



Path to rebuilding Republic should start with citizens' assembly

• OPINION

Without radical political reform we are in danger of sleepwalking into a different crisis in 20 years time

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WHEN THE grey-suited men and women from the EU and the IMF came earlier this month and put their feet under the desks in the Department of Finance and the Central Bank they may have been astonished by the ineptitude of the public servants and ministers who occupied those places over the last 10 years. Their job will be to agree a plan to credibly enable Ireland to pay back the loans extended to us for the banks. They may make a few suggestions about how we should regulate our banks better in the future, and say some broadening of the tax base would be prudent, or that it might be an idea that the Department of Finance employ a few economists, but that will be it.

We appointed top-class people to head the Central Bank and as Financial Regulator, but there have been no real changes to the country's institutions. We are in danger of taking decisions to avoid the last crisis. So it's hard to see how anyone with a PhD in economics will be unemployed in the next 10 years. Armed with the experience of this financial collapse they will ensure this crisis could not happen again.

But the exact same mistakes are rarely repeated. We don't know what the next potential crisis will look like. So while it is prudent to put in place rules about mortgage lending and return Capital Gains Tax to pre-1999 levels for development land, it will probably not make a great deal of difference – we wouldn't make that mistake again

(not for a while anyway). In order to avoid any crisis we need a political system that is both vigilant and decisive. We need to radically re-engineer our institutions so that policy crises of the magnitude that we see today and saw in the 1980s, and indeed the 1950s, are much less likely to happen.

This radical reform should be all encompassing and include:

- How we run and finance political parties and electoral campaigns;
- How we elect TDs;
- How and from where our government is appointed;
- What powers we give to TDs and how they are supported to do their job;
- How we assess proposed policies and how they get debated and decided;
- How we ensure cabinet ministers can be held accountable;
- How the civil service is run and how the public service is accountable to the people;
- How we appoint judges and hold them to account;
- How we run and fund local government;
- How we ensure data and information are freely available.

This is not some arcane academic issue. When the current Government assured us no external support was needed and it was going to bring in the mother of all hair-shirt budgets, the markets refused to be convinced. This is, in part, because the markets did not find the Government's assurances credible.

In order to ensure credibility with anyone – citizens, other states, even bond markets – the most convincing route is to put in place institutions that ensure governments cannot behave recklessly for electoral gain.

As a former chief economist of

the IMF argued in May last year, "the economic solution is seldom very hard to work out . . . the biggest obstacle to recovery, is almost invariably the politics of countries in crisis."

When full, independent information is available to the public and when power is divided between the three branches of state, citizens and markets can have more confidence that rules will not be changed to suit the government's interests.

So if we argue a radical reform of the political system is needed, what form should it take and how should it be decided? We hope all the political parties will embrace the need for reform in their election manifestos and the eventual programme for government.

However, election promises in this area have a tendency to be watered down and even ignored as the parties in government wonder why they should make their lives more uncomfortable. Fine Gael and Labour might start to think "this time is different"; that they could be in power for a long time. So one thing should not happen; it should not be left to politicians who have vested interests in designing political systems to suit themselves. The people should decide.

As we have been arguing for the past few months on www.politicalreform.ie, the process of reform is almost as important as its content. The crucial component is to positively engage the people, including those who are increasingly disengaged or disillusioned.

The best way to do this is through a citizens' assembly, a place where representatives of the people can gather for constructive debate, problem solving and engagement. It will be a model for a certain type of decision making – deliberative

democracy – but also an opportunity to build a New Republic. It is crucial the parties agree to allow any proposal that is agreed by a carefully constructed representative citizens' assembly go to referendum without fear of change by political parties.

It is important we have well-qualified and well-intentioned politicians with access to expertise and information to enable them make decisions.

It is necessary that debate take place in public on policies that are chosen on their merit and based on evidence.

It will be important that a strong and vibrant civil society engages with politics in the future. But it is vital that the people of Ireland feel a sense of ownership over and affinity with our political system.

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