



## Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland

### Oral Hearing with the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

#### Opening Statement by Dr Alan Renwick, University College London ([a.renwick@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.renwick@ucl.ac.uk))

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with your committee today. My name is Dr Alan Renwick. I am Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit at University College London, a research centre focusing on how best to structure and operate democratic politics. And I am Chair of the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland.

I am joined here today by four of my fellow members of the Working Group. They are:

- Dr Etain Tannam, Trinity College Dublin
- Dr David Kenny, Trinity College Dublin
- Professor Christopher McCrudden, Queen's University Belfast
- Professor Brendan O'Leary, University of Pennsylvania and Queen's University Belfast

If I may, I will in these opening remarks quickly introduce three things:

- why we created the Working Group
- the nature of the Working Group
- and the Group's interim conclusions.

#### Why we created the Working Group

We created the Working Group because referendums on the unification question *might* happen.

If they happen, it's important that they be conducted well. But they can be conducted well only if someone thinks through what that would involve, and no one has yet done that thinking fully. We wanted to help fill this gap.

We did not create the Working Group because we thought that referendums are imminent. The evidence is that a majority in Northern Ireland would currently vote for maintaining the Union, against unification. But, clearly, no one can know how opinion might evolve over time.

#### The nature of the Working Group

The Working Group is looking at how any future referendums on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would best be designed and conducted. We have no collective view on whether such votes would be desirable or what the outcome should be if referendums were to be held.

The Group is based in the Constitution Unit at University College London. It comprises 12 experts from Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, and the University of Pennsylvania, as well as UCL, with expertise spanning political science, law, sociology, and history.

## Interim conclusions

Turning to the group's interim conclusions, I will, if I may, highlight some key findings.

As a starting point, we assume that any referendums would be conducted within the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, so we start by setting out what that entails.

- As is well known, unification could not happen without a referendum vote in its favour in Northern Ireland. We conclude that a referendum would be required in the South as well, either amending or replacing the Constitution.
- The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland must call a referendum if a majority for unification appears to him or her likely.
- A referendum in the South wouldn't have to be on the same day – it could come later. But the same proposal would have to be put to voters both north and south.
- The threshold in each referendum would be a simple majority of 50% + 1. If that threshold were met in both jurisdictions, unification would then have to take place.
- So the majority principle applies to the decision on sovereignty itself. But on other matters, the 1998 Agreement's wider ethos of seeking to proceed by consensus should be upheld as far as possible.

So that is the 1998 Agreement. But there are many other matters that the Agreement does not resolve, which our report examines in depth. Let me state three broad conclusions that we reach on these.

First, it would be highly unwise for referendums to be called without a clear plan for the referendums and other associated processes. These would be complex processes and, poorly designed, could lead to problems. Such a plan would need to be agreed by the governments, in close consultation with others. We do not say when planning should begin—that is a political matter, and we recognise that it is very sensitive. But a plan should be agreed by the time any referendum is called.

Second, there are several plausible configurations of referendums north and south, with referendums coming relatively early in the process, before the details of a united Ireland have been worked out; or later, once a plan has been developed. We will be happy to go into further details. For now, let me just say that there is no perfect approach: each configuration has advantages and disadvantages.

Finally, the conduct rules for any referendums would be crucial. Existing campaign rules are badly out of date in the digital age in both the UK and Ireland, and urgently need to be strengthened.

I hope these headlines give a flavour of the Working Group's analysis. So far, we have published an [interim](#) report, presenting our draft conclusions. So we are keen to hear your questions and reflections. We plan to release our final report later in 2021.