

The Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations

A Vision for the Future of North-South co-operation?

Strand 2 – a generation on

Report from second symposium, ‘Working together for economic development on the island of Ireland-past, present and future’.

Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 25 Nov. 2024

“If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together” -
(Angela McGowan, Director, CBI, Northern Ireland).

(9,142 words)

Introduction:

The symposium was the second of four exploring ‘A vision for the Future of North/South Cooperation’, reviewing Strand Two of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (BGFA), a generation after its signing. It convened a diverse group of policymakers, academics, and civil society representatives to reflect on prior achievements in North/South cooperation, while envisioning its future trajectory. Panellists discussed the evolving landscape of cross-border collaboration on the economy, agriculture, tourism and transport. A particular focus was placed on the three joint implementation bodies: The Loughs Agency, InterTradeIreland, and Waterways Ireland. Discussions also featured contributions on other related policy areas, namely health and the environment policy realms. Conversations throughout the symposium featured a varied array of opinions, demonstrating the richness of discussion.

Report Structure:

The report will follow the flow of the symposium and include the following sections:

1. Shared Economic Prospects & Challenges – the Business Perspective: Ms. Angela McGowan and Mr. Danny McCoy.
2. The Joint Bodies at 25: Ms. Margeret Hearty, Mr. John McDonagh and Ms. Sharon McMahon.
3. Areas of Cooperation: Another Dimension of North/South Relations: Mr. Aidan O’Driscoll, Prof. Brian Caulfield, Mr. Ray O’Leary, and Dr. Joanne Stuart
4. Pointers/Opportunities for Economic Cooperation on the Island of Ireland: Prof. John FitzGerald, Prof. Alan Barrett, Ms. Maureen O’Reilly, Sir David Stirling, Ms. Michelle Shirlow, and Michael D’Arcy.

1. Panel One: Shared Economic Prospects and Challenges – The Business Perspective:

- **Speakers:**
 - **Angela McGowan** (Director of CBI, Northern Ireland)
 - **Danny McCoy** (CEO of IBEC)
- **Chair:** Prof. Brian M. Walker, President, The Irish Association.

Welcome Remarks - Prof. Brian M. Walker, President, The Irish Association

In his welcome remarks, Prof. Walker greeted attendees, outlining how the seminar would focus on the question of economic cooperation, with specific attention on implementation bodies; InterTradeIreland, the Loughs Agency and Waterways Ireland, and three areas of cooperation; Transport; Tourism and Agriculture. Prof Walker then introduced the first speaker, Angela McGowan.

1. Angela McGowan:

Emphasising cooperation between the CBI and IBEC, Ms. McGowan began by outlining how, *“the single overarching objective of CBI-IBEC collaborative work, is to protect and build upon the positive gains that both economies have enjoyed since the B/GFA”*. Further, Ms. McGowan suggested that *“there is a shared opportunity to strengthen both economies, and build resilient economic pathways”*. Developing this theme, McGowan opined that, *“the full economic potential of the Northern Ireland economy has not yet to be realised, and part of that shared island approach is to ensure that that potential is realised.... it’s easy to imagine what could be achieved for the island, and the all-Island economy, with the right collaboration and the right ambition”*.

Ms. McGowan discussed how the CBI and IBEC have identified five priority areas for all-island firms:

- (a) Investing in essential infrastructure and connectivity.
- (b) Ensuring North/South policy alignment on energy and net-zero ambitions.
- (c) Maximising the benefits of the all-island labour market.
- (d) Highlighting the synergies for private sector investment within the all-island economy.
- (e) Prioritising the long-term resilience of the all-island economy.

Ms. McGowan would focus her remarks on the first three priorities.

(a) Investing in Essential Infrastructure and Connectivity:

Ms. McGowan discussed how, IBEC and the CBI published their ‘Connected’ joint report in 2015, on the potential for improvement in road infrastructure. However, since 2015, ‘next generation infrastructure investments’ have been happening elsewhere. Accordingly, *“as an island, we need to keep up”*. To actualise this, Ms. McGowan outlined the CBI’s and IBEC’s joint vision, for the establishment of a ‘Joint North/South Infrastructure Commission’. Ms. McGowan discussed IBEC and the CBI’s 2024, ‘All-Island Key Policy Priority Asks Document’, setting out a range of

investment proposals. The CBI and IBEC have also sought the creation of an ‘All-Island Strategic Investment Fund’, to mobilise critical infrastructure.

(b) Ensuring North/South Policy Alignment on Energy and Net-Zero Ambitions:

On energy transition and decarbonisation, Ms. McGowan discussed how *“the global energy transition appears to be entering a new phase, marked by rising energy costs. Rising geopolitical tensions which have created a sense of urgency around security of supply and we face the prospects of a diminished US support for decarbonisation in the years ahead with the incoming Trump administration. Closer to home, bottlenecks from planning and grid capacity continue to stifle our green transition progress, and across Britain and Northern Ireland, policy direction is lacking when it comes to a coordinated and strategic approach to reducing carbon, probably much (more) so than it is here in Ireland”*.

Ms. McGowan framed the twin ambitions of reaching net-zero and achieving energy security, as a ‘double-edged sword’: Investment opportunities in green energy represent *“magnets for investment”*; while transitioning away from what is already in place is complex and costly. That said, *“the longer we leave it, the more expensive it’s going to be, and the less energy secure we will be”*.

Ms. McGowan outlined how the CBI and IBEC had mapped a joined up all-island decarbonisation strategy, in their 2024 Shared Energy Futures Report.

(c) Maximising the Benefits of the All-Island Labour Market:

Ms. McGowan asserted that, *“securing the right balance between labour supply and demand will be critical to the island’s future economic success”*. However, *“Brexit has definitely muddied those waters”*. In respect of overcoming Brexit-related challenges, Ms. McGowan highlighted the recent LEEF Report¹, published on behalf of the Labour, Employment, Economic Forum Shared Island (Initiative) Working Group on labour conditions across the island, that evidences the difficulties, which amount to *“newly created barriers to labour mobility”*... *“Quite simply, when it comes to the island’s labour market, a myriad of new problems have emerged post-Brexit for employers and employees, around taxation, benefits, pension contributions, tax relief, as well as visas for both work and tourism”*

Ms. McGowan outlined the need for *“the UK and Irish governments to co-design potential solutions to these labour mobility problems”*. In this respect, McGowan suggested establishing “a dedicated ‘All-Island Labour Mobility Task and Finish Group’, with a view to addressing the need for:

- (i) Rule changes to allow cross-border workers to be taxed on one side of the border only;
- (ii) An enhanced approach regarding the mutual recognition of qualifications.
- (iii) The retention of transport workers relief, and its extension to Northern Ireland.

2. Danny McCoy:

While Danny McCoy’s address engaged in a broader analysis of current opportunities and threats to economic development.

¹ (Available here - <https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/All-island-labour-market-study-2024.pdf>)

Mr. McCoy opined that moves towards protectionism and posturing of defence are a threat to the Irish economy, as they raised questions about whether the property rights on intangible assets would indefinitely remain free from usurpation. Mr McCoy discussed the rise and recent retreat of the **ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) agenda**: It's "*very clear that that stakeholder capitalism has now shifted back to shareholder capitalism*". Mr. McCoy suggests that the ESG agenda is to the forefront of current debates occurring between the EU and the USA, where the "*the ESG agenda has been pushed down in the United States*", representing one crucial factor in determining the increase of capital and savings flowing from Europe to the U.S. The return of shareholder capitalism demonstrates the volatility of factors which influence investment: "*modern day trade is a function of decisions made about investment*".

In the global context, the rejection of the ESG agenda, contravenes the approach of the European Union, who for the last number of years "*has continued on trying to underpin this stakeholder capitalism*". However, according to Mr. McCoy, the onset of the new European Commission signifies "*Europe also starting to abandon the primacy of stakeholder capitalism*". This is crucial because of its impact on the overall investment environment, which has knock-on implications for the prosperity of the island of Ireland, and the two islands of Britain and Ireland.

As a final point, Mr. McCoy suggested that North and South should begin to jointly develop targets. The joint business council of **IBEC and the CBI** "*have commissioned over the last three years the ESRI and NISRA, to look at a macro-economic model of the island economy, and the results of that... early in the new year, will show us at least a consistency on those flows between North and South, but also in the context of the East-West (dynamic) in a global model*".

Questions and Discussion:

Andy Pollak (former Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies).

Queried Danny McCoy on whether there was economic modelling already ongoing on the all-island economy. Mr. McCoy confirmed that work was already ongoing within the ESRI, and that publication was expected in early 2025.

Jill Travers (Irish Association Member):

Picked up on the theme of protectionism and tariffs. Angela McGowan emphasised the importance of diplomacy for maintaining and building upon existing relationships, irrespective of areas where policy preferences may differ. Danny McCoy concurred, suggesting that we may be witnessing a broader global return to tariffs.

John Healy, Member of the Irish Association:

Discussed the all-Island economy, mentioning how it had been weaponised by certain commentators and analysts in Northern Ireland, who suggested that it was intangible, and used in a deceptive way by advocates of Irish unity, to whip up pro-unity hysteria. Mr. Healy thus queried the speakers on the

tangibility or otherwise, of the all-island economy. Both Ms. McGowan and Mr. McCoy affirmed that the all-island economy was a tangible phenomenon and asset.

Mr. McCoy emphasised how labels can be sensitive but pointed to the reality that; *“as an economy, there’s no doubt it exists, so anybody who tries to doubt its existence is deluded... whatever label you want to put on it, economic activity spills over the border, and it would be a feat of the Northern Irish economy to not be contiguous with the Republic of Ireland economy’s success of the last 15 years, and not see that spillover....It not just exists, but it is incredibly dynamic, in contrast to some other regions of the United Kingdom, which doesn’t have the advantage of being contiguous to the Republic of Ireland”*. Ms. McGowan emphasised how the whole Agri-sector was completely integrated: *“Maybe we have to get the label right, but there’s no denying that businesses work across the island, and they have great economic benefits from doing so”*.

Dr. Joanne Stuart, (CEO, Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance):

Dr. Stuart queried whether something more needs to be done to emphasise the importance of the B/GFA framework to the UK government.

Ms. McGowan, noted positive attempts made recently to build bridges where relationships may have been damaged before. Nonetheless, Ms. McGowan cautioned that many of the new Labour politicians and advisors lack the historical memory of the generation that initialized and bedded down the peace process and were *“not well educated on Northern Ireland, or Ireland”*.

Mr. McCoy emphasised a point which he felt he underplayed earlier. His hope was that a reconceptualization might occur, whereby policy may be begun to be reframed as a **“two islands strategy”**: *“The peace process is not just an island of Ireland peace process.... The peace process was for two islands... And similarly, the construct going forward, we should think of things in two islands, which might mitigate some of the labelling (problems)”*.

Prof. Brian Walker (chair):

Brought the first panel to a conclusion, thanking the keynote speakers.

2. Panel Two: The joint bodies at 25:

- **Speakers:**
 - **Margeret Hearty** (CEO, InterTradeIreland)
 - **John McDonagh** (CEO, Waterways Ireland)
 - **Sharon McMahon** (CEO, Loughs Agency)
- **Chair:** Michael D’Arcy - D’Arcy Smyth and Associates; and Senior Research Associate, Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation.

2.1.1 Michael D’Arcy (Chair):

In his opening address, Michael D’Arcy offered a historical overview of the development of the joint bodies, which he said the CSO estimates to be worth €11.5 billion.

2.2 Margeret Hearty, CEO, InterTradeIreland (ITI):

Ms. Hearty began by outlining ITI’s role as the all-island economic development agency, which aims to grow trade between North and South, and contribute to the development of the all-island economy. Ms. Hearty contextualised the economic development since 1998, when, at the signing of the B/GFA., “*we had largely two economies working back-to-back*”. However, “*today, we have a very changed economic landscape*” with highly interlinked supply chains, a growing all-island labour market and strong FDI in both parts of the island. This has amounted to almost €12 billion in trade, up from “*a lowly*” €2 billion, at the signing of the B/GFA.

Ms. Hearty spoke of how ITI was to the fore in mitigating Brexit impacts. 60,000 businesses benefited from its ‘Brexit Advisory Service’, while 11,000 benefited from its ‘trade hub’ service in 2024, to help navigate the Windsor Framework. In its daily operations, ITI focuses on playing an ‘*institutional connector role*’, to enhance ‘*shared policy promotion areas, where a cross-border, all-island approach can accelerate progress*’.

Ms. Hearty stressed how ITI is driven by an evidence base for policy decisions. ITI’s ‘All-Island Research Programme’ examines areas where there are common economic policies in each jurisdiction, such as in net-zero, productivity and digitalisation. In this regard, ITI commissioned a report to identify all-island circular economy opportunities, given how “*waste doesn’t stop at the border*”. This led to the establishment of the ‘All-Ireland Circular Economy Forum’, facilitated by ITI, which brought the relevant government departments together from both North and South to discuss the ways for the report’s recommendations to be put into practice. In terms of strategic priorities, ITI aims to support more cross-border trade, harnessing “*networks and clusters, North and South, to collaborate on priority areas, of low carbon, fintech, cyber, advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences, and in many cases, developing disruptive technologies that are being sold globally*”.

Finally, Ms. Hearty drew attention to a series of persistent challenges that make cross-border trade more difficult, such as, access to skills and labour, rising costs of energy, and decarbonisation. To overcome, Ms. Hearty opined that collaboration between ‘*all the players in the ecosystem*’, on a North/South basis would be instrumental.

2.3. John McDonagh, CEO, Waterways Ireland:

Mr. McDonagh outlined the function of Waterways Ireland (W.I), as the cross-border navigational authority responsible for the management, maintenance, development and promotion of almost 1,100 km of inland navigable waterways and 700 km of Greenways and Blueways, for recreational purposes. It is the largest of the six North/South implementation bodies, employing 350 permanent staff. W.I recently completed an economic study highlighting the €625 million cross-border annual value of its waterways, capturing economic, social and well-being benefits.

W.I objectives, revolve around four main areas: promotion of recreation, heritage preservation, supporting community development, and driving sustainability. Mr. McDonagh outlined the practical benefits of the work of W.I: Firstly, as a vehicle to drive economic growth, particularly in local economies. Secondly, in building communities by providing shared space for recreation. Thirdly, in environmental protection, through conservation projects. Fourthly, in promotion of cultural heritage, by preserving historical sites.

Mr. McDonagh outlined several key achievements that W.I has secured, which epitomise the “*transformative power*” of its work. These include the Development of Greenways and Blueways, such as the Royal Canal greenway; which is the longest greenway on the island at 120km in length, connecting Dublin to Longford. Other similar projects include the Drumshambo Acres Lake Boardwalk, and the Lough Derg blueway, which have enhanced recreational and tourism opportunities. W.I has also developed Heritage Hubs in Enniskillen, Athy and Mullingar, offering kayaking and day-boating recreational activities, enhancing both tourism and recreation.

W.I has a number of projects currently in development, epitomising a diverse range of functions, such as at Carnroe on the Lower Bann; the redevelopment of the Ulster Canal, connecting upper Lough Erne in Co. Fermanagh with Clones in Co. Monaghan.; in Tullamore, the Harbour is subject to a regeneration project. Mr. McDonagh also alluded the “*transformative*” development of Dublin’s waterways, where W.I is working with Tourism Ireland to develop a ‘masterplan for Dublin’, where it is envisaged that the Grand Canal Basin will transform into a “*giant playground*”.

2.4 Sharon McMahon, CEO Loughs Agency:

Established in 1952², Ms. McMahon outlined how The Loughs Agency’s mission has expanded considerably beyond its initial remit, which focused on safeguarding fish stocks. Today, the LA’s primary responsibilities pertain to the promotion of the development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough for commercial and recreational purposes, in respect of fishery and aquaculture matters; the management, conservation and development of the inland fisheries of Foyle and Carlingford Loughs; the development and licencing of aquaculture; and the development of marine tourism. The L.A is also involved in European level research, and collaborates with the Northern Ireland Executive and Government of Ireland, to develop shared responses to environmental challenges.

The L.A is prominent in enforcement and regulation of illegal fishing and pollution, having the ability to investigate incidents of malpractice and bring forth prosecutions for regulation breaches. The L.A

² When it was formally known as The Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission

operates an extensive court case management system, practicing domiciliary prosecution on a cross-border basis, with the cross-border nature of this remit key in enabling the L.A to follow the pollution trail, even if this occurs on a cross-jurisdictional basis. Relatedly, the L.A carries out surveying and scoping exercises and is involved in projects that monitor and seek to enhance habitat and fishery conditions.

The L.A delivers on its objectives through a series of strategies that reflect its differing remits. The Science Strategy sets out the key guiding principles of all activities. Other strategies include Fisheries and Angling Improvement Strategies, and the Marine Tourism Strategy. The L.A also has an active scientific research department, providing an evidence base for decisions to be taken. This research supports the ocean economy, by collaborating with other research agencies, governmental organisations and academia, throughout the island of Ireland, Europe and Canada. The Loughs Agency has played a fundamental role in several international projects in recent years, including under the auspices of Interreg funding.

Looking to the future, Ms. McMahon urged both the Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive to review its funding mechanisms, outlining how budgetary constraints are impacting the Agency's ability to deliver on its core objectives: *"We need a sustainable budget process... we've used other funding streams to look for what we can't get at home, we go elsewhere, and that's where we get our money to operate, to do that essential research and development"*.

Ms. McMahon also suggested a need to update the relevant legislation, to enable the L.A to fully carry out its remit; *"I would say that we need to look at the remuneration packages for the people we employ, we need to look at innovative management frameworks, and... the Foyle Fisheries Act needs a little refreshment to meet the needs of managing modern ecosystems"*.

3. Panel Three: Areas of Cooperation: Another Dimension of North/South Relations.

- **Speakers:**
 - **Aidan O'Driscoll** (Former Secretary General, Department of Agriculture)
 - **Prof. Brian Caulfield** (Professor of Transportation, Trinity College Dublin)
 - **Ray O'Leary** (former Assistant Secretary, Department of Tourism and Transport)
 - **Dr. Joanne Stuart** (CEO, Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance [NITA])
- **Chair:** Michael D'Arcy

Michael D'Arcy (Chair):

Introduced the session and welcomed the first speaker, Aidan O'Driscoll.

Aidan O'Driscoll – On Agriculture:

Mr O'Driscoll emphasised the collaborative North/South relationship between government departments in both jurisdictions, as typified by contact on a weekly basis during Mr. O'Driscoll's time as Sec/Gen. Mr. O'Driscoll highlighted that N/S agri-trade was valued at €2billion in either direction, with deep North/South integration stemming from integrated value chains and integrated models of ownership.

Mr. O'Driscoll discussed how the integrated model of agriculture has been maintained and deepened over time, even despite the shock of Brexit, which despite challenges for smaller agri-food companies trading East-West, hasn't derailed North/South cooperation in agriculture.

One such area of strong N/S cooperation, is management of animal disease. Mr. O'Driscoll explained how this was more informal than formal in nature, but that patterns of cooperation were such that: *"the two departments work together seamlessly in managing these things and we'd be absolutely up the creek if we didn't....so we're joined at the hip on these kind of issues"*. Such cooperation was identified by Mr. O'Driscoll as crucial during the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. Similarly, in relation to the European policy space, during Mr. O'Driscoll's time in as Sec/Gen, Irish and Northern Irish MEPs and civil servants were briefed on an equal North/South basis.

In addressing the broader theme of political contentiousness, Mr. O'Driscoll opined that *"politics does of course matter, I'm not saying it doesn't"*. Nonetheless, agriculture was an area where there tended to be close ministerial relationships, given North/South mutualities.

Looking to the future, Mr. O'Driscoll, pinpointed several areas where challenges are shared. These included adding value to product and generational renewal in farming. Animal health was also identified by Mr. O'Driscoll, as an area with scope a more joined-up approach in the future, with the potential for the possible development of a "joint-strategy" on animal health. Additionally, future developments in the flows of free trade was something that could potentially effect farmers both North and South. In continuum, Mr. O'Driscoll highlighted potential regulatory divergence as a risk to further integration of agriculture, particularly if the UK was to deviate further from the EU regulatory standards in agri-food production, making continuation of the existing mutuality *"extremely challenging"*.

Prof. Brian Caulfield– on Transport:

Prof. Caulfield emphasised mobility, including the scale of daily movements across the Irish border. Prof. Caulfield noted how a research initiative he was previously involved with, at Trinity College Dublin, tried to track movements, but the vast scale made such modelling too difficult, forcing them to give up. Prof. Caulfield stressed the importance of efficient public transport networks to address climate change, which he termed as an “existential” crisis, that would make Brexit seem like a “tea party” In this regard, the All-Island Rail Review offered a blueprint, in Prof. Caulfield’s opinion, for what was capable of being achieved in establishing an interconnected, efficient system of public transportation. He also cited the new upscaling of the Dublin/Belfast rail service, which, according to his contacts with Irish Rail, has exceeded the expected level of demand, thus demonstrating the potential for new developments to capture the public’s attention and change behaviour in a more climate focused way. While Prof. Caulfield acknowledged that some economists may feel that developing the railway network represented good value, from a climate perspective, he urged that it made sense to invest in rail from both an environmental and spatial planning perspective.

Ray O’Leary – on Tourism and Transport:

Mr. O’Leary delved into his practical experience of N/S cooperation at senior civil service level, in the realms of both transport and tourism, acknowledging that *“there are always both challenges and opportunities”*. Focusing on tourism initially, Mr O’Leary emphasised how necessary cooperation persisted during times when the NSMC was not functioning, as civil servants *“found ways to work it... because ultimately both administrations were trying to do the best they could for the local areas in their sectors”*. Generalising this point, Mr. O’Leary asserted how *“North/South cooperation at the level of Government, at the level of Bodies, does not exist independently of the society, but equally, that has to be borne in mind in how we work... We have to bear in mind that the background to the conflict, which we have spoken about, was rooted in ideas of identity and culture and emotion, and they are part of our human characteristic”*. Mr. O’Leary spoke about how appreciating the sensitivities of culture and identity was crucial to fostering good relations: *“When we talk about all these issues, it’s all very well to be rational, and economic, and logical; you (the Irish Association) talk about in your own document, replacing passion with planning; but we can’t forget the passion. Frankly, when you’re talking about tourism marketing, you want a little bit of passion. Those things have to be handled. They’re not a problem, they’re just part of the complicated tissue, and if the kind of trust that makes long-term partnership, something that isn’t dependent on individuals or structures, but comes by way a way of existence between administrations, and between peoples; actually facing up to, and dealing with those sensitivities are actually what creates that trust (and) you can gain from it”*.

Mr. O’Leary continued this theme when discussing transport cooperation. He argued that cooperation in transport *“in many ways should be much more rational, but it isn’t always, because transport reflects geography, and geography can also be sensitive to those things [differences in identity and culture that can represent flashpoints for conflict]... you can have all the cost-benefit analysis you like, but if it doesn’t get the ownership and the recognition of sensitivities, you’re not going to deliver anything”*.

Dr. Joanne Stuart – on Tourism.

Dr. Stuart began her remarks by noting how the island of Ireland is marketed abroad as one singular unit, rather than two separate units. She also expressed her regret that Tourism Ireland was unable to attend the seminar, but outlined that her organisation, the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance, works very closely with them.

Dr. Stewart opined that tourism is largely an export sector, with 70% of the spend by tourists in Northern Ireland, being by those who have travelled into the jurisdiction from elsewhere. Dr. Stuart outlined how tourism on the island has grown considerably with the peace process. Nonetheless, there is a strong disparity between the rates of tourism into the North and South. That said, Dr. Stuart outlined how the global perception of the island of Ireland is positive, and that Northern Ireland has benefited from that: *“there’s a real love for Ireland across the seas.... Being promoted as part of the island of Ireland, was really positive for Northern Ireland... The increased investment we were receiving on that overseas promotion, as part of that island of Ireland was significant, and a huge increase on what we would have been getting through ‘Visit Britain’ previously”*. Dr. Stewart noted how this framing of the island as one unit had shielded Northern Ireland’s tourism sector from the worst effects of Brexit. Dr. Stewart also praised funding from the Shared Island Unit, such as in relation to the hourly train service and the investment to connect the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ with the ‘Causeway Coastal Route’.

Dr. Stuart outlined several challenges facing the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. Firstly, non-aligned legislation in several areas, such as on VAT, corporation tax and passenger duties on flights between NI and GB,, each of which puts tourism business in Northern Ireland at a comparative disadvantage. Secondly, In Dr. Stewart’s view, climate change means that *“there needs to be a different thinking around international promotion”*. Thirdly, capacity issues pose a difficulty, with hotel access taken off business that rely on tourism for their footfall, due to rises in immigration, with asylum seekers and refugees being housed in hotels. Dr. Stewart specified knock on implications for tourism in the North, emanating from immigration management policy decisions in the South. Fourthly, Dr. Stuart suggested that more be done to accelerate infrastructure enhancement particularly in the realm of Electric Vehicle (EV) charging portals.

Panel discussion.

Mr. Darcy, as chair, encouraged the panel to focus on:

- investment challenges;
- on the possibility of divergence in accordance with Brexit; and
- on the capacity for more joined-up thinking on a North/South basis.

Aidan O’Driscoll:

Identified the North/South Animal Health Strategy as an area where further cooperation should occur.

Similarly, Mr. O’Driscoll discussed Agri-Food Strategies. There have been five such strategies produced in the South since 2000. These are high-level policies in the Republic, inclusively produced that have attracted international attention and acclaim. Northern Ireland now has developed its own “Food Strategy Framework”, signifying the beginnings of a catching up. In Mr. O’Driscoll’s view, there is potential to join those up on a North/South basis.

Prof. Brian Caulfield:

Discussed the example of the all-island electricity grid as a model example of North/South cooperation that has significant practical benefits, which represents the model for other areas to follow. Prof. Caulfield emphasised how the All-Island Strategic Rail Review was deliverable but required the investment and political will to carry it through: *“From a climate perspective, we can’t afford not to, and we can’t afford not to go it in terms of connecting the island as well”*. Focusing on

the economic value of engaging in the rail investment, Prof. Caulfield insist that “*it’ll never to be cheaper than it will be today to start these projects*”.

Michael D’Arcy:

Asked Prof. Caulfield about the source of funding for transport investments.

Prof. Brian Caulfield:

Suggests in reply that the funds could be sourced from the ‘Apple Money’, following the CJEU ruling on breaches of EU competition law.

Ray O’Leary:

Criticised the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, arguing that “*for the vast majority of the country, rail will never provide a decent quality service, for either people or goods*”. Conversely, Mr. O’Leary argues that “*investing in roads is investing in public transport,*” on account of busses travelling via road, with the main form of public transport globally being via busses.

More broadly, Mr. O’Leary suggested that integrating land use development and transport on a cross-border basis, is an area where much work remains to do.

Dr. Joanne Stuart:

Dr. Stuart discussed the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA). This was explained as regulating the “*permission to travel to the UK*”, including across the land border from South to North. According to Dr. Stuart, the model the ETA is based on follows similar models in the USA, Australia and New Zealand, which revolve around a “direct port of entry”, encapsulating the idea that visitors arrive directly into the UK, whether by air, rail or ferry. However, this would appear to contravene the fluid nature of the Irish border, and the extent daily crossings. The capacity for the ETA scheme to undermine the current island of Ireland tourism model is accentuated by the fact that 70% of visitors who come to Northern Ireland do so via the crossing the land border. Additionally, Dr. Stuart alluded to the significant amount of ‘day-trips’ into Northern Ireland, valued at over £1 billion per annum; with day-tip visitors mostly entering from the Republic of Ireland. Accordingly, Dr. Stuart expressed her fear that the tourism industry in Northern Ireland will be jeopardised if Home Office plans to introduce the ETA scheme proceed. Dr. Stewart outlined how the NI Tourism Alliance is arguing for an exemption from ETA’s for travellers crossing the Irish border. Dr. Stuart alluded to the fact that the Northern Irish Executive, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee, all Northern Irish political parties, and the Irish government, are fully supportive of an exemption from the ETA initiative. In Dr. Stuart’s view, up to 20% of tourism businesses are at risk by the stringent application of the ETA legislation.

Questions and Answers.

Chris McGimpsey:

Expressed the view that the notion of the all-island economy will always raise concerns for unionists, and that this had largely gone unaddressed in preceding discussions.

Prof. Brian Walker, President of the Irish Association:

Stressed the importance of North/South relations, and accentuated the value of viewing them as being but one dimension in a wider totality of integrated British-Irish relationships. Prof. Walker also pointed out that historically, it has been nationalists not unionists who have been more sceptical of cross-border cooperation.

Ray O’Leary:

In addressing Mr. McGimpsey’s analysis, said he would “*happily take that point, because that was the point I was trying to address*”.

Angela McGowan, Director of CBI, Northern Ireland:

Raised two points. Firstly, seeking Dr. Stuart’s opinions on how best to cope with environmental pushback on tourism. Further, Ms. McGowan expressed her support for the development of the rail network, under the All-Island Strategic Rail Review. Critiquing the point raised earlier by Mr. O’Leary, Ms. McGowan suggested that road networks were not the most efficient means of public transport.

Dr. Joanne Stuart:

Dr. Stuart suggested that the tourism industry was seeking to enhance value, not volume. In practice, this would mean focusing less on trying to increase the numbers of tourists visiting but instead focusing on them spending longer periods of time in Northern Ireland, or the island of Ireland.

Prof. Brian Caulfield:

Prof. Caulfield alluded to ROI Census statistics showing only 6% of those who declare themselves as having a disability use public transport. Developing the rail network would help to address this disproportionately low level of uptake.

4. Panel Four: Pointers/Opportunities for Economic Cooperation on the island of Ireland.

Panellists:

- **Prof. John FitzGerald** (Emeritus Professor at Trinity College Dublin and Independent Economist)
- **Prof. Alan Barrett** (Director of the Economic and Social Research Institute – ESRI.)
- **Maureen O'Reilly** (Independent Economist and Senior Research Associate at the Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation)
- **Sir David Stirling** (Former head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and Chair of NIE Networks)
- **Michelle Shirlow** (CEO, Food NI and former board member of Tourism NI)
- **Michael D'Arcy** (D'Arcy Smyth and Associates; and Senior Research Associate, Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation)

Chair:

Dermot O'Doherty – Vice President, Irish Association.

Introduction - Dermot O'Doherty (Chair):

Mr. O'Doherty introduced the session and welcomed the speakers.

Panellists' initial reflections on earlier proceedings:

Prof. John FitzGerald:

Expressed his opposition to the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, claiming that the rationale was not climate orientated, as the railroad upgrade would be completed after 2040, *“and by then, if we've done our job, cars will and renewable, and buses will be electric”*.

.Prof. Alan Barrett:

Expressed his view that those playing down the relevance of the all-island economy were politically motivated in doing so: *“there does seem to be a constituency that want to sort of suggest that this thing [the all-island economy] doesn't exist, and it strikes me that, maybe there is politics behind this”*.

Prof. Barrett expressed his strong support for the further development of the all-island economy, as well as East-West and other forms of economic cooperation: *“the more we develop economic links across borders, the more there's benefits for everybody, and that includes North/South on the island of Ireland, it includes East-West and it includes the entire global economy.... There's clearly economic activity North and South. I think this is positive for everybody on the island of Ireland”*.

Finally, Prof. Barrett vented his frustration that politics and political sensitivities often restrained North/South economic cooperation from progressing: *“I do wish that politics could perhaps be taken out of the discussion, and that we could focus on the economics, which is that free trade, enhanced economic activity across the two islands, is potentially beneficial for everybody, regardless of your political view”*.

Maureen O'Reilly:

Despite emphasising the value of mutual learning, Ms. O'Reilly acknowledged that the jurisdictional difference can create bureaucratic hurdles, with the dynamics of Northern Ireland's devolution system adding to the complexity of collaboration: *"there was a cross-border project, an infrastructure project. It got over the line, it required signatures. It only needed two signatures on the Southern side. It needed thirty-five on the Northern side"* Ms. O'Reilly thus suggested the benefits of 'bottom-up' cooperation.

Michelle Shirlow:

Picking up on Aidan O'Driscoll's earlier point, Ms. Shirlow believed there to be an opportunity to co-develop 'Food Strategy Frameworks' on a North/South basis.

Sir David Sterling:

Sir David noted the difference in performance between the Northern and Southern jurisdictions and accentuated the need for North/South performance gaps to be closed. However, he suggested that there was no clear pathway for how this convergence is to be achieved.

Opportunities for Economic Cooperation:

Michael D'Arcy:

Mr. D'Arcy opined that the contemporary challenge concerned convincing political unionism of the value of North/South cooperation – as this will enable existing cooperation to be built upon. Relatedly, Mr. D'Arcy suggested that a refocusing should take place on the British-Irish and North/South institutions established by the B/GFA : *"Part of the genius of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was that it created a context to have these conversations about coping with the externalities in a way that continued the process of creating stability on this island, which is essential to underpin peace, and embed it, and embed the prosperity that we have enjoyed"*. Mr. D'Arcy suggested that the Republic of Ireland had banked the majority of the peace dividend, and emphasised the need to build on prior progress in a "shoulder to shoulder" rather than in "back to back" manner.

Mr. D'Arcy emphasised the importance of having legislatively underpinned organisations working on areas of cooperation; where the legislation was legally underpinned by both jurisdictions: ***"how could you ensure enforceability in two jurisdictions' waters unless you had a legislatively underpinned entity actually doing so?"***. Mr. D'Arcy suggested that the joint bodies required better resourcing, with the protocols agreed in 1998 needing updating.

Mr. D'Arcy suggested that more efficient cross-border macro-economic modelling was needed to support sufficient North/South planning. While alluding to the complexities of the current work

ongoing between the ESRI and NISRA³, Mr. D’Arcy opined that the work will take considerable steps towards addressing “*a missing link in having coherent macroeconomic modelling to support policymaking in all the jurisdictions, but particularly on the island, in a joined up way*”. Secondly, Mr. D’Arcy alluded to a project ongoing by the Centre for Cross Border Studies, to collate the work of the cross-border bodies, and to chart out where they’re going, with this series of Irish Association seminars feeding into that.

Prof. Alan Barrett:

Prof. Barrett highlighted “*a pretty phenomenal gap*” in productivity differences as being a key cause in differing North/South economic performance. Pondering how Northern Ireland’s economy might show signs of converging, Prof. Barrett suggested that leveraging mutual benefits in at least three main ways:

a) Increased emphasis on Skills:

Including adopting an all-island approach to skills development.

b) FDI:

Prof. Barrett argued for marketing FDI on an all-island basis.

c) Immigration:

Prof. Barrett advocated that Northern Ireland might gain from immigration flows from South to North, but did caution that there may be limits on this capacity due to inter-jurisdictional regulatory frameworks that add to the legal complications.

Prof. John FitzGerald:

Prof FitzGerald began his remarks by picking up on Prof. Barrett’s suggestion that skills need to be upgraded in Northern Ireland especially, arguing that Northern Ireland may have to reform its entire education system.

Prof, FitzGerald’s discussed energy and the environment, accentuating the need to engage reforms to adapt to climate change, and to leverage these for economic and environmental gains..

Energy Systems:

Prof. FitzGerald lamented how seventeen years on from the establishment of the all-island electricity system, the North/South Interconnector still had not been built.

Prof Fitzgerald warned that “*the wheels are coming off the bus*” of the All-Ireland Electricity Market, owing to a dispute over ownership of the grid being solely held by Eirgrid, a Republic of Ireland state-owned company. Prof. FitzGerald criticised the Northern Ireland Executive, describing as “*lunacy*” the recent attempts pursue the partition of the All-Island Electricity grid, via establishing a Northern

³ “*the macroeconomic model that’s been built, in the coordination of the ESRI and NISRA is actually for Northern Ireland, but it will be compatible with both the Hermes model that the ESRI has, and the regional modelling that NISRA are doing, and it’s a pioneering exercise by them within the UK for the Regions of the United Kingdom and the Devolved governments, it’ll be launched in early January, and it’s been a missing link in having coherent macroeconomic modelling to support policymaking in all the jurisdictions, but particularly on the island, in a joined up way*”

Ireland based company to administer the grid in the Northern jurisdiction. In Prof. FitzGerald's view, this was only going to increase the costs of providing energy.

Climate Change and Renewables:

Prof. FitzGerald noted how, since 2020, investment in renewable energy sources was prominent the South, but not in the North. Prof. FitzGerald urged policymakers in Northern Ireland to embrace the up-front cost for consumers, arguing that this would induce long-term pay-offs.

Prof. FitzGerald suggested there would be significant benefits for the island if the UK were to align with the EU on electricity. Failing to do so would induce imposition of the EU CBAM tax, from 2026 onwards, on all flows of electricity from GB to NI and ROI.

Agriculture:

Prof. FitzGerald noted that *"a third of the Republic's emissions and between 20 and 25% of the North's emissions come from Agriculture"*. In Prof. FitzGerald's view, this will mean *"getting out of beef, continuing milk, and making major changes"*. Acknowledging the integration of agriculture models, Prof. FitzGerald urged that *"we need to work together"* to ensure that there was an alignment in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in the production of milk in both jurisdictions, as misalignment would hamper sales abroad in the future.

Carbon Tax:

Prof. FitzGerald suggested that a carbon tax rollout was needed in Northern Ireland to match that of the South, as only aligning policy on a North/South basis in respect of climate change would sufficiently *"clean up the North, as well as the Republic"*.

Maureen O'Reilly:

Ms. O'Reilly reminded attendees of Northern Ireland's limited fiscal powers, reduced to the realm of business rates. She also suggested that the UK's immigration policy, under application in Northern Ireland, was a difficult one to navigate in a way that enabled flows of inward migration.

Ms. O'Reilly focused on the all-island labour market. Drawing on her own experience of independently researching on behalf of the Labour, Employment, Economic Forum, Shared Island (Initiative) Working Group⁴, O'Reilly acknowledged that successfully navigating its intricacies can be a complex and difficult process. Nonetheless, the all-island labour market was deemed critical to border regions. In her interactions with border region employers⁵, Ms. O'Reilly noted how employers informed her that being open to cross-border employment was of fundamental importance for them in being able to attract the necessary staff: *"some of the employers had said that they can't sell themselves, unless they're selling the cross-border labour market"*.

In respect of the issues that thwarted the all-island labour market, Ms. O'Reilly argued that there were two major issues. The first was 'information failure - such as in relation to taxation, and the *"ticking-time bomb ... for cross-border pensions"*⁶. The second was skills, where Ms. O'Reilly highlighted the

⁴ (Report available here - <https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/All-island-labour-market-study-2024.pdf>).

⁵ Ms. O'Reilly discussed how, when she and her colleagues ran a workshop event in Derry/Londonderry, offering advice to businesses who wished to attend, such was the high demand from employers that there turned out to be a waiting list of them seeking to know more about how best to navigate cross-border employment.

⁶ In highlighting how successful resolution to pension complexities would require changes in legislation and policy, Ms. O'Reilly expressed the concern that what may emerge, as a result of trying to manage such complexities, is a litany of difficult and different legislative pieces that are not well understood, which in turn may act as a further disincentive on embracing the All-Ireland Labour Market. Ms O'Reilly noted that problems

way the mutual recognition of qualifications (MRQ) no longer exists on a North/South basis post-Brexit. Accordingly, in Ms. O'Reilly's view, this has added to the difficulty of operating business on a North/South basis⁷.

On FDI, Ms. O'Reilly noted Northern Ireland's greater economic exposure to prevailing shocks within individual companies, due to its smaller industrial base. Ms. O'Reilly thus argued for Northern Ireland to seek spillover effects from the South's FDI.

Michele Shirlow.

Ms. Shirlow focused on within industry North/South collaboration, which she believes needs to be primarily informal, and led by actors on the ground.

Ms. Shirlow noted how, since the foundation of Food NI - a membership organisation that sought to enhance the reputation of Northern Ireland's food and drink industry - there has been a significant increase in new food companies emerging. In this respect, Northern Ireland's food industry began to tap into new energies, with organic, non-statutory cooperation fuelling the fires of industry development.

Ms. Shirlow thus explained her desire to see this industry led North/South cooperation revived: *"I'd like to see another 'Year of Food and Drink', but this time North/South cooperation would occur 'in the context of that agri-food strategy framework'".* Accordingly, Ms. Shirlow expressed her desire for North/South cooperation to happen on a grassroots, industry-orientated level, where agenda and policy setting authority would rest with those capable of acting within industry.

Ms. Shirlow expressed a constructive criticism of cross-border bodies, that much of their work is greatly similar what government departments are already engaged in. In Ms. Shirlow's view, *"it would be good if there was a bit of scope for more creative solutions"*.

Sir David Sterling:

Sir David focused in brief on several themes, that he characterised as *"enablers for economic development"*; namely; FDI, energy and climate; as well as subsequently discussing transport; and tourism.

Sir David expressed his support for the IDA and Invest NI marketing the island of Ireland cumulatively, rather than simply trying to attract FDI to their own respective jurisdiction. In doing so, he alluded to the review of Invest NI, which suggested working more collaboratively with the IDA, *"with the idea being that we do present a joint proposition for Ireland"*.

arise here from the complex ways in which UK employment is both a reserved and devolved matter: *"some employment law is devolved, but what will actually happen is, arguably, that you'd have different legislation all over the place, and nobody knows what it is. So that's a real concern. There's an EU retained Law Bill, that's the UK Government's bill that looks at how you start to change EU legislation, and I listened in on a House of Lords debate and was horrified, because it wasn't even that they didn't take into account the devolved nations... and how the legislation might affect them, the cross-border bit was even further down the line"*.

⁷ Ms. O'Reilly noted how : *"One cross-border business, a very successful indigenous Northern Ireland business who had opened up a unit in the South and regretted doing it... when you start to get to those kind of decisions you think, this has to be dealt with"*.

On Energy Infrastructure, Sir David discussed the importance that the North/South interconnector be built.

On Energy-Intensive Industry, Sir David argued that a review of Northern Ireland's industrial policy might be in order to consider how 'data centre orientated industries' could be attracted to the region.

In respect of **transport**, Sir David suggested that rail would be of significant importance in years ahead, and that the Belfast and Dublin administrations should have the ambition that travelling between the two cities can occur within the timeframe of one hour.

On **tourism**, Sir David argued for the support of arts and culture, as a vibrant arts and cultural sectors can drive tourism and enrich the livelihoods of citizens. Similarly, Sir David suggested that art and culture can help entice outside business investment, by recalling a previous conversation with a senior executive in Seagate, who told him that the company would not have invested in Derry/Londonderry, if not for it having a vibrant cultural and sporting sector.

Question and Answer Section:

John Healy (Irish Association Member):

Queried the panel on whether the increasing divergence in North/South outcomes made it more difficult to pursue mutual economic cooperation.

Sir David Strling:

Opined that Northern Irish policymakers needed to look hard at how the region is going to improve its economic performance, with known key drivers needing enhancement - talent, skills, and infrastructure. However, Sir David acknowledged there were "*limitations on the levers that we have*", stemming from devolution. Thus, Northern Ireland was left with the task of having to "*make the best with what we can*".

Prof. Alan Barrett:

Prof. Barrett acknowledged the restrictions on the policy levers that the Stormont administration was capable of employing. However, Prof. Barrett argued that the North could learn from the South's planning endeavours, such as through development of a coherent National Development Plans. In Northern Ireland, "*policy just seemed an awful lot more silent*" in respect of developmental planning.

Prof. Barrett opined that if there was integration of large-scale planning on a North/South basis, utilising the various levers and legislative competences that are available for the Stormont administration to deploy, then there could be mutual progress made. This sort of planning would "*take the model of the (South's) National Development Plans and apply them to Northern Ireland*".

Maureen O'Reilly:

Ms. O'Reilly agreed with Prof. Barrett that the North could learn from the South in respect of both national-level and local/regional level planning. She suggested that there's a sense of common

purpose in the Republic, with policy levers and those who trigger them generally orientated towards the same direction, whereas this was not as prominent in Northern Ireland.

Angela McGowan, (Director, CBI, Northern Ireland).

Ms. McGowan discussed divergence in skills levels, as a particular concern for Northern Ireland, with creative thinking, needed to address the number of individuals not in education or training (NEETs).

On **FDI** Ms. McGowan argued that work should be undertaken to begin developing all-island strategies that would maximise the prospects of attracting investment :*"I think it really would be worthwhile to look at an FDI strategy around (cross-border) overflows, border FDI and how we make sure there's training and access to labour on either side of the border, so that particularly in the border regions"*.

Commending Maureen O'Reilly and her colleagues for their work on the LEEF report⁸ Ms. McGowan argued that, *"rather than slipping backwards"* the challenge was to consider how regression, in the form of increased barriers to cross-border labour participation, might be stopped. Ms. McGowan then asked Ms. O'Reilly for her thoughts on the two areas in respect of all-island labour mobility. Firstly, the development of an *'All-Island Labour Mobility Taskforce, bringing together government and business to try and sort out some of those issues?'*

Jill Travers (Irish Association Member):

Ms. Travers sought the view of the panel, on her outlook that London and Dublin administrations should work together, in so far as possible, to find creative solutions on an East-West basis, so to drive solutions to North/South and East-West related issues.

John Dunlop (Irish Association Member):

Mr. Dunlop noted that no panel member had paid much heed to the corporation tax differentials between the Northern and Southern jurisdictions, with the Republic's 12.5% rate giving it a significant comparative advantage. Secondly, he argued that there was a 'brain drain' from Northern Ireland, which also left it with a comparative disadvantage in trying to close the economic performance gaps.

Panel Responses to Questions:

Michele Shirlow:

Suggested that the practical difficulties of Brexit, for East-West trade, had thus far not been appreciated by the panel.

Prof. John FitzGerald:

⁸ Available here - <https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/All-island-labour-market-study-2024.pdf>).

On Education/Skills: Prof. FitzGerald argued that it is within Northern Ireland's own control to remedy the experienced levels of educational underachievement which are contributing to the region's skills deficit. Prof. FitzGerald articulated the view that the 11+ test should be abolished, as failing children at such an early age sets the wrong tone for the individual's belief educational attainment: Further, Prof. FitzGerald recalled and expressed his support for Peter Hain's suggestion to integrate the Grammar and Secondary Schools.

On FDI/Skills: Prof. FitzGerald argued that the problem of skill deficit in Northern Ireland could be at least partly addressed by targeting the return of skilled emigrants.

On Corporation Tax, Prof. FitzGerald pointed to the manner in which Apple employ(ed) thousands of people in Cork, including prior to relocating its profits to Ireland in 2015, Thus, in Professor FitzGerald's view, *"most of the employment is separable from the intellectual property and the really corporation tax revenues, so that Northern Ireland is not as disadvantaged as you would think in that regard"*.

On Health: Prof. FitzGerald regarded North/South cooperation on Health, as *"something that is undervalued"*, highlighting how significant amounts of North/South health cooperation are ongoing, including in the realm of child cancer treatment and child coronary surgery.

Ms. Maureen O'Reilly:

Ms. O'Reilly argued that Northern Ireland doesn't have a classical 'brain drain', that would make it untypical from any other region in the UK. Ms. O'Reilly expressed her view that migration between regions in England is of similar levels to Northern Ireland's 'brain drain' but that the effects in Northern Ireland are larger because of the smaller territorial size.

Addressing the comments of Angela McGowan (Director, CBI, Northern Ireland), on the All-Island Labour Mobility Taskforce, Ms. O'Reilly opined that there was *"great opportunities for cooperation around cooperation around skills"*. However, Ms. O'Reilly opined that any cooperation in this area would be starting from a low base, given the absence of current coordinated cooperation. In respect of industry specifics on MRQs, Ms. O'Reilly highlighted how currently, apprenticeships can't be undertaken on a cross-border basis due to the absence of the mutual recognition of qualifications, but did mention that work was ongoing within governmental departments to see if this could be addressed. In other industries, there had been ad-hoc attempts made to integrate the recognition of skills on a cross-border basis⁹.

Panellists' final remarks on Furthering North/South opportunities:

⁹ Such as by Chartered Accounts Ireland having modules available to take that would allow individuals to swap competences between the two jurisdictions. However, in another comparable industry - insurance – there was less North/South coordination in respect of skill recognition. When researching the LEEF report which explored the complexities of the all-island labour market, Ms. O'Reilly recalls being told by an insurance company that *"they couldn't literally let an insurance person go across the border to provide advice because of the skills (misrecognition), and those are the kinds of things you can do something about"*.

Dermot O'Doherty (Chair):

Mr. O'Doherty reflected on the preceding discussion, and offered some of his own views on areas where North/South cooperation might be strengthened. In recognising the earlier points made by Maureen O'Reilly and Angela McGowan, regarding skill development as being a key fulcrum to support the all-island economy, Mr. O'Doherty advocated for increased cooperation in the area of skills. He suggested that this could arise either through the establishment of a new joint implementation body or a new specified area of formal cooperation. Mr. O'Doherty also argued that a joint body be established to explore cooperation on infrastructure.

Sir David Sterling:

In responding to John FitzGerald's suggestion to reform the education system in Northern Ireland, Sir David expressed the realist view that "*unfortunately, politics trumps rationality on pretty much every occasion*".

Sir David noted a mapping exercise undertaken prior to Brexit, which highlighted over 150 areas of ongoing formalised North/South arrangements for cross-border cooperation [156 in total¹⁰].

In considering how cooperation might be furthered, Sir David outlined his five-point checklist of conditions that tended to be present to support the most seamless types of North/South cooperation:

- 1) **The existence of mutual benefit in whatever cooperation is taking place:**
- 2) **Trust, and good relations between North and South, both at official and ministerial level:**
- 3) Sir David noted how **the projects that have succeeded have not tended to raise political sensitivities amongst unionists**, enabling them to deliver quick wins, without appearing to be overly political. Conversely, the projects that haven't been delivered have tended to be viewed as trojan horses for unionists.
- 4) **That the project to be undertaken is sufficiently financed and affordable:**
- 5) **Principled leaders who have championed particular projects:**
In this respect, Sir David noted how a DUP minister championed North/South cooperation on children's cardiac services.

Sir David cited the Enterprise train service, the Middletown Autism Centre, the M1 motorway, and the revitalization of the Ulster Canal (which "*was a particular thing for David Trimble*"), as projects which developed quickly having passed his five-point test. Conversely, Sir David cited the Narrow Water Bridge as a project that didn't fully satisfy his five-point test, and which has taken longer to deliver, but has got there due to persistent commitment and pressure. Further, Sir David argued that the North/South Interconnector and the upgrading of the A5 haven't been politically championed to the same extent, by any party at national level. In Sir David's view, this has enabled NIMBY (not in my backyard) lobbyists to exercise power, including sufficient influence over local political

¹⁰ Report Available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c0aa00040f0b6706b5b0306/Technical_note- North-South cooperation mapping exercise 2 .pdf

representatives, which has undermined progress.

In his concluding remark, Sir David emphasised the importance of mutual political will as a key predicator of successful North/South cooperation¹¹.

Michele Shirlow:

Ms. Shirlow emphasised the importance of mutual will but focused on a bottom-up rather than top-down view. Further, she expressed her desire to see more cross-border cooperation at council level.

Maureen O'Reilly:

Ms. O'Reilly accentuated the need for bilateral arrangements to be worked out that opened the viability of the all-island labour market.

Ms. O'Reilly noted that there are bilateral arrangements elsewhere between different jurisdictions, that offer demonstration effects for how complexities in relation to tax, pensions, and social security can be resolved to the mutual benefit of supporting cross-border employment. However, Ms. O'Reilly noted how *“it boils down to who’s going to take on the challenge to make it work”*.

Prof. Alan Barret:

Prof Barrett noted that joint North/South research conferences had taken place between the ESRI and both Ulster University and Queen’s University Belfast retrospectively, focusing on education and productivity. Prof. Barrett highlighted how organic conversations on cross-border issues had preceded to these conferences: *“No government agency said ‘you’re to sit down and talk to those guys’, we just picked up the phone and said ‘these are interesting issues, let’s have a conversation’”*.

Michael D’Arcy:

Mr. D’Arcy stressed the importance of the NSMC, arguing that the role of its Secretariat should be broadened, to become a focal point to develop cooperation in practice; to *“be a more progressive entity.... Because, who do I call on North/South? Do I call two departments? London? Dublin? Brussels etc? Where does it come together”*.

Mr. D’Arcy argued that there was a need to try and organically develop an inter-generational personal commitment to the B/GFA, to ensure that fruits of the peace process would continue to be borne in the future: *“it takes the commitment of individuals... to get stuck into this complexity, to”* encourage the next generations *“to give it the time and energy that it needs”*.

Prof. John FitzGerald:

¹¹ Specifically, Sir David argued: *“If you have two groups of people on either side of the border, who are willing to make things work; no matter how labyrinthine the structures are that they’re working within, they will make it happen. The converse is that deliver and develop the most elaborate structures in the world, but if you don’t have people on both sides of the border who are prepared to make them work, who see the mutual benefit and the mutual interest, and who are prepared to champion them; then you will not have that work. I think that’s the context we need to be looking at this in”*.

Prof. FitzGerald discussed approaches to supporting organic cooperation, suggesting that dynamic structural arrangements help alleviate barriers to cooperation: “*What you need is to allow that (organic cooperation) to happen, and to take away the obstacles, (as) there are obstacles to going further on that. So, if you see a good idea to work with a Northern Ireland institution, then there’s somebody there to give you a hand, and deal with the obstacles. I think that’s the way forward*”.

On the environment, Prof. FitzGerald paid particular attention to the institutional gap, noting the absence of an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Northern Ireland, which made cross-border cooperation on environmental protection matters practically more difficult.

Dermot O’Doherty (Chair):

Mr. O’Doherty thanked the speakers of the final session, bringing it to a close, and handing over to President of the Irish Association, Prof. Brian Walker, to make a final address.

Prof. Walker thanked all those in attendance, including all speakers before bringing what had been “*a brilliant conference*” to a close.

Symposium #2 proceedings account:
James McElearney. apprentice rapporteur,
as edited by The Irish Association