

Article for Sunday Independent

By Michael McDowell

I wrote here last month about the uniquely dark power of the Government's whip hand in Irish politics. I did not exaggerate, as recent events have shown.

Alone in Europe the Irish Government can, and has now shown it will, punish parliamentarians for voting with their conscience on a matter of profound moral belief, by removing their speaking rights, their participation in committees, and ending their membership of the parliamentary party.

What is more, in Ireland the leaders of the big parties can decide centrally to end the careers of those parliamentarians by de-selecting them regardless of the views of the local party.

What price independence of thought? Political oblivion?

A far cry from the day that Liam Cosgrave as Taoiseach was allowed to vote against his own Government's Bill on contraception.

The whip hand of Executive dominance now proposes to abolish Seanad Éireann - the only House where freedom of speech, thought and action still lingers in our parliament.

And we are told that the justification is to save money!

The Government in its pursuit of its plan to grab total power for itself in a single chamber parliament ruled ruthlessly by a party whip has now resorted to the blackest of untrue propaganda to persuade the Irish electorate that they can save themselves €100m over five years by abolishing the Seanad.

This claim is completely false and has been trotted out again and again in order to make their power-grab seem sensible and attractive to an electorate which is weary of their other austerity measures.

Far from saving the Exchequer €20 million in any year, the total direct cost of Seanad Éireann (i.e. the money actually saved by abolition) is approximately €6.5m when you deduct taxes and levies from a gross cost of €9m. €9m was a figure recently given in evidence to an Oireachtas Committee by Kieran Coughlan, the Clerk of the Dail (who will be a member of the Referendum Commission).

That means that the actual "saving" of abolishing the Seanad amounts to no more than one euro, sixty cent per head of the population in any given year.

Far from making any real difference to the national exchequer, the abolition of Seanad Éireann will produce no noticeable financial improvement at all.

The €20 million Government lie was based on attributing on-going Leinster House costs and overheads which won't be saved at all by abolition to the Seanad. It's an old trick and it may work on some people.

Of course it can be argued that €6.5m is a lot of money, even if the Government is lying about €100 million. Fair enough. It could be cut now without any expensive referendum.

If the Seanad were abolished, and if the Dáil were, as promised, to sit longer hours and on more days to carry out the work now performed by members of the Senate, these extra sittings would probably cost a significant fraction of the small amount of money supposedly "saved" by abolishing the Seanad.

The annual cost of senators' salaries is €4.2 million of which about a third (say €1.6m) goes back to the Exchequer in taxes, USC and levies.

We should compare these figures with the annual payroll bill which this Government spends on 37 Special Ministerial Advisors, politically appointed and totally unaccountable, for whom there is absolutely no constitutional mandate.

Those 37 politically appointed government advisors collect a cool €91,000 each on average every year, which adds up to €3.4m per annum for their salaries, and that is without making any provision for their office overheads, their secretarial staff and assistance, travel expenses, etc.

The €6.5m net annual cost of the Seanad should also be seen in the light of the €200m plus additional payroll costs added every year in respect of public service increments.

The €6.5m "saving" to the Exchequer is less than 1% of Dublin City Council's annual budget.

Without any constitutional change at all we could cut senators' pay to, say, €30,000 per annum in a reformed Seanad elected directly by the people on the basis of one person one vote.

What we need in the Seanad is not a group of Dáil Éireann has-beens or wannabees but women and men who have proven themselves to be significant figures in the eyes of the public. I am confident that there are many, many women and men of quality and achievement who would consider it an honour to be elected to a reformed Seanad and would gladly accept an annual allowance of €30,000 to perform the important tasks envisaged for them by the present Constitution.

If this were to happen the annual true extra cost per citizen of a reformed Seanad would be of the order of €1.25 – the price a packet of sweets.

The Government's €100 million claim a black, black lie. Cost is not, and never was, the true reason why the last bastion of free speech and thought in our democratic system must be closed down.

The true agenda is Executive control.

There are Bills before each House of the Oireachtas which would give us a completely reformed Seanad, including gender equality, a vote for every citizen, votes for Irish passport holders abroad and votes for Irish citizens resident in Northern Ireland. These Bills could be enacted now without any constitutional amendment.

Our democracy is being degraded and abused.

If we vote to abolish the Seanad, we will wake up the next day to find we have a eunuch legislature which rubberstamps Government edicts at the wrong end of the whip.

We will still have an empty Farmleigh still costing us €2 million per year, but no Seanad, no checks and balances, no independent voices in our parliament.

We will kiss goodbye to the present provision for non-TD Ministers. There will never be a place in our parliament for conviction politicians like Mary Robinson or statesmen like Ken Whitaker. A whip-ridden single chamber will be able to remove presidents and judges, surrender our EU veto on tax and other issues and impose European Union laws under Article 29.

This Government which is so addicted to guillotining debate on legislation will be able to ram through legislation without debate, and the courts will be powerless to stop that.

When and if all of this comes to pass, and we wonder later why we did it, we may find in the newspaper archives that a dishonest Government in 2013 persuaded us to mutilate our constitution and degrade our democracy for a saving of less than two euros for each of us each year. The price of ten cigarettes each year to throw away the system of parliamentary checks and balances! And we threw away the chance to bring new, different voices into our parliament and Government all because we fell for the monstrous €100 million lie.