



■ Minister Noel Dempsey and Government chief whip Seamus Brennan are among the driving forces of Oireachtas reform.

# Time has arrived to update Dail and Senate

THE DAIL AND Seanad have been on their Easter break. You have noticed, haven't you? After all, these are the two Houses which make the legislation governing our everyday lives so they DO matter. It's full steam ahead again with the Stadium Ireland controversy refusing to go away and Fianna Fail and the PDs both under pressure from the Opposition on the issue.

Despite Mary Harney's reservations, it's clear that Bertie Ahern and Jim McDaid are very much wedded to the project. So, as the late Micheal O Hehir would say, this game is not over yet.

The pace of the row has been stepped up again during the week with the Dail in recess but it's on the floor of the Dail that the real "meat" of the controversy is being thrashed out. And that's the way it should be.

The relevance of the Oireachtas to the very people it serves has often been called into question - and not without good reason. You have to say that politicians invariably do themselves very few favours in the eyes of the public by the way they conduct a business which should be the most important facet of Irish life.

Everybody should visit Leinster House at least once in their lifetime to see how the system operates. It's certainly worth a look.

There is no guarantee you will be impressed by what you see as many of the procedures of the two Houses are archaic and time-wasting. Indeed, some might go further and say they are positively antediluvian in this fast-moving computer age.

For instance, at a time when so many transactions can be conducted at the flick of a button, it is extraordinary that it takes the Dail more than 20 minutes to complete a single vote!

The TDs - like the Senators in the Upper House - have to troop physically through the division lobbies to register their Ta or Nil vote on any motion.

Traditionalists argue that this is the way it has always been done and that we should maintain the style in our Dail and Seanad Chambers which were good enough for our predecessors.

It's hardly a good argument when so much has changed in our everyday life and we are putting ourselves forward as the best-educated and most technological-advanced country in Europe.

Yet we stay in the Dark Ages when it comes to running the country itself. It makes no sense.

Environment Minister Noel Dempsey has been examining the question of electronic voting for the general public at



election time. The way things are going, the public will be voting electronically at the polls sooner than the politicians are in the Dail.

It is interesting that when a pilot project on electronic voting was conducted on the occasion of the Dublin South-Central by-election last year, older people were actually shown to have taken to it more easily than the younger folk.

With electronic voting, we could have results in double-quick time rather than having to wait days, sometimes, for results to emerge. I know some people who regard politics as a bit of a blood sport enjoy the long counts and the attendant drama but, really, isn't it time we came into the 21st Century on this one? In the meantime, Government Chief Whip Seamus Brennan has also brought forward a new package of measures aimed at streamlining the workings of the Dail and Seanad.

Electronic voting is just one of these measures for updating the Oireachtas and for making it more relevant to the everyday lives of the people in its debates.

I have often seen situations where the Dail has been prevented by its own outdated procedures from debating a major strike or some other big controversy of the day which is the sole topic of conversation in every house and pub in the country.

There has been a bit of argy-bargy about the ownership of the new Oireachtas Reform proposals as many of them did, indeed, figure in the "democratic revolution" document produced last year by John Bruton and Jim Mitchell of Fine Gael.

But what does it matter whose idea they were if they improve the operation of the House and make for a more efficient and effective system.

The trouble with Oireachtas Reform is that it always seems to be brought forward near the end of the term of a Government. It should be one of the first

items on the agenda for any new Government and should be acted upon straight away on taking up power.

When all is said and done, does the taxpayer really care in minute detail HOW the Dail conducts its business, as long as it does that business properly and in the interests of the public?

The thought struck me very forcibly one day recently as the House indulged in one of those silly games of cat and mouse which does it no credit at all.

This kind of thing happens when the Opposition doesn't get its own way and tries to show the Government that it can hold up the workings of the House by delaying tactics such as refusing to agree to the order of business for the day.

Am I losing you already? I thought as much.

Most of the time the Irish public won't even know this is going on because those of us covering the Dail know right well we would bore you stiff if we went into the nitty-gritty of this kind of petty behaviour.

The hold-ups often delay the real business of debating important pieces of legislation by an hour or more. In the end, the Government has the majority and, inevitably, gets its way so it's a totally fruitless exercise.

The new reform proposals would mean that a certain number have to be in the chamber at all times. It will certainly look better on TV to have dozens of Deputies in their seats rather than having a few scattered around the Chamber.

But I'm not to sure about the benefit of this measure for the effective operation of business. It might LOOK bad but I think it is better for TDs to be in their rooms working for their constituents while keeping an eye on the debate through their TV monitors than to be sitting idly in the Chamber awaiting their turn to speak.

One way or another, the Dail and Seanad need a shake-up. Change is needed. All are agreed on that. And the sooner the better.

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**Judge Donnchadh O'Buachalla**  
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**Dated this 25th Day of April, 2001.**

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