



European Affairs Committee

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland Sub-Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Follow-up inquiry on impact of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

Wednesday 25 May 2022

4.05 pm

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Members present: Lord Jay of Ewelme (The Chair); Lord Dodds of Duncairn; Lord Empey; Lord Godson; Baroness Goudie; Lord Hain; Lord Hannan of Kingsclere; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Lord Thomas of Gresford.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 40 - 48

Witness

[I](#): Sorcha Eastwood MLA, Alliance Party.

Examination of witness

Sorcha Eastwood.

Q40 **The Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome back to this public meeting of the sub-committee on the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. We now continue our engagement with the five largest political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly after the Assembly elections on 5 May. Our second witness today is Sorcha Eastwood, Alliance Party MLA for Lagan Valley. You are extremely welcome and we very much look forward to hearing the evidence you will give us.

Today's meeting is being broadcast and a verbatim transcript will be taken for subsequent publication, which will be sent to you to check for accuracy. I should refer to the list of members' interests as published on the committee's website. Perhaps I could begin by asking whether you could set out the Alliance Party's overall position in relation to the protocol, and then we will move on to other questions.

Sorcha Eastwood: I am really thankful for the opportunity to be with the committee again and to give evidence today, Lord Chair. If I may, I will make a few opening remarks in terms of the Alliance Party position on where we are now. It is important to establish at the start that what we are discussing today and what we are seeing reflected in our politics across and between these islands is the fallout of Brexit. From the outset, when David Cameron made clear his intention to hold, in his words, "an in/out referendum", Alliance made clear our opposition to it, precisely for reasons that we have now sadly seen borne out in real time.

We have instability in our politics in Northern Ireland, impacts on people's opportunities, impacts on business and even people leaving and going elsewhere, but it has also had a profoundly destabilising impact on politics within GB, the effects of which are still being felt. In the intervening years post 2016 to now, we have had numerous iterations of what Brexit may or may not look like. Theresa May's softer Brexit envisaged all of the UK in the single market, but was roundly rejected by Brexiteers and, indeed, the harder elements within, primarily, the Conservative Party. We eventually landed on the hard Brexit favoured by Johnson, which seemed to form a core pillar in his 2019 election campaign.

If I may, I would like to draw a conclusion here before we move on. It is not without foundation to suggest a level to which Brexit, as an ongoing campaign issue, and the UK Government approach to Brexit and the protocol are intertwined. That is to say that, on a number of occasions, it has been felt that the issues around Brexit and Northern Ireland have been seemingly co-opted into a wider debate by those who would wish to make a wider political point, often not being particularly well informed or even well acquainted with Northern Ireland, a place that is my home and our number one priority.

Over the last number of years, Alliance has campaigned on the basis that we rejected and opposed Brexit, as we did not want to see borders or

barriers anywhere on or between these islands. Indeed, I wonder whether those who so enthusiastically championed a hard Brexit often reflect on the outcome of where that has arguably taken us.

It is clear that the protocol exists as a means to manage the outworkings of a hard Brexit and what that entails in practical terms. We would not have one without the other, and that is a point that bears repeating. However, since January 2021, Alliance has been proactive in seeking to put forward solutions. You could perhaps best characterise our approach as that of protocol pragmatists or protocol realists. We were the first proponents of a comprehensive veterinary agreement, which is something that we still believe has most value. Most importantly, we are unwavering in our commitment to doing what is right by everyone in Northern Ireland.

Walking away from engagement will not work. It simply entrenches positions, and unilateral action is deeply unhelpful. If you listen to the business community, it is clear that anything other than a negotiated outcome is suboptimal, and we agree. Now is the time for clarity, honesty and a collegiate approach, not simply speaking to a base in isolation. People in Northern Ireland and, indeed, right across the UK are in the grip of a cost of living crisis and a health service crisis. That is reflected in their priorities. Where there are issues with the protocol, we have been and will continue to be proactive and solution-focused, but we must also recognise that people have various and other important issues.

We often said that in the great referendum debate of 2016, in the battle of logic and emotion, emotion will often win out. Sometimes it is very difficult and complex to get to the nub of the issue. Are we talking simply in economic terms or in emotional terms? Ultimately, it is a mix of both, and it could be argued that one is much more easily handled than another.

Alliance is a bridge builder. That is who we are. Indeed, that is our USP. We represent unionists, nationalists and people such as me who are neither of those things and unaligned. We believe that that gives us a unique position, not just in terms of this debate but on wider issues in Northern Ireland. We have most recently seen our most successful election to date returning 17 Alliance MLAs. We are there to play our part, and, as I have said, our priority is working for everyone in Northern Ireland. I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you very much, Lord Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed for that opening statement. That was extremely helpful.

Q41 **Lord Thomas of Gresford:** Hello. We do have the protocol. How do you assess its economic impact since it came into force? What benefits and drawbacks would you identify? There was a story last week suggesting that Northern Ireland is doing rather better than the UK at the moment economically. What is your comment?

Sorcha Eastwood: This is one of those questions to which you can almost tailor your response. People often fall into the temptation of using statistics to match their world view. We think it is incumbent on us to be as forthright and honest as possible. I will point to the OBR analysis that suggests that Northern Ireland, for want of a better phrase, has in some way been cushioned by the protocol. Indeed, within certain sectors, it cited the protocol as a reason for business growth or expansion. Indeed, in my constituency of Lagan Valley, the business Brookvent has cited the protocol as a reason for its continued success.

By the same token, we are also aware of businesses that are having difficulties in terms of how they do business. Indeed, one of the questions I first tabled last week as a new MLA was to the Economy Minister asking what level of contact his department has had with the TSS. When we met the Cabinet Office back in late 2020 and early 2021, we sought to make it clear that we felt there was a special role for TSS to link with businesses in Northern Ireland and, most importantly, GB in order to smooth that relationship between GB and Northern Ireland. That has been lacking in terms of direction and signposting to businesses in GB.

While there have been issues, there is enough of a body of evidence out there to suggest that there has been cushioning, if I continue to use that phrase, in economic terms. Indeed, one of the sessions that your committee held a number of weeks ago with representatives from Marks & Spencer and others suggested that there had been the potential for Marks & Spencer, if I cite one company, to engage on a more local basis to source food, particularly sandwiches. We have seen that right across Northern Ireland, not just in that business but in others, where there has been an opportunity to look at more local resourcing.

It is important to realise that when we go into these economic comparisons, it is difficult to understand what people's floor is and whether they are using a no deal or a negotiated outcome. It is important to make that distinction. Overall, to sum up, there are difficulties and issues that can be overcome, but there is very much a USP that businesses have cited to us with Northern Ireland having access to both markets.

Lord Thomas of Gresford: With access to both markets, that seems to put Northern Ireland in an advantageous position.

Sorcha Eastwood: Yes.

Lord Thomas of Gresford: Do you see that in the economy? Are there firms coming to Northern Ireland? Is there investment? Does it outweigh the difficulties of those who are trading at the moment?

Sorcha Eastwood: I agree with that contention. Where I am in Lagan Valley, which has the A1, the main transport corridor between north and south, a number of businesses have sought to expand at that level because they understand that it has that unique access point. We have also had people citing the need to hire additional staff, which is a good

thing. However, it is not the case that we are not seeing other barriers. We are in the single market only for goods, not for the other three of the four fundamental freedoms. That is important. Prior to Brexit, I came from a manufacturing and, most recently, a construction background before I became involved in politics full time. We had experienced issues there in terms of staffing. When we speak to businesses, one of the key issues they have is not with the protocol per se but with labour. That is probably reflected right across the UK. While there are issues, there are also those areas of growth, which are worth stating. It is worth putting in context the wider macro issues that will be impacting on businesses as well.

Q42 Lord Empey: Good afternoon, Sorcha. Welcome to the committee. How would you assess the political and social impact of the protocol in the context of the recent elections including the functioning, or lack of it, of the Executive and the Assembly itself?

Sorcha Eastwood: Good afternoon, Lord Empey. It is lovely to see you and to be here this afternoon. Yes, that is an excellent question. When Brexit first came on the scene as a concept around 2011, I had only just joined Alliance, but I knew in my heart and gut that this was not in Northern Ireland's best interests. Sadly, from 2016, we have seen that borne out. It is very difficult to establish, sometimes, people's issues with what they are talking about. Are they talking about an economic issue or an identity issue? Sometimes they have been conflated, but they are, in some ways, difficult to extract. On some level, they are inextricably linked.

I would say, being an Alliance elected rep, that we are a voice for everybody in the community. I know unionists who are supportive of our party position and feel that some of the rhetoric coming from elected unionism is not chiming with what their view would be. There is certainly more evidence to back that up. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland want stability and a level of certainty in which to operate. That applies to the business community as well.

As I referenced at the start, when you have the great debates, is it logic or emotion that wins out? You know as well as I do, Lord Empey, that oftentimes the people who seek to expound more hard-line positions are not as adept or ready to offer support in terms of assurance as to people's identity or emotional support. We have found it sometimes difficult to get on a level with people to say, "This is not fundamentally a threat to you". However, it is completely legitimate for people to feel that way, and it is important to state that. I do not wish, in any way, to diminish the view of those people who hold it.

However, it is extremely frustrating to see people who are—I do not wish to say "used"—forming part of various campaigns that, when I look at them, I do not see as having their best interests at heart. Brexit has profoundly created shockwaves across and between these islands and is making people question their own identity. Northern Ireland was in that happy position where we were within the islands, but, ultimately, we

were all under the umbrella of EU membership. I thought that was helpful for people wanting to explore who they were, their identity and what was important to them. We are now seeing the outworkings of that, and it is extremely complex.

Lord Empey: How do you feel that attitudes to the protocol are evolving within the communities?

Sorcha Eastwood: You are right. We have seen an evolution of people's attitudes towards it. In January 2020, and in January 2021 when we first saw the operational impact, there was quite a bit of traffic coming through from businesses. A small number of people contacted me with the fears and worries that they had coming from it and what it meant for them, but those queries and worries have largely fallen away. People are dealing with the cost of living crisis and a health service crisis, of which I am sure you are all aware and appraised.

Ultimately, people want a solution and a long-term outcome. They do not want a piecemeal approach. They want something comprehensive that has clarity, so that they can build on that and move forward from there. From an ad hoc perspective, it certainly is not something that is raised with me. It was raised less than a handful of times across my election campaign in Lagan Valley. As I say, the massive issues that people were citing on the doors were the economy and health, particularly mental health. It would not be realistic if I did not paint that picture for you because that is what the feeling is very much on the ground.

Q43 **Lord Hannan of Kingsclere:** Thank you very much, Sorcha. I wonder whether I could ask you to imagine that you were completely in charge of EU policy on the protocol. What would you do differently? You and Alliance have been very clear on what the UK should be doing differently. We have heard that, but I wonder whether you could apply that to the EU. Do you think its current stance could productively be modified and, if so, in what ways?

Sorcha Eastwood: It is incumbent on all partners within this to be creative and flexible, and that applies to the EU as much as the UK. We make no bones about that. We need to see more of a creative approach, but, ultimately, for me and Alliance, the key element in that is trust. Our priority, as we have stated from the outset, has been Northern Ireland. Yes, we will absolutely call out the actions of the UK Government where and when we think it is appropriate and right to do so, but we have also done the same for the EU. Ultimately, our priority is Northern Ireland, so that is our *raison d'être* in all this.

Our advice has been consistently to be open and to be creative. The frustration that has been voiced by business and, to a lesser extent, community and voluntary groups has been about a lack of trust. Unfortunately, that has characterised some of the dialogue in Northern Ireland over the years, indeed over the decades, but, by the same token, we have been able to get round that in the past. I do not see the issues now as being insurmountable.

Trust is clear, but what is also relevant is the bottom line: what are we talking about here? You often hear people say that they want to get it changed. What is the change? That may occasionally be used interchangeably with scrapping. Clarity of requests people are making would be helpful. If people had a very clear pathway set out, that could only be helpful, instead of vague statements saying something needs to be changed or removed.

Lord Hannan of Kingsclere: Forgive me, but both sides would say they have a clear pathway. The UK has said it wants the green channel for goods, neutral arbitration and democratic control over taxation. The EU has said it is prepared to modify the details of some of the goods access. I have heard the critique of the UK Government. I am just asking you whether you think the EU's position is correct as it stands. Would you change it in any way if you had complete freedom to do so?

Sorcha Eastwood: I will address some of the issues in the first point that you raised. To be fair, knowing the practicalities of what is required, some of what was put forward by the Government was contradictory in nature. We know that there are issues with data. We also know that there are issues in terms of how that will work practically speaking. To arrive at that point through unilateral action is not the way to go. Again, that speaks to the trust point. In terms of your substantive question about the EU, if we were speaking to it, which we have and continue to do, we would say, "Be creative and flexible".

To be fair, we have experienced that level of flexibility. We have seen breakthroughs in medicines and other flexible workarounds. Ultimately, what we want to see from the EU and the UK is a negotiated outcome. Anything less than that is completely suboptimal and damaging in the long run.

Q44 **Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick:** Sorcha, you are very welcome. What is your response to the Foreign Secretary's announcement last week of her intention to introduce legislation in the coming weeks to make changes to the protocol, bearing in mind that we have not seen any legislation as of yet?

Sorcha Eastwood: Baroness Ritchie, it is lovely to see you here virtually and engage today. We set out our party position in response to the statement made last week. We said that we felt it was unhelpful and that any sort of unilateral action would be damaging. As I outlined in response to Lord Hannan, while some of the grittier details of the trusted trader approach and the dual regulatory regime can be done within the architecture of the protocol, other things cannot and are slightly contradictory in nature, to be as polite as I can.

We know that there is a need for a negotiated outcome. I am going to sound like a broken record here, but, if we are to get to a point where we are looking at that landing zone, which has been very well telegraphed and well briefed, the only way that will be possible is through trust between the UK and EU. It is not only that, but the understanding of

businesses that what they are doing will be compliant and seen to be compliant, not just within the UK but within Europe. In our view, the concept of that dual regulatory regime would not aid that. We think it carries a huge risk. We are not seeing it called for prevalently among the business continuity.

Again, it is slightly muddled in that there was an initial statement to say, "We're willing to work within the protocol, but perhaps we will be a bit ambiguous and say that we may decide to do something different". Then, today, we are back to a statement about working within the parameters of the protocol, so further clarity on that would be welcome. At the end of the day, as much as this is driven by us as elected reps trying to advocate for our constituents, it is as much about the business community and what it is saying. We have heard strongly from them that what is being asked for, the concept of the red and green channels itself, is perhaps not out of reach, but how we get there is key.

It will only be done with the confidence and backing of business, as I have said already, to make sure that things are compliant and that, if and when an audit occurs, it can be proved to be compliant. We do not want to have a scenario where people shy away from Northern Ireland in terms of goods, so we need to bolster business confidence.

Q45 Lord Godson: Thank you for your testimony this afternoon and for your answers. There is inevitably some overlap at this stage in proceedings, but I would like to tease out a little more, obviously because you are speaking for the Alliance Party, to understand the evolution of the Alliance Party's thinking on these matters. My understanding was that the position of the party was in favour of full implementation of the protocol. I am interested in your thoughts on the evolution of that away from that initial concept of full implementation, not least in the light of the new voters you acquired at the recent Assembly election.

Sorcha Eastwood: The original concept of compliance and legality still stands. That is certainly not up for change in our party position. That concept of rigorous implementation relates to people honouring their word. Yet, last week, we had that statement from Liz Truss talking about unilateral action, which is a concern for us. It is a concern for business and, frankly, it should also be a concern for the UK Government in their standing on the world stage because once you agree to something, you then need to follow through. Our position from the start has been clear that we need solutions that are negotiated and legal, whether that is domestically or in terms of honouring international legal obligations and those sorts of norms.

We have also been pragmatic from the start. We have set out our solutions from January 2021. We have been very proactive in that regard. We will continue to be proactive, but, ultimately, this is an issue between the UK Government and the EU. If trust is lacking between those two partners, that fundamentally needs to be addressed. It needs to be at the core and at the nub. I do not think any outcome will be arrived at that is in good faith or positive to all parties if there is not that trust at the heart

of it. That will be done only through a clear understanding as to what is possible and what can be done.

There is still very much a way to travel in terms of that final landing point, but Alliance has been clear that we, as a party, are about the rule of law and upholding international legal obligations as required through treaties. We will not resile from that in terms of honouring those obligations and making sure that businesses have certainty and are compliant within Northern Ireland. As I said earlier, we do not want to risk the reputation of Northern Ireland businesses and, indeed, UK and Ireland businesses by operating within a sphere that is anything less than legally compliant and above board.

Lord Godson: I have a final query on that. There has been a long-time party position, as you have described. You have described, in some measure, its evolution. You have put the burden on the UK Government to maintain their obligation. I wonder what obligations you think the Government of the Republic of Ireland might need to fulfil now, bearing in mind that there were one or two analyses within the Republic, most notably from Rory Montgomery, former senior Department of Foreign Affairs official, who said that one of the issues, now the biggest problems, around the protocol was the over-negotiation by the Irish Government in the lead-up to the forging of the protocol. What are the obligations of the Irish Government in this process to obtain trust now?

Sorcha Eastwood: It is incumbent on all parties, the UK, the EU and indeed anyone else involved, to be clear and frank. We have had very good engagements with the UK Government, and on other occasions with the EU and, indeed, have ongoing good relationships with the Irish Government. We are seeking to use our influence as a party that has a unique voice through which we can advocate for people right across the community. We are calling for all parties, not just one, to be clear and candid and, ultimately, put the people of Northern Ireland first.

Our ask is quite simple in that regard. It is clear that, ultimately, the issues today are stemming from Brexit, as I clearly elucidated at the start. I understand that my Lords are probably keen for me not to expound on that any further. We are engaging across the piece, not just with one party in isolation, and that is something we have done from the start in engagement with the UK Government, the EU and the Irish Government, as well as our friends further afield. It takes a village, and Northern Ireland, as many of my Lords will know, has had a lot of friends and support from not just across, between and around these islands, but much further afield.

The answer remains that we need to keep having the dialogue. The worst thing that could happen at this stage is that we do not have the dialogue or that the dialogue is in some way constricted by, perhaps, a preordained outcome or view. We need to see that ramping up in the next few weeks and creativity and flexibility applied by all parties, not one.

Q46 **Baroness Goudie:** Good afternoon. It is nice to be with you. What is your perspective on the EU's proposal to modify the protocol? Does it go far enough to address the concerns over its operation?

Sorcha Eastwood: Baroness Goudie, it is lovely to be able to engage with you this afternoon virtually. Addressing the EU and its offers, last year and, indeed, slightly into this year, when significant movements were made on medicines, it felt that that was not fully regarded to the extent it might have been. That was an important moment, one that could have been built on. Indeed, people did try to build on it.

However, when there were—perhaps “disinformation” is too strong a word—certainly very broad brushstrokes that there had been no movement on this issue, that was not helpful for anybody involved. I welcome flexibility from the EU as we have done from the start, and we have been very clear about that. We welcome creativity. Ultimately, we need to see that relationship down to the nitty-gritty detail of how we look at data, paperwork and staff in actual locations in terms of the ports and how they are interfacing and understanding that data. It is one thing to have data presented after a time, but what will be key to some of these workarounds in a practical sense is having the data available in its complete form in real time. We are hearing that coming through very strongly from businesses and others.

We are also hearing that we need to have protections for the many businesses and producers in Northern Ireland that have built up a world-renowned reputation, not just within the UK but on the world stage, and that are very important to us and our economy. We need to have that dialogue and much more of a practical, technical focus, but, again, that can be fully arrived at only with trust.

Q47 **Lord Hain:** Thank you and welcome, Sorcha. It has been great hearing your evidence. You put building trust pretty well at the centre of what you have been saying in answer to various of my colleagues' questions. If you were in charge of the whole future negotiations over the protocol and were able to direct things, how would you seek to bring people together, given the divergent concerns and priorities of all the communities and parties in Northern Ireland as well as London, Dublin and Brussels? Where would you focus specifically in terms of the future of the protocol and its application?

Sorcha Eastwood: Lord Hain, it is great to be here this afternoon. If it was up to me and the Alliance Party at this juncture, the most important thing would be to have a functioning Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland immediately. The importance of that cannot, in any shape or form, be discounted. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, regardless of who they voted for in the Assembly election just under a month ago, regardless of their view on the protocol, are not happy with this being used as leverage and an impediment to having an Assembly and an Executive, so that would be my first ask. We cannot escape from that, and it would be remiss of me not to mention it.

Secondly, we have been saying that that Assembly and Executive should be elected and formed immediately, with intense negotiations, at the same time, to seek clarity as to what people's asks are. If we are hearing today from Liz Truss that it is all about working within the parameters of the protocol, which is what I heard, that needs to be communicated clearly.

We need to understand that simply acting unilaterally is not the right way to go. Whatever people think the outcome may be at the end of that, ultimately it is a self-defeating exercise. It will be damaging and will not enjoy popular support or provide comfort to business, community, voluntary and other important stakeholders that it is comprehensive and steadfast. We need to move away from that piecemeal approach. We need to have something that is built on strong foundations.

Lord Hain: Do you mean the protocol? Of course, the Executive and the Assembly do not have a direct say in the protocol negotiations.

Sorcha Eastwood: I am referring to the fact that, at present, we are blocked from having an Assembly and an Executive because one party, the DUP, is claiming that that is being used as leverage and a mandate not to form an Assembly and an Executive. The UK Government are apprised of that. They know that. We need to end that rhetoric and not buy into that narrative. I am elected to the Assembly, so I would say that, wouldn't I? I can see my constituents languishing on health service waiting lists. I am not going to not mention that fact.

That forms a key part of what we are talking about here. Yes, ultimately, the negotiations are between the UK and the EU, but we, as representatives for Northern Ireland parties, are feeding in and saying, "This is what the people of Northern Ireland are saying". The trust piece is for the UK Government and the EU to work between themselves. We are dealing with both the UK Government and the EU in a constructive and positive way, and will continue to do that, but if that is what the people of Northern Ireland are being told, which they are, we need to end that narrative and say this simply cannot be allowed to continue. On one end, some people are portraying this as something being used as a bargaining chip. We are not okay with that, and that needs to be fully separated out.

Lord Hain: I understand, and, personally, I agree with you, but that is by the way. What would you specifically focus on in terms of negotiations around the protocol to try to bring people together, particularly to address unionist concerns over identity and the mitigating priorities that would make the protocol work better than it clearly is?

Sorcha Eastwood: There are a number of elements to that question. The first one is technical and practical, in terms of the issues around data, data sharing and data integrity, labelling, STAMNI and other arrangements we have at the minute, which need to be much more comprehensive and solid. It needs to be made abundantly clear to all

partners that it is the parameters within the protocol that we are taking about, so that we do not move away from that.

The second point around the identity piece is much more complex and cannot be done in a glib or dismissive way. People have been hurt. It is as simple as that. They are feeling a deep hurt and a deep frustration. Particularly some within the unionist community, who I cannot claim to speak for, but I certainly have constituents who share that view, are feeling very hurt. "Hurt" is the word that I keep coming back to because they were promised one thing and delivered another. We are trying to be a voice and a home for those people. Some of them have found a home with us, not just now but in the more recent past.

Much more needs to be done by way of seeking to fundamentally address the issue that the Brexit of sovereignty, that very raw Brexit of 2016 of pulling up the drawbridge, shutting the doors and harking back to some distant past, was never going to be possible, but also was never going to be good for anybody involved across, on or between these islands. Slowly, people are coming round to the fact that, ultimately, what was portrayed and promised was never going to be deliverable.

We are trying to be a voice for those people and seek to reassure, but it is deeply unhelpful and destabilising when others, as I said initially, seek to co-opt the fears of people here as part of some other wider debate to make a political point. That is not helpful because, at the end of the day, people have been through so much here. It is one of those things that people sometimes refer to.

Lord Hain: If I may interrupt, you spoke pretty eloquently about your constituents who are unionists and who feel that sense of hurt. Would direct representation by a functioning Executive and Assembly in Brussels, over regulations and laws that affect Northern Ireland in the future and now in the joint committee negotiations, with Ministers and MLAs being present for their voices to be heard, help address this? Would that partly address the concerns of your constituents from the unionist community who feel hurt?

Sorcha Eastwood: To clarify, are we talking about the potential for Northern Ireland to have representation, not, obviously, in Europe in the fuller sense that we have lost, but in some other way?

Lord Hain: Yes, and in the joint committee negotiations.

Sorcha Eastwood: Yes. The joint committee is an area that we have not fully bottomed out in terms of our full voice. We know that there was a pause in activity prior to the election in Northern Ireland. Now that is over, my understanding is that that will resume. I think people who did not share our view initially about wanting to remain in now understand that it can only be beneficial if the voice of Northern Ireland is being heard.

It is also important to point out that the voice of Northern Ireland is multifaceted. There are many voices that should be at the table, ours being one of them. There is not simply a binary Northern Ireland. There is an emerging and very strong group, of which we are part in Alliance, and we play a special role there. Absolutely, there should be that opportunity to have as many platforms as we can, including at and through the joint committee, within Europe.

Q48 The Chair: I just want to ask one final question. Like Lord Hain, I was very struck by the emphasis you have placed during your evidence, for which very many thanks, on trust. That is something that has been concerning us here in the committee as well. I think you are talking about trust between the EU and the UK Government over the negotiations. I just wondered whether that is the case. If it is, how should that trust be rebuilt and whose responsibility is it to do so?

Sorcha Eastwood: The importance of trust cannot be overstated. Yes, it is in relation to the UK and the EU. It is not just within the last few months. It has been, unfortunately, a prevailing theme in that relationship between the two. It would be helpful if there was, in a way, a reset. As I say, there had been that stoppage of activities in the pre-election period in Northern Ireland and an understanding that that would resume now that the Assembly election has concluded. If we are to be serious about making progress in this matter, we need to have some form of a reset and have that made clear.

At the risk of going over old ground, for the people of Northern Ireland—the UK Government have a huge role to play here—we must have an Assembly and an Executive established immediately and forthwith. That is probably the most important thing that people from a Northern Ireland standpoint on the ground are saying at present. That is key in terms of the UK/EU relationship at present. We cannot fully separate that element of it out, but a reset and clarity of purpose and of the parameters within which we are operating would be useful.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed for your evidence. That has been extremely helpful to us in our discussions. On behalf of all of us, I would like to say thank you again and call this section of the committee to a postponement. Thank you very much indeed.