Parliament in the Republic of Ireland

By Muiris MacCarthaigh

The Irish Parliament, the Oireachtas (pronounced irr-okh-tuss), is a bicameral legislature consisting of a 166-seat directly elected Lower House, Dáil Éireann (pronounced dawl ay-run), and a 60-seat indirectly elected Upper House, Seanad Éireann (pronounced sha-nad ay-run).
By way of historical background, the first sitting of a body called Dáil Éireann was in January 1919, assembled as part of a separatist agenda to create a system of government independent of that in London. The first constitutionally-provided sitting of Dáil Éireann was in 1922, and followed the creation of the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland) under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. As well as providing for the popularly elected chamber, provision was made in the new Constitution of the Irish Free State (1922) for a new Senate - Seanad Éireann – which was principally created to ensure representation of the minority Protestant and formerly Unionist population in the new state. Following repeated attempts to delay government reforms in the early 1930s, Seanad Éireann was actually abolished in 1936, only to be re-established the following year by virtue of the new 1937 Constitution of Ireland. A proposal to again abolish the Seanad was put to the people in a referendum in October 2013, but defeated by 52% on a low turnout of only 39% of the electorate.

Election System

Since 1921, all elections to Dáil Éireann have used the unusual PR-STV electoral system, combining the single transferable vote with multi-seat constituencies, currently ranging between 3 and 5 seats (Weeks 2010). The number of seats has fluctuated since 1920, expanding from 128 (including 8 ‘university’ seats) to reach the current chamber size of 166, including the speaker. A routine criticism of the Irish electoral system is that it produces local ambassadors rather than national legislators, but the system itself remains popular and recent consideration of reforming it settled on retaining the status quo. The number of seats is due to reduce to 158 at the next general election, which must take place in 2016 at the latest. A member of Dáil Éireann is known as a ‘TD’, an acronym for Teachta Dála meaning a Deputy to the Dáil. The maximum length of a Dáil term is to five years, and the Constitution dictates that an election to Seanad Éireann must be held within 90 days of the dissolution of Dáil Éireann.

Seanad Éireann is an indirectly elected chamber, but with the exception of 11 seats, the system of PR-STV is also used to elect Senators. In line with the 1937 Constitution’s provisions, the majority of Senators (43) are elected to five vocational panels by an electorate comprising the incoming members of Dáil Éireann, outgoing Senators, and all city and county councillors – a total of just over 1000 voters. The vocational panels are culture and education, agriculture, labour, industry and commerce, and public administration, but in practice the Senate is elected by and members organise themselves according to party lines. Of the remaining seventeen senators, six are elected by university graduates (more on this below) with the final eleven Senators appointed by the new Prime Minister or Taoiseach, an extraordinary patronage power designed to ensure that the government always controls a majority in the Seanad. As the Seanad has a principally legislative function, which itself is subordinate to the wishes of the Lower House, its role and very existence tends to come into question frequently.

Political System

The Irish political system is an adversarial one, but the party system is distinctive in respect of its traditionally low degree of ideological differentiation. There is an absence of a strong left-right cleavage, and support has tended to cluster to the centre-right. The two traditionally largest parties – Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – emerging from opposing sides in the Civil War of 1922-3 and occupy this right of centre space, though they have never formed a coalition government. Rather, from 1932 to 1989 Irish governments consisted of either a single party Fianna Fáil government, or a coalition led by Fine Gael that has always included the centre-left Labour Party. Since 1989 all Irish governments have been coalitions of various hues, but regardless of government Irish parliamentary politics remains strongly majoritarian. Through a combination of ‘winner-takes-all’ politics and
consequent tightening of the parliamentary rules over the decades to favour executive prerogative, opposition parties have traditionally struggled to make substantive input into the policy process. The current administration is a coalition of Fine Gael and the Labour Party, which commands the largest-ever majority held by an Irish government of 65% of seats.

Structure and Representation

The membership of Dáil Éireann has remained traditionally male, white and middle-class, with an increase in the number of professionals and university educated members in recent years. Only 16% of TDs are female, however, one of the lowest comparable figures in Europe and notwithstanding considerable social change and a sharp increase in female employment generally since the early 1990s. The number of female Senators is larger, at 32%. Equally, and despite a period of extensive immigration to Ireland from the mid-1990s, minority social groups are poorly represented in the Irish parliament. A large portion of the parliamentary agenda is concerned with local constituency matters, and while critics point to the need for more serious devolution to local authorities as a means of de-cluttering the parliamentary agenda, others point to the ability for such concerns to be elevated to national level as a vital element of Irish democratic life. And though constituency work is not unique to Irish parliamentarians, its relative importance in securing re-election does seem to be higher than in other jurisdictions. A survey published in 2010 found that TDs spent 53% of their working time on constituency-based work, 38% on legislative work, and 9% on ‘other’ work.

Powers and reform

In terms of legislative-executive relations, Dáil Éireann has tended to find itself branded as one of the weakest legislatures in Europe in respect of holding government to account. Party discipline remains incredibly strong to the point where failure to vote with one’s party leads to automatic expulsion from most Irish parliamentary parties. As in other legislatures, much of the decision-making and debate takes place in the private meetings of parliamentary parties, but the House Standing Orders confer remarkable agenda-setting power on the government, and more specifically the Taoiseach. The new administration elected in 2011 made commitments to address this long-standing imbalance, including some interesting reforms rushed out in expectation of a unicameral system, but which seem to have caught members unawares.

Yet it remains the case that opposition parties have relatively limited opportunity to control the parliamentary agenda, and guillotines still feature quite regularly. A sectoral committee system has become an established element of the parliamentary system, albeit much later than the case in other European legislatures, but in line with the chambers, government retains a majority on almost all of them. A referendum proposal to dramatically increase their investigative powers, inspired by the need to uncover the details surrounding the circumstances leading to the Irish banking crisis in 2008, was defeated in 2011 by 53% of voters. However, a framework has subsequently been developed to allow the Oireachtas hold inquiries into matters of ‘significant public importance’.

Also at time of writing, and in response to the recent defeat of the proposal to abolish the Seanad, the government is proposing to address a long-standing grievance held by those third-level institutions created post-1937 that their graduates are currently excluded from voting for the six university Senate seats, despite enabling legislation for such being passed in 1979.

Further Reading


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