

Dear Sir,

I would like to welcome your initiative in trying to think through the processes that would ideally be followed prior to the holding of any referendums on a united Ireland on the island of Ireland. I wish to comment on your interim working paper, and, in particular, on the options presented in para. 33 of the Executive summary.

The proposed referenda essentially provide a binary choice between the status quo and a possible alternative future designated as a "United Ireland."

I am aware that some "reforms" or policy changes could also be proposed within the Status Quo, in parallel or prior to any referenda. But in constitutional terms, that is no different to the status quo, in that such changes can be proposed at any time under current constitutional arrangements.

As the status quo is self-evident in everyday life, it does not require much imagination or explanation for voters to understand what this means in practice. A "United Ireland" on the other hand, could mean whatever various parties could decide it should mean, ranging from a nationalist utopia to an oppressive dystopian world. All sorts of predictions could be made for the economic, political, social, human rights, community and personal consequences of a vote for a United Ireland. And as with any prediction, no one can be entirely certain which version of such consequences will ultimately come to pass.

There is, therefore, a fundamental asymmetry in the vote between a known and relatively certain present, assumed to be available in future with a vote for the status quo, and an unknowable and relatively uncertain future, the perceptions of which will depend very much on what messages are broadcast by various interested parties, depending on their resources and ability to control the narrative.

The experience of holding the Brexit referendum was instructive in this regard. Wildly contrasting visions of what Brexit would look like were presented to the electorate, and they had very little hard evidence to go on as to which version would end up being correct. While it is too early to comment on the economic consequences, it is clear that the final shape of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement - are very different from what voters were led to expect at the time of the referendum vote.

To provide voters with a fair, balanced, and objective choice, it is therefore necessary to provide them with the maximum information possible about what the future will look like, be it under the constitutional status quo, or under a proposed United Ireland.

There is no requirement for a referendum anywhere to initiate the process of providing such clarity. It could simply be a decision by the two Sovereign governments to initiate such discussions and develop detailed proposals. They would also be well advised to, consult widely with the political parties and civil society groups in both jurisdictions through the various mechanisms you suggest. The greater the involvement of N. Ireland parties and civil society bodies in the process of developing such proposals, the greater the degree of ownership they are likely to take of the outcomes.

Submitted as feedback to the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland Interim Report – 10 February 2021

Those proposals could include details on how sovereignty will be transferred, what the governmental structures of a united Ireland would look like, and what constitutional provisions will govern those structures. As you suggest, voters will also want some assurances on what public policies will be pursued in areas such as health care, education, policing, civil defence, security, and international relationships. Crucially, such policy proposals should also include a consideration of the financial arrangements will apply, and how this will impact on the taxation and living standards of individuals and families in all parts of Ireland.

My point is, that the more clarity and detail that can be provided, the less fraught the debate, and the more informed any voter choices will be. The scope for misinformation and manipulation will also be reduced accordingly.

Of course, it is impossible to predict the future with absolute accuracy under either the Status Quo or United Ireland scenarios, but voters deserve no less than the good faith and best efforts of both Governments to make as accurate a presentation of the real choices facing voters as possible. Joint British and Irish Government reports on the financial, economic, political, social and public services consequences of voters taking either option would add greatly to the credibility of those reports.

One issue that needs to be addressed is the fear that many Unionists would have that even considering what shape a United Ireland might take could hasten its arrival, and many would be unwilling to engage in that discussion for that reason. However, if the terms of reference of any consultation process were to include, also, what changes might be made in governance structures and public policies within existing constitutional structures, they would have every incentive to engage. After all, the more things can be improved under existing constitutional arrangements, the less likely a vote for a united Ireland.

The incentives for nationalist actors would be the reverse. But crucial to the credibility of any proposals that might emerge would be whatever resources both governments are prepared to commit in either scenario, and independent economic projects on the impact of same.

But both Unionism and Nationalism is based on much more than estimates of economic advantage. It is also based on social and cultural affinities, loyalties, and feelings of belonging. Thus, any proposals for either scenario, brought forward by both governments, would have to address how both Irish and British identities would be provided for and affirmed under either scenario.

It might very well be that any engagement between the British and Irish governments on planning for the future of Northern Ireland would result not, in the first instance, in proposals for referendums on a united Ireland, but on reforms to and updating of the Belfast Agreement, to take into account the 23-year experience of operating the Agreement, and the fact that one party is no longer within the EU.

What is clear, however, is that both governments need to engage in such a process, without prejudice to any particular final outcome, if the strains created by Brexit, demographic

Submitted as feedback to the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland Interim Report – 10 February 2021

change, and the continued divisions in N. Ireland society are to be addressed. The more certainty that can be provided on the options and opportunities that the N. Ireland electorate may have in the future, the better the chance that wise choices will be made and those tensions reduced.

Kind regards,

**Frank Schnittger,**  
**BA (Mod) and MPhil Peace Studies (TCD),**  
**Former senior executive, Diageo,**  
**Editor, European Tribune**