



# BELFAST WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY

**Report of the  
Belfast Women's Assembly  
27 June 2023**



**MNÁ NA hEIREANN HAVE YOUR SAY**

# THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF IRELAND

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.

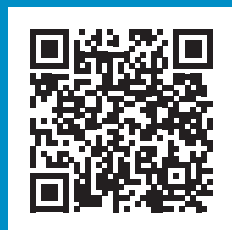
A final report will be compiled at the culmination of the project. This is a report of the Belfast Women's Assembly that took place in the Europa Hotel on June 27th 2023.

The meeting was addressed by Vice Chairperson of the Commission Seanadóir Lynn Boylan.

A video of the Belfast Women's Assembly is available on YouTube: **Belfast Women's Assembly on the Future of Ireland - YouTube**

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](mailto:commission@sinnfein.ie) or via the following webpage [www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland](http://www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland)



## AUTUMN/ WINTER PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

- 🕒 Waterford People's Assembly- October 12th 7.30pm- Tower Hotel, Waterford
- 🕒 Tionól Ghaeltacht Chonamara, 27 Samhain 7.30pm- An Cheathrú Rua, Co. na Gaillimhe

# INTRODUCTION

"Despite the pivotal role women have played over the course of Irish history, too often their voices have not been heard. In the new Ireland women must have an equal place in society. Tonight's Women's Assembly is an opportunity for you, the women of this area to Have Your Say."

This was how Sinn Féin Seanadóir Lynn Boylan introduced the fifth public event hosted by the Commission and its first Women's Assembly.

Held in the Europa Hotel on June 27th, Seanadóir Lynn Boylan also said "Partition has disadvantaged women all over Ireland. Women 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. This women's assembly is about encouraging popular grassroots participation in the ongoing conversation about our shared future."

Over one hundred women came together to have their say on the Future of Ireland at the Belfast Women's Assembly.

The independent Chairperson of the session was Eilish Rooney, an Emeritus Scholar at Ulster University and a member of the Constitutional Conversations Group.

Eilish was supported on the night by Cuisle Nic Liam who provided a translation service ensuring anyone who wished to contribute as Gaeilge was able to do so.



*Declan  
Kearney MLA is  
Chairperson of  
the Commission*



*Senator Lynn  
Boylan is Deputy  
Chairperson of  
the Commission*



## OPENING ADDRESS FROM SEANADÓIR LYNN BOYLAN

Seánadóir Lynn Boylan opened the session by saying the presence of so many women at the event was evidence of the growing momentum in the conversation about that future.

The response to this event was significant and a waiting list was set up due to the demand for places.

Lynn went on to say, "We hope this women's assembly will be the first in a series of dialogue on this issue."

She also extended a sincere welcome to those in attendance from the unionist culture and said the new Ireland must be a warm house for all and all traditions and beliefs must be respected and cherished.

She invited them especially to be part of the conversation and for us all to plan for the future together.



Lynn went on to say,

"We're here in Belfast, the birthplace of Mary Ann McCracken. She was born in Belfast in July 1770 to a wealthy Presbyterian family. In July 1798 her brother Henry Joy McCracken was sentenced to be hanged for his part in the United Irish Rising.

"She was a radical thinker and social reformer, who was implacably opposed to slavery and poverty, was a friend of the disadvantaged, and an advocate for the rights of women.

"Mary Ann, like many women in this area, showed heroism, leadership and commitment to social justice and freedom.

"Despite the pivotal role women have played over the course of Irish history, too often their voices have not been heard.

"In the new Ireland women must have an equal place in society.

"Since the imposition of Partition our island has been forced to operate with one hand tied behind our backs. Partition has disadvantaged women all over Ireland.

"Many of you in this room have experienced the heartache of young people being forced to emigrate due to a lack of jobs, opportunities and housing in our country.

"Children on both sides of the border wait years for healthcare and our elderly wait days on trolleys as services suffer due to chronic underinvestment.

"Constitutional change is now fixed on the political horizon.

"Conversations are happening across the country – in our places of work, in our universities, as we drop our children at the school gates and at the match on Sundays.

"There is now an urgent imperative for the Irish Government to establish a Citizens' Assembly to begin the work of planning for the future. It should agree with the British Government to set a firm date for the unity referendum provided for in the Good Friday Agreement.

"This is an exciting time for us all; filled with opportunity and hope for a better future.

"That's why we need to get it right.

"Our new constitutional national democracy will emerge from a phased transition and that is why planning and preparation should begin now.

"Grassroots communities should be involved at the beginning of that process, not at the end.

"The Commission on the Future of Ireland is about inviting workers, trade unionists, business owners, community activists, women, our youth, our LGBTQ+ communities, Gaeilgeoirí, academics, our new communities, Travellers, those with disabilities and everyone who calls this place home, to have their say on the process of change.

"Our shared challenge is to create a future which is warm and welcoming for everyone.

"Those of us who aspire to a united Ireland need to create the space in this conversation for those who disagree, or who need reassurance.

"All ideas and concerns deserve to be heard.

"This is a time for nation building for generosity and reaching out the hands of friendship.

"Now is the time to plan and work for a new Ireland where women are safe.

"A new Ireland where women are trusted.

"A new Ireland where women are treated equally.

Lynn concluded her remarks by referencing the words of the late Eileen Howell, another strong Belfast woman who was an advocate of change.

"It was just last week that the new St Comgall's Community building was named in Eileen Howell's memory.

"Eileen once said, the time has come to end those processes through which others decided what was best for us. Gone are the days of mediation between policy decision makers and the West Belfast community. This community demands a process which listens to us, which involves us, a process in which decisions are made with us, not for us.

"Mná na hÉireann, let's keep our expectations high. Dream big and plan for change together."



## MAIN DISCUSSION

Following a warm welcome and an icebreaker, Independent Chairperson Eilish Rooney opened the main discussion and gave the women an overview of the format.

Each table was given 3 discussion cards.

- ➊ A New United Ireland- What matters most?
- ➋ UK/Union- What matters most?
- ➌ The third card gave the table the chance to discuss an issue of their choice

The idea behind the cards was to structure the conversation in such a way that any woman could have her say on what matters most to her. Each card was followed by an open mic session from the floor.

Each table had a facilitator and a notetaker.

The tables had ten minutes for discussion on each card. Then the facilitators gave a brief report back so that everyone could hear something of what was being talked about across the room.

At the end of the first card conversation, the atmosphere was electric.

Everyone was clearly taken with the significance of the discussion and eager to keep going.

This report is based on notes taken at the tables. The notes from each table revealed wide ranging, pragmatic, inquisitive, and intelligent engagement. However, whilst the notes provided a valuable summary of the topics discussed at each table, they cannot capture the buzz of conversation that filled the room when the Belfast Women's Assembly set to work.

The energy, enthusiasm and serious engagement was simply extraordinary.

Contributions throughout the event revealed a clear appreciation of the potential for practical, positive change in women's lives that a new Ireland could bring.

Many women in the room were long term campaigners in the women's sector on women's rights and equality, on domestic violence, reproductive rights, childcare, disability, ageism, social and climate justice, Irish

language, and wage parity. Some were involved in women's networks and local groups whilst other women turned up simply to learn more about the new Ireland conversation.

They treated the Belfast Women's Assembly as an occasion to push for improvements in day-to-day life in the here and now. They viewed the prospect of a unity referendum as an opportunity to plan for a new Ireland that guarantees women's equality, gender rights and social justice. Everyone had their say, and everyone listened.

Women at each table wanted to know more about what a new Ireland might mean for them, their families, and their local community; when will preparation for a referendum begin? what will be on offer? Will there be a transition period? Will governance be shared north and south? All the tables made the case that women's everyday lives should be central at all stages.

## TOPICS

Women from various backgrounds called for more opportunities to engage in the preparatory work of shaping a shared future on the island. Those from women's groups in working class districts said that too many children remain in poverty; too many women are not safe in homes where the strains of inadequate housing, poor education and inaccessible health care are faced by under-resourced women's groups. They acknowledged that these experiences are shared by women in loyalist and republican districts. Some see constitutional conversations as an opportunity to press for intersectional gender justice here and now.

The women wanted to know details about how the south of Ireland and north of Ireland fare in relation to state benefits; health care; education; housing; employment; environment. They asked, how will women's equality, safety and rights be enhanced and protected in a new Ireland?

Some said they want to engage in constitutional conversations on an all-island basis; to be involved in building a progressive programme for governance in an Ireland where women's social, economic, political, and cultural equality is no longer an aspiration but a reality. They looked forward to an Ireland where women will be seen and heard making



decisions that bring about climate justice, the best health and social care possible, and the best childcare and education in urban and rural areas. One table proposed that there should be a Minister for Childcare in the new Ireland.

The Belfast Women's Assembly envisaged a new Ireland as one that will bring an end to inadequate housing, economic poverty, and the wasteful divisiveness of partition politics.

Everyone recognized that a referendum on Irish reunification is not a magic wand to fix the conditions of marginalised women's lives across the island. However, in the year of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, the commitments made there to equality, rights and social justice resurfaced throughout the meeting.

There was a clear feeling in the room that a 'New Ireland' should not just be a merger of the north and south as it is now and that we have a real opportunity to create something 'brand new' and 'better'.

The opportunity to take part was appreciated by everyone. People left the room wanting to know more, curious as to the next steps and keen to play their part.



# A NEW UNITED IRELAND - WHAT MATTERS MOST?

Some of the issues raised were:

Rights & Equality

INCLUSIVITY

**Disability rights**

OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
YOUNG PEOPLE

Diversity

**High quality maternity  
& abortion services**

Cross community recognition

**A working health service for all**

INTEGRATED EDUCATION

Governance structures

*Regional assemblies*

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Support for LGBTQI community

**RIGHTS FOR IMMIGRANTS &  
NON-NATIONALS**

ABOLISH PAY GAPS

**Affordable childcare**

**Good work life balance**

**REFORMED ECONOMY**

EDUCATION SYSTEM WITHOUT  
RELIGIOUS INTERFERENCE

**JOBS**

A new start

INFRASTRUCTURE

*Preparation*

**Awareness**

PLANNING

Patience

**BENEFITS**

Pension

**FEELING SAFE**

Working together

**Making sacrifices**

TACKLING DOMESTIC ABUSE

Workers rights

**European Union**

# UK/ UNION - WHAT MATTERS MOST?

Some of the issues raised were:

VOICES

**Identity**

*Language*

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Better off financially?

*British passport*

Do the south want us?

**Old history**

Feeling unwanted

Westminster legislation

- will that be carried across?

BEING IGNORED

**Who will we vote for?**

*CAN'T FORGET THE PAST*

Parades

**Acceptance**

*Community relations*

STATUS QUO

Fear of change

**Loss of NHS**

Will I have to learn to speak Irish?

DISPELLING MYTHS

**Free education**





# OTHER ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

Some of the issues raised were:

Women's Safety  
GENDER RIGHTS  
**Poverty**  
HOMELESSNESS  
All island gender pay parity  
**Ageism**  
GOVERNANCE  
Commemorations  
**SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT GOAL'S**  
Bill of Rights for women  
TRANS RIGHTS  
**Male privilege**  
'NOBODYS CHILD'  
**Duplication of services**  
Change the working week

RELIGION  
**Cost of living**  
Need to 'get NI working first'  
Community Wealth Building  
CLIMATE CRISIS  
**Tourism**  
TRANSITION  
Communication  
**TRUST**  
Mental Health support  
**Gradual process**  
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY  
Policing service  
**Justice system**  
CIVIL SERVICE

## CONCLUSION

From the outset, the Belfast Women's Assembly exceeded expectations.

Previously, women had been present and often prominent at public meetings of the Commission on the Future of Ireland. Those meetings hosted contributions from people based on their expertise in advocacy and activism, and in research relevant to local audiences.

The Belfast Women's Assembly differed in that everyone in the room was invited to have their say, to 'dream big' and speak from the authority of their own lived experience.

The Belfast Women's Assembly felt free to 'dream big' and be pragmatic.

The event drew to a close with open mic contributions from the floor. It ended with Eilish Rooney asking for a show of hands on the need for the Irish Government to convene a Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Ireland. The positive response was tremendous.



# TESTIMONIALS

*"A lot was covered and the format allowed great participation. But this is a huge topic so there is always more to be said. As preparation unfolds we should be able to delve deeper into all topics. All issues will have a gender dimension."*

*"I would like to hear from interest groups similar to a citizens' assembly. Overall, it was a great event and initiative. I would like to see a follow up discussion on what the 'gold standard' of women's rights should be in a united Ireland, something we can all get behind and advocate for."*

*"The round table was excellent for putting people at ease and enabling them to speak with confidence. Everyone wants more of these inclusive & diverse events."*

*"It was an excellent event. Personally, I was enlightened as to issues others (whom I would have considered had similar views to me) felt passionate about. It was a great start. Thank you to all who organised the event."*

*"We need a plan to make it happen-stepping stones we all take together , one by one , gently and inclusively , healing past wrongs by doing right now ....together."*

*"We need to lobby the Irish government to plan. The establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on Irish Unity is what is needed. We can't allow another Brexit to happen. Women have a huge part to play and many are active already in groups such as Gaels le chéile, Ireland's Future etc. We all have a responsibility to become involved in the discussion and make this a better place for everyone."*

*"I would be delighted to attend another event, as would the 5 people with me. We felt that it opened up an avenue of thought."*

# THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF IRELAND

REPORT OF THE BELFAST WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY, 27 JUNE 2023







