

Sleepwalking our way  
to a Rubberstamp Parliament

Practically nobody who intends voting “yes” on Friday will be aware of exactly what is contained in the 57 page Bill to Amend the Constitution to Abolish the Seanad.

Hidden away in the small print are constitutional amendments of which 95% of the voters will probably never have heard. This is among the 7 entire Articles and 70 amendments to the text that no newspaper has even listed, let alone examined.

This amendment is a proposal to remove from the President the right under Article 27 to refer legislation to the people for their decision.

It is a proposal to abolish the Article 28 right of the Taoiseach to nominate non-TD experts to be members of the cabinet, such as James Dooge.

It is a proposal to amend Article 29 of the Constitution to remove the “double-lock” we were promised at the Lisbon referendum on our surrender of our veto in EU matters of fundamental importance such as our veto in respect of corporation tax.

The new Article 29 will allow Dáil Éireann alone to surrender this right by a single vote of a single chamber without any referendum decision by the Irish people.

This is a proposal that a Government with the majority which this Government has can remove a member of the judiciary by the vote of a single chamber under an amended Article 35.

A “yes” vote will end for the possibility of having people like Gordon Wilson, Seamus Mallon and Bríd Rogers from being members of our national parliament.

A “yes” vote will sweep out of the Constitution all parliamentary checks and balances and leave the Government whips in total control of the legislative process.

Under Article 15.10 and 15.11 of the amended Constitution, a majority in Dáil Éireann under the control of a government whip will be able to decide all issues relating to procedure, as to whether a Bill is pushed through without debate, and whether a Bill becomes law without hearing both sides of the argument, or without considering its content in detail.

A future majority in the Dáil will be absolutely free to decide on what, if any, consideration is given to Government Bills before they become law.

Speaking rights and private members Bills in the one chamber Dail will be regulated by the Government supporters.

Article 15 makes it clear that the courts will have no right to intervene where Bills are passed into law without debate.

Instead of opening up our parliament by making sure that both of its Houses fulfil the roles that the people's Constitution envisaged for them, all power will be put in the hands of a Dáil which will remain totally controlled by government through our draconian whip system.

Consider the fate of Lucinda Creighton.

While I do not agree with her in respect of all of her views on the abortion issue, I am absolutely certain that no country in Western Europe would have sacked its competent Minister for European Affairs, expelled her from the parliamentary party, evicted her from her Dáil offices, and told her that she would be de-selected at the next General Election, for standing by her sincere views on a matter of conscience.

Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave was allowed a free vote against his own Government on contraception a long time ago. Now conscience is a capital offence, politically.

Those who stand by their conscience must commit "political suicide". As Churchill once remarked: "The trouble with political suicide is that you live to regret it."

In the "Brave, New World" of a post abolition Dail, Creighton's fate will await any who step out of line. And remember the media cheer-leaders who recently derided Micheal Martin as "weak" for allowing his deputies to vote as they believed on that issue.

The Tory and Lib/Dem MPs who opposed bombing Syria have not been expelled from their parties. Ireland, alone among European states, has converted the role of TDs to the meek status of servile rubberstamps of the Executive.

And now we are asked to remove from the Oireachtas the one chamber where independent voices like Garret Fitzgerald, Mary Robinson, WB Yeats, Ken Whittaker, Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, David Norris and many others spoke out for minorities and spoke up on issues on which others preferred to remain silent.

The ludicrous Dail Reform package will simply not change Government control of the Dail. Their "super-committee" plan has no constitutional status and will fall into disuse as soon as it becomes inconvenient, just as their solemn promise in 2011 to use the guillotine on the "rarest" occasions translated into its using it on 55-60% of Bills by 2013.

We are sleepwalking our way into a rubberstamp parliament where the majority bullies its way on every issue.

For what? The arguments in favour of abolition are threadbare and discredited.

The “*Save €20 million*” claim was blown apart. The “*Fewer Politicians*” claim is also bogus. Dublin is to get an extra 60 paid councillors in the local government shake up next June. The Government has meekly side-stepped its “*Cut the Dáil by 20 TDs*” solemn pledge to the people.

The Seanad has limited powers which it uses, amending this Government’ legislation over 55) times.

It has important safeguard roles under the Constitution which, though rarely used (it rejected the proposal to abolish PR), are integral to our democracy.

You don’t rip out burglar alarms because you haven’t been burgled or block up the fire escapes because you haven’t had a fire. You improve them if you think they are not adequate.

This week we have a choice between bogus populism posing as rubberstamp reform, and taking a God-sent opportunity to stand up for ourselves, and to extract real reform by voting “No”.

**ENDS**