



ICTU submission to
Seanad Public Consultation
Committee on the
Constitutional Future of
the island of Ireland

September 2022



The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) is the federation for trade unions on the island of Ireland. We represent over 750,000 workers in all sectors of the economy, throughout the island across our forty-four affiliate unions. We are the recognised and legitimate voice of organised labour in Ireland.

Our membership includes 200,000 workers in Northern Ireland through twenty-six affiliate unions. Of our Northern Ireland members, 75% are members of unions headquartered in Britain, 20% are headquartered in Northern Ireland and 5% headquartered in the Republic of Ireland. We are governed by our constitution, the decisions of our biennial delegate conferences and our elected Executive. Our Head office is in Dublin, our Northern Ireland office is in Belfast. Our elected Northern Ireland Committee, (NIC) deals with affairs internal and pertaining to Northern Ireland. We are non-party political, although a few of our affiliates do have formal relationships with some political parties. We seek to advance the interests of our members north and south by working with all political parties in the interests of our members, while being beholden to none.

We are the largest cross community civil society organisation in Ireland. We, uniquely represent workers who are Irish, British, Northern Irish, all/ none of the above and international. Within our elected leadership we have people who would describe themselves as nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist. We have others who would not describe themselves in those terms. However, what unites us and keeps our movement together is a respect for this difference and plurality and seeing it as a source of strength and not a weakness, combined with our shared desire to see a fairer more equal island for all workers.

We have been and remain a strong advocate and persuader for peace and reconciliation particularly during the 'troubles.' We campaigned for and continue to support the full implementation of all parts of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA) as the constitutional settlement on this island of Ireland.

Given this rich diversity and plurality of our membership we do not specifically advocate either for constitutional change or for the constitutional status quo, but we are determined to ensure that workers and their families in particular their socio-economic interests are at the centre of any discussion or debate concerning prospective constitutional change. The debate and discussion on the future constitutional status of the island of Ireland cannot be left to political parties alone and those who have fixed and firm views on the matter. All citizens, civic society, and representative organisations across the island of Ireland have a right to ensure their voices are heard. Obviously, people and their identities are multidimensional, and are represented in diverse ways. People can and do express themselves through political actions by voting for political parties (or not) and their associated policies and ideologies, but they also express themselves and their preferences through a multiplicity of other activities and actions in their communities, associations, and workplaces.

We are particularly concerned that in effect, the three essential and interrelated strands of the B/GFA are not operating at all as envisaged.

Strand one, the Assembly (at the time of writing) is not sitting, and the Executive remains in cold storage and has been for 30% of the time since the establishment of devolution. We support both the concept and practice of true power sharing and accept the continued need for a mandatory coalition in Northern Ireland. It is unacceptable with an involuntary (required) mandatory coalition that any one political party, whomever they are, has the capacity to prevent local devolved government operating in the interests of all the community.

Strand two, the North South Ministerial Council, (NSMC) has been the subject of various boycotts for a few years and is not operating as intended in a complete and holistic way. There is also a need for parallel north/south social dialogue between and with all social partners on the island of Ireland. We believe this is essential and complementary and needs to be part of the overall architecture of strand two.

Strand three, the East-West dimension and relationship is at its lowest point in the last 25 years, fuelled by the current UK government which appears more intent on an ideological battle with the EU in pursuit of Brexit purity rather than exercising its joint obligation in partnership with the Republic of Ireland government as co-guarantors of the B/GFA. This is an unacceptable situation, and we know that stability within Northern Ireland is best achieved, when both co-guarantors of the Agreement are working in partnership with one another.

Therefore, the key elements of all three strands of the B/GFA are seriously damaged and it is incumbent on all of us to prioritise this issue and seek to address this through renewed dialogue and consensus. A fully functional B/GFA with each of its three associated strands fully operational is a key requisite for both constitutional change and/or the constitutional status quo. This must be the primary objective of all.

We are particularly concerned that political interpretations and disputes over the Northern Ireland Protocol (in reality, the Brexit the UK government sought) has exacerbated and heightened existing tensions between communities and the various political parties operating in Northern Ireland. For the B/GFA to work, we need to see power sharing both in practice but also in spirit. The required reciprocal generosity has, save a few exceptions been absent from the political process in recent years.

We acknowledge that Brexit and in particular the type of Brexit insisted upon by the UK government, (particularly as Northern Ireland did not vote in favour of Brexit), has created the context where there are more and emerging discussions about the prospect of constitutional change. This is both logical and legitimate, as it is clearly catered for in the B/GFA whereby both constitutional change and the aspiration for the constitutional status quo are both equivalent aspirations for the people of Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland.

However, the possibility of constitutional change should not be seen as inevitable, nor should it be seen as a binary option, i.e. the status quo or one unitary state on the island of Ireland. We must learn from the huge errors of the UK Brexit in/out take it or leave it referendum in the case of the future of the island of Ireland. People in the UK had a decision on in or out of the EU. The people of the UK, civic society and social partners have had zero input into the type of Brexit that has occurred and the future relationship between the UK and the EU. Tragically this matter has been decided exclusively by a political elite that does not reflect the nature of the 52%-48% breakdown of the vote. We must ensure we do not in any way repeat such mistakes when considering the constitutional future of the island of Ireland and the people who live here. The chaos and political divisions prevalent in Britain (and spilling over to an already contested Northern Ireland) must therefore be avoided in Ireland in any debate about our constitutional future. The debate cannot be left to a political elite who have hard and fast perspectives on the question.

Indeed, were a form of constitutional change to occur it is important to note that the B/GFA and its terms, remain and endure as an international agreement between the UK and the Irish government. Therefore, constitutional change does not mean the end of the B/GFA. This is a positive which should not be taken for granted, but the agreement itself is, in many parts not operational and in other parts, not fully implemented, (i.e. we are still waiting for a bill of rights and a civic forum which would provide a form of social dialogue).

We believe that any discussion on the future constitutional status of the island of Ireland must be inclusive and its outcome must not be presumed or assumed. It must also ensure that the various traditions and cultures on the island are woven into the fabric of constitutional options that may be considered. It seems while there is some public discourse about the possibility of constitutional change there is limited public discourse on the type and extent of constitutional change and what any new dispensation may look like. Clearly there is much work to be done on this and we believe it is essential that participation in such a process must be as broad based, inclusive, participatory, and as comprehensive as possible.

We believe irrespective as to whether constitutional change takes place or not, there are a number of essential and critical key policy issues that are required to be addressed urgently, to ensure that the people who live and work across the island can do so in dignity. These include policies to promote higher living standards for all, access to quality universal public services, a strong and inclusive economy with good sustainable jobs where work pays, combined with strong civil and human rights, including collective bargaining rights, to cite but a few. Our paper entitled '[No Going Back – a new deal towards a safe and secure future for all](#)' which we published in May 2020 outlines key policy issues which must be tackled north and south.

This sentiment was adopted in a motion to our all-island biennial delegate conference in Belfast in 2021 and forms a core policy position of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The relevance and urgency of these policies are not conditional on, nor predicated by constitutional change or otherwise. These policies must be adopted as a matter of urgency whether we have one or two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. There are specific socio-economic challenges and crisis facing citizens on both sides of the border. In some instances, they are the same, in others they differ to varying degrees. These issues must be tackled urgently and are a requirement whether one favours constitutional change or the constitutional status quo. Neither constitutional change nor the status quo will address such matters. They require urgent political action and are not a matter of chance but of choice.

Having lived through a once in a lifetime pandemic and now enduring a uniquely driven cost of living crisis it is also time for strong policy choices that address how both the state(s) is funded and the adequacy of the services it provides in order that the state(s) is prepared for future economic and societal shocks, those foreseen and not.

It should not surprise the committee to learn that both Ireland and the UK, as relatively wealthy European states have a lower public spend per head of population than many relevant EU comparators. We need a serious and urgent debate on the role of the state and its resourcing and particularly where additional resourcing should come from.

We would welcome an opportunity to appear before your committee in the autumn. We seek to ensure that the voice and interests of workers across the island of Ireland are heard and we are determined to play a vital role in any/all discussions on our collective interests and futures.



Irish Congress of Trade Unions
31/32 Parnell Square
Dublin 1
Ireland

Tel: +353 1 8897777 Email: congress@ictu.ie

www.ictu.ie

 @irishcongress

Irish Congress of Trade Unions
45-47 Donegall Street
Belfast
BT1 2FN

Tel: +44 (0)28 9024 7940 Email: info@ictuni.net

www.ictuni.org

 @NIC_ICTU