries in constituencies, even if it means the population is 10% too large.

Deputy Brian Stanley: In regard to the boundary commission, I accept that there may be cross-county boundaries, but the preference should be for larger constituencies of five or six seats. However, that is another day's work. The boundary commission should at least try to align constituency boundaries with municipal districts in the adjoining county rather than biting a piece from two municipal districts.

Dr. Adrian Kavanagh: That is a good point. In regard to the Deputy's point about larger constituencies, Professor John Coakley in UCD carried out useful research which indicated that if there was scope for larger constituency units, it would not be necessary to move away from county boundaries. If, for example, we had six seat constituencies, we might have combined counties Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon in one constituency without drawing in parts of south Donegal or west Cavan to make up the numbers for the four seat Sligo-Leitrim constituency. What was the other question?

Deputy Brian Stanley: It was on the appointment of the commission, with regard to who should be on it and how people should be selected or appointed.

Dr. Adrian Kavanagh: The commission must be answerable to the Oireachtas and there should be all-party agreement on this. As I tried to say in my initial submission, ideally there

should be an identifiable head of the commission, an ombudsman or electoral czar. This is for various reasons, the main one being it is important to have an identifiable person who can speak on behalf of the commission to try to get across what it is doing. It should not be someone who is or has been involved in politics, nor should the person be from the administrative sector. It should be someone outside the political administrative sector who has a very good understanding of how elections operate. I am sure Mr. Donnelly has ideas about this.

Mr. Seán Donnelly: I am not so worried about the personalities involved. I am more concerned about how it should operate. I do not disagree with what Dr. Kavanagh said. We seem to use High Court judges for everything we establish.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We have begun to run out of them.

Mr. Seán Donnelly: I do not know why it is. It is just one of those things which seems to have grown up. I do not see the necessity of it. There are many other well-qualified people. My main concern is how the electoral commission is established and operates. I will leave it to other experts to comment on the personalities involved.

Mr. Peter McVitty: I am from a very rural part of the country. When I was canvassing I met an 88 year old man who has lived in the same house all his life and has never left the area. He was taken off the register. He cycled to vote but when he arrived at the polling station he discovered he was not on the register. There should have been something in place for that man. The people at the polling station knew in their hearts and souls he had not come from somewhere else. I have heard a lot about regulations and rules from the people sitting behind me. We must have regulations but some of them are a bit over the top. When a child is born, he or she gets a PPS number, and when they reach 18 years of age, the State stops their children's allowance. It should be compulsory for everyone to vote. It would wake people up a bit if it were introduced.

The changes introduced by the boundary commission in Cavan mean 13,000 voters in west Cavan have been put into a constituency with Sligo and Leitrim, as were 8,000 voters in Donegal. Did whoever came up with that idea really put any thought into what they were doing? My municipal area has been divided in two. Part of it is in Sligo-Leitrim and the other is in Cavan-Monaghan. It is ridiculous. Who picks the people on the boundary committee who introduce these rules? I speak to people, and other councillors here deal with the same issues every day. People at the top do not think of those who understand what is happening at the bottom. The people who deal with this every day of the week should be listened to more.

Deputy Robert Dowds: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I hesitate to say this, but Mr. Donnelly makes a very strong case for being in charge of the electoral commission with his passion for the subject and his breadth of knowledge. What is the opinion of the Data Protection Commissioner and Department of Social Protection on Mr. Donnelly's suggestion that the CSO has the knowledge and expertise to be able to bring it about? I will be heretical and state I agree with Mr. Donnelly that we should have electronic voting. If we were to have it, there should also be a paper vote, so if there were ever a contest on whether the electronic result was correct the paper vote could be also examined. I am not a statistical expert, but I understand electronic voting would be more accurate in determining a seat being decided by three or four votes. We should strongly pass on the message that it would be very useful if the census age division went from zero to 18 years as opposed to zero to 19 years. This would be useful with regard to drawing up an electoral register. What do the witnesses think of the idea of the electoral commission looking after the boundary commission? I ask this because of the

points made by Mr. McVitty. The constituency to which he referred is the ideal example of something being put forward which a person of any political hue would not have put together. There ought to be a political input to the electoral commission, perhaps from retired politicians or people with in-depth political knowledge and expertise who will act independently. How can we best arrive at this without it being politically partisan?

Senator Terry Brennan: I thank the witnesses for their presentations, particularly the members of the Association of Irish Local Government for their very comprehensive presentation on the role of local authorities. Ten years ago I was in a football dressing room. I was not playing, but a man who was boasted that he and his wife had spent the entire day in Northern Ireland and that he had voted 11 times. I took note of what he said but I did not pass any comment. The next local elections, in which I was involved, were held in June 2009. I decided to check on my friend who had spent the day voting in Northern Ireland. Lo and behold he was on the register six times at six different polling stations in the one county. Someone spoke about councillors having local knowledge. This actually happened to me. I asked the rate collector responsible for compiling the late additions to the register whether this was a small man or a big man with curly hair and it was the man. Two of the polling stations were across the road from each other. This is a problem and it must be identified. We must ensure it does not happen again. I believe it does happen. I will not go so far as to say it happens mainly in Border counties where people may have come from or gone to the North, but it does happen. I suspect there were four or five people in the car that went north that day but I cannot guarantee it.

Let me draw attention to another issue involving local knowledge. The Chairman will be aware of it. People who had emigrated to England, the United States and other parts of the world were still on our local registers. I ensured that they were removed from them. They were on the register so that they could vote in an election if it was held when they were home for summer holidays, for example. If we do not keep our registers up to date, we cannot have an accurate reflection of the percentage return. How do we overcome the problems? There are people who have died but who are still on the register. In some instances, their voting cards may be used by somebody else. I feel strongly about this issue. There must be some way of identifying those who need to be removed from the register.

I took my wife with me for the day to the west of Ireland. When having lunch in a hotel, she asked me who knew we were there on that day and whom I had told we were going. I told her I had told nobody. My wife said she had asked the reception whether Terry Brennan had received a telephone call and was told that I had and that I had taken it. I had taken no call. However, I discovered there was another Terry Brennan in the hotel on the same day. We must ensure there is proper identification. It could be a PPS number. Councillor McVitty mentioned the concept of people having a PPS number from when they are born. This obviously does not apply to people born in Northern Ireland and living in the South, and *vice versa*. Could we have co-operation between North and South to ensure no problems arise? I believe what I have described has happened and will continue to happen if there is no proper identification system. If one is voting electronically and keys in a voting card number, such as 456, and that number is registered, one cannot or should not be able to go to another polling station and enter that number.

There are people who boasted to me that they have never voted and never will, yet they are still on the register. There should be some way of removing people from the register if they do not vote in two successive elections. I believe Councillor McVitty mentioned compulsory voting. It is a great idea. People are killing one another in foreign lands for the right to have a

say. One should relinquish that responsibility if one does not exercise one's democratic right.

Senator Denis Landy: I do not wish that the Chairman lose his seat in the next general election, but should that unfortunate event happen, nobody would be more eminently qualified to head the boundary or electoral commission. Very few in this room, despite taking pride in their knowledge of elections and statistics, could beat the Chairman in this regard. I believe I lost a bet with him on one occasion; perhaps I never paid him. I commend him on his knowledge.

I apologise as I was not able to be here for the earlier contributions. I was representing my electorate with a Minister as part of a delegation. I have a number of points. This is our fourth or fifth day listening to submissions on the electoral commission. The PPS issue has arisen on every occasion. I lay down a challenge for the IALG. Representatives of the CCMA were before us. It is now within the ability of the IALG and CCMA, armed with the knowledge we have and the information imparted to us on the making available of PPS data to local authorities, to fix the issue once and for all. It is a big challenge but I put it to the delegates. I would like to hear their response.

Councillor McVitty told a story about an 88 year old. I encountered a similar case with a 90 year old in the 2011 election. He is now deceased. I knocked on the man's door only to discover he had been taken off the register although he had lived in the same house for 49 years as a council tenant. That was appalling. It is down to people like ourselves in the system to solve this. There is a solution and I would like the delegates' response on that.

With respect to the eminent speaker who referred to centralising the franchise, I totally disagree. We have seen too many services centralised in this country. I would probably need two hands to count them. In every case, a mess has been made. The solution is not to centralise but to get to the nub of the problem. The nub of the problem is that nobody is grasping the problem in his hand and dealing with it. That is what we need to see and that is why I am laying down the challenge.

I am intrigued by opinion polls at times. I take a steer from the Chairman because I have won a lot of money over the years based on his predictions, particularly on the Seanad referendum. I do not mind saying that we lumped the money on when we saw the ridiculous opinion polls based on knocking on doors that I had knocked on throughout Tipperary for two or three months. The opinion being obtained from those who were committed to going out to vote was that they were going to vote "No" to the abolition of the Seanad. The best opinion poll is one that one produces on one's own patch.

I get a little annoyed when opinion polls carried out at national level make downward extrapolations and give results on a constituency-by-constituency basis. The power bases for elected people are different in every constituency. Therefore, they should all be taken with a health warning. I do not agree that they should be banned a week or any other time before an election. They should be available right up to polling day, because I do believe they contribute. I accept the comment that polls did affect trends before polling day and that voters are allowed to change their views.

On the Boundary Commission, there are now new proposals for the changing of boundaries in Waterford, Drogheda, Laois, Carlow and perhaps one other location. I guarantee that if Councillor McVitty checked who made the changes regarding Leitrim and Donegal, and all the other cracked ideas, he will find there was no retired, experienced politician on the boundary

commission. I disregard the comments that retired politicians should not be on any commission, including the electoral commission. Nobody has more knowledge of the system than those who are practised in it, in some cases for 20 or 30 years, and who have voluntarily retired. As stated earlier, their experience is cast aside in favour of the retired judge.

I would like a response on the various issues I have raised.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am sorry I had to leave the committee briefly. I would have liked to hear everything the delegates had to say. I wish to raise a few issues. There has been a significant concentration on the electoral register. Unlike some of the previous speakers, who are concerned that people could have nine votes, I am trying to get votes for the people I represent, because one in four people in my constituency, Dublin West, are from outside Ireland. In the most recent referendum, young people did not have to be persuaded to vote when they had something to vote for that they cared about. Many European people who are married to Irish people and who have been living here for a long time had no vote in the referendum, although they would have liked to have a vote and should have had one. I am more concerned about that than I am about citizens abroad. In my area, the big problem is getting people on the register rather than getting them off it.

The Dáil and local authorities are not representative of the population. They are too old, too male and too pale. They certainly will not be helped if we have a register that does not reflect the reality of the changing Ireland. According to the National Youth Council of Ireland, 30% of 18 to 24 year olds are not registered. I believe the Union of Students in Ireland, which was before the committee last week, conducted a massive mass registration of young people for the referendum. These are serious issues that need to be looked at by the electoral commission. I do not know if our speakers have considered this but, as a result of the housing crisis - because the Government, in the main, is not building local authority houses - and homelessness, every time a person moves, he or she must go to the Garda station and get re-registered. I faced this issue last year. A range of people in my constituency are homeless or have had to move because of rent increases. The rental sector makes up a massive proportion of the population. It is about 700,000 people. The electoral register is a significant issue.

We probably need an electoral commission for a longer period, because these issues will not be resolved if local authorities are working at different levels. I have some fears. Creating super-quangos is a problem. I would not like to see staff in local authorities losing their jobs, because they are generally decent jobs and there are few enough of those. Local authorities are being divested of all their responsibilities, from bin collection to water. There are no houses. I do not know what councillors actually do but I would not like to see councils losing more staff. I think that is a role that should be maintained.

We have spoken previously at the committee about judges and male academics. It does not have to be a retired judge who heads this up.

With regard to PPS numbers, I read what the Data Protection Commissioner had to say. Could the witnesses comment on how this could help? Without permanent storage, is there a way this can work? There is massive paranoia in society about PPS numbers, as we saw recently in respect of Irish Water. Once you mention PPS numbers, people go into freefall about it because of their distrust of the Government and the establishment. If this was implemented without proper safeguards, people would be very concerned about it. How could it be done?

It is ludicrous that so many young people are not registered when this could be done auto-

matically upon reaching the age of 18. There are many people who become Irish citizens. I have attended ceremonies because I know a lot of people who have gone through the process. They should be handed a form to register that day. Instead, they do not even realise that they must upgrade their vote from local to general elections. They just think, "Oh, I'm an Irish citizen," but they are not on the register. Going around my area, I find it ludicrous. In one area, 51% of people are not Irish. You might as well throw the register out the window.

Registration of political parties is another thing that is listed as a possible function of the electoral commission. It should be easier for people to designate themselves in a certain way for the purpose of standing for election without necessarily having to establish a political party. In other countries, there are alliances of people for the purpose of elections. Otherwise, a person is designated as non-party. This is something that should be looked at, although I suspect it will not be looked at because it suits the current system to have two big parties and few small parties, although some of the big parties are becoming smaller and will continue to do so. It is linked to political reform. There is a list system in other countries. People can go on a list to stand for election. Being designated as non-party automatically deprives a person of identity, and this should be examined, because politics is changing in this country and people are more willing to look for alternative formations.

Senator Cáit Keane: I apologise, as I had to leave earlier to go to the Seanad. We have discussed this matter for a few days. We have a lot of experts before us today who have been dealing with the organisation of elections for years. Dr. Kavanagh and Mr. Donnelly have done *pro rata* work for this State. When the State needs to be told what it should do regarding central registration and data collection, electronic organisation and anything that needs to be known, where does it go? It does not go to a State organ or body. It goes to either Mr. Donnelly or Dr. Kavanagh for central analysis. I am not saying they should be done out of a job, but this job should be incorporated into the electoral commission, because there is a body of knowledge there, going back to 1991 in the case of Mr. Donnelly and his first book. You do not throw out the baby with the bathwater. I am all for setting up an electoral commission, but we need to take note of what is there.

There is a body of knowledge in local authorities. When rates were being collected and rate collectors visited every house, it was easy for them to know what was happening. Local councillors have a body of knowledge. They know who lives in the houses. We should not throw out the baby with the bathwater in this respect either. We need local expertise and knowledge. We need central registration and collection of data to enable everybody throughout the country to have a central means of access. In Mr. Donnelly's submission, I saw that when he went looking for information he had to go to every local authority, and they all had different answers. Eventually, he had to put it in writing and give reasons why he wanted it. Local authorities have the information but each one has it in its own database. Centralising the information for people who want to carry out central data processing is very important. The electoral commission could make use of that. In setting up anything, one needs to look at the expertise in local authorities.

There is considerable criticism of the electoral register. Every Senator and Deputy here has spoken about people who are on and off the register. I know Senator Brennan spoke about somebody who voted nine times. All of this can and will be corrected at a central level. If a person moves out of one local authority area, he or she is not required to de-register. A central database would correct that, because the computers would be talking to each other.

I am sorry for concentrating on Mr. Donnelly. I do so because he has so much expertise.

One point that was made in his submission was that it was not electronic voting that was wrong but the actual process of counting. There was nothing wrong with the system of voting. Mr. Donnelly made the point that if it had been done centrally it would not have happened, because they were all doing their own thing at a particular time. Manual voting is not perfect either. It is not the case that everything manual is correct and everything electronic is wrong. IT is brilliant for this type of thing. Again, Mr. Donnelly said that he had never seen a recount come up with the same count twice. If we keep this in mind, we will not be frightened away from doing things electronically. We should not be afraid just because it failed us once. It was made into a political football in the past.

I was here for the presentation by the Data Protection Commissioner on PPS numbers. I can see why people would be afraid of using PPS numbers. Any European country with electronic voting has a central identifier. We do not have that in Ireland. It is only in the past couple of years that all Departments have begun talking to each other on computers. I cannot remember who made it, but one of the recommendations was that the registration of electors should be contracted out to the Central Statistics Office. Why would a body be set up if its function is to be contracted out? That is passing it on. The knowledge and expertise in local councils should be used. That information should be collated. It was not possible to do that in the past, but it is possible now with computers, and it would not involve transferring information every four hours onto floppy discs; that is done automatically. It is not that the function should be removed from the local authorities and given to another body. We can ensure that everyone works together to do it properly. There are problems with the process. At the last meeting, criticism was expressed of the fact that councils no longer check the number of people living in a house. I live in Dublin, and last week I had a visit from someone in South Dublin County Council checking on the number of people who live in my house. They were doing a check. Councils do those checks, but we have had too many experiences of people being crossed off the register if they did not return the form or whatever. I have heard many Senators and TDs mention that.

I am sorry I was not here for the entire presentation. I thank the people who have done what we should have been doing nationally for years. I am sorry I missed their contribution, but it is available online, as well as that of Mr. Liam Kenny.

Chairman: What was the book you referred to from 1991?

Senator Cáit Keane: Was it *Poll Position*?

Chairman: Correct. I am just testing your knowledge. I call Deputy Mulherin.

Deputy Michelle Mulherin: I am competing with Senator Keane now.

Chairman: Members might keep to asking questions, because I will revert to the panel for some brief closing remarks.

Deputy Michelle Mulherin: There is a lot of emphasis on the electoral register because that is the empowering point at which one can participate, through one's vote, in democracy. However, we must also consider that we will never have the optimum position, which is that everybody who should be on the electoral register is on it. There are two parts to that, the first of which is trying to get people to register, which has been debated. The second part is that, as Councillor McVitty stated, there will be occasions on which the names of people who have been on the register for 40 or 45 years are removed. There should be accountability for that, as there is in every other area. We are sitting here recounting such stories. There should be a

paper trail in terms of the reason someone's name was removed. The county registrar has a role, and people's absence can be notified after deaths and so on, but if a person is looking to vote, some evidence should be provided as to the reason their name was removed. When elected representatives, for example, find out that someone has been removed from the register, it would be worthwhile for them to follow up on that to determine the reason. If there was not a valid reason for removing the person's name, somebody should be held accountable. Otherwise, it will continue to happen. The evidence that might have to be produced to show why a person has been removed from the register could vary. I have encountered cases in which the name of a person who had lived in an area all of his or her life was removed from the register. Somebody should be accountable for that if we are serious about doing our business.

I agree that we should cater for people from European Union countries who live here and may have married here but who will never get to vote in referendums or general elections. Those people are *de facto* citizens of the country. Alternatively, we could have a simpler process whereby people from EU countries who have lived here for a certain length of time can become citizens. It would not be as expensive to provide for that.

I have not asked any questions but I would make the point that we are not a nanny state. Every time we start moving in this direction we say we will look after this, that and the other area. That is unachievable. I would like to see more of an emphasis on people who want to participate in the democratic process, and that begins at a younger age. We never get a full turnout in elections in terms of the numbers on the register, even allowing for errors. Many people are not interested in voting. I agree with Deputy Coppinger that people vote when they are interested in the outcome and, in fairness, some of the issues are not as exciting as the marriage equality referendum, but it is necessary and it is part of our democracy. It is important that people participate. We should have that conversation. Democracy can be laborious. There is an idea that it is all about those types of conversation, even the conversations we are having now. We might try to glamorise the process on occasion when we are trying to get votes, but we might engender that idea when young people are in secondary school, and not just expect them to register and vote when they become of age. There are young people of 16 who are fit to vote but there are people of 21 who will never want to vote. That is not the issue. It is about instilling in people the idea of citizenship, and part of being Irish and participating in the democratic process is using one's vote and making the best decision possible. We must also engender the idea that my vote is equal to that of the President or the man living down the street.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are not all equal.

Deputy Michelle Mulherin: We are by virtue of our vote.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is not democracy when politicians keep breaking promises.

Chairman: You have already spoken, Deputy Coppinger. Thank you for that insightful comment. We will now hear closing comments. Many of the points have been made well over the past six weeks. We are rehashing many of the topics, and the questions, raised with witnesses over that six-week period. I ask the witnesses to reflect on some of those if they wish to make closing comments. We are a little caught for time. I will call Dr. Adrian Kavanagh, who will be followed by Mr. Seán Donnelly, the representatives of the Association of Irish Local Government and, if they wish, the Data Protection Commissioner and the representatives from the Department of Social Protection. I ask Dr. Kavanagh to be brief.

Dr. Adrian Kavanagh: I will make a few brief points. In response to the points made by

Deputy Dowds and Senator Landy on political input, the point I was trying to make in my initial submission was on the idea of having a political advisory committee. I agree that politicians, party workers and people working in political organisations know a great deal about politics. They know about aspects of politics that academics do not have a clue about, so expertise is needed. The suggestion I tried to make in my submission is that the best way to do that would be to have an advisory committee made up of former politicians, current TDs, Senators, councillors, members of party headquarters and party workers. It would have to be a good mix representing all parties, groupings and alliances that was balanced in terms of gender, age and area. That would be my argument.

On the register, my sense is that the PPS number is the best way to go about it. Looking at what they do in the United Kingdom, there is scope to use online registration, not just to register people but to facilitate people who are moving house. It may need to be centralised. Eircodes could help the process even more because now one can type in one's name, PPS number and Eircode and that will show the holding district and the county one should be in, but we still need the locally based councillor. As Deputy Mulherin and others stated, we need to prevent people from being accidentally removed from the register. That can happen where people get into a moral panic about the registers being in a mess and the need for them to be cleaned up. As we have seen in the past, many people, usually older people, can be taken off the register because they did not complete forms or they were unable to check their registration online.

Deputy Coppinger made a good point about not having a committee made up of male judges or male academics. I would argue that some female academics would be excellent members of a commission. Dr. Theresa Reidy has spoken here, and there are a few others. We have to move away from the idea that every commission has to have a High Court judge or other such person. We do need expertise, but other voices are necessary also.

The idea of removing people from the register if they do not vote in two elections is bad politics. The danger is that after a while there might not be many people left on the register. Who should be removed? It might be younger voters or, in the case of a low turnout, people from disadvantaged areas. I do not like that idea.

I understand the point about compulsory voting. My argument is that we should only consider compulsory voting when the electoral system has been cleaned up. Otherwise, we have no right to talk about compulsory voting. If we had compulsory voting, people would have to have the right to choose "none of the above" when it comes to voting.

Mr. Seán Donnelly: I will make some general points. I believe an electoral commission should be set up, and it could be done fairly quickly once the staffing and so on is in place. The very first thing to do is to get a decent website up and running. One can do a lot of the stuff that should be transparent in Irish politics. I refer to historical data on elections and other such information. Irish politics is full of myths. The register came up as an issue a few years ago when a by-election turnout was dreadful. People panicked and said the turnout was dropping and people were losing interest in politics, which never happened in this country before, and all of that nonsense. The obvious thing was that the electoral register was getting out of control. People now have much more mobility. People who were born in Donegal had a vote there, but if they went to UCG they had a vote there and if they were working in Dublin they had a vote there. They voted once, which meant there was 100% turnout, but because they were on the register three times it was considered to be a 33% turnout. That has been the problem. The solution was to check the register. I remember thinking it would be great because I would see every register, but the way the website works is that one puts a name in and one is told whether

that name is on the register. Big deal. That is the most ridiculous thing ever. It is nonsense. We were not serious about that.

It is obvious from the hearings that the biggest item is the electoral register. It is a huge issue. If one considers the number of times it has been mentioned at the meetings, one can see it is way ahead of anything else. It is obviously very important and it must be treated with the utmost respect. Deputy Coppinger referred to getting people on the register and removing duplication. That is extremely important. It is not good enough in this day and age if we are making decisions based on inaccurate facts in terms of turnout and such issues. We must have transparency. We must have all of the figures available to us.

I remember some crowd did a survey in this country a few years ago and reported it to be one of the most corrupt countries. I wondered what they were talking about. They quoted certain figures. A couple of weeks later they withdrew the statement because it was based on inaccurate facts and they did not stand up when challenged.

It has been said that transfers decide who gets elected. Transfers do not decide elections. The first preference vote mostly decides elections. It is only in 10% of the seats that the transfers play a big part. There is all this mythology about elections and the fact that the turnout is dropping. We must get real. The hearings have shown how important the register of electors is. It is definitely not good enough at the moment. It does not work and it is giving us the wrong facts and figures. I accept there are problems with PPS numbers. I do not mind what way they do it.

The census is a system that works. It is carried out by the Central Statistics Office. It works because it is done by a central body. It deals with a population in this country of 4,588,252. We are a small country. Could one imagine us doing the census through the county councils and then have someone adding the numbers up at the end? It would not work. A centralised approach works. One would break it down into the electoral districts. The way the Revenue Commissioners probably works is that it does not check everybody's VAT; it carries out random sampling or has another way of doing it. That will work. We know that the census has worked.

Chairman: I have one point to put to Mr. Donnelly before we go any further. Gay Mitchell did a quiz book of Irish politics in 1990 and he did a follow-up in 1994. One of the first questions in the 1994 publication was "What is psephology?". His explanation was that it was the sociological and statistical analysis of election counts and trends. In my experience there is only one person who has referenced most elections in recent years in this country and that is Seán Donnelly. I thank him very much for that and for his contribution this afternoon.

Deputy Robert Dowds: I asked Mr. Donnelly a question about electronic voting and having a paper trail as well.

Mr. Seán Donnelly: I agree with that. The thing about electronic voting is that one gets far better and more accurate results out of it. The issue is transfers, even though I derided them a few minutes ago. If one has transfers after the first count, an electronic system only uses the first batch of papers on the system. I use it in opinion polling and it has worked for me over the past 15 years. It goes through every vote and every paper and does it in percentages, so it is a much purer form. That is important when one is down to small margins involving between one and three votes. That is why electronic voting is much more dependable and accurate and one gets a lot more out of it.

Chairman: It is entirely accurate in that sense.

Mr. Damien Geoghegan: I agree with Mr. Donnelly. There was much talk about electronic voting, but unless the State can show that it can get various websites working right and IT systems in different agencies, people just will not trust electronic voting. It is as simple as that. Mr. Donnelly touched on the point when he referred to *checktheregister.ie*. If there is one thing that is in a worse state than the register, it is the *checktheregister.ie* website. That is a fact. Young people nowadays want information at their fingertips, at a couple of clicks of a button. One has various websites and census results going back to the late 1800s, and one can find out what house and what street one's great great grandfather lived in, but when one goes onto *checktheregister.ie* one cannot even find one's own house on it.

Local authorities need to do a lot of simple things. For example, when a local authority house is allocated, that person should immediately be placed on the register. It is as simple as that. The supplementary register should also be open longer for additions. It is closed too early prior to polling day. If one is out canvassing and one meets someone six weeks prior to an election and they are not on the register, one can get them onto the register, but if one meets a person four or five days beforehand it is too late. If one had met them the previous week it would have been possible. We need to consider such issues and keep the supplementary register open that bit longer.

Quite a lot of people do not want to go on the register. That will have to be dealt with. Whatever about compulsory voting, everybody has an address or a place where they reside and perhaps one should at least have compulsory registration. There are a number of reasons people do not want to go on the register. They may not want their domestic situation, for example, being brought to the attention of the authorities. That is something we need to deal with as well. It is not a simple or a black-and-white issue. There is much food for thought there.

Senator Denis Landy: Councillor Geoghegan is a Waterford man who loves a challenge, such as the one in Thurles the other day. Will he take on the issue with the County and City Managers Association, CCMA, in terms of what I said about PPS numbers? Will he engage with the CCMA to see if a solution could be found? The ball is in the court of the local authorities. They are the critical people in the equation.

Mr. Tim Duggan: I agree with Deputy Coppinger that there has been quite a degree of sensitivity around PPS numbers in recent times in particular. Notwithstanding that, it is worth remembering that the PPS number has been established as the unique personal identifier for engaging in transactions with the public service and, consequently, that is the context in which it should be considered. After all, it is the outcome of an Act of Parliament for that very specific purpose.

In addition, serious consideration should be given to the fact that beyond the PPS number there is the public service identity dataset, which has very valuable information in it that could be of pertinence to an electoral register and the maintenance of it, such as people's nationalities, dates of birth and other information of that nature. The whole idea of people going onto the register automatically on reaching 18 years of age could be fashioned out of that dataset and its leveraging.

A number of contributors mentioned changes of address, people emigrating and such issues that arise for the register. In reality, none of the identity infrastructure that is currently in place will adequately deal with that. What happens in other countries is they maintain population

registers, and if we are serious about dealing with continual changing of address and people leaving the country then the only way to deal with that is through a legislative population register, as exists in central European countries in particular.

Ms Helen Dixon: The Oireachtas can, of course, legislate to create solutions to the various issues we have heard about with the electoral register, but the solutions do not necessarily need to involve collecting additional personal data in each case. For example, data matching in relation to the existing register could be provided for by matching up against a consolidated Department of Social Protection website. When this was done in the UK, 66% of the entries on the register were validated automatically through data matching without the need for people to provide additional or personal information. Only the 34% that could not be matched then had to provide additional identity information. That is one solution that could be examined in the first instance. If the use of PPS numbers is legislated for - it may well be a viable solution in some of the issues that have been identified - we need to be clear that it does resolve the issues and that it does not create further issues. We need to be sure it does not create a chilling effect in terms of those seeking to register to vote. Deputy Coppinger mentioned some of the sensitivities we have seen around the use of PPS numbers. All of those could be mitigated. If it is a good idea to use PPS numbers, a proper privacy impact assessment, which includes public consultation, to identify what the sensitivities are and explain why it has been proposed as a solution, will mitigate those risks.

Chairman: I thank all the witnesses for their contributions. All of their exchanges with us will help us in our deliberations in the preparation of our report later in the year, probably in September. I thank the witnesses for taking time out of their busy schedules to attend. It is very much appreciated.

I propose we suspend for five minutes and then resume in private session to deal with correspondence.

Sitting suspended at 4.50 p.m. and resumed at 4.55 p.m.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.55 p.m. and adjourned at 5.10 p.m. *sine die*.