

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM

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### FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

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*Dé Máirt, 11 Bealtaine 2021*

*Tuesday, 11 May 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

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The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Frances Black,
Pádraig Mac Lochlainn,	Niall Blaney,
Brendan Smith,	Emer Currie,
Peadar Tóibín.	Annie Hoey,
	John McGahon,
	Rónán Mullen,
	Niall Ó Donnghaile.

I láthair/In attendance: Senator Erin McGreehan.

Teachta/Deputy Fergus O'Dowd sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

## **Future of Ireland: Discussion**

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Deputies Conway-Walsh and Dr. Stephen Farry MP. My colleagues Senators McGahon and Currie will attend as soon as they can. The Seanad is sitting at the moment but I am told they will be here shortly.

All Members of the Oireachtas should attend this meeting remotely from their offices within the Leinster House campus. Remote participation outside the campus is not possible. If there is unwanted feedback, it may be necessary to mute everyone and the person speaking can then unmute themselves. I ask everyone to stay muted unless they are contributing.

As regards the questions rota, I propose to take Sinn Féin first as I understand two Sinn Féin Members will attend the Ballymurphy inquest report launch at 11 a.m. so they need to leave early. The order is Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the SDLP, the Alliance Party, Independents, Aontú, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and the Green Party. We will then go around again. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I very much welcome our two witnesses. The Reverend Karen, which is what she prefers to be called, and Mr. Trevor Lunn MLA will discuss topical issues related to Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement. On behalf of the committee I welcome them both to this meeting. The three of us here in the committee room are wearing masks because it is the order of the House as we are in close proximity. Everybody else is in their offices so they do not have that obligation, no more than the witnesses. I want the witnesses to be absolutely relaxed. They are very welcome.

I will read the notice on privilege. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected pursuant to both the Constitution and statute by absolute privilege. However, witnesses and participants who are to give evidence from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts does and may consider it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Witnesses are also asked to note that only evidence connected with the subject matter of the proceedings should be given. They should respect directions given by the Chair and the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should neither criticise nor make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the person or entity's good name.

I call Reverend Karen and Mr. Trevor Lunn to make their opening statements. When they are finished, our members will discuss their contributions with them in rotation.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** I thank the Chair and members of the committee for the invitation to address them today. I grew up in a unionist background in east Belfast, raised by a single mum. I am currently the first and only female Baptist minister on the island of Ireland. I have been involved in ministry life for approximately 20 years and have worked both inside and outside the church walls. My work is focused on peace and reconciliation, and I am a leader of a peace hub, Soulspace, based in north and west Belfast. We are currently in partnership with different organisations such as the Anabaptist Mennonite Network, which connects peace hubs across the world. We are based at Forthspring community centre on the Springfield

Road in west Belfast, which is literally built into the peace wall. I have served as chaplain to two Lord Mayors of Belfast, and I am currently involved in various projects including, the Catholic-Protestant divide, gender equality, racism, LGBT+ rights, interfaith work, and so on. I am a champion of progressive faith and public theology as I believe in equality, inclusion and creating a fair society for all.

Who is my neighbour? This ancient question is foundational to my work. It stems from an ancient story told of a man who was beaten up and left on the side of the road to die. We are told that certain people who saw the wounded man chose to cross the road and ignore him. However, one man responded. He was from a different background, identity, religion and a different community. When he encountered the wounded man he had compassion for him. He took a risk and knelt down into the dirt and dust to help his neighbour. Why is this important? It is important because whether we have faith or not, this ancient story has the potential to help provide a unifying framework to build a nation of neighbours.

What is our context? The Good Friday Agreement is a document that examples this ancient story. The document provides the foundation for building a nation of neighbours with a commitment to “partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands”. Twenty three years ago 71% captured the vision and voted “Yes”. I am thankful for the brave leaders, peacemakers, thinkers and risk takers who brought about this agreement. I am thankful that my children get to grow up in a different Northern Ireland from what I did. However, we are still a wounded people. We only need to view our media coverage to discover that the political backdrop of Northern Ireland remains both complicated and complex. A few weeks ago I stood with local residents and community activists at the peace wall at Lanark Way. We created a human chain to prevent young people getting to the wall to riot. That evening I witnessed a deep sense of *communitas* and of togetherness. Ministering in the streets has informed me that the majority of people do not want to return to the past.

What is Ireland’s Future? A few months ago I took part in an online discussion concerning Ireland’s Future. During an era in Irish history when serious consideration is being given regarding possible Irish reunification, the danger is that just like the ancient story of who is my neighbour, we cross the road. In other words, we ignore the rising number of voices wanting to engage in conversations regarding our future. The question therefore is, what is the next stage?

Let us talk about a table of neighbours and a citizens’ assembly. I propose that the next step is to set up a fully funded citizens’ assembly to provide a table where people from North and South can come together in a place where all voices can be heard. A citizens’ assembly extends a conversation from being solely politically-led to include being people-led and providing an opportunity to cast vision, discuss, deliberate, learn and unlearn, and enabling us to plan for the future. Most importantly, the forum would contribute to this unifying framework as a nation of neighbours based on finding our common ground, common values and a common vision regarding healthcare, education, employment, economy, identity and so on. These are what matter to people most. Brexit is a stark reminder of the importance of carrying out the groundwork before a border poll is called. The baton of peace and reconciliation has been passed on to us today. We have a responsibility as peacemakers to have this conversation. There is a little phrase, *solvitur ambulando*, which means “it is solved as we walk.” It is important that we do not cross the road on this. I support the vision of Ireland’s Future and others in the setting up of a citizens’ assembly.

In closing, I commend and thank the Government for accepting the amendment put forward

in the Seanad last night by Senator Black in respect of the planning and preparing for a citizens' assembly. I thank the Chairman.

**Chairman:** I thank Reverend Karen for her very comprehensive commentary. I call on Mr. Trevor Lunn MLA to make his contribution.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** Good morning members and I thank the Chairman and the committee for the invitation to be here this morning. It is quite comforting to see so many familiar faces on the screen in front of me.

I will give the committee 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 of Lisburn from 2006 to 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, a member of the Royal Black Institution and was probably an Apprentice Boy as well.

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, where I attended, no Irish history was taught and that virtually no Roman Catholic families lived in my area. As I grew a little older and 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 11 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 the committee from the community house in 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 I hope they get the closure they deserve.

Despite all of this, I still regard myself as a "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 the southern Government and the public platforms for debate on both sides of the Border. I also 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, the reference even away back of Harold Wilson 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 should become more clear by the time we have this meeting but does not seem to be the case, the disarray among unionists, and the mixed messages not to say untruths coming from Westminster, are all contributing to uncertainty and doubt within the population and to the upsurge of violence, which at least so far is relatively minor.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Good Friday Agreement and the 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 of 50% plus one. It is being suggested recently 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 benefits arising from reunification. Ireland's Future is clear in its insistence that the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts must be respected as the only way forward. If that was not the case, I would not have joined the organisation.

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 we should 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. That is all I have to say at this time. I hope I have not run over my time and I am happy to take any questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Lunn very much for his comprehensive contribution. I spoke to Ms Michelle Gildernew MP earlier and she suggested that we take Mr. Paul Maskey MP and Mr. John Finucane MP first, as they have to attend the inquest statement at 11 a.m.

**Mr. Paul Maskey:** It is great to see both Mr. Lunn and the Reverend Karen at the meeting today. It is a very important aspect of the work that we do. It would be remiss of me not to wish the Ballymurphy families well today. This is a massive day. It is 50 years of campaigning for them. I know Mr. Lunn has been very much part of that journey with them in recent years as well. I thank him on behalf of my constituents in west Belfast for all that work over the years. I am glad that he will see that in the courts today. I would like to think that this committee would send its regards to all the family members today and wish them well. I hope it is a great success today for them because it has been a long time happening for them. I say "well done" to all the families.

I also thank the Reverend Karen. She mentioned the fact that she stood in Lanark Way shoulder to shoulder with community activists. I was proud and honoured to stand shoulder to shoulder with her in Lanark Way. I believe the actions that took place that evening helped to create some positivity around that area and stopped the riots. I think that was a very good piece of work done by community activists, youth activists and some political activists, as well as people like the Reverend Karen, who worked tirelessly to ensure that we worked together to bring peace to our streets in those days some weeks ago. It was a bit of work well done.

I thank both the witnesses for coming to the committee. It is a very important debate. Both Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn mentioned the citizens' assembly. My question to both is what more they think politicians and political parties can do to make this a reality. I believe that talking is good and that we get places when we talk. We can learn from each other. We can have that conversation with each other, which is very important. At today's meeting, what more can

we do as a collective to try to make this a reality? I thank them and I apologise for having to leave early, it is just because I have to be somewhere very shortly.

**Chairman:** Mr. Finucane is welcome to speak and Mr. Lunn and Reverend Karen can respond.

**Mr. John Finucane:** I will come in very quickly if that is okay. I echo Mr. Maskey's comments to both Mr. Lunn and Reverend Karen. They are both very welcome before the committee today. As a slight caveat to Mr. Maskey's question, I would be interested to hear their views on what they feel the Irish Government needs to do with regard to a citizens' assembly and why it needs to do it. A subquestion within that is what protections they feel need to be afforded and what actions can be taken to reassure those with a unionist background who cherish the union with Britain to ensure that their culture and identity is protected as we go forward in this conversation.

**Chairman:** If the witnesses would like to answer or if any other Sinn Féin member would like to make a contribution he or she is welcome to do so.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** Could I make a very brief comment? A bit like my other two Belfast colleagues I have to go to the same event. I extend the welcome to Reverend Karen and to Mr. Lunn and thank them for their contributions. I apologise for missing some of it as I was in the Chamber. I caught the tail end of Mr. Lunn's contribution. He will appreciate what it is like getting tied up in the Chamber and missing things.

I have seen both of their contributions independently and in terms of Ireland's Future going back a while now. I take great heart from the fact that through the initiative of our committee colleague, Senator Black, last night the Seanad voted for the establishment of a citizens' assembly. That is very important and significant and chimes with the work Reverend Karen in particular has undertaken. I know Mr. Lunn appreciates the importance of that as well. While I do have to slide out, I will certainly get the opportunity to read what has been said over the course of the meeting. I would love to hear their views on the importance of the adoption of that call by the Seanad last night and where it sits.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** I thank the Sinn Féin representatives for their welcome and their words. I want to say a couple of things in terms of the Irish Government. First, I thank all the politicians. It is not easy being in the political world in our context, but wherever they stand politically I think most people recognise that they work hard and we hear their heart and vision in that in terms of Ireland's future. What I would simply say is that they should keep doing that and keep connected to their communities. The beauty of a citizens' assembly is that it comes from the grassroots and it comes up. This will complement the work of the politicians because it gives the opportunity to be able to inform them and to give information back and to help the politicians shape matters, and if the day comes when we have a border poll that the politicians then run with that. It complements the work the politicians are already doing but it brings in people's voices.

I think Mr. Finucane referred to our precious unionist community. More than anything, it is important to say that the beautiful thing about a citizens' forum or assembly is that there is room at the table for everyone and it is important that we keep extending that hand of welcome. It is important that we do that right across our communities. I commend the Government. I thank it so much for last night, for the recognition that this planning and preparation needs to start for the citizens' assembly. I ask the Irish Government and our politicians to continue to the next



step of that and to work towards that. The folks that I work with really want to begin to cast vision and dream and just consider if there is something better out there for us.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** I thank the members for the questions. I thank Mr. Maskey for his compliments. He is quite right that I have been working with the families here for more than ten years now. To turn to what the politicians can do, the Seanad took a big step last night in terms of what they can do. They forced through the establishment of a citizens' assembly. Could I just point out that the British agreements that we have - the St. Andrews Agreement, the Good Friday Agreement, the New Decade, New Approach agreement and the Stormont House Agreement all reference the possible establishment of the sort of body we are talking about, in particular the Good Friday Agreement, which states that "a consultative Civic Forum will be established". It is not the only thing that has not been brought to pass arising from that agreement but it is there in black and white.

As to what the Irish Government can do to assist, I think the Irish Government would probably be more disposed to this move than perhaps the northern Government would be, but it has taken a good step last night. I tried to bring a motion before the House in Stormont to promote the idea of the establishment of a citizens' assembly, North and South. I have not made much headway with it yet because various parties are slightly resistant to the idea, but we will see where that goes. It is in its early stages.

Mr. Finucane mentioned protections for the unionist community and what would be built into whatever would come out of all this discussion. There are three sections of unionists. There are the ones who vote for the Ulster Unionist Party and would be perfectly happy with the way they are. There are those who vote for the DUP who would never accept what we are talking about, but there is also probably 40% of the population who do not vote at the moment. We have joined the rest of the world in not being very good at voting and those are the ones we would need to convince. There are some Protestant unionists who will never accept this and it would not matter what came out of this discussion, but the question is how big a minority are they and to what extent should their views be taken into account. Obviously they must be taken into account, but how important are they in the overall scheme of things? That is probably all I would have to say about it. It is a work in progress.

**Senator Niall Blaney:** Deputy Smith is running a little late and Senator McGreehan is on the way as well. I extend a warm welcome to Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn and thank them for their presentations. We have been calling for some time to have more unionists' voices at the table. The witnesses are very welcome here today. I am very interested in their approach and presentations.

To take the comments made by Mr. Lunn first, he referred to the unionist community needing assurances. Given all that has gone on in the past with respect to working up all the agreements up to the Good Friday Agreement, an awful lot of work went on behind the scenes to give that assurance to unionists. Reverend Karen spoke about taking people to the table. There were many tables and many people have been taken to them. There were many people taken by an awful lot of individuals who worked behind the scenes, which most people do not know anything about. That work has not really started yet. We have seen of late in recent months the difficulties in Lankford Way and other areas in Northern Ireland when political vacuums were created. Does Mr. Lunn believe assurances can be given to unionist communities, political leaders and unionist parties in Northern Ireland given the leadership? I would like to hear his view on that.

Reverend Karen mentioned taking people to the table, which is a great way of putting it, but we need many tables. I and Senator McGreehan, a colleague who is present and due to speak next, brought forward a motion on the Good Friday Agreement and the shared island unit last night and we discussed at length the idea of a citizens' assembly. I spoke against it on the night but we did not vote it down because I do not want to shut down discussion. It is my view and the view of the Government that it would be too early to have a citizens' assembly. We are not in that space yet. I feel that without the ability, first, to meet the unionist community and create that assurance, I am not sure a citizens' assembly would be as effective as we would like it to be plus I would be wary of setting the conditions and terms for any assembly without that political and unionist input. We are dealing with a very dicey situation. I would like to hear Reverend Karen's views on that. Moreover, when the coronavirus scenario moves on, I would welcome if members of this committee could go to Belfast and meet the witnesses and their communities. Many fires could be put to bed in that way than meeting such an assembly. I thank the witnesses again for their time.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** If it is okay with Reverend Karen, I will reply first. I thank the Senator for those comments. As far as the various agreements are concerned, it is important to remember not everybody signed all the agreements. The DUP did not sign the Good Friday Agreement. The guy who is liable to become its leader, in particular, walked away from the Ulster Unionist Party at that time and joined the DUP. The Ulster Unionist Party has told us recently it did not sign the New Decade, New Approach agreement. It was news to me but apparently it did not sign it and let us bear in mind that agreement has not been ratified yet. The St. Andrews Agreement was so inconclusive and vague and did what most agreements do, which is leave things open such as the Irish language legislation, which was approved by the British Government but not by the Stormont Assembly.

Moving on to the Senator's question about the parliamentary activity on Lanark Way, as I said in my opening statement, that activity has been relatively minor so far but that is not to say it could not become much worse, but I question whether there is an appetite for it. I can tell the Senator that in Lisburn, in my area, a loyalist protest was called on Saturday night which happened to coincide with the people coming out of mass just down the street on Chapel Hill. Nobody turned up for the protest. There was an effort by leading loyalists in Lisburn, as far as I understand, to try to play it down. No bands turned up, nobody turned up to riot and the main activity there was the police, not protestors. Nothing happened. If we look across the country, I know these things happened in Belfast and a wee bit in Portadown and Carrickfergus, obviously, but most of the country remained quiet. If we go about this the right way in a controlled manner, and I agree with the Senator it will not happen overnight and that it will take years, but the appetite is there across our population to move things forward and not move them backwards. I will leave it at that.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Lunn. Senator McGreehan is present and she might like to come in at this stage or Reverend Karen might also want to come in.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** Will I go ahead?

**Chairman:** Yes.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** I second what Mr. Lunn said. I thank Senator Blaney for his comments. He raised great questions. It is right to fear these things. It is right to have things we would be concerned about, but when we get to the core of what people want, I do not believe it is political. I believe it is the things we share together such as healthcare and



education and what I mentioned earlier. When we get to the core of people's lives, we need to acknowledge we have come a long way. Brexit has catapulted us to this place and we need to learn lessons from Brexit. It is a great reminder the groundwork is critical in this.

If we are going to set up a citizens' assembly with a remit to examine and explore Irish unity, then the groundwork, as Mr. Lunn said, will probably take years. In that there will be difficult conversations. The whole idea of neighbour has to be recognised. In Ireland's Future we talked about a warm house for all. This is not about saying one person is welcome and another is welcome. No one is an addition. This is already our home. The way the political stance is at the moment provides us with an opportunity to have these conversations. That is really what I want to emphasise. There is nothing to fear about conversations. The beauty about the story of the good neighbour is that when the man went to help the wounded, it never affected or diminished his identity. This is about gathering around a common vision and common goals and beginning to do the hard work based on experts. We need to be able to deliberate, learn and unlearn. It will be difficult.

These conversations are happening at kitchen tables. We have phenomenal grassroots community workers. All voices are there. People are doing this day in and day out. People have contacted me asking whether and how they can be part of it. Those are the people who I want to be heard. They include Kathleen, from the café, Sarah, the single mother, Jim, who is divorced, and Aidan, who is a mechanic. Those are the people we need to give the space to hear from. To leave this conversation off the table is not to put everything on the table. I do not think we need to have the answers but we need to begin to start this journey.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** I support what Reverend Karen was saying. Questions are being asked of me and my involvement in this. Some people were perhaps surprised with my involvement. I am being asked plenty of questions not by fellow politicians but by members of the public. The questions are about what happens to our health service, our education and our policing. People ask where Stormont House stands in all of this. I could list all the questions but committee members probably know what they are. I am not being asked about the threat of loyalist violence. I am not being asked about major political questions because the people who might ask me those questions have their minds made up. I prefer to go back to at least 40% of the population who are persuadable in both directions. I want the unionist population to make their case as well. This is not a one-way street. I agree with Reverend Karen on the point about the kitchen table. My grandchildren are asking me about this. It is a valid discussion and I hope it continues.

**Senator Emer Currie:** I welcome Mr. Lunn and Reverend Karen. It is nice to meet them. I read the briefings with interest. What is nice about today is we get a chance to engage at a human level with personal stories and opinions. That is positive. I would like to see more of that in this committee because it is about reaching out to people in their day-to-day lives and experiences in considering the future. I believe that is what is happening.

The conversations around a vision of what a new Ireland could look like are really important. Reverend Karen is right to say it is not political but outside of politics. It is about people getting engaged in this and asking what education would look like and what health could look like. Obviously, it is important we move aside from the "isms" and go into the conversations of a vision. I really welcome any participation in these.

I have said this before at this committee. There is a big difference between the engagement people have in the North and in the South. Some people are already very invested in this and

some are completely apathetic about it. Others are afraid to have the conversation. That is why I believe there is a significant degree of sensitivity around this. It is not to avoid it but to ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate, because it is so important.

The question around the citizens' assembly is about timing more than anything else and ensuring we are gathering the right momentum and doing this in a positive way. Senator Blaney referred to the talks and dialogue taking place before the Good Friday Agreement. We have to learn from that. We also have to go back to the 1960s and the civil rights campaign for social justice and all that was happening at that time. We have to allow people to get engaged in this conversation - that is what we call it. We have to allow people to get involved.

The question I have is around the civic forum and the North-South consultative forum. I talked about this last night. The Good Friday Agreement is so important and we have to defend it fiercely and implement it. I want to ask the witnesses about this. Who do they see becoming involved in the civic forums? I see it as an opportunity for the people who have been left behind and those who did not benefit from the peace dividend and those in business to consider the opportunities with the protocols for GB and EU markets. I see it benefiting North and South for tourism and the all-Ireland economy. That work should be happening. What are the views of the witnesses about progressing that?

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** My thanks to Senator Currie for that. It was very inspiring. What Mr. Lunn said is right. These conversations are already happening. The purpose of the citizens' assembly is that it brings structure. I am passionate about this. We have to think outside the Catholic and Protestant divide. We have to include our Muslim neighbours and the LGBT+ community. We have to include various ages. It is about recognition of the business people and the 1,000 people who already signed the document some years ago saying they were supportive of this. That list contains experts in the medical field, business people and people working in rural communities. It is about ensuring the work is done and the framework is in place. Someone mentioned about different forums and subforums and committees where those voices can be brought together and represented in a citizens' assembly.

I emphasise that this takes time. As Mr. Lunn said, everything has to be included in this conversation, including the conversations to support remaining part of the United Kingdom. That is important. At the end of the day, if a border poll is called, we will vote. That is the beautiful thing about democracy.

I commend the groups that already exist, including Ireland's Future and the newly formed Ireland commission and shared Ireland as well as the other groups working on uniting the United Kingdom and working together for a better Northern Ireland. These conversations are already happening. Groups are set up to do this. They are seeking to bring together a wide range of people. It is about commending them and ensuring their voices are representative because they have been doing the groundwork for some time.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** I echo what Reverend Karen has said. The question of how to populate a civic forum or citizens' assembly is an interesting one. I do not quite know how the candidates would be selected. Not having politicians would be a good start because a citizens' assembly would need to have a non-political discussion.

As regards people changing their minds and being prepared to move into a space where they would consider the kinds of questions I am trying to promote and that we are discussing, we should look at the voting figures. My ex-party, the Alliance Party, has suddenly seen a surge of

votes. One should bear in mind that the Alliance Party is agnostic on the Border situation and reunification, yet it has experienced a major surge in the form of DUP voters transferring to it. This was very much evident in the European Parliament elections. It was also evident in the last Assembly elections and it was certainly evident in the Westminster election, particularly in the Lagan Valley constituency.

My thrust is to compare the circumstances that have developed over the years in the Republic and Northern Ireland. Fifty years ago, Northern Ireland was the powerhouse of Ireland. In manufacturing terms, it was the big noise. Dublin was well behind the eight ball, as is said these days. This situation has changed dramatically over the years. Apart from the Republic having become a powerhouse of industry, technology and all the rest of it, it has made terrific social strides that people in the North did not see coming. We would have thought it would never have happened in the South. The Republic has shown us the way in terms of gay marriage, abortion and other social issues and we are having to play catch-up with a bit of help from the British Government. All these matters need to be discussed in something like a citizens' assembly. There are enough people in the North who are prepared to participate, listen and make their own judgments on them.

**Senator Emer Currie:** Last night, I read out the names of the victims of the Ballymurphy massacre. I felt it was important to do so and to acknowledge what an important day this is for all of us. While we are all here talking about the future, the past weighs heavily on us this morning. Today is an opportunity to hear the truth about what happened.

**Chairman:** I thank the Senator very much for that contribution.

**Ms Claire Hanna:** I thank Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn. It is refreshing to hear from them. I was really struck by Reverend Karen's point that what people want is not just politics. We have had a lot of that but it is a matter of getting into the substance. Reverend Karen will probably be aware the New Ireland Commission was launched last week by the SDLP. Quite a few months of planning were involved and there are to be quite a few more years of the same. Dozens of sectoral experts and thinkers have been assembled to try to get into — to echo quote Donald Rumsfeld — the known knowns, unknown unknowns and all the other matters we need to discuss, because the reality is that while we talk about the constitutional conversation, it is about so much more than the Constitution. My regret has been that even in the 20-plus years since the Good Friday Agreement, there has been so little talk and action concerning meaningful change in people's lives. I hope that, through the New Ireland Commission, we will consider the why of the new Ireland and not just the how. It is exciting work but it is quite clear already, even from our initial meetings and the various strands of work, that it is probably a marathon and not a sprint, or some distance in between.

Senator Currie's summary on a citizens' assembly is correct. It is right to start thinking about the structure, agenda, some of the topics, the parameters and how we might take it forward. There are really good ideas circulating but I am not sure whether the initiative is ready to burst out just yet.

Many of us are thinking about the future but today is also very much a day on which our very grim past is in view. Like others, I express solidarity with the Ballymurphy families, who have been relentless in their campaign and dignified. They have done so much of the detailed work that credible investigations should have been doing. I look forward to hearing that work vindicated today. I regret the families have had to wait so long.

Today, with horrible timing and, I believe, ill intent, the UK will be announcing an amnesty on prosecutions and, we understand, a departure from the Stormont House Agreement and the attempt to try to get to grips with the past. How do the witnesses believe the past can somehow be decoupled from the future in this debate? We are aware that no matter how many years go by, whether in decades or centuries, the past and all that went on here plumbs into many people's political viewpoints. How do we go about detoxifying in this regard? Understandably, both witnesses have talked about the threats of violence over the protocol and other such matters. With their experience of different communities, how do they believe we can make a break and move forward with some sort of joint, shared commitment to non-violence and to putting the ugly part of our past behind us together?

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** I thank Ms Hanna. She mentioned the SDLP initiative, the New Ireland Commission, at the start. It is a very good initiative. I wish it a fair wind. I hope it does not overshadow what we are trying to establish, which is a non-political citizens' assembly. There is no reason it should but we will see how it goes. I wish Ms Hanna well with it.

I am glad somebody raised the issue of legacy given the day that is in it. I am referring to the British Government's timing, or Mr. Boris Johnson's timing, and bringing this into the Queen's speech. While the Queen's speech had to be today, did this have to be mentioned in it? We will see what the Queen is actually told to say but it does not sound good. People have asked me about this and I have said I would not like to be in the position of having to tell the Ballymurphy families that if they have a successful day today, there will be no prospect of prosecution or further investigation. I could not say that to them.

The UK Government has been at this for some time. It may be that it will get away with it on some basis. I am waiting to see what is actually in the document. It is hard to believe that blanket immunity would be issued for people. At the same time, if it goes the other way and soldiers are prosecuted for what happened in various incidents here, we should bear in mind that under one of the agreements, many prisoners, terrorist prisoners, were let out without having completed their sentences and that others who perhaps should have had much longer sentences had them restricted to just two years, with the prospect of some remission. Therefore, I would not realistically expect soldiers to go to jail, but that should not mean there should be no investigation and no attempt at prosecution. There is such a thing as a suspended sentence. We have a long way to go with that but it is certainly a matter for both the New Ireland Commission and the citizens' assembly to discuss.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** I thank Ms Hanna for her words and leadership. It is great the SDLP has set up the New Ireland Commission. There is room for everyone. All of the groups can complement and inform one another and work together. There is no reason there cannot be a sense of togetherness in a citizens' assembly. I love the range of stellar and good people from all walks of life that the New Ireland Commission has pooled together, while also recognising the work of other groups.

To add to what has been stated, we are a wounded people. Speaking as a minister, my heart aches today for the Ballymurphy families. It is a heavy day. My prayers are for all the families and the people standing with them. We all stand together on this.

As to dealing with the past, I do not have the answers. There are great people working on the ground with the deep wounds we will carry into our conversations. Those wounds cannot be something on which we shut the door. When we are wounded, we can sometimes get caught up looking into all we know, but the way to *solvitur ambulando*, that is, walk our way through

that, is to provide fresh vision. Fresh vision can provide hope and a way forward even when we have to walk wounded. All of us have been wounded by the past. Our common ground is that there is room for fresh vision. I do not view the wounds of our past as something on which a door should be closed. They are part of who we are, but we can walk wounded and have been doing so. However, we need to ask ourselves whether we can remain in this place or if we are ready to embrace a fresh vision of a better future.

**Ms Claire Hanna:** That was very well put. It is a shadow on the conversation but it does not have to define us. Perhaps we can find ways to process what happened.

Keep up the good work. As I stated at last week's meeting, we should let a thousand flowers bloom on this because some people will be plumbed into networks and organisations like the citizens' assembly, Ireland's Future and the New Ireland Commission while others will not be and will just hold their views quietly. It is a question of how we bring them all together. I look forward to working with Reverend Karen over the next few years.

**Deputy Peadar Kirby:** I thank both of our guests for their interesting presentations. I wish to reference the families of Ballymurphy and send our solidarity and thoughts to them in their long search for justice. I hope they achieve a large part of that today.

I agree with what Reverend Karen said about timing. I often find it interesting that commentators say that matters are moving slowly in the North and so on, but these issues take generations to change. Even in the South, the difficulties stemming from Civil War politics lasted generations, and they were not as deep as those that exist in the North of Ireland.

Mr. Lunn indicated how the 50% plus one was important. There is a considerable debate in the South on whether the 50% plus one is the right way to proceed. We must have voices to indicate the importance of the democratic decision, and that democracy has not changed in all of these discussions.

I would be a little cautious about a citizens' assembly. There are different views in the South as to how effective the Citizens' Assembly was in recent years. It has a role in allowing people who may not be politically connected or are free of the shackles of political parties to discuss their experiences and ideas, but the stakeholders in this process have to be inside the discussions tent. If they are outside the tent, they can feel detached from discussions. It would not be good for them and they would be less likely to be positively disposed towards discussions.

I agree with Reverend Karen on how the debate in the South sometimes gets distilled down to flags, anthems and so on. In reality, bread and butter issues are the most important elements of most people's lives - the health service, jobs, education and their ability to reach their full potential.

I was struck by something when I carried out research into the all-Ireland economy approximately three years ago as a member of what was then the Oireachtas Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation. I spoke to people from all backgrounds - those who were involved in unions, business, education, health, etc. They all pointed to three elements, those being, planning together, funding together and delivering together. If we could achieve those three elements on an all-island basis, it would mean a more efficient and better service delivery for everyone.

The important word is "convergence". Convergence does not need to have a threatening aspect for a particular community. If we converge elements of society, for example, public



service delivery, taxation and regulation, it makes it easier for life to function within the island of Ireland, be that in business, education and so on. Areas where there is a lack of convergence make life harder. Regardless of what background people come from, we should be able to achieve convergence in many areas of life North and South. If people then make a decision towards unity in future, and I hope they will, achieving that unity will be far easier because many aspects of society will already have been converged. What are our guests' views on convergence, what is possible under the current Administrations and how can we work towards that?

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** Deputy Tóibín referenced the fact Reverend Karen had said matters moved slowly and had to move slowly, but I could point to a couple of major issues in the South that moved slowly for 500 years before suddenly accelerating and being dealt with effectively and quickly by the South. Those were the two significant social issues that have already been mentioned.

The Deputy referred to 50% plus one. There is a suggestion that it should be changed to a more definite expression of opinion, perhaps 60:40 or two thirds. That suggestion is largely coming from south of the Border rather than north. I can think of a referendum - the Brexit referendum - where 50% plus one was perfectly acceptable to the people who wanted to leave. They got their way. I do not see any reason to change what has been laid down in an international treaty, namely, the Good Friday Agreement, under which 50% plus one on both sides of the Border is sufficient. To me, that is a referendum.

The Deputy made an interesting point about convergence. When does the discussion on convergence start? Does it start after a referendum? Not really, as it must start long before that so people know what they are in for and what their prospects are.

Reference was made to the health service in particular. When I consider the health service scenario on both sides of the Border, I am aware that in the South the Government has the ten-year Sláintecare programme to bring the health service there up to the point where it could be free at the point of delivery for everybody, which would be great. That would be in line with the National Health Service we have. There are people who defend our health service and say that we are far better off than those in the South. Maybe we are slightly better off in some ways but we currently have waiting lists exceeding 300,000. This is partly as a result of Covid-19, obviously, but the problem goes much further back than that. It is going to take years to solve. When I look at the two health services I do not see an awful lot of difference. When I look forward I see even less difference. If we could converge the two systems and increase the level of co-operation that actually already exists across the Border, it would be a good step along the road.

On the other issues, I admire Educate Together in the South. It can be compared to our integrated education movement. I wish it well. It is something that could also be worked on jointly. All of these issues are resolvable.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Sometimes in the South we get distracted, as many people do, with flags and anthems and so on. I believe the biggest step the South could take towards persuading people would be, without a shadow of a doubt, the development of a free-to-access healthcare service funded centrally by taxation. Even people in the nationalist community in the North of Ireland would have concerns around migrating to a less accessible health service.

I agree 100% with the point made on the education system. Pluralism is the key that unlocks many difficulties on how Ireland should function in the future. If we have a pluralist society,

people can be confident their cultural background, their values and their objectives will have an equal respected place within a new Ireland. This would be a big step to allay fears among many people.

**Senator Frances Black:** I must first say a huge thank you to Mr. Lunn and Reverend Karen for coming to the committee today. Listening to them both has been very refreshing and inspiring.

Before I make any comments I send out my solidarity to the Ballymurphy families today. I cannot even imagine how they are feeling today, with all of the stress, anxiety and work they have experienced over the past years. I want them to know I am certainly thinking of them. I commend Senator Currie on calling out the names last night in Seanad Éireann. It was very moving and I thank her for that.

The witnesses' presentations this morning were very powerful. There is no doubt that everything has changed with Brexit. Despite voting by a clear majority to remain, the fact is the North is being dragged out of the European Union against its will. This brings enormous problems and puts front and centre the question of our constitutional future. For me, the issue is around human rights. Irish citizens in the North must have equal rights. Brexit undermines this, which is a concern.

I cannot stress enough how important planning and preparation are. History has shown us that change often comes very quickly. It is simply not tenable as a political position to say we would like to wait until change picks up the phone and announces itself as on its way, setting out a clear timetable for its arrival. We must focus on planning and preparing. Listening to everyone here, I realised we are all on the same page when considering Ireland's future given the New Ireland Commission and the shared island unit. I loved Reverend Karen's comments on us all working together. Let us all work to bring everybody together to look at how we will bring about change.

The only question I have for Reverend Karen and for Mr. Lunn is around their experiences in their own communities. What is the biggest fear around this conversation? From our perspective of the Good Friday Agreement, this is what we need to hear today. What is that block and that fear? It is very important we look at how we are to go forward on this issue. I thank both of the witnesses. I really appreciate them and they are both inspire me.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** I am happy to say something on that. I thank Senator Black for her welcome and for the opportunity to be here. I commend the Senator's work last night in putting forward the amendment, for which I thank her.

I would say that the greatest fear around the issue is timing. The effect of Brexit is still very fresh. As I said earlier, if we have learnt anything from Brexit, it is about the lack of planning. When people do not know what they are going to vote for, it automatically creates a nervousness. Sometimes, because these conversations are heightened and are happening, as they should be, people automatically panic. People have said to me they are not ready for a Border poll tomorrow. I spend a lot of my time reassuring people that the purpose of the citizens' assembly is to begin those conversations. Leaders in communities have a responsibility for that. It is not about championing, waving the flag or saying "Let us do this". It is about settling people and saying all we are asking for at the moment is for conversations.

When I get down to the core bread and butter with people on this, I will be honest with the

committee, I have not had one person say to me “I am not up for that”. I genuinely have not had this. Certainly after the announcement of this on Twitter last night, I have found people contacting me asking if they can be part of this. It is about settling people’s fears about it being rushed through, telling them it will take time and that we are committed to the hard work of planning, preparing, listening, learning and unlearning. It is about reassuring people that we will take our time with that so that when the day comes, the political parties, the unionists and those North and South will have shared their vision. People will go to vote on that day, whenever it is, and they will know exactly what it will mean for their families and what it will mean for education.

There is a fear on the part of people who think it is moving too fast. I believe this is highlighted on social media and in the press when it is actually not moving too fast and is going at a good pace. The citizens’ assembly is a priority and needs to be set up to start those conversations. Those can begin now. They are already happening.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** It is nice to see Senator Black again. She mentioned, like many others, the Ballymurphy families today. I am going down the road shortly to join them and I will pass on the comments and emotions that have been displayed today by so many representatives from the other side of the Border. I think it is absolutely marvellous and I hope that the Ballymurphy families have a successful day. It is going to be very emotional day for them but it is nice to hear that the members support them so openly.

Senator Black asked about the fear and what people are afraid of. When I was growing up, people were afraid of domination by the Catholic Church. That was the big thing. I remember the father of my first girlfriend who told me one night, when we were having a discussion about this, that as far as he was concerned the South was not ruled from Dublin but Maynooth. That was a big strapline for people in those days, that the Catholic Church dominated everything. I dare say that there might have been some validity to that argument but it certainly is not the case now, and rightly so. The South is an open-minded, outward-looking cosmopolitan type of society and long may it continue to progress. That fear is gone. There is a fear of a loss of identity and culture. The ability to display culture is quite a big thing. I see no reason in a new Ireland why that should be interfered with. In fact, given the South’s record in these things, it will be more than open to making sure rights of identity and culture are protected.

The health service has already been discussed. People would like to hang on to our 300,000 waiting list health service as an alternative to whatever is going to happen in the South. I cannot discount that that is a big thing but it will be resolved, I think.

Lastly, there is the cost of living. I have seen so many comparisons between the cost of living in the South and the cost of living in the North. At the moment, I find it quite impossible to decide who is better off. In the South, wages are higher but so are prices, costs, taxation and all the rest. How do you make the comparison? How do you make the comparison looking ahead to what would be the situation after reunification? It is impossible. There is also the cost of reunification. That is not really a fear for the population. That is a fear perhaps for government. There are other fears but identity, the health service and the cost of living are high on the list and we have to deal with those.

**Chairman:** I understand Deputy Michael McNamara is present.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I do not know if I can join the meeting because I am not in the Leinster House complex. While I can listen to proceedings, I do not think that I can contribute, but I would like to.

**Chairman:** Sorry, I was told you were present at the meeting but you are not.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I am not in the Leinster House complex and I do not want to pretend otherwise. I am in my constituency office in Clare still so it is probably improper that I contribute in any substantive way.

**Chairman:** That would cause controversy. Thank you, Deputy. I was misinformed and thought you were present at the meeting in the official format, as agreed by Standing Orders. It is nothing to do with you or me but that is not the case.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I am not going to pretend otherwise.

**Chairman:** We would like to hear the Deputy's voice on the next day. It is back to Sinn Féin, followed by the Labour Party.

**Mr. Francie Molloy:** I welcome Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn to this important debate. It is good to hear voices of different angles and it is very important to have them at a meeting of this committee.

Reverend Karen talked first about neighbours and I think that the neighbour issue is very important. Although I live within what is termed "the murder triangle" I always found that my neighbours worked together. It is a farming community where neighbour helped neighbour and it did not matter from what religious domination they came from, so neighbours is a very important issue. I remember one unionist man saying to me that, for him, the land was the most important thing. Whether you called it British or Irish, his 200 acres of land were more important to him than anything else. He wanted to work it and live it, and it is very important we have that within the rural community.

What both Mr. Lunn and Reverend Karen advocated for and it came across very well was strong leadership. What we need is strong leadership. People keep saying that now is not the time and we must wait and get everybody on board before we start. If we had everybody on board we would be well down the road at this stage. If civil rights campaigners had waited until everyone came on board before starting to look for rights, then we would not have got them. That is more than 50 years ago, so things do move slowly whenever we get into this situation. This is now the time to make the most of and build on the investments of the past, particularly European investment, in building community structures, infrastructure and all that exists.

It is very important that we get a unionist voice into discussions. People talk about having the right structures in place but I think you can be too structured so we need more informal discussions. Someone asked me a while back would I talk to a number of unionist politicians and I said of course but I would rather talk in Moygashel Orange Hall where I could talk to ordinary unionist, Protestant working people, and that is key to getting a conversation going with the working-class community. We are all part of that and, to some extent, people may have different visions of how to do that.

How do we get that vision? How do we bring the citizens' assembly into the working-class Protestant community, unionist community or whatever term we want to use? How do we get the grassroots unionist response? I found at council meetings at different times that unionist, the DUP and others would agree with a lot of the messages that we brought, but because we delivered the message, they would not vote with it. However, it is very important, if we are representing ordinary working-class people, that we give them an opportunity to be heard. We did not have much say in partition and partition happened very quickly after all without much

discussion or input into it so let us have a better say in this matter. I believe the assembly must form another version of a more informal discussion other than its regimented parliamentary structure. It is an assembly after all and it is a good mechanism for a transition within an all-Ireland structure. It does not have to be done away with. It can be part of the all-Ireland structures for managing the changes that might actually happen within it.

How do we get the voice of the grassroots unionist community, not the politicians but the working-class people, into the civic forum and citizens' assembly and get discussions going? I do not think it has to be one discussion; it can be several and very informal. I thank the witnesses for coming along and it is good to hear everyone.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I thank Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn for their important contributions. Their contributions are important in the sense that often we focus on the politicians, particularly those in the DUP and Ulster Unionist Party, as representative. They remind us that unionism is not just the elected politicians of the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party, and that there is a much broader unionism that we need to speak to in the North. The contributions of the witnesses are important in that regard.

Reference was made to the citizens' assembly. Prudent and careful planning for a referendum is inevitable. It may be five or ten years away but it is inevitable, especially with the way events in Scotland are going. This will have a significant impact on our island. We need to prepare.

My fear is some representatives of unionism insist they will not participate. Should we allow a veto on a citizens' assembly or on responsible planning for a referendum because some refuse to engage? I am keen to get the thoughts of the witnesses on that.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** Mr. Francie Molloy made the point about unionists being prepared to listen to the message but having something of a hang-up if the message was coming from Sinn Féin. That is a valid point but perhaps it is not as serious now as it was. When I first joined the Northern Ireland Assembly, most DUP members would not turn their head to speak to Sinn Féin members. Those days are long gone. Some DUP people might surprise us by the extent to which there is conversation and co-operation displayed with Sinn Féin members. I hope no one takes this the wrong way, but I believe the idea of a citizens' assembly has to be led by citizens and not by Sinn Féin. This is because Sinn Féin by association, whether correct or otherwise, has baggage and this upsets unionists or some in the unionist communities. When I joined the assembly I made a conscious decision to treat everyone the same because everyone was there with the same mandate and people voted for them. I find that useful. I look around the screens. I have good friends on the screen, including some who have just departed. Some are members of Sinn Féin and the SDLP. There are nationalists and republicans. I do not really mind as long as they talk to me and I can talk to them.

How do we involve unionists? I said earlier there were some unionists who will never listen to this argument. However, I believe they are a diminishing band. My impression of unionism at the moment is that there is a substantial section prepared to listen and talk. Once they start, they may even develop some enthusiasm for it because the alternative is to cling on to a link with Britain when it is so painfully obvious that large sections of the British population do not see it as important.

Deputy Mac Lochlainn mentioned the Scottish situation. If Scotland votes to leave the union, then to me the union is finished. I cannot see any rationale for trying to maintain a united



kingdom of three countries, one of which is Wales and another of which is Northern Ireland. I believe little England would come to the fore with English nationalism, and in no time at all we would be driven to another situation rather than working toward something with accommodation and compromise and coming up with something fair to everyone. It is not easy but it is about the long term.

I have to go down the road now to the Ballymurphy event. I am sorry to leave early but I really would like to be there for the start of that event. It is starting about now.

**Chairman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Lunn, for your contribution today. We understand and acknowledge the reason you are leaving, as other members have too. We found your contribution enlightening and informative. I look forward to meeting the committee physically when we can do so. I hope when we are free to travel to the North, notwithstanding Covid-19 and so on, we can meet Mr. Lunn and Reverend Karen to discuss more fully their views. I appreciate and fully understand the reason for leaving the meeting now.

**Mr. Trevor Lunn:** All committee members would be welcome in the North any time.

**Senator Annie Hoey:** I know Mr. Lunn has to leave. My thanks to him and Reverend Karen for their interesting contributions. These are not especially long questions. I know we keep going around the issue of the citizens' assembly. I am particularly interested in it. I was sceptical of the concept when such assemblies were set up first. Now I have become a big convert. The real incredible value of them is they are made up of regular Joes picked in a relatively random way and there is no alliance or allegiance. That is one of the great strengths. It is non-partisan and all of that.

Based on the conversation today in particular, the role of religious leaders North and South in the citizens' assembly and how that should play out is relevant. Is it that there may have to be two different forums? Does there have to be one forum and one assembly? Will the witnesses give any thoughts on how we integrate? I know several forums are happening at the moment, including the shared island forum and so on. What are the thoughts of the witnesses on that? Do we need to keep the citizens' assembly as it is in the sense it is made up of regular citizens or Joes? Is there a way to combine them or have them as separate things? How willing would unionist communities be to come to the table of a specific structure like the citizens' assembly?

The other question was for Mr. Lunn but I will ask Reverend Karen. In his opening statement Mr. Lunn mentioned the proper groundwork that needs to be done with unionist communities to reassure them their identity and culture will be protected in a united Ireland. Are there any further thoughts or expansion on the kind of key assurance the community would need from the South? From whom do those assurances need to come for them to be taken in good faith by the community?

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** Mr. Francie Molloy mentioned this point earlier, as did several other folk. I do not believe this has to be simply one conversation. The first thing to say is these conversations are already taking place, whether at the kitchen table or within communities. There is room for everyone. All these things need to be discussed and thought about at the next stage in setting up a citizens' assembly. Senator Hoey is right. If we waited for everyone to be on board, where would we be? We need to begin. That is why I keep going on about the Latin phrase *solvitur ambulando*. We need to begin to work and take those steps. These things will be solved and we will work these things through as we go ahead.

We also need to recognise there have been phenomenal people over the years - the Good Friday Agreement is testament to this - who have been risk takers. These have been people who crossed the divide and recognised we are neighbours of each other. My community is your community and my people are your people. That is the whole heartbeat of being a neighbour. Those people exist. People poured onto the street in Lanark Way, ranging from politicians to youth workers to parents and residents, to say “No” to this. They sought to create a better way to do this. This shows there are people living out day by day what it means to be a neighbour. Recognising the shared island publication is a great initiative. It is about building a nation of neighbours. It has already started.

A question was asked about getting unionists on board. Mr. Lunn said there will always be people who will pull up the drawbridge. It is back to the ancient story of crossing the road and wishing to ignore it and not be part of it. The reality is the majority of voices I hear from and the people I work with in all sections of the community are open for conversation. They recognise this conversation needs to happen and are ready for it. I believe we will be relying on grassroots community leaders, youth workers and people who work across the communities. Earlier I mentioned our community centre is built into the peace wall. It is people who were doing this long before I or anybody else ever came along. The baton has been passed on to us but the gatekeepers, those who want the peace and reconciliation, are there. This gives us an opportunity to do that but it is important to recognise that it is already taking place. Valuable work with community activists, day in day out, is already being done. When I was chaplain to the Lord Mayor of Belfast, this was an opportunity to get a window view into everything that was happening in our city. These are the unsung heroes as they are working and doing this, day in and day out. The citizens’ assembly gives us a chance to pull those folks together. Whether it is groups that have been set up or it is our grassroots, this is a recognition it is already happening.

The other thing I want to say, and I say it as a mum, about the 50% plus one, and there is much conversation about that and I do not see any reason to change it, is that I automatically think of when I play football with my son and every time I go to score a goal, the goalposts are moved. We need to stick with and to begin to work our way through this. It is not a case of asking how we engage. People are already engaging. It is just to maximise on that.

**Senator Annie Hoey:** I was wondering if Reverend Karen has any thoughts on the assurances or what is it that political leaders need to do to be taken in good faith or if there is still a body of work that needs to be done a little bit further down the line before those sort of assurances can be given. I suspect it is perhaps a little bit further down the line but I would be very interested to hear Reverend Karen’s thoughts on that.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** Where we all stand politically is down to everyone’s opinion. I mentioned on a number of occasions that we need to commend the people here and the people up North and across the board for the work they do as political leaders. I do not see it being one or the other, if I am honest. The people on the ground and, in particular, the voices of a citizens’ assembly and the different forms of engagement that are taking place complement and inform politicians. There are people who can be go-betweens. As I said earlier, when we hear from certain politicians, people react in different ways depending on where that person stands politically, but within those communities there are the settlers. These are the people who say this is going to be okay. There are also people who, simply because of Brexit, panic and say we may go too fast on this. The reality is when you settle that and explain this will take time, we are just engaging in conversations and making it a bit more formal, then people get it. Yes, political leaders are key in this process but the people-led aspect is equally important.

**Mr. Mickey Brady:** I thank Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn for their presentations. It was good to see Trevor again, who I know through the assembly. This is more of a comment on my part. It has been my experience over many years that both communities in the North probably have much more in common than they often realise. As an example, when I was in the assembly, I was invited a few years ago, I believe, by Westbourne Presbyterian Community Church, by its Minister, Reverend Mervyn Gibson. This was to do with the welfare cuts. One of the things that particularly struck me was that both sides of our community were equally as badly off because of the Tory austerity measures that were being imposed and continue to be, even at this stage. Would Reverend Karen agree that, for most people in the North, it is the bread and butter issues, which some have already mentioned, which are a priority, and the effort of trying to exist? This is especially the case for people with disability - historically, we have a higher number of disabled people in the North, for whatever reason - and those people trying to exist on the benefits system. There is a myth abroad that the benefits system in the South is worse, but of course it is not. It is trying to convince people, if we are going to bring this argument forward, that they are going to be better off and that their quality of life will be improved. That is a very important point to make.

The dialogue that was involved when I spoke to a loyalist audience in east Belfast was, unfortunately, interrupted by the flag protest at that time. On a day-to-day basis I deal with people from the loyalist-unionist-Protestant community and we have absolutely no issues. We are there to help everybody.

On the question of getting a unionist voice, there was an opportunity for one of my own constituency, Ian Marshall, to be re-elected to the Seanad, but unfortunately he did not get the support he probably required.

**Ms Órfhlaith Begley:** I welcome Reverend Karen to the committee and the discussion that has unfolded. I commend her on the work she has been doing during the recent disturbances at the interface. It was excellent to see the community come together, from political leaders to herself to local residents.

As to the discussions we are having today on a citizens' assembly, it would provide a platform to discuss a wide range of issues. In particular, given a discussion on Irish unity is now well under way, it would provide a platform in which to elaborate those discussions and to plan and prepare for what a new Ireland would look like in terms of the health service and a wide range of issues that affect everyday society.

Does Reverend Karen believe a citizens' assembly or forum could help engage unionists in discussing what a new Ireland would look like and what way they would like a new Ireland to be shaped? On a second question following on from that, could a citizens' assembly also act as an aid to reconciliation going forward?

I also extend my solidarity to the Ballymurphy families today because they have been on a long journey towards truth and justice and it is to be hoped today will be a significant step for them. I thank Reverend Karen.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I welcome the contributions of Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn. As Ms Hanna and others have said, this is a particularly difficult and traumatic day for the families of the victims of the Ballymurphy massacre. We sincerely hope the findings of the inquest will bring the truth. We at this committee have often discussed with the families of victims that the least people deserve is the truth about what happened to their loved ones. We sincerely hope

they will get the answers today.

Mention was again made today of the fact the British Government put out a narrative last week about an amnesty for people who committed hideous crimes. That would be a terrible renegeing on an international agreement and commitment and it would be absolutely reprehensible if the British Government were to go ahead with that. It would again damage trust in politics.

Mr. Lunn referred to the Good Friday Agreement and that it being respected in all of its parts was the only way forward. If we want to get to a new, agreed Ireland and a shared island, we must honour the commitments that have been made through international agreements, especially the Good Friday Agreement and all its successor agreements, and we need to have them implemented.

Mr. Francie Molloy touched on the issue of the civic forum. As we know, the civic forum is provided for in the Good Friday Agreement under the stewardship of former First Minister, David Trimble, and the former deputy First Minister, the late Seamus Mallon. It was established in 2000. My recollection is that it has not met since 2002. It is, again, provided for in the Stormont House Agreement under the establishment of a civic advisory panel. There should be more attention paid to putting in place that civic forum because it was to deal with economic, social and cultural issues.

Mr. Lunn used the phrase “to provide a forum for non-political discussion”, but that was in the context of a citizens’ assembly. I do not hear much attention being paid to the need to set up the civic forum that has been provided for since 1998. My understanding is this is a matter for the assembly and the Executive. Perhaps Reverend Karen would offer her view on that, or in subsequent discussion with Mr. Lunn perhaps she would mention to him that I believe much more attention should be paid to putting in place the civic forum that is provided for and which would, as mentioned by him, provide that non-political forum for discussing issues that concern the people every day. As Mickey Brady and others said, what concerns people is welfare, health, jobs, education and so on. We need those issues being discussed by the non-elected people as well. In the interests of time, I will conclude on that point.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I would like to comment on a point made by Reverend Karen in regard to the 50% plus one. It is important to say that 50% plus one is the democratic standard. It is the democratic mandate. To deviate from that risks my vote or someone else’s vote being bigger than the other. That is a very important principle of democracy. The concerns that are being articulated around it reflect more of an unwillingness to force an annexation or to replicate an unwilling counter majoritarian scenario. It is not about changing the numbers, rather it is about the broader conversation we are having, which is about great dialogue and being invested in and talking to each other and creating the circumstance which, whatever the constitutional outcome, is one that has been agreed together and moved forward together. That is where I see that focus on the 50% plus one conversation going. It is interesting to see how the conversation on that point alone, which is trying to express a generosity about the circumstances in which we have the conversation, risks becoming polarised very quickly. I am not suggesting Reverend Karen is doing that, but I am observing this series of conversations.

On the citizens’ assembly, it is a fantastic and necessary prerequisite for any major constitutional change. One of the issues discussed by this committee was the engagement between the universities, which appeared to be engagement between the universities around the Border rather than in Belfast and Cork. It would be really interesting to have a citizens’ assembly on a county basis, thus forcing counties throughout the country to engage with each other and at an

early stage. My comments are observations on the dialogue thus far rather than specific questions. I again thank the witnesses for joining us today and for participating with us.

**Senator John McGahon:** I will be brief. It was great to hear Reverend Karen say there is still a good proportion of people involved in unionism in Ireland who are open to dialogue. That brings me to back to the point made in recent weeks that there are three minorities as such in Northern Ireland, the nationalist minority, the unionist minority and the soft unionist minority in the middle made up of both sides of the community that could go either way.

On the citizens' assembly, it has worked well here in the Republic. I think it is the way to go. On another occasion we might, perhaps, have a conversation about the best way to engage that third minority I spoke of, which is the soft unionist minority who would be willing to engage and open up that dialogue, and how best we can include those voices in that debate.

**Ms Michelle Gildernew:** I also thank Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn for participating in this debate. It is important we heard from them. I am delighted they are here. I hope the wee man continues to make a full and speedy recovery. I have one question to which I would like a one-word answer, if possible. What one thing would encourage unionists to get involved in a discussion about our future? Would it be the NHS or is there another issue the witnesses believe would tempt them to get involved?

**Chairman:** I again thank Reverend Karen and Mr. Lunn for engaging with us today. It was an enlightening discussion. It was important for us to hear what they had to say coming from their different perspectives. Owing to Covid regulations, this meeting has to conclude. I ask Reverend Karen to be brief in her response.

**Reverend Karen Sethuraman:** I thank everyone for the opportunity to be part of today's meeting. It has been an absolute honour. I have loved meeting everyone, some of whom I follow on Twitter and others of whom I have had some interaction with previously. A lot has been covered in the past few minutes, but I will try to keep my response brief.

Ms Begley asked if unionists would engage. I believe they would. Mr. Lunn mentioned that 40% of people do not vote. There will always be a pool of people who will pull up the drawbridge and not engage, but I still believe the majority would be open to conversations. On the question as to whether this would contribute to reconciliation; it would. Anything that seeks to bring together what is divided is reconciliation. This would be a phenomenal beacon to the world in terms of a willingness to go further down the road on this.

On the civic forum, Deputy Smith is correct that it last convened in 2002. I think the 2014 Stormont House Agreement also provided for the establishment of a civic forum, but that has not happened. If any of the representatives from the North are listening in, that might be something worthy of consideration. To be honest, there is nothing wrong with setting up a civic forum, but it needs to go beyond the North. We are at the stage now where we need to do North and South if we are to build on the work that has been done already and is being done in terms of the shared island dialogue.

Ms Gildernew asked what would help unionists. We need to maximise the welcome and listening. As I said earlier, we are going to go ahead with this and they would be an addition to that work. This is already our home and they should work with us to make it better. That constant welcome is important. As someone in ministry life once said to me, "You've got to keep reaching out your hand even if it's cut off." It is important we do that. The welcome and



listening is important. For me, 95% of ministry life is listening to people, not trying to solve their problems or fix them. When people feel listened to, they will contribute. I again thank the committee for this opportunity.

**Chairman:** Reverend Karen is very good on time. I would say that your religious ceremonies are spot on as well as your address to us here today.

This meeting will adjourn now until 9.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 18 May, when we will meet representatives of the shared island unit. I very much thank Reverend Karen and Mr. Trevor Lunn.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.30 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 18 May 2021.