

**The role of the TD  
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Some of the dissatisfaction with the nature of political system focuses on the role of the TD. Are there too many TDs, and do they spend their time in the best way?

**Slide 1: too many TDs?**

The Dáil has 166 TDs for around 4.2 million people, ie around 1 per 25,000 people. On this basis the UK would have c2,200 MPs, while India would have c46,000 – so it might seem that the Dáil is over-staffed. On the other hand, with such a ratio Malta would have only 16 MPs and Luxembourg 19, well below what those countries actually do have, so now it might seem that the Dáil is under-staffed. If Ireland employed India's ratio it would have just 2 TDs, if it employed Malta's ratio it would have around 680.

All of this illustrates the obvious point that the smaller the country, the higher the number of MPs per head of population. The general relationship identified by Taagepera and Shugart is that the size of a country's parliament is approximately equal to the cube root of its population, which in Ireland's case would be 162. In short, Ireland is not over-staffed with TDs in comparative terms, especially when it's borne in mind that unlike larger countries it doesn't have a tier of provincial / regional MPs.

**Slide 2: TDs and their workload 1**

INES, the Irish National Election Study (<http://www.tcd.ie/ines/>), has asked about contact between TDs and constituents. In 2002, it found that 21 per cent had contacted a TD over the previous five years while 79 per cent had not. In 2006 it found that 17–18 per cent had contacted a TD over the previous year, while 82 per cent had not; of the ones who had made such contact, most had contacted only one TD while a minority had contacted more than one.

**Slide 3: TDs and their workload 2**

How does the Irish pattern compare with that from countries elsewhere? In the debate on institutional reform in this country it's common to hear the view that in

most countries MPs don't get called on to do much constituency work, and that therefore it must be the PR-STV electoral system that compels them to do it in this country. However, this is an insular view that takes no account of what actually happens in many countries around the world.

In fact it's a norm that MPs have a heavy constituency workload, and this is usually their most important role, way ahead of anything to do with parliamentary committees, legislation etc. (On the subject of the electoral system, it's also a norm across the smaller European democracies that the electoral system is multi-seat PR with competition among candidates of the same party, just as in Ireland – but that's another day's work.) Thirty years ago Michael Mezey wrote: 'members of every type of legislature say that they are subjected to an incessant flow of such [casework] demands, and they indicate that coping with them requires a substantial portion of their time and resources'.

For example, in France the main role of *députés* is seen by their voters as 'interceding with central government on behalf of individuals or councils, rather than as a legislator or watchdog over executive power or debater of the great issues of the day'.

In the UK, in the House of Commons, whereas 30 years ago some MPs could get by with making a visit to their constituency every 2 or 3 months, the workload has expanded hugely and these days there are many MPs who do virtually nothing except constituency work. In the new devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales, MPs overwhelmingly identify helping to solve constituents' problems as the most important part of their role.

In Canada – which like France and UK has single-member constituencies, and also has a whole tier of provincial MPs – it is far and away the largest part of an MP's role, so much so that for one week per month parliament simply does not sit in order that MPs can spend the whole week in their constituencies. Any time Canadian MPs are given more resources, they use these not to spend more time on broad policy matters but to improve their constituency service.

Generally, all the evidence is that nature of electoral system plays at most a very marginal role in affecting the relationship between MPs and their constituencies. It's well known (as John Coakley pointed out in the first presentation this morning) that in this country MPs had extensive constituency work even in the 19C, and they would almost certainly continue to do so under any other electoral system. NB in this country there's also no provincial tier of govt, and local government is very weak, so contacts that in some countries would go to local or provincial elected representatives go to national-level parliamentarians here.

#### **Slide 4: is there any value in TDs' constituency work?**

From what's been said so far, it might seem that the concentration by TDs on constituency role is a regrettable or deplorable fact that, judging by the comparative evidence, we just have to live with.

But we could take a much more positive view of constituency work. For one thing, it's clear that TDs are responding to popular demand in doing this work, eg

INES and other findings show how important it is for most voters that their TDs will be good at working for the local area.

In addition, it can sometimes seem that the debate on TDs' constituency work is dominated by a well-educated and articulate commentariat consisting of those who are unlikely themselves ever to have a problem with social welfare benefits and who are perhaps unaware of the struggles of some of those who do. Most TDs, reflecting on their experience of constituency work, can cite examples of timewasters (people who want a TD to obtain all-Ireland final tickets for them, for example, or those constituents who contact every TD in the constituency about the same case) but can also cite very genuine cases where someone needed their assistance. For example, Labour TD Róisín Shortall in 1995:

I represent an area with a very high level of unemployment, poverty, housing problems, and people who spend their lives in queues, trying to sort out social welfare issues. I get up to 250 letters a week, and the follow-up on all these takes time. I wish it were not so. I wish people were sufficiently empowered to sort out their own problems. I wish they could go to their citizens' advice bureau and get the help they need. But this doesn't happen.

The idea that a TD should shut their door on such constituents and say 'don't be bothering me, the constitution doesn't say anything about TDs doing constituency work, I'm in the Dáil in order to concentrate on legislation and not to deal with that kind of thing' does not seem to amount to an enhancement of democracy. Even if we could figure out a way of 'reforming' our institutions so as to enable TDs simply to ignore those constituents without fear of electoral punishment, would we really want to do that?

The pros and cons of constituency work are debated in many countries. It does, clearly, reduce the time that MPs are available to spend on legislative or committee work. (Though we need not feel sympathetic to ministers for being personally over-burdened with constituency work; according to the answers to a set of PQs in December 2008 and January 2009 the 15 cabinet ministers then had 216 staff in their private offices and looking after their constituency offices, with a further 187 on the staff of junior ministers.) But on the positive side it reduces alienation from the political system as a whole, makes voters feel that at least someone is 'on their side', and keeps MPs aware of the reality of life for ordinary people, preventing the development of a completely out-of-touch political class.

### **Slide 5: should TDs have a greater role in policy-making?**

The role of TDs here could be enhanced by institutional reforms within the Oireachtas, as Muiris MacCarthaigh will outline.

But we must recognise that TDs think, act and vote as members of parties, and that will always impose a limit to how independent their behaviour will be. Moreover, while many people in this country (and indeed other countries) think that the whip system in parliament is too rigid and that TDs should be freer to vote on issues according to their conscience, we need to pause before embracing that: if all 166 TDs were independents, would the result be an improvement on the status quo or would it mean that any kind of effective government became impossible?

If we're looking for one unusual feature of Irish politics that might be responsible for the relatively peripheral role of the Dáil, it's the fact that in practice virtually all ministers are TDs (a point made by John Coakley earlier). Hardly any other country operates this way. It means that nearly all TDs, especially government back-benchers, think in terms of one day being promoted to government, not in terms of the Dáil as an independent scrutiniser of government as might be the case in the Netherlands (where ministers cannot simultaneously be MPs), for example.

**Slide 6: conclusion**

Constituency work is the norm for MPs in most countries. It's hard to imagine a job specification for any self-respecting MP that does not involve defending and promoting the interests of the constituency as a whole and of individual constituents.

Instead of looking down our noses at constituency work and seeing it as something to be disdained as 'clientelism' (a highly inaccurate term in the light of any conventional definition as to what clientelism actually entails) or discouraged, it would be better to see it as a strength of the Irish political system. Instead of trying to eliminate it, we should look to resource it better, and indeed steps have been taken to that effect with the provision of funding for TDs towards the running of a constituency office. Maybe 'reform' is needed not so much in the way TDs discharge their role but in the way we visualise the roles of TDs in Irish society.

**Further reading and references:**

John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (eds), *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 5th ed (London: Routledge and PSAI Press, published August 2009), chapter 8:  
Michael Gallagher and Lee Komito, 'The constituency role of TDs', pp. 230–62.

**Web site on electoral system reform:**

[http://www.tcd.ie/Political\\_Science/staff/michael\\_gallagher/IrishElectSys.php](http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/IrishElectSys.php)