

Eoghan Murphy, Seanad Abolition Debate (Trinity College, September 2013)

You would think from listening to NO side in this campaign that if people vote to abolish the Seanad on Friday, that it will throw our country in to some kind of political crisis – that the system will be so undermined that our democracy will lie in tatters and chaos will ensue.

At the same time you are led to believe that retaining and reforming the Seanad – even though no one can agree on the correct formula – will solve all our political ills and that we will have a great parliament of great parliamentarians fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

Nonsense. It is complete nonsense. A false choice. Abolishing the Seanad will not erode our democracy, because the Seanad is not a part of our democracy. Its existence and how it functions is grossly undemocratic.

There are many problems with our political system. But to think that reforming the Seanad is the answer to them is unfortunately misguided. It is akin to rebuilding the garden shed when the roof of the house is leaking. It is Dáil Éireann that needs to be rebuilt. We are standing in our own way a bit here and that is natural. Because we have grown up with a second chamber in our political system we assume that that means that we should have one, or that we need one.

And yet we know from best international practice that small countries like ours do not need a second chamber to have a healthy and robust democracy. Are we so special, are we so different?

What powers?

What powers could you give the Seanad that would give it a meaningful role in the political system? To give it similar powers to Dáil Éireann would be to create a copy of the chamber that we already have; we do not need to create a second Dáil. To give the Seanad powers to amend or veto Dáil legislation would be to create a second chamber that undermines the democratic legitimacy of the first, Dáil Éireann – elected by you as a parliament. And to create a second chamber with weaker powers than the Dáil would be to return to the status quo.

Experts?

Perhaps we could use it as a chamber for certain expertise, electing paediatricians, economists and physicists to debate important legislation? But these experts would only have expertise on that particular area of Irish life – what good is it having an expert paediatrician in such a chamber when debating legislation on Maritime Law for example? We could use these experts far more efficiently by having them present at Oireachtas committee hearings, as we did with the recent Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill.

There is no argument for a second chamber - we do not need a second Dáil. We do not need a House of Lords for political patronage or for maintaining the elitism that exists in Irish

politics. We are not so large and diverse a country with a Federal system that requires a Senate to politically stalemate a House of Representatives and hinder attempts at sensible progress. We need one parliament, elected by the people, to represent them in one chamber and to work on the national issues of the day.

Reform the Dáil

We have that in Dáil Éireann. Yes it needs to be reformed – no one is denying this. The government reform programme is currently underway and while not yet going far enough in my opinion, the work of parliament and the work of government is never finished. It is a process, a constantly evolving dynamic that is always in need of self-reflection and of change.

And I will continue to push this agenda forward, in to areas like whip reform, reform of the Ceann Comhairle's powers, and wrestling greater power and independence for the Dáil. Making the Dáil the check and balance on the government. But that is where our focus should be. The question of Dáil reform is not answered by focussing on the Seanad.

And I have a genuine concern that to embark on a process of reform of the Seanad would unnecessarily waste tax payers' time and money, would get in the way of Dáil Reform, and still would not solve the problem. The Seanad has no meaningful role now and will have no role once the Dáil has been reformed. Better so to get rid of the Seanad now while the option is before us.

This is not a referendum about whether or not the people want to abolish the Seanad or Reform it, despite the attempts of some to fool the public in this way. This is about whether or not we want to abolish the Seanad, or stick with the status quo, with business as usual in Irish politics.

A number of arguments have been put forward in this campaign against abolition of the Seanad.

Power grab

Arguments that say the proposal is a power grab by the government. Rubbish. The Seanad has no power. The last time the Seanad delayed a government bill was in 1964. And that was a bill on pawnbrokers. So there is no power there. And surely the last thing we need in this time of change and with so much left to do is more delays on important legislation.

In fact, I believe that to keep the Seanad would be a power grab given the extra powers and money that its existence gives to the political parties and government of the day.

Necessary to have 2 chambers

You will hear arguments that it is necessary for a democracy to have a second parliamentary chamber. It is not. Denmark, Finland and Norway are all European countries of comparable size with only one chamber. And they all feature, together with other unicameral countries like New Zealand, in the top ten on the OECD Democracy Index. Some of the world's best democracies have only one chamber.

Doesn't cost that much

You will hear arguments that it doesn't really cost that much – only the price of a pint of milk per week per person perhaps – so therefore we shouldn't abolish it. Well just because it's cheap doesn't mean it's good. I'd rather spend my money and peoples taxes on something we need – like a better staffed committee system for scrutinising legislation.

Gave us great people

You will hear the argument that the Seanad gave us great people in the past. It has, and it still does. But it's not the Seanad that made or makes these people great. It is who they are and they would do great things regardless. We don't need some sort of social welfare political platform for these people. If they want to be politicians, let them run for the Council or for the Dáil or for Europe. But at the same time you don't need to be a politician to make a contribution to national public life.

I know that our parliament isn't perfect. That's why I want to change it. Reform doesn't happen all in one go. It is, by its definition, a process. And it's a process that is never finished, never complete. But we are getting there.

Reform does not mean creating a second Dáil that we do not need so we shouldn't be wasting our time and money trying to build one. On Friday you will be asked if you want to remove an outdated part of our parliamentary democracy in a move to build a better one. I

am asking you to make that decision – to be the catalyst – and to tell the government, with determination, that you want nothing but a radically reformed parliamentary system.

I put it to you that breaking the status quo and removing the Seanad – saying Yes on 4 October – will do just that.

We do not need a second Dáil.