

WATERFORD PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

Report of the
Waterford People's Assembly
12th October 2023



The Commission on the Future of Ireland was launched 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 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 Waterford People's Assembly which took place in the Tower Hotel on 12 October 2023. It was the ninth such event organised by the Commission.

The meeting was addressed by Waterford TD David Cullinane on behalf of Sinn Féin.

It was chaired by broadcaster and Public Relations Consultant Liz Reddy.

The Panel was:

Catherine Ní Fhaoláin, Education and Mental Health Advocate

Irial Mac Murchú, the CEO of Nemeton TV

Former Independent TD for Waterford and Minister, John Halligan

A video of the Waterford People's Assembly is available on Youtube:

[Future of Ireland discussions gather momentum across the island. - YouTube](#)

Currently the Commission has received almost 200 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

The tenth People's Assembly was held in An Cromptán, Carraroe in County Galway on 27 November and a report will be published shortly.

The next People's Assembly will be in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh on the 22 February 2024.

The following week there will be a People's Assembly on 27 February 2024 in Strabane, Co. Tyrone.

INTRODUCTION

Opening the occasion, Sinn Féin Waterford City Councillor Joeanne Bailey noted that the Waterford People's Assembly was the ninth such event to take place around the country. She introduced David Cullinane to deliver the opening address.

Opening Address by David Cullinane TD

“Your presence here this evening is more evidence of the growing momentum of the conversation about the future of Ireland.

“We meet to explore the opportunities for Waterford in a new, united Ireland.

“These opportunities will only be realised by the fullest possible involvement of citizens who are committed to the fundamental changes that are required to bring about equality and social cohesion, rights and public services.



“A lot of the focus on the Irish Unity conversation has centred around the North. The people of Waterford need Irish Unity just as much as the people of Derry. The Southern state is a very unequal society. Oxfam Ireland has reported that the wealthiest 1% of the population has accumulated 70 times more wealth than the bottom 50 per cent since 2012.

“For decades the State depended on emigration to get rid of unemployed people, women were treated terribly, a conservative elite presided over Magdalene Laundries and other institutions.

“Thankfully a lot of this has changed but there is still an absence of public services including social and affordable housing, health care, childcare etc.

“It is no accident that this conservative ethos, implemented by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, has endured for so long.

“The ending of Partition presents the opportunity for a complete realignment of Irish politics and the emergence of left / right parties. For the first time ever the left will have the possibility of bringing about the objectives contained in the 1916 Proclamation.

“Citizens’ rights must be at the core of the new Ireland. The ending of partition and the reunification of Ireland provides scope to develop a new society. This is an important time in shaping Ireland’s future. It is an exciting and positive time.

“This Waterford People’s Assembly also provides an opportunity to highlight the current issues experienced by those living in the county and how a different constitutional arrangement could provide the scope to address this and further unlock the potential of Waterford.

“Issues such as lack of jobs, housing, infrastructure, tourism, education, healthcare etc. should be explored. Along with the potential, in a new united Ireland with a stronger economy, to address these issues.

“There are excellent success stories in Waterford and the county has a lot to be proud of. Our panel here tonight is a testament to those success stories and I look forward to their insights and indeed the contributions from the audience.

“There is massive potential for further development of Waterford, and indeed the country, in a new united Ireland. That is why we are here tonight – to continue that conversation and to plan for the future.

“Constitutional change is now fixed on the political horizon. Of course,

that doesn't mean Irish unity is inevitable, but the discussion has become dominant in our political discourse.

"The Waterford People's Assembly should not be a one off and every effort should be made to continue the conversation. This is about giving people their say. We want to encourage popular grass roots participation in that conversation about our shared future.

"Conversations are happening across the country – in the workplace, in our universities, at sporting events and at the school gates. People are talking and they are demanding change.

"There is now an irresistible case for the Irish government to establish a Citizens' Assembly on constitutional change. A Citizens' Assembly has an important role to play in preparing the groundwork in advance of a unity referendum.

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

"Grassroots communities should be involved at the beginning of that process, not at the end. These Assemblies are about inviting working people, trade unionists, business owners, community activists, women, our youth, LGBTQ people, Gaeilgeoirí, academics, representatives from our new communities, and others, to come together, and have their say on the process of change.

"Our shared challenge must be to create a future which is warm and welcoming for everyone. And that means asking and answering the questions being asked about a united Ireland. Can we protect public services, pensions, and create decent jobs and pay? Can we create an Irish national health service? I believe we can.

"Can we negotiate and agree new constitutional, democratic arrangements and structures which will leave no one behind? Absolutely.

“Can we tackle sectarianism, and open up a new phase of our peace process, based on reconciliation and healing? The answer is we can, and we must.

“We have a responsibility to reach out to unionism and to assure those who are for maintaining the union with Britain that there is a better way.

“Irish Unity is also the route back into the European Union.

“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.

“I believe we possess the collective wit, wisdom and compassion to start democratically planning for self-determination, constitutional change, reunification, and national reconciliation.

“All ideas and concerns deserve to be validated. Every voice should be heard.

“This is the time for planning, and to engage with each other. It is a time to sow the seeds of hope and optimism. It is a time for nation building. A time for generosity and reaching out the hands of friendship.

“Tréimhse inar féidir linn a chruthú le chéile. Go raibh maith agaibh.”



Following Teachta Cullinane's remarks the meeting was handed over to the independent Chairperson Liz Reddy who introduced the panel and began the conversation by posing the question; "How could Irish Unity benefit the people of Waterford?"

The future of Ireland

John Halligan told the Assembly that there was now a democratic framework in place allowing everyone to vote for a United Ireland.

On differences between North and South in terms of living standards and similarities on social issues affecting working class people, Halligan emphasised the importance of unifying Protestants, Catholics, Right and Left to build a successful United Ireland.

"Geographically and historically, Ireland is one", Halligan said. He dismissed recent remarks by the leader of the British Labour Party that a United Ireland was "not on the cards" adding that there was a fear factor about openly discussing the prospect of Irish unity in certain circles, including the media and that this tended to reinforce partitionism.

Irial Mac Murchú, told those attending that Irish Unity would be a huge economic asset. He said that Brexit had demonstrated the danger in a lack of serious planning towards significant political change. He said that lessons should be learned from that. He pointed out that cross border trade was now worth €10 billion, whereas twenty years ago it was at €3 billion. He added that a border poll was inevitable but that a clear and concise plan on how to unify the country was required.



A Business Plan for Irish Unity

Discussion in this session focused on the shape of the housing and health services in a new Ireland.

Catherine Ní Fhaoláin said it would be foolish not to prepare now for a future United Ireland and that it was important to hear what everyone had to say.

She said the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation, particularly in relation to equality, are worth striving towards. These, she said, are all interlinked with education: “A child needs a roof over their head and free access to a GP in order to be able to do well at school.”

Ní Fhaoláin said it was the responsibility of this generation to discuss how these issues would be dealt with in a new Ireland in order that we leave a better country and society to our children and succeeding generations.

On the cost of a United Ireland, she said the question should really be about how much it will cost not to unite the country.

Dialogue with the unionists as to their economic needs is essential. People in Waterford can't know what unionists need or want, so we must listen directly to them, she said.

Catherine Ní Fhaoláin also said that the issue of identity was not necessarily determined by the country one lives in. As vice-principal of Mount Sion Primary School - one of the most diverse schools in the country - Ní Fhaoláin works with children who speak 38 different languages. This diversity is a great opportunity, she added.

Irial Mac Murchú said that he had done a lot of business in the North and that the business people he spoke to were overwhelmingly in favour of a unity referendum. He believed the majority of those people would vote 'Yes' in such an event as they do not see a future within the United Kingdom.

Mac Murchú also said the North did not receive adequate media coverage in the South and that this was unhelpful to the overall objective of planning the future together.



A Citizens' Assembly on Irish unity?

John Halligan felt there should be a Citizens' Assembly on Irish Unity but believes only a Sinn Féin government would convene one.

Halligan had message for Sinn Féin - people go into politics with the best of intentions, but the senior civil servants hold the real power.

He says there are 13,500 managers in the HSE alone. No other country has such a top-heavy system. In Estonia, Latvia and other similar sized countries, you can see a doctor or consultant on the weekends, but not in Ireland.

So, Sinn Féin needs to secure these basic rights for people and take on the vested interests. There needs to be a 'new beginning'.

Catherine Ní Fhaoláin believes that such a 'new beginning' could occur in a united Ireland. She felt Ireland should take the best of ideas from both the North and the South. That the pros and cons of each other's systems should be explored through dialogue.

Ní Fhaoláin promoted a vision of community-based primary care for mental health in all parts of a united Ireland. The ending of partition will redefine how we look at all these issues, she added.

David Fallon made a contribution from the floor saying that a Citizens' Assembly should be up and running and adding that sport can be a unifying factor. The exploits of the all-Ireland rugby team is a prime example, and they are giving great hope to people both North and South.

Irial Mac Murchú said that he was in Germany during the unification and the atmosphere was like no other, it gave him hope for Ireland.



Questions and contributions from the audience

Davy Lane, President of the Waterford Council of Trade Unions said many trade unions are already organised on all-Ireland basis. Trade unions must have their say in the planning of a new Ireland, and in any Citizens' Assembly. He said Ireland was the only state in the EU without a Fundamental Social Charter of Workers' Rights; and that this must be rectified in a united Ireland.

John Hayes, who lives in Waterford and has spent time living with native Americans, Chileans and other various communities across the world said he felt that the people of Ireland want change, and that the achievement of unity is all about trust.

Regina said that many sections of the Southern media do not report on events in the North, and vice versa. This has led to ignorance in both jurisdictions about the other. Journalists and the media have a duty to actively talk about a united Ireland and lead the discussion out of the room and into the wider public consciousness.

Michéal Ó hUallacháin stated that input from the EU would be vital in the construction of any united Ireland.

Irial Mac Murchú pointed out that the North would automatically re-enter the European Union in the event of a united Ireland and that including this in the Withdrawal Agreement had shown great political foresight.

Saying that there will be a cost associated with unification, Mac Murchú added that there was a duty on both the British Government and the EU to fund a transition period, as the latter did with Germany.

He said the German situation was somewhat different. There was little time for preparation given the rapid pace of events which followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The country had only been divided for 50 years, so the gap and emotional distance between the two parts was considerably less than that between the North and in the South of Ireland.

Nonetheless, EU support, particularly financial support, was crucial in ensuring the successful completion of German reunification.

The British Government is obliged to implement the decision of voters in the North should they back a united Ireland and this entails financial support too.

The South is also relatively prosperous, so the question of affordability becomes less difficult.

While the Irish economy is booming, it is also true that not everyone is experiencing the positive effects of this.

By 2050 there will be 10 million people living on the island of Ireland. It will be a young and diverse population. A united Ireland unlocks

massive potential for these people, so the plan has to be shaped to provide for their needs.

One member from the audience highlighted the need for health and education integration in a United Ireland scenario.

Responding to a question about pro IRA songs Catherine Ní Fhaoláin said that people are entitled to high spirits and emotional expression but that this will be a serious conversation for all Irish people to have and everyone is entitled to their views.

She said education systems, North and South, would need to be merged in the event of unity and that the strongest elements from both systems should be included. The same should apply to the healthcare system.

Aoife Mitchell raised the issue of the erosion of workers' rights in the South over many years. Workers and trade unions must have a valid input into the preparation and planning of a united Ireland. She feared that big business will shape a new Ireland for their own benefit to the detriment of workers.



Tom Ford said we needed to learn from the Scottish Independence movement. He said we needed to think about how unity would incorporate various symbols and emblems.

He said a united Ireland would be a beacon of hope to the world and to those seeking freedom elsewhere.

Irial Mac Murchú highlighted concerns about how our state is run, on the state of the health service, projects such as the metro North, the National Broadband Plan, roads, water, power, infrastructure, and services and how nobody is held accountable for such projects running massively over budget. There was concern with the lack of a culture of accountability.

Mac Murchú said taxpayers deserve better services and a standard of living. He did not have the answer to these problems, but felt we should look at other countries for inspiration.

In response to a contribution from a woman who worried about a new Ireland becoming a 'politicians' republic, Catherine Ní Fhaoláin said that an ideological change is needed in a new state, so we should be looking for new ideas instead of necessarily new politicians. The younger generations can bring much to the table in this regard.

Ismail, a member of the audience, asked if equality would be prioritised in a united Ireland and highlighted issues about underemployment. As a former student in WIT, he found it difficult to obtain meaningful work despite his qualification.

Another member of the audience said Ireland was becoming an increasingly pluralist society and that it is very important to treat those of a different nationality the same as we treat those native to Ireland. This would also demonstrate to Unionists that they will be respected in a United Ireland.

A number of audience members said there was so much in common between Irish nationalists and unionists with more to unite us than divide us.

Conclusion

The Waterford People's Assembly was a huge success. Almost 200 people attended the conference in the Tower Hotel, Waterford. The discussion lasted for two hours and was a fascinating and interesting conversation on the future of Ireland.

At the end of the meeting the packed hall unanimously backed the call for the Irish government to hold a Citizens' Assembly to begin the work of planning for the unity referendum that is part of the Good Friday Agreement.

Citizens' Assemblies have played a unique and important role in the last decade in helping to reshape Irish society. It makes sense that a Citizens' Assembly be part of shaping our future.

The contributions ranged across the adverse impact of partition on Waterford and the southern economy; the advantage of building a single all-island health service funded by direct taxation; the damage done by Brexit; engaging with the Protestant/unionist people, and the imperative of creating a new Ireland that embraces everyone on the basis of equality and respect.

In recent years there has been a significant growth in North/South trade which underpins the enormous economic potential that can be generated by unity.

The debate on Irish Unity is now centre stage. It is a daily topic of conversation for many and the demand for the unity referendum that is part of the Good Friday Agreement is growing.

The Irish government is a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. It has a responsibility to defend the Agreement and part of this must be to plan for the future. We all plan for the future in our lives. The government has to end its resistance to this.

It is crucial that those of us who want a united Ireland create the space for those who are opposed to it or those have not made up their minds and who may be persuadable.

Sinn Féin is seeking a new, agreed and united Ireland. We want to build a just, fair, and equal Ireland, an economically prosperous and socially and culturally inclusive Ireland. We want to protect our most vulnerable, the elderly, children, the ill, ethnic minorities, those with disabilities – and ensure that equality is the touchstone upon which all policies are formulated.

Finally, Sinn Féin appeals to all citizens who are interested in the possibility and potential of Irish Unity to become active on this issue. Join in the conversation.







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