



ARMAGH / DOWN / LOUTH PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

**Report of
Armagh, Down, Louth Peoples Assembly
30 March 2023**



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 Armagh, Down, Louth People's Assembly that took place in the Carrickdale Hotel on 30 March 2023.

The meeting was addressed by Uachtarán Shinn Féin
Mary Lou McDonald TD.

A video of the Armagh, Down Louth People's Assembly is available on YouTube:

https://youtu.be/HP2OWkwK0_U



Currently the Commission on the Future of Ireland has received over 150 contributions from a broad range of interested individuals and groups.

It is important to note that contributions can still be made to the Commission at commission@sinnfein.ie or via the following webpage www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland

In June the Commission will be holding a Women's Assembly in Belfast and a Youth Assembly in Dublin and we are planning two more Peoples Assemblies to be held in the South later in the year including one in the Galway Gaeltacht.

INTRODUCTION

"No-one holds the title deeds on what a United Ireland will look like. We all have our aspirations, our ideas". This was how Sinn Féin president Mary Lou McDonald TD introduced the fourth public People's Assembly meeting.

Held in the Carrickdale hotel on 30 March, Mary Lou McDonald TD also said that in this border area, "You continue to navigate two currencies, two sets of regulations, two banking systems, agencies for economic, climate and health development that face away from each other and the failure by two governments to properly invest in critical infrastructure like roads, public transport, and broadband".

The independent chair of the session was Dr Conor Patterson: Conor is currently Chief Executive of Newry & Mourne Cooperative & Enterprise Agency and he is a Director of Enterprise NI, and Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade. Conor is Chairperson of Daisy Hill Hospital Future Group and has been actively involved in the economic regeneration of the east border region since the mid-1990's.

The panellists for the meeting were: Reverend Karen Sethuraman who is the first female Baptist Minister in Ireland, and is currently a Pastor of SoulSpace Peace and Reconciliation Hub; Aidan Browne is responsible for the operations of the Regional Development Centre at Dundalk Institute of Technology and the institute's commercial output and industry engagement agenda; Gerry Murphy is the Assistant General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Previously he was Northern Secretary of the Irish National Teachers Organization; Mairéad McAlinden is a retired health service Chief Executive. Mairéad is also a member of the Future of Daisy Hill Hospital lobby group.



Declan Kearney MLA is
Chairperson of the Commission.

Senator Lynn Boylan is Deputy
Chairperson of the Commission

THE KEY THEMES OF THE DISCUSSIONS WERE:

- ➞ The impact of the border on provision of health services
- ➞ Irish Unity
- ➞ Economic Rights
- ➞ Cultural Identity



Opening Address by Uachtarán Shinn Féin Mary Lou McDonald TD

Mary Lou McDonald TD addressed a number of themes in her address including the impact of the border on the communities of Armagh, Down and Louth, as well as the significance of the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, the importance of extending welcome and partnership across the political

cultures in the region and the need to recognise that our 'shared challenge is to create a future which is warm and welcoming for everyone'.

McDonald TD said that in her vision of a new united Ireland, "the Daisy Hill, Louth, and Drogheda hospitals would be working in tandem to cater for the entire regional population and Ireland's Ancient East wouldn't stop at Carlingford".

Commenting on the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement she said: "The Good Friday Agreement reminds us that, democratically, the British government's jurisdiction in the North can be ended through the Referendum on Irish unity."

Addressing the "many people in this region who are unionist", McDonald TD said that, "The Orange Order was founded in neighbouring county Armagh. That tradition is reflected in our national colours. This is the place that we all call home. Our resolve is to make it a better place for all, unionists are our neighbours, and they should also be our friends."

Mary Lou stressed that "the new Ireland must be a warm house for all, and



your traditions and beliefs must be respected and cherished”.

Focusing on the work of The Commission on the Future of Ireland Mary Lou McDonald TD said that, “Our shared challenge is to create a future which is warm and welcoming for everyone and where the potential prosperity of areas like this border region can be fully unlocked”.

“Together we can protect public services, pensions, and create decent jobs and pay. Together we can create an Irish national health service and introduce all island climate protections. Together we can negotiate and agree new constitutional, democratic arrangements and structures which leave no one behind.”

“We can tackle sectarianism, and open a new phase of our peace process, based on reconciliation and healing”.





THE OPEN SESSION

Opening the session's discussion, the meeting chair asked: Is the border and the two systems that result from it good for the region?

There then followed a wide-ranging discussion between the panellists with active participation from the audience also.

Health Provision

Mairead McAlinden:



Mairéad told the meeting how she has 'worked in building services across the border, particularly in relation to healthcare services'. And that 'Different funding streams and politics create blockages for accessing healthcare'. McAlinden believes that, "There are huge opportunities for hospitals to work collaboratively across the border".

The reality according to McAlinden is that, "Our healthcare service in the Six Counties is in crisis, it is more challenged than ever. Every emergency department is struggling. There must be a way to better the healthcare and the time to rectify the situation is now".

An Audience Member asked McAlinden: 'Are we just going to proceed with a fully nationalised health service across the board or are we going to rely on a mixed system of private and public healthcare?'

Mairéad McAlinden stated that she believes: 'The NHS in the Six Counties is part of a political commitment. We do not have the capacity in the NHS in the North to deal with all the demand. There must be a way to overcome this issue and find solutions for the whole of the new Ireland'.

Gerry Murphy argued that, 'We would want to see a national health service provided. In the North it is not a success story, there are failed models around staffing with many going to private companies and paying agencies. One national health service is the goal, with the will of the people'.

One audience member who has worked in this sector remarked that 'the full national health system mentioned is not feasible and a mixed model should be talked about'.

Another audience member asking a question on health said that: 'many within the NHS do not know how money is spent. Is money being spent as well as it could be? Is it time to look at other options rather than an NHS when it comes to a health service such as private health insurance?'

Dr Conor Patterson, interjected: 'If people want to enter the private system they can but the private system can paralyse the public option. Clinicians shouldn't have to choose'.

The discussion on health continued with an audience member stating that, 'In an ideal world the public option is the way to go given affordability issues around private health insurance. And as long as people can't afford private health insurance, the public system will continue to be overwhelmed'.

Mairéad McAlinden, replied that, 'There is a huge level of demand on our public health system presently'. Talking about how money is spent McAlinden made the point that when she worked in England she paid for

her prescriptions. 'People are alert to the reality of the situation, they know it's not about a free ride. As citizens there are things we can do to lift the pressure'.

Raising an issue related to medical care for the elderly another audience member, added that: 'If you are 70 to 80 years old there is a 10-year waiting list for a hip replacement operation. Elderly are told to die in pain or go private there is no other option. It's an unbelievable situation for people. I had to go private and I oppose private healthcare'.

Audience member - Matthew Carville stated that 'Two neo liberal Governments cuts draining public services and that's why our health service is in the state it's in'.

Irish Unity

The chair moved on the discussion asking the panel: How could Irish unity benefit counties Down, Armagh and Louth?



Aidan Browne

'I see the opportunity to correct things' said Browne, 'when you look at how the border has performed', there is he believes an 'enterprise debt'. 'The Republic of Ireland is seen to be performing very well in comparison to Northern Ireland, which is performing 50% less than what it should be. A United Ireland is a real opportunity to correct all of that.'

Browne believes that, 'London's immigration policy will cause problems to industries in the North'. And that the 'DKIT hinterland is one of the highest growing areas. DKIT historically has more international students studying with them than students from across the border- 500 students from China -100 from the North'.

Browne said, 'My job is to support economic development. Inequalities seem to be growing the richer the Republic of Ireland is getting'. He added that there are 'two education systems here neither working well. Having one system would work better. We need to check and rebalance'.

Audience Member Michelle Osbourne told the session how her 'daughter graduated from DKIT as a nurse and worked in Our Lady's in Drogheda'.

She had 'never considered coming over the border as the North is a cess pit in terms of agency working. What can be done to keep her in Ireland?' Osbourne has 'already lost two children to emigration'.

Aidan Browne spoke again. 'A United Ireland would give us the opportunity to re-check and re-balance and look at health and education. Looking at global indexes, it's no accident that Nordic countries outperform many others. They put people first, they put family first, they put health and well-being first and to do that they pay higher taxes for better public services'. Browne told the audience he also has a son who is 20 years old and is 'going abroad for the wrong reasons, he is going abroad because he doesn't have the opportunities he should have in this country'.

Economic Rights

How can socio economic rights be formulated in a New and United Ireland was the next theme introduced by the chair?



Gerry Murphy:

'The ICTU represents 200,000 people who reflect the society in which they come from- all religions, faith groups and none, their view on socio economic legacy are the same. How we handle economic rights will distinguish the old system from a new Ireland where we ensure social equality.'

'How do we get there? I would share the view of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and their proposal for a committee. I believe such a committee should be populated by legislators from both sides of our island for e.g., a Constitutional Convention, a People's Assembly- That model worked well dealing with social issues in recent years in the South of Ireland'.

Finally Murphy raised the issue of Article 45 of the EU charter which declares that 'every citizen of the Union has the right to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States'. Murphy said that as 'a trade unionist I would like to see article 45 expanded dealing with workers' rights'.

Cultural Identity

The chair asked the panellists to address the question of 'Cultural Identity'



The Rev. Karen Sethuraman told the session that, 'This island is a home to us all. The conversations we have must include the opinion of unionists from the outset'. Karen told the audience that she has 'realised from her journey in life that we are so much more than just two communities'.

Karen related some key lessons from her own life experiences, and told how she had 'made a change' when she married her husband who is originally from

India. 'You can only stand from where you sit,' said Sethuraman.

Karen explained how she 'learned to sit in the seat of others at the table of discussion. We need places at the table so that all voices can be heard. From all backgrounds people are questioning – Is there something better? People are more concerned about education and healthcare than they are about flags. 'We want to create a home for all of us' said Sethuraman.

An audience member asked, 'In a United Ireland what can be done to bring our diaspora home. There are no homes for them here despite being well educated and skilled. We talk a lot about what we can do to bring the Unionist community on board, but what about those Irish people who want to come home, who don't want to be away. What would a united Ireland create?'

A separate audience member, from Co. Meath offered some 'general reflections'. He commended Mary Lou's comments on a shared home place re: unionists. The speaker explained how he had spent time in Belfast and has some perspective on how 'some people have shifted to the middle ground but there remains those who care deeply about their identity. If we are to have one nation it's important we embrace those who will resist a United Ireland'.

He also returned to previous topics of the meeting, picking up on what has been talked about, health, housing and cultural rights, stated that 'it seems that this discussion and the planning for a United Ireland would require more than just one citizens assembly. The process may require 10 or 11 to

deal with the breadth of areas this conversation covers’.

A third audience Member, Michael Rice asked the panel on ‘advice for young people from a Unionist background who do not want to have that conversation.’

Rev. Karen Sethuraman told the audience, ‘I am not a Unionist; we are all in agreement including Unionists that a border poll is coming. This will be politically led and needs to be people led. We will be better as a New Ireland’.

Other questions and observations from audience members included: ‘When building new schools in a UI should we look at private schools? Public and Private Schools divide and cause issues in the South’. An audience member commented that the majority of schools are Catholic in the Republic of Ireland with a notable number of schools under Protestant patronage, they asked ‘What would the benefits of secular education be in the new Ireland?’

Another audience member raised the question: ‘The Future’- What do the young people want for their future?

On education Gerry Murphy said that, “They should secularise the entire system and this would bring everyone together by removing the barriers keeping people of different faiths and backgrounds apart. The old days are gone’.

Audience member, Matthew Carville spoke again. He said, ‘Growth for growth’s sake is not a suitable instrument to measure quality of life. In a United Ireland we must look at some of the other crises around us including the climate and ecological crises. It’s biophysically impossible to sustain an economic growth system based on a finite eco system. We can’t sustain a United Ireland on a dead planet’.

Discussing reaching out to unionism an audience member, said: ‘Talking about Unionists, we need to get on with it and show them what’s possible. Public services across the island are in tatters and people are burying their heads in the sand. We need to go back to square one and start again and draw up new systems for health and education. It will take time, we need to get that Citizens Assembly up and running because this is going to take a long time. What’s going to happen the morning after a successful United Ireland referendum?

Will it be like Brexit or will we have the answers? We have to learn from

the mistakes of Brexit'.

Mairéad McAlinden, added that, 'If there is going to be a new constitution, it is important people know their responsibilities as well as their rights, such as their environmental responsibilities'.

Addressing Irish language rights an audience member asked: 'Ceistóinhear as an lucht féachana maidir le háit na Gaeilge san Éire nua. Tá seisean ag ceistiú mar athair ag tógáil clainn trí mheán na Gaeilge'.

An audience member raised the issue of childcare and its rising costs and availability impacting those who have families and those who wish to start families. This was responded to by another audience member, who said: 'We should examine countries that have implemented successful systems in how they govern their own countries and examine how we can implement similar systems here'.

Gerry Murphy told the audience, 'This is an exciting time and there is a great future to look forward to. We have the capacity to better employment across the island. Why should those abroad come home? To make a contribution so that those after you don't have to go'.

Murphy also said that, 'We don't have to persuade every person that a new Ireland is a great idea, we just have to plant a seed in people's minds'.

The chair Conor Patterson, focused on the 'talking about improving the quality of life for people' and invited Aidan Browne to talk about some of the international best practice he referenced earlier. Patterson also highlighted how 'the Norwegians take a different approach to the UK when it comes to the oil industry and they have the second largest sovereign wealth fund in the world. Yes they have high taxes but there isn't the same gap between the haves and have nots as elsewhere'.

Aidan Browne, addressed the meeting. He said, 'We spoke about different crises earlier, these Nordic countries implement policies to mitigate against such crises, for example only an individual is allowed to buy a house so corporations/investor funds can't buy up stock. It's a practical example of something that could be done to help people own their own home'.

'From an economic development perspective, we need to look at all the levers, public services, climate, family value, we need to look at all this

and try to come up with a vision of what a new Ireland might look like and create a strategy out of it. Great to see young people in the room that do not have baggage when it comes to this debate. They bring a fresh perspective and we need to look at how our expertise can support them with that'.

Rev. Karen Sethuraman, said, 'Brexit has made us ask is there anything better. A lot of people are now teaming up to make something better. I want a nation of neighbours. Governments need to step up and start working on this. Conversations on health and education must be underpinned by compassion. The world is our oyster, we can be a beacon to the world, we need to put our shoulders to the wheel and make it happen.'



CONCLUSION:

The need to partition proof everything



Dr Conor Patterson, closed the meeting.

He said that, 'Knowing the challenges and complexities it takes, that support needs to come from a government. I would plead to people to not let this drift for another 25 years. I am one for setting a date if we don't there won't be motivation and it will drift.

The Six Counties are an incredible asset, it's just not been deployed. We need to sell the North to the rest of Ireland. The date Patterson suggested was ' 2028, 30 years after the Good Friday Agreement'

For 'those who oppose this', Patterson said, 'Let them produce their prospectus and present it to the populace. Partition gets in the road everywhere such as Daisy Hill Hospital tied up against the partition of boundary. DKIT needs to have a minimum number of students to qualify for University status. It falls short of this because it is tied up against the partition boundary.

'I appeal to the Irish Government and Shared Island Unit to partition proof everything. I think a border poll is inevitable, when the Good Friday Agreement was concluded it was agreed there would be six cross border bodies, and 247 areas of collaboration'. Now with better collaboration, 'imagine what could be achieved'.





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