

Let people have their say on type of country they want

ELAINE BYRNE

Tue, Feb 02, 2010

Reform of the Irish political system will only happen when the public takes ownership of the reform process

HENRY GRATTAN retired from parliament in 1797 in protest over his proposed political reforms being ignored. He was convinced that in the absence of vital and fundamental reform, Ireland was drifting towards rebellion.

No one believed him.

In his 24-page "Letter to the citizens of Dublin", Grattan explained his dramatic decision. In order to "save the country", he wrote, it was "absolutely necessary to reform the state". The "continuation of the old system" would lead to Ireland's downfall because the people no longer had confidence in parliament.

A year later, the 1798 rebellion occurred which gave rise to the 1801 Act of Union. The Irish parliament voted itself out of existence and Ireland was robbed of legislative independence for 120 years.

The Irish political system is in grave need of reform now. The capacity, however, for institutions to self-reform is a rarity and indeed it is questionable whether any established organisation can be entrusted to reform itself. The rhetoric and reality of Seanad reform, for instance, has produced no fewer than 12 separate unimplemented reports with yet another report on the way. Change thus becomes a process without end.

Why? Because the need for vigorous and meaningful transformation is so great we believe the only solutions possible are realistically, or perhaps even conveniently, out of reach. This approach believes that necessary reforms are too enormous to ever achieve, which means that nothing ever happens but we have convinced ourselves that we tried.

At the recent Parliamentary Society of former Oireachtas members, many pointed to the electoral system as the cause célèbre of every political malaise. Not to the political culture that they themselves nourished and sustained. As Prof David Farrell wrote on these pages yesterday, "reforming our electoral system is not going to be enough; indeed, it may be little more than a diversion".

So, what next? Icelandic civic society responded to economic collapse with a bold and ambitious initiative in active democracy with a national assembly comprised of its citizens. A similar initiative is under way in Britain. Baroness Helena Kennedy, well known in Ireland as the barrister who successfully acted in the Guildford Four appeal, chaired the Power Inquiry (www.powerinquiry.org). This largest to date study into the sources of disengagement from British democracy has created the Power2010 campaign (www.power2010.org.uk). Power 2010 randomly selected a representative sample of British society last month to participate in a deliberative poll. This process of public consultation was designed by Prof James Fishkin of Stanford University (<http://cdd.stanford.edu>).

Like the Icelandic process, participants were provided with balanced briefing materials and placed into small group discussions with moderators to discuss a range of proposals for reform drawn from nearly 4,500 online submissions by the public. Reforms were then ranked in order of preference. The results were striking because many of the suggestions were small but practical but when combined would fundamentally revolutionise democratic action. Many populist reforms were rejected in favour of reasserting the role of parliament and giving people a meaningful voice in key issues.

Of the 4,500 suggested proposals, strengthening the committee system was ranked highest. In descending order was: allowing voters to vote for none of the above on ballot papers, increasing the number of issues decided by free votes, establishing a duty of public consultation on controversial matters through a deliberative process, scheduling election day on a weekend and reducing the government's use of statutory instruments to bypass parliamentary scrutiny.

An interesting reform included allowing a special referendum on whether to remove an MP from office if enough constituents request it and holding a fresh election to choose a new MP.

Other highly ranked reforms focused on promoting the public trust with issues relating to the freedom of information Act, political donations, consulting the public on politicians' wages and requiring political parties to practise more internal democracy. Compulsory politics lessons in schools and greater decision-making powers for local government were also noted. Changing the electoral system was ranked 23rd.

Baroness Kennedy believes that: "It's time for politicians to step aside and the people to have their say on how our country should be run." Reform will only occur in Ireland when the public takes ownership of the reform process. Civil society must step up and initiate similar citizenship initiatives to those in Iceland and Britain.

Tonight, for the first time in the history of Trinity College, a fully constituted committee of the Oireachtas will sit in College Green. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution will listen to what my students in their early 20s have to say about electoral reform, and by implication, political reform. John Bowman will then chair a panel discussion on the issues raised. The event is open to the public and further information can be accessed at www.politicalreform.ie

Perhaps other universities, organisations or communities might also find alternative ways to engage in the process of reform. This is where the leadership will emerge for a second republic.

Grattan finished his letter with the words "may the liberties of the people be immortal". A concept of citizenship which was before its time but which has its own responsibilities.

Elaine Byrne is an adjunct lecturer in the department of political science, Trinity College

© 2010 The Irish Times