



STUDENTS IN A NEW IRELAND

**REPORT OF 'STUDENTS IN A
NEW IRELAND'**

**QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, BELFAST
TUESDAY 21ST APRIL 2026**





INTRODUCTION

The Commission on the Future of Ireland was established by Sinn Féin in July 2022.

Its remit is to undertake a grassroots consultation with the people of Ireland and internationally on the future of Ireland. This will be achieved through the hosting of People's Assemblies across the country and internationally; through the collection and publication of written contributions; through hosting sectoral meetings and through private engagements. A final report will be compiled at the culmination of the project.

This is a report of 'Students in a New Ireland' which was hosted in Queens University Belfast in collaboration with Ógra Shinn Féin.

The discussion was chaired by Sociology & Criminology student and Ógra Shinn Féin representative Annie Nic Mhánais. The panel included Law Student Jeb- Jeb Samama, Medical Student Eimear Nic Siacais, and Law graduate & SDLP representative Will Polland.

Footage of the event can be watched here:

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/fQTuXv3oXiQ>

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



Declan Kearney MLA
is Chairperson of the
Commission.

Lynn Boylan MEP is
Deputy Chairperson of the
Commission

MAIN DISCUSSION

Chairperson Annie Nic Mhánais began proceedings by asking the panellists “Do you support, oppose or feel undecided about Irish Unity and why?”

Will Pollard responded:

“I support Irish Unity.

“This, for me, isn’t just about adding six counties into the current set of what there is in the Republic. There is so much more that we can do with this opportunity.

“What brought me to this position and my nationalist beliefs and my politics in general and ultimately the SDLP was my commitment to be back in Europe.

“That is one of the things that I’m most passionate about. This region was pulled out of the European Union despite overwhelming support in the referendum in 2016.

“This is a substantial opportunity to re-enter the structures of the European Union and that’s something we can’t ignore.

“It’s only something that can benefit us on this island.

“We can see that in the disparity from the divergence from 2016 in the Republic and the North- things are vastly different. You can see it in the roads themselves.

“For me, I see Irish Unity as being able to build something new.



"It's not just the same old country. It's the opportunity to look at the constitution constructively. There's an idea that you could rewrite the constitution.

"There's an idea that you could amend vast weights of the Constitution. That's attractive. That's something that not every country in the 21st century gets the opportunity to do.

"So it's something that we have to grab with both hands. It's something that we have to do the groundwork on as well. You can't take it for granted. I think a lot gets thrown out about the inevitability of Irish Unity. I think the conversation is growing and the conversation is popular. This room being as packed as it is today is a good example of that with students.

"But the hard work has to be there too. There's a lot of people, particularly in the north, but also in the Republic, when the hard conversations come around, who need convincing.

"So rooms like this are very, very important to that. I absolutely support Irish Unity- I think it's a great route back into Europe and it's an opportunity to build a country for the 21st century."

Jeb-Jeb Samama responded:

"My position is that I am undecided on it.

"I was born here, but my parents are from the Philippines. They came here around 2002 post Good Friday agreement.

"There's that sense of disconnect, at least in my part, in terms of the trauma and the suffering that the people in Northern Ireland have suffered through.

"Irish unity to me is a bit like going to the 'Lego' store and buying a Lego box. When you try to build it, and you see the picture, it looks amazing. It looks like a really wonderful thing to have. But then when you open the box, it feels like it's without instructions.

"It feels like we as a people have to figure it out ourselves in terms of what is the best way forward in actually 'creating' Irish Unity.

"How do we actually show it to everyone and show that it's worth it and it benefits us.

"Going back with the analogy- you can always build Lego without instructions, but it's going to look a wee bit funky.

"I'm not necessarily against Irish Unity but I think it's going to take a lot of time and a lot of constructive thinking."

Eimear Nic Siacais responded:

"I want a United Ireland.

"I was born and reared a 32 county socialist Republican. I'm a Gael. It has always been in my life and has always been part of my upbringing that this is something to be strived for.

"But I also don't look at it with any sort of blind nationalism or a romantic idea of this panacea in this beautiful land that we just have to get this and everything will be okay. That's not the reality. It is going to take a lot of work.

"But everybody in this room, this generation- we have an opportunity of a lifetime that other countries would do anything to be able to do.

"We have the opportunity to change our futures north and south. We can improve services, improve education, improve health outcomes etc.

"We have the opportunity to fix things and a United Ireland is the way to do it."



Annie asked the panellists if they believe Irish unity could have a positive or negative impact on Students across the island?

Jeb-Jeb Samama:

"It's a 'if it's done right' situation.

"As we all know, Northern Ireland is struggling heavily with the budget. Just recently the Stormont Executive were saying they don't have enough money- they've always been running at a deficit.

"If Westminster can't provide the money that we need there's a fear in me of how Dublin is going to be able to fund us?"

"It would be good in the sense that there would be a lot more connectivity, cross border work and people actually getting to meet each other more instead of the isolation I feel is there at the minute. I feel like I don't get to meet people from down south enough. And vice versa.

"I think it would be a good opportunity to also share the cultural heritage that the island does have.

"I am slightly worried as well in terms of how the cost of living is going to affect students. The cost of rent in Dublin is extortionate. It's way too high. I want more opportunities for students so that they can come here and study here in Belfast.

"If there is to be a United Ireland there needs to be a plan. How is it going to work in terms of tuition fees, are we going to have more development in terms of housing for students, what will happen to the NHS, how will welfare work?

"We are often too afraid to talk about the nitty gritty stuff but we need plans around all of this."

Eimear Nic Siacais:

"Students are very important to society and are often ignored. The future belongs in their hands. This is your future that you're looking at.

"At the minute there are courses up and down the island. There is duplication of courses. Courses are closing down because there aren't enough staff or students. It makes sense to roll out courses out on an all island basis.

"In my medical course, unusually in the north, in every year of the 5 years that it has been running, more than half of the students are from the south. To study medicine in the south is extortionately expensive. But then on the flip side of that, for undergrads, it's more expensive to be a student up here in the north.

“Students are far more prone and far more at risk of poverty than the average adult. There’s double the risk for students in the North, despite the housing prices in the south, because disposable income is just so much less in the North.

“The housing prices in Dublin are atrocious but that issue is also coming up thick and fast in the north.

“There was an article a few weeks ago about parents of students paying £1000 a month for their children’s rent in Belfast. With the wages that exist here, it’s just completely extortionate and it’s unsustainable.

“In a United Ireland you can get rid of the duplication of services. There are disparities around funding for students, student loans and tuition fees also.

“There’s a lot of good work happening already. The recent collaboration with Queens University and Dundalk was significant.

“We also now have people studying in the south, but earning a degree from the north. These are all positive steps.

“I believe a United Ireland would be extremely beneficial for students. It needs to be done very carefully. There needs to be protections in place, particularly around poverty.

“Students need to be involved in the discussions and the planning process. Students have to make these decisions.”



Will Polland:

“There’s the opportunity of it being overwhelmingly positive.

“I was recently at a meeting recently with members of the Social Democrats from Trinity and UCD. It was an eyeopener for myself in terms of the differences in the CAO and UCAS points systems and issues for students trying to organise accommodation with last minute offers etc.

“I know the Irish government are currently looking to address some of these issues.

“We want more people going south for university and vice versa.

“The biggest opportunity for United Ireland in terms of students is bringing to an end the disastrous brain drain here at the minute with many students travelling to Australia and elsewhere for work. We have slept walked into this due to the lack of opportunities. It’s vital that student voices are included in terms of building a new Ireland so that progress can be made to keep people on our shores.

“In terms of secondary education here in the north, I am weary of some of the things being done by our education Minister Paul Givan. For me it is worrying. Particularly in terms of the curriculum, what I see is an absolute trial starter for right wing Christian fundamentalism, entering into our schools.

“In a New Ireland, there is the opportunity to look at the curriculum across the board, particularly with the Republic, where you have a country deeply held in the past of the Catholic Church.

“We have the opportunity to look at where we can objectively change the curriculum to be more focussed on the future and to be more reflective of where society currently is. So those are 2 big aspects that come to my mind when it comes to the opportunities for students. We have to work for it.”

Audience Contribution- Student from Donegal

“Speaking from the perspective of someone from a border county who has had their options restricted. The border is what restricts students from the north going to the south for university due to costs. Planning and costs are what restricts students from the south staying in the south to study.

“I didn’t have the option to go to Galway or Dublin, despite offers, due to costs. The border is quite literally restricting students and is impacting our academic future.

“Students have to be the ones that make the decisions. It is us, the people, that have to determine the functionality of a United Ireland. Students have a big role to play in this.”

Annie mentioned that there have been calls for the Irish government in particular to establish Citizens’ Assemblies to plan for our future by many civic groups but this still has not happened.

She asked for a show of hands from the audience in terms of support for the establishment of citizens’ assemblies on Irish Unity. There was overwhelming support from those in attendance.



Annie asked the panel if they felt this would be useful in the planning process? She asked “How important is it to you that Irish Unity is planned carefully- and do you think enough is being done on this?”

Will Polland:

“Planning is absolutely essential.

“If you want to build a new country you need to be able to produce something that they have in advance of going to the polls.

“We are still dealing with the repercussions of Brexit. It was an absolute disaster.

“I don’t want a United Ireland to be like that. We need to show people what we can get out of it.

“There’s 3 defined roles to begin the process. The 1st one is what we’re doing here tonight with civic society. We’re having conversations and we’re hearing different opinions. More and more people are hearing about this conversation and engaging in it. That’s an essential role. It may transform as we get closer to the idea of a referendum and it may become more focussed on campaigning. It may become more of a convincing tool.

“Bodies like the Sinn Féin Commission on the Future of Ireland, the SDLPs New Ireland Commission, Ireland’s Future etc are doing fabulous work in this space.

“The next thing that comes to mind for me are Citizens’ Assemblies. They are essential. They’ve been at the heart of some modern history that was made. They’re a great way of getting, particularly, student voices, for example, in the conversation, hearing their opinion, and ensuring that whatever’s put out within a white paper, in advance of a referendum, is reflective of the views of as many people as possible, unionist, nationalist, others etc.

“When you’re creating a country, basically from scratch, the most important role has to lie with the Irish government. They need to be doing more in terms of Unity. The opportunity of a referendum is coming. They need to be prepared for it and the onus is on them to do that work. In the last general election, the SDLP called on parties to commit to a minister for Irish Unity.

“Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael need to get more serious on it. This is something we can’t ignore.

“Those three things are essential in how we go forward and plan for Irish Unity.

“Without this essential planning work and citizens assemblies I don’t know how we’re going to get much further.”



Eimear Nic Siacais:

“We need a proper structured road map. We need representative citizens’ assemblies for health care workers, students etc.

“Citizens’ Assemblies need to reach across society, across class, religion, race, ethnicity. We need opinions. We need more data. It needs to be done in a proper structured way. We need a proper roadmap and we need the Dáil to do that. Otherwise we’ll be sitting in rooms like this forever having the same conversation.

“We need them to start listening and get the ball rolling. There’s ways everyone in this room can do that.

“Are you a member of a trade union? Get them to put a motion in. Are you a member of the law society? Get them to put a motion in.

“We need civic society to roll out opinions. It’s gonna take a lot of work, but it can be done.”

Jeb- Jeb Samama:

“I think planning is essential. It’s really important that we don’t rush it.

“Alluding back to Brexit, the referendum just happened and then all of a sudden we were left dealing with the negative consequences of that.

“We need the Irish Government to actually listen to what people are calling for. It is an eventuality that they need to prepare for. If people want Citizens’ assemblies they should establish them.

“Many people should be included and have their voices heard. I agree with Eimear, it should be representative of race, creed etc and we should include health workers, students etc because we’ll have a wider, varied and professional outcome.”

Audience Contribution - Student & SDLP member:

"I'm worried that the Irish government is kicking the can down the road in terms of a United Ireland. They say they want it. But the problem is that they're always saying we'll have this one day but aren't actually doing anything about it.

"I'm a member of the SDLP and at our last conference we had TD's there from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael etc. It's good that they're interacting and having conversations. But it's only conversations at this stage. If there's going to be a United Ireland there needs to be serious preparations like a minister for Irish Unity. This would show they're taking it seriously and it's not just an aspiration.

"It's a great opportunity and we have to take advantage of it."

Audience Contribution- Colin Harvey- Ireland's Future:

"I'd like to congratulate the Commission on organising the event. And to the panellists for really thoughtful contributions. I primarily came along tonight to listen to everyone in the room tonight. Ireland's Future has been calling for a civic initiative for a very long time precisely for that reason- to listen to people.

"What do the panelists think might shift the dial? And thinking about the future for students on the island- if you were writing a prospectus that would persuade people to vote for change- what would be your priority issues- what would you recommend that would be persuasive to students who are undecided on this issue?"



Jeb- Jeb Samama:

"I think it has to do a lot with the economy. I feel like it isn't quite well explained enough in terms of what actually is the tangible benefit. How is it going to put more food on the table? How is that going to help with the rising rent? etc

"Whether you're unionists or nationalists, this is our home. It is our home and if we don't look after it then it doesn't matter whether we're part of the United Kingdom or by the republic."

Will Polland:

"Electoral performance is the first issue for me. When there are enough seats returned within a particular ideological belief it's a clear indicator of where people are at.

"A way of pushing that forward are examples like tonight of Sinn Fein and the SDLP sharing a panel and nationalist parties cooperating with each other.

"We may not believe the same things as each other. We have the same overarching goal, we know the destination and we know the job that we have to do in terms of convincing those people who just aren't there with us yet.

"The next thing is getting criteria for the border poll to be called. My biggest fear is that a referendum will be called and we win it with no planning having been done first.

"In terms of a prospectus, the first thing I would include is jobs/ opportunities.

"The idea of an all Ireland market. Northern Ireland has the fastest ethernet connection to the US and therefore it is a base for a lot of stock trade. You could expand this and push the market across the island.

"And on top of that, if you're a student studying and you want opportunities, ensuring the right to Erasmus is absolutely essential. People need to be able to grow their horizons and their studies. People need to be able to go further afield, learn about other cultures, and learn in other societies. It's so essential. This is one of the massive benefits of membership of the European Union.

"The next thing is the housing crisis. People can't afford to live. We can tackle this by cracking down on vulture funds and making sure new affordable houses are being built.

"There are so many opportunities. If you could look at this, fleshed it out and put those 3 things to students, it's attractive, it's new and it's different to what we have currently and it sounds like it might work."

Eimear Nic Siacais

"Firstly for me is the democratic right to self determination. We can't raise taxes here, we have no fiscal control.

"The symbolic aspect of 'I want self determination for my own national identity' doesn't matter if you can't feed your kids.

"What does matter is how we make this place better for our children and their children. What are the big ticket items that are actually going to be better in a United Ireland.

"Big ticket items for me include health firstly. The NHS doesn't exist anymore. GP's here in the north are going the same way that dentists have already gone.

"You have to pay for healthcare in the south, but 50% of the population have medical cards. Sláintecare has been delayed but is being rolled out more and more. Your right to access care is a human right.

"I'm currently on placement in a neurology department. The routine neurology waiting list is 8 years currently. You may as well deny access. The right to access does not exist.

"Should people that can afford it have to pay for their health care? I don't want a two tier system. I want a universal free at the point of use health care system. But it's not the reality that we're looking at at the minute.

"For students, education is a massive issue. There is a huge economic brain drain. We ran a survey with the BMA last year on career intentions for newly graduated doctors. 40% of them intend to leave after their 1st year of training. That's insane. 20% of students leave the north and never come back. They're taking their skills with them. The economic benefit of having our young people stay here would contribute massively to the economy.

"The north has the worst educational attainment on these islands. Our kids that do well, do very well, but despite that our gap is still bigger.

"The south has the highest number of 3rd level educated young people in Europe. Can you imagine the opportunities if this was stretched on an all island basis.

"We're looking at a generational shift. Do you want to have economic hubs in Derry that are mixing with Letterkenny? Do you have an aunt that has to travel from Malin Head to Dublin for cancer services or do you want her to be able to go to Altnagelvin for treatment? That's what it's about."

Annie asked the audience and panel how do they visualise the future, how do they see the future unfolding from where we are at this current time and what are their hopes?

Audience Contribution- Student

“When we talk about building this new island, we need to ensure that it doesn’t create a unitarian model.

“There needs to be a local control so we don’t just further entrench the Dublin-centric values which have failed the other 25 counties in the south.”

Will Polland:

“At this point I want to see action on this. If we don’t have action, all of this is for nothing.

“We need planning from the Irish government. We need political parties working together. We need unionists involved in these conversations telling us what their ambitions and concerns are too. We need to be back within the EU.



“Building a new Ireland isn’t about flags or our very deep history. It is about building a better country and giving people a better start in life and not having it determined by the conditions in which you were born into.”

Jeb-Jeb Samama:

“I hope there’s a day where you no longer have to ask people whether you’re nationalist or unionist or other or X, Y, or Z, but rather, what is best for Northern Ireland and how we can move forward.

“I do want to stay here. We’ve talked a lot about brain drain. In the future, I want this to be a place where people want to stay and their children stay. We have to remember the past but we also have to learn from it.”

Eimear Nic Siacais:

“What I want is for everybody to go and talk to their friends and family about this. You may be a unionist. You may be a nationalist. You may be undecided. That’s okay everybody’s opinion matters. It’s all of our futures.

“People are open to talking about it, people are open to moving forward. They want to know what it will look like. I’d encourage everyone to go away from here tonight and continue the conversations.”

Audience contribution- Lecturer from Queensland University of Technology

“I’m here from Australia. I want to thank the panel and audience for their extraordinary points of view that I’ve heard in the room tonight. I teach at QUT in Australia- Queensland University of Technology. I am self-funding a project called ‘What does peace mean to you?’

“I’ve been talking to students about what peace means given the geopolitics around the world. I’ve loved hearing all of the various points of views. People have openly shared their stories, and their family stories of intergenerational trauma.

“They’ve talked about what they all have in common and how they want to continue to move forward. This ties in with this discussion on a united Ireland. I really enjoyed the discussion and wanted to say thank you again for sharing your thoughts with us all.”

Audience contribution- Student from Mid Ulster:

“Economics is what will decide the outcome of a referendum on a United Ireland. This is something that hasn’t really been looked at in depth and should be.

“The lack of progress on the A5 road is a big issue. Lack of investment in rural areas and into the north from Westminster is a big issue.

“Whenever we’re in control of our own finances and are free from our taxes going to fund the British military, dictatorships etc. When we invest in our students, infrastructure, labour markets etc- that will bear the fruits economically.

“The system here has failed. A lot of people are leaving university and expecting doors to be open. They’re not. It’s mismanagement and it’s a disgrace.”

CLOSING REMARKS FROM CHAIRPERSON ANNIE NIC MHÁNAIS

"I'd like to sincerely thank all of those who contributed tonight, especially our fantastic panel. It has been an excellent meeting.

"It's the people in this room that have to act, we need to move this conversation forward at pace. We need the Irish government to listen to us.

"There's no doubt that tonight's meeting shows that people want to have this conversation. This conversation belongs to everyone, and we need everyone engaged in it. So, let's move forward together. Students and young people must be at the heart of shaping a New Ireland ."

