

How Serious is the Debate about Irish Unity?

A serious and meaningful debate about Irish unity is not well served by unfounded claims about when unity will be achieved. Naming a year by which unity will be achieved, as Sinn Fein has now done, in this case 2016, can only be meaningful if more fundamental issues have already been addressed and, more importantly, resolved. The debate will be no more than wishful thinking unless it focuses on the kind of united Ireland we would wish to see and, secondly, on how the case for unity should be promoted in the context set by the Good Friday Agreement.

Without knowing what unity would mean and how its cause should evolve in the context of an agreement supported so recently by an overwhelming majority of the people of Ireland, claims that it will be achieved by any date make little sense.

Furthermore, to state that Irish unity is inevitable begs the question as to why unity hasn't been achieved before now. The plain and simple answer is that the conditions necessary to achieve real and lasting unity between 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter' have not existed. When those conditions exist then it can confidently be stated that unity is inevitable.

Creating those conditions means working for unity and ensuring that sufficient agreement exists to enable unity come into existence in the first instance and, second, to enable unity endure. While a simple mathematical majority is all that is technically required for constitutional change to be achieved in a 'border' poll, it must surely be preferable to maximise support beyond that level.

Real and lasting unity requires the people of Ireland freely establishing agreed political institutions under a common constitution that would have particular regard to their individual and communal rights. It would hardly be in keeping with that aim to have unity achieved by simply imposing the will of one section upon another.

Having suffered majority rule at the hands of unionists, nationalists are the first to recognise that crude majority rule doesn't work. That is why the SDLP has, from the party's foundation, stressed a partnership approach to government, locally, regionally and, ultimately, nationally as well.

Hence the checks and balances built into the Good Friday Agreement to prevent any repetition of majority rule. Partnership between our political traditions together with similar checks and balances would, in all probability, still be required for whatever form of government would exist in a united Ireland.

Questions about what unity might mean raise a number of possibilities, all of which would have to be considered. From a nationalist perspective the last significant occasion during which these issues were addressed was at the New Ireland Forum in 1983-84. That forum brought together representatives from

the main constitutional nationalist parties in Ireland: SDLP, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour.

The Forum's report details three different constitutional frameworks: a unitary state, a federal or confederal state. A unitary state, i.e. one government for the whole of Ireland, has been a preferred option by many nationalists. It would be the simplest and neatest form of government but given the distinctiveness of Northern Ireland, it has been recognised that other forms of government would need to be considered.

A form of devolution in which Northern Ireland retained its regional administration, assembly and executive but subject to the overall authority of an all-Ireland government has long been recognised as a possibility. Successive Irish political leaders from de Valera to FitzGerald have indicated a willingness to consider such an arrangement. The SDLP's first policy document *Towards a New Ireland* outlined similar proposals.

The essential ingredient to making any proposal a reality is sufficient agreement. Without agreement a united Ireland will not come into existence. Agreement being the only road to achieving a really united Ireland it must be worked for.

This very principle is at the heart of the Good Friday agreement. In the agreement it is referred to as the principle of consent. In other words the consent of a majority of the people is required if a united Ireland is to be achieved.

The practical effect of accepting this principle is to be seen in the partnership arrangements provided by the Good Friday agreement. These arrangements provide the means whereby Irish women and Irish men of the unionist and nationalist traditions can work together in partnership to the mutual benefit of the people they represent. This is happening in the Assembly and Executive as far as governing Northern Ireland is concerned.

On an all-Ireland basis it is happening in the North-South Ministerial Council. The Council brings together representatives of the people of the whole of Ireland, unionist and nationalist. Within the Council these representatives are working together developing economic, social and cultural programmes for the benefit of communities throughout the whole of Ireland. Consequently the Council is breaking down barriers between our different political traditions, North and South.

From direct experience of the North-South Council, I am confident that as its programmes take effect greater understanding and trust will develop between the people of Ireland, North and South. Such understanding and trust are essential to a peaceful, agreed Ireland.

Sloganising about Irish unity will not achieve agreement much less will it achieve unity itself. Worse, violence in the name of Irish unity, by bringing so much pain and suffering, has deepened divisions between the people of Ireland and has made the task of achieving unity much more difficult.

Now with our new political institutions the only way forward is to build on the Good Friday agreement and create greater trust and confidence between our communities. The people of this country voted on same day, on the same issue to live free from violence, threats, intimidation and sectarianism. They voted to share power to the benefit of all our people. They agreed to work in partnership, in new structures and in ways that allow new relations to evolve in a mature and productive way.

Implementing all aspects of that agreement is the immediate challenge to all who believe in meaningful and lasting unity in Ireland.

Sean Farren MLA, SDLP, North Antrim