



UNITING IRELAND FOR ALL

**A FRAMEWORK TO PREPARE FOR CHANGE
ACROSS THE ISLAND OF IRELAND**

Labour Party Position Paper

*Adopted by Party Conference,
March 2024*

Labour 

INTRODUCTION

A generation has now grown up on our island knowing only peace, but over 30 years of bloody conflict in and about Northern Ireland caused more than 3,500 deaths and countless injuries. The Troubles left an enduring legacy of collective and personal anguish, loss and anger, and our collective work of reconciliation to embed a lasting peace continues.

The commitment of statesmen and stateswomen from throughout these islands who dedicated themselves to achieving a political resolution to that conflict, resulted in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Last year we marked its 25-year anniversary. That hard-won agreement reshaped and reimaged both relationships and political arrangements between people in Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Ireland and Britain. It was a transformative agreement that received the overwhelming support of the people of this island when they endorsed it in joint referendums.

With the Good Friday Agreement as our starting point, we want to build and support institutions that provide society with security and stability, built upon democratic assent and popular participation, but a profound question remains.

The Agreement included for the first time a democratic mechanism for achieving unity through the principle of consent. In Annex A under Constitutional Issues, it outlines that a poll may be called by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. This power shall be exercised if at any time it appears likely that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland cease to remain part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland.

At the same time Article 3 of the Irish Constitution was amended and the opening line states: 'It is the firm will of the Irish Nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions, recognising that a united Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island'. This means there would be referendums held in both jurisdictions.

The Labour Party fully endorsed the Good Friday Agreement and has consistently called for its full implementation ever since. Despite the political challenges that Northern Ireland has experienced since 1998 and notwithstanding the many pauses in the functioning of local political institutions, that wholehearted support remains.

However, moving beyond the 25th anniversary it is also important that we do not stand still. We must recognise the need to refresh and reset parts of the Good Friday Agreement, address the issues around political institutions with much needed reform, and acknowledge changing political dynamics across Ireland caused by the Brexit referendum, and the current public debate about a future poll on Irish unity.

It is on this latter point that this position paper reviews the unity debate and sets out Labour Party proposals on how we continue to support the Good Friday Agreement while simultaneously recognising the need to prepare for political change across the island of Ireland.

Crucially, our planning for a future united Ireland must be informed by another, core commitment of the Agreement that the power of either government with jurisdiction in Northern Ireland must be exercised 'with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities'.

Note: throughout this document, poll or referendum is used to refer to the mechanism for a vote on the future status of Northern Ireland, either to remain in the UK or form part of a united Ireland.



FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING A UNITY REFERENDUM

The Labour Party is proposing the following framework to advance in a structured way, planning for the future of our island and the conduct of a unity referendum. These policy proposals will inform the approach of the Labour Party if elected to government:

- » We must recognise that a unity referendum could be held on our island within the next decade, as provided for under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, and that a task of this magnitude requires careful planning.
- » Acknowledge that only the Irish State can lead on the political and administrative processes leading towards a unity referendum, so this task must be taken up by the next Irish Government to ensure adequate preparation.
- » Substantial civic dialogue must be facilitated well in advance of a poll to prepare for this, through Citizens' Assemblies or similar type models informed by recent practice, with as broad a range of voices and political actors as possible from across the island.
- » A new Department of Unification responsible for reconciliation, harmonisation, integration, and unity planning should be established under the remit of the Taoiseach during the next government term, moving towards a standalone senior Ministry in advance of a referendum.
- » A new, cross party Joint Oireachtas Committee should be established to oversee, assist, and advise on the preparatory work of the Government, and to also work on transitional and political issues.
- » The next Taoiseach should appoint a cross community group of Senators from Northern Ireland to join such a committee, with a standing invitee status also for MLAs and MPs from Northern Ireland similar to the approach taken by the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.
- » An academic advisory council should be established to provide the Irish state with the best available domestic and international research.
- » The Government should initiate a wide ranging consultative and technical process leading to a Green Paper and subsequent White Paper on all the issues.

- » A Green Paper would set out the issues whilst the White Paper would seek to draw conclusions. The Government would be empowered to commission specific pieces of research or advice.
- » Citizens' Assemblies should be held following the publication of a Green paper. Democratic consent from both the Dáil and the Assembly for these deliberative forums would be preferable but should not be limiting.
- » Consultative forums should also be used on a case-by-case basis to examine options contained in the Green Paper to determine a preferred approach and address sectoral and thematic issues.
- » Consultation would include individual citizens, the economic and social community including social partners, and international friends of Ireland. Detailed consideration must be given to the treatment of cultural issues.
- » Significant planning in advance of any poll will be needed in conjunction with the European Union on proposals for reintegrating Northern Ireland.
- » The government should liaise closely with our friends in the United States and the broader diaspora during the planning and consultative process.
- » A mechanism for engaging with the government of the United Kingdom on planning issues that arise from a unity referendum will need to be formalised, preferably through the established British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.
- » A significant portion of the new Future Ireland Fund should be put aside to support the process and implementation of unification. The fund is estimated to reach around €100bn by 2035.

BREXIT AND A UNITY REFERENDUM

In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, the Labour Party highlighted that the result had potential implications for how we viewed the Irish constitutional question. Northern Ireland has been formally taken out of the European Union despite voting to retain its membership. European integration and the success of the wider European project over 50 years did serve as an inspiration for many of the Good Friday Agreement's key architects, and, at the time, the UK's departure from the EU was not the live prospect it subsequently became.

The ensuing difficulties, involving the reconciliation of the needs of the European single market and the Brexit vote, have therefore been extremely disruptive not only in Britain, but also Northern Ireland.

In this context, the related vacuum caused by the recent lack of political institutions in Northern Ireland has given impetus to discussing other existing constitutional arrangements consistent with the provisions in the Good Friday Agreement on a poll, given that a united Ireland would facilitate re-entry of Northern Ireland into the European Union.

It is also important to note that alongside Brexit while there has been no appreciable rise in the nationalist vote since the Good Friday Agreement, there has been a reduction in the share of the vote afforded to explicitly Unionist parties in Assembly elections and an increase in support for non-aligned parties.

Academic analysis of the most recent local elections in 2023 shows that for the first time that first preference voters for pro-unity parties and candidates (44%) exceeded that received by those in support of the union (40%) while others received 16%.

The Alliance Party does not take a position on the constitutional question and has seen its support grow in recent years. A survey of members in March 2024 on how they would vote in a unity referendum showed 38% would support unity, compared to 27% against and 30% who do not know. This shows how even the unaligned middle ground is shifting. A series of authoritative polls have also reported that outright opposition to a united Ireland within unionism is softening over time.

This has, not without reasons, in addition to demographic developments, led campaigners to believe that a poll might be won within a reasonable timetable. Admittedly the polling on this option, albeit mixed, suggests there is some way to go to reach a tipping point whereby the British Secretary of State could initiate the Border Poll under the Agreement. However, the conversation is being had, and not just among those in outright support.

RESPONDING TO THIS CONTEXT

Given these changes, it is right that the Labour Party engages proactively with the constitutional questions that have emerged from Brexit and the debate about the future status of Northern Ireland. We must begin to consider the key issues that arise and how best to manage them.

The attitude of the Irish government to date has been that time is neither right for a referendum or for active preparations for one. The de facto view seems to be that the restoration of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, alongside the slow painstaking work of the Shared Ireland initiative are where the focus should lie. Reform of the Stormont Assembly and power sharing executive as we have called for, to avoid future prolonged suspensions, is now also needed.

The Labour Party broadly supports this work, but also recognises that given changing political dynamics and popular debate there is an opportunity and necessity to take matters a step further by institutionalising the discussion on a future referendum and related issues. This is aligned to the public view in both Northern Ireland and Ireland as indicated in the most recent ARINS/Irish Times polling surveys.

Parties more closely associated with advocacy for a united Ireland have also been slow to address the issue in anything but broad-brush strokes.

In response to campaigning by pro-Unity groups, pro-Union advocates make two essential points. They argue that the conditions set out in the Good Friday Agreement are not met and are unlikely to be met in the near future. They argue too that there has been an unwillingness on the part of pro-unity advocates to set out a vision of what a United Ireland might look like. "What choice are you asking us to make?" they might ask.

Nationalists too have expressed frustration at the political failure to provide a context for future conversations, though do acknowledge the consultative work being undertaken by some parties.

In the absence of such a vision, the debate has focussed on discussions about the respective merits of both Ireland and the United Kingdom in economic terms and quality of life issues. That such a conversation is taking place at all, is a testament to the transformation of both the economy and society in Ireland. It would have been inconceivable even 25 years ago.

However, Labour do not see these approaches as polar opposites. It is both possible and important to work on a number of fronts. It is possible to begin the discussion about what constitutional change might bring while supporting the optimal performance of Northern Ireland. It does not seem unreasonable to us that as we

approach the thirtieth anniversary of an agreement based on the principle of consent that we should close our minds to the idea of testing that consent.

To date, advocates of all parties, including ourselves, have laid emphasis on the importance of new approaches to engagement on the issue. The SDLP for example has established a New Ireland Commission to build a movement for a New Ireland based on six core principles, that through citizen engagement seeks to create an ambitious blueprint of options and possibilities.

The success of citizens' assemblies held in Ireland, at assisting in the unlocking of difficult political issues is without question. However, we believe that there needs to be considerable work done in advance of such a process. Any Citizens' Assembly or similar process must ensure it has public engagement from as representative a sample of views as possible while also accepting that political Unionism will not engage in a forum that plans for a united Ireland. Such work would include political parties, setting out views on key issues.

No political party, not least ours, has a monopoly of wisdom on such issues but we believe that such a discussion is imperative. Current polling, such as that undertaken by the Irish Times and the ARINS project in December 2023, indicates the complexity of the issues involved, but also a willingness and acceptance on the part of the Irish electorate that it will be forced to consider difficult issues about the identity of its own state, a state that its citizenry is largely proud of and believes it to have been a significant success.

LABOUR AND THE CONVERSATION ON IRISH UNITY

Labour occupies a unique place in Irish political life. We are the only political movement to exist prior to partition and be sundered by it. Our then sister party, the Northern Ireland Labour Party played an honourable role, including the identification of grievance affecting the northern minority community in the policies of Northern Ireland before it was washed away by heightened tensions of the sixties and seventies. It is true that our parties did not always see eye to eye on issues, but Labour was also unique among Irish parties in having occasionally stood candidates for electoral contests in Northern Ireland after partition, up until the foundation of the SDLP.

Labour has also played a key part in developments in an extracted peace process. We are a proud sister party of the SDLP within the Party of European Socialists and were supportive of the efforts of John Hume and others to refine the constitutional question as being focussed on people, not on territories. In Government we contributed to Sunningdale, the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Downing Street Declaration.

Of equal importance Labour has been for half a century a driving force behind the liberalisation of Irish society and the development of its modern open economy. We are the only party, north and south, that puts the economic and social wellbeing of people, both as individuals and as communities, at the heart of our political identity. If there is to be a successful conversation about unity, these two factors will have been as significant, if not more so, than any other issue. The success of any new political arrangements will be determined by the quality of life and the quality of the environment it offers its citizens.

LABOUR'S OFFER ON IRISH UNITY

Labour believes that an honest and upfront discussion is what is required on the issue of unity. We believe that it will have a profound impact on Irish society and that it is imperative that the pitfalls of the Brexit referendum must be avoided, where nobody understood what they were voting for.

We also believe that the tone of any discussion about Unity should set a standard for any future unified state. The task ahead of us is a difficult one. The ultimate failure of the Irish nationalist project has been its inability to sell its message to all the people it seeks to include in its remit.

The maximisation of what political scientist Brendan O'Leary has described as 'losers' consent' to any proposals for constitutional change is of critical importance, not just to secure consent to any arrangements, but as a statement of inclusive intent.

We believe that an element of any border poll will constitute an offer on the part of those seeking change to those hesitant about it for whatever reason. As such it should be both generous and welcoming. We recognise that that is not without challenges and that as such, should be subject of informed and open discussion. How we conduct that conversation, will be revelatory in itself.

Labour recognises that a unity model is not the only option facing Northern Ireland and may not be the only model that will facilitate the development of a progressive politics for Northern Ireland. It is however, as a party founded by James Connolly, our preferred model. But discussions around a unity model are not precluding of other debates and policy initiative about taking Northern Ireland forward.

It is important too that we acknowledge, with the task of preparations for a unity referendum, that for those of us who support change, it will be our responsibility to try and maximise support for that position that will sell itself to all communities, north and south of the border.

We recognise then that those who adhere most politically and emotionally to the Union are unlikely to take part in the process in a substantial way. Some may do so, but most will not. That is their right and their entitlement. We are in effect responsible for creating an offer to all the people of this island, from whatever community, about what a new constitutional arrangement can be like.

As such deliberative fora must be consultative about the nature of such an offer. We cannot and should not present them as outcomes.

While Labour believes that the principle of consent in a unity referendum rests on a simple majority, that should not be the extent of our ambitions. The larger the majority for change, the easier it will be to bring about.

THE CHALLENGES – NORTHERN IRELAND

In Northern Ireland, the challenge means reaching beyond the nationalist vote into unionist and non-aligned communities.

These citizens have views about the Irish state that we don't necessarily acknowledge or realise. They will recognise that we are deeply attached to our view of history, their role in our past, and the means by which we express that identity. They will be aware that our definition of Irishness has often been exclusive of them. They will want to know how their British identity will be catered for and supported in any new political arrangements.

They will have social and economic concerns too. Fear of change of this magnitude, is of itself, a concern. While the unification of Germany for example, has been broadly successful, it would be naïve to underestimate the difficulties that process encountered in what, at face value was a culturally homogenous society. These social and economic concerns will not be confined either to members of the British Irish community. Many Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland will have issues too.

As Claire Hanna, SDLP MP has recently said, for many people, the journey towards constitutional change makes them more anxious than whatever might come at the end of it. She quotes Sammy Douglas, the former DUP MLA and now councillor who said in Susan McKay's book that he didn't fear a united Ireland, but that he feared the 10 years running up to it. Hanna goes on to say "I think that that is a perspective a lot of people share and polling bears that out. We don't have to give up, or give in to that view, but we absolutely do have to give it credence."

While it may be fashionable to play down cultural concerns in societies where the old cultural monoliths have been added to by new communities (neither part of Ireland would be recognisable to either side of the Home Rule debates), Labour believes issues of identity and its accommodation are critical to any successful unity project.

The return of paramilitarism and violence will be a risk in the context of any serious planning for unification. Northern Ireland remains in many places a deeply divided society. Sectarian tension can quickly erupt but is much more difficult to definitively address. The threat of violence in opposition to any referendum or outcome in favour of unity is a significant challenge that must be prepared for.

Deeply entrenched poverty and isolation, particularly in working class and loyalist communities must be addressed over the next decade through a functioning Stormont Executive focused on better outcomes. This means investing in education, training, economic development, and new opportunities for communities left behind for too long.

Indeed, for the Labour Party, a central motivation for unification is not the nationalist dream of the fourth green field, but to achieve a social democratic transformation of our island, that delivers a more equal and prosperous society where citizens, irrespective of their background can reach for, and achieve their full potential.

THE CHALLENGES – IRELAND

Strong opinion poll findings in Ireland reflecting support for unity need to be subject to some caution. If those supporting change are to make an offer capable of attracting the maximum level of support possible in non-nationalist communities, it will contain real and symbolic asks on the part of many of us used to living with a settled identity and shared story. Equally, there will be economic and social change involved.

Many of those advocating a border poll in Northern Ireland, do so on the basis of saying it will involve a significant recasting of the Irish state. Only when these changes are known will it be possible to gauge the true level of support in our jurisdiction. Encouragingly the recent ARINS research suggests a strong level of awareness amongst voters in Ireland that these issues will fall to be considered.

However it is only through the methodical and comprehensive work of civic dialogue, and a Citizens' Assembly process, informed by a Green Paper that the detailed offer to be made in a Unity Referendum can be determined. That is why the Labour Party is proposing a framework for working through those issues.

BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES

One of the most positive outputs of the Shared Ireland process is the work that is taking place on the respective strengths and weaknesses of both economies. For many people, what are called bread and butter issues could play a significant role in how they cast any vote in a unity referendum. Taxation levels, housing costs, the performance of respective public health services, education models, climate change mitigation and many other concerns will all be issues.

For example, for the Labour Party the achievement of an all-island secular education system and a universal public healthcare service would be core political objectives in a united Ireland.

Significant issues arise around how synergy might take place. It is not realistic to suppose that alignment can take place over night. How economic alignment and investment prioritisation are to take place needs to be subject to significant a priori scrutiny. There is scepticism in some quarters that the Irish state would be able to subsidise Northern Ireland to the extent that the UK does. Labour believes that this is the wrong approach. Any sustainable approach must be about building the economic capacity of both economies in a sustainable fashion.

Credible proposals for change will have to deal with issues of transition. While a clear plan for change will be important, it is not realistic to assume that it can pre-judge every aspect of unification. There will be those opposed to change who will only be prepared to engage in a process when the outcome of a poll has been determined.

Obvious issues include whether the existing Northern Ireland will continue to be a devolved authority in new arrangements. Would Stormont be retained? Would any such retention be permanent or transitory? Does this present an opportunity to address deficiencies in regional and local government in the Ireland of today?

These subjects will require very detailed consideration through deliberative forums, and in the comprehensive planning that must take place well in advance of a referendum. We recognise that the Shared Island Initiative has dipped its foot into some of these facets through dialogue, research, and forums. However, the work to date has not considered how two separate public administration and legal systems that have extensively diverged for over a century can be aligned, and then ensure the entitlements and expectations of citizens in each respective jurisdiction can continue to be met.

This work will have to be carried out by the machinery of government, tasked with examining each aspect, and then developing proposals for consideration and adoption.

SYMBOLISM

The issues around administrative and economic transition are of such complexity that they will require substantial preparatory work before the prospect of a poll arises. Indeed, were the timing of a poll within our gift we would only countenance it after such work has been seriously advanced.

However, there are issues of symbolic significance that would benefit from some indication of openness to change.

Labour believes that there will have to be a willingness in Ireland to embrace in some form the identity of the British Irish community in Northern Ireland. We believe we can learn from organisations that operate already on a shared island basis, accommodating the needs of different communities in very troubled times. Organisations like the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Irish Rugby Football Union, other sporting bodies, and Chartered Accountants Ireland have all operated on a cross community basis for over a hundred years.

It is difficult to conceive how asking a potential new community to adopt our flag, our anthem and our identity is inconsistent with an invitation to a new Ireland. So would seeking to admit new citizens without some reflection of their cultural heritage in the state to which they'd be asked to offer allegiance. Some of the existing symbolism, indeed much of it, reflects elements of historic conflict, not shared futures.

The framework we adopt for planning a future unity referendum must approach the issue of symbols and culture with an open and generous mindset. Labour believes that our approach to this issue should be about identifying symbolisms that are based upon what we have in common, and not what divides us.

RECOMMENDED PROPOSALS

Labour's vision for a unity referendum is grounded in our social democratic and socialist values of equality, solidarity, and fairness, and informed by principles of peace, reconciliation, and non-sectarianism.

Central to our framework of policy proposals is learning the lessons of Brexit, while also recognising that when a referendum is called, the public support it might achieve will be contingent on the proposals put to the people, and the preparatory work that has been carried out many years in advance. For example, while the UK government would facilitate the process, it is not a participant. However, its role in how that point is reached can't be ignored, and structures will be needed for co-ordinating that planning work.

Labour believes that a successful poll would present the country with the biggest implementation challenge of its history and as such the preparatory period is of immense importance. Those of us advocating change will have a huge responsibility to set out a vision of what that change would look like. We should not seek to represent the views of those who do not share this vision. We are the persuaders.

That is why we believe the planning must start now.

Labour will bring that planning to the heart of the next government by establishing a formal Department of Unification tasked with harmonisation, reconciliation, integration, and unity planning. It would initially be under the aegis of the Taoiseach, and over time as work progresses, and in advance of a unity referendum would be led by a senior Minister at Cabinet.

This Department will develop the work of the Shared Ireland Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, taking responsibility for the Anglo-Irish Unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs, overseeing the North-South Implementation Bodies, and post-Brexit trading arrangements between Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Britain. The Department will also lead the development of the Green and White Papers, a Citizens' Assembly, a new Joint Oireachtas committee, and an academic advisory council.

Next steps:

- Labour shares the view of campaigners that the only body capable of addressing an issue of this magnitude is the Irish state and that it should be led by Government.
- A new Department of Unification responsible for reconciliation, harmonisation, integration, and unity planning should be established under the remit of the Taoiseach during the next government term, moving towards a standalone senior Ministry in advance of a referendum.
- Substantial civic dialogue must be facilitated well in advance of a poll to prepare for this, through Citizens' Assemblies or similar type models informed by recent practice, with as broad a range of voices and political actors as possible from across the island.
- A new, cross party Joint Oireachtas Committee should be established to oversee, assist, and advise on the preparatory work of the Government, and to also work on transitional and political issues.
- The next Taoiseach should appoint a cross community group of Senators from Northern Ireland to join such a committee, with a standing invitee status also for MLAs and MPs from Northern Ireland similar to the approach taken by the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.
- An academic advisory council should be established to provide the Irish state with the best available domestic and international research.
- The Government should initiate a wide ranging consultative and technical process leading to a Green Paper and subsequent White Paper on all the issues.
- A Green Paper would set out the issues whilst the White Paper would seek to draw conclusions. The Government would be empowered to commission specific pieces of research or advice.
- Citizens' Assemblies should be held following the publication of a Green paper. Democratic consent from both the Dáil and the Assembly for these deliberative forums would be preferable but should not be limiting.
- Consultative forums should also be used on a case-by-case basis to examine options contained in the Green Paper to determine a preferred approach and address sectoral and thematic issues.
- Consultation would include individual citizens, the economic and social community including social partners, and international friends of Ireland. Detailed consideration must be given to the treatment of cultural issues.
- Significant planning in advance of any poll will be needed in conjunction with the European Union on proposals for reintegrating Northern Ireland.

- The government should liaise closely with our friends in the United States and the broader diaspora during the planning and consultative process.
- A mechanism for engaging with the government of the United Kingdom on planning issues that arise from a unity referendum will need to be formalised, preferably through the established British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.
- A significant portion of the new Future Ireland Fund should be put aside to support the process and implementation of unification. The fund is estimated to reach around €100bn by 2035.

This policy framework will inform the approach of the Labour Party if elected to government.

APPENDIX

Speech to Ireland's Future Conference by Ivana Bacik TD, Labour Party Leader

Three Arena Dublin, Saturday 1st October 2022

A Chairde, tá áthas orm bheith anseo inniu ar son Phairtí an Lucht Oibre agus ba mhaith liom buíochas mór a ghabháil leis na heagraithe go léir.

I am delighted to speak today as Leader of the Labour Party.

As the oldest political party in the State, Labour aspires to achieve an agreed, united island, founded on fairness and equality for all people on the island.

We are Connollyite republicans who believe our nation would be better united.

Like our sister Party the SDLP, like us members of the PES, we also share a strong commitment to the achievement of a social Europe and a recognition of the vital importance of the European project and the EU to the future of this island.

We in Labour stand for a real republic across the island – one which values equality and redistribution more than just semantics; one which can see beyond sectarianism; one which recognises that true equality is based on pluralism.

So while we support the holding of a referendum on Unity, we believe that a huge amount of preparatory work must be done in both jurisdictions in advance of any such referendum vote.

We must learn from the mistakes of Brexit to ensure that people on both sides of the Border are clear on what it is they are voting on, and critically to ensure that a new, agreed and united island would be a state accepted by all communities on the island.

Generosity must be at the heart of any successful transition – whether the Just Transition we need on Climate Change, or the transition required to deliver a united island.

We don't want to swap the majoritarianism of the past for a new one.

We should take inspiration from the work of the great social democratic peacemaker, John Hume, who was courageous enough to rewrite the canon of Irish nationalism by pointing out that it's people that matter - not territories.

And because people matter, so to do their economic circumstances – you cannot eat a flag!

There is no more republican sentiment than that.

Hume was inherently critical of Irish nationalism's failure to address unionist opposition to its unity project, in both its constitutional and republican guises – from Home Rule to the War of Independence.

We need to be careful that there is no slippage back from that.

There isn't anything inherently natural or pre-determined about any political settlement on the island – unionist or nationalist.

But if we are to live in peace with each other, under any constitutional settlement, it requires respect and allegiance for any constitutional arrangement.

In 2022, there are no planters and there are no Gaels. There are only those who by accident of birth or act of choice call this island home.

The most recent electoral contest in the North demonstrated a rejection of the orange-green binary at a scale never seen before.

So you can be British Irish in the same way that you can be Nigerian Irish and Polish Irish – or indeed Czech Irish as in my own case.

Our national identity is not set in 1916.

It is a living breathing phenomenon, unrecognisable today from what it was a century ago and will be different again in another century.

Demographic changes make it even more imperative that we abide by the principles of the Good Friday Agreement, our political guiding star.

The principle of Consent is at the core of that Agreement.

That may be the legal test but the moral test is greater still.

The consent of the maximum number possible, from all traditions, new and old, must be our goal in seeking a shared future on this island.

In order to abide by the principle of Consent, we must recognise that we have yet to do the work necessary to enable the making of informed choices in any referendum about the future of the island, on both sides of the border; to protect our island's most marginalised communities from the consequences of a hasty campaign, or the vanity project of any one group seeking ideological victory.

In terms of timing, for what it's worth, I think the thirtieth anniversary suggestion, set out by former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, is not an unreasonable one.

We believe that in advance of holding any referendum, an all-island citizens' assembly or assemblies, approved by the Stormont Assembly as well as the Oireachtas, must be constituted.

This is because ultimately, whatever proposals for the future of our island are arrived at, if they are to serve as an 'offer', they have to enjoy broad political support across the entire island.

That being the case, there will need to be considerable work done in assembling the arguments for change, and the solutions to the issues that will inevitably arise from doing so, in advance of the debate around creation of such assemblies.

The Taoiseach's Shared Island Unit has been a hugely positive initiative in this regard - and other welcome initiatives are also examining some of the practical issues involved in developing the groundwork preparatory for holding a citizens' assembly or indeed a referendum.

The preparatory work in advance of establishing the assembly/assemblies needs to be an All of Government agenda.

The best way to go about this is to revive the old Green and White Paper tradition of assembling the evidence and identifying both problems and solutions before proceeding.

The Green Paper brings together the broad range of issues and the White Paper focuses on possible solutions.

This process should be adopted by Government, to identify the issues that require discussion and deliberation at open and visible citizens' assemblies.

Once this process is complete, then the process of establishing the citizens' assemblies through legislative systems can get underway.

Finally, we must recognise that many people will vote in a unity referendum on issues of identity, but others will vote on economic and social issues.

While the obvious issues of symbolism regarding an anthem or a flag can dominate debate, there are much more challenging questions that require deliberation.

What does an all-island national development plan for infrastructure look like?

How will we deal with the economics of any new arrangements?

What will housing, health and education systems look like?

Not just slogans, realistic and affordable solutions must be offered.

It is easy to talk about a new Ireland - but that Ireland will be built on the foundations of our current systems.

When we dream of a new Ireland - a fair and equal Ireland - we must be realistic about our current infrastructure which is inadequate to meet the real needs of communities on so many fronts - on the climate emergency, the cost of living crisis, on housing, on childcare - this infrastructure has suffered from the hegemony of the two-party system of the past century.

A Chairde, there is much work to be done in the debate on the future of our island, and Labour will approach it constructively.

Arguably ours is the only tradition that has ever enjoyed significant cross community support. Our history also affords us the opportunity to make a unique contribution to this debate - and that is what we will do.

And I hope that my words today will provide some grounds for reflection about our shared future on this island.



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