The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

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Teachta / Deputy Fergus O’Dowd sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.
Mapping Diversity, Negotiating Differences: Constitutional Discussions on a Shared Island: Discussion

An Cathaoirleach: On behalf of the committee, I very much welcome Professor Jennifer Todd, University College Dublin, and Dr. Joanne McEvoy, University of Aberdeen, who are here to discuss their recent report Mapping Diversity, Negotiating Differences: Constitutional Discussions on a Shared Island. I thank them both for attending.

I will explain some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practices of the Houses with regard to references the witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. 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 they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as do those witnesses giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts, 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 and they should respect directions given by the Chair and the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or 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 good name of the person or entity.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I call on Professor Todd to make her opening statement, to be followed by Dr. McEvoy.

Professor Jennifer Todd: I thank you all very much. We are delighted to be invited to be here. We have agreed for Dr. McEvoy to begin and I will follow up, if this is acceptable to the Chair.

An Cathaoirleach: Yes.

Dr. Joanne McEvoy: I thank the Chair for inviting Professor Todd and I to join the session today. We are delighted to be here to give evidence. We are reporting evidence from our research that has taken place over several years. Over the next ten minutes, we will explain that research and describe it as simply and as straightforwardly as we can. We will then invite questions. I will take five minutes and then pass over to Professor Todd.

I will first give the committee the context of the research. Our initial discussions took place in the wake of Brexit when, as we know, there was increased discussion on the potential of constitutional change on the island in the future. That discussion was dominated by official nationalism and a clear reticence to engage on the part of official unionism. We wanted to explore the multiplicity or diversity of voices across the islands on the issue. Our work was motivated, inspired and driven by the need to explore this multiplicity of voices from different communities, groups and citizens on their political engagement. These were citizens and communities who felt disengaged, marginalised, or disinterested from the constitutional discussion that was emerging in the wake of Brexit. On most counts this wide group of people amounted to close to half of the population on the island. It is clear that only with their participation in the discussion on the constitutional future of the island would such a process by fully inclusive and
democratic, and only with their participation and inclusion would it be legitimate.

Research questions were driven by this need to engage with these citizens and communities and especially around several important questions: do such citizens and groups want to participate in a constitutional discussion; what is important to them and what are their priorities should they wish to participate; and if they do not wish to participate or if they face obstacles in their participation, what are these obstacles and what might be done about them? We engaged in open-ended conversations with some 120 politically and constitutionally disengaged participants across the island in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. We engaged with them in a series of in-depth interviews, in focus groups, and in a series of informal deliberative cafés, which is a participatory research method. We talked with migrant groups, disadvantaged young people, university young people, women’s groups including Border women’s groups, gender activists, and citizens and communities all accessed through community organisations. They came from North, South and from the Border area. They came from different backgrounds. There were people who identify as unionist or as nationalist, and those who identify as neither. Their main interests were in social issues rather than directly political issues.

Most of our work was with mixed groups, mixed focus groups and mixed deliberative cafés. We wanted to access their views on this debate and on North-South relations. We designed the research in a way that would focus on the participants’ own voices and their own perspectives to drive and to shape the discussion in the way that they wanted it to, to focus on their values and their priorities, and to facilitate research in a way that enabled them to voice their own concerns. We also designed a set of focus groups conducted by Ipsos MORI with a representative sample of the constitutionally undecided. These were groups of people who have been surveyed to say that should there be a referendum on the future of the constitutional status of the island, they would be undecided and would not know how to vote. This was another 30 participants, half from the North and half from the South.

Following these different projects, we tested our findings in a policy seminar and in academic workshops. We worked with fellow academics, with politicians and community partners. We had a policy seminar in June 2022 with a number of policymakers from Dublin and Belfast. Our work was really about developing and experimenting with informal and small-scale deliberative sessions. These sessions were designed to be educative and explore different policy questions with the communities that we had engaged with and how people relate these policy problems that they had identified as important to the wider political and constitutional questions. Our work was multi-method and evidence based.

Although the work was not representative, we suggest that the findings are meaningful and credible in showing patterns of response of large sections of the population. It helped us to map ways towards having a more inclusive discussion on the island’s constitutional future. The findings are mapped out and described in more detail in the report and a series of academic publications. I will start to explain the findings and then I will invite Professor Todd to take over.

We found considerable and important convergence among these diverse groups on their values and their priorities for what they wanted to see happen in the discussions. We found the more people talked, the more there was convergence. Importantly, we found that when there was greater participation, this did not bring about increased polarisation, as some fear with this discussion. Rather, it allowed participants to think about and share their views and avoid having knee-jerk reactions. Frequently, participants re-engaged with statements they had made early on and qualified them, learned from one another’s viewpoints and shared those experiences. I will now hand over to Professor Todd.
Professor Jennifer Todd: Most of our participants, even though they said they were disengaged from politics, were in fact interested in the constitutional issue. They wanted to be involved in the discussions and they saw it as important. There were of course practical issues that stopped them going to meetings, but the central obstacle, or the most surprising obstacle we found, was that most of all and most convergent, was that they did not like the way the constitutional issue was being discussed. They said they found it ideological and that they had spent lots of time moving away from what they thought were old ideologies and they did not want to go back to them. They said they did not care much about things like the technical details of a referendum or the exact institutional form of an united Ireland. What they wanted to talk about were the social problems that exist now, and the shape of a possible united Ireland, that is, what a good society would look like and whether a united Ireland would be a better society. That was common between people from unionist and nationalist backgrounds, and from neither. What they wanted was constitutional discussion to begin with what some of them called organic or bread and butter issues, and gender rights and socioeconomic issues. That sounds like a shared island perspective but the more we explored, the more they wanted to go beyond this. They wanted to go beyond it in two ways. Obviously, they wanted grassroots, bottom-up participation and to help define what the problems were rather than have people making speeches about them. They also wanted to move beyond the problems to ways of resolving them and to ways forward. Therefore, they wanted to open up the constitutional issue via things such as gender guides to how to create a better society. They wanted unbiased information on this. They were deliberative participants. They often mentioned the citizens’ assemblies and so on and they wanted unbiased information to be made publicly available on both sides of the Border, showing how the problems they experienced in everyday life would be impacted by different constitutional arrangements. They also wanted policy-makers to take their concerns seriously. Border women in particular said they were constantly being consulted and that their consultations were then put into a briefcase or a filling cabinet somewhere and did no good.

We found a particular lack of knowledge in the South towards Northern Ireland, and a particular need for discussion in the South, in the Republic of Ireland. It turned out in the Ipsos focus groups that the southern focus groups expressed much more hardline attitudes than the Northerners did. They said things like “No” to any change in flag or anthem. One young man said his ancestors had fought for Irish freedom and he was not going to change what they won. What was interesting about the South was that the more people talked, the more they changed their minds. Sometimes they changed their minds in practically the next sentence. By an hour and a half later, at the end of the focus group, all of them said things would not work without compromise and negotiation. What this shows is that deliberation and discussion is especially important in the Republic of Ireland to allow Southerners as well as Northerners to reflect on what is necessary in a potential united Ireland. If we look at the one comparative situation of reunification in recent history, which is German reunification, what happened there, partially because it was done in such a hurry, was that East Germany how to change a whole lot while West Germany did not change at all. Even decades later, that still provokes resentment in East Germany. What we have to avoid in an Irish situation is the South staying the same and the North changing a lot because that will not work. We have to prepare for both South and North being able to change to something like a new Ireland.

I will mention a couple of policy issues to finish up. We are academics not policymakers but several clear recommendations have emerged from our research. Deliberations have to go beyond the big set piece citizens’ assemblies, which work well, to small informal local participatory events and there has to be a lot of them. As Dr. McEvoy said, these events have two functions. One is educative and the other is defining the problems which policy has to resolve
on a local and spatial level and helping define the form of a united Ireland, or possibly united Ireland of the Good Friday Agreement, that can then go to the public at larger-scale events. One example is healthcare. Our Border women discussed fairly problematic issues of the provision of healthcare across the Border and they were very expert in doing this. What followed from what they were saying was that any possible model of an united Ireland would have to be able to deal with those dysfunctions of healthcare in the Border area because of course they would be even more scandalous in one State. What these small-scale discussions do is to find problems and constitutional experts and policymakers can then look at possible ways of resolving these and put them back again to the public. How is this to be done? Two models come to mind. The first is the model which worked quite well in the decade of commemorations. This involves sets of small-scale events happening in locations from schools to local councils and so on, where local deliberations could be had on the issues that need to be looked at. The challenge is do such deliberation on a cross-Border basis. We feel it is very important to do that. Another example comes up in other countries where there are days of deliberation across the entire island in different forums, from schools to online forums to anything from councils to mother and child groups. Again, the challenge will be to collate the results, input them into new constitutional models to be put back again to the public.

We concluded that co-ordinated collaborative research is necessary to maximise participation, inclusion, accountability, and legitimacy in constitutional debate. We proposed the establishment of a dedicated research centre to collect and collate research results from big surveys down to local informal deliberative events and to map a cumulative programme of research over, say, the next five years. We considered it important this would be done now before a referendum becomes imminent. An alternative mechanism would be to incorporate a diverse and inclusive academic team into a renewed shared island unit. We thank the committee members for inviting us and we look forward to their questions.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Professor Todd and Dr. McEvoy. We will now move to the different groups, beginning with Sinn Féin as per the rotation order.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank Professor Todd and Dr. McEvoy. This is an exemplary piece of research not only in what it tells us but how it was conducted because I can clearly see it was done from a community development perspective. It is primary research that reaches people who sometimes can be hard to reach; people who are left out of decision-making, people who have a significant amount to offer and people we have a lot to learn from. Even from reading the paper, I can see things I have not seen cited before so this committee is grateful to everyone involved in this research, together with the work that was presented by the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University, which includes Fidelma Ashe, Eilish Rooney and Joanna McMinn. I can see correlations between the research and findings of both groups. This contributes very significantly to the work this committee is doing. The witnesses will know that we are part way through our hearings on issues relating to the constitutional future. The broad headings for our work are finance; and economics, including pensions and social security; healthcare; environment; natural resources; education and skills; democratic planning; women and constitutional change; and human rights and equality. The witnesses’ work will feed into that. What we discuss here will come under a few of those different headings, particularly democratic planning and women and constitutional change. Hopefully, our work here in respect of the experts we invite in to discuss these issues will also be helpful to the witnesses’ discussions in the future, to their research and to the women and others who have contributed to that work. Working together, we can bring the conversation on.
It is particularly helpful that the witnesses’ research focuses on the multiplicity of voices. I will probably go to the end to ask my first question because I really like what they are identifying regarding what the future steps might be. My colleagues will come in on the other questions. What do the witnesses need in order to progress their work? What do these groups need? As they do not want the research to be left on a shelf, what do we need to scale up this really valuable work for them to be able to participate and in terms of the collaboration between the different groups that are doing work that is not the same as the witnesses but similar in order that we can have a framework for that? What does the framework look like? Regarding the research centre mentioned by the witnesses, who would do that, how do we bring it on and how can this committee help?

Professor Jennifer Todd: We need a three to five-year research programme and this needs funding for at least an administrator and some academics and ways of collating and collaborating. Regarding whether this is within the existing unit, I work in the Geary Institute in UCD and Dr. McEvoy and I work with ARINS in the Royal Irish Academy while there are units in Trinity College, DCU and in the North. It is not up to me to say which institution it should be in but we do need a three to five-year programme that is well funded and can mesh survey research, which is very expensive; advice on big citizens’ assemblies; and small-scale co-ordinated research. The research centre needs to be connected to the Civil Service because we need expert help in accessing people and accessing local councils and so on. Two of us cannot do it. It has to be inter-institutional. As the Deputy noted, we have worked with Fidelma Ashe and her colleagues such as Eilish Rooney. Theresa O’Keefe is doing similar work in UCC so a lot of people are doing this.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That gives me a good picture. In terms of resourcing the groups themselves, what do these groups need to be able to overcome some of the barriers identified by the witnesses in terms of their participation? I am thinking of the practical things they need to be able to come to the table.

Professor Jennifer Todd: I will give one short answer and then Dr. McEvoy can come in. Part of what they need is routinised channels of communication so that it is not just a politician or civil servant dropping in once and then going away. We need routinised modes of communication. These informal deliberative cafes are cheap. They cost less than €1,000 so it is not expensive. Co-ordination, collation and analysis are more expensive.

Dr. Joanne McEvoy: The community groups with which we engaged talked a lot about consultation fatigue without action and a perception that when they are asked their views, they articulate their views and their perspectives or what they think end up in a filing cabinet and not much happens thereafter. What they would prefer to see is a mechanism for interaction and sharing of expertise, how they define the problems as they see them on the ground and their experiences can feed into policy for policy to suggest ways in which these problems can be ameliorated or public service delivery improved and for them to have an opportunity to feed back in so it would be an interactive process, relationship or mechanism rather than simply consultations.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: In terms of how the witnesses see it or how the people with whom they consulted saw it in terms of feeding into a citizens’ assembly, Dr. McEvoy is basically talking about a citizens’ assembly plus, plus, plus, namely, all the preparatory work to bring people to the place of a citizens’ assembly. Could she describe how all this feeds together? Could she discuss the Scottish referendum and the measures that were used there to involve hard-to-reach people as well?
Professor Jennifer Todd: What is now being talked about internationally is what is called systemic deliberation. This builds deliberation in small-scale local units and builds communication between these and more intermittent large deliberative assemblies. There are several experts on that in Ireland so if we were to go forward with this, we would want people like David Farrell and Jane Suiter and others in DCU, UCD and Trinity College who work on deliberation to look at the ways deliberation can take place at different levels - basically multi-level and multi-location deliberations that feed into each other. There are examples of this in other countries and certain US states.

Dr. Joanne McEvoy: To add to what Professor Todd said, we found there was an appetite when we engaged with community organisations for such a process of sustained and systemic deliberation in which they could participate but that they would prefer to deliberate and discuss issues that are relevant to the constitutional question but not a citizens’ assembly on the constitutional question or the topic of a united Ireland. It would be more about bringing deliberation to local communities around policy issues. For example, healthcare and education would be important issues. The question then would be how to connect that deliberative process to the wider constitutional question and deliberation on that. It is a mix of small-scale locally based deliberative events and a larger process.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Is there an opportunity within, say, the PEACEPLUS programme to bring together such a structure? This committee makes recommendations to the Government regarding what is needed, what it would look like and what the outcomes of it would be. Can the witnesses help us do that?

Professor Jennifer Todd: This sort of thing has to be done by more than two people, so we would want to build a network to do it, but something like PEACEPLUS could be very valuable. The difficulty is it is really only the Irish Government at the moment, given the British Government is not interested, that can build the expertise on the island.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The institutions, we hope, will be back up and running soon and we all recognise the need, at least in this committee, to have the institutions back up and running as quickly as possible. Is this work that could be done under the communities portfolio regarding grassroots and the feeding-up from there, with collaboration between the Department here and the Department in the North? At the end of the day, it is just about giving people a voice. It is not about dictating to people what to say or feel, but the value of this work is enormous into the future. My party colleagues will speak to this later, but we will do whatever we can to be useful in ensuring the voices that have contributed to the witnesses’ research are respected and that there will not be just the consultation fatigue they mentioned. We should show it is valuable, and there is a willingness among all parties and none within this committee to ensure the value of that work will be captured and combined with the other work we have been doing as a committee. I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank Professor Todd and Dr. McEvoy for a very interesting opening statement and compliment them on their work. As Deputy Conway-Walsh said, it is always a concern that we do not get to talk to people who feel marginalised. I was surprised to hear Dr. McEvoy mention consultation fatigue. I have often thought there was not enough consultation with the groups they mentioned and I am delighted there has been such widespread consultation. It is very important to get speaking to the different groups.

The witnesses stated in their opening remarks that the process has to be inclusive to ensure disengaged participants, both North and South, will be involved in the process. Over the years,
having been involved in various cross-Border programmes and so on, it was always a concern to me that we were not reaching the people for whom the programmes were intended. I have often seen people participating in North-South groups and so on and, knowing some of the people who participate them, I have found they are often better informed, whereas people who have not taken so great an interest in social, economic or political issues may not be engaged. The witnesses’ reach to those groups, therefore, is extremely welcome and important.

They said something like 50% of people are not interested in the narrow constitutional issue but they want the overall issues that affect them daily to be front and centre in all deliberations. That is a good starting point and it is extremely important. They said those people have their own voices, values and priorities. It makes eminent sense when we talk about small-scale deliberation, more at the micro level than in a large, macro grouping, carrying out research or putting forward recommendations for a decision. Dr. McEvoy stated that the more we explore, the better, from the point of view of informative discussions.

Professor Todd spoke about Border women complaining about their inability to access healthcare across the Border. As someone who lives near the Border and represents two of the southern Ulster counties, Cavan and Monaghan, I have a reasonable level of knowledge of issues in my neighbouring constituencies north of the Border, where there are particular issues. The witnesses mentioned local councils. When this committee was formed on the previous occasion, the first time the shared island unit made a presentation to this committee, one request I made to it was to use the knowledge and expertise that exists in our local authorities. In fairness, many local authorities North and South, in the darkest days of this island, were working together and trying to ensure the people understood one another. Joint projects were put forward and brought to fruition, at a time when there was very little North-South co-operation or very little east-west co-operation and when the political climate was extremely difficult. Would it be possible to expand on the concerns expressed about the healthcare issue, in particular by women in the Border counties?

**Professor Jennifer Todd:** There were a couple of concerns among three different groups and they all started off with many frustrations. Often, it was with one specific issue. For example, one woman had had a baby in the North and was living in the South, so had to come back to the South and photocopy all our medical records to give them to her doctors in the hospitals in the South. This became a discussion point throughout the seminar in the context of the difficulties of communication between hospitals.

I am not sure whether my machine is working properly, so I might ask Dr. McEvoy to continue.

**Dr. Joanne McEvoy:** When we held our deliberative pathway sessions with three groups on the Border in Monaghan, they were three hour-long sessions. Working with these community groups, we asked them what they would like to talk about and what their priorities were for the wider constitutional discussion, and they identified healthcare as essential for them. The way in which we structured the session was that the research was very open ended and we first invited people to talk about their lived experience and what they see as important. Much of that discussion focused on problems of communication between the North and the South. They talked about being in a position where they felt able to surf between the two systems, but there were many frustrations in trying to access service delivery. They felt there was a lack of joined-up thinking across the Border in regard to healthcare. They want to see improved co-operation between Departments and between hospitals, improved infrastructure for communications and improved access to services on both sides of the Border.
Deputy Brendan Smith: Deputies O’Dowd and Tully and I represent Border counties, and while I will sometimes come across a woman who has given birth to a baby and works in Cavan, for example, I come across more queries from people in south Fermanagh who wonder why they cannot access oncology services in Cavan General Hospital and have to go to Belfast or Derry for some of those services. There is so much that could be achieved if we had more co-operation. There is some co-operation. Altnagelvin Hospital is so important for Donegal, as is Our Lady’s Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin for paediatric care for children in Northern Ireland. Of course we can build on that. When the institutions are up and running in Northern Ireland and the North-South Ministerial Council is working, I sincerely hope there will be progress in that particular area. The witnesses referred to a lot of research that is ongoing within the universities and research institutes and that is very welcome. They said it needs to be co-ordinated centrally and that makes eminent sense. Far too often those of us in politics, and I am sure those in academic life, can be talking too much to one another instead of reaching out to other people or people reaching out to us as well. From that point of view it is very important that research is co-ordinated and that we do not have overlapping or duplication of projects. There are a lot of universities in the North and South and of course in Britain, and there are many relevant research institutes North and South. I see that a lot of those research projects are funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs reconciliation unit and by the shared island unit as well. Naturally, we want to see more of that. How were the groups picked? Was there just one session with the groups or follow-up consultations with groups that were met?

Dr. Joanne McEvoy: We first identified the kinds of groups we would want to engage with. We wanted to engage with women’s groups, migrant communities and young people. We had focus groups through Ipsos MORI as well with citizens who we had already identified through surveys as being undecided on the constitutional question, “Should there be a referendum?”. The way in which we sought access to the groups we were interested in was through networks of community organisations. Essentially, we started off through our own contacts with these community organisations. We worked with the umbrella women’s organisation in the Republic of Ireland and similarly with other organisations in Northern Ireland. We worked with migrant community umbrella organisations in the North and then smaller ethnic minority organisations in the North and South. With young people, again we worked with different associations, student associations, the Washington Ireland Program and so on. It was really through a network of community groups and through our own contacts that we were able to access them. By moving from the umbrella organisations deeper down to the smaller locally based community groups, we ensured we got to the grassroots communities. Does Professor Todd want to add to that?

Professor Jennifer Todd: Due to the time and funding available, we only did single three-hour deliberative sessions. We believed it would be much more useful to follow up by doing one health deliberative three-hour session and then a few weeks later to bring politicians in to look at ways to resolve the issues identified in session one. We wanted to move between more politically focused and more socially focused issues in the confines of the relatively little funding we had.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I understand from listening to the witnesses today that the people who were involved in the deliberations were more interested in the social and economic issues rather than the narrow political issues like constitutional issues, political structures and configurations, etc. Were the participants interested overwhelmingly more in economic, social, bread-and-butter, day-to-day issues than purely political issues?
Professor Jennifer Todd: Yes. We interviewed some politicians on the side. We had one party-political person - a councillor - among our various focus groups. All the guests were primarily interested in social issues, and not always just economic issues. Some were passionately interested in gender politics or things like women’s health or reproductive health. The disadvantaged young people we talked to were really interesting, and interested in social issues and in a sense in communication. They had absolutely no trust in politicians. They were kind of political but they did not like politicians and they wanted to talk.

Deputy Brendan Smith: We are not shocked by that revelation. Did social media play a part in informing the views of participants?

Professor Jennifer Todd: The young people, yes. I am not so sure about the older ones.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Was Professor Todd concerned about the influence social media had?

Professor Jennifer Todd: I am concerned but not from our research. We spoke to disadvantaged young people. This was clearly well planned. We worked with community groups and so on. They were really impressive young people. They got their information from social media, but they also listened to each other - North and South, Protestant and Catholic. We could see they were thinking about these issues and so on. I was not worried about them but I could see why people were worried about misinformation from social media.

Deputy Brendan Smith: My final question, on the issue of participation, was addressed earlier by Professor Todd. Were 50% of participants from Northern Ireland and 50% from this State? Was it roughly that divide?

Professor Jennifer Todd: It was, more or less.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Black is next. Before she speaks, I will say that I looked at a television programme she featured in recently. I thought it was a remarkable assessment of her career and ambitions and the work she has done. I congratulate her.

Senator Frances Black: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I appreciate that. I want to say a huge “thank you” to Professor Todd and Dr. McEvoy. They are doing phenomenal work. I feel bad that this is the first time I am hearing about it. It is wonderful to hear about the work they have been involved in and the research they have done over the last three years. I thank them most sincerely because it is such important work. I have two questions. First, what inspired the witnesses to start this phenomenal work? What were the numbers of participants, if that is possible to answer? It feels like the participants really wanted discussions. I hear what the witnesses said about it being a bottom-up process that was reflective of lived experiences and real problems on the island. That is absolutely key for people on this island. The fact participants were concerned with socioeconomic issues and not simply institutional ones is so important.

The other question is around the shared island initiative, which is doing phenomenal work. Is this something the witnesses see the shared island unit taking up the baton of, along with them? Is that what they would like? Do they want the shared island unit to come in and continue this work along with them? There are three questions there if that is okay.

Professor Jennifer Todd: I get my evidence by talking to people, and talking to ordinary people in Northern Ireland. If I am writing about Northern Ireland, I go back to mid-Ulster, where I was born, and out to Newtownards or somewhere like that and talk to ordinary people.
Part of what inspired the work Dr. McEvoy and I carry out is the sense many of my colleagues, whom I talk to all the time, are kind of top-down academics. They say the big questions are when the referendum is going to be held, whether it is going to be held before or after something else, what exactly is going to be asked and so on. These are big questions, but they did not seem to me to be the prior questions or the questions people I talk to, either in the North or in the South, were thinking about. They also seemed to send people to sleep, except those who were really concerned with this matter. That is what inspired me. I was counting up the number of participants. We talked to at least 155 people; probably more like 160-plus. Dr. McEvoy may wish to take over.

**Dr. Joanne McEvoy:** The inspiration for the work was really in the post-Brexit moment when the discussion about the future seemed to grow legs and become heightened. It seemed there were voices and viewpoints that were crowded out and once we began to tap into this there was a feeling on the part of people that should this discussion go ahead and should there be a process of discussion, that it needs to proceed with caution. It needs to go slowly and to take into account how ordinary people feel on the ground and what they want to see as part of this discussion, other than a focus on institutions.

Much of my other work is on institutions and on power-sharing, so I quite agree with the deliberations about potential constitutional and institutional designs for the future. However, that misses a big part of what people want discussed. When we talk to people they also, in quite a positive way, saw the discussion as an opportunity, as even potentially transformational, that there is an opportunity to make a better society for everybody across the island but that could only be in a way in which these problems are identified and considered as part of the discussion. There is a fear that should the discussion proceed in a way that avoids or does not give space to ordinary people to express what they see as important and their values and priorities, we would be missing an opportunity.

**Senator Frances Black:** On the policy recommendation relating to the shared island initiative, can the witnesses give us a bit more detail about what they would like from that first recommendation? I can see both witnesses are smiling.

**Professor Jennifer Todd:** The shared island unit, if I understand it correctly, started off really quite small. It still is, although it has expanded a bit. It does not really do informal, grassroots discussion and the question is whether it can, perhaps in the future, be expanded more as an all-island body to look at research from the bottom up as well as set piece discussions and so on. I do not know if that is politically possible or not. It strikes me as one way forward, but it is only one. Other colleagues have suggested other ways forward. South Korea has a ministry for reunification. I am not sure that is necessarily the best way forward. An expanded shared island unit that is opened up to allow it to deal with constitutional as well as socioeconomic issues could be one vehicle that already exists and that could be expanded.

**Senator Frances Black:** Is working with the shared island unit something Professor Todd would like? Let us say more funding was put in from the shared island unit to the work she is doing to continue it and maybe go into more depth on this. What she is doing is really vital. Working from the ground up is absolutely vital. Is that something she would like to see from the shared island unit?

**Professor Jennifer Todd:** I would definitely like to see it increase its bottom-up capacity and strengthen the commitment to a programme of research over three to five years on that, which could be co-ordinated. Again, it would then not just be two of us and two people here
and two people there doing something. We clearly need co-ordination to do this to the best effect.

**Senator Frances Black:** I thank Professor Todd for that. The shared island unit is doing work but it is a small team. Maybe it needs to be expanded.

I have a final question, which I hope the witnesses have time to answer. It is about expanding on the role of gender in constitutional discourse. The debate is obviously dominated by political parties, which can be quite male-dominated, despite the incredible strides made by women politicians and activists. How do we create more inclusive and productive forums for discussion that are more appealing for women and other underrepresented groups?

**Dr. Joanne McEvoy:** I thank the Senator for the question. We have done a great deal of work with some women’s groups, in particular in Monaghan. They were calling for exactly that, namely, some increased engagement, some inclusion and these kinds of small-scale deliberative events. That brings us back to the question of the infrastructure required to set up those sessions. In discussions with those groups, they focused on women’s rights, gender issues, healthcare and so on, but they also wanted to see ways in which they can discuss and deliberate with others across the two jurisdictions, but also to feed into policy. That is the key takeaway from our work with them; they want ways in which they can seek to influence policy and have policy speak back and inform on their potential recommendations. That then becomes a conversation between grassroots and policy and represents increased interaction. Professor Todd may have something to add.

**Professor Jennifer Todd:** I do not; I agree.

**Senator Frances Black:** Yes. That is absolutely vital. From my experience of travelling up North a lot, I know any time I talk to people the main concern is healthcare. That is true in the South too, but especially in the North. Everybody is really impacted by the crisis we are having. From the witnesses’ experience of this work, what findings have they had in the context of healthcare specifically?

**Professor Jennifer Todd:** One of the findings that came from our deliberative cafés is that we do not resolve the healthcare problems on a regional, simply cross-Border basis. It was our finding that commitment is needed from the politicians of Belfast and Dublin or London, Belfast and Dublin to get the big knocks sorted out. The women were really good at pointing out what needed to be done and what was not being done and what was coming out in each of the cafés was the participants were getting very frustrated because they could not see how to do it. It was that movement from real expertise on local and regional problems to what to do politically to resolve this that we needed extra discussions to deal with. That movement has to involve coming back to political will, constitutional issues and how to reorganise administration such that it does not lead to all of these knots and traps at every turn.

**Senator Frances Black:** Does Dr. McEvoy wish to comment?

**Dr. Joanne McEvoy:** Just to reiterate that in the sessions, the women’s groups were very articulate in identifying the problems but they wanted to see political will to solve these problems, as Professor Todd already said. They felt it was not for them or for the voluntary sector to sort out the problems. In waiting for potential solutions, they want to see greater co-operation to sort out some of these problems and, as I said already, interaction between grassroots and policy.
An Cathaoirleach: Does Mr. Molloy wish to comment? He is online.

Mr. Francie Molloy: It is an important report and important academic research. I imagine the present is a great time to research and come up with a vision people have for the future. That is what we are missing - how we create opportunities for a new Ireland. I was interested in what the witness said about people not really being that interested in constitutional changes but more in social changes. Do the witnesses take from that there is an acceptance constitutional change will happen and we need to start building the infrastructure and social mechanism to deal with the issues that will come about with that constitutional change? I know from my interaction in the past with unionists, for instance, where I live - it is an area that was termed “the murder triangle” during the Troubles - it was difficult enough to engage sometimes but I had conversations with neighbours because you live beside them and talk to them. Often, people asked me if I ever talked to Protestants. I said that if I did not talking to Protestants, I would talk to nobody because my neighbours are Protestants. That was the conversation. I thought in some of the conversations that they wanted to engage in discussion but found it difficult because politics is seen as a dirty sort of word and dangerous. There is an opportunity to create that discussion. I like the idea of cafes to open up small discussions. A constitutional convention is a big convention and if the decisions that come out of it are advisory, that is good enough, but very seldom are they changed. It is important that to be part of that overall constitutional convention, there are small consultations to engage at local level and bring people along.

I thought that the research showed that people are not really interested in whether there is a change in the national anthem or the flag but more in issues around social changes. It would be good if we could get that conversation opened up. When the witness spoke, I thought of the opportunity we would have if the Assembly was back up and running again. There is a chamber there, which was the old Senate chamber. That could be used as a discussion chamber for an ongoing Assembly. One problem with political structures is that everything is based on motions and political input and there is no opportunity for discussion with ordinary people on the ground. It is about creating an opportunity to have a discussion with people, where they can come and have their say in a venue created for that purpose.

Concerning the future, coming back to the previous question about how the witnesses see this developing, what structure do we need to engage further and develop this? I recall an issue around remembrance Sunday, which we are coming up to again. I got advice from a unionist to invite people into my council chamber when I was chair of the council because whenever you invite people into your venue, you make the rules. When you go to somebody else’s venue, they make the rules. How do we get opportunities to engage with people? We brought in unionists from within the British Legion. They asked what they could bring with them. I said, “Whatever way you normally go to these events; I do not know.” They asked if they could bring flags and banners and I said, “Yes”. They also asked who would take the photographs, which would become an important issue. I said that we would take the photographs, give them to them and they could use them in whatever way they wanted. It was interesting - in the final analysis of the whole thing - that when we were taking the photographs, even though I was the mayor, I could not get anybody to sit on either side of me because nobody wanted to be too associated with a Sinn Féin mayor in that situation. Two elderly women came forward and said I did not seem to be that harmful. I found that with that open discussion people were having, people could start to engage better. How do we engage these cafes on a wider scale, cross-Border, internally and cross-community, in local areas, halls and businesses, whatever the case may be?

An Cathaoirleach: Does Mr. Maskey wish to speak? He had his hand up.
Mr. Paul Maskey: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I also thank Dr. McEvoy and Professor Todd for this very important work. Going through the document and the report they produced sets out clearly their hard work and commitment to get the outcomes they did. It is not an easy piece of work with all this engagement but it is very important. I commend them on this work. My party, Sinn Féin, set out a commission over the past year to do people’s assemblies across Ireland. I think we have done ten at this point. The first was in Belfast in the Belfast Waterfront Hall in October of last year, I think. I was involved in the organisation of that event. I think there were more than 300 people at that meeting. When you bring a large number of people together, sometimes it is hard to get someone to say something in front a big audience like that. That evening, it was very easy because many people put their hands up and we extended our time. It brought people together from a wide range of backgrounds. There were educators, academics, health workers, sports enthusiasts, people representing disability groups, trade unions and people representing the business community. It was very important. A report was produced on that evening in Belfast and on the nine others across the island. It is important work. The witnesses met at least two organisations in my constituency of Belfast West, the Falls Women’s Centre and the Shankill Women’s Centre. I commend them on doing that. I have no doubt they had a lot of good answers and truthful and frank conversations with the two organisations. They are first class in the job they do not only for women’s rights but also in making sure our communities are a lot better and progressive. They are very progressive organisations doing great work. I am delighted that the witnesses met them for their report.

The gender issue has been touched on. Are there obstacles that impact on women participating in some of this conversation in greater detail? Do they feel ownership? Are there blockages or hurdles faced especially by the women’s sector at this time? I ask Professor Todd to elaborate on that point, please.

Professor Jennifer Todd: I will briefly say something about all three of the issues raised by both Mr. Molloy and Mr. Maskey. The provision for the future is what can absolutely be talked about in small informal gatherings in a way that is necessary now. We found that it was not that everybody was agreed that constitutional change was going to happen but that there was a strong sense that if provision for the future can be more or less accepted with regard to values and so on, then if that is you do not get your first preference, it is not so bad, because you would still get this vision and these criteria for what a good society is going to be.

On the area’s discussion chamber, the assembly, systemic deliberation is always “both and” not “either or”. There is a chamber in the assembly in Strormont and that could be used as a discussion chamber. Equally, with “both and”, with regard to what talk there can be, and the various ongoing discussions in all sorts of sectors, systemic deliberation is supposed to connect up rather than say it is done this way, not that way.

As to what the women’s sector needs or what is important there, it relates to some of the institutional details. Dr. McAvoy is an expert in power-sharing and I have also done some work on that myself so it is not that women are unable to do this. Many of the voices talking about the institutional details of a future united Ireland are male voices and many of the women and gender activists we talked to said that this is just not the way we think about these things. The women, gender and LGBTQI+ sectors want more organic deliberation, which comes from where people are actually at. That term “organic” is one people are using a lot and comes from what people are actually concerned with, and what comes up from there to look at what the political answers to these questions are. That also means openness from the top down. It was not that there was too much consultation. When Dr. McAvoy was talking about consultation
fatigue, it was the case of while some of these women from the Falls Women’s Centre and the Shankill Women’s Centre are always asked for their opinion but their opinion is not always taken into consideration. It is accepted, then it stops and they have to give it again next year, the year after and the year after that. Some of these women were talking about being asked the same things again and again, they were saying the same things and it still was not making any impact on policies.

**Dr. Joanne McEvoy:** I would just like to echo Professor Todd’s point in response to Francie Molloy about whether there was an acceptance of change. There was an overwhelming interest in the discussion but not necessarily acceptance of change, and certainly not change as something that is inevitable. The process of discussion should be seen as an opportunity to reflect on the problems that face ordinary people and as an opportunity to bring about the types of change that would make a better society for all, should that include constitutional change or not.

What is also relevant here in response to Paul Maskey is that there was a clear view that there was what we call a discursive barrier to participation in our work. We talk about this discursive barrier where women’s groups reflect on the language used or what they see as a loaded political language around a united Ireland, unification and so on, which seemed to push people down an institutional discussion, where there was a desire to pull back a bit, to slow down and to frame the discussion around what is important to people rather than abstract ideas.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Do Mr. Molloy or Mr. Maskey wish to come back in there on any of those points?

**Mr. Paul Maskey:** I am happy enough with that, Chair.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I have been very impressed by the work both Professor Todd and Dr. McAvoy have done. They have stimulated a lot of ideas and debate here. I visit the North occasionally and one of the issues I find is that I often end up in these cold halls on estates in the middle of nowhere with very poor infrastructure, and with young people who are completely involved in a struggle to live, to try to get a job and an education. Many of these communities are riddled with drugs and crime. These places are the same in the North as they are in the South and the only difference might be the religion or the flag that might be flying in the local community. One of the key points the witnesses are making, which is very important, is that when we are talking about what a united Ireland would look like in healthcare provision, is how we deal with the drug problem, North and South? Can we work together to fight it? What is the best practice in wherever that is?

The other thing I find with young people and some of their community leaders is that, notwithstanding that they know the political system, they are often not really part of it or they do not feel that they share in the decisions made about their community. That is also a key issue for me.

When the witnesses talk about pairing schools and bringing local councils and groups together and continuing that, and taking the point about developing the shared island unit’s activities, I believe that is hugely important and could be hugely beneficial but it has to have broad support and impact and it must be resourced.

The other question on constitutional change, to which the witnesses referred, is there are constitutional models and many different options. The united Ireland or part of the United Kingdom positions no longer hold sway North or South now. We, as a society, have to come
The difficulty with all of this is that when the institutions in the state are not functioning, such as when the executive and the North-South bodies are not working and east-west relations, while they are improving, are still tepid in some places; how do we then get change unless we get political engagement? Many unionists will not engage because the constitutional question for them is not a place they want to go to. If we could show them in the South, perhaps, a bit of light, this might reassure them and, at the same time, get a consensus for a closer future together. I do not know if that makes sense to the witnesses or if they wish to comment on that. That is what I am thinking about, for what it is worth.

We will leave our discussion there as I believe all of our members have participated. I thank the witnesses for attending.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.29 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 16 November 2023.