



## **National Women's Council of Ireland**

### **Submission to the Constitutional Convention**

#### **Meeting on the topic:**

#### ***"Dáil electoral system"***

#### **About the National Women's Council of Ireland**

The National Women's Council of Ireland (founded in 1973) is the leading national women's membership organisation. We seek full equality between men and women. We represent our membership, which includes 165 member groups from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations.

We lead and are catalysts for change in the achievement of equality between women and men.

Our mandate comes from articulating the views and experiences of our members and making sure their voices are heard wherever decisions are made which affect the lives of women in all their diversity.

Our vision is of an Ireland, and of a world, where there is full equality between women and men.

## Core recommendations (summary)

1. **Pick a system that maximises representation of women and also of minority groups.**
2. **Ensure that the gender quotas are easily compatible with any future system.**
3. **Have fewer constituencies and more TDs per-constituency and maintain the Single Transferable Vote.**
4. **Develop a national list system.**
5. **Protect small parties and not give too much control to parties over their membership.**

### Which system does the NWCI recommend?

The NWCI held two seminars on the electoral system to prepare for the Constitutional Convention. The first was in Cork in September 2012 and the second, jointly with Claiming Our Future, in Dublin in May 2013.

**At the meeting in Cork our members recommended a mixed system while at the meeting in Dublin they recommended an improved version of PR-STV.**

NWCI would like to see either:

Improved version of the current multi-seat PR-STV system which includes bigger constituencies.	A PR-STV list with large multi-seat constituencies as well as a national-list (eg. a Mixed Member system)
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Here is a flavour of what our members told us about the electoral system:

- “We need to be mindful of independent TDs and having diverse voices in our parliament.”

- “PR/STV is not very woman friendly because of the hours.”
- “Local government reform is also essential, especially if we retain PR/STV.”
- “An AMS would allow us to bring in outside expertise but allow us to retain a closeness to voters.”
- “Irish people like to know their politician.”
- “We do not want anything that will re-enforce our current narrow ideological spectrum.”
- “Political education in schools is also urgently needed.”
- “Do we need to change the system? What about changing the politicians?”
- “Can we move constituency work to local government?”
- “Parties are already powerful. We don’t want them to become too powerful.”

## Introduction

Our democracy faces many challenges. These include:

- A widening gap between the richest and the poorest;
- An unequal balance in pay, political representation and domestic responsibilities between women and men.
- Increasing cynicism with politics;
- People do not feel they are the authors of their own destiny – decisions are made elsewhere.

We often think that fixing our electoral system will help us fix all of these other problems. However, fixing our electoral system is only useful if it provokes a radical shift in our political culture. We should not see electoral reform as the panacea to all of our problems.

However, improving our electoral system can bring some benefits to our democracy and our society. It can help us:

- Ensure that more women and minority groups are represented in our parliament;
- Re-focus the work of some TDs towards national issues;
- Develop a more mature political culture where debate is encouraged instead of stifled.

### **Women in politics: a recap.**

Ireland has one of the lowest levels of representation of women in politics in the world. After the Meath East by-election Ireland joined North Korea in 89<sup>th</sup> place in the global ranking tables (15.8% of the Dáil). We have never had a Traveller – man or woman - elected to the Dáil and only 1 Muslim (a man).

***Our political system should be more representative of the population as a whole.***

There are five reasons commonly attributed to the lack of women's representation:

Cash – women earn on average 16% less than men, this pay gap is even more acute for mothers. Elections are expensive so women don't have access to the same resources as men do to fight campaigns.

Care – women are responsible for 86% of care for children, relatives and domestic work. This means women have less free time to pursue other activities. The current electoral system places very heavy demands on time which is a real barrier for women who also wish to have a family life.

Culture – our political culture is designed by men, for men. It alienates many women (and many men) because of its approach to decision-making where decisions are made at strange hours of the night or behind closed doors without any transparency or accountability.

Candidate selection – parties, particularly at local level, tend to select men.

Confidence – women often do not put themselves forward for elections as men do.

The Convention on the Constitution has already made excellent recommendations in relation to improving the representation of women in Irish politics.

However, one of the main challenges for many women is finding time to be involved in the current system when women have so many domestic responsibilities to deal with.

Dr. Alan Brady of Trinity College Dublin has argued:

The current Dáil electoral system entails extremely large time commitments outside of normal business hours. This is not an inevitable feature of electoral systems; the outside time commitments vary between various systems...

While some of these out-of-hours commitments are caused by Dáil sitting times, much of the difficulty is caused by the extreme volume of constituency work and constituency visibility that is a feature of the Irish system.”<sup>1</sup>

Research by Claire McGing in NUIM supports the contention of the Constitutional Review Group that constituents will tend to approach multiple TDs with one issue. McGing goes even further and argues that women TDs get approached by citizens who are not living in their constituency because they want to speak with a woman about a certain issue.

***For as long as childcare and family responsibilities are borne disproportionately by women, the current electoral system will be a barrier to***

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<sup>1</sup> *The Constitution, Gender and reform*. Brady, Alan (NWCi) 2012. Available at [www.nwci.ie](http://www.nwci.ie) .

***women's entry into politics, because of the excessive and anti-social time commitments involved.***

This is why the NWCi would like the Convention to make recommendations about the electoral system with the representation of women at the forefront of your thinking.

**What do we want our politicians to do?**

Contrary to popular belief, politics is a difficult and thankless task. Our TDs work hard, dedicating themselves for long hours in the evenings and weekends.

In Ireland TDs have three broad roles:

1. They promulgate and vote on legislation.
2. They listen to and represent the views of constituents and representative organisations.
3. They contribute to debates in the Dáil and in the media or at conferences and events.

Each TD will decide how they spend their time. However, for many TDs their main priority is to ensure they get re-elected. This means they focus time and financial resources on tending to the needs of constituents.

The current Irish system does not lend itself to TDs focusing on national issues, nor does the system allow TDs to make decisions with any level of detachment from local concerns.

There are positive, and negative aspects to Ireland's current PR-STV system:

Positive

- TDs are close to the concerns of their constituents so they keep those in mind when making decisions.
- TDs can be held more directly accountable for their actions.

- Small parties can flourish and have significant influence.

#### Minus

- TDs are too tied to the local, narrow, sectional interests of their constituents.
- Constituencies are not big enough to get truly diverse representation.
- TDs do not get to make decisions that are best for the whole country.
- Small parties can flourish and have significant, perhaps undue, influence.
- Politics is focused on personality rather than policy.

## Getting more women in politics: system comparison

Comparison of relevant factors for electoral systems			
	Closed PR List	PR/STV	Mixed System
Constituency link and workload	None  No link with any geographical constituency	Yes  Excessive levels of work as TDs in same constituency duplicate work	Yes  Not clear how much if introduced in Ireland but would be less than PR/STV
Role of Party	High  Candidates rely entirely on party for selection and position of priority on party list	Medium  Party has substantial role in selection, but constituency support valuable also	High for list seats  Medium for constituency seats
Position of independent candidates	Weak	Strong	Medium
Position of smaller parties	Strong  If party can get onto the ballot, it can expect vote share to correspond to seat share	Quite strong  Larger parties get some seat bonus, but smaller parties can obtain seats with some geographical concentration of their vote	Weak for constituency seats  Strong for list seats

## The experience internationally

### The link between inequality and electoral systems.

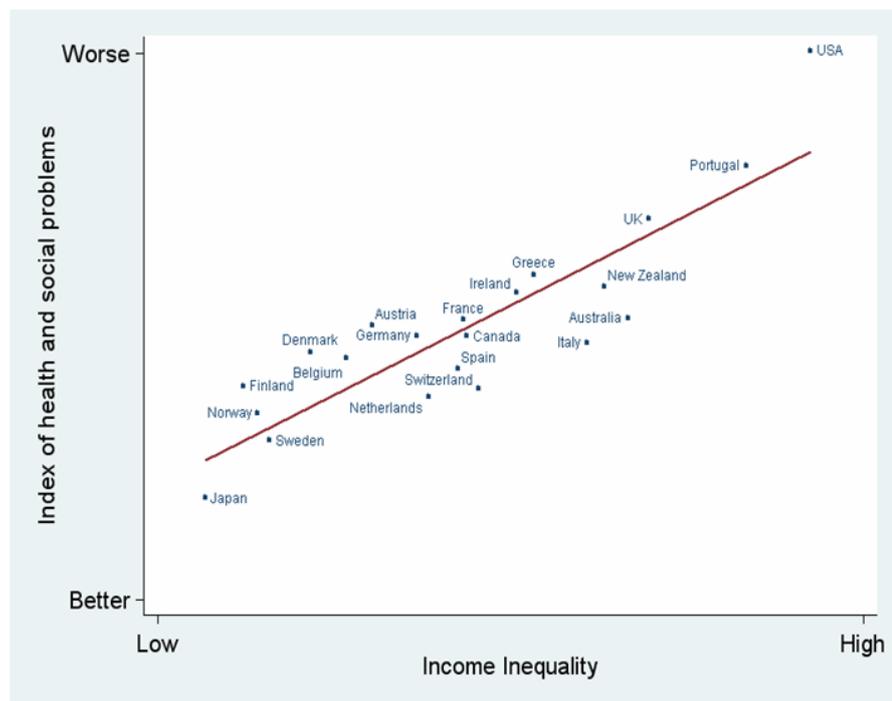
Countries which have proportionate electoral systems (as opposed to countries which have “winner takes all” electoral systems (eg. the UK’s first-past the post) tend to be more equal societies.

The following table (courtesy Dr. Mary Murphy, NUIM) shows a list of countries rated for inequality and social problems. The countries at the top right hand corner have more inequality and also more social problems.

**By and large the countries with more social problems and more inequality between rich and poor have “winner takes all” electoral systems.** (There are exceptions, of course; for example Ireland has a proportionate electoral system but is a relatively unequal society.)

### Health and Social Problems are Worse in More Unequal Countries

- Index of:**
- Life expectancy
  - Math & Literacy
  - Infant mortality
  - Homicides
  - Imprisonment
  - Teenage births
  - Trust
  - Obesity
  - Mental illness – incl. drug & alcohol addiction
  - Social mobility



Source: Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (2009)

[www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk) Equality Trust

## New Zealand

One country which changed to a new system was New Zealand, in 1999. The change was made – in part – because of a desire to have more diverse forms of opposition. It moved to the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system. MMP is a combination of small (single-seat) constituencies and a closed party list system. Previously they used a first past the post system modelled on the UK.

Although New Zealand was the first country in the world to give women the vote they previously had a very low level of participation of women in politics. Dr. Alan Brady again:

“The new approach is credited with increasing women’s membership in Parliament to around 30% in the elections in 1996, 1999 and 2002.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, in the 2002 election, women won more of the constituency seats than the party list seats. This suggests that reform of the electoral system can improve women’s participation. The MMP system is very similar to the Alternative Member System (AMS) considered by the Constitution Review Group. While the comparison is imprecise, this certainly suggests that a system of this type would improve gender equality in the Dáil.”

However, the NWCI does not favour the adoption of single-member constituencies as in New Zealand but rather having larger constituencies (eg. 6 seats) with fewer number of overall constituencies.

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<sup>2</sup> McLeay, E. ‘Climbing On: Rules, values and women’s representation in the New Zealand Parliament’ in Sawyer, M Tremblay, M and Trimble, L (eds.) ‘Introduction: Patterns and practice in the parliamentary representation of women’ in Sawyer, M Tremblay, M and Trimble, L. *Representing Women in Parliament: A Comparative Study* (London: Routledge, 2006), at pp.74-76.

## **What kind of electoral system would help us get more women involved in politics?**

Every electoral system has positives and minus points. There is no perfect system.

A strong option is to improve on the current system rather than replacing it fully with a new system. An alternative option is to opt for a mixed system, drawn on some of the best parts of the existing system but with additional features.

The NWCi recommends the following principles should apply in the development of a new electoral system:

- 1. Pick a system that maximises representation of women and also of minority groups.**

Why?: Our parliament should reflect the society it serves – although a man can represent a woman’s perspective we should encourage more diversity in our decision-making processes. The more experiences we have when making decisions the better our decisions are going to be. We need to find ways of accommodating and promoting difference – our electoral system can help with this.

- 2. Ensure that the gender quotas are easily compatible with any future system.**

Gender quotas are the most effective proven method for improving women’s representation in politics. In 1992 Ireland was 35<sup>th</sup> in the world for women’s representation in politics – today we are 89<sup>th</sup>. Many of the countries who have moved ahead of us did so because they introduced quotas. 17 of the top 20 countries for women’s representation have quota systems.

- 3. Have fewer constituencies and more TDs per-constituency and maintain the Single Transferable Vote.**

Why? Again the academic evidence shows that the larger the constituency the more diversity in politics. Women tend to be used to “balance” tickets and also because large parties tend to take the first few seats but the smaller parties win the later seats. In order to guarantee diversity in Northern Ireland constituencies are 6-seats, where-as in Ireland they tend to be 3 or 4 seats. The Single Transferable Vote system is also a very effective method for protecting small parties.

#### **4. Develop a national list system.**

Why? The evidence shows that women tend to fare better in what are called “party-centred PR list systems”.<sup>3</sup> This means that there is a national list system which the party select the candidates for. However, this evidence should not be placed outside of Ireland’s own cultural context. There are clear risks to such a system. To counter those risks we should maintain a constituency system as well as a national system.

#### **5. Protect small parties and do not give too much control to political parties over their membership.**

Ireland has a strong tradition of smaller parties which tend to have a positive influence on coalition governments. Our electoral system should seek to promote and encourage small parties. Larger multi-seat constituencies tend to do this, as does the STV.

With a national list system there is a risk that political parties can get too much power at the expense of their grassroots membership. The Convention should ensure that citizens in political parties also have some control over selection of candidates.

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<sup>3</sup> *Designing for Equality: Best-fit, medium-fit and non-favourable combinations of electoral systems and gender quotas* by Stina Larserud and Rita Taphorn, p15. IDEA, 2007. Available at [www.idea.org](http://www.idea.org) .

## **Conclusion**

The NWCI welcomes the deliberations by the Convention and encourages its members to build on the excellent work already conducted on women in politics by building an electoral system which is inclusive and increases the representation of women and also of minority groups.