

## **The Citizens' Assembly inaugural meeting, Dublin Castle, 15 October 2016**

### **The Role of Irish Citizens in Decision Making: The Experience to Date Professor David Farrell, UCD**

Thank you for the invitation speak at this inaugural meeting of the Citizens' Assembly. I am honoured to be here. In the brief time that I've got I want to make four points.

#### **1.**

The first thing to note is that this new citizens' assembly is of historic importance – and I don't say that lightly! This is one of the very few occasions in the world in which a random selection of citizens – citizens from across the length and breadth of the country, from all walks of life, of all different ages – have been brought together to discuss details about a country's constitution. There have only been a handful of cases like this in the world so far.

The picture shows the cases to date:

- The citizens' assemblies of British Columbia and Ontario that met in the mid 2000s;
- The Dutch citizens' assembly that met around the same time;
- And the Irish Constitutional Convention of 2012-14.

That is the total sum of assemblies of this type to date: these have been the only four cases in the world where a government has invited a random selection of its citizens to discuss a country's constitution and how it might be reformed.

As citizens of this state we all get a chance to vote in referendums on constitutional change: that's common to many other countries. But it is very rare – very rare – for a group of citizens to be given the sort of opportunity you've been given to discuss the details of constitutional questions and possibly suggest changes that are then to be discussed by the Oireachtas. That's a pretty unique and powerful role that is being given to you as a group of Irish citizens.

#### **2.**

A second point worth noting is the continuity that your citizens' assembly represents. In fact, Ireland is absolutely unique in this regard. This is the first time anywhere that a country has had two of these sorts of processes in a row. It says something about how successful the previous constitutional convention was seen to be that the government has decided to set up this new citizens' assembly. And one that will follow exactly the same method of operation: meeting in the same hotel; following the same operating procedures.

### 3.

Which brings me to my third point about how your Citizens' Assembly will operate.

Today is a very formal affair – as it should be. It marks an important occasion – an historical moment in our history.

But after today your meetings from now on are going to be very different. As the pictures show, you will be moving to an entirely different venue – a hotel ballroom (and a very nice one at that!) in which you will be sitting around small tables spending a lot of your time talking to each other.

It will be a case of dispensing with the formal dress, rolling up the shirt sleeves, and getting into the detail of what you've been asked to discuss. If you don't believe me – then just focus for a moment on some of your predecessors – members of the constitutional convention.

### 4.

My final point is to point out the obvious. Your job over the coming months is to examine a number of important questions about our constitution and how politics operates in this country. You will be given lots of information, hear lots of commentary from experts and advocates, and you will have the opportunity to debate among yourselves and come to a considered view on each of the topics. The outcome may be that you recommend change, but not necessarily in all instances. It may be that on some issues your collective view is to not recommend any change. That decision is entirely yours.

If you don't mind be saying I am quite jealous of you: you're the lucky chosen few. A lot will be asked of you over the coming months – not least your precious time – but I hope you find the experience as rewarding as I know your predecessors in the Constitutional Convention did. I wish you every success!