



TOWARDS A NEW IRELAND

NEALE RICHMOND TD

**Paper delivered to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.
19 April 2021.**

Executive Summary

Twenty-three years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, conversations regarding the future of Northern Ireland's status have once again come to the fore of our political and public discourse.

This paper will address how we should begin to plan for the future of a New Ireland, any decisions on the future of our island must be based on open and honest discussions.

In order to achieve this New Ireland, I will argue that we must first focus on creating a shared island by building relationships across communities and by truly maximising the institutions provided for by the Good Friday Agreement.

A United Ireland worth having cannot be achieved without delivering on these aims but equally, these should be the shared aims of all political leaders on this island regardless of their opinion on the future of the island.

When it comes to a possible border poll, the lessons of the Brexit Referendum must be remembered, voting for a concept without material definitions of what the result will lead to is a recipe for disaster.

That is why I will lay out what I believe the concrete steps to holding a border poll should involve in line with the consent principle of the Good Friday Agreement using a Citizens' Assembly and Parliamentary Committee oversight in advance to present a clear proposition on which to vote on.

In terms of what a New Ireland should look like, discussions will need to be first held on practical matters such as the economic impact and opportunities; what the political system of this New Ireland that allows for safeguards to identity will look like; the need for a temporary devolved administration in Northern Ireland; required changes to the legal system, as well as hugely important issues such as healthcare, education, social welfare, policing, infrastructure and European Union (EU) membership.

Symbols are emotive and easy to visualise and while their importance should not be overlooked, anyone thinking that a new flag or anthem will somehow resolve all issues is mistaken. They must be the final piece of the discussion with the heavy, practical and life impacting lifting done first.

While I never expect any Unionist to vote for a United Ireland, I fundamentally believe that a New Ireland must be a place where Unionists do not feel compelled to leave. We must address and work towards understanding the fears held by many who are wary of a United Ireland; to demonstrate a willingness to show they are truly welcome.

For those of us who desire a United Ireland, an old sporting adage should be borne in mind: "the only place success comes before work, is in the dictionary". Achieving a United Ireland worth having will require mass amounts of work, patience, compromise and imagination.

It can be achieved.

Introduction

Despite all the contemporary difficulties that we face on this island, and indeed across these islands, twenty-three years on from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement there is a clear sense of hope for a better future. We owe this to the signatories of the Good Friday Agreement.

We should be hopeful and optimistic for our shared future even if we do not necessarily agree on what constitutional form that future should take.

At the time of writing this paper, it is not lost on me that we are just two weeks shy of the centenary of the formation of Northern Ireland. As such, it would be remiss not to acknowledge how the past one hundred years have shaped our island. During this time, we have seen violence plague our island, divisions deepen but crucially, peace and hope for a better future is now the dominant wish on both sides of the border, though visions of this future crucially differ.

In this paper, I will address how I believe we should begin to plan for a New Ireland, both in terms of the challenges we are faced with in the immediate future and the tasks we must undertake to build trust and relationships on the island. If only one point is taken away from this discussion, I hope it will be the importance of fostering open and honest dialogues regarding Ireland's future and utilising the Good Friday Agreement to its fullest potential.

Without discussions and listening to the hopes and fears of all on this island, we will never make progress. While these conversations may be at times uncomfortable, they are crucial in ensuring that everyone on this island can share their opinion on its future in a respectful manner. If we are only speaking with those who agree with us, we will never make progress.

While peace in Northern Ireland was a hard-won achievement, when we discuss the future of our island, we must remember just how fragile this peace really is. Recent scenes of violence and unrest in Northern Ireland only serve to remind us of this although we should remind the world that despite this unrest, Northern Ireland has not suddenly reverted to a darker time.

We must remember that these discussions are fundamentally emotional ones for many, and we must be delicate in how we approach them.

Recognising the very clear differences that exist across this island is the key starting point of any discussion.

However, regardless if one seeks a United Ireland or for Northern Ireland to remain in the Union it is in everybody's interest for an enhanced level of engagement and cooperation across the island on all manner of issues.

Those of us who became politically active in the past twenty-three years should always bear in mind the massive personal, political and emotional sacrifices that were made by the generation who brought peace to these islands. These sacrifices were made in the face of violent and seemingly never-ending opposition.

As this is a delicate subject, we must not put the work of our predecessors at risk by moving too quickly towards a United Ireland without laying the necessary groundwork through building trust and relationships on the island. However, we also must not shy from our passions and opinions needlessly. Desiring a United Ireland is consistent with the sacrifices made by those who have gone before us, speaking about a United Ireland is consistent and campaigning for a United Ireland is also consistent.

That consistency can only be maintained by working for that goal in a considered and respectful manner. We cannot shy away from the discussion, nor should we, but we should not use the discussion to antagonise.

It is understandable that many Unionists will feel under threat from any such discussion. Unionists are defined by wanting to remain as part of the UK - this is a recognisable fact and all efforts should be made to acknowledge their legitimate aspirations. But those aspirations should not put a limit on the contrasting aspirations of others as long as all actors agree to respectful disagreement. We owe it to society to show that we can disagree without being disagreeable, the same will be true for the varying opinion of how a United Ireland should be achieved and what it should look like.

PRESENT CHALLENGES

We cannot discuss Northern Ireland or its future without acknowledging that Brexit has significantly shifted the conversations on both sides of the border from a range of angles.

When the UK's potential exit from the EU was first mooted, the threats to the delicate balances that exist in Northern Ireland were raised by many groups in Northern Ireland as well as the Irish government. Northern Ireland leaving the EU opened the door to a potential hard border on this island, threatening the Good Friday Agreement and peace as we know it.

After years of negotiation and countless suggestions rejected, the Northern Ireland Protocol of the Withdrawal Agreement was adopted as the way forward to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. Mere months after the protocol was endorsed by both British and European leaders, it has now been politicised and used by certain fringe groups in Northern Ireland to stoke up past resentments. These actions played a part in the frightful return of riots, violence and threats in Northern Ireland. Though these riots do not indicate a return of the Troubles, any violence is unacceptable and the involvement of predominantly young people, the supposed 'peace generation', is particularly worrying.

Tensions are undoubtedly on the rise in Northern Ireland; Brexit and Covid-19 have re-opened the conversation about the future of Northern Ireland, the future of our island and how we can grow closer and work together. Although we should not apologise for a desire to achieve a United Ireland, we must recognise that this strikes a note of fear in certain groups. This must be borne in mind when we have these discussions because at the end of the day, words matter, and they can have a profound impact. For those of us who want a United Ireland, it is easy to forget that there are many in Northern Ireland who are appalled and terrified at the prospect. Fear that goes unchecked breeds anger and there is a delicate balance that we must strike in these discussions.

When we discuss the future of our island, we are holding in our hands the future of all its residents, Irish, British, Northern Irish, a mixture or other. Everyone comes to these discussions with their unique perspective and background. All groups in Ireland deserve a seat at the table for these discussions; indeed, this is the only way we will find progress.

Convincing all groups to take that seat at the table is a different matter. There is an obvious suspicion in Unionism that any efforts led by the Irish Government are a cover to start the discussion on moving towards a United Ireland. This is not automatically the case, the lack of political Unionism at the All Island civic dialogues held following the Brexit Referendum was the first in a series of missed opportunities to fully discuss the challenges that were looming.

Even if for some of us the aim is to achieve a United Ireland, many of the measures that need to be taken to improve life for all on this island now should be taken regardless; they do not have to have a definite final destination.

SHARED ISLAND

Many people in Northern Ireland have, not unfairly, felt that their issues have been ignored since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and that too many in Ireland have disengaged from their issues. This is a fair sentiment, and as mentioned above, it is fair to say that events of recent years have pushed discussions regarding Northern Ireland back into the political discourse in Ireland, when such discussions never stopped in many communities north of the border.

When the current Government was formed, the Shared Island Unit was established in the Department of the Taoiseach by Micheál Martin. Included in this is the Shared Island Dialogue, which seeks to foster constructive and inclusive discussions on the future of our island, and the Shared Island Fund, which was allocated €500 million out to 2025 in Budget 2021 towards cross-border cooperation and infrastructure projects.

The importance and potential of the Shared Island Unit cannot be understated. Conversations are now being had at the highest level of Government with the people of Ireland and Northern Ireland on the future they aspire to for the island. There is room for all in these discussions: Nationalists, Unionists and those with no affiliation. Those who were previously left out of discussions regarding the island, such as women, young people and ethnic minorities are of crucial importance to these discussions. Such conversations are never going to be easy, or indeed comfortable, but they are the best way to move forward in building an inclusive island, and one that is built on mutual respect such as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement.

The Shared Island Fund ensures that commitments made in bringing our island closer together are acted on; actions to back up words. €50 million of the €500 million budget is allocated for 2021 alone and will seek to deepen the all-island economy, crucial transport links such as the A5, the Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway and deepen links in health cooperation North-South.

It is through work like this that we will truly discover the future of our island; not through the weaponising of political deals such as the Northern Ireland Protocol or through calls for an immediate border poll. These are merely distractions from the work and hours of cooperation that must be prioritised in order to bring our island into its next chapter.

The enthusiasm and the commitment towards building a Shared Island is there from this current Irish Government but it is not necessarily a widespread commitment. Certain political leaders feel this does not go far enough but rather a Citizens' Assembly should be established now and a date for a border poll set in order to progress the conversation or to supposedly focus minds.

While these are valid aspirations, I maintain a legitimate concern that entering these steps prematurely will merely seek to stoke tensions needlessly. In order to achieve a United Ireland, we must truly build or at least seek to build a Shared Island. Even if we do not achieve in delivering a United Ireland, such efforts are the correct path to take in order to break down the evident barriers that still exist, not just within Northern Ireland but clearly between Ireland and Northern Ireland. These are not necessarily barriers of politics but barriers of understanding.

Many Unionists have also dismissed engaging with the Shared Island Unit either outright or instead seeking a 'Shared Islands' dimension. Unionists should not fear discussing a Shared Island, many of them have referred to the need to develop understanding between communities or stridently declared that many in the South simply do not understand Unionism, as one Democratic Unionist Party Member of Parliament recently declared on RTÉ, "you just don't get it". How can we attempt to understand Unionists and their concerns if many Unionists in turn refuse to engage?

There should also be no contradiction in developing the notion of a Shared island while still maintaining an engagement and loyalty to the United Kingdom (UK). It simply makes social, economic and crucially geographic sense to use every tool possible to develop shared strategies that can benefit all. The lack of a fully coordinated approach to tackling the Covid-19 pandemic in this island has exposed the weaknesses of the current levels of engagement.

There are others who voice a concern that the Shared Island Unit will not do enough to tackle the social and economic deprivation that often breeds political tension, political tensions that can then be harnessed by paramilitaries and turned into violence.

The Shared Island Unit has begun its work in a steady and assured manner, but it must be recognised that it has been in existence for less than a year. A year in which in-person discussions have not been possible and one with serious public health concerns drawing much political focus.

If the Unit is to achieve its goals, it must receive continued focus, funding and support, as well as being challenged to do more even, if at times it finds itself encountering obstacles.

To be successful, the Shared Island Unit must be seen to be a tool towards the genuine betterment of society, to play a part in lifting people out of entrenched mindsets and deprived circumstances. Such goals may seem difficult to achieve but every effort to progress towards them will help all those involved.

Any genuine discussion about improving the livelihoods and relationships on this small island must start here. It simply cannot be skipped or rushed; it must be given a fair chance to make an impact.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

It is clear from the Good Friday Agreement that just as mutual trust and acting in good faith is the key to preserving peace on our island, it also provides the basis for its future. Institutions such as the Shared Island Unit are the key to fostering these relationships as it holds in equal importance listening to the fears of some groups as well as the hopes and goals of others. 50% plus one approval in a border poll may be enough to bring about a United Ireland but if we do not build on trust and relationships, it may well lead to an island more divided than ever. Rendering down any debate to a sectarian headcount or focussing on 'them'uns and us'uns' would be a failure and affront to those who made so many sacrifices to bring this island out of a very dark period.

There can be a tendency for discussions surrounding the future of our island or a United Ireland to be focused on Nationalists and those who are inclined to agree with this view of our future. While understandable, if we only involve those who agree with us in these discussions, we will never make progress. Many people, on both sides of the border, have real hesitations and fears about this path, and their fears are completely valid and must be listened to. This is the only way to build trust and without trust, we have no tenable future.

According to the 2011 Census, 40% of residents of Northern Ireland consider themselves to be British only, 25% are Irish only and 21% are Northern Irish only. While these figures will have shifted over the past decade, it is crucial that we take them into consideration when discussing our future.

The shifting demographics in the South must also be recognised in discussions, this includes 300,000 British passport holders and many more who make up what is often referred to as the New Irish community.

Just as those from Northern Ireland have every right to avail of British or Irish citizenship, or both, this right must absolutely be extended into a United Ireland. Under no circumstances will the British in Northern Ireland be stripped of their identity or lose their right to British citizenship, or their equal rights within a United Ireland, nor will their children and descendants if this is their choice. However, if history has taught us anything it is that there is a clear difference between affording rights to a person or group and them feeling the benefit of said rights. It is up to those of us who aspire for a United Ireland to ensure that we will welcome all those into any New Ireland, regardless of their beliefs or views.

Unionism has a long history in Ireland, on both sides of the border, we must accept that Unionism will not disappear just because Ireland is United and those with these beliefs should be given every opportunity to hold and voice them. Northern Ireland's First Minister, Arlene Foster, has said that she feels she would have to emigrate if a United Ireland were to come to pass. While I never expect any Unionist to vote for a United Ireland, I fundamentally believe that a United Ireland must be a place where Unionists do not feel compelled to leave. It needs to be respectful, warm and demonstrate genuine equality of opportunity.

Division has done untold damage to Ireland and Northern Ireland and we know better now than to presume that these divisions will heal on their own accord. When left unchecked, division breeds mistrust which breeds hatred. We must learn from the mistakes of the past and try to address these divisions to allow wounds of mistrust to heal.

If we have learned anything from the peace process in Northern Ireland it is that peace cannot be imposed on a nation or its people – it is a true process that must be wanted, with those seeking peace involved in every decision regarding the future of their nation. The future of Ireland is no different. Though we cannot expect to assuage or solve every concern that Unionists feel when they are met with the idea of a United Ireland, we can give them a platform to voice their concerns, and we can listen and understand their perspective. We can also disagree with this perspective if needs be and should not be afraid to do so.

GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Good Friday Agreement is the greatest political achievement in the history of this island. It brought peace to Northern Ireland; it acknowledges that there are differences in political opinions and aspirations but affirms our commitment to strive towards, “partnership, equality and mutual respect” as the basis of relationships on the island. The Good Friday Agreement must be the cornerstone of a New Ireland, guiding us at every step.

Rather than simply using the Good Friday Agreement as a talking point, we must use it in its entirety, including the institutions it affords us. These institutions must work properly, formally and regularly. The challenges posed by Brexit go far beyond the operation of the Northern Ireland Protocol but the best way to address all these challenges is through the institutions already well established. These institutions provide vital formats not just for discussions on a North-South basis but crucially also on an East-West basis.

The North South Ministerial Council brings together the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government by encouraging cooperation on matters of mutual interest such as health, education, agriculture and social welfare. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted just how intertwined our island is and the importance of North-South cooperation on these issues. The Good Friday Agreement aims for the full Council to meet twice a year, but only four meetings have been held since 2016. A formal and expanded calendar of meetings for this Council should be established. There are so many issues and problems that impact people across this island, issues that do not recognise any borders. The Council provides an ideal forum where the Irish Government can discuss the workings of the Northern Irish Protocol with a view to encouraging the European Commission to allow for certain flexibilities.

The British Irish Council aims to strengthen ties between Ireland, Northern Ireland, the UK Government as well as the Welsh and the Scottish devolved administrations. These semi-annual meetings provide important links between the nations and allow for established meetings to discuss crucial areas. Critics of the Council will regularly point to the lack of serious engagement from the UK Government. While the Taoiseach will always attend, the British Prime Minister rarely attends. If the importance of the neighbourhood relationship is to be maintained, then this is an obvious area where a simple change can deliver this. Once again, an expanded calendar should be agreed upon with agreed themes that are topical and impactful for everyday life.

The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which promotes cooperation in all levels of mutual interest, is arguably now more important than ever as it has the potential to replace the close relationships Irish and British Ministers established through European Council meetings. Though it is hugely valuable, the Conference has not met since November 2018 despite many calls for it to meet in recent times. There is a scope to provide a regular sectoral dimension to the Conference that demonstrates how even though the UK has left the EU, Ireland is able to maintain the closest of working relationships. Agreeing a calendar of meetings that correspond to the scheduled calendar of the Councils of the EU would allow for an unrivalled amount of cooperation. This cooperation could ultimately provide for much more coordinated thinking and response when addressing the shared difficulties that emerge on this island.

Beyond the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement that focus on Government, there is also huge scope to expand relationships on a Parliamentary level. The British Irish Parliamentary Assembly brings together Parliamentarians from across the UK and Ireland. It is one of the great, untapped, resources in building trust and relationships between elected representatives. The agreed work plans of the various Committees of the Assembly should be acknowledged by all Governments and Administrations with recommendations, where feasible, acted upon and not just noted. Going forward, hosting wider meetings of the Assembly with all parliamentarians from across the islands should be considered, rather than the usual, proportional delegations. A grand event of this sort could play an important role in a grand reset of Anglo-Irish relations.

On the same basis, the North-South Inter-Parliamentary Association also provides a key format for regular engagement between parliamentarians from Northern Ireland and Ireland. These meetings tend to be held in a very cordial atmosphere, one that is rarely translated onto the Chamber floor or television studios. If we aspire towards more civil discourse within our communities, political leaders must show leadership and show first-hand that it is possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

If we want to utilise the Good Friday Agreement to the best of our abilities and foster links both on this island and with our closest neighbour, we must actively engage in these institutions, not view their meetings as box checking activities. When push comes to shove, institutions are only as useful as our willingness to engage in them. We cannot, and must not, take the Good Friday Agreement for granted but must avail of every opportunity it provides, both for the sake of the future of our island but also for our present.

There are also opportunities to build North-South relations through the Joint Committees of the Oireachtas and their counterparts in the Northern Ireland Executive to seek to hold quarterly meetings that are of sectoral interest. Most issues encountered by citizens in one part of the island will be replicated elsewhere and so by pooling experience and expertise we may move closer to solutions than we would be working alone.

In order to achieve a United Ireland, it is vital that these institutions are given the opportunity and energy to fulfil the potential allowed for them in the Good Friday Agreement. Importantly, even if a United Ireland is not achieved, maximising the potential of these institutions will provide a return for all citizens of this island.

What will the New Ireland look like ?

It is easy to call for a border poll as soon as possible to agree for Northern Ireland's departure from the UK and assimilation into the existing Irish State. Such an approach may sound feasible, but it is unambitious and doomed to fail. A United Ireland that is no different to the Ireland of today is simply not good enough if we want to achieve a peaceful, prosperous island where all are welcome.

When the time comes for the discussion of what a New Ireland should look like, we need to be imaginative and generous in the formation of a newer, better, version of what we have now on either side of the border.

THE ECONOMY

Many discussions on a New Ireland focus on the obvious and emotive issues of symbols. While they are deeply important to many and warrant serious discussion, a far more important starting point must be the economic dimension. How will a United Ireland be funded?

Currently the UK Government provides a subvention to Northern Ireland of approximately £10 billion or £5,000 per person per year. Whether the UK continue to provide a phased reduction of the subvention to Northern Ireland or the Irish Government provide this funding will need to be determined. If we are to accept that a United Ireland will require a serious financial undertaking by the Irish taxpayer then we must convince them that the return on this investment will be worth it.

Many discussions on a New Ireland focus on the obvious and emotive issues of symbols. While they are deeply important to many and warrant serious discussion, a far more important starting point must be the economic dimension. How will a United Ireland be funded?

Currently the UK Government provides a subvention to Northern Ireland of approximately £10 billion or £5,000 per person per year. Whether the UK continue to provide a phased reduction of the subvention to Northern Ireland or the Irish Government provide this funding will need to be determined. If we are to accept that a United Ireland will require a serious financial undertaking by the Irish taxpayer then we must convince them that the return on this investment will be worth it.

There is a generalised assumption that the vast majority of those living in the South would happily vote for a United Ireland; emotionally and romantically it has widespread approval but the practicalities of any such move will require far more rigorous thinking than has been offered before. A United Ireland would certainly be initially costly to the Irish Government and people, but this should not be interpreted that there would be no economic benefits to a United Ireland.

The fates of an economy can drastically change over time. It is easy to forget that when Northern Ireland was created, the six Northern counties were the economic driving force of the island, with most of the island's manufacturing works taking place there, compared to the largely agriculture-driven economy of Ireland. In the 1950s approximately 400,000 people of a population of less than three million emigrated from Ireland due to poor economic prospects. In the century since partition the tide has changed dramatically, with EU membership and a new global outlook transforming the Irish economy, while in Northern Ireland the economy has contracted, reliant on subvention from London. It should not be discounted that Northern Ireland's economy can once again see growth. The Northern Ireland protocol allows Northern Irish businesses full access to both the UK internal market and the EU Single Market, a gift which has the potential to transform the Northern economy; attracting businesses who wish to operate in both markets, leading to job growth and economic growth. It is not quite the best of both worlds that some have declared but there are undoubtedly marked opportunities there for the Northern Irish economy.

The two economies on the island are today pulling closer together than ever in the past decade, and this shows no signs of abating.

The recently launched Dublin-Belfast economic corridor is an example of this and reinforces how intertwined our economies are. Through the Shared Island Fund we will continue to see increase cooperation on the island, making it easier for businesses to operate on an all-island basis, for patients in the West and North-West of Ireland to receive healthcare in Northern Ireland and vice versa and promoting all-island trading links. Alongside the Northern Ireland protocol, this renewed focus on intra-island links has the potential to transform our island, and the context through which we discuss the economic benefits and costs of a United Ireland may change over time as a result.

One of the lingering concerns for many in the most Brexit era was the area of entitlement to pensions and social welfare payments. Any New Ireland will need to ensure that agreeable rates of payments are introduced but that the pension entitlements and contributions from the previous order are recognised and integrated.

The costs of these will need to be considered but the template established by Brexit should allow for a seamless balance of payments that will ensure acceptable levels of continuity.

Taxation and spending rates will be addressed by the Government of any United Ireland, but it must be pre-agreed what national and local taxes will need to be levied. There are already levels of consistency when it comes to income tax, social insurance, motor tax, value-added tax and much else. but where there are discrepancies between the two jurisdictions this will need to be discussed and either amalgamated or abolished in a New Ireland.

It cannot be denied that harnessing the full economic potential of the island is in everyone's interest. The current constitutional position is limiting this, we are a small island in the Atlantic with a combined population of just seven million. When we market the entire island for tourism, sporting, higher education or investment potential this will not only be cost-efficient but will maximise opportunities and efficiencies for all.

For those seeking to sell the prospect of a United Ireland in the South, the notion that Northern Ireland would somehow automatically be an economic burden must be dispelled and countered with ambitious plans for a maximised economic growth plan of a truly United Ireland.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

It cannot be doubted that EU membership has transformed Ireland in every regard; we have moved from a country where women could not work in the public service after marriage with a protectionist economy and a large reliance on agriculture to one of the fastest growing economies in the EU. From 1973 to 2018 Ireland received over €40 billion from the EU and we are now a net contributor as a result of said economic growth. We are a clear EU success story and our commitment will not wane, regardless of the future of our island.

The fact that Brexit has contributed to the resurgence of the subject of Irish unity is especially relevant as when and if Ireland is united, its future will lie squarely within the EU. Bearing in mind the example of German reunification, as Taoiseach, Enda Kenny won the agreement of EU Member States that a United Ireland would automatically join the EU following a successful border poll.

A New Ireland as a fully-fledged Member of the EU and the Eurozone must be a clearly stated aim and indeed would also be a major attraction for the many people in Northern Ireland who voted against Brexit.

The EU has been a close ally of Ireland and Northern Ireland's and this shows no signs of changing. Prior to Brexit, the support the EU gave to Northern Ireland was crucial in both the lead up to the peace-process and the funding of institutions and services that allowed the process to take shape.

Though Northern Ireland has received peace funding from the EU since 1989, between 1995-2013 alone €1.3 billion was received through three PEACE programmes.

As has been established, a New Ireland should be an Independent Republic within the EU. However, any New Ireland must also be recognised by the United Nations and enhance its diplomatic footprint across the globe. While a New Ireland will seek to remain militarily neutral, consideration should be given to the feasibility of such a policy going forward, given the need to underline our commitment to the shared security of the EU as well as reimagining the existing Memorandum of Understanding between the Irish and British Governments when it comes to Defence matters.

Applying to join the Commonwealth of Nations would be a relatively simple way of ensuring a continuation of relations between British citizens in Northern Ireland and their previous connections.

Accession to the Commonwealth alone would certainly not convince Unionists to vote for a United Ireland, but nevertheless it has many merits. Such a move could be made in advance of a potential border poll as a gesture of goodwill as well as strategic acknowledgement of the potential benefits to Ireland in terms of diplomatic, trading and sporting opportunities as well as in the interests of reconciliation.

There would need to be an intense policy of education on what the Commonwealth is and does as the levels of ignorance and its perception as a continuing vassal of the British Empire is still prevalent.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 was an important steppingstone on the path towards the Good Friday Agreement and the position we find ourselves in today, crucially it also gave the Irish Government an advisory role in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

This is something that any New Ireland should draw on to frame the relationship between the State and the UK.

The existing East-West institutions of the Good Friday Agreement must continue to operate with a renewed focus and formalisation. The Anglo – Irish relationship going forward must not just be one of sovereign equals with a deep and complicated history but a relationship where the British citizens of a New Ireland can be assured of continuing ties with the British Government and monarchy.

As a matter of courtesy and practice, the Irish Government should continue to advise the British Government of any matters of relevance that may impact what was Northern Ireland and crucially the rights and identity of British citizens within the State.

Reassuring the British and Irish Government's commitments to the rights enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement as well as the terms of the Common Travel Area should be established through a continuing Memorandum of Understanding.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

While the economic future of the island is hugely important to the discussions on a United Ireland, what our island will look like goes further than this.

Starting at the top, the New Ireland will be a Republic with a directly elected President as Head of State continuing with the same role as is currently enjoyed in the Republic. A New Ireland could ensure that the President appoints a Council of State with reserved places for members from what was Northern Ireland and the remaining Unionist community.

Our current political system has all Irish citizens represented in Dublin in bicameral legislature. Drawing on the aspirations of the early Seanad where attempts were made to ensure that Southern Unionist voices could continue to be heard, there is a need to address concerns from some in Northern Ireland regarding their representation in a New Ireland. Many have suggested that a New Ireland be a federal one, but perhaps there should be an agreement for a devolved administration for what would have been Northern Ireland to continue to be based in Belfast parallel to an All-Ireland Dáil for an initial agreed period of a decade to ensure that the transition to the new state is done so cognisant of the desire to achieve as great a buy in as possible from all communities.

Within any New Ireland parliament, it is important that several time safeguards are adopted to ensure as high a level of integration as possible. For the sake of this paper, when referring to parliament I envisage a continuation of a bicameral legislature with similar legislative function as is currently enjoyed by the Dáil and the Seanad or indeed the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

A lower house made up of multi seat, geographic, constituencies should be elected by proportional representation, single transferable vote. This lower house should in turn elect a speaker and a deputy speaker but for the first decade of its existence ensure that at least one of these positions is always held by a member from what would have been Northern Ireland.

The same practice should also be applied when elected Chairpersons and Vice Chairpersons of Parliamentary Committees for the first decade too. A standing Committee on integration and implementation should also be established, the work and the discussions of a United Ireland would necessarily end with a Referendum.

There is much scope for imagination and safeguards when it comes to the possibility of an upper house. Although I served for four happy years as a member of Seanad Éireann, I did vote to abolish it when given the opportunity. This was largely based on a frustration with continuous failed attempts to reform the Seanad.

A new upper house could be elected directly by the people using a national list, holding the elections to both houses on one day but such an upper house could then be supplemented by a pre-determined number of appointments by the Government of the day. In addition, there should be reserved seats in the upper house for the Irish diaspora across the world as is commonplace in many EU Member States.

Again, this upper house should elect a speaker and a deputy speaker but for the first decade of its existence ensure that at least one of these positions is always held by a member from what would have been Northern Ireland.

When it comes to the functions of Local Government, this is often a matter overlooked in the discussion about a New Ireland but it must be clearly stated that there will be an equivalence of function of all Local Authorities across the island with an agreed funding network to allow a continuation of projects and infrastructure works. The prospect of directly elected Mayors for all cities should also be considered.

LEGAL SYSTEM

Although Northern Ireland and Ireland are both common law jurisdictions and covered by the European Court of Human Rights, a new constitution and legal framework will need to be established in a New Ireland. This must be decided upon in conjunction with legal experts from both sides of the island, bearing in mind the existing legislative and penal requirements in existence. An assimilation of existing judicial and legal systems should not be impossible in a relatively short period of time, but it must be allowed for in advance of any possible border poll.

Policing has been a contentious issue across this island since the first police forces were established by Sir Robert Peel. Despite some grievances, the Police Service Northern Ireland has been the model for the creation of a refreshed police force reflective of a more diverse society. The appointment of Drew Harris as Garda Commissioner in 2018 was a seismic moment that illustrates the common purpose of the two police forces that exist on this island.

A New Ireland should be able to combine the strengths of both the Police Service Northern Ireland and An Garda Síochána in one new police force, albeit one with a strong regional and sectoral dimension. This should be an unarmed force whose mission is rooted in the principles of community policing. Such a force should ensure that there is an even distribution of leadership roles with an agreed Commissioner from the outset. All pre-existing ranks and years of service should be assimilated into the new arrangement.

In addition, an expanded Defence Forces will need to be constructed that provides for the needs of the entire island by land, air and sea as well as continuing commitments to United Nations peacekeeping missions. All service personnel from Ireland and Northern Ireland serving in the British armed forces should be accommodated in an expanded Defence Forces at the same rank and with the same conditions of service maintained if they so choose. There is form for such accommodation as was seen previously when the Defence Forces explicitly recruited Irish servicemen from the British forces during the twentieth century.

EDUCATION

Developing a New Ireland provides the opportunity to reassess and restructure the educational needs of the population across the island. A new, balanced, curriculum for primary and secondary education which draws on the strongest points of both existing systems should be designed with relevant state examination structures established. Decisions will have to be made regarding choices between continuing with the Junior and Leaving Certificate exams versus the General Certificate of Secondary Education and A-Level exams currently in situ in Northern Ireland, as well as the grammar and high school system in Northern Ireland. Does the International Baccalaureate have a role to play? This is once again where discussions with educational experts as well as members of both communities will come to the fore. Whatever examination system is chosen will likely be eased into practice to ensure that no student's examination results are put in jeopardy by a change in the administration.

While the teaching and learning of Irish will remain a key focus, there needs to be realism about the role of compulsory Irish in any New Ireland. How can we demand students from a Unionist background be required to study Irish when there is such difficulty in getting bilingual street signs as is?

Irish should remain a core subject in the educational curriculum of any New Ireland but the option to not study the language must be given. However, to ensure the protection and the development of the language, greater resources should be made available to grow attendance at residential Irish language colleges in Gaeltacht regions as well as for lifelong learning initiatives for the language.

The issues of admissions and patronage continue are ongoing on both sides of the border, this is unlikely to change but greater integration at all levels of education is in everybody's interests.

An appropriate and broader scheme of access to Further and Higher Education would provide an enhanced opportunity to better serve the requirements of society and aspirations of our younger generations. In advance of this, greater coordination and cross assimilation must be fostered North and South when it comes to maximising existing opportunities.

A dedicated strategy for Higher Education cooperation should be an immediate priority regardless of any future constitutional discussions. For example, a regional strategy for the North West when it comes to Higher Education really should include the University of Ulster campuses at Magee and Coleraine.

North – South cooperation in increasing the number of students, particularly women, studying STEM subjects is greatly needed as is the cooperation of Higher Education Institutions in order to maximise the all island potential of continued access to both the Erasmus Plus and Horizon programmes.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Improving public transport infrastructure is a key aim of the fledgling Shared Island Unit with dedicated funding ring fenced for projects such as the A5, the Ulster Canal connection from Clones to Upper Lough Erne, the Narrow Water Bridge, and cross-border greenways, in particular the Sligo-Enniskillen greenway.

Beyond this, a high speed train between Belfast and Dublin has been a long standing campaign for many business and civic groups while the dearth of a rail service to the North West of the island either from Dublin or indeed Belfast is a glaring hole on the interconnected map of our island.

A coordinated North-South approach to the roll out of Electric Vehicle charging points today would be a vital step to future proof future motoring needs let alone those in a United Ireland.

A New Ireland must ensure all local, regional and national transport providers are assimilated and truly interconnected with clear funding lines.

Developing such key connections are in everybody's interest and can be flagship projects of a New Ireland as well as the highest possible spec communications services rooted in high speed broadband.

Much of this work has already been done but the effort required should not be underestimated. Mobile phone operators that currently operate under license in two jurisdictions will have to adopt their model, while An Post and Royal Mail in Northern Ireland will need to merge into one entity with an agreed network.

Public service broadcasting will also have to be reimagined in any New Ireland. The BBC has a proud history in Northern Ireland but how can this service and the service of other existing Northern Irish television and radio stations be maintained in a New Ireland? A singular public service broadcaster for the whole of the island should be an aspiration but a greater integration of services between RTÉ and BBC Northern Ireland should be a starting point. Cooperation is already ongoing and provides for a degree of a starting point, but this will need serious examination to ensure balanced regional and cultural programming.

There are many more areas that require attention, many of which will require timely and agreeable terms of merger. These areas will include sport but also the arts, our parklands and wildlife services, disability services, youth organisations, childcare models and beyond. These will also need to be agreed in advance of any border poll or at least acknowledged as areas that need a focussed approach of integration although many currently work successfully on an all-island basis.

HEALTHCARE

An area of much contested division on the island now is the health service. Many people in Northern Ireland rightly hold a deep affinity to their National Health Service; such affinity transcends any political or national identity. A New Ireland will need a new health system that draws on the strong points of both jurisdictions and ensures a level of care that is not diminished but enhanced from the status quo anywhere on the island.

There is a certain cross-border element to healthcare on our island as of now. As it stands, cancer patients in the North-West of Ireland can receive their radiation treatment in Altnagelvin's cross border cancer centre, receiving treatment much closer to home than if they had to travel to hospitals in Dublin or Galway. In fact, cross-border healthcare reached an all-time high in 2018 with over 3,500 patients availing of cross-border healthcare. The benefits of a unified healthcare system on our island could lead to lower waiting lists and increased options for patients all over Ireland.

In any possible campaign, the National Health Service and the initial Covid-19 vaccine roll out will be held up as reasons to oppose a United Ireland by many. This will have resonance and as such requires huge preparatory work. But such work should not ignore the potential for improvement that a unified health system would allow for; a service that draws on the efficiencies and strengths of both systems that can pool resources, talent and funding to provide a better level of care.

SYMBOLS

For many people on both sides of the border, wounds of the past are still very fresh. While it is easy to think of the Troubles and Peace Process as a thing of the past, twenty-three years is a very short period and divisions in Northern Ireland are still a way of life for many. Education and Housing are still hugely segregated, with the use of symbols such as flags, murals and the painting of pavements still relevant in certain areas.

We have all heard the John Hume quote, "you can't eat a flag" which still bears true today. Though symbols are still hugely important in Northern Ireland, they do not improve anyone's daily life or their economic outcomes. For many, it comes down to a fear of losing their identity, but as mentioned, we must ensure that enough trust is established between communities to at best eradicate these fears or address them at worst.

The fact of the matter is that when and if a United Ireland is achieved, Northern Ireland will not simply assimilate into Ireland as we know it. Many issues are up for discussion, from our flag, our national anthem, our parliament and the titles used therein as well as the primacy or equality of our national languages. No discussion can be off the table as no aspect of the future of the island can go unaddressed.

It would be naive to assume, however, that simply by changing the titles of our politicians or making the learning of Irish optional in schools that Unionists will automatically feel welcome in a United Ireland.

These discussions and the process of building relationships, building our all island economy and building a truly Shared Island will and should take time if done correctly. Anyone who has paid attention to Northern Irish politics over previous decades can see that the peace process is a constant evolution. If we call for too much movement too quickly, we may end up with more signs of unrest and violence such as has been seen in Northern Ireland over previous weeks.

Symbols are emotive and easy to visualise and while their importance should not be overlooked, anyone thinking that a new flag or anthem will somehow resolve all issues is mistaken. They must be the final piece of the discussion with the heavy, practical and life impacting lifting must be done first.

It would be easy to simply say we should revert to the St. Patrick's Flag, adopt a new national anthem with no lyrics and change the post boxes to yellow; such ideas will grab headlines and imagination but they should be the finishing point, not the starting point of any discussion.

How will the New Ireland be achieved?

BORDER POLL

While the prospect of a border poll is now more likely than ever, it is responsible to be realistic about how this may occur and under what circumstances. To have any validity, such a poll must be fully consistent with the consent element of the Good Friday Agreement. The responsibility to adjudicate if a poll is warranted rests solely with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Quite simply, it is too premature to hope or call for a poll either in the immediate or near future.

The unrest of recent weeks shows us the sensitivities amongst Loyalist communities and the ease with which nefarious actors are prepared to ramp up tensions and play on fears of any threat to the UK.

Addressing the root issues at play here - the societal and economic problems in these communities - will be difficult and at times uncomfortable, but work that must be prioritised.

The lessons of the Brexit Referendum must be remembered, voting for a concept without a material definition of what the result will lead to is a recipe for disaster. While outlining what a successful border poll will result in is unglamorous work with technical and often mundane details, it is crucial work that must be prioritised.

The role of the Secretary of State in deciding if and when a border poll is required is widely accepted and as such, it should too be acceptable after the next Northern Irish Assembly elections for those who aspire to a United Ireland to be given a clear indication from the Secretary of what factors will underpin the decision to bring about a border poll. The Irish Government should not be unwilling to play a consultative and fair part in these considerations.

Frankly, until the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement have embedded and made an impact on the people and political systems of Ireland and Northern Ireland, this time is unlikely to arrive.

It is easy to speak of a United Ireland in terms of 'when' rather than 'if' as it is something that so many of us feel very strongly about. The fact of the matter is, however, that it is far from given that there would be a majority for the idea, on either side of the border.

Without plans through which people can have a clear image of what the future of Ireland will look like, it is very difficult for many to attach themselves to the concept.

There is genuine concern in Northern Ireland, among Unionists and Nationalists alike, on the prospect of losing the National Health Service, their education system, public pensions and other supports. Without knowledge of how these systems will operate in the future many simply cannot foresee what a United Ireland will look like.

On a more emotional level, many in Ireland have simply disconnected from Northern Ireland since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. They may not have ever visited the North, or even know anyone from the North. Images of riots, protests and marches do little to lift this unease that many people experience when they think of their Northern neighbours. The same can be said for many in Northern Ireland who may be more accustomed to visiting Liverpool or London for the weekend than Galway or Dublin. This once again reinforces why the building of relationships and trust is so crucial in the development of our future. Just as we cannot presume that a Unionist in Northern Ireland will ever support a United Ireland, we also cannot presume that many people in Ireland will support it either.

If the discussion on a United Ireland is to be sustained and taken seriously on both sides of the border, it needs to be a useful and productive one. As we build on personal and political relationships on the island, we will learn more about what our new island will look like. We must also trust and consult experts on how the island will run and operate, how it will be funded and what changes should be made to ensure all are welcome.

A United Ireland, a New Ireland, can only be built on a foundation of genuine engagement, understanding and balance.

FINAL STEPS TO A NEW IRELAND

While the decision to hold a border poll rests solely with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, there is nonetheless an opportunity to map out what processes should be undertaken if the Secretary of State deems a poll to be merited.

Once the Secretary of State makes that determination, they should work with the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs to lay down the activities to be undertaken in advance of such a poll.

The first order should be to establish an Independent Electoral Commission under an external Chairperson to oversee the process. A date in a suitable timeframe, perhaps within two years of agreeing to a border poll, must be decided with the two Referenda held on the same date in Ireland and Northern Ireland asking a simple question : "do you agree to a United Ireland?"

A Citizens' Assembly should be established from across the island composed of individuals that represent a fair example of society. This Assembly will shape what United Ireland will look like along the criteria set above. The deliberations of the Assembly should then be debated and amended by a dedicated Committee of the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly before being referred to the Executive Committee of the Northern Irish Assembly, the House of Commons Northern Irish Affairs Committee and the Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

The reports of each Committee should be once again debated by the Citizens' Assembly who will produce a vision for a United Ireland to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs to translate into a legislative form.

This should then be put to the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland by Referendum, requiring a majority in each jurisdiction.

There is clearly much more to the holding of a border poll than many would expect. This work will be very difficult, and a lot will be asked of citizens on the island. We must be prepared for emotions to run high and the importance of open and honest discussion will be more important than ever.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shared my views on how we are best placed to move towards a New Ireland. This is a hugely important subject that warrants detail, scrutiny and most importantly, discussion. The path to a border poll lies in the Good Friday Agreement. Through utilising its institutions and sentiments to the best of our abilities, we will build an island more connected than ever; emotionally, physically, economically and culturally. When this time comes, we will then be able to start discussing what our new island will look like, and the technical details therein. When and if a border poll arrives, there must be no doubt as to what a United Ireland would look like, how it would operate and how it will be governed. Knowledge is power, and we must seek to empower voters fully as to what their future could look like.

I could not begin to cover every issue related to a United Ireland, but I have laid the foundation of how I believe we are best placed to move forward.

Undoubtedly Brexit and Covid-19 have pushed these discussions to the fore of our political discourse, but the contents of these discussions have largely unchanged as our island and our people are fundamentally the same. We are a nation of people who want for peace, prosperity and reconciliation. We have more in common than we do in opposition and this must be borne in mind through these difficult and uncomfortable conversations.

Whether or not a border poll will arrive in a near or far future, our island is moving closer together and all residents, regardless of political affiliation, will reap the benefits. United or not, we are certainly moving towards a New Island that will benefit us all.

For those of us who desire a United Ireland, an old sporting adage should be borne in mind: "the only place success comes before work, is in the dictionary". Achieving a United Ireland worth having will require mass amounts of work, patience, compromise and imagination.

It can be achieved.