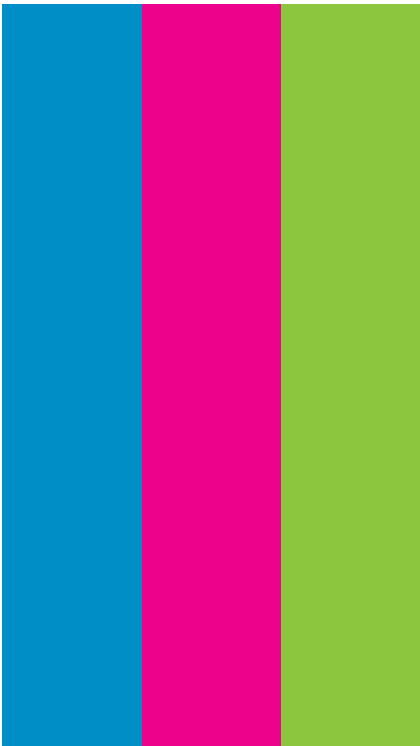


**ABAIR LEAT
HAVE YOUR SAY
HAE YER SPAKE**
THE NEW IRELAND IS FOR EVERYONE



ARMAGH PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

**ARMAGH CITY HOTEL
29TH OCTOBER 2024**



Sinn Féin

www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland

Sinn Féin launched the Commission on the Future of Ireland (the Commission) in July 2022. Its primary aim is to conduct an in depth consultation with the people of Ireland and beyond, regarding the future of Ireland.

This is being achieved through organising public People's Assemblies across the country and internationally, collecting written contributions, and hosting sectoral meetings and private engagements.

The Commission has held 18 public events to date and it has received 200 written contributions from a wide range of individuals and diverse groups.

You can make a written contribution by emailing commission@sinnfein.ie or through the following website: www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland

Declan Kearney MLA is the Chairperson of the Commission and Lynn Boylan MEP is the Vice-Chairperson.

A video of the Armagh People's Assembly is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFaSDePkIWU>

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



Declan Kearney
MLA Chairperson
of the Commission
and Lynn Boylan MEP, Vice-
Chairperson.



INTRODUCTION

The Commission on the Future of Ireland was established by Sinn Féin in July 2022. Its remit is to undertake a grassroots consultation with the people of Ireland and internationally on the future of Ireland. This will be achieved through the hosting of People's Assemblies across the country and internationally; through the collection and publication of written contributions; 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 People's Assembly which took place on 29th October 2024, in the Armagh City Hotel.

The meeting was chaired by Darragh Mackin (Human Rights Lawyer) and the panel for the event included Sinead Hughes (Health Professional), Ian Marshall (Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy at QUB & former Senator) and Dr Anne Devlin (Economist).

OPENING ADDRESS

The People's Assembly was opened by Councillor Sarah Duffy who welcomed everyone to the discussion and encouraged audience involvement.

Sinn Féin National Party Chairperson Declan Kearney gave the opening address on behalf of Sinn Féin.

He stated that:



“Sinn Féin has a plan to achieve Irish unity – clear practical steps that go beyond the rhetoric of unity.” The Chairperson of the Commission on the Future of Ireland said,

“This is the 18th public event organised by the Sinn Féin Commission on the Future of Ireland. People’s Assemblies and sectoral meetings have now taken place across Ireland. The level of discussion on constitutional change is remarkable. There is now an unprecedented cross-party political consensus on the need to plan and prepare for Irish unity.

Opening address continued

"The pathway to a new Ireland should be incremental and phased – intelligently and democratically managed. Sinn Féin has a clear plan for the transition to a new national democratic settlement on our island. "We will set out our plan in the forthcoming Irish general election along with practical steps to achieve unity. These will include among others:

- Establishment of a reunification unit within Roinn an Taoisigh.
- Appointment of a Minister of State for reunification.
- Publication of a Green Paper on constitutional change within the first 100 days of a new government term.
- Convening a Citizens' Assembly on our constitutional future.

"The point is that a new all Ireland framework of governance must be carefully planned and resourced.

"At its core the partition of our country institutionalised the denial of the Irish people's right to self-determination. The right of self-determination is enshrined within international law is integral to the Good Friday Agreement.

"Irish unity has become the defining issue for our generation. We can be the authors of a new future. One that is positive, progressive, inclusive, anti-sectarian, and multicultural."

Opening remarks from the Chairperson and Panel

Chairperson Darragh Mackin welcomed everyone to the 18th public meeting of the Commission on the Future of Ireland. He outlined that it would be an 'interactive' meeting and encouraged observations and comments from the audience regarding the future and Armagh's place in it. He also referenced the breadth of experience in the audience, saying there were people in attendance from business, farming, community, sporting clubs and people of various political persuasions.

The first question Darragh posed to the panel was 'How could Irish unity benefit the people of Armagh?'

Ian Marshall responded, "I come from a community where many people struggle with that question. And when we have these conversations about unity, we need to take one step back and recognise and acknowledge that for everyone in the room here tonight, who would be strongly supportive of Irish unity, there's probably another room we could fill with people who have a different opinion. Bearing that in mind, I think there are opportunities for Irish Unity, but there is a conversation that needs to happen, but nobody will listen unless these conversations are underpinned with evidence and data. When we talk about unity, we actually need to understand each other. My lessons at school included everything but Irish history, people from the protestant Unionist community never fully understood the hurt or the division or the pain that people felt when the island was partitioned.

"There is a job of work to do, to allow people to understand that feeling of separation and division. On the flipside, lots of people in the nationalist and Republican community have never actually understood the feeling of belonging that Unionist/loyalist communities have to the UK, to the crown, to the Monarchy and all those things that represent Britishness. When we have conversations about unity, I think it is important that we start off recognising that not everybody shares the same position. We do come from a very

divided past, but when I look at the young people here and I look at my own children, I know that they see life completely differently to how we (my generation) see life. The problem I have is that there are people who want to join the conversation but don't feel comfortable to join. What I would suggest is to have a constructive, respectful, opportunistic conversation about unity

"When I look south of the border I don't see an economy that's offering anything attractive. I look at an economy that has a 24.5 billion surplus at the moment, but take away corporate tax dividends and take away the Apple windfall, you're actually 6.3 billion in deficit. I see young people leaving the island, there's a housing crisis. There are lots of issues.

"So I think the conversation about Irish unity is one to be had. I think it needs to happen by comparing and contrasting the opportunities of a united Ireland and maintaining the status quo. I think if we present the evidence, facts and information and let people have the discussions but also take away the stigma of the conversation about unity and take away the stigma of conversations about the status quo, and I think if we get this right, then unity is a fantastic opportunity.

"However, if we get it wrong, the thing I am nervous about is what do we do with the losing side the next day. I believe if we unite people first then we can have mature conversations."



Dr Anne Devlin responded by explaining that she was brought up in a mixed household and would have attended band parades on a Saturday and visited Clones on a Sunday supporting Tyrone GAA. She said her family all have entirely different opinions about the constitutional future and have no issue in discussing it at home. However she did reference that she has sensed mixed families often avoid the constitutional future conversation because it is too difficult.

In terms of the benefits of an all island economy Anne said, "It is difficult to talk about the economy of the island without knowing what a united Ireland might look like. Ultimately, we cannot aim for simply fitting the north into the south.

"The south of Ireland isn't a utopia and has many problems. The main focus for those advocating for Irish unity should be how to explain how it can benefit everyone. The north's Departments don't have the funding needed to deliver effective public services.

"In the short-term, solutions are needed for the north that are unique. However, there is a tendency in local devolved government to simply copy what England is doing. We need to be far more innovative. In the south, they usually analyse international best practice when designing policy. The surplus in the south is reflective of the fact that its economy is much stronger than in the north."

Discussion continued

Sineád Hughes stated that she has worked with a variety of groups and that the key thing is that there is no stigma attached to fully discussing the issues; that people have their say, can be passionate, that voices are heard and that everyone can join in the conversations, including different interest groups e.g. those with disabilities.

Sinead felt that the Unity conversation had really stepped up a gear over the past 3/4 years.

"We need to look at what unites us and bring the conversations to all environments and forums to allow full conversations to take place; in Church halls, Community Centres etc.

"The benefits to border counties are obvious in terms of health provision, work force and pay levels; which are currently huge issues. In the UK we are a small percentage of the whole, but in an All Ireland context Armagh and Ulster are part of 25% of the island.

"We need to go forward with hope and we need to take people with us. It is a time of transition and we need to be mindful of perspectives and the stories of each other."

Chairperson Darragh Mackin then asked the panel, "In a new constitution, how can we protect people's rights and identities?"

Dr Anne Devlin said, "Cultural conversations are very interesting. The Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist (PUL) label is not representative of all unionists and this is often missed in discussions about our constitutional future.

"Do we know everything we need to know in terms of what these communities actually want? Not just the people we see on the news or on twitter. For example, I went to a Protestant Grammar school and as I mentioned already I would've attended band parades, however, most students who attended my school wouldn't have been near a loyalist band parade.

"If we're not getting the full picture then who are we safe guarding aspects of that cultural identity for? There is a social class issue in terms of British identity even in terms of bands/ various lodges etc. More to be done in terms of that discussion."

Ian Marshall said, "We have moved into a phase of putting people in pigeon holes and we dehumanise people and this is problematic. We forget that behind every politician or public figure is a father, brother, mother, daughter, and that then gives a platform to where we dehumanise people because they look differently to us, talk differently to us.

"I sat as a protestant presbyterian from south Armagh, in the Seanad, and that didn't actually matter, because to them, I was a Nordie from the black north and



I sat beside a Sinn Féin Republican from west Belfast and we were both Nordies from the black north. Protecting people's rights is about understanding people. It's about not just listening to sound bites and getting to know people.

"The Irish media look at unionism and loyalism through the lens of some big egos in Unionist politics and some very high profile people who are sectarian, who are bigoted and who are certainly not representative of the community I come from. Respect for cultural identity has to be about understanding people and that goes both ways."

Sinead Hughes replied, "There is more that unites us than divides us.

Respect is the key, where rights and cultural identity from all walks of life are safeguarded.

"People are the drivers of change on both sides of the border. We can use our similarities to drive change.'

"There are a lot of myths to dispel; would people have their identity protected? Safe spaces, respect and allowing vulnerable groups to also have their say, will be pivotal to any meaningful change.'

"Policies and data sets are important, but people are at the heart of any new constitution, this is the way forward, with people at the core."

Discussion continued

Darragh Mackin asked Dr Anne Devlin how Irish Unity could benefit the Economy?

Anne replied, "I don't even know where to start! Brexit has had an impact on the economy which underpins the difficulties experienced in border communities. For example, businesses struggle to invest in their workforce due to legal issues. There is a need for more cross-border initiatives.

"The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) compared the education systems north and south and there are stark differences. The notion of the north having a word class education system is nonsense and data shows this. One of the main drivers of educational underachievement in the north is academic selection.

"The number of early school leavers is 2/3 times higher in the north than in the south. The way in which the north's Further Education (FE) system operates means that colleges and schools are competing with one another.

"In the south, there is a clear pathway for young people and numbers attending Higher Education (HE) is very high.

"In 2005, educational attainment between north and south was similar, but the north's hasn't changed in two decades.

"I've been doing a few projects on the

all island labour market, stemming now from people remote working etc. We were speaking to businesses up in Derry and they said that due to the border they were unable to invest in the company. Companies which were headquartered in London and America etc said when they went looking for money they were asked where are you going to get workers from? That's a big problem.

"In regard to the comparison of economic inactivity between north and south, it is nearly identical. However, in the south it is primarily being driven by women leaving the labour market to care for children. In the north, it is primarily being driven by long term inactivity, underpinned by an ineffective welfare system. It is so difficult to get benefits that people tend to remain in receipt of them, as opposed to seeking reemployment."

Darragh Mackin asked Ian Marshall for his views on how agriculture and farming could be affected, improved or what benefits might be offered to the people of Armagh in respect of unification?

Ian said, "We're all fairly close to agriculture, we are only ever one generation removed from the land and we are probably much closer to it here in Armagh. The beauty of agriculture revenue is that if it's made locally, it's spent locally and it's in the local economy, we fundamentally have an all island agricultural economy.

Our red meat industry is owned by 7 companies that are all-island companies, our dairy companies and the flow of milk that goes North-South and the product goes South-North, that's already happening. We have a completely integrated all island economy in agriculture. For agriculture, Unity isn't that much of a stretch of the imagination, it's not hard to comprehend what that will look like.

"My work in Queens university looks at bio economy, green energy and renewables, my concern is that there is 2 conversations going on here. Despite having a single electricity market for the island we are talking about bio methane opportunities and renewable technologies in 2 separate conversations, and that for me, isn't a healthy

thing to be doing.

"Sometimes the evidence and data in theory is good, but you're not sure until you can prove that. For example, the £350 million on the side of a bus stunt by Boris Johnson.

"Whether you are a Republican or a loyalist, if you want to fast track Irish unity or if you want to protect the union, then Northern Ireland has to be successful and prosperous and vibrant. We need to get our shoulder to the wheel and work together to make this place work. I actually think for anyone who is a Republican you pursue Irish unity by driving the North-South east-west economy, because that is a comfortable e space for everybody."



Discussion continued

Chairperson Darragh Mackin asked Sinead Hughes if Irish unity could offer citizens the opportunity for better health outcomes?

Sinead said, "At present there are two systems operating on a small island. Housing and health are intertwined, with housing being a key determinant of health, so better planning is clearly needed.

"Two systems and two approaches on one small island does not help planning. Going forward all island approaches to the issues that people are raising will also involve us collectively bringing forward different solutions. There are many practicalities that need to be worked on and primary care is a key starting point."

There are quite a few crossborder bodies already working together. Pooled resources are better than separate ones. Services can be developed in a more targeted way. There is a myth that in a United Ireland people will have to pay for healthcare which is inaccurate.

"Health care is at present stretched on both sides of the border, with potential users impacted for eg at Daisy Hill. Border areas have been negatively impacted already, but there are also strong areas of cross border success eg cross border cancer care.

"Essentially, on both sides of the border people want to see health and wellbeing in sharper focus. The shape and design of future services should again seek to involve people in the design.

"Sláinte Care is an integrated care model, with services free at the point of delivery. Its launch alongside more free prescriptions are good practice areas that show the way forward.

"We should also be looking at international models and best practice examples. How other countries emerging from conflict and change shaped their new services, e.g. Germany, South Africa.

"We also need to be mindful of marginalised groups including Travellers; we can go forward but respect our past too."

AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTIONS

Blaine McCartney asked, "How do we address the issue of poverty, the main source of inequality?"

Dr Anne Devlin said, "Health, education and the economy all have an interlinked role to play in tackling poverty.

"However, there simply isn't enough funding. The British welfare system is not effective and isn't the safety net it was designed to be. People need more money in their pockets. Cutting benefits and work coaches don't work. There needs to be

flexibility in the welfare system and there also needs to be good jobs.

“The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme in the south aims to reduce educational disadvantage and has been very helpful for children living in poverty.

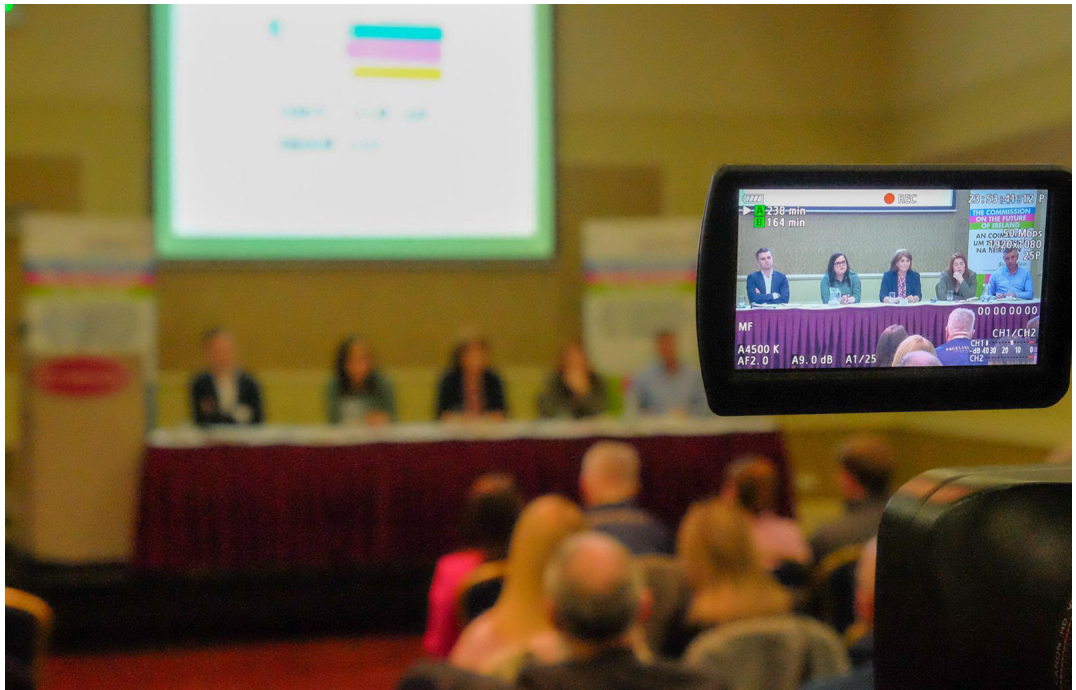
“ This is in contrast to the RAISE programme in the north which the jury is still out on. Despite the south’s progressive taxation system, poverty is still a huge problem.”

Sinead Hughes replied, “We need to look at existing inequalities, not just in healthcare and focus more

on early interventions.

“We need to improve our Primary Care facilities and resources and use and support the knowledge of the community and voluntary sectors who are on the ground as well.

“The roll out of the MPT model is hugely important. If you read the Sláinte Care proposals they are an inclusion opportunity.”



Audience contributions continued

Conal Hamill, retired QUB School of Nursing raised the difficulties of patients trying to even get phone calls answered by their GP Surgery, an example was given of a lady who had made 32 phone calls to her local surgery before any answer. Connall felt that when discussing constitutional change the issues that concern people most will still be Health, patterns of immigration, housing etc and yet what confidence can we have that the current government in the 26 counties who spent extortionate money on a bikeshed and have an incomplete, already most expensive childrens' hospital in the world, would be able to remedy matters?

Sinead Hughes replied, "We need to improve access to health services and make it less complicated. Emigration of the workforce from Ireland is a huge issue. We need to do more in relation to workforce planning."

Ian Marshall replied, "When I started as a senator in 2018 it was the first time I read the Irish Proclamation. And you couldn't disagree with anything in it. When you look at the failure of politics it's the art of survival from one election to the next. Politicians say things to make them popular in advance of an election. Hard decisions need to be made and this is hard for politicians as implementing these is really difficult."

Karl Hughes raised the issue of Daisy Hill, the issue of a fractured system on the point of collapse; that healthcare is a lynchpin and no matter what your alle-

giance the issue of what an all island system would look like is important. He said we are currently haemorrhaging young people trained in healthcare services here and the central government should explore ways to stop them emigrating, perhaps by use of financial incentives.

Chris Swaine who referenced his proud Irish & British identities, made a point that small things are often the deciding factor in making decisions and referenced issues such as personalised number plates/ motability cars/ owners of dog breeds which may be affected by dangerous dog legislation. How do we explore what all these little issues are? People need the information- there's a saying if you don't know- vote no.

Dr Anne Devlin replied, "From an overall perspective, we need to learn from Brexit that achieving Irish unity will be a long term process, even following the ratification of a border poll. There is a lot of work to be done and conversations to be had as things won't change over night. We need a long term plan."

Ian Marshall replied by saying, "Citizens assemblies are really important, but there's a responsibility on government to set the framework and the mechanism to have the conversation. Engaging with organisations and groups and the ordinary man and woman in the street, but it must be done within a framework that is set out and it is directed, organised and constructive."

“For anybody who believes in unity and believes passionately with their heart that it would be better in a United Ireland, then you should have nothing to fear in this.

“Anybody from a Unionist background who can see a future where their children are healthier, wealthier and better off, might vote for unity.”

Sinead Hughes replied, “Citizen’s Assemblies would definitely work. The conversations need to be meaningful. We should also have local citizens assemblies.

“We have to go to where people are, allow them to have safe spaces to raise the issues and then listen to the full range of needs. The future will unfold with the full involvement of our people old and new.”



Discussion continued

Chairperson Dáire Mackin then asked the panel how does the future unfold from here and what does it look like?

Sineád Hughes said she understood the issue of young people emigrating as her son is currently in Australia and that we all hope our young people return. She added that many young people used to just go for a year's travel and experience, but more now stay 5 years or longer.

"I have great hope and I think we're already doing fantastic things on this island. But we need to do more. I feel very hopeful."

Ian Marshall said, "I am optimistic about our future, look at the journey we've been on, look at what we have now. I think we are not unique in that, we have to take a look at the root causes as to why they are leaving. But I am mindful that when people go away and come back, they realise home wasn't all that bad.

"We have a temperate climate, we have a skilled workforce, and despite its flaws, we have a good education system as well as really good people.

"I see now in the university that a lad or a girl in a Glasgow Rangers top can sit down beside someone in an Armagh GAA top, and they don't actually care. So for me, the opportunities here are immense and the future is bright.



CONCLUSION

Chairperson Darragh Mackin concluded the event by thanking the panel and the audience for their participation. He closed proceedings by saying,

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

“People having their say is what is important.

“This is only the start of the journey. We cannot be complacent.

“We all have a part to play, no matter how big or small, in the weeks, months and years ahead.”

Darragh encouraged the audience to continue these conversations and to ensure this is not a one off. He also encouraged people to write to the Commission with their thoughts by contacting commission@sinnfein.ie





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