

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



RURAL

COMMUNITIES

IN A NEW IRELAND

**National Ploughing Championships
Wednesday 18th September 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 10 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.

This is a report from the People’s Assembly held in the National Ploughing championships in Co.Laois.

A video of Rural Communities in a New Ireland is available to watch here: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/U7eFXxVqosECw3E2/>



Declan Kearney
MLA is Chairperson
of the Commission.

Lynn Boylan MEP is Deputy
Chairperson of the Commission



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 public 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 Rural Communities in a New Ireland event which took place at the National Ploughing Championships in Co Laois, on Wednesday 18th September 2024. This was the 17th public event hosted by the Commission.

The meeting was addressed by Sinn Féin Agriculture Spokesperson in the north Declan McAleer MLA and chaired by Sinn Féin Agriculture & Rural Development Spokesperson in the south Martin Kenny TD.

The panel for the event included Catherine Lane (National Women's Council), Paula Melvin (Uachtarán Conradh na Gaeilge), Richard Halleron (Agriland) & Louise Lennon (Irish Rural Link).

Currently 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 or via the following webpage www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland.

Opening address by Declan McAleer MLA **Declan McAleer welcomed everyone to the 17th public event hosted by Sinn Féin’s Commission on the Future of Ireland.**

“Your presence here today demonstrates the growing momentum in the conversation about the future of Ireland. We want to encourage popular grass roots participation in the conversation about our shared future. We want everyone to have their say. Those who advocate Irish unity; those who are undecided and have questions; and those who at this time oppose change.

“We are here today at the National Ploughing Championships, the annual showcase for rural communities and all that is positive in rural Ireland, to give you the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and to listen to the points raised,

“Since the imposition of Partition our island has been forced to operate with one hand tied behind our backs and rural communities have especially suffered.

“Investment in the road network, better broadband, access to housing, healthcare, child-care and support for small businesses, including agriculture, are needed across Ireland to enable rural areas to prosper,

“We have all experienced the heartache of young people being forced to emigrate due to a lack of jobs, opportunities and housing in our country. In many rural areas across Ireland, Brexit threatens our excellent national standards of farm produce, it damages our reputation as a lead supplier of agri-produce across the world and it cuts farmers in the north out of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy. Decisions which affect our agri industries should be made on the island of Ireland, and not by Tory governments in Westminster,

“In the event of a successful unity referendum the entire island would be a member of the European Union and our full economic potential could be unlocked.

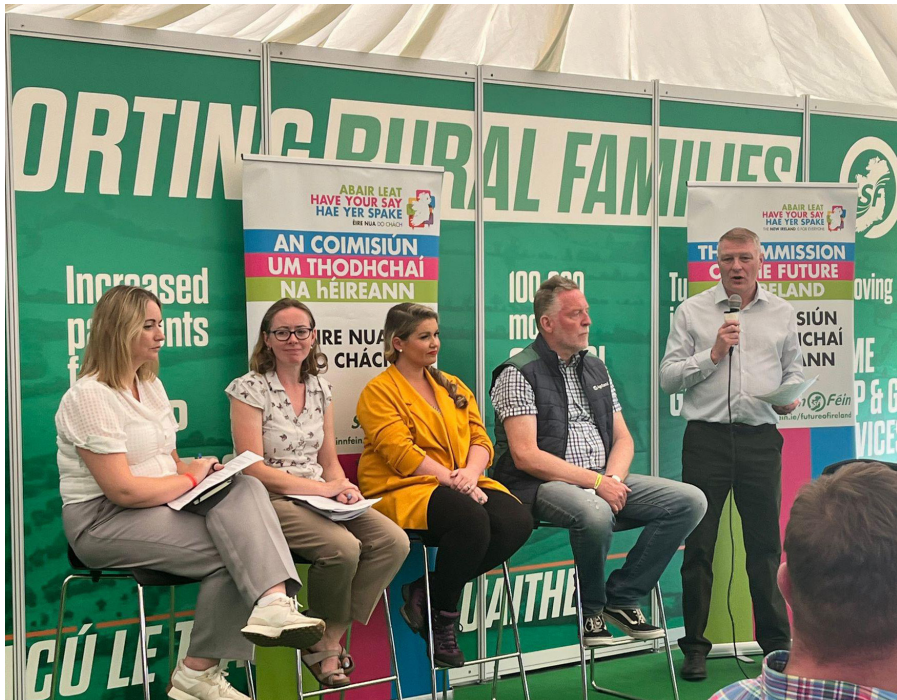
“A vast amount of academic research and modelling and new studies and books on all aspects of reunification are being produced regularly. Many, including Sinn Féin, urge the Irish Government to begin planning and preparing for constitutional change and there is now an urgent imperative for the government to establish a Citizens’ Assembly to prepare the groundwork in advance of a unity referendum. Conversations are happening across the country – on our farms, at the mart, at our local GAA clubs and at our kitchen tables.

“This is an exciting time for us all; filled with opportunity and hope for a better future. It is absolutely crucial for farming families and rural communities to engage in the conversation around Irish unity to ensure they maximise the benefits that reunification could have for their communities.”

MAIN DISCUSSION

In opening the main discussion, Martin posed a number of questions to the panel

- ➡ How could Irish unity benefit farming families & rural communities?
- ➡ How do you see the future unfolding from where we are now?
- ➡ How important is access to the EU market?
- ➡ What are the other challenges faced by rural communities?



Richard Halleron responded by saying production in agriculture is the story of rural Ireland and that food security is the biggest challenge for Ireland and the world. He mentioned that the war in Ukraine has caused food production to increase by 30-40% worldwide.

Paula Melvin highlighted the importance of the Irish language in the conversation on unity and said it needs to be front and centre to constitutional change. Paula said we need to look at the role of the Irish language in a new constitution and also expressed her disappointment at no reference to the Irish language being made in the recent programme for government in the North.

Catherine Lane said that 'quality of life' for women in rural Ireland is a huge issue. She said there is no border on the island for women's issues. She also questioned what a feminist's future would be like in a new Ireland. "The most important thing in this conversation on unity is that women need to feel safe, have a decent income and have what they need in terms of living a normal life and raising a family."

Louise Lennon highlighted that challenges in transport across the island are the same. Louise stressed the need to create space for community groups to come together and said many in rural areas come up against difficulties in being able to commute across the border due to the lack of transport and infrastructure.

Paula Melvin referenced the difficulties coming up against people in rural Gaeltacht communities. She said the biggest issue for people is housing- "If people cannot get planning permission to build a house in the gaeltacht then the gaeltacht will be lost."

Paula also mentioned that the Irish language is critically underfunded in the 26 counties. She said the current Programme for Government was good for the Irish language but it wasn't implemented or followed up on which is disappointing.

Catherine Lane said women's role in agriculture is undervalued and for the most part invisible. She said investment in farming needs to be targeted to smaller farms and that women need to be supported in all decision making areas in rural Ireland.

Richard Halleron responded by saying there is a greater role for Agri women in Agri-business. "There is a huge disparity in the amount of financial support for farmers north and south."

Louise Lennon said women are the backbone of the Irish farm and it needs to become normal that the farm can be passed onto the daughter and not only the son. Tourism is also an important sector for rural communities.

Louise continued by saying the housing issue needs to be solved for rural and urban areas- "It needs to be possible for older people to downsize and still stay in their local community and allow their houses to be made available to families who need the



bigger house.” Louise also said, “We need farm diversification to improve the economic value of small farms- days of cheap food are over.”

Richard Halleron referenced statistics that show 75% of all student vets are women and 95% of farmers in the north are male. Richard said the quality of food is so high but farmers aren’t getting the price they deserve. Richard said, “There has been a £300m budget for Agriculture in the north for the last 17 years and now there is no pillar 2. Farmers in the north are struggling to get seasonal workers, for example harvesting mushrooms. If payments drop then profitability drops.”

AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTION

“The biggest issue in Irish farming is labour, farmers are asked to invest in their farm and now they are in debt.”

Catherine Lane said we need to find ways of investing in care in the community for all, young, old and people with disabilities.

Louise Lennon concluded the main discussion by saying we need to explore ways of promoting trades as a career in schools. “ We need to provide support for rural dwellers in the north in the event of a united Ireland. The issue of Private vs Public health care needs to be addressed and we need to start paying our doctors and nurses

CONCLUSION

Closing the event Martin Kenny TD said

"I'd like to sincerely thank all of those who contributed today, especially our fantastic panel. It has been an excellent meeting and I think we had some very insightful and at times personal testimony provided.

"It is crucial that those of us who want a united Ireland create the space for those who are opposed to it or those who 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 have had our say and now we need to move into the planning and preparation phase towards the new Ireland. It is vitally important that a Citizens' Assembly on Irish Unity is established by the Irish government and that rural voices will be heard.

"I hope that these conversations will continue across rural communities in Ireland.

"I would appeal to citizens who are interested in the possibility and potential of Irish Unity to become active on this issue. Join in the conversation."

THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF IRELAND

REPORT ON RURAL COMMUNITIES IN A NEW IRELAND, 18TH SEPTEMBER 2024





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