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# IRISH UNITY AND THE ALL ISLAND ECONOMY

**Report of 'Irish Unity & the All  
Island Economy', Europa Hotel,  
Belfast, June 28th 2024**



**Sinn Féin**

[www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland](http://www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland)

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 sectoral event 'Irish unity and the All Island Economy' which took place on 28th June 2024, in the Europa Hotel, Belfast.

The meeting was chaired by **Cathy Gormley-Heenan - Academic and the panel for the event was Pearse Doherty TD, Conor Murphy MLA and Caoimhe Archibald MLA .**

A video of Irish unity and the All Island Economy is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKCFxwJpwg>

The Commission on the Future of Ireland has received hundreds of 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)



Declan Kearney MLA is  
Chairperson of the Commission.

Lynn Boylan MEP is Deputy  
Chairperson of the Commission

## INTRODUCTION

**The People’s Assembly was opened by Órlaithi Flynn MLA with the following remarks:**

“We want to encourage popular grass roots participation in the conversation about our shared future.

We want everyone to have their say.

Participation from the audience will be a key part of the discussion today, so don’t be shy, have your say.

Constitutional change is now fixed on the political horizon. Conversations about the constitutional future of the island of Ireland are happening across the country and beyond.

Irish Unity needs to be planned for and people naturally want to know what the new Ireland might look like.

That means those of us who want Irish Unity must provide the space for discussion, listening to people’s hopes, aspirations and the concerns of those who have not yet made up their minds, and are unsure how they would vote in a unity referendum.

Citizens want to know what the new Ireland will mean for them and their families. A strong and fair economy is the basis for a thriving society and it is for this reason that Sinn Féin’s Commission on the Future of Ireland is hosting today’s discussion entitled Irish Unity and the all Island Economy.”



## OPENING REMARKS FROM CHAIRPERSON & PANEL

**Órlaithi** then handed the meeting over to the independent chairperson **Cathy Gormley-Heenan**.

**Cathy** introduced herself and the panel and she encouraged audience participation in the event. She also introduced Tomás O'Neill who performed the role of chairperson's support and was available to translate any contributions made in Irish. Cathy posed the first question - Can we afford Irish Unity?



**Caoimhe Archibald** responded saying, "The question is can we afford to continue to have partition and remain in a union with Britain." She talked about the cuts, austerity and economic self-harm of Brexit – particularly on a region coming out of conflict. Caoimhe said that those who traditionally had reservations are joining the conversation on uniting Ireland, from a Protestant or Unionist background, are now joining the conversation.

In Caoimhe's opinion even with the installation of a Labour government not much will change. She referenced the underinvestment by the British government in public services, Caoimhe said that partition led to a poorly performing economy in the north linked to a poorly performing British economy compared to a more dynamic southern economy, which invests more in skills with 3 times as many young people in the south enrolled in skills training and the 40% productivity gap between the north and south and this has grown over the past 20 years. Caoimhe said 'Irish unity provides a real opportunity to build a society and economy that we want and to design the public services and infrastructure fit for the 21st century.'

**Conor Murphy** responded to the same question saying, "The short answer is yes we can afford Irish unity! One hundred years ago the northern state was the richest part of the island, and for the first years of its existence was a net contributor to the exchequer." Conor talked about the subvention being an accountancy exercise. Speaking about the recently published paper by Fitzgerald and Morgenroth, Conor said; "The recent paper suggests unity would cost €20 billion per annum but it depends how you take the figures. They included the north's contribution to British debt, the maintenance of the royal family and British foreign policy among other costs, which wouldn't be a factor in a unity scenario."

Conor continued saying; "Other eminent economists such as John Doyle in DCU suggest the cost of the subvention could be as low as €2.8 billion per year which would represent only 1.5% of the south's annual economy in comparison." He said that unity would bring huge economic output and prosperity with huge potential for growth as discussed by Kurt Hubner in his report. Productivity, jobs, wages and other measures of prosperity in the north are very poor compared to south. Can we afford not to do unity?

Responding to the same question **Pearse Doherty said:** “We can use statistics anyway we want. We know that this state here (in the north) has a subvention because of the factors that Coiamhe and Conor mentioned. The fact is the economic levers are in London. We need to ask the question, in the context of a united Ireland, what would be the subvention on day 1 and that’s a totally different question. As Conor mentioned you wouldn’t be servicing British debt in a unity scenario, why would you? You would not be servicing the billion euro for the British Army so that would be stripped out. People here who paid into their pensions when they were working will still get their pensions paid, the same way that people in Donegal who work in Scotland still get their pension paid through the British Exchequer. That’s why Professor John Doyle brings the number down to €2.8 billion.

So yes it’s absolutely affordable, that’s not in question.

The economy is very robust in the south. In the last number of years it’s growing at the fastest rate in all of Europe. Deficits in Britain are running at £87 billion about 3% of income whereas in the South it’s got surpluses of 3%

The surpluses that we will record in the next four years is 37bn Euro, the economy is very strong in the south and the reason for this is that the government has been able to take decisions that are in the interests of the Irish economy and the Irish people.”

Speaking about being a member of the Oireachtas Finance Committee for the



last 14 years Pearse said some of the most important things the annual Finance Bill does is tweak tax incentive schemes that are about supporting regions and sectors including arts and sport and none of those levers exist in the north. The subvention exists because there is a dearth of financial levers in the north

Uniting Ireland would provide levers to address economic issues of the north. There is no reason Derry can't be as prosperous as Kerry.

Cathy Gormley- Heenan then asked the audience if there were any contributions based on what people had just heard.

## AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTIONS

**Frank Martin from Carrickmore** voiced his concerns about Brexit setting back "40 years of progress." In Frank's opinion Ireland needs to get away from the British and get realigned, we have no future until we do. He referenced the wage disparity between north and south saying that his granddaughter who is a pharmacist gets paid 50% more in the south than the north. Frank also asked when Casement Park would be delivered.

**Tom Hartley** asked "What would be the impact on an Irish economy in Ireland with the increase in population of 1.3 million, 3 additional airports, more infrastructure? Is there a positive impact with more facilities coming into the Irish economy?"

**An audience member said:** "About 30,000 students are leaving the south for Australia. One of the biggest exports in the north is our graduates. They go to Scotland, Wales, and England and a lot of them are not coming back. The corporate tax rate in the north is far too high, how do we build a united Ireland that encourages these young people to stay because every one of my mates is talking about emigrating. How do we encourage Foreign Direct Investment into the north?"

**In response Conor Murphy said;** "In response to Tom's point, the debate is always framed as though the north is a burden for the south to take on. It was interesting that when Fitzgerald and Morgenroth





published their paper David McWilliams tweeted “€20 billion, Cheap” stating that it was a bargain.

Three of the biggest ports on the Eastern seaboard are in the north and two of the best universities on the island which are networked into other universities and colleges. Ireland being an island of 8 million people is actually the perfect size for an awful lot of economic and health development and research. We have one of the best advanced manufacturing sectors anywhere, in the north, leading in the world, a very good fintech sector in Belfast and an excellent cyber security sector in Belfast. Things being invested in in the arts sector in Belfast are unrivalled in the world. The debate is always framed as a negative when it should be framed as a positive.

There is an enormous opportunity here. There are a percentage of people who leave because they want to go and travel and have experiences. But the number of young people who want to go to uni here but can't is about 25%. The solution to this involves more public funding, adding more university places through public funding, increasing tuition fees would make university less accessible. Enormous opportunity for recruitment and to train young people up. I understand that people get frustrated with the politics but we want young people to stay and there are opportunities for them and we need to talk to them, rather than say the economy is dead here.

There is a real challenge in terms of pay, you can get much higher pay in the south and better conditions and that is a consequence of partition and the only solution to that is to end partition.

**Pearse Doherty responded saying** – “In the context of young people, we are talking about a new Ireland. Across Ireland young people feel this place isn't for them, constitutional change can provide an opportunity to look at what's broken and what's working. Huge challenges exist in the south, housing for example that drives people abroad but that's a man-made problem that can be fixed with the right type of policy. We need young people to be able to stay here and raise a family if they want, it's all fite fuaite, it's all integrated.

Brexit is important but it isn't the end of the world, the key thing is that the EU Commission has already decided that in the event of a united Ireland, the whole island would be automatically in the EU. So we need to explain the opportunities.

In terms of Tom's question, the reality is, regardless of the growth in the southern and northern economies, partition is an impediment to both of them. Donegal is part of the southern economy and has the worst performance in the state in terms of poverty and unemployment, the lowest level of disposable income in the state and the highest reliance on medical cards in the state. Why? We are part of the Southern economy, partition is the reason for it. The statistics in Strabane are the same, partition is impacting the border corridor. What we are talking about here is breaking down barriers in terms of employment law, trading environment etc , developing joint up investment, looking at the island as an island, looking at education as an island, making





sure we don't have a situation where the north has 80% less Foreign Direct Investment than the rest of the state.

Even though the barriers exist, people and business are moving beyond them. North-south trade has developed by 20% since 2022, its now €9.5 billion. If we break the chains, we've seen from the modelling that when we break down barriers the north and south grow.

For me the one of the biggest statistics isn't around the deficit, it's the fact that a young girl born in the south today has a life expectancy of 1.5 years more than in a young girl born in the north, that's partition's fault, it's linked to poverty and that's because we don't have the economic levers we need to better society in the north and that's the real opportunity of constitutional change."

## AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTIONS



**Róisín Nic Liam** - Cad é mar a cuireann muid leis na ceantracha gaeltachta. Cad é mar a cuireann muid an gheillgear chun cinn? How do we demonstrate the benefits of Irish unity to the Gaeltacht communities?

**Rosa McLoughlin** - Cúpla ceist, an bhfuil planáil de dhiaith anois, tuisceart agus deisceart, cad é na rudaí atá de dhíth sa phleán sin ó thaobh eacnamaíochta agus polaitúla? A few questions, is there planning now, in the Assembly and the Dáil, what are the things that are needed in that plan from an economic and political point of view?

**Audience member** - Foreign Direct Investment was mentioned quite a few times. The quality of our people in the south has led to that. Conor released his new sectoral strategy yesterday and we've had huge success in the 6 counties with Foreign Direct Investment for technology companies but quite often part of the challenge is that they're call centres so it doesn't move the productivity dial and our indigenous companies suffer with wage inflation and how they can compete. In a united Ireland how can we protect indigenous companies while

also not bringing productivity down?

**Audience member Tomás** - I'm from Armagh I live in England, travelled from Manchester to be here this morning. I have a 5 year old girl who speaks Irish and plays camogie. I'm very proud of my background. Living in England, living with working class people, they know nothing about our struggle in the north but they have a real appetite for learning about the real history of the north. As someone who has flown into Belfast and will travel to Dublin, you can see the vast difference in development. In terms of tourism, how do we increase tourism throughout the north? I believe that's a massive opportunity.

**Pearse Doherty said in response:** "Síleann go dtuigeann comhlachtaí anois go bhfuil tábacht a bhaineann leis an teanga, níos mó anois ná mar a bhí. Tá comhlachtaí ag tuighbheal go bhfuil luach leis an ghaeilge. Ó thaobh údaras na gaeltachta, tá sé lonnaithe sna ceantracha bochta tuaithe ach tá siad in ann comhlachtaí a mhealladh chuig na ceantacha sin, cosúil leis na comhlachtaí vaccine. Silím go bhfuil feidirtheachtaí ann, go bhfuil na postanna ar fáil agus go bhfuil na feidirtheachtaí ann don d'aois óg. Ó thaobh an reamhobair, caithfidh an réamhobair a tarlú i ngach gné cosúil le ceisteanna eacnaíochta. Bíonn muid ag rá sin leis na bainceanna srl.

I think that companies now understand that there is an importance related to the teanga, now more than before. Companies are realizing that there is value in the Irish language. From the point of view of the Gaeltacht Authority, it is located in the poor rural areas but they are able to attract companies, like the vaccine companies. I think the possibilities are there, the jobs are available and the possibilities are there for your young age. From the preliminary work point of view, the preliminary work must take place in all aspects such as economic issues. We keep saying that to the banks."

There needs to be forward planning now by the Irish state in terms of what constitutional change would mean. These are the engagements I have had with the Central Bank and the NTMA as opposition Finance Spokesperson. We have talked to them about the opportunities which would exist in terms of market size and investment strategies. But there is a need to sit down and plan this out. All who aspire to a united Ireland need to be sure how we can grasp the opportunities.

**Conor Murphy responded saying** – "Sinn Féin since February has taken the Department for the Economy, we have increased the contribution to Intertrade Ireland which had fallen below the levels required. We have also done this with Tourism Ireland. There has not been an appropriate level of engagement from government and agencies over the years here (between north

and south). There is much more cooperation now with the government in the south and a strong willingness from the southern government to collaborate. Invest NI, Intertrade Ireland, IDA and Enterprise Ireland are now working very closely together.

Despite the lack of engagement, the growth in the all island economy has been 6 fold over the last 10 years.

Regarding Foreign Direct Investment versus indigenous businesses there have been valid criticisms. When I came into the Department for the Economy we brought four points of focus to everything that the department does – good jobs, regional balance, productivity and net zero. We also told Intertrade that indigenous business needs to get the same focus as Foreign Direct Investment.

We are a very small medium enterprise economy. We need to bring small businesses together to affect change. Regarding tourism the Department for Economy has invested more money in tourism. It was a deficiency of the Good Friday Agreement that one tourism body for the whole island wasn't created. But the 3 agencies and the two Departments (north and south) are now engaging and working as 5 together. We are talking about how we can expand the tourism brands into the north – The Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, the Hidden Heartlands.

The north has actually been doing very well with tourism since Covid especially with tourists from the south coming north. About 70 percent of tourists to the island come through Dublin airport and getting them to come and explore the whole island is a challenge."

**Caoimhe Archibald stated,**  
 "Economic planning really does need to happen and needs to happen quickly. The cost of reunification should be seen as an investment.

When we talk about the lack of productivity in the north it's important to note that it's not because people in the north are less entrepreneurial or



innovative, we have huge talent and potential here and we need to maximise it to enable people to reach their potential.”

**Independent Chairperson Cathy Gormley-Heenan asked Caoimhe,** “Would increased fiscal devolution, make a difference to the all island economy?”

**Responding, Caoimhe said:** “We have very limited power, we get our block grant from the British government, my job (as Finance Minister) is to share out the funding, which has been reducing in real terms. The only real fiscal lever that we have is the regional rate and that is a bill that is passed on to ordinary households and businesses and so it’s limited. .

As part of the agreement to restore the political institutions in the north we had an agreement to explore a new fiscal framework and there has been some progress with this but we also want more budgetary management tools for the Executive.

The recent Fiscal Commission established by Conor when he was Finance Minister identified a number of potential areas for the devolution of powers. We would like as much financial devolution as possible in order to meet our policy objectives. In the first instance it’s getting these powers and deciding what to do with them, some are more complex than others for example in terms of being able to devolve them. Things like Income Tax and Excise Duty, and the Apprenticeship Levy are things that we would like to progress immediately. As an Executive we will have to take a stance on these and that requires working with other parties. It is about devolving the powers and then distributing them to achieve policy objectives and deliver better public services.”

Cathy Gormley-Heenan then went back to the audience asking if anyone had any business related questions.

## AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTIONS

**Colin Neill of Hospitality Ulster said,** “I look at Tourism Ireland as a really great success, even when we didn’t have an Executive it worked away and we have seen real benefits with €6 billion euro and 300,000 jobs created on the island of Ireland. Tourism Northern Ireland has done reasonably well too with a 43% increase in visitors from southern Ireland which is really positive. Our members will have their own political views but as an organisation we have a strong view that the all-island economy is a really positive thing. Can we actually grow the all island economy now and it might reduce the fiscal

deficit as we go there, if our domestic economy is doing well our businesses do well and our staff do well.

**Frank Martin stated:** “I’m deeply involved in wind energy and agriculture. One of the problems we have is how to move away from overproduction of agriculture and move towards renewable energy. Currently we’re competing with the royal estates, they’re deciding where the infrastructure goes. That’s why it’s going into the sea and we will be paying the royal family for years to come because the British government controls our waters that control everything at the moment.

**Audience contribution** – “What’s the prospect of the 12.5% Corporation Tax being enacted in the north before Irish unity?

**Pearse Doherty responded saying** – “That is all tied to the devolution of fiscal powers and the conditionality that comes with that to actually get the benefit of the 12.5%. 12.5% is a part of the attractiveness in the south, many Foreign Direct Investment companies in the south now will actually be paying a minimum of 15% as part of the OECD agreement. The other parts are the unfettered access to the European Union, an educated workforce, infrastructure, the capacity and the indigenous businesses which support the Foreign Direct Investment sector as well.

It’s also about stability as well, there is an understanding that Foreign Direct Investment is important and that is understood across the political divide in the main. We recognise the importance of it in terms of jobs but also in terms of tax that enables investment in health and education and so forth. Last year’s Finance Bill changed research grants by another 5%, that can’t happen in the north because the fiscal levers don’t exist. This happened due to discussions with the IDA.



Can this 12.5% across the board happen before unity? I believe not due to the deficit in fiscal powers in the north and difference in regulations both north and south. We will have a single currency in terms of a united Ireland.

Ending partition is the only way to unleash the all-island economy, to remove barriers.

Off-shore wind energy is a huge frustration for our party in the south where we do have all the fiscal levers other countries wonder why have we not harnessed what is offshore in terms of wind energy, the government there hasn't made the investment and grasped that opportunity to actually have energy independence and also to provide energy to other European countries in a sustainable way.

In regards to spooking markets, what does the economy look like, there are a number of questions, when does the currency change, what is it pegged to, on what date does it change, how does all of this happen, what happens to tax rates and how long do they differ during a transitional period? These are the conversations we need to have. There are more opportunities than challenges. We need to plan that out so there is a clear understanding about what is on the other side of the referendum.

From our engagement with those purchasing Irish debt, and the NTMA who sell Irish debt on behalf of the Irish state, the key thing is to have a plan. Once you have a plan markets build into that, what FDI doesn't want is shock. We need planning, we need a Citizens' Assembly and a paper from the Irish government and we need other partners to engage in this conversation. We will ensure that will happen without delay if we lead the next government.

**Conor Murphy added** – "Pearse mentioned all the barriers to an all island economy, but despite that the all island economy has grown and continues to grow. One of the changes is that you now have policy on both sides of the border which is supportive of economic growth. In fairness there has been a lot of work behind the scenes between north and south agencies and government departments, a lot of organic links have been built up.

I have met with many businesses who would have normally been associated with a traditional unionist viewpoint, but every single one had a foothold in the south. Every one of them recognised that that was the way to go.

There is an awful lot we can do to support what is already happening, prior to constitutional change. We already have a single electricity market on the island, have a shared ambition to become self-sufficient in renewable energy and eventually a net exporter of energy. Next week I'll be meeting with John

O'Dowd and Eamonn Ryan at Foyle Port to discuss opportunities in offshore and onshore wind and other renewable energy sources. We have plans for bio-energy, geothermal, wind and we need to figure out how to implement those things. We have an ambition to heat the whole of the Stormont Estate through geothermal and that then opens up big opportunities on the manufacturing side but also for households who would benefit from stable energy prices, clean, green energy and the opportunity to become a net energy exporter. Even within the fiscal limitations the opportunities are enormous, and they become much more substantial in the event of constitutional change.

### **Cathy Gormley-Heenan then posed the question to Caoimhe Archibald about risk versus reward when it comes to fiscal devolution**

**Caoimhe Archibald said** – “Thanks Cathy, in relation to Colin’s question I think we are headed in the right direction in terms of north south cooperation and the All Island economy but there are barriers which remain.

Fiscal devolution isn’t a substitute for proper investment in public services either because you can’t just heap taxation on people to make up for what isn’t there, you would have the opportunity to generate revenue in a more fair and equitable way than at present where we can only add regressive charges onto what people already pay and in my opinion that isn’t the correct direction of travel. In relation to corporation tax we would like to harmonize corporation tax north and south, legislation has been passed to devolve corporation tax to the north, but it has never been commenced because there is an affordability element to it and the block grant would be reduced to enable us to have corporation tax devolved would be prohibitive, the last figures state £800 million of corporation tax receipts. When you look at the pressures on our public services that number will have increased because there has been divergence in the tax rate since then. Ideally what you want is ordinary citizens benefitting from well paying jobs. There is more work to do on corporation tax, this was covered by the Fiscal Commission which acknowledged that it is worth exploring more but there are issues with it.

The question around risk versus reward and the devolution of fiscal powers is really important because it could lead to losing revenue as was the experience in Scotland. We need to align what we want to achieve from a policy objective with the powers we seek to devolve and use. Conor set out his economic vision around creating good jobs and improving productivity, if you had income tax devolved doing those things would raise your income tax without even having to touch the rate of it, just having the tax assigned to us would foster a more productive economy, other interventions such as childcare would help put more people into employment so its about getting the powers and using them to carry out what we set out to achieve.

Cathy Gormley-Heenan stated; “There are those who argue that northern Ireland has the best of both worlds, with unfettered access to the GB and EU markets, what is the benefit of an all-Island economy when it appears that the north has benefits of its own?”

**Conor Murphy responded saying** – “Brexit was a bad thing and that’s why people across the political divide here voted to remain in Europe, the best of both worlds argument is overstated. Membership of the EU was already benefiting the island, the single market and customs union and the removal of the physical impediments of the border was very beneficial and also in agriculture.

What we have is not as bad a Brexit as it could have been. We do have dual market access which is a unique benefit to here and we need to exploit this and Invest NI is looking at this.

We need to examine what dual access actually means for various businesses.

The highest growth we have had in our economy is the service sector, the Protocol doesn’t cover services. Dual access hasn’t solved Brexit but it has helped us not get the worst version of it. There are real negative impacts to Brexit now, especially regarding tourism, for example the British government is intent on bringing in an electronic travel authorisation which means that international tourists coming to the north from Dublin would have to fill in a permit so the number of these tourists will drop.

Employees working in the north and living in the south will also be affected. So there are real negative impacts to Brexit. The sooner we can access automatic re-entry to the European Union (through Irish unity) the better.

## AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTIONS

**Colin Harvey:** “I would like to start by commending the Commission on the Future of Ireland for covering these important issues. My question relates to what the economy is there to do for people, the question around improving the lives of people on the island of Ireland. One of the significant arguments for this change is that people will be better off and that it will be a fairer society for all. I’d like to ask the panel about the possibility that this opens up to build equality, fairness and the wellbeing of future generations into how we think about the economy. When we promise that people will be better off, that that actually happens in practice.

**Ciaran** - How would an all island economy affect culture and art. Outside of the main commercial art centres we have in northern Ireland. Funding small independent arts, would this have any effect? Arts tend to be cut first in budget



changes. Would we pay a TV licence to RTE or BBC who would be the national broadcaster?

**Pat Walsh** - Good news last night about 260 new social and affordable homes in West Belfast. Is development going to continue for social and affordable homes, where will the money come from? In trying to deliver social and affordable homes, developers and builders are having major issues with statutory bodies such as NI Water, NI Electricity and the planners.

**Raymond McCord**- I'm from the unionist community. What is the difference between the new Ireland and Irish unity? I class myself at the minute as a unionist and I want to remain a part of Britain. There needs to be a wee bit of education in relation to respecting each other. I'd like events like that to be like what we do in victims' events and make them completely cross community and I'm not being disrespectful to you in any way. I would like to say that a lot of people would not be happy with me coming here but I'm here for my grandchildren and their future and that's what I'll vote on.

I would like to see more of this happening and I would say to people, influential people within the republican and nationalist side, that unionism isn't determined by a small click of people on the Shankill Road, it's determined right across the country. We don't see a proper representation of unionist people in regards to debates like this. The finance matters are above my head, but one of the things that unionist people will be saying is 'are they trying to buy us off?' 'Are they trying to buy us into a united Ireland?'

More needs to be explained and the best way as I see it is by bringing people together, if you're going to have a discussion about a new Ireland or an all Ireland, all communities need to be involved in it.

Synopsising, Cathy Gormley-Heenan asked the panel how the financial concepts could be distilled to make it more easily understandable, how could the research be repackaged for the public domain to make it more meaningful to people. Colin's question on the opportunity to build equality into the economy, Ciarán's around culture and arts and Pat's on social housing and Raymond's around the pro union perspective and what's best for grandchildren in terms of economic future.



**Caoimhe Archibald responded saying:** “Colin and Raymond have asked interlinked questions. I do think reunification will result in a new Ireland, it will be a new constitution we will seek to develop, the well-being of future generations has to be embedded in that, there are good examples out there – what Wales does in that space. There is a real opportunity to ensure that economic fairness and social justice are the principles upon which we build a new constitution and a new Ireland.

There are huge opportunities for culture and arts in a new Ireland, north and south punches well above our weights with regards to support for the arts. In the south they are quite well supported compared to the north. We should do better in the north.

In relation to social housing commitments, there are huge challenges in relation to our budgets in terms of capital investment and resource budgets and we are really really challenged by that this year. The commitment to deliver on housing is absolute and we are going to look at all options in relation to that and as soon as there is a new British government next week we will strongly make the case that there needs to be investment in infrastructure, housing in particular but also waste water, roads and renewable energy.

## AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTIONS

**Damian McCabe** – “Thanks to Sinn Féin Ministers we have seen a focus on Derry and the North West for the first time since the beginning of this State. 80% - 90% of funding and financial support goes to Belfast. In Derry Magee is being expanded and you’re bringing Invest NI over the Glenshane Pass, but with the current challenges how can we get funding ring fenced and how can we get milestones put in place? Derry, Donegal and Tyrone as a geographical unit have the highest levels of deprivation, lowest disposable income, highest unemployment and my point is, with a 5-10 year expectancy for a united Ireland, Derry and the north west cannot wait, we need to transition.

**John Doherty** - Regen “Whenever we see historically how (the Department of) Finance is run in the north you always get this sense that you’re jumping from one crisis to another. To what extent do you feel you’re limited in your ability, across all the parties in the north, to carry out a vision that will carry us into the next generation?”

**Kevin** – “Next Friday morning we will wake up to a Keir Starmer government in Britain and despite the fact that profits of companies are enormous, and despite the fact that the wealthy class have got even wealthier over the last 15 years; wages for ordinary people have been stagnant for many years, Starmer

has promised very little in terms of remedying this. What would a united Ireland be promising what would our leaders of Sinn Féin be promising if that was to be achieved and what fiscal policies would be used to ensure there was a narrowing of the gap between the wealthy and the poor?"

**Ciaran O'Neill** – "I'm involved in motor sport and the classic car scene and first I would like to thank Deirdre Hargey for trying to bring the World Rally to the north. It has massive tourism potential, we currently have a chance now in Ireland to bring it forward, so hopefully Pearse will work on this. My question is what will happen to vehicle registration when we go to a united Ireland because Ireland doesn't have personalised registrations but in the north we do and people have invested a lot of money on personal registrations."

**Conor Murphy responded saying** – "Politics is about the happiness of people and developing the economy is about having a fairer society in which people can feel fulfilled and earn sufficient to keep them in a good way of going on. There is always an assumption that unification will simply be absorbing one thing into the other. There are things the north does better in terms of society than the south. For instance myself and Caoimhe and Gordon Lyons, the 3 Ministers, have been working together on community wealth building projects. There are two pilot schemes, one in Derry and one in Larne which are working closely together. When I was in the Finance Ministry I was working on procurement we were introducing social value contracts into government procurement, you cannot get a government contract now in the north unless you're paying the real living wage to people, you have to have 10%, soon to be 20%, social value attached to govt contracts. So even with our limitations there has been a focus on using economic benefits to uplift everybody, unlike the southern establishment parties who leave it to 'the market' to look after things and things will equalize as they come. There are enormous challenges in the southern state with regards to poverty, deprivation and social isolation.

We all live in border counties so we know what it's like to be on the periphery of both states.

So what does a new Ireland look like as opposed to a united Ireland? Quite often the debate is about absorbing the 6 county state into the existing structures. This is a genuine opportunity to create something new and better which recognises the very significant British identity in Ireland and engages with that in the vital preparation, and in terms of the constitutional make up of the new Ireland to give due respect and place for people who don't feel comfortable with an Irish identity.

That's the difference between just having a united Ireland, this dialogue is a genuine attempt to reach out and I know that this question is much deeper than finances and I know there's much more to what unionists think and feel about their place and the future and the sense that we can buy unionism into a united Ireland is disrespectful to people within the unionist tradition because that's not their primary motivation for their outlook.

We have to make the space for change as comfortable as possible. The tide of demographic change will not be stopped and neither will the growing opinion that the current constitutional framework is detrimental to us economically, politically and socially. So there's an onus on those who want change to engage with those who don't feel the same way. This space today is a Sinn Féin created space and it is open and democratic and inclusive as it can be but an Irish government doing this would have a much greater effect.

I attended a Féile event a number of years ago at which a prominent unionist medic made the point that an Irish Taoiseach has never said they want unionism to be part of a united Ireland.

I don't want a united Ireland that excludes people, that's not something I aspire to at all. We want a genuinely new Ireland.

Regarding regional balance, we are putting a focus there. Magee is an economic driver for the north west but as Pearse has said the problems in the north west are across the border. So we have linkages with agencies in the south to try to affect change. It's not about waiting for a united Ireland, these things are happening now.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

**In giving closing remarks on behalf of the Sinn Féin panel, Pearse Doherty said –** “The

economy has to serve society, it can't be the other way around so when we talk about unleashing the potential of the all island economy, why are we talking about that? It's because we want people to have decent jobs, to feel valued in their place of work, we want to be able to have tax revenues to support the type of services that we want, whether that's investment in the arts, in health infrastructure and all of those areas.



That's one of the challenges in the south where we have a very buoyant economy, with surpluses and growth the envy of Europe and Foreign Direct Investment with many leading tech companies headquartered in Dublin and Cork but yet we have children with scoliosis that can't get treatment, we have people with disabilities who still can't get access the healthcare they need and where 4000 children still live in hotels because there are no houses for them.

I want to live in a new Ireland, not just in a united Ireland where a child still can't get an operation to cure their scoliosis. That's not the type of Ireland I want to be part of. This is a real opportunity for us to imagine what is the best on this island and leave what doesn't work for us behind us.

There is a unique opportunity, through the Good Friday Agreement which guarantees constitutional change through a democratic process. There is a likelihood that if we don't seize this opportunity that conservative forces who are happy with the status quo would just allow a referendum to mean that the north is stitched into the south.

I think arts and culture are part of that and we have had good discussions on that in some of the Commission's events previously. There should not be competition in terms of funding north and south. A lot of the decisions like TV licenses will depend on who is in government in a new Ireland. Sinn Féin wants to abolish the TV license.

Regarding the north west and its optimisation, huge work is being done there, Sinn Féin and the Department for the Economy are focussing on this, in fairness there has been reciprocal work by successive Irish governments. The St Andrew's Agreement ensured that the Irish and British governments would co-fund the A5 road and that the north west would benefit from that.



There's much more to do, we need a city deal, and a deal for the city region of Derry Letterkenny, the All Island Rail Review is just a review, we now need to look at infrastructure, a number of colleagues and myself went to the European Commission over 20 years ago with a map and we showed the motorway network, the rail network and he genuinely asked if the north west was a desert. It doesn't make sense for the 4th largest city, Derry, not directly connected to Dublin. These are basic things which would open up huge opportunities and provide greater access.

In terms of the World Rally this is something we have raised already with the government and are working on. I love the fact that you can look at a car and know what region it comes from so personalised plates are not an issue I've come across in the discussions on a new Ireland but it shows that everyone will come to the discussion with their own unique concerns.

In terms of preparedness, I think the political system in the south is moving more towards a realization that they need to plan and prepare. The election results in the north show demographic changes and the fact that Brexit has turbo boosted the conversation. The instrumental work of Ireland's Future in engaging all those across the political divide has led to a greater understanding that the political establishment has to plan.

If Sinn Féin is in government we would set up the forums that are required but I think across the political divide there is a greater understanding of the need to do that. The inevitability of the referendum has dawned on those in the south and they have looked across the water at the Brexit referendum where a vote was carried without any planning.

What that preparedness looks like is we need the forum, the all island Oireachtas committee taking in all the parties north and south, we need the civic forum or constitutional assembly, where civic society can engage and open to all and we need the government to produce a green paper to start the conversation at a state level. A referendum will take place and in my view it will be won, so what are businesses and different sectors doing to prepare for this, the GAA the Arts sector but I think the starting gun will be when the government says they're going to produce a green paper and officially start the conversation.

**Cathy Gormley-Heenan brought proceedings to a close by thanking the panel and the audience for their contributions.**

She urged people to give feedback on the meeting and on the future more generally to the Commission.





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