

Thank you chair, good morning members, thanks for the invitation to be here this morning.

Maybe I should give you an idea of my background, I am now the independent MLA for Lagan Valley having been an Alliance Party representative from 2007 until 2019 when I left the Party. From 2001 until 2011 I was an Alliance Party Lisburn Councillor and Mayor 2006-2007. I am also a past president of Lisburn Chamber of Commerce.

I grew up in a very Unionist community in Belfast, my father was a proud Orangeman and member of the Black Institution. Over the years and particularly since I became involved in active politics, I have found myself questioning many aspects of Northern Ireland life, the fact that at Belfast Royal Academy no Irish history was taught, that virtually no Roman Catholic families lived in my area and as I grew a little older, as I read some history, the clear discrimination both historic and current against the Catholic community was obvious to me. I was married in August 1971, a date which has some resonance today as it was the month of internment and the events in Ballymurphy when eleven civilians were shot dead by the British army. Many years on, the Ballymurphy inquest verdicts are to be delivered this very day and I am speaking to you from Ballymurphy where I am to hear those verdicts this morning. I am proud to have actively supported the Families for over ten years now and hope they get the closure they deserve.

Despite that, I still regard myself as a "very soft" Unionist but certainly like many others, open to a discussion about the best way forward for the Island of Ireland and its people, North and South, including the prospect of reunification. The Good Friday agreement makes provision for that discourse and of course the possibility of a Border poll. Such a poll is not likely or desirable for a few years but the discussion has started and given the major changes now taking place across these Islands, the outcome cannot be predicted despite the efforts of Unionists to play down the notion that it could go against them.

I note the Shared Island unit initiative by your Government and the myriad public platforms for debate on both sides of the border. I note the comments by British Secretaries of State around "no strategic or selfish interest" in Northern Ireland, the recent tests of opinion in England specifically indicating that a large majority of English voters would be in favour of breaking the link with Northern Ireland and even away back Harold Wilson's reference to "Spongers" in Northern Ireland and Churchill's immortal reference to the "dreary steeples" of Fermanagh after the second world war.

Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol, the position of Scotland which will become more clear by the time we have this meeting, the disarray amongst Unionists and the mixed messages, not to say untruths coming from Westminster are all contributing to uncertainty and doubt within the population and contributing to the upsurge of violence, which at least is relatively minor so far.

The Anglo Irish agreement, Good Friday agreement, St Andrews agreement all make it clear that the status of Northern Ireland can only be changed by the expression through a referendum of the people of Northern Ireland. The stated requirement is a simple majority, 50%+1. It is being suggested that a larger majority should be required but I see no reason to change what is already laid down. In anticipation it is imperative that voters across the Island should be well informed and there is an onus on both Governments to provide the necessary information.

For that reason I support the demand of the organisation which I have recently joined, Ireland's Future, for the establishment of a Citizens Assembly on an all island basis to seek that information and provide a forum for non political discussion about the problems and/or benefits arising from

reunification. Irelands Future is clear in its insistence that the Good Friday agreement in all its parts must be respected as the only way forward.

Finally there are threats of violence from Loyalist groups if this is taken forward and reunification becomes likely. I acknowledge the possibility but we should not be deterred from the course set out in the Good Friday agreement and work for the greater good of all our people. I believe if the proper groundwork is done to reassure Unionists about how their identity and culture will be protected in a united Ireland, any threat of violence from loyalists will not be supported in the Unionist community. It is up to all of us to provide that reassurance.

Thank you Chair, I hope I have not run over my time and am happy to take your questions.