

How To Build An Inclusive New Ireland

Six Core Principles



**New Ireland
Commission**



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Context

A quarter of a century from the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland, and the whole island of Ireland, has been described as being in “a time between times”. The pace of change in recent years has at times been bewildering.

The extraordinary tumult of Brexit has fundamentally altered the UK state, with the impacts of steady economic decline and impoverished public services becoming ever more depressingly clear by the day.

These phenomena are even starker in a Northern Ireland marked by chronic political dysfunction and tribal stalemate. It is in this context, and with the hopeful prospect of re-joining the European Union as much as on the reunification of territory, that the debate on a different constitutional future, in a New Ireland, is finding new resonance.

South of the border, the extraordinary economic success story that the Good Friday Agreement helped to catalyse continues, but with questions about the distribution of wealth and provision of healthcare and housing. Though the debate on constitutional futures is distinct across the island, there is growing interest in the potential of a New Ireland.

The New Ireland Commission aims for radical new approach to our politics: one that is about engaging citizens, innovative policymaking and setting out an inclusive and ambitious blueprint for a New Ireland.

This document sets out six core principles for our movement to build an inclusive, hopeful, reconciled New Ireland.

The New Ireland Commission

In 2021, the SDLP formally created the *New Ireland Commission* to shape its contribution to the debate on constitutional change. As well as establishing an expert panel drawn from a huge range of backgrounds on the island, including new communities, trade unions, political parties and public service leadership, SDLP elected representatives were encouraged to participate in private, focussed dialogue inside their communities, with a specific focus on private conversations with unionist communities.

The initial work of the Commission has largely been in private, its conversations have been detailed, rich and often candid. For example, multiple meetings within unionist communities, ranging from leaders of denominations to loyalist community workers, have taken place. This engagement is based on mutual respect and celebration of diversity - values which have always been intrinsic to the SDLP. It has not been based on proselytization or conversion.

Part of the product of those meetings has been to define our mission and the development of a set of **six core principles** to underpin the work of building a New Ireland.

We seek to build a movement for a New Ireland:

- With reconciliation as a guiding force
- That embraces diversity
- In which no one is left behind
- Is led by citizens
- Is future focused and outward looking
- Is founded in hope with honesty

The primary purpose of the paper is to set out the **six core principles**, how they are consistent with the values of Good Friday Agreement and how they will help us achieve an inclusive, reconciled New Ireland. **They are the principles that will guide the work of the Commission, and the movement we want to build.**

Good Friday Agreement

The Foundation Stone

The foundation stone of any constitutional future on this island is the Good Friday Agreement.

The Agreement was and remains a singular achievement in Irish history. It brought broad based peace to a troubled region, saved lives, improved lives and created an indispensable framework for relations on the island of Ireland, and between Britain and Ireland. 25 years on from its signing, the SDLP remains immensely proud of its instrumental role in its creation.

However, the achievement belongs most of all to the people, who demanded a better future and have been consistently clear in their refusal to return to the worst of the past – even when the political process has been halting and dysfunctional.

The 25th anniversary of the Agreement is a moment to reflect on that achievement, and the progress it heralded. More important than marking the past 25 years is building a vision of the next 25 years for Northern Ireland, all of Ireland, and ultimately for relationships across these islands.

Our duty is to protect the spirit and values of the Agreement, even as we advocate for change. The promise of reconciliation, mutual respect, the right to be British, Irish or both, and a commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means collectively represent the foundation for a New Ireland.

The **six core principles outlined in this document** are based on the many conversations that have taken place since the creation of the *New Ireland Commission*, but through them run the values of the Good Friday Agreement.

Six Core Principles for our Movement

1. Reconciliation as a Guiding Force

Our approach will place reconciliation between the people of the island of Ireland at the centre of the conversation on the future and as an over-riding objective of our vision for a New Ireland. Our view is not only that constitutional change need not be a barrier to reconciliation, but that the conversation itself can be a positive route to breaking down divisions on this island.

We know that in too many ways, the 1998 Agreement's aspiration to reconciliation has not materialised, and that all too often divisions have been entrenched further, not least inside Northern Ireland. At a North-South level, notwithstanding huge advances in the depth of all-island civic, social and economic life, there remain significant areas where people in the two parts of Ireland need to understand one another better. While huge symbolic moments such the reciprocal state visits of the late Queen and President Higgins demonstrated the progress in East-West relations, the events of the past seven years have highlighted wide gaps in mutual understanding and respect.

There are some, North and South, who imply that constitutional change is incompatible with deep and sincere reconciliation. We firmly disagree, and believe that we should make reconciliation between people in Northern Ireland, and across the island of Ireland, a core aim of constitutional change and an explicit constitutional mission of a unified state. Groups who advocate for the status quo, either explicitly or tacitly, might also be asked why they believe our current constitutional arrangements are more likely to deliver reconciliation than changed ones.

We will place reconciliation and anti-sectarianism at the forefront of our approach to this conversation, and our policy development work. Bringing people together and finding a path to true reconciliation is an argument for constitutional change.

2. Embracing Our Diversity

The SDLP's former leader said that “difference is the essence of humanity”, but in Ireland our differences have too often become divisions.

We believe in building a vision of the future that genuinely celebrates all the diversity of the island, and gives maximum expression to our plurality of identities and traditions. This will mean not just enshrining the Good Friday Agreement right to both Irish and British national identities, but also celebrating the new communities and new identities that enrich Ireland in 2023. We will need to reflect on the emergence of Northern Irish as an identity that is both increasingly meaningful to a section of people, but also complex and nuanced in its various meanings.

Embracing diversity and pluralism as a core principle will also mean that a New Ireland formulating a new relationship with the rest of these islands, reflecting the depth and uniqueness of the relationship of all our people, and our connectedness.

Making diversity a core principle of our approach will mean engaging honestly and creatively on some of the most sensitive questions, which get to the root of historic divisions on this island. The prize is one has eluded this island: an inclusive Ireland comfortable in its complexity, drawing strength and pride from its diversity.

3. No One Left Behind

A New Ireland has to be aimed at addressing persistent injustices, economic and social, in both parts of the island, and transforming life chances. In the north, too many communities have not experienced the benefits of peace and prosperity, and far too many of our young people leave because it is not the kind of society in which they want to build their lives. South of the border, more can be done to spread the extraordinary prosperity created in recent decades.

We do not simply believe in changing the constitutional position for its own sake. We believe it is the best means of allowing all the people and communities of this island to reach their full potential. We believe that a transformed all-island economy has the possibility to bring opportunity and self-esteem to communities who have been failed for too long. We believe that a New Ireland can better direct resources to improve and expand public services for our population in the 21st century. We believe that a New Ireland offers the best means of dealing with the greatest challenges of the century, not least the climate emergency, in a way that protects everyone in society.

Our vision for a New Ireland will be rooted in social democratic values that have always inspired the SDLP, and aimed at building a more prosperous, and just society for all the people who share this island.

4. Led By Citizens

We know that no vision for change on this scale will be successful if it is top-down or removed from the real concerns and needs of the people who will live in the new society we want to build. Our approach will be fundamentally civic and citizen-led, informed and led by constant engagement and challenge, and aimed at building a mass movement for a better society in a New Ireland.

We are aware of the deep frustrations and cynicism towards politics and politicians. Trust has been eroded, people feel a disconnect between the challenges they face in their daily lives and the dysfunction at Stormont.

The SDLP believe that we need to build a new relationship between citizens and politics. People must believe that their voice matters, and they are listened to. They also should expect their politicians to have a vision and plan for the future – one that addresses the issues they currently face.

Working with a range of experts across our island and internationally, we want to empower citizens to understand the options for our future and how we realise the enormous potential of our people and our island. The *New Ireland Commission* will be innovative in its approach to policymaking and ensure it is expert-led and evidence based, but always informed by constant engagement with citizens.

Rather than simply deliver a set of proposals for change, we first want to ask to as many people as possible what kind of society they want.

5. Future Focused, Outward Looking

We recognise that no constitutional conversation can avoid the past, which in Ireland often means a difficult and painful past. Building a vision of the future must be about shaping what is to come, not winning a battle to right the wrongs of the past. Though this project is aimed at constitutional change, which will necessarily mean a referendum in the years to come with opposing propositions on a ballot paper, that need not, and should not, be reduced to a victory or loss for one historical tradition over another.

Our approach to this conversation, and the vision we will develop, will be resolutely focused on the future. And not simply on constitutional futures, but on how a new constitution might better help us meet the opportunities and challenges of this century: how to ensure meaningful work and economic justice in an age of automation; how an Atlantic island can harness our natural resources to create a generation of green jobs.

Similarly, rather than simply looking inwards, we want to build a vision of a New Ireland's place in the wider world that is engaged and open. As well getting Northern Ireland back inside the European Union with the rest of the island, we want our approach to constitutional change to be an example to others of how to peacefully build a reconciled nation, comfortable in plural identities and invested in the wellbeing of its neighbours and the wider world.

6. Hope With Honesty

Our movement will be informed by a commitment to encouraging hope for a better future, not merely frustration at a difficult present or a troubled past. Democratic politics in the 21st century has become mired in cynicism, and crippled by public distrust in the capacity of political parties and movements to make their lives better. As well as commitments to diversity and citizen engagement, our movement will be informed by a social democratic belief in the power of common endeavour to improve the lives of all the people in our society. Cynicism and anger disempowers citizens: removing from them the right to believe they can shape something better. We believe that an inclusive, prosperous, just New Ireland is a genuinely hopeful vision for this island.

We cannot ask people to base their hopes – or their votes - on simple faith, so our hopeful vision must be matched with honesty about practical questions affecting their lives – from pensions to healthcare to identity – and real rigour in providing answers.

We are committed not just to providing practical answers to essential questions, but to engaging in all conversations with integrity and sincerity.



New Ireland Commission