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Deliberating across the Divide

A RESPONSE TO ‘A MODEST PROPOSAL’ BY JANE SUITER¹

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The Chair of the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland recently noted that ‘a period when referendums are not immediately on the cards is precisely the time when the careful examination of the issues and options is best done’.² Jane Suiter’s paper makes a welcome, significant and timely contribution to this examination and to the wider public discussion on Northern Ireland’s constitutional future post-Brexit.

Suiter’s article highlights the success of citizens’ assemblies in Ireland, Scotland, France, the UK and elsewhere, with particular reference to the Irish

¹ This is a Response to Jane Suiter, ‘A modest proposal: building a deliberative system in Northern Ireland’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.23>.

² Alan Renwick, *Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland: Final Report*, May 2021, available at: <https://constitution-unit.com/2021/05/26/the-working-group-on-unification-referendums-on-the-island-of-ireland-final-report/>.

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assemblies and their valuable pre-referendum deliberative impact on constitutional reform. Openly acknowledging the challenges a citizen assembly process faces in deeply divided societies such as Northern Ireland, it proposes a deliberative system that is more holistic, inclusive and institutionalised than what has been employed in Ireland to date. What it suggests is informed by the pioneering Ostbelgien model.

This response reflects on three issues that it believes warrant further consideration and discussion, namely, the participatory bottom-up approach, intergenerational solidarity, and independent and international actors.

Suiter rightly emphasises the requirement for trust-building within and across communities in the initial phases of building a deliberative system in Northern Ireland. She suggests that preliminary discussions focus on wider issues of well-being that are of common concern to all in Northern Ireland. The paper proposes that as confidence in the process develops, a move could be made from deliberations on cross-cutting issues to consider more contentious ones such as symbols and other constitutional matters.

This response notes that participatory, bottom-up approaches to topic choice and the design of the assembly process and procedures would engender wider public trust and confidence and could form part of the wider public engagements and consultations included in the proposed model (Figure 1 in Suiter's paper). A bottom-up approach to identify and decide on the range of issues to be discussed could draw not only on the Ostbelgien Citizens' Council process but could be multi-staged and involve diverse engagement tools and techniques such as online crowd-sourcing platforms, face-to-face discursive forums and interactive workshops to reach different groups. The intersectional nature of identity and inequality may require targeted approaches to include those at risk of marginalisation.

Next, Suiter's strong emphasis on intergenerational solidarity is very welcome. Its future-oriented approach outlining a specific role for youth parliaments resonates with deliberative democracy's future focused norm, one that is not, however, always formalised in citizens' assembly processes. The recent experience of the Scottish Climate Assembly and its relationship with the Scottish Children's Parliament highlight the value of such an approach and the richness of the ideas and materials that came from the children and young people who participated. A future-oriented approach need not only prescribe a particular role for youth representatives but may also consider

future focused experiments such as those employed in Japan,³ as well as engagement techniques that promote intergenerational justice through the adoption of a legacy mindset and cathedral and seventh generation thinking.⁴ A future oriented focus could be one of the core values underpinning all the discussions within the deliberative system.

Informed by the Good Friday peace process, Suiter highlights a particular role for independent and international actors as potential chairs and sponsors. Interestingly and innovatively, she proposes that the process is held under the auspices of the Special EU programmes body and the International Fund for Ireland. This and the organogram presented (Figure 1) at the end of the paper raise both political and technocratic questions. Namely, should the assembly report directly to them as well as to the Stormont assembly and the Irish citizens' assembly? Also, how would the Northern Irish process be serviced? Would the staff come from the Northern Irish civil service? Finally, how would this process be institutionalised, as is suggested, in the short to medium term?

In sum, Suiter's paper outlines a wider systemic approach that is multi-levelled, sequenced and incorporates a diverse array of actors. It recognises the value of different forms of deliberation; elite, enclave, mini-public (citizens' assembly) and the wider public. It is to be commended for offering a comprehensive and timely 'blueprint' for discussion with political parties, civil society and communities in Northern Ireland.

³ Keishiro Hara, Ritsuji Yoshioka, Masashi Kuroda *et al.*, 'Reconciling intergenerational conflicts with imaginary future generations: evidence from a participatory deliberation practice in a municipality in Japan', *Sustainability Science* 14 (2019), 1605–19.

⁴ Roman Krznaric, *The good ancestor: how to think long term in a short-term world* (London, 2020).