



VotingRights.ie

Mr. Enda Kenny T.D.
Department of the Taoiseach
Government Buildings
Upper Merrion Street
Dublin 2, DO2R583
Ireland

March 28, 2016

Dear Taoiseach,

As you seek to come to an agreement with other political parties on a new programme of government, we urge you to pay careful attention to the role that Ireland's overseas citizens will play in the future of our country. Specifically, we urge you to include the following recommendations to end the current disfranchisement of one-in-six Irish-born citizens who are emigrants and in doing so make Ireland a more inclusive and democratic nation.

As Ireland celebrates the Centenary of 1916, we note with profound admiration the inclusive vision laid out by the Proclamation of a republic and a permanent national government *"representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women."* Unfortunately, this vision has yet to be fulfilled. Indeed, one hundred years on, Ireland has a two-tier system of citizenship in place that leaves many of its citizens unrepresented, with 17.5 percent of all Irish-born citizens disenfranchised simply because of their status as emigrants.

The global Irish family is large and will only continue to grow in the decades ahead - yet too often we are seen as distant cousins instead of fellow citizens; applauded for our good works, enterprise and generosity yet, at the same time, denied our fundamental rights as citizens under Article 2 of the Constitution. We urge you, then, to see the inclusion of these recommendations as a unique opportunity to complete the vision of the Rising in this Centennial year.

We also see this proposed programme of government as forward looking: an agenda for the next 100 years; giving the "Global Island" that Ireland has become a more vital connection to its best ambassadors - its citizens living around the world. Ireland as a nation may indeed have an increasing global vision but it remains woefully behind the vast majority of democratic nations around the world when it comes to safeguarding the political rights of their emigrant citizens.

Over 125 nations and territories have an absentee ballot process or other electoral options in place to make sure their citizens living abroad can vote. Ireland does not. In continuing to disenfranchise its emigrants, Ireland is failing to meet the emerging norms of modern democracy. Ireland now stands apart from its democratic neighbors in the EU, as the vast majority of them ensure that all their citizens retain the right to vote.

Reforming Ireland's electoral system will allow the nation to meet 21st-century norms of democracy and emigrant citizenship. Moving toward a system that embraces emigrant political participation will bring Ireland in line with its EU neighbours, embrace the Global Irish community, and realise the fundamental rights of citizenship enshrined in Article 2 of the Constitution.

During your first five years as Taoiseach you laid a new and strong foundation for engaging the global Irish: creating a Minister of Diaspora position, the establishment of the first Global Irish Civic Forum and we pay particular tribute to your achievement in creating Ireland's first-ever diaspora strategy. We ask you now to build on this new foundation and to see yourself as a leader committed to upholding our Constitutional rights and representing the "whole people of Ireland." This is a historic moment in the life of the country as well as a unique opportunity to transform Ireland into a modern 21st century democracy.

In the specific we ask the government to consider these important recommendations as it develops its new program of government:

1. Maintain a Minister for Diaspora Affairs position within the Cabinet

In addition, strengthen the position of Diaspora Minister with a Cabinet committee linking all departments with diaspora engagement.

2. Act promptly on the recommendation of the Constitutional Convention, and allow a referendum in 2017 giving emigrants and Irish citizens in Northern Ireland the right to vote in the 2019 Presidential election.

To announce a date for referendum proposed by Constitutional Convention and publish draft legislation enabling overseas and Northern Ireland voters to participate in presidential elections.

3. Give all citizens including emigrants and Irish citizens residing in Northern Ireland the right to vote on all future constitutional elections.

The return of many Irish citizens to Ireland in 2015 to vote in the constitutional referendum on same-sex marriage was an inspiration to the people of Ireland and affirmation of the deep desire of Irish emigrants to be active citizens and full participants in shaping the future of Ireland. Constitutional changes, of course, affect all citizens, resident and non-resident alike.

4. Ensure a Diaspora voice in a reformed Seanad

Accept the recommendations of the Seanad Reform Working Group by extending the vote to citizens abroad to ensure Diaspora representation in the chamber.

5. Grant the right to vote in elections to the Dáil to all Irish citizens including emigrants by the creation of a system of reserved constituencies.

A system of reserved constituencies would be a compromise that would allow a balance between adequate representation of overseas citizens and the fear that emigrant votes would 'swamp' the votes of resident citizens. This system, used by nations including France, Italy and Portugal, assigns dedicated constituencies for emigrants; we would envision, for example, the creation of a 5-seater overseas constituency in the Dáil.

6. Create an independent electoral commission to modernise Ireland’s electoral process including the creation of an absentee ballot process so Ireland can join more than 125 nations that currently meet the norms of a modern global democracy.

This should be established by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. Emigrant groups should have significant representation on the commission.

7. Reform the current voting regulations to expand the time that emigrants can remain on their home electoral registrar.

The current 18-month time limit is much too restrictive given the migration-and-return patterns of Ireland’s one million emigrants. Indeed, the vast majority of EU nations (all, in fact, except for the UK, Denmark, Cyprus and Malta) have no time limits at all. The government should engage with the global Irish community and EU voting experts to reconsider the conditions under which emigrants can remain on their home electoral register.

8. Creating an enduring partnership with Ireland’s global family

The Government should continue the work of the Global Irish Economic Forum and build upon the success of the first Global Irish Civic Forum by extending its engagement, strengthening self-organisation for a return Forum in June 2017.

We also note the importance of maximising the link between Ireland and all of its citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. To this end, we seek the continuation of RTE’s longwave service to the UK as a vital symbol of Ireland’s commitment to its relationship with the Irish abroad, and particularly to the welfare of the generation of emigrants who sacrificed so much to assist Ireland in the last century.

9. Increase consular representation to main centers of recent emigration

Since 2008 over 250,000 Irish born citizens have emigrated, and migration patterns have been shifting to newer destinations. The Government should undertake an immediate review of consular representation in the main centers of recent emigration, such as Australia, to ensure that staffing and activities adequately reflect the changing needs of growing Irish communities.

10. Engage the global diaspora in the current government review of emigrant voting rights

We ask the government to complete the study by the end of 2016 on emigrant voting rights which was announced in March 2015 as part of the new Global Diaspora Policy and to engage the Diaspora community on the result. This study was to be undertaken by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government in conjunction with the Department of Foreign Affairs.

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Since 2008, hundreds of thousands of young men and women have emigrated, many of them forced to leave to find work. The mass departure has ripped the social fabric of the nation,

saddened mothers and fathers, and disenfranchised citizens as they left the departure gates at Dublin airport.

Many of these emigrants are eager to return home with new talents to raise families and contribute to the strength of the nation. But while we are away, and until we can return home, we would like the government to uphold our Constitutional rights as citizens. Many policies that the Dail and the government enact have a direct impact on our lives and our ability to return home. Yet we have no voice or say in these deliberations. As you noted in your recent address at the GPO, "Ireland works best when it works together." We would like to be included.

In this Centenary year, we note with pride the active role that Irish emigrants played in the Rising and the founding of the nation, and how inclusive were its visionaries. Emigrants fought in the GPO for Ireland's freedom, sustained Ireland through the War of Independence and raised millions of dollars to help create the Free State. Ireland's "*exiled children*" played their part in helping to create the Republic in 1916. In 2016 we wish to play our part as well as full participants in an Ireland that is inclusive, equitable and democratic: that sees us not as a useful resource to be harnessed, but embraces us for our creativity, enterprise, generosity and standing as equal citizens.

President Michael D. Higgins in his 2012 lecture to the American Irish Historical Society stated that "The impact of the Irish immigrant experience on Ireland itself was creative, profound and lasting. Modern Ireland was constructed as much in Edinburgh and New York as in Galway or Dublin." We believe that this will be no less true in the future than it has been in the past; that Ireland going forward will be constructed in London and Sydney as in Galway and Dublin, in New York and Shanghai as in Limerick and Cork.

If Ireland is to be a Global Island in the 21st century, the nation needs to fully embrace all of its citizens, act immediately to recognise our Constitutional rights and, in "*cherishing all the children of the nation equally*", complete the vision of the 1916 Rising and of the republic which you now lead.

For additional information about www.VotingRights.ie and the work of our growing global coalition please contact either Noreen Bowden (NoreenBowden@gmail.com) or Kevin J. Sullivan (skjsully33@gmail.com). A copy of this letter has also been sent to the Fianna Fail negotiating team.

Sincerely,

Noreen Bowden, www.VotingRights.ie

Paul Cahill, President, Irish Business Network Germany

Barry Corr, CEO, Irish-Australian Chamber of Commerce

Adam Patrick Fulham, President, Irish Association of Latin America

John Hartnett, Founder and President, Irish Technology Leadership Group

Mary Hickman, Founder, Votes for Irish Citizens Abroad (VICA)

Conor O'Neill, We're Coming Back

Kevin J. Sullivan, www.VotingRights.ie

