



A Study of Relevant Literature
concerning the Debate about Northern
Ireland's Constitutional Future

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The future of Northern Ireland has been debated and analysed for more than a century now. Civic groups, academics and politicians have produced a mix of studies, papers, academic articles and conferences on this topic, namely what is the best long-term future for Northern Ireland and how this conversation should be conducted. Since the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to leave the European Union (EU) in June 2016, a new energy has been injected into this debate, and more research projects, particularly within the academic and civic sphere, are being produced. Since the Good Friday Agreement was negotiated in 1998, the mechanism for a border poll has been one of its most commented upon provisions, yet it is so often misunderstood, and many of the issues around a vote are still being debated and analysed. Contrary to the notion that there is little study on this topic and little groundwork being laid, there is actually a vast amount of literature and examination that has been done and indeed ongoing.¹

This review will aim to draw out the key themes of the many studies that are related to this topic. It will examine some of the position papers drawn up by relevant political parties and their representatives on this issue since the EU referendum. It will also focus on publications from civic society groups, such as Ireland's Future and We Make NI. Then it will look at some of the academic perspectives that are examining issues around border polls and the subvention. Finally, it will take an international focus, looking at perspectives from similar jurisdictions such as Scotland and Quebec, which have held referenda on their constitutional position within the UK and Canada respectively. Throughout the review, there will be recommendations for further study and issues to be explored in more detail. It is not the intention of this review to make comment upon any particular constitutional outcome, rather chart where the conversation around this issue is presently and the work that has been done thus far. Nor does this study include every perspective that has been written or spoken on this topic.

1 The author would like to thank Allan Leonard and Brendan Heading for their comments on the various drafts of this report.

SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND

The debate about the constitutional future of this island is not new. The Good Friday Agreement provides for structures to achieve cooperation, creating power-sharing institutions for governing Northern Ireland. But also recognising other aspirations, the agreement provides for the potential of constitutional change via a referendum.² These aspirations — to seek to protect the union or achieve unity — were not extinguished by this agreement or the subsequent process that followed.³ In fact, subsequent reforms to the Good Friday Agreement, such as those relating to the election of the First Minister in 2006 via the St Andrews Agreement, have been regularly argued as perpetuating the unionist/nationalist divide rather than helping build a more united community.⁴

Whilst the focus on the constitution did not disappear, it did move from being the central focus of political debate to one that was having to compete for attention with other topical issues. The restoration of devolution and the relative stability in which it operated meant that other socio-economic issues crept onto the public agenda (e.g., health reform, education and economic growth). In the Republic of Ireland, aside from cursory nods in the direction of the long-time held aspiration, constitutional futures did not feature as an issue in either the 2007, 2011 or 2016 general elections.⁵ Indeed, even during the centenary of the Easter Rising it was noteworthy how little unification featured in public discourse, as the official celebrations focused on celebrating achievements of the Irish Republic since it gained independence in 1922.

A fundamental shift was provoked as a fallout of the June 2016 referendum on membership of the EU.⁶ As Murphy (2021) notes, the referendum campaign "coincided with a period when Northern Ireland's historically contested politics had settled into a cycle

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- 2 Fenton, F. (2018) *The Good Friday Agreement*. Biteback Publishing & Aughey, A. (2005) *The Politics of Northern Ireland: Beyond the Belfast Agreement*. Routledge
 - 3 For more on the various different political aspects of the Agreement and the years that followed see Guelke, A, Cox, M & Stephen, F. (2006) *A Farewell to Arms?: Beyond the Good Friday Agreement*. Manchester University Press.
 - 4 For how the battle over who would become First Minister helped move votes from 2007 onwards see Tonge, J, Braniff, M, Hennessy, T, McAuley, J & Whiting, S. (2014) *The Democratic Unionist Party: From Protest to Power*. Manchester University Press.
 - 5 For how parties and campaigns were conducted see Gallagher, M & Marsh, M. (eds) (2008) *How Ireland Voted 2007: The Full Story of Ireland's General Election*. Palgrave MacMillan.
Suiter J., Farrell D.M. (2011) 'The Parties' Manifestos'. In: Gallagher, M., Marsh, M. (eds) *How Ireland Voted 2011*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Marsh, M & McElroy, G. (2016) 'Voting Behaviour: Continuing De-alignment'. In: Gallagher, M., Marsh, M. (eds) *How Ireland Voted 2016*. Palgrave Macmillan
 - 6 For more on recent evolution of the debate see Harvey, C. (2021) 'Let 'the People' Decide: Reflections on Constitutional Change and 'Concurrent Consent.' *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2. Royal Irish Academy, pp. 382–405.

of somewhat mundane normality."⁷ Yet whilst many scholars in this field have noted the different focus of the referendum campaign in Northern Ireland (e.g., border and economic issues) in contrast to the rest of the UK (e.g., immigration and sovereignty), there is an important focus about how little the concerns of Northern Ireland featured in the national debate about Brexit. In addition to this, its impacts have had a destabilising impact on how Nationalists and Unionists view themselves in this context.⁸ For Nationalism, the identity questions and fears of a physical border on the island were of paramount concern.⁹ For Unionism, the attempt to put the referendum campaign in the rear-view mirror and ensure the UK left the EU as one unit became the focus of the debate.¹⁰

Such intolerable pressures on already fractious communal blocs, along with the rise of scandals such as RHI, placed the power-sharing Executive in an untenable position, and with Sinn Féin's withdrawal in January 2017, devolution would remain on the shelf for three years as the Brexit debate happened around Northern Ireland. Internally, Nationalists organised civic groups to press for the re-examination of their position. Political parties such as Sinn Féin renewed their push for a border poll, and the SDLP pursued a partnership with Fianna Fáil. Within Unionism, the Democratic Unionist Party forged a confidence and supply agreement with the Conservative government in June 2017, and consistently pressed the case for one nation, one exit from the EU, resisting calls from the other non-unionist parties for special status for Northern Ireland.

Rather than soothing constitutional anxieties, the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland has heightened them amongst different sections of the community.¹¹ For those from a pro-unification disposition, the process of the UK's exit from the EU has fed the notion that a change is possible and could be achieved at a faster pace than otherwise would have been envisaged. Aughey and Gormley-Heenan's (2017) "border of the mind" construct is useful in this instance of understanding how powerful even imagining a possible outcome can be on political discourse.¹² The restless people that Colum Eastwood referred to are

7 Murphy, M.C. (2021) 'Northern Ireland and Brexit: where sovereignty and stability collide?'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29:3, 405-418. Page 406. \

8 Doyle, J and Connolly, E. (2017) 'Brexit and the Future of Northern Ireland'. Fabbrini, F (ed), *The Law & Politics of Brexit*. Oxford University Press, 2017, DCU Brexit Institute - Working paper N. 1 - 2017. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3102330> accessed 18th December 2021.

9 Boland, V. (2016) Fears mount in Ireland over post-Brexit 'hard border' *Financial Times*. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/56f62810-8afd-11e6-8cb7-e7ada1d123b1> accessed on 9th June 2022.

10 For more on how the Northern Ireland parties engaged with the referendum see McCann, G & Hainsworth, P. (2017) 'Brexit and Northern Ireland: the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union'. *Irish Political Studies*, 32:2, 327-342

11 For more information on the governance challenges for Northern Ireland emerging from the Protocol see Hayward, K., Phinnemore, D., & Komarova, M. (2020). *Anticipating and Meeting New Multilevel Governance Challenges in Northern Ireland after Brexit*. ESRC UK in a Changing Europe Initiative.

12 Gormley-Heenan, C. and Aughey, A. (2017) 'Northern Ireland and Brexit: Three

real.¹³ Likewise, for Unionism, the idea of differential treatment and any form of barriers with the rest of the UK has created anxiety about their place in the union and even raised questions about Britishness, which has thrown the internal dynamics of that movement into a state of real flux.¹⁴

SECTION TWO: EVOLVING ACADEMIC DEBATE ABOUT REUNIFICATION AND THE UNION

A further outcome of the UK's decision to leave the EU was the increasing level of attention that has been given towards constitutional frameworks and the potential pathways ahead for the island of Ireland and the UK. That isn't to say studies and examinations were not conducted or ongoing before. Much like the political debate mentioned above, the outworkings of Brexit has injected new focus and interest within academic institutions to consider relationships and the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. There are two main academic themes that have been examined: the mechanics of how a referendum can be called, and the main issues that need to be considered should a united Ireland occur. Indeed, there have been a number of debates about the threshold that would be desirable for constitutional change to occur.¹⁵

Referendum: when to call it

Contained within Annex A of the Good Friday Agreement is an outline for the holding of a border poll on Northern Ireland's constitutional future.¹⁶ Yet since the agreement was made, many misconceptions and debates exist over what criteria need to be met for a Secretary of State to actually call a vote, as well as the role of the Irish government in this

effects on 'the border in the mind.' *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. 19(3), pp. 497–511.

13 Colum Eastwood opening remarks at the 2018 Leaders Debate at Féile an Phobail. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McLw-msO5kU> Accessed on 20th December 2021.

14 Breen, S. (2022). Kill protocol or the Union is finished, TUV chief tells rally in The Belfast Telegraph. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/kill-protocol-or-the-union-is-finished-tuv-chief-tells-rally-41335367.html> Accessed on 9th June 2022.

15 Manley, J. (2017). Nationalist anger at Varadkar '50 plus one' remarks. *The Irish News*. Available at: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/2017/10/18/news/nationalist-anger-at-varadkar-50-plus-one-remarks-1164926/> Accessed on 20th December 2021.

16 The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement is an agreement between the British and Irish governments and most of the parties in Northern Ireland on how this jurisdiction should be governed. To read the agreement in full see, *The Belfast Agreement (1998)* Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement> accessed on 19th December 2021.

process. Also, what is the actual time frame on the length of a campaign and conditions upon which a future vote could be held? A working group headed up by the University College London's (UCL) Constitution Unit has spent more than two years examining this very question, taking in more than 1,300 submissions of evidence from interested individuals and groups. The report's findings note the unfavourable position that the UK was left in following the Brexit vote, due to the lack of planning for potential outcomes and preparation for a referendum. One of the pertinent findings of the report is on this concept of the need for a plan, as they state "such a plan would need to be agreed by the governments, working closely with the full range of actors in Northern Ireland, across the island of Ireland, and in the UK."¹⁷ The findings note the need for common positions on the dates of a referendum, rules for the campaign, a timetable for implementation of the result and the consideration of the potential for different verdicts to be registered in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. An important recommendation is about how out-of-date referenda campaign rules in both the UK and Ireland are at present.

A further issue is that of whether a simple majority is enough to pass a referendum. This has been contested by senior political figures in terms of either desirability or basic rules about a poll. Such are the misconceptions that abound in this area of the agreement.¹⁸ Whysall (2019) notes the existing provisions on a border poll, that "the only plausible interpretation is that the provision refers to a majority of those who actually vote – rather than a majority of the electorate, or of the whole population."¹⁹ The role that a referendum plays is often a central part of the focus as the vehicle for change. Yet, the work about what we want these referenda to achieve needs some consideration. Are people being asked to vote on a detailed plan? Or are we asking people to register a desire for the direction of travel and then the process of agreement happens, as was the case with the Brexit process?

What might a new Ireland look like?

This part of the debate is something that is more elastic than other parts of the discussion. There is no pre-agreed structure for academics and scholars to work off when it comes to imagining a new dispensation after a potential change in Northern Ireland's constitutional

17 Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland (2021) Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/working_group_final_report.pdf accessed on 19th December 2021. Page 246.

18 For more on legal frameworks of a poll see Harvey C. & Bassett M. (2019). *The Future of Our Shared Island: A Paper on the Logistical and Legal Questions Surrounding Referendums on Irish Unity*. Constitutional Conversations Group. <https://brexitlawni.org/library/resources/the-future-of-our-shared-island/>

19 Whysall A. (2019) *A Northern Ireland Border Poll*. University College London Constitution Unit. Available at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/185_a_northern_ireland_border_poll_0.pdf accessed on 20th December 2021. Page 8

future. Nevertheless, within academic discourse a worthwhile discussion about human rights, public services and identity is taking place within the literature. An underpinning theme within these studies is the place for the Good Friday Agreement in any of these scenarios.

Dealing first with human rights, Harvey (2020) has examined some of the main issues around commonalities and diversions that exist between the UK and Ireland. Harvey notes, "Unless and until it is superseded, the British-Irish Agreement (the bilateral legal underpinning) will continue to bind both states, and its institutional architecture may also be retained."²⁰ Both states share commonalities, such as both being dualist states with the ratification of a number of human rights instruments. However, within studies on the areas of rights, it is widely noted the differential approach of both states to these rights issues and the fact that Northern Ireland still has not seen the implementation of key rights issues outlined within agreements, such as a Bill of Rights.²¹ These differences and areas where Northern Ireland is falling short do inform the conversation about these issues and where they fit in with any constitutional future. Key questions, such as the rights and duties to the British/Unionist population, have been noted, as this could be the responsibility of the Irish government in a unification context. Likewise, consideration of questions about the role of the British government is important. Moreover, with the UK outside of the EU and the current debates around human rights that are ongoing within a Brexit context, there could well be more differences and divergences in the future.²²

Whilst the rights conversation has a framework of the Good Friday Agreement that underpins and signposts debates about the future, a key issue such as healthcare (which gets a huge amount of focus in the arguments about unity vs the union) has had little academic focus in a constitutional context. Heenan (2021) has noted that the regularly talked about benefits of the Health and Social Care NI (HSC) and Health Service Executive (HSE) cooperation has received little research. Her article notes, "The regular and repeated calls for further collaboration and cooperation have not been accompanied by any detailed plans, feasibility studies or robust data to support an all-island approach."²³ Yet interestingly the same economic, social and political challenges face both systems — a point even more demonstrated by the arrival of COVID-19 on to the island of Ireland. The discussion around sharing of resources, data and further information around issues such

20 Harvey C. (2020) A New and United Ireland? IACL-IADC Blog Available at: <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/irish-unification/2020/3/5/a-new-and-united-ireland> accessed on 20th December 2021

21 Ibid.

22 See Chapter 3 for more on this debate in Harvey, C & Bassett, M. (2019) The EU and Irish Unity: Planning and Preparing for Constitutional Change in Ireland. GUE/NGL European Parliamentary Group. Available at: <http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/the-eu-and-irish-unity/> Accessed on 20th December 2021.

23 Heenan, D. (2021) 'Cross-Border Cooperation Health in Ireland' Irish Studies in International Affairs, vol. 32, no. 2, Royal Irish Academy, pp. 117–36. Page 118.

as contact tracing will be key informers of any future debates around health cooperation. The fact that such scant research exists, even when looking at cooperation and the fact that health is an identified issue under the North-South Ministerial Council, is something worthy of further consideration and examination in any work that looks at Northern Ireland's constitutional position.²⁴

The economic debate around unification focuses on two main areas: the subvention and living standards for both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. Debates around a new Ireland within political circles often focus on issues like the subvention, with figures talking up the higher end of the subvention and those disputing this analysis. This dividing line has characterised much of the academic debate on this issue also. Doyle (2021) asserts that subvention is not as great as alleged, arguing, "The public finance deficit that would be likely to transfer to a united Ireland is significantly less than £9.4b per annum."²⁵ His study of Office for National Statistics (ONS) data identified costs of approximately £3 billion that would transfer over to the Irish government. However, this argument has been disputed by others in the field. Barrett (2021) challenges the use of ONS data as a reliable way to understand the complexity of Northern Ireland's finance.²⁶ He cites the uncertainty that the British government would continue to cover pension liabilities. In addition to this, bringing in the wider constitutional context he notes that any potential gains made on the fiscal side by Ireland, could be used in the context of Scotland too. That would have an impact on the negotiating position of all parties in any potential settlement.

Doyle's work does provide some important clarity to the new Ireland debate and costs thereof for those who want to advocate for it, as he notes, "The type of public services that are provided in health, welfare, education and infrastructure will be the real determining factors of the costs and benefits of a united Ireland and those are the areas where public debate should focus."²⁷

The academic divide on the question of costs vs benefits of a united Ireland are far apart, and as stark, as exists within political discourse, the differing assumptions in two key reports make this clear. Hübner and Nieuwkoop (2015) authored a report with a

24 Similar issues around integration of social welfare systems exist as divergences and unanswered questions remain. See Fitzpatrick, C & O'Sullivan, C. (2021). 'Comparing Social Security Provision in the North & South of Ireland: Past Developments and Future Challenges.' *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 283-313.

25 Doyle, J. (2021) 'Why the 'Subvention' Does Not Matter: Northern Ireland and the All-Ireland Economy,' *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2, Royal Irish Academy, 2021, pp. 314-34. Page 323.

26 Barrett, A (2021). 'Debating the Cost of Irish Reunification: A Response to 'Why the Subvention Does Not Matter' by John Doyle.' *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2, Royal Irish Academy, pp. 335-37.

27 Doyle, J. (2021) 'Why the 'Subvention' Does Not Matter: Northern Ireland and the All-Ireland Economy.' Page 334.

positive economic outlook in the event of Irish unification.²⁸ Their detailed reports come to two fundamental conclusions. First, on the issue of uniting two economies, it “requires careful and reflective public policies that deal with fall-outs on the one side and foster adjustments on the other.”²⁹ The second conclusion focused on the development of skills within the workforce and the ability to attract investment, which they assert would “reduce the fiscal cost of unification but also will also potentially attract genuine FDI [foreign direct investment] and reduce the opportunity cost.”³⁰ The modelling suggested that unification could bring €36.5bn in eight years. Although it should be noted this report was authored before the UK exited the EU and takes no account of the economic impacts of Brexit.

On the other side of this debate are more sceptical forecasts about the economic benefits that could be achieved by Irish unification. Fitzgerald and Morgenroth (2019), who argue that the subvention is approximately just under £9 billion, assert that unification could see living standards in Ireland fall between 5% to 10% in order to facilitate the potential cost.³¹ They conclude, “Whatever form Irish unity took there would be a heavy economic cost for both Northern Ireland and Ireland.”³² The authors outline potential scenarios, none of which see a net positive outcome. They argue that even if Northern Ireland was allowed to forgo its share of debt interest payments, the deficit it would join a united Ireland with would be £6.9 billion.³³ However, as the authors see as the more likely break up option, if Northern Ireland left the UK with these liabilities the projected deficit would climb to £8 billion. Fitzgerald and Morgenroth go on to note that the issue of harmonisation of welfare and public sector pay rates could bring extra costs.

Suggestions

Studies and examinations within academia have in the main focused on process issues of when a referendum can be called and the complementing issues, such as a focus on time frames, who calls a vote and what a potential negotiation might look like. The various reports and studies cited above raise important questions about work that needs to be done and processes that need to be planned for by the British and Irish governments. On the issue of rights and responsibilities, a fair degree of consideration has been given towards placing a framework around the potential rights issues that could extend from a potential change in Northern Ireland’s constitutional status. Unlike the referendum proposals, there is an existing framework of joint cooperation in this area emanating from

28 Hübner, K and Van Nieuwkoop, R. (2015) Modelling Irish Unification. Available at: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/unification/hubner_2015-08.pdf accessed on 20th December 2021

29 Ibid. Page 61.

30 Ibid.

31 Fitzgerald, J and Morgenroth, E. (2019) The Northern Ireland Economy: Problems and Prospects. TEP Working Paper No. 0619.

32 Ibid. Page 1.

33 Ibid. Page 33-4.

the Good Friday Agreement. There is some useful consideration about the similarities and divergences that exist between the application of rights issues in the UK and Ireland. Much of the literature notes the areas where implementation of some of the rights proposals within the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent agreements that followed has been slow. There is an onus on the Irish government to consider the rights implications and procedures for its side, should unification ever take place.

Whilst there has been a lot of consideration of issues around rights and the process of referenda, there has not been the same attention given toward core public services such as healthcare, which is often cited as being one of the main issues within the constitutional debate. There has been little examination of cooperation in the first instance, let alone any aspect of what healthcare system would be optimal. The pandemic has shown how critical cooperation in this area is and even though this is an area designated within the North-South Ministerial Council it has not seen the same level of examination. Debates about the wide scope of reform of healthcare are currently ongoing within Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, this is an opportune moment to consider possible options for further cooperation and options for what a potential health system might look like in a potential unification context.

The issue of the subvention within the economic debate is clear and stark. With estimates varying from £3 billion to £10 billion, there are substantial gaps, which makes it difficult to get an accurate picture of just what the fiscal position of Northern Ireland is. A clear point of consensus within the studies is a need to develop the skills base of the Northern Ireland workforce. However, it is a reality of the economic discussion that many of the costs and liabilities of a united Ireland will be up for debate in any negotiation between the Irish and British governments, which will make it difficult for a definitive figure for the cost of unification to be developed.

The impact of Brexit on this debate is clear. Post 2016, these studies, the creation of working groups and an institutional focus on the topic of Ireland's constitutional future has noticeably increased. At the time of writing, there are a number of research projects ongoing on this topic as well as the Shared Island Fund, which will be commissioning research on improving understanding and cooperation on the island. Recent research has raised questions and pointed to areas for further study. As noted above, the UK's experience leaving the EU demonstrates the need for planning and research on big topics. Whilst none of this can be done exclusively by academia alone, the studies done to date have put in place some frameworks and questions for policymakers to consider and act upon in the years ahead.

SECTION THREE: CIVIC CONVERSATIONS ABOUT UNITY AND THE UNION

One other consequence of the referendum on EU membership has been the emergence of civic groups with a focus on the constitutional position. This is not completely new, as organisations such as the Irish Association have examined and debated relations on the island for decades. In more recent times we have seen groups such as Ireland's Future (pro-unification) and We Make NI (pro-union) formed, to encourage conversations and debate about the future direction of Ireland. The Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool has also set up a forum called Civic Space to host these debates. These groups have produced position papers and blog posts outlining key issues from their perspectives. In addition to this, other figures within society have authored works and produced papers on this topic, some of which will be considered below. One important thing to note is these groups are made up of volunteers and their publications are designed to steer debates rather than come up with definitive conclusions on policy.

Pro-Unification Groups

Since 2016, a number of groups have been formed on social media, as well as constituted groups, to promote the issue of a new Ireland. Chief amongst these in terms of holding public events and producing discussion papers is Ireland's Future. These papers have produced questions for what they believe the parameters of the debate should be around the constitution. Its first position paper sketches out some of these themes, making the argument about the need for planning, with a call for an all-island citizens' assembly to be created to bring together various strands of opinion.³⁴ This mechanism has been used in the Republic of Ireland to bring forward constitutional change in recent years and mirroring this has been similar attempts to use this approach in Northern Ireland.³⁵ Like some of the academic studies, there is a recognition of the need for planning before a referendum takes place, as their paper argues, "We place emphasis on advance planning and the need for an evidence-based and informed debate."³⁶ With the shadow of Brexit, they draw unfavourable comparisons between how that referendum was conducted and how they believe one on Northern Ireland's constitutional future should be composed.³⁷ They have

34 Ireland's Future (2020) A Principled Framework For Change. Available at <https://irelandsfuture.com/publications/a-principled-framework-for-change/> accessed on 21st December 2021.

35 See Pow, J & Garry, J. (2019). Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland: Summary of Participant Evaluations. Available at <https://citizensassemblyni.org/participant-evaluations-of-the-citizens-assembly-for-northern-ireland/>. Accessed on 21st December 2021

36 Ireland's Future (2020). A Principled Framework for Change. Page 3.

37 Ireland's Future (2021) Advancing the Conversation. Available at <https://irelandsfuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Advancing-the-Conversation>.

proposals for debate shaping, with ideas such as parliamentary committees conducting research into the potential implications of a change. Within Ireland's Future, the Good Friday Agreement forms a foundational part of their thinking, particularly on rights issues, as they note issues around protection of citizenship rights and protection of basic human rights.³⁸ They highlight that rights protections could go further in a new Ireland context, but they feel the Good Friday Agreement provides an important framework for any conversation about rights in a new constitutional position for Northern Ireland.

Not all contributions in this sphere are limited to position papers or public events. The Shared Ireland podcast has been in operation since 2019 and produces a regular series of interviews with politicians, commentators, academics and other civic leaders on the island of Ireland.³⁹ A sample of their podcasts return similar themes, with a focus on identity, a recognition that Brexit has had an impact on the conversation, and the need for a plan before a vote being referenced. These similar themes are being identified by academic studies, and some of the main departures are between those interviewed from a unionist perspective and a nationalist perspective, which highlights the need for further clarifying research into many of the legal, economic and rights perspectives that are currently out there in the discourse.

Gosling (2020) and Humphreys (2018) have produced studies worthy of note and important contributions to the socio-economic and wider political debate. Gosling argues that the focus of the arguments for a New Ireland needs to be conciliatory and led by those with less history and more future.⁴⁰ Taking a positive perspective of the arguments, he argues that a mix of Brexit and wider shifting attitudes make the case for constitutional change a strong one. His study looks at the likes of healthcare and devolution and incorporates perspectives from political/civic leaders in Northern Ireland. His fundamental analysis is that a ten-year framework should be developed to achieve unification. However, he also notes the lack of consensus around the real figure that is the Northern Ireland subvention; the book takes an optimistic view about what the end cost of unification could mean in the longer term. Humphreys' study usefully charts the evolution of the process of Brexit and its impact on the internal politics of Northern Ireland.⁴¹ He notes that even a process of leaving the EU that was sensitively handled creates the risk of psychological and physical problems along the border. Much like many of the studies noted above, his analysis argues that the process for winning a poll stands at 50 per cent plus one. His analysis disagrees with arguments that a higher threshold is required; he does note that this is a legal reality

pdf Accessed on 21st December 2021.

38 Ireland's Future (2021) Rights, Citizenship and Identity in a United Ireland. Available at: <https://irelandsfuture.com/publications/rights-citizenship-and-identity-in-a-united-ireland/> Accessed on 21st December 2021

39 See Shared Ireland podcast here: <https://sharedireland.com/>

40 Gosling, P. (2020) *A New Ireland: A New Union: A New Society*. A Post Brexit Edition.

41 Humphreys, R. (2018) *Beyond the Border: The Good Friday Agreement and Irish Unity after Brexit*. Merrion Press.

and that those arguing for constitutional change should aim for as much support as possible.

Pro-Union Groups

More recently there has been the formation of civic groups with a focus on a pro-union message. We Make NI, formed in 2020, has produced a series of articles from contributors about Northern Ireland and its place within the UK.⁴² Unlike the pro-unification groups, the focus of these pieces from campaigners and artists is to celebrate the achievements of Northern Ireland. Interestingly they also include articles from those who are highlighting issues with current service provision and policies, and what can be done to improve them.⁴³ Within the Civic Space initiative (not exclusively pro-union) there are more unionist voices from within this sphere of society writing about the unionist argument for retaining the link with the UK.⁴⁴ Like the Shared Ireland podcast, these are individual reflections, rather than statements of policy. Although even though perspectives differ, the centrality of the Good Friday Agreement to some of the arguments remains, as Kerr notes, "The Good Friday Agreement has allowed us the space to comfortably define our own identity, and to peacefully pursue our political objectives."⁴⁵ Within some of the arguments of many contributors is the desire to move away from some of the more negative campaigning tactics that have been displayed by some of the main Unionist parties. For example, Wright summarises, "The electorate prefers to be persuaded rather than coerced through fear-mongering and prejudice: to be led rather than commanded. It is the latter which has produced a democratic deficit within unionism where ever-growing pro-union or civic unionist electors feel disenfranchised."⁴⁶

A publication that is worthy of note from a pro-union perspective is an edited collection from Foster and Smith (2021) which brings together a mix of politicians, historians and journalists to produce a "manifesto" that is in favour of the constitutional link between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The book contains within it a variety of historical perspectives right up to some modern arguments for the United Kingdom. A central thesis is challenging narratives and perspectives that have been put forward by Irish Nationalism.

42 We Make NI webpage: <http://www.wemakeni.com/>

43 See Robinson, L. (2021) Where are we now? Available at <https://wemakenidotcom.wordpress.com/blog/> Accessed on 21st December 2021

44 Institute of Irish Studies at University of Liverpool. Civic Space initiative. Available at <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/irish-studies/civic-space/> Accessed on 21st December 2021

45 Kerr, L. (2021) One hundred years on. Time for a serious re-think. Available at <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/irish-studies/civic-space/pro-union/border-poll/one-hundred-years-on/> Accessed on 21st December 2021.

46 Wright, T. (2021) The electorate prefers to be persuaded rather than coerced.. Available at: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/irish-studies/civic-space/pro-union/border-poll/persuaded-rather-than-coerced/> Accessed on 21st December 2021.

Although authors such as Aughey (2021) critique the political leaders within the pro-union fold arguing "If Unionism is a much misunderstood political doctrine then Unionist politicians must carry most of the burden of culpability."⁴⁷ Stressing the positive aspects of Unionism, Aughey argues that its concerns are not those of nationality, but rather rights and citizenship. The idea of the Union should transcend nationalism and allow an individual to express whatever cultural values or identity that they so wish. The study also contains perspectives that challenge some political consensus around devolution. Hill (2021) has a chapter outlining the rise of "Devosceptic Unionism" in recent years as parts of the UK deal with separatist movements. He defines this form of Unionism as those who believe in the abolition of the devolved institutions to those who wish to see a greater presence of the Westminster government in national life. His argument asserts that devolution has not halted nationalism within the UK and has simply led to a retreat of the British government from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For Unionism, he puts forward an argument about the need to not neglect making a positive case for Britain and what it can be. Yet his overarching thesis provokes challenges for a devolutionist political consensus across the main Unionist parties in the UK as he states "Whatever the answer is, we won't find it by drawing a positive veil across twenty years of retreat and taking a badly-designed and misfiring settlement as our inviolable starting point."⁴⁸

47 Aughey, A. (2021) 'The Idea of the Union' in Foster, J.W & Smith, W.B. (Eds) *The Idea of the Union: Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. Belcouver Press. Page 220.

48 Hill, H. (2021) 'The Re-emergence of Devosceptic Unionism in Foster', in J.W & Smith, W.B. (Eds) *The Idea of the Union: Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. Belcouver Press. Page 274.

SECTION FOUR: PARTY POSITION STATEMENTS

Political parties on the island of Ireland tend to have views on the constitutional future. On the pro-unification side, there is a different emphasis on language and approach in areas such as the timing of a border poll. Whilst many of the parties advocate for change, there is little in terms of a defined view from each party of their point of view in what they would like to see a united Ireland look like. There is a good deal of discussion documents and papers outlining the main arguments, but no defined view from each party. Sinn Féin has since 2016 produced a number of documents on Irish unity, examining healthcare, economic development and human rights. An important theme running through many of their studies is the importance and driving force of Brexit. In all of its documents language such as “Brexit has changed everything” features, and it makes the argument that it poses challenges toward collaboration in areas such as healthcare.⁴⁹ Sinn Féin clearly takes a minimalist view of the subvention, arguing its real level is around £3–6 billion.⁵⁰ This figure and analysis has been subjected to criticism.⁵¹ The party has called for the creation of a citizens’ assembly to examine the issues around unification and at the time of writing is in the process of setting up its own citizens’ assemblies.⁵²

The SDLP also contains within its party platform a commitment to Irish unification. The party has within the past year set up a New Ireland Commission, which aims to “engage with every community, sector and generation on this island to build new proposals that can generate a consensus on our future constitutional arrangements.”⁵³ The commission has been appointed and at the time of writing has held meetings but not produced any reports. The party has produced documents before on a united Ireland. In 2005, they launched a document that linked the Good Friday Agreement and unification.⁵⁴ This is a theme that has been present in the rights conversation above. The SDLP differs from Sinn Féin on border poll timing and process for getting there. The party also differed in the past about the best way to reach out to unionism, as well as how to deal with legacy issues

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- 49 Sinn Féin (2016) Towards a United Ireland. Available at: <https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2016/Towards-a-United-Ireland.pdf> Accessed on 22nd December 2021
- 50 Sinn Féin (2020) Economic Benefits of a United Ireland. Available at: https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/Economic_Benefits_of_a_United_Ireland.pdf Accessed on 22nd December 2021
- 51 See Coulter, C. (2021) The Double Bind, in Civic Space. Available at <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/irish-studies/civic-space/pro-union/pro-union-economics/republican-political-economy-doubles/the-double-bind/>. Accessed on 22nd December 2021
- 52 Kearney, D. (2021) People’s Assemblies in 2022. Available at <https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/62400> accessed on 22nd December 2021.
- 53 Social Democratic and Labour Party (2021) New Ireland Commission. Available at https://www.sdlp.ie/new_ireland_commission accessed on 23rd December 2021
- 54 Social Democratic and Labour Party (2005) A United Ireland and the Agreement. Available at: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/sdlp/sdlp210305unity.pdf> accessed 23rd December 2021.

arising from the Troubles. The two parties agree on the threshold required for a successful vote. Both parties recognise the conversation and debate that is underway, but both have not nailed their respective colours to the mast about what a new Ireland would mean in practice.

In the Irish Republic, politicians from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have taken it upon themselves to produce documents and papers on the topic of a new Ireland. Fianna Fáil TD for Dublin Bay South, Jim O'Callaghan, produced a paper in 2021. His overall view is that there must be a plan in place before any referendum happens. O'Callaghan argues that when it comes to developing a more formal plan, "It is not for any one individual or party to draft a constitution for a new Ireland."⁵⁵ His paper speculates that pro-union parties might in a new unitary state have an entitlement to seats in government and that reforms to the office of the President be made to ensure a lack of alienation. The paper goes on to chime with sentiments from Sinn Féin and SDLP above about using the citizens' assembly mechanism, "[the] level of all the political parties of the island but also at the level of the citizenry of all parts of the island, possibly within an all-island citizens' assembly."⁵⁶

Fine Gael TD, Neale Richmond, has also produced a paper on a united Ireland.⁵⁷ His paper focuses on some of the main debates around what a new Ireland might look like in the future. Unlike others within nationalist discourse, he does not directly dispute the £10 billion subvention figure and acknowledges that it will be costly for the Irish government in the early years and that the challenge for those on the pro-unification side will be to convince southern voters that this will be a worthwhile project. Richmond comes closer to much of the civic unity groups on the emphasis of the Good Friday Agreement providing a framework for conversations about future relationships. Like his Fianna Fáil counterpart, he speculates about reforms to the current system in the Irish Republic that could incorporate unionism in a united Ireland context. Richmond suggests potentially re-joining the Commonwealth, reforming the Presidential Council of State to reserve places for unionist representatives, and reshaping the current parliamentary system to ensure that the unionist community has an important place.

Whilst it's not a party, on the pro-unification side it is worth noting the report from the Dáil and Seanad Committee on the issue of "Uniting Ireland and Its People in Peace & Prosperity" for the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.⁵⁸ The report contains within it a number of recommendations, such

55 O'Callaghan, J. (2021) The political, economic and legal consequences of Irish reunification. Paper delivered to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. 23 March 2021.

56 Ibid.

57 Richmond, N. (2021) Towards a New Ireland. Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University, 19th April 2021.

58 Brexit and the Future of Ireland: Uniting Ireland and Its People in Peace and Prosperity. (2017) Available at : https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_the_implementation_of_the_good_friday_agreement/

as a study into how Northern Ireland generates its income and receives funding. It also continues along the line of new vehicles to promote dialogue, such as the formation of a second New Ireland Forum to focus and debate the issues around Irish unity. In terms of planning, the report argues for further study about constitutional and legal changes required before a referendum should take place. On reaching out to Unionist opinion, the report recommends "fears and concerns of the Unionist community need to be examined, understood and addressed comprehensively by all stakeholders in advance of any referendum."⁵⁹

Pro-Union

On the pro-union side, there is much less in terms of conversational discussion, papers and reports to analyse. As Northern Ireland is currently in the UK, the focus for these parties is maintaining the status quo; the focus of the main parties is to not fuel the discussion around a border poll. There is much less out there in this field from the Democratic Unionist Party and Ulster Unionist Party. The DUP manifestos from 2016 onwards have contained commitments to oppose any holding of a border poll. Yet it would be unfair to argue that the party has no proposals for debating Northern Ireland's position within the UK. In 2019, the party proposed creating a "National Convention for the Union underpinned by a committee comprising representatives from the four constituent parts of the UK to map out a new vision for the Union."⁶⁰ The party has also proposed strengthening bodies such as the British-Irish Council, making it akin to the Nordic Council model.

Like the DUP, the UUP oppose the holding of a border poll and refuse to engage in conversations about the constitutional future of Northern Ireland regarding unity. They oppose the Northern Ireland Protocol and want to see any sea border removed. Much recently, the party leader, Doug Beattie, has taken some new initiatives to promote the union, such as visits with his party colleague, Mike Nesbitt, to the United States⁶¹. The party also has had representatives engage in initiatives such as Civic Space from the University of Liverpool, with representatives celebrating the achievements of Northern Ireland over the past century. It also has Health Minister, Robin Swann, promoting how being part of the UK helped Northern Ireland fight the COVID-19 pandemic and MLA, John Stewart, speaking about the economic benefits.⁶²

reports/2017/2017-08-02_brexit-and-the-future-of-ireland-uniting-ireland-and-its-people-in-peace-and-prosperity_en.pdf Accessed on 23rd December 2021.

59 Ibid. Page 15.

60 Democratic Unionist Party (2019) 'Let's Get the UK Moving AGAIN. Available at https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/dup/dup_2019-11-28_ge-man.pdf accessed on 23rd December 2021.

61 Manley, J. (2021) Mike Nesbitt and Sir Reg Empey to sell unionism's case overseas, in *The Irish News*. Available at <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2021/10/11/news/mike-nesbitt-and-sir-reg-empey-to-sell-unionism-s-case-overseas-2474310/> accessed on 23rd December 2021.

62 Ulster Unionist Party (2021) on Civic Space. Available at <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/irish->

Neither of the two main Unionist parties has the same initiatives that exist within their counterparts in Sinn Féin or the SDLP. But, from a Unionist perspective, as noted above, there is some sense in this approach, but a more formal move in promoting the union would be a useful addition to the conversation on the pro-union side. The space in this regard is currently being filled mostly by the nationalist parties who are campaigning for change. However, for the status quo arguments, they also need new ideas and some structure toward conversations that needs political party input and direction.

[studies/civic-space/pro-union/ulster-unionist-party/](#) Accessed on 23rd December 2021.

SECTION FIVE: INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

It is tempting to think that constitutional divides and disputes only exist on the island of Ireland, but other parts of the world have also had to wrestle with the issue of referenda and independence movements seeking change. For the purposes of this review, this section will note the examples of Scotland and Quebec. Both jurisdictions have seen their respective independence movements use their electoral strength at regional levels to bring about referenda to decide on whether they should create new independent countries. To date neither have been successful, but in both contests, the separatist side polled credible enough results to keep the issue alive for a period of time after the vote took place.

Quebec

The issue of Quebec's position within the Canadian federation has been a hotly contested issue since the first election of the Parti Quebecois in 1976. The pro-independence movement has been able to hold two referenda on this issue — in 1980 and in 1995. It lost both times, but in 1995 by just 1%. Hebert's (2015) study of the most recent referendum has discovered some of the main flaws within the Quebec sovereignty movement, which can be instructive for any exercise conducted in Northern Ireland.⁶³ Firstly, the three main leaders of the movement did not share a common concept of what would happen in the aftermath of a Yes victory in 1995. The serving Premier, Jacques Parizeau, favoured a quick approach towards independence from Canada, whereas the Chief Negotiator and Bloc Quebecois leader, Lucien Bouchard, favoured a renegotiated settlement with the rest of Canada — a sentiment that was supported by the other leader of the yes campaign, Mario Dumont.⁶⁴ The lack of any plan, mixed with a not exactly clear question, would have provoked months of uncertain negotiations and quickly exposed divisions within the sovereigntist forces. For example, Bouchard favoured a second referendum to approve any deal that was made; Parizeau did not. Also, because there was no agreed process for a referendum with the Federal Government, the Canadian Prime Minister, Jean Chretien, refused to accept that a narrow majority would be enough for Quebec to leave Canada.

Scotland

In Scotland, there was a very different approach from the Scottish National Party (SNP) government. First Minister, Alex Salmond, and British Prime Minister, David Cameron, reached an agreement in Edinburgh in 2012 — a set of rules for a referendum to take

⁶³ Hebert, C. (2015) *The Morning After: The 1995 Quebec Referendum and the Day that Almost Was*. Random House.

⁶⁴ See Chapter 3, *Ibid.* for how divergent the views within the pro-independence were leading up to the referendum.

place that would have an outcome that would be recognised by the two governments. Unlike Quebec, the process was consented to and agreed upon by the main policymakers before asking the people. Tierney (2016) highlights how the process mattered in achieving a largely peaceful and agreed outcome: "In the end, the quality of Scottish, and indeed British democracy could be gauged not only by how each side reacted to the outcome but the process through which the outcome was reached."⁶⁵ The length of the referendum campaign also meant there was a great deal of time for issues to be discussed and analysis produced. On the pro-independence side, the Scottish government produced an extensive white paper, outlining their vision for what an independent Scotland would look like if a Yes vote was achieved. On the pro-union side, the UK government produced 14 Scottish analysis papers in the year leading up to the referendum. As Mullen (2016) notes, there was a huge quantity of information available to voters to assist them in making up their minds before the referendum was held in September 2014.⁶⁶

Both of these case studies are instructive. Scotland had a vast array of material and a long campaign to tease out the issues. In contrast, the Quebec government in 1995 only had a period of a few months before holding a referendum. The lack of planning on the pro-sovereigntist and pro-federalist sides for nation-changing outcomes would have certainly led to chaos and uncertainty. In the other case study, Scotland had an agreed process, which like Brexit would have hit administrative and political issues along the way. Nevertheless, the Scottish process was undoubtedly more robust than Quebec's. It is noteworthy that since the Scottish referendum, the Parti Quebecois has argued that this would now be their template for a future vote.⁶⁷ Taking the time for an agreed process that can be mutually recognised is partly achieved in an Ireland context with the Good Friday Agreement, but a more formal agreement like the Edinburgh Agreement will be necessary to map out campaign periods and structure.

Conclusion

This review is intended to be a helpful summary of the debates that are out there on the constitutional debate. It does not contend that every single source that mentions or looks at the constitution is included. There are many groups, academics, activists and parties who are speaking about these issues from their particular perspective. The aim of

65 Tierney, S. (2016) 'The Scottish Independence Referendum: A model of good practice in direct democracy?' In McHarg, A, Mullen, T. Page, A, Walker, N (Eds) *The Scottish Independence Referendum: Constitutional and Political Implications*. Oxford University Press.

66 Mullen, T. (2016) 'Introduction,' in McHarg, A, Mullen, T. Page, A, Walker, N (Eds) *The Scottish Independence Referendum: Constitutional and Political Implications*. Oxford University Press.

67 McKenna, T. (2017) Jean-François Lisée, identity politics and Quebec sovereignty. CBC News. Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/813308483639> Accessed on 20th December 2021.

this review was to take time, review the arguments and attempt to put them into some structured framework. Contrary to the argument that there is little work in this field being done, there is actually a huge amount that has been done and with more projects likely to be completed in the coming years.

There is no doubt that Brexit is a driving force across the board for this process. The number of articles and statements about the future of Northern Ireland increases following the referendum result. Whilst at this stage the outcome is not determined, there is no doubt that without that huge event, it is unlikely it would be receiving the attention that it is getting now.

The issues around unity remain the same throughout the studies — there needs to be a plan. A plan to scope out what rules will govern a referendum should one take place. Some form of agreement on the subvention to Northern Ireland so that we can have a more focused economic debate. Also, some of the governmental and rights issues require more attention. All of these can be helped by future research by not just academics but also the British and Irish governments. This can be helped by political parties stating more defined views, whether they're supporting the pro-union or united Ireland positions. Another issue is a lack of a starting point. When the SNP held their respective referendum on the issue of leaving the UK, detailed options were placed before the electorate, which helped their debate. At the moment, discourse on the island of Ireland is heavily influenced by surveys and polls that point out snapshots of opinion at a given time. Whilst these have some use, it is a limited one for a referendum that is likely to be some years away.

Another important part of this debate is that a sizeable number of people in Northern Ireland subscribe to neither unionism nor nationalism.⁶⁸ How these voters' views are taken into account will be important; a citizens' assembly could tease out for examination the views of this section of the community. How we view the development of our socio-economic programmes, education system⁶⁹ and the narratives we place on the debate are also all crucial and require some consideration.

Fundamentally, this cannot be left to civic groups and academics to come up with the ideas alone. Governments need to agree and have in place plans to prepare for the possibility of this outcome. This means preparations on the British government side to stimulate interest and promote the benefits of the UK and on the Irish government side, ensuring that the plans and policies are in place to make unification work if it is voted

68 Hayward, K. (2020). 'The 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland: the Rise of the Centre Ground?'. *The Political Quarterly*, 91: 49-55.

69 For examples on how Northern Ireland's education system has evolved see Brown, M, Donnelly, C, Shevlin, P, Skerritt, C, McNamara, G and O'Hara, J. (2021) 'The Rise and Fall and Rise of Academic Selection: The Case of Northern Ireland'. *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32, no. 2 477-98.

upon. The dearth of research on major public policy areas such as healthcare needs to be addressed. With political will and determination, this can be achieved and it needs to happen so that whatever way this ultimately goes, a better and more informed debate takes place about the future of the UK and Ireland.

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The Future Relationship Conversations project has received support from the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade through their Reconciliation Fund. Holywell Trust receives core support through the Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland, Derry City & Strabane District Council and the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

