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A Reply

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A Reply¹

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I would like to thank Professor Harvey for engaging so closely with my proposal for a citizens' council in Northern Ireland. It is heartening to see the beginnings of debate on the topic. In the interest of furthering the necessary deliberation on the matter I would like to make a brief response to each of the points he raises.

First, Professor Harvey is concerned that 'much of the current discussion privileges the anxieties and fears of one community in Northern Ireland'. However, from a deliberative perspective, it is essential to focus on inclusion; after all, at the heart of democratic deliberation is the recognition of minority preferences and their inclusion at the discussion table. It is arguably particularly important, in a context where one community could become a minority under new constitutional arrangements, that especial attention be paid to that community. See for

¹ This article replies to Colin Harvey, 'Deliberating on the constitutional future: a response to "A modest proposal: building a deliberative system in Northern Ireland" by Jane Suiter', *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.26>.

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example Tali Mendelberg's work on how deliberative design can avoid inequality by fitting institutional procedure to the social context of the situation.²

Professor Harvey's second concern is that unionism will be focussed on defending the maintenance of the Union. This, he believes, raises questions about how monolithic unionist/loyalist communities in fact are. This is a point worth emphasising within the consociationalism political system in Northern Ireland. It is quite possible that many people from both nationalist and unionist backgrounds, as well as those without either allegiance, will have a more nuanced understanding of identity than has been articulated by the political actors who represent them and speak the loudest. For example, in the Irish republic, many were surprised by the outcome of the citizens' assembly on abortion and predicted that the radical nature of the proposals were too far from the perceived centre ground. However, the assembly, through privileging the voices of ordinary citizens and allowing people the space to reflect on the issues, succeeded in challenging the default positions of many political elites and interest groups. The focus on the potential open-mindedness of participants facilitates this.

Third, Professor Harvey is concerned that advocating constitutional change requires further recognition as a legitimate civic/political objective that can be manifested without fear. I must say I agree with this, but equally, the objective of maintaining the Union must be recognised as a legitimate aspiration. It is not the job of an assembly to favour one over the other, but to hear the views of ordinary citizens and think through the issues 'with equal concern and respect'. Indeed as Jürg Steiner has found in a large-scale field experiment with ex-guerrillas and paramilitaries in Colombia, Serbia and Bosnia and Brazil,³ even in times of fragile conflictive situations and hostile parties, deliberation is possible.

Fourth, I agree that the language around the deliberative forums will be important when inviting people to the table; indeed, the whole process must be subject to very careful choreography.

Fifth, my argument is that it would be useful to build a more deliberative system in Northern Ireland in order get beyond 'existing divisions' and assumed or default positions. That must be done in advance of a hyper salient and polarising all-island debate.

Sixth, inclusion is not only about identity, although that is important. It also refers to other socio-demographic characteristics, beliefs and values.

² Christopher F. Karpowitz and Tali Mendelberg, 'Groups and deliberation', *Swiss Political Science Review* 13 (4) (2007), 645–62.

³ Jürg Steiner, *et al.*, 'Deliberation across deep divisions: transformative Moments', *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 29 (January 2017), doi:10.5937/BPA1629157J.