



THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF IRELAND

AN COIMISIÚN UM THODHCHAÍ NA hÉIREANN

**Report of the
Belfast People's Assembly,
12th October 2022**



INTRODUCTION

The Commission on the Future of Ireland was established by Sinn Féin in November 2021. Its remit is to undertake a grassroots consultation with the people of Ireland and internationally on the future of Ireland.

This will be achieved in a number of ways: through the hosting of public People's Assemblies across the country and internationally; through the collection and collation of written submissions; through hosting sectoral meetings and through private engagements.

A final report will be compiled at the culmination of the project.

This is a report of the first People's Assembly public meeting which took place in Belfast's Waterfront Hall on 12th October 2022.

The meeting was addressed by Sinn Féin's Party Chairperson Declan Kearney, Leas Uachtarán and First Minister Designate Michelle O'Neill, and the independent chair for the evening, Eilish Rooney of the University of Ulster.

Over 300 people packed into the Waterfront Studio where they discussed constitutional change and the steps needed to create the new Ireland.

The event saw 10 guest speakers make verbal submissions and this was followed by a discussion with the audience.

The conference was divided into two sessions. The first covered 'The Economy and Communities in the New Ireland' and the second was titled 'A New Ireland for Everyone'.

At the end of the evening, the independent chair Eilish Rooney asked for a show of hands on the need for the Irish Government to establish a Citizen's Assembly on the Future. The response was overwhelmingly in favour.



A video of the Belfast People's Assembly is available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B88dmep9SS4>

Some 75 submissions were made via the webpage in the run-up to the Belfast People's Assembly.

Ten substantial submissions were received directly to the Commission email address.

It is important to note that submissions remain open and individuals and groups are encouraged to make a submission to the Commission at commission@sinnfein.ie or via the following webpage www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland

The growing momentum of conversations on the future of Ireland was the key theme of Declan Kearney's address. He described it as "an ambitious initiative aimed at making a positive contribution to deepening the conversation on constitutional change and Irish unity".

The National Party Chairperson believes that, "There is now an irresistible case for the Irish Government to establish a Citizens' Assembly on constitutional change".

The People's Assembly has, according to Kearney, "an important role to play in preparing the groundwork in advance of a unity referendum".

He said that it is "an exciting time for us all, filled with opportunity and hope for a better future".

In terms of the need for a public consultation process that the People's Assembly project involves, Kearney emphasised that, "Grassroots communities should be involved at the beginning of that process, not at the end".

The People's Assemblies initiative "can make an important contribution" to the debates on the future of Ireland, he said.

First Minister Designate Michelle O'Neill addressed the meeting and urged people from all backgrounds to get involved in the discussion on a New Ireland. She said:

"This is our home place. All of us who live here. Let's make it a better home place for everyone".

O'Neill said that she was "working to build a society not of Orange and Green, but a rainbow of colours and multiculturalism which reflects who we

are and what we stand for today, and that embraces our diversity”.

“We want more than the reunification of our island – we want the unity of our people. We want a future which consigns sectarianism to the past and in which all of our citizens - Irish, British, northern Irish or none of these - can live together in peace and prosperity. It can be done. But even if you disagree, let’s talk about it.

“We can have an Ireland where no one is left behind. We have it within our grasp to create a peaceful, united, democratic Ireland.”





KEY THEMES

There were a range of issues raised by the contributors, demonstrating the complexity of relationships and institutions on the island and the scale of the challenge in building a new, agreed Ireland.

ISSUES RAISED ON THE NIGHT INCLUDED:

- The logistics of the British exchequer subvention.
- The role of practical, cross-border, all-island concepts and projects that deliver and provide meaningful opportunities for involved communities.
- The need for effective funding of local communities.
- Unity represents an opportunity to reconstruct our country from the bottom up and to build a just economy.
- A real plan to tackle climate change and a radically different economic strategy must be at the core of any all-Ireland economic strategy.
- An all-Ireland transport infrastructure strategy could be a game changer for the island economy.
- Growing population on the island will be a logistical challenge in the next decade.
- An all-island, free at the point of delivery health service is a necessity.
- The rights of disabled people need to be a core consideration of the new Ireland.
- A new Ireland must have a focus on funding quality, affordable housing and sustainable communities, along with a plan to rebuild and invest in rural Ireland.
- The need for integrated education should be considered.
- The citizenship rights of migrants are a key issue.
- The Irish language must have a central place in a new, United Ireland, with rights constitutionally guaranteed.

SESSION 1:

THE ECONOMY & COMMUNITIES IN THE NEW IRELAND

SUMMARIES OF REMARKS BY KEY SPEAKERS:



**Seamus McGuinness,
Research Professor of the Economic Social
Research Institute (ESRI)**

Professor McGuinness stated that the economy in the south of Ireland performs better than the north on a number of key metrics such as productivity output and risk of poverty. Household disposable income and life expectancy is higher in the south and that jurisdiction also has higher levels of educational attainment, higher exports and higher levels of Foreign Direct Investment. This suggests that the northern economy has the potential to grow and flourish in a United Ireland.

In addressing the argument on the cost of unity, McGuinness highlighted that estimated 2017/18 figures for subvention, falls by about 25% in a United Ireland, due to certain expenditure no longer required post-reunification.

He argued that the costs of pensions (currently estimated to be in the region of £3 billion) could remain a British liability.

McGuinness also pointed to a growing consensus among researchers that the current level of subvention exists because of the north's low productivity. He suggested a transitional period in the event of a border poll to allow for operational responsibility to shift to the Republic and to allow for the development of policies to address the north's low economic productivity, maximising the economic benefits of reunification and eliminating subvention needs.



Ruth Tallion, Director for Cross Border Studies

Ruth spoke of the need to put forward all-island solutions to social, environmental and economic issues that will deliver the needs of people more effectively than separate jurisdictional approaches. She argues that unionists or sceptical Irish citizens can best be convinced of the merits of a United Ireland by developing practical cross-border,

all-island concepts and projects that deliver and provide meaningful opportunities for their input into design and implementation.

Tallion argued that home-grown Brexiteers see the Good Friday Agreement as an obstacle to Brexit. She believes that they never supported the agreement and see Brexit as a mechanism to get rid of it – to this end they are prepared to support the demolition of human rights protections and the impoverishment of their own constituents. She cited the example of the leader of the DUP preparing to accept the loss of 40,000 jobs if the end result is a hard border on the island.

Ruth highlights the Shared Island Initiative, which has ring-fenced €1 billion in funding for all-island projects to 2030, and argues that every opportunity to use the Strand 2 and 3 institutions in the event of a restored Stormont should be maximised to develop all-island integration and build common cause with progressives in Britain. This is important for both present day returns and to lay the foundations for unification.



Áine Hargey, Chairperson of the Markets Development Association

Áine began by telling the assembly of her experience being born and raised in the working class Markets area in Belfast. She stated that decades of regressive economic and social policy led by successive British and Unionist governments has ripped all industry and infrastructure out of the area, with decades long attempts to shrink

district boundaries, encroach on the land and impoverish the people. She

highlighted the fact that £1.1 billion was invested in the Laganaside area in the 10 years post Good Friday Agreement, yet none of this money reached the Markets community.

Hargey spoke of the replacement of military barricades by economic ones, segregating the community from the wealth and economic opportunities that existed all around it. She argued that this is a common experience in working class communities across the island – people trapped in an endless cycle of falling in and out of poverty and generations of families dispossessed, disrespected and bypassed by the state. She stated that all of this is underpinned by a complete disconnect with those who rule in Westminster and predicated by the abject failure that is Partition.

She believes that Partition is the root cause of bread and butter issues and that anyone who is serious about ending inequality must also get serious about ending Partition. Unity represents an opportunity to reconstruct our country from the bottom up and to build a just economy, focused on equal outcomes and not just equal opportunity. A movement that is genuine about a new Ireland needs to also be genuine about a new kind of economics.

Áine spoke of the need to harness the power and potential of working class communities in building a new Ireland, tapping into the resilience ingenuity and solidarity as well as the pride and strength, creativity and connection, knowledge, power and tradition at the heart of many working class communities. In the Markets, the community is tapping into all these skills in an attempt to model how a working class community can take back control of its destiny at a local level. The Markets is attempting to rebuild the community as a model of what's possible for all working class people in a new Ireland of the future.



Glynn Roberts, Chief Executive of Retail NI

The issue of transport infrastructure was the core theme of Glynn Roberts. He specifically highlighted the importance of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review and the need to invest in rail links between Belfast, Dublin and Cork and modernising existing services through electrification and improved connections.

He described such developments as a potential “game changer” for Ireland, “turbo-charging our economy”, improving connectivity and reconnecting communities.

“The retail sector is Ireland’s largest sector and employer and is key to any future success on this island. This is why Retail NI works hand-in-glove with counterparts south of the border, Retail Excellence Ireland, to make sure that governments North and South hear our member’s voices...

“We work North-South, East-West to create a better future for us all. But my main message to you tonight is the importance of investing, improving and modernising Ireland’s transport infrastructure. We all know infrastructure is the backbone of economic growth and I firmly believe in the untapped potential of rail to contribute to social and economic development across the island of Ireland, providing faster and more frequent connectivity, connecting communities, as well helping us meet our ambitious climate action objectives.”



David Gavaghan, non-executive Director, Confederation of British Industry

The future projected population growth of the island from 7 million to 10 million people over the next 30 years was the key focus of David Gavaghan.

Gavaghan highlighted the need to invest in infrastructure and connectivity to ensure jobs, welfare and the needs of the people of the whole of

the island of Ireland in the future.

He also highlighted the argument that there needs to be greater investment in cities, where population density will increase, and there is a need to ensure highly populated cities in order to be globally competitive.

He said:

“In 2010 Intertrade Ireland published a report that it had commissioned by the Irish Academy of Engineering - Infrastructure for an island population of 8 million.

“It was launched by Martin McGuinness on the steps of Stormont. It was a really significant statement of confidence in the future of the island, trying

to identify the future infrastructure needs, which are fundamental to making people's lives better.

"Later a second report was published on the importance of the eastern economic corridor of Ireland and its connectivity. The report was dedicated to the work of George Quigley. It looked specifically at the importance of being globally competitive. Without it we will not be able to produce the jobs, the welfare, and the needs of the people of the whole of the island of Ireland.

A third report – a more significant piece of work – looked at the connectivity of the island."

SPEAKERS FROM THE FLOOR:

Chartered Accountant in Dublin

"The reality is that Partition has been an economic failure for 100 years. If the 26 Counties, through reunification, will be an economic powerhouse, we can use that wealth not just to create prosperity for the top 10% but for the whole country.

"That means when we talk of a republic, we talk about not just having democratic rights but we talk about the wealth being put back into our communities; put back into our health services; put back into our education service and helping all that can happen.

"This country can be very prosperous. The 26 Counties has very high GNI, a very high GDP but we are still driving a car, a gluaisteán, with three wheels and one of the wheels is let down.

"We do not need to take lectures from people in London who are now bankrupt. We are capable, Irish people who went out into the world and built the world. Why don't we build our own country? We are more than capable."

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

"When I look at the north here and how many people are on antidepressants because of the trauma that we have all suffered throughout the years of the conflict, I believe that a healthcare system is a must in a

New Ireland where everyone is treated at the point of service when they go for it.

"Across Ireland we have a mental health pandemic. We need to look at how we build resilience in communities and in the context of a United Ireland, we need to look at mental health costs in a new Ireland.

"Imagine going from Donegal to wherever and instead of stopping and starting in every wee town in a truck for example, we could have a rail system. I hope that this citizens' assembly sets out a clear, positive plan for that type of development because it is a no brainer."



Sinéad Quinn, James Carson and Michael Gaffney

SESSION 2:

A NEW IRELAND FOR EVERYONE

SUMMARIES OF REMARKS BY KEY SPEAKERS:



Greta Gurklyte - Public Engagement Officer, Disability Action

"We need a new form of governance and decision making that works for disabled people" was the core theme of Greta Gurklyte's address:

"Disabled People have been waiting too long for change. We do not have the same protections and rights as counterparts in the neighbouring jurisdiction and in England, Scotland and Wales.

"The Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission has stated that lack of progress in equality legislation means that we are living in the 'dark ages' and that there is a serious risk of falling way behind, to not being a developed country."

The cost of living emergency presents a specific, extra challenge for disabled people, who face "impossible choices this winter between breathing and eating, due to the escalating costs of running lifesaving machinery in the home, and without action disabled people will die this winter".

"Disabled people have been left behind at Stormont, and by Westminster. We need a new form of governance and decision making that works for disabled people. The current political crisis is devastating. We needed sustainable institutions months ago to save our lives.

"Part of tonight is about thinking about what can work. We know that working together works. We know that collaborative partnerships bring about the best possible outcome. I have worked on the cross-border ONSIDE project which was co-designed with disabled people. ONSIDE was developed to improve disabled people's health and wellbeing by digitally equipping and upskilling disabled people and reducing social isolation. This project has reached 2,400 disabled people, reduced social

isolation and established community hubs operating here and in the south of Ireland.

"As disabled people we agreed we need to work together to deliver real change and rights and equality for all. We can achieve more by working together."



Professor John Barry - School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Politics, QUB

Professor Barry highlighted what he called "some uncomfortable biological and physical truths". He believes that a real plan to tackle climate change and a radically different economic strategy must be at the core of any all-Ireland economic strategy. We must embrace a radical post growth economic strategy.

The maintenance of growth past sustainable levels relies on "overwork, environmental exploitation, endless overconsumption and consumerism" as well as "the privatisation of our public services and non-market provisions". Barry argued that, "growth in overdeveloped societies such as ours is worsening not improving our living standards".

"GDP tells us absolutely nothing about the real social conditions in our society or the well being of our citizens. It tells us nothing about inequality, the distribution of income and wealth and resources or indeed poverty and social inclusion, and it tells us nothing about the value of the unpaid work of women.

"Arguments for Irish Unity based on a scientifically unfounded projection of a post-unification economy based upon island-wide, endless economic growth are scientifically illiterate, extremely risky and lack all credibility."

This, he believes, will be "unity by ecocide". Therefore, to ensure a firm scientific footing for the economic debate on reunification, all future contributions must engage in the reality of the planetary crisis and the opportunities that can be realised by embracing a radical post-growth political economy.

Barry called for "an economy that values the mental health of its citizens,

full employment in meaningful work and universal public services, all within Ireland's fair share of a flourishing natural world and a stable climate".

"A New Ireland requires a new way of thinking and managing in a post-unification economy, all discussions around reunification need to be based on a completely different model and understanding of political economy", he said.



Dr Raied Al-Wassan - Northern Ireland Council for Racial Equality

Dr Al-Wassan came to the North 32 years ago to study at Queens and decided to make it his home. His address focused on the concerns of migrants in the Six Counties, particularly their right to Irish citizenship.

"6.5% of people living in the north were not born in the UK or Ireland. Most are entitled to vote and do vote, moving between parties and candidates tactically, particularly those who are best at helping their cause.

"A border poll is coming and migrants will be entitled to vote. The main issues for them are an NHS, which provides a good service and is free at the point of delivery, tax, the economy, and business interests, but most importantly Irish citizenship is a key issue.

"At present, those living here are not entitled to Irish citizenship. The Irish Government are not willing to discuss this. Do we expect people to vote in a United Ireland poll that would make them second class citizens?"

Finally, raising the issues of hate crimes, Dr Al-Wassan said that "ethnic minorities fear an increase in hate crimes post border poll, and that before a border poll is held we need to address hate crimes and have a clearly set out plan for citizenship".



Maighréad Ní Chonghaile, ó Bhéal Feirste thuaidh, gníomhaí teanga le fada, gníomhach ag leibhéal an phobail agus in earnáil na Gaelscolaíochta

“Chuaigh na mílte chun sráide arís eile ar na mallaibh i mBéal Feirste chun cearta teanga agus Acht Gaeilge a éileamh.

“Tá sé simplí domhsa. Bheinn ag dúil go huile agus go hiomlán go mbeadh teanga na nGael agus cearta na nGael iomlán im-leabaithe agus iomlán fréamhaithe go córasach sa dlí agus i mBunreacht nua na hÉireann ar bith...”

“Rinneadh go leor leor ionsaí ar an teanga agus ar phobal labhartha na Gaeilge thar na blianta fada anseo sna 6 Chontae... Is cinnte nach bhfuil na tuairimí diúltacha i leith na Gaeilge teoranta do na 6 Chontae. Áfach, go deimhin, tá cás déanta ag go leor daoine go bhfuil seasamh na Gaeilge sna 26 Chontae i bhfad siar óna bheith iomlán tacúil nó slán...”

“Feictear domhsa go gcaithfear pleanáil don athGhaelú anois mar chuid den athaontú...”

“Is léiriú speisialta maith den bhláthú a thagann as comhoibriú trasphobail bunaithe ar dhul chun cinn na Gaeilge amháin de, atá ann in Oirthear Bhéal Feirste...”

“Ba chóir go rachadh an caint ar aghaidh go Leitir Ceanainn ar an mhí seo chugainn agus chuig cibé áit ina dhiaidh sin – Coinneoidh na daoine sa seomra seo an Ghaeilge ar an chlár agus cearta teanga ar an tábla i rith ama – níl sé de cheart ag duine ar bith ár dteanga dúchais a chuir ar an mhearfhada, gan ligeán do cheist na Gaeilge bheith i lár an aonaigh, bíodh sé sin in imeacht de chuid Shinn Féin nó ag an leibhéal is airde sa dhá Rialtais...”

“Caithfear go bhfuil ceist na Gaeilge, cearta teanga, oideachas lán-Ghaeilge, seirbhísí trí mheán na Gaeilge, comharthaíocht agus feiceálacht na Gaeilge, uilig mar thosaíocht in Éire Nua Athaontaithe.”

“As you know, thousands took to the streets recently in Belfast to demand language rights and an Acht Gaeilge

“It’s simple for me. I would fully expect that the language and rights of Irish

language speakers would be fundamental and integral in law and in the constitution of any new Ireland.

"As we know, unfortunately, there have been many attacks on the language and on the Irish-language speaking community for many years here in the six counties.

"These negative opinions on the Irish language are not restricted solely to the Six Counties, however. Indeed, plenty have made the case that the position of An Ghaeilge in the 26 counties is far from being protected or safe.

"Looking forward, it seems to me that we need to plan for the re-Gaelicisation now as part of the conversation around reunification

"On that subject, one such example of the development of the Irish language that comes from cross-community cooperation is the Skainos Centre in East Belfast.

"Personally, I would strongly recommend that any conversations taking place around the future of Ireland have the Irish language and language rights central to the conversation. This should be developed and discussed alongside other key issues and not included as a bolt-on and the end of the conversation.

"The people in this room will keep An Ghaeilge on the agenda and language rights on the table throughout the discussion. It is nobody's right to put our native language on the long-finger or to prevent An Ghaeilge from being a central discussion point whether that be in a Sinn Féin event or at the highest level in the two Governments...

The issue of the Irish language, language rights, all-Irish education, services through the medium of Irish, signage and the visibility of the Irish language - all must be a priority in a new, reunified Ireland.



Ben Collins - Writer & Communications Consultant

Ben Collins made the point that a new Ireland must have a focus on funding quality affordable housing and sustainable communities, as well as the need to rebuild and invest in rural Ireland.

He said:

"Sovereignty for me is not a flag on a pole. It is a roof over your head and food on the table.

"Housing is the foundation stone for society. The quality of home that somebody lives in has an impact on their physical and mental wellbeing.

"We must look after the most vulnerable and help them to live as independently as possible, for as long as possible in their own homes.

"We want to see everyone have access to a good quality home. A new Ireland must have a strong focus on this. The best way to achieve this is through a mixed tenure approach where social, affordable and private housing is provided together. This helps to create sustainable communities."

An all-Ireland approach is needed with specific targets set for all government departments across Ireland to ensure that they deliver quality housing in a joined up manner.

"We need to ensure that we provide high speed broadband so that we can harness this potential, reinvigorate our towns and villages and reduce carbon emissions from people having to commute into our urban centres. Remote working should be welcomed and encouraged across the private and public sectors", Collins said.

He continued:

"The housing regulator in the south does not allow out of state control. This means that northern housing associations cannot leverage their assets to help fund and build housing in the south. It means that northern housing associations cannot use their expertise in terms of staff or board members on approved housing bodies in the south, in a truly joined up way. Housing needs to be considered a key part of Ireland's infrastructure and all of this should be done on an all-Ireland basis.

"Prior to Brexit northern housing associations were able to access low cost loans through the European Investment Bank. In one example they were able to draw down €200m for solar panels which were put on social housing to help address the climate crisis and provide cheap and safe energy for their tenants. The EIB is no longer processing applications from Northern Ireland for this and the supposed UK Investment Bank is not providing funding either. Irish unity will enable us to reverse these two

retrograde steps.

"Building new housing provides an economic multiplier effect for the wider economy so by focusing on this we are providing homes and jobs."

SPEAKERS FROM THE FLOOR:

One male speaker focused on the online submission proforma and the question it contains regarding the protection of rights in a new Ireland:

"Would I be subjected to an annual display of hatred towards my own culture.....there have been suggestions about changing the Irish flag...we need to appreciate the meaning of the flag and what the white represents."

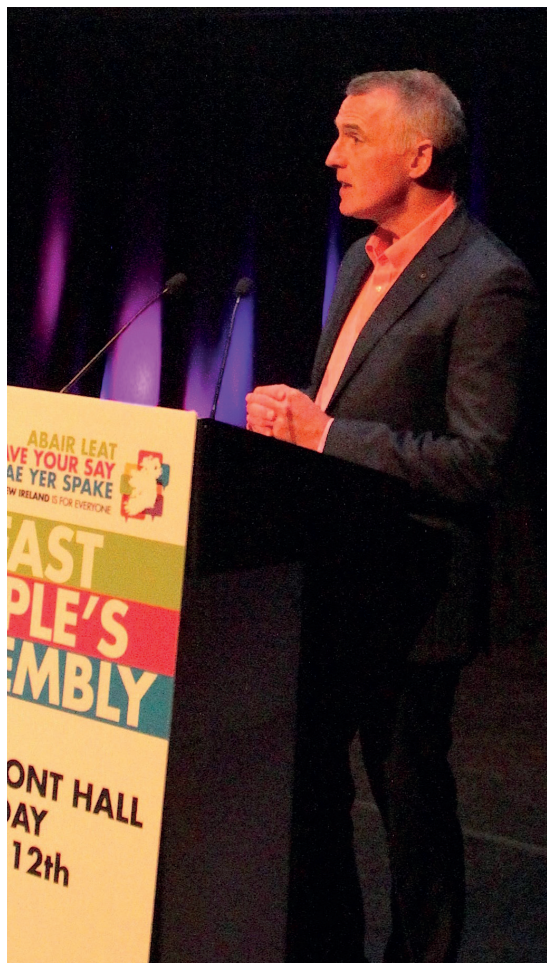
Rachel, who works as a teacher, commended the speakers in the session and told the meeting how she didn't have a Catholic friend until she was 36:

"I made that friend when we were teaching in an integrated school together... Partition is always going to exist on our island as long as we continue to segregate our children."





**First Minister Designate
Michelle O'Neill MLA**



**Declan Kearney MLA
National Party Chairperson**

CONCLUSION

The Belfast People's Assembly was an informative and thought provoking event, which addressed a multitude of topics.

It is clear from the wide range of speakers from diverse backgrounds, that there is a desire to engage with the Commission on the Future of Ireland and that this desire is not limited to those from a republican or nationalist background.

The principle message from the meeting is that people want a better future and they believe that a future which is better than the present arrangement is possible and desirable.

The issue of citizens' rights formed a large part of the discussion – housing rights, language rights, migrant rights and the rights of disabled people were discussed.

The economy, low productivity in the north, class-based economic policies and developing all-island infrastructure as an aid to economic development formed the basis for other contributors.

The meeting voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Irish Government establishing a Citizens' Assembly on The Future. Those in attendance clearly believe that there is a need to begin planning for constitutional change and that this should be led by the Irish Government.

Feedback from those who attended indicate that participants were motivated by being part of the conversation and that there is a demand for this type of meeting to be held again.

Others have requested private engagements following the Belfast People's Assembly and this will be accommodated by the Commission.



Clíodhna NicBhranair and Eilish Rooney, Independent Chair



