

Letter from Ireland: That Other Referendum



On May 22 this year, people in the Republic of Ireland will exercise their democratic right by going to the polls to vote on two proposals to change the constitution. The first proposal is to allow same sex couples the right to marry each other. It is a proposal that has created much debate across the nation but one in which many favour and looks set to pass comfortably. The second proposal is one which has sparked less of a debate and it is worrying.

Beside the marriage equality referendum there is also a referendum to lower the age of candidates eligible for a crack at the Irish presidency. But for some reason it seems to be sidelined as a non-event.

The role of the president in Ireland is nothing more than a ceremonial one. He or she simply represents the country overseas; they cut ribbons on new infrastructure and serve out their seven year term without interfering too much in the political process.

At the moment if you want to get a chance at winning a seven year stay in Ireland's version of the white house then you have to be over the age of 35. This other little known referendum proposes to lower this age to 21 and while equality is the name of the game in the marriage referendum, where is the equality in denying those aged between 21 and 35 the chance to become president of this supposed nation of equality?

To stand for election to the Irish parliament a candidate must be at least 21, which means a government minister or even the prime minister can be in their twenties or early thirties and make important national decisions, a power which I have already noted as being nil in the office of president. In France, the nation which inspired our republican ideals here in Ireland, you can stand for its highest office from the age of 18 and it is a role that holds much more power and responsibility than the one in Ireland.

The job of Irish president may be an easy occupation once you get it, but it is not an easy candidacy to attain. The road to the Irish presidency is a long one: a candidate must swim the murky waters of the political party nomination process, raise truckloads of money and have a squeaky clean back round. If anyone aged between 21 and 35 can achieve that then surely that shows they have the determination and experience to hold such a prestigious office.

To state that a person under the age of 35 is too young to become head of state is a statement built on flimsy foundations. Think of recent Irish history and a certain statesman called Michael Collins. He never reached his 35th birthday but in his 31 years he had become a member of the Irish parliament, a minister for finance, commander in chief of the national army, a director of secret intelligence and chairman of the provisional government. All of this while conducting a war against the imperialist forces of Britain! Yes they were different times, in fact they were dangerous times but there is no such predicament like that for today's president which makes the job for him or her even easier!

So on May 22nd when Irish people will vote to grant gay couples equality, hopefully they might think of that other referendum and give those aged between 21 and 35 their equality and right to run for the highest office in their land.