

## Convention to discuss reform of Constitution

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A CONSTITUTIONAL convention made up of politicians and ordinary citizens will be established next month to begin discussing reforms of key passages of Bunreacht na hÉireann.

The convention was given the green light by the Cabinet yesterday at its weekly meeting. A resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas is required to establish it. A chair will be appointed around the same time. A Government spokesman yesterday said all this would happen before the Dáil breaks up for the summer recess, allowing the convention to begin work in the autumn.

The idea for a convention was first floated by Fine Gael at its ardfheis in 2009 but was also adopted by the Labour Party in its general election manifesto. The novel idea behind it is that ordinary citizens comprise the majority of the membership of the convention.

Some 66 of the 99 delegates will be “citizen members”. They are expected to be chosen by a professional polling company from data contained on the electoral register. There will be a 50-50 split between men and women, and participants will come from as wide a geographical, demographic and social spread as possible.

A small technical legislative change will be required to do this. The Government spokesman said last night that this would also be completed before the end of the Dáil’s summer term in mid-July.

The remaining 33 delegates will comprise politicians from the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly. One representative of each Northern party will sit on the convention with the Oireachtas representation reflecting party strength.

Initially, the convention will discuss two of the six constitutional issues identified by both Coalition parties in the programme for government. They are a proposal to reduce the President’s term of office from seven to five years, and a proposal to lower the voting age from 18 to 16.

The other issues identified for discussion: a review of the Dáil electoral system; provision for same-sex marriage; amending the clause on women in the home and encouraging greater participation of women in public life; and removing the concept of blasphemy from the Constitution.

Originally it was proposed that the convention would report back within 12 months of the election but that timetable was pushed back. Last night the spokesman was not in a position to say when the convention would report other than to confirm it would have completed its work by the end of the Government’s term.

Similar programmes involving the participation of citizens have been tried in several countries. Two assemblies in Canada made recommendations that were not adopted in subsequent referendums. In the Netherlands and Iceland, far-reaching recommendations made by assemblies were subsequently adopted into law.

In Ireland, a group led by academics, We the Citizens, used a citizen assembly model to address a number of key issues in Irish society. The final report reflected mixed results. One of the practical difficulties that emerged was getting citizens chosen at random to participate in the proceedings.