

Submission from #Think32

Twitter: @Think32_

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This submission is made on behalf of #Think32.

#Think32 is a grassroots movement of people who promote discussion on the unification of Ireland through social media.

#Think32 gained 13k followers on Twitter and 4k on Facebook by leading the discussion on issues relating to Irish unity.

Our members wish to remain anonymous.

1. How would any referendum process be triggered?

a. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is legally required to call a referendum in Northern Ireland if it 'appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland'. How should it be determined whether that threshold has been met? (Several options are set out in Alan Whysall's report.)

The SOS can form a conclusion from several data sources including opinion polls, census results and election results.

A specific question should be included on the 2021 census referring to the holding of a border poll.

b. The Secretary of State has discretion to call a vote even if the threshold above has not been met. Are there circumstances in which it might be desirable for him/her to do so?

There is dissonance between the data sources above and the actual result that would occur in a border poll so the data should be treated as indicators, rather than absolutes.

For example, the data sources above may show a slight minority in favour of Irish unity, however a border poll in reality may show a majority for Irish unity.

Further, a factor that is not possible to be taken into consideration by people within the data sources above is the actual border poll campaign itself. The campaign would involve the Irish government campaign for Irish unity (given its constitutional obligation) so would greatly inform debate on the matter most likely be positive for the pro-unity side.

It is worth noting the pro-independence vote in the Scottish independence referendum rose by 20% during the actual referendum campaign.

Trying to extrapolate if a majority is in favour of unity in the absence of a campaign is flawed and can only be speculated upon. It is like expecting people to know if they want to buy a car for £15,000 when the car make and model is withheld, where the car could be anything from 15 year old clapped out banger to brand new Ferrari.

c. What role, if any, would be played by the government of the Republic of Ireland in these processes?

The ROI Gov should be treated a full and equal partner in preparing the journey towards a border poll.

2. What issues would need to be addressed in the processes leading up to and following any referendum?

People who are aged 16 and older should be allowed to vote. It is important the franchise is extended to 16 and 17 year olds as they will have to live with the consequences for longer than anyone else in the electorate.

The electorate needs to be defined, for example EU citizens living within the jurisdiction and citizens living outside the jurisdiction.

a. What options for Ireland's and Northern Ireland's future governance could be considered, and what implications would these have for the nature of the decision-making process?

It may be too much of a stretch to illustrate how the governance of a united Ireland would work in practice before a border poll occurs.

What can be agreed and proposed to be voted on in border polls are the structures and processes that would be used to develop the future governance of a united Ireland.

b. What policy matters would need to be addressed in preparation for any referendum?

A plan for both outcomes of the border poll should be developed.

3. How would referendums North and South be structured?

a. At what point or points in the decision-making process would referendums take place, both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland?

Referendums would take place after the governments agree on, and there is a consensus among the local parties, on the structures and processes that would be used to develop the future governance of a united Ireland if the result of both referendums is in favour of unity.

b. In particular, would referendums take place before detailed negotiations on the form that a united Ireland would take or afterwards or both?

The structures and processes used to agree the governance should be agreed before the referendum, however the details of governance do not have to be agreed.

Structures and processes mean the committees, panels and teams that would be charged with developing details plans of governance if the border polls are passed.

The number of members of each panel can be agreed and the topics to be addressed should be agreed. The processes should be time limited.

The decision-making process should be outlined, with a dispute mechanism put in place. The dispute mechanism can involve Irish, British and international members.

Protections for unionists should be incorporated within these decision-making structures in the form of proportional guaranteed participation for the unionist community.

c. Would referendums take place simultaneously both north and south on the same matters, or would there be differences?

This would be our favoured option; however, it would need to be constitutionally beyond reproach within both jurisdictions.

4. What processes of discussion should surround any referendum(s), including before a referendum is called and before and after any referendum is held?

a. What talks/negotiations should be held among key political actors? Who should be invited to participate?

A citizen's assembly should be held in both jurisdictions.

Should there be requirements for consensus, as in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement negotiations?

A consensus is preferred but not required. It is important unity referendums are not held up indefinitely because one party is against it.

b. How should civil society and members of the public be engaged? Should, for example, citizens' assemblies be held?

Yes

If so, at what stage(s) in the process on what questions?

How should any processes north and south be related to each other?

5. Design features of the votes themselves

a. Which franchise should be used for a referendum in Northern Ireland?

b. What role should the Electoral Commission play in a referendum in Northern Ireland?

c. Are there any specific campaign rules that need to be put in place?

d. How long should the campaign run for?

Between 12 and 18 months

e. What roles should the British and Irish governments play in these referendums?

The British government should adopt a neutral position and allow its members decide on how they campaign.

The Irish government is constitutionally bound through article 3 to unite the people of the island.

f. Are there any issues around who should lead the respective campaigns?

g. Are there any issues around the dissemination of public information, campaign finance and general regulation of campaign activity that we should consider?

h. What thresholds should be used?