



**Opening Speech by the Chairperson,  
The Honourable Ms Mary Laffoy,  
at the Meeting of the Citizens' Assembly on  
*Fixed Term Parliaments*  
14 April 2018**

Good morning everyone and welcome back to the Grand Hotel in Malahide, for the last time, for our final weekend meeting of the Citizens' Assembly.

I would like to welcome all of you joining us online, the observers present with us today in the room and of course the Members themselves.

Our original attempt to meet on the topic of *fixed term parliaments* six weeks ago was hampered by Storm Emma and the snow. It became obvious throughout the course of the week leading up to that weekend that it was not going to be feasible to continue. The safety of our Members, suppliers, staff and observers is always of paramount importance and as such we decided that the meeting due to take place on 3-4 March last should be postponed.

The rescheduling of this meeting required the approval by the Houses of the Oireachtas of a second extension to our term by a further one month. I would like to thank the Taoiseach and his officials for carrying out the administration associated with this and the members of both Houses for approving our extension to allow us to fulfil our remit.

I would like also like to thank all of the Assembly's stakeholders and suppliers who were so accommodating in terms of making themselves available this weekend. I am most grateful to you all for your contribution in allowing us to conclude the Assembly's formal proceedings.

Returning to the present, this is the eleventh weekend we have gathered here since November 2016, in addition to the inaugural meeting in Dublin Castle.

To date we have covered four topics, heard from 61 expert speakers, spent endless hours deliberating and made 70 recommendations to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Those numbers will have increased by the end of this weekend!

This weekend we bring to a close the Assembly's formal proceedings with our consideration of the fifth and final topic assigned to us: *Fixed Term Parliaments*.

It is understood that this topic was included at the request of the Independent Alliance.

In advance of this weekend, the Members were provided with links to a Private Members Bill from 2015 which was proposed by Independent Alliance TD Shane Ross, now Minister for Transport. The Bill entitled

Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Fixed Period for the Duration of Dáil Éireann) Bill 2015, sought to introduce a Fixed Term Parliament in Ireland. Members were also provided with extracts from the Report of the Constitution Review Group 1996 which was chaired by T.K Whitaker.

This will be the second time we will both commence our consideration of a topic and formulate recommendations within the space of a single weekend.

### Structure of this Weekend's Discussions and Ballot Paper

Our consideration of *fixed term parliaments* will focus on whether there should be greater restrictions in place on the Taoiseach's ability to advise the President to dissolve the Dáil. This topic requires us to consider of a number of constitutional articles.

In developing the work programme it became clear that this topic is relatively discrete and self-contained.

For this reason the structure of this weekend's agenda is slightly different to what we experienced last January.

This morning we will hear from four speakers in four distinct sessions.

Dr Eoin Daly from NUI Galway will explain the current law and practice on the summoning and dissolving of Dáil and Seanad Éireann. This will be supplemented by a presentation from Dr Eoin O'Malley from Dublin City University who will discuss the history of the political practice of invoking the legal provisions around summoning and dissolving the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Professor Petra Schleiter from the University of Oxford will give an overview of the experience and practice of fixed term parliaments in other jurisdictions. She will provide an insight as to the different types of fixed term parliament that exist and are used in different parts of the world.

Finally, Dr Rory Costello from University of Limerick returns to the Irish example and what the implications would be if fixed term parliaments were introduced here. He will examine the pros and cons and any other issues arising.

These first two sessions will be followed by roundtable discussions and questions and answers with the first two speakers. The second two sessions will be followed by a further roundtable discussion and questions and answers session. On that occasion, this morning's four speakers will be on the panel.

This weekend's speakers have prepared very informative papers to accompany their oral presentations. The Members received these papers a week ago in anticipation of the weekend's proceedings. The papers will become available on our website throughout the course of today.

This afternoon we will work on the Ballot Paper.

I would like to briefly refer to the Ballot Paper which will dominate this afternoon's proceedings and is the mechanism by which we formulate recommendations.

We have not circulated a draft Ballot Paper to the Members. The reason for this is that the preparation of the Ballot Paper is Member-led. It

reflects the deliberations of the Members and incorporates the areas of most interest to them to vote on.

For previous topics it was possible to circulate a draft in advance as when a topic was considered across multiple weekends we could ask the Members for suggested inclusions on the draft Ballot Paper through either roundtable discussions or reflective exercises.

Similarly to the last topic on *the manner in which the referenda is held*, the secretariat, in consultation with the Expert Advisory Group, will be preparing a draft Ballot Paper based on the discussions throughout this morning.

To assist with this task and to focus the Members minds as to the types of things they would like to see expressed on a draft Ballot Paper, time has been allocated in the agenda at the roundtable discussions after this morning's sessions to seek feedback from the Members on possible issues arising for the Assembly's recommendations. This feedback will be given in public during the questions and answers sessions.

The draft Ballot Paper will be worked on over the course of the lunch break by the secretariat and the Expert Advisory Group. It will then be printed and ready for the Member's consideration after lunch.

I will provide a detailed explanation of the draft in public session. The Members will then have the opportunity to critically discuss its contents in their roundtables and the wording will be finalised in public.

This gives the secretariat the opportunity to print the final version of the Ballot Paper overnight.

Tomorrow will solely be focussed on voting and results of the votes will be announced in public session. The results will constitute the Assembly's recommendations in respect of this topic.

### Expert Advisory Group

As I have just briefly referred to, we are extremely fortunate to have the benefit of a number of members of the Expert Advisory Group on site this weekend.

I would like to express my gratitude to Oran Doyle, Robert Elgie, John Garry, Kevin Rafter, Theresa Reidy and Rachael Walsh for their work to date and continuing support and guidance.

Robert and John will join us on the stage this afternoon to help answer any questions you may have in relation to the Ballot Paper.

### Submissions

I'll very briefly refer to the submission process for this topic.

Typically, the submissions process is useful mechanism to ascertain the pressing and most prevalent aspects of the topic at hand.

Despite the secretariat's best efforts to encourage public engagement with the submissions process, we have received our lowest number of submissions for this topic. In total, 8 were received and have been published.

For this reason we decided there was little worth in summarising those received. Instead the Members were directed to the full text of each

submission on our website. We have also provided them with a print out of the full text of these.

They can be read on our website [www.citizensassembly.ie](http://www.citizensassembly.ie).

### Reports

I would like to provide a short update on publication of the Assembly's reports on our third and fourth topics – *how the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change* and *the manner in which referenda are held* respectively.

Work continues to be carried out by myself and the secretariat on the preparation of both of these reports and they will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas in due course.

Once published, they will be available as a public record to view on our website.

### Conclusion

Returning to today's proceedings, I now would like to invite Dr Eoin Daly from NUI Galway to commence today's presentations.

**ENDS**