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**IRISH UNITY**

**AND THE**

**ALL IRELAND ECONOMY**

**REPORT OF 'IRISH UNITY AND  
THE ALL-IRELAND ECONOMY'**

**CANAVANS, GARVAGHEY, TYRONE  
22ND NOVEMBER 2024**



**Sinn Féin**

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



## INTRODUCTION

Over one hundred local business leaders, academics and community activists from Tyrone and Fermanagh filled Canavan's at Garvaghey.

The conference focussed on a wide range of issues, including provision of acute services; future of the rail infrastructure; the A5; housing; education; tourism; and cancer services.

The Ministers spoke of the challenges the Executive faces due to British government underfunding and the lack of local fundraising powers apart from the regional rate. John O'Dowd pointed out that the North is tied to a failing British economy in crisis, while the Southern economy is experiencing successive budget surpluses.

Sinn Féin has a plan for national reunification. This includes planning for, and actively working towards the holding, by the end of this decade, of referendums on unity as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement; the appointment by an Irish government of a Minister of State for reunification; the publication of a Government 'Green Paper' and the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly or Assemblies to discuss the future.

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.

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

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)

This is a report from the Irish Unity & All Ireland Economy event held on the 22nd November 2024.

**A video of Irish unity and the All Island Economy is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSjTPr-BGGo&t=4781s>**



Declan Kearney MLA is Chairperson of the Commission.

Lynn Boylan MEP is Deputy Chairperson of the Commission

## OPENING ADDRESS FROM PAT CULLEN MP

Pat Cullen MP, on behalf of herself and West Tyrone MP Órfhlaith Begley, welcomed everyone to the discussion.

Pat gave an overview of the work of the Commission and referenced recent events with the diaspora in Ohio.



Pat said the Commission wants to encourage popular grass roots participation in the conversation about our shared future and that we want everyone to have their say.

Pat referenced a range of economic forecasts which have predicted that the continued development of the all-island economy will lead to a stronger economy and said Irish unity and the freedom to make fiscal decisions here on this island will underpin this.

Pat then introduced the Independent Chairperson Dr Anne Devlin, an economist who works with the ESRI.

Pat finished by saying, “We are delighted to have Anne lead the conversation today and I hope you all enjoy the discussion.”

## CHAIRPERSON OPENING REMARKS

Dr Anne Devlin welcomed everyone to Sinn Féin's 19th Commission on the Future of Ireland event and encouraged the audience to participate as much as possible. Anne gave a brief introduction of the Sinn Féin panel which was made up of Conor Murphy MLA & Economy Minister, Dr Caoimhe

Archibald MLA & Finance Minister, John O'Dowd MLA & Infrastructure Minister and Pearse Doherty TD & Sinn Féin Finance Spokesperson.



## MAIN DISCUSSION

Anne opened the discussion by asking **“Can we afford Irish Unity?”**

**Conor Murphy responded** by saying, “We can’t afford not to end partition. We need to end duplication, we’re currently working with 2 different tax systems, 2 different currencies etc. Trade between north and south has grown organically over the last number of years. DFE has further funded Intertrade Ireland which was on a starvation diet in the last number of years. This needs to change to grow the all island economy from a government perspective.” **Conor referenced** the first all-island trade mission to Singapore which he led between Invest NI and Intertrade which was made up of 14 companies across the island and said the synergies between companies was remarkable.

“When Ireland was partitioned the north was the richest part of the island and the state of ‘Northern Ireland’ was a net contributor to the British exchequer. Unionists argued that this economic success was dependent upon the north’s ties with the British Empire, which at that time was at its height. Today, the British economy is stagnant, and the economy in the south of Ireland outperforms both the north and Britain. In this context it has become very difficult to make a positive case that the union with Britain boosts the north’s economy. In fact, it is clear that the north’s economy is dragged down by its ties to Britain’s failing economic model and its long-term problems of low productivity and low growth.

“Some people look at the north as a burden - but look at our ports, airports, advanced manufacturing etc., we have an enormous asset in the north which would be a benefit to the entire island”.

**Conor also referenced** the cost pertaining to British royal palaces, British military etc which our taxes are paying for but don’t benefit us.



### **Pearse Doherty TD continued,**

“Conor has summed it up perfectly. What’s the case for a United Ireland? It’s often seen as a conversation stopper and why is that? I have been the spokesperson on finance for 14 years and I see the need to support research and development and the need to work together. Organically things should work together well but because of restrictions and regulations as a result of partition they aren’t able to.

“For example, tourism should flow naturally from Dublin to the North West but there are barriers which stop this and the same goes for trade. There is massive potential here and it is clear that we can’t afford partition any longer. We must bust through and break these barriers.”

**Dr Caoimhe Archibald said,** “When people ask me can we afford Unity, my automatic response is can we afford to stay with Britain. Anne’s research points to historic damage – productivity gap, gap in disposable income, twice as many young school leavers in the north. For the past 14 years, British Governments have run with an agenda of austerity and chaos. The self-harm of Brexit, the impact of partition during the pandemic etc – limited our ability to respond effectively. Infighting within the Tory party resulted in the wrecking of the economy. Now we have a new British Government – I have publicly and am privately recognising the economic mess they have inherited and political choices in how they respond.

“Cuts to Winter Fuel payments for pensioners and hikes in national insurance will impact on small businesses and the community and voluntary sector. Decisions over which we have no control will greatly impact our communities, businesses and people. One budget will not undo 14 years of austerity. We continue to be constrained on decisions around effectively delivering public services and in trying to stimulate the economy.



Caoimhe was critical of decisions of the Irish government around regional balance.

“As Finance Minister – when I listen to Pearse and colleagues speaking about billions of surpluses, I cannot help but be envious with no fiscal powers here to do similar. On an island of 7 million people it makes no sense to have two of everything. How do we reimagine and build public services, economy and infrastructure for everybody on this island.”



**John O’Dowd MLA said,** “The economic argument against Irish Unity is no longer credible. Public services here are underfunded. We’re often accused of going to London with a begging bowl. British government figures show that the north has been underfunded which debunks the argument of always begging. We are always going to be constrained on investing in public services under the current arrangement.”

**John referenced** the All island rail review and said the equivalent Minister for Infrastructure in the Irish government is currently talking to the EU about how to fund the review while he is scrimping to fund his part. “Brexit and partition has blocked us from being able to go to the EU in a similar way. We need to be ambitious and look towards the future to invest in infrastructure and this vision is not coming from the British government. We need to do things differently and Irish unity allows that.”



**Dr Anne Devlin** then referenced regional imbalance west of the Bann and asked for thoughts on how to tackle this.

**John O’Dowd said** “Many decades of partition has left this part of the north behind and decisions made by previous administrations have left us behind.” John mentioned the A5 road project and spoke about the importance of this piece of infrastructure in terms of road safety and the economy.

“If we want a balanced and fair economy we need suitable road infrastructure to do this. Companies that Conor talks about will be able to move their product more efficiently and effectively and it would create employment opportunities.”

John said addressing years of regional imbalance is a key focus for Sinn Féin and should include bringing rail back to the west, expansion of Magee, investing in transport and decarbonisation and connecting ports and airports to the rest of the island and elsewhere.”

**Frank Martin, an audience member from Carrickmore** said, “We should demand a vote back into Europe. I think it would go a long way to integrate the economies as we had before. Almost all infrastructure money that came to this area, never came from the British and it never will. When they do things for all the parts of the “UK” as they say, it’s never for here – we are losing by the day.”

**Conor Murphy responded,** “The likelihood is that the quickest route back into the EU is through Irish unity. Dual market access is a benefit but does not undo other negative impacts of Brexit. We’ve been arguing against the Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme and we struggle to get the labour we need because of the impacts of Brexit and the pool of people we have.



In the long term our interests are best served by being back in the EU. A great opportunity is offshore wind - we’re looking at a range of sites in the north sea but issues with the British government saying these sites are part of a defence strategy is impeding us in terms of decarbonisation targets etc.”

**A woman in the audience** said her son from Tyrone is coming home from Canada next year, with his partner from Tipperary. They want jobs in Dublin, but will have to live in Belfast as the accommodation is cheaper. “Young people will bring us a United Ireland. It is concerning that the housing crisis in the south is so bad and the current Government has no solutions to that.”

**Helen from Fermanagh** who is secretary of Save Our Acute Services at the SWAH asked how can Sinn Féin improve in a real/genuine way, the rural deprivation impacts that people in our central border area suffer from?

**John O'Dowd responded,** "The All Ireland Rail Review was carried out by independent consultants and I have asked them to go away and look at Fermanagh again. A review mechanism has now been built in which means Fermanagh will be reviewed every 10 years and sooner if evidence comes forward to suggest that rail to the county would be a viable option. Rail journeys brings investment right across the island. Rail cannot just be Belfast to Dublin, it needs to be Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh etc. I want to see an all island economy, not just Belfast and Dublin."

**Conor Murphy said,**"I represent a border constituency which has all the same issues and challenges as West Tyrone and Fermanagh. Progress has been made to join services together. Pregnant women from Louth could be having babies in Daisy Hill rather than travelling to Drogheda etc. Altnagelvin now services Donegal for Cancer Services which is another good example of cross border initiatives that are successful. A ray of hope is the tourism sector - I am working with the Irish government to expand tourism brands across the island and extend them into the north."



**Pearse Doherty continued,** “As Conor mentioned, in Donegal we have been fighting these same battles. Partition offers us nothing. There are people who are travelling 4 ½ hours for cancer treatment but through hard work and cooperation of all agencies, people in Donegal can avail of cancer treatments closer to home in Derry.

“A poll by TG4 on Tuesday (19th November) stated that 70% of people from Donegal now receive their treatment in the North West Cancer Centre. Regional examples of nurse placements, GP and acute services etc could all make a huge difference to people’s lives.

“Partition must end, the government in the South must push this forward quickly and effectively. Like the question about the young Tyrone man and Tipp woman, my parliamentary assistant travels from Belfast to Dublin. They aren’t able to afford housing in Dublin but the infrastructure from Belfast to Dublin allows for them to travel and earn better wages. There is a huge opportunity here. Being from Donegal I know all too well that the last train to leave Donegal was in 1963.

“Many cross border workers face issues in relation to dual payroll requirements and tax to name but a few. We must build on the potential of the all island economy.”

**Rose Tierney, Cross-Border Tax advisor and co-author of the ESRI Labour Economic Employment Report,** said nearly 20,000 cross-border workers have issues with dual payroll requirements, if they’re living and working on either side of the ‘border’. Very complicated. Another big discrimination is people not getting tax relief on pension contributions and is something that could be easily fixed. Rose encouraged the SF reps in the room to get behind their report. <https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/All-island-labour-market-study-2024.pdf>

**Independent Chairperson Dr Anne Devlin** said, “As a cross-border worker I know the complexities and challenges that people face. HMRC doesn’t understand it and the Revenue Commissioners don’t understand it.” Anne asked if Caoimhe’s department was doing anything to remedy this.

**Dr Caoimhe Archibald replied,** “This is work myself, Conor and Pearse previously have taken significant interest in. This has become more prevalent because of working from home arrangements and things which have evolved in recent years. I am aware of complexities, including things like opening a bank account. The willingness of HMRC to engage on this is a challenge but I will continue to raise these issues and



**Pearse Doherty said,** “I take a personal interest in this, as our party’s spokesperson on Finance and Public Expenditure in the south. We have the same issue in the south as we have here. We are talking about complexities facing people from Inishowen working in Derry and vice versa. As I mentioned before these things fall organically but are made difficult because of procedures. This is something I would like to personally look into; employment rights, tax relief, payroll etc. These issues will continue to frustrate ministers north and south until the end of partition.”

**Dr Anne Devlin** said there are issues with housing in the north coming down the line, supply issues and affordability. How can we tackle this?

**Pearse Doherty said,** “This is the number one issue in the south and is now an issue affecting every part of the 26 counties. It’s not just a social issue, but an economic issue. It is no longer an issue just facing the cities but it is throughout. The Chamber of Commerce and largest FDI are now raising housing issues, as they cannot be convinced that housing would be there



to support new jobs. It is a man-made crisis. Solutions can be resolved by policy. We have resources, but not the political will. It is multifaceted but we have the solutions. There is currently a surplus of 24 billion in the 26 counties this year. The next 5 years projected 8-10 billion surplus per annum, with a budget package of about 6 billion euro spent.

“In Donegal I am currently working with 3 families who will be homeless within a short period of time. House prices increased by 95,000 in the past 5 years in the 26 counties. We need far more state intervention to deal with supply issues and make housing affordable.”

**Dr Caoimhe Archibald continued,** Housing is the number one issue I deal with in my constituency office. There are regional specific issues. In the North-Coast, demand has risen from working from home opportunities. PRS prices are increasing and people have nowhere to go. We do not have the same levels of funding to invest. Our capital budget is constrained. We did not get to invest in housing specifically. It is an absolute priority for us as an Executive, within the Programme for Government– but again, we are constrained by what we have. We are looking at solutions e.g. to allow the Housing Executive to borrow, as they haven’t been able to for many years. This will still not meet the level of demand. Other constraints in relation to our wastewater infrastructure etc impact on building anything and on the environment.”

**John O’Dowd said,** “We are not masters of our own destiny, we are relying on decisions being made in Westminster. There is a crisis in housing. Multifaceted. It comes down to lack of investment. We do not have the ability in this decade to turn the Economy around. We have a failing economy, but the south is flourishing and they are not using resources correctly. It should be about prioritising the people – investing back into their wellbeing. Otherwise, we will not be reaching optimum.”



**Tom Connolly from the Advanced Manufacturing Sector** said, “It’s clear to most people from nationalist/Republican background, the economic benefits of a United Ireland. What is the Strategy for identifying the bones of contention – and the fact they are different in different geographical regions and social circles? If those issues are clearly identified and can be worked on to be knocked over – how can that be linked from a broader public all-Ireland point of view, as a win for the argument in relation to a UI? And how can they be linked through Economy, Sports, Education, Infrastructure – and best ways to link to the Commission and other UI projects?”

**Conor Murphy said,** “This is our 19th event. These events are open to everyone to come along and are being done in the absence of the Irish government taking serious initiative. The government in Dublin should be planning for Unity. Dialogue should be structured, resourced and with the right people coming into the room to identify solutions. It should be a time-set piece which looks at what taxation, the economy, health etc looks like – the preparation work needs to be done.



We should be talking to all people, of any political viewpoint and we need to listen to ideas, even if they are different from our own. Most of our Commission events do not involve SF people at the top table and it has been refreshing to hear the views of others, particularly those from a Protestant background.”

**Dr Anne Devlin responded:** “I think that’s a really important question that you have asked there –what we see in the news and what we see on twitter as the bones of contention are maybe not the bones of contention that people are talking about around their dinner tables, those people that aren’t maybe as vocal or aren’t engaged in activism, so I think events like this are important.



**Anne** then referred back to Caoimhe Archibald’s point around fiscal powers and devolution, and said “we have talked about how we are tied to the UK and how that isn’t great for us, do you want to talk more specifically about different fiscal powers and different things that the departments could be doing, if they had the opportunity?”



**Dr Caoimhe Archibald responded,** “When Conor was Finance Minister he instructed a fiscal commission to be set up to take a look at the potential for the devolution of fiscal powers and he put in place a panel of eminent economists to do that work, headed up by Paul Johnston from the institute of fiscal studies. The piece of work done was very comprehensive, it was robust and would stand up to scrutiny, that has subsequently been consulted on, so people have had the opportunity to share their views.

“The paper made a number of recommendations about potential powers that could be devolved to the Executive that would give us slightly more ability to make decisions about how we would raise money and spend our money. I think it has been reflected from the conversation today that It would still be sub-optimal in terms of having the ability to be autonomous and to have full self-determination and the full powers of a sovereign government but in the interim it would give us the ability to make some policy decisions on how we raise our money and to potentially be able to that in a more progressive and fair way.

“As it stands we have one power that we use to raise money and that’s the regional rate and it is a very blunt tool in terms of trying to raise any additional money. For example if you wanted to raise a £100M, you’d have to put up the regional rate by over 12% and that’s the scale of what we are talking about in terms of the limitations of what we can do. So, the Fiscal Commission made recommendations of what we can do with a number of potential powers and some of those were things like excise duties, things that would make sense on this island to be able to have control over. Another was income tax, again something that could be utilised as seen in Scotland.

## Dr Caoimhe Archibald's reponse continued

"Earlier this year, I negotiated an interim fiscal framework on behalf of the Executive, with the British Treasury and one of the next actions of that is to look at the principles around fiscal devolution. Also within that, is what is called 'our level of need'. Based on an analysis that was done by the Fiscal Council here, we have a level of need of 124%.

"The Executive's view is that our level of need is actually higher than that and we building a case of evidence to be able to support that and that is the next phase of our negotiations with the British Government in relation to our funding arrangements and we hope to make some progress on that in the very near future."

## Glynn Roberts from Retail NI

said, "Rural towns feel left behind. There is a regional divide on Foreign Direct Investment and transport infrastructure – work on these is vital." Glynn asked what would Sinn Féin do in Government to build on the good work of the Shared Island Fund- how do we get a slice of the apple?

**Conor Murphy said,** "Ultimately what we need is one governing structure for the Island and then we get the synergies that we need right across the 32 counties "



**Pearse Doherty:** "Rural areas have been left behind. John as Minister for Infrastructure has been to the fore on this with projects such as the A5. A Sinn Féin government would prioritize the development of these major projects and would have a better impact.

**Pearse Doherty TD reponse continued,** “Sinn Féin would prioritise a green paper on Irish Unity and establish a Citizens’ Assembly in a state organised way. Sinn Féin would lead a change approach to overcome the obstacles in relation to health and infrastructure. At a government level we would invest back into the regions who have suffered for too long under the status quo.”



**An audience member** raised concerns about the lack of public transport in rural areas. He also mentioned that a bus journey from Omagh to Dublin could take the guts of 5 hours when it has made all the stops at various locations on route. Just not good enough.

**Another audience member** said, “It has been so interesting to hear this conversation today. They asked if the same 26 counties Government remain – are they committed to any notion of a United Ireland? I’ve heard before from people in the south that unity will cost too much. I’ve also heard people mention the huge subvention the north gets from Britain. I have done work with FinTech and within the financial services sector- when you go abroad to Dubai and the Middle East – the branding of their skills and education is phenomenal. They want our skilled workforce. I have tried to promote what we have in the north – but it does not seem to land, as there does not seem to be that same branding. I’m not sure skills and training/education are promoted enough abroad? Also, is Trump a real issue for us?”

**Michelle Gildernew** spoke from the audience and said, “It would be remiss not to mention the gap between life expectancy north and south. Children in the north suffer generational poverty, poorer housing and infrastructure. I invested heavily in rural childcare when I was a Minister. £10 a day childcare in Government should be where we aspire to be in the north. Making people more prosperous and healthier. I talk to women including Loyalist women about how their life expectancy is shorter. We need social issues in the discussions about Irish Unity.”

**Audience member Chris Swaine said,** “Brexit has not helped the situation. The biggest problem is structural. Concentration of wealth and political and economic power in the South East. Dublin is running ferociously hot. Would it not make sense to move future jobs from the East, instead of pumping water across – to build the West? In a new Ireland, what would panellists think on how we can ensure this island does not follow the same path?”

**John O’Dowd said,** “We have not properly invested in public transport in decades and rural communities have been left behind. Transport plans including Fermanagh and Omagh will go out to consultation soon. Regional imbalance isn’t just a northern problem, it is a problem in areas of the state as well. The A5 and All Ireland Rail review will allow us to spread wealth, jobs and the economy around places that are being left behind.

“Others are thinking about Irish Unity but Sinn Féin in government would act on these issues and ensure that discussion and planning goes forward. The debate can’t just be a Sinn Féin debate and discussion.”

**Conor Murphy said,** “The big attraction here is skills and people, but it’s also an ongoing challenge. Joint trade-missions are vital, so Invest NI is not competing with Enterprise Ireland. There is no point competing – we need to make sure it’s the island as a whole.

**Pearse Doherty said,** “The rise of Sinn Féin has put Irish Unity on the political agenda for other parties. Others like Ireland’s Future have played a major role in talking to leaders from across political divides. The Trump effect is real, but what it will be we do not know. He talked about Ireland and our FDI before and our corporation tax grew by 60% the last time he was in the oval office. The 26 counties economy has a lot going for it. Bumper corporation tax – none of us are saying to spend on day-to-day expenditure, it should be for housing, rail link, offshore wind energy infrastructure, water infrastructure, etc. There is a need for water investment, all over the country, including that lost by pipe ruptures. Conversations about proper balanced regional development, boosting regions and planning across all Government Departments is vital.”

**Dr Caoimhe Archibald continued,** “We are constrained in the current constitutional set-up. There is hope for a different focus on how we approach these decisions on an all-Ireland basis. We will continue to hold any government’s feet to the fire. People expect delivery, on childcare, healthcare, education – we need to prioritise resources and implement policies and strategies, such as the Anti-Poverty Strategy.”

**Dr Anne Devlin** said through the Shared Island Unit the ESRI have compiled a list of research. There are consistent gaps in skills, education and productivity, gaps which are basically identical.



**Bridie McElhill** travelled from Donaghadee to take part in the discussion. She asked “What are the hidden hazards going forward on this issue?”

**Jimmy from Co. Fermanagh** said, “While on journey towards a new Ireland – what can we do in the meantime to identify opportunities for better north-south co-operation? What can we do better to identify opportunities and bring things forward?”

**An audience member** said a strong message out of this meeting should be that we would like to be back on a strong European economic position. SF should be calling for a northern representative in Europe, which was lost during Brexit.

**John O’Dowd said**, “People from all backgrounds and areas such as Donaghadee, coming and having their say is fantastic. This reinforces the need for the upcoming government to establish a citizens’ assembly on the proposition of a new Ireland. Brexit shows us that we need to uncover the hidden hazards.

“Learning from being in government is that ‘partitionism’ had developed in the Civil Service and staff have worked with their backs to each other, just delivering on their own remit, and not looking across the border. This is changing and a focus has been put on it in the early stages of this executive to collaborate across the border.”

**Dr Caoimhe Archibald,** “We need to bring people with us and ensure there is a forum to have those conversations. The best forum we could have would be Citizens’ Assemblies organised by the Dublin Government. On the question of North-South co-operation, we need to look for the opportunities- across Ministerial portfolios, businesses, trade unions, etc. Within my own Department – I have seen the issues on willingness to work with us. That has changed and there is more desire to do things differently, which comes from political direction and will. We want to be back in the EU within a United Ireland. The quickest way back to the EU is through a Unity Referendum. We have an open door in that respect.”

**Pearse Doherty concluded,** “Attitudes are changing, politics are changing and this will continue, momentum will continue to build. The situation of a referendum without doubt is under consideration. Parties in the south are committed to Irish Unity but refuse to sit down and talk about it or plan for it. That’s the biggest risk that we face. It will happen but the space for the United Ireland conversations must be inclusive. We need to show that certain fears surrounding Unity are unsubstantiated. We must use every avenue to allow for these discussions, we come together best with sports so in our GAA clubs, Golf clubs etc, have those conversations. The evidence is clear. We cannot afford partition any longer and we will all be best served in a New United Ireland.”

## CONCLUSION

Independent Chairperson Dr Anne Devlin concluded the discussion by thanking the panel and the audience for their participation. Anne encouraged the audience to continue these conversations and to ensure this is not a one off.

She also encouraged people to write to the Commission with their thoughts by contacting **commission@sinnfein.ie**

