

# European Affairs Committee

## Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland Sub-Committee

### Corrected oral evidence: The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill

Friday 21 October 2022

4.20 pm

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Members present: Lord Jay of Ewelme (The Chair); Lord Empey; Baroness Goudie; Baroness O'Loan; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick.

Evidence Session No. 9

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Questions 68 - 73

#### Witnesses

**I:** Chris Quinn, Director, Northern Ireland Youth Forum; Nicole Parkinson-Kelly, Vice-Chairperson, Northern Ireland Youth Forum; Brian Dougherty MBE, CEO, North West Cultural Partnership (NWCP).

#### Examination of witnesses

Chris Quinn, Nicole Parkinson-Kelly and Brian Dougherty.

Q68 **The Chair:** Thank you very much indeed for coming and giving evidence to us this afternoon. We are very grateful to you for being with us and giving us a chance to discuss things with you.

We were in Newry yesterday; we are in Belfast today. This is part of some work that we are doing on the implications of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which is now in Parliament. It has been through the House of Commons; it is going through the House of Lords. We have had some very good and sobering evidence so far both in Newry and here from trade, politicians and civic society. We are very glad to be ending our talks with you, as representatives of civic society. Thank you very much for being with us.

This is a formal evidence session, so we will produce a transcript of the evidence you give us. We will send you that in the next few days so you

can look through it and check we have properly and correctly quoted you. We have just under an hour. Once again, thank you very much for being with us.

The first question is to ask each of you about your overall assessment of the current mood and attitude of the people and communities of Northern Ireland, including those you represent, work with and engage with, in relation to the protocol. How do you feel those attitudes have changed over the last couple of years?

**Brian Dougherty:** Thanks for the opportunity. There is a wee bit of a myth out there that people from the unionist community do not engage, but, speaking for myself and my work with the North West Cultural Partnership and the Londonderry Bands Forum, we are always very willing to take up these opportunities.

When we talk about the protocol as a single entity, sometimes we miss the broader picture and the broader context. If we are looking at where civic society is, particularly within unionism, I am the CEO of an organisation that works primarily with loyalist communities using cultural expression as a means of getting young people and adults to look at progressive leadership within unionism in Derry and the broader north-west.

We have found that this whole process of civic instability has its roots back in 2016. As someone who has been working in the community sector for 25 years, for me that was the paradigm shift in where unionism has felt placed within society in Northern Ireland. It coincided, of course, with the Brexit referendum. We found that there were a number of ingredients that helped to create this current sense of instability.

About two years ago, you may remember, there was civic unrest that started off in Londonderry and then progressed to the rest of Northern Ireland. At that time, we did quite a bit of research into trying to find out the rationale behind that. We spoke to young people, we spoke to adults, we spoke to people who were accused of initiating some of the violence. It also coincided with a major piece of work we did with Professor Peter Shirlow at the University of Liverpool looking at Protestant attitudes in Derry at that time. We came up with what we felt was a stark series of six ingredients that created the context we are in now, of which the impact of the protocol was only one.

We found that the sense of an anti-British narrative seems to have come through society since 2016. That has manifested in political opportunism on the part of the powers that be in Europe, the Stormont Government and the US Government. We also found that academia and a growing commentariat had fed into this by painting unionists as right-wing little Englanders who are anti-progressive, despite the fact that our unionism was quite nuanced. For example, I voted to remain in the referendum, yet we were all bunched into one. This Brit-bashing or Brit-popping has been built since 2016. We heard that from young people we spoke to.

We also heard other issues that were adding to this toxic mix. At that time, we heard that the sense of two-tiered policing was coming to frustrate many of the young people who initiated the violence. At that time, the Derry City and Strabane District Council was quite blatant in its opposition to the local community and the city celebrating the centenary, for example. That fed into the process as well.

The breakdown in structures because of lockdown was an issue. For example, when we spoke to the young bandsmen we work with and asked them why they were engaged in violence, they said, "Had our hall been open, we would have been practising the band. We would not have been on the streets rioting". Once those local structures—be it through the band, through sporting organisations or broader youth provision—had broken down, that social capital and that network broke down as well.

Probably the most important ingredient that came back to us was the increasingly growing disconnect between civic unionism and political unionism. There has been a huge sense, which has become far more prevalent and even more so recently, that the general population within the unionist community do not feel their voice is being heard. They do not feel they are being properly represented. That gap has left a very vulnerable disconnect as well in that respect.

When we asked young people why they were engaged in civic unrest and whether the protocol had anything to do with it, the vast majority of them did not have a clue what the protocol was. They had heard about it from the media and everything else.

Derry is very much seen as an outside city. It is peripheral to Belfast, to Dublin, to London and to Brussels. If you are a unionist within Derry, you are even more peripheral. Unionists often talk about being on the periphery of the periphery. There is a sense in the Protestant population that we keep our heads down and we do not rock the boat, but it is almost like a rubber band. If it stretches, eventually it will expand and break. Those five ingredients have added to that sense of toxicity, which is maintained today.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that. That was a very interesting start. Nicole Parkinson-Kelly, would you like to go next?

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** Yes, I can talk about the perspective of young people. I am sitting here as one of the Good Friday agreement babies. I am 24 years old and am turning 25 in the same year as the Good Friday agreement. I was born 11 days afterwards, so I was very, very lucky. I am here from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum with Chris, who is our director.

On our engagement with young people and what we do, we have produced a manifesto for change, which we can circulate around the table. This came from a survey of approximately 9,000 young people. We asked them what the top priorities for political change were for them in the coming years. Across the different topics, we have housing, poverty,

and policing and justice. Peacebuilding is in there, but, much like you were saying, the protocol has not appeared in it. It is not a priority for young people, and there is not a lot of knowledge around that particular area. We produced a report. Chris, which one was this one?

**Chris Quinn:** This was from the cross-border study.

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** This was a cross-border study for a paper that we did called *Our Voices: Looking Beyond Borders*. We looked at young people's level of understanding of the NI protocol itself. Only 21% came back saying that they had a lot of understanding about what the protocol is and what is contained in it.

**The Chair:** I am slightly surprised that it is as high as that.

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** That is still very low. When you compare that to other topics—the Good Friday agreement at 48%, the Troubles at 64%—there is a lot more discussion or education around those other areas. That links into an overall lack of political education within our own education systems at secondary level, which I personally would love to see. Young people are going out. They want to be able to vote from the age of 16. They needed to be informed on the issues so they can vote effectively on them. There has been a big callout for that.

**Chris Quinn:** Thank you for having us. It is an absolute pleasure to be here. This manifesto for change was published just before the last election and was based on five years of research. We have done various bits of research on a range of issues that young people feel are important.

Just under 9,000 young people were involved in the findings of this. I did not speak to one young person who spoke about the protocol. I cast my mind back to Brexit. When Brexit first happened, we hosted a North South Youth Forum event. We spoke with young people at length about Brexit and this was the key thing that they said back to us: "We haven't been involved in this conversation". Whether you were pro-remain or pro-leave was in some way secondary. What young people told us time and time again was that they feel left out of the discussion.

It is the same with the protocol. I would agree with Nicole and Brian. If we look at the riots in April 2021, I would be of the opinion that the vast majority of young people were not necessarily venting their frustration about the protocol itself. There were other things going on. There was maybe a bit of manipulation and other things in the melting pot.

To go back to your initial question about this perfect storm, let me cast my mind back. Over the past eight years, thinking backwards, we have been through the crises of Brexit, Covid, the cost of living and political instability. Even up to last night and today, this world we are living in is very interesting. You wonder how we will look back at this snapshot in time. Through all of this, we have seen rising poverty. During Covid-19, young people presenting as homeless increased by 400%. That is a huge

statistic in itself. We had a mental health crisis before Covid. I would argue that that has been exacerbated even more.

We almost have a perfect storm that has brewed up. I saw during Covid-19 that in some ways young people became quite angry. They felt, "This isn't enough". Decisions were being made about them on a daily basis. We were tuning in to the radio every day and hearing decisions about education. There was a huge discussion on the 11-plus—whether young people should be in school and whether they should sit exams. Not once were young people asked their opinions on these things.

My default, as a director of the youth forum, is that we ought to involve young people in these discussions. Whether it is about legacy issues, victims and survivors, our peace process, the protocol, Brexit or the cost of living, young people need to be engaged in these conversations. They have been on the side-lines for too long.

A big thing that we call for is that people should be able to vote from a younger age. For some, that is a contentious issue. We have lobbied for a long time that the voting age should be lowered to 16. I firmly believe that could change the way politics is done here and the discourse that we all live out.

To answer your initial question about a snapshot in time, we have faced crisis after crisis. You have this political sphere that is like a pantomime at times, but equally you have these big social issues that are just getting worse and worse. What Covid-19 showed me was that, on the one hand, addiction, the street use of heroin, the availability of drugs, and sex and exploitation all appeared to get worse and more visible, but, on the plus side, we saw that we can work together to solve them. The Government and the voluntary sector worked together to solve some of these problems, but it was a sticking plaster. I will pause there, because I am probably digressing into different areas.

**The Chair:** That is fascinating. Thank you very much for that.

Q69 **Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick:** In fact, my next question may not be appropriate. You have said the protocol is not a major issue in community groups and with young people. You have told us what the major issues are from the quantitative surveys you have carried out.

Perhaps I can move on to the other question I have, which may be helpful. As you know, there are now talks between the UK and the EU. What steps should the UK and the EU take to resolve the current tensions around the protocol and the tensions manifesting themselves, as Brian has said, in the wider community?

**Brian Dougherty:** I do not want to sound like a whinging Derry man, but that peripherality is very much part of the psyche of the unionist community in Londonderry. For those who do not know, the constituent base of our organisation is largely marching bands and pro-union Ulster Scots heritage organisations. We work with 3,500 youngsters across Northern Ireland, for example, on tuition of the B-flat flute, bagpipe and

highland dance. We do a lot of civic issues. We work with organisations on bonfires, contentious symbolism and so on.

At the North West Cultural Partnership, we see ourselves as a key alternative civic voice, yet we have never once been approached by the EU and asked for our opinion, which is in complete contrast to the Westminster Government. We have been informed and given a voice by the previous Secretary of State, Lord Caine and others, who have been quite keen to hear what the tensions are and what the sense is on the ground. Not once has the EU approached any form of unionism within our city, as far as I am aware. I am pretty certain that has not happened.

My appeal would be for the EU to listen to young people, to come and listen to the moderate form of unionism, and to hear these concerns. It should not paint this as a binary issue that is simply about sovereignty or the economic impact of the protocol. It is all those other ingredients that I mentioned. That context is really important, particularly around the language used by the EU and this perception, whether real or not, that very quickly the European Union took the side of nationalism within that context. They need to come in, be visible, and recognise and realise how optics can play out in communities and how words do make a difference.

**Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick:** This is very beneficial. We could look at some things in our report in relation to that.

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** We would be supportive of the establishment of a civic forum that is properly funded, valued and supported, from which real government action comes. Being a youth organisation, we want to make sure that young people's voices are represented within that space. Ideally, they would have seats at the table so they can share their views directly with people as opposed to going through people who represent them.

I would also argue for looking at the education system itself to make sure that we are providing more fact-based education and myth busting, so young people can challenge all these different opinions in a room in a healthy manner.

The real underlying issue is the lack of representation across the board. Whether that is young people having the opportunity to engage with their political representatives or whether it is Northern Ireland politicians being represented in those UK-EU discussions—we lack a face there full stop, never mind cross-community representation—there needs to be a focus on representing Northern Ireland's voice, as well as young people's voices, in that process.

I was lucky to go on a trip through the European Union Visitors Program back in March. We discussed a lot of these issues and were able to meet with elected officials from different countries, including the Republic of Ireland. Something we discussed that we found infuriating was that, despite all these decisions being made on our behalf we have lost our

elected voice. There is no representation for us out there. We rely on charity and generosity to represent us.

We were bringing out these issues, which were not at the top of government officials' agendas because it was not their country; they are there to represent other countries and their voters. That is a particular frustration across the board: the ability of young people to speak to those politicians and, for me personally, the lack of representation our politicians have on the international stage where decisions are being made on our behalf without our involvement.

**Chris Quinn:** In the interest of time, Nicole has put our position there beautifully. I absolutely agree with everything she is saying. It is about giving young people and civic society that platform.

**The Chair:** Nicole and Chris, do you share what Brian Dougherty was saying about the lack of interest in your work by the European Union and the interest shown by the British Government? Is that across the spectrum?

**Chris Quinn:** From my perspective, we are quite lucky, in that we have links with the British and Irish Governments. The Northern Ireland Office will invite us into various discussions with civic society. It is a good place to engage. With any of those things, you wonder to what level it is lip service or to what level your words are having an impact.

I was struck by something Nicole said there about bringing our voices to Europe. Through the European Union Visitors Program, Nicole was able to bring that Northern Irish, Irish or UK voice out to Brussels. From you and Clodagh's feedback, that was pretty huge. From that, I learned that our voices are not heard in those arenas. Is there a way to get those voices out there more?

When I hear people chatting, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that our main two political blocs at the moment are talking about national sovereignty. The big debates at the minute are around a border poll and remaining in the EU. The big issue dominating our constitutional question remains. In some ways, I feel the voices of civic society get lost, particularly at a European level.

Q70 **Baroness Goudie:** Good afternoon. I am very pleased to meet you this afternoon. Thank you for the literature. It is very well put together. I have to read it a bit more. What impact has the protocol had on community identity in Northern Ireland?

**Brian Dougherty:** One of the fall-outs of what has happened since 2016, which I explained earlier, was that all of a sudden sovereignty and a sense of identity have started to come back into the psyche of broader unionism. You will see bonfires being built higher; you will see kerb stones being painted brighter; you will see murals appearing, which would not have been the case pre 2016. I do not want to be condescending, but if working-class communities do not have a voice,

they will make their statements by other means. Quite often, it is as blatant as contentious symbolism.

It certainly has raised the whole issue of identity. Unfortunately, no matter what process, policy or political movement happens in Northern Ireland, everything seems to be through the prism of the constitutional issue. All of a sudden, Brexit has taken us closer to a united Ireland and so on. It has raised that within communities again.

A really important point to make, which came out of research that I can forward to you, is about the sense that within unionism a three-tiered process has started to emerge in recent years. At the top level, you have political unionism. Below that, you have a really well-structured, well-resourced and professional community sector, right across all communities, in Derry and elsewhere.

Below that, we have found that there is a third tier emerging. That third tier has co-ordinated itself into bonfire and cultural groups, marching bands and other peripheral organisations. That gap between the third tier and political unionism is so large now that there is a real danger of civic instability and a reversion to violence within the loyalist communities.

We use the parallel of how it has manifested itself in nationalist and republican areas, particularly in Derry, where political nationalism and the community sector have almost become merged. That third tier has emerged as dissident republican activity, which has created extreme levels of violence. We saw that with Lyra McKee and at the bonfires and such.

The challenge we have now in loyalism or unionism in Derry is not about cross-community relations or cross-community tensions but about fractious internal relationships. We have to ensure that that third tier of bonfire builders, cultural organisations and bands does not become so distant from the mainstream community sector and political unionism that it creates even further civic instability.

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** I can really speak only from a personal perspective about this one. I will let you take it further, Chris.

For me, witnessing the events taking place at the moment, I have seen a lot more divisive discussion on social media. I have seen a lot more people being more vocal as to what they feel about the political atmosphere at the moment. It has been healthy in some spaces, because it is good to have these discussions and to cover these topics, but in other spaces not so much.

We have to remember that our community in Northern Ireland is continuously diversifying at the minute. In 2015 we had the Syrian refugee crisis. We have a lot of Ukrainians seeking refuge in Northern Ireland as well. When we talk about community identity in Northern Ireland, it is not strictly the historic green and orange that we are used to having discussions about. We have to consider that there are a lot of



other people in our society now who are becoming parts of all our communities. How do they feel about all this?

They are coming into a historic debate from a completely different atmosphere, country and culture. Their voices are lost in these discussions, so it is really important to engage with and reach out to them. It is not just about our deep-rooted traditional community backgrounds. There is a gap there. Their voice has definitely been lost in this process. Today, we are sitting here and discussing this on behalf of young people. There are a lot of young people who feel they do not have an opportunity to speak on such issues. That is something that might be good to look into in the piece of work you are doing.

**The Chair:** How far back does that go? Ukraine does not go very back very far, but I mean the sense that there are those who are not being taken into account, and ought to be, by us or by others. Is it recent—from the last two years?

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** From my personal experience, my first introduction to meeting people from a different culture and a different background was when I was in primary school. That was in 2002. We had a couple of fellow pupils with a Chinese background in our classrooms. They were great.

The point at which I saw the most change was around 2015 and the Syrian refugee crisis. I had a placement in Barnardo's and I did some research on integrating refugees into our society. That ended up being my dissertation topic in the end. For me, that was the biggest turning point. I could see people from different cultures with different religions and different attitudes. That was the biggest point of integration that I can remember in my lifetime. You might have something else to say.

**The Chair:** I am sorry to go on. Is it just you saying that? Are the communities you represent, as it were, conscious that the nature of Northern Irish society is changing?

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** Speaking here today, I am going to keep this as a personal opinion, based on my experiences. I previously worked for Ulster University students' union. We had a big drive on diversity, equity and inclusion, and on creating more campaigns and awareness of the different traditions celebrated by the different cultures and communities we have in Northern Ireland. There has been a magnifier on it for the past few years. I can argue from that perspective since there is now a diversity, equity and inclusion officer in the students' union. That was a new role. There is definitely demand for it. That is entirely from my journey, but I hope that helps.

**Chris Quinn:** I can follow that with some data. I am just looking at a report that we did—I can circulate this through the clerk, if you would like—called *Young People of the Peace Process*. Just before the centenary of the establishment of the state of Northern Ireland, we sought young people's views on some of the big issues. This report mirrored what was

in the census. There is a broader spectrum of political identity and national identity, which we saw in this report and which the census probably proved to us.

There was a slight bias. When I look at the young people who responded to this, there were slightly more young people who identified as Catholic than Protestant, if you want to put it in those terms. Some 52% of the respondents said they identified as Irish, with 45% saying Northern Irish and 26% British. Bear in mind that you could check various boxes.

One thing that we noted around the time when Brexit happened was that more young people were talking about their European identity. In both the north and the Republic of Ireland, when we were doing our north-south work, we found that there was more language around European identity. I suppose that manifests itself in the anecdotal evidence that you hear about different people from different backgrounds applying for different passports, if you want to link it to all of that.

To answer your question, we had young people in the Seanad of the Oireachtas two Fridays ago. The young people spoke from a range of backgrounds about the constitutional future of Ireland in that arena. The young people we brought down were from a range of backgrounds: unionist, nationalist, republican, loyalist and otherwise. You saw that spectrum in that arena. Young people were saying, "Actually, I don't care too much about the constitutional future of Ireland", or, "I do believe in this or that".

My analysis of this, speaking from a personal perspective as Nicole did, is that we have seen a more diverse view. I would not say that it is the majority of young people, but you would find more young people who identify politically in a different way to how they are perceived. What I am trying to say is that more young people from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds are saying, "Don't put me in that box. Don't presume I am one or the other because of my perceived religious identity". You are hearing more of that.

In fact, one of the very positive things I pulled out of this study was that a significant minority of young people were saying that they would vote for a politician who did not necessarily have the same constitutional viewpoint as they did if they felt it could further a social issue they were campaigning on. As an example, mental health is huge. That was a real positive that I drew out of this.

Again, there are many caveats in this. Young people were saying, "Our politics is caught in the past. We are talking about the Troubles all the time. We want to talk about the future. We feel disconnected". But I am seeing these little chinks of light that shining through. Young people are saying, "Do not put me in those pigeonholes". We are looking at identity in a much broader way than orange and green.

**Q71** **Baroness O'Loan:** I am reflecting on the evidence you have given so far. You have told us that, generally speaking, young people do not know

about the protocol and they are not really interested in it. Nicole, as you said, that may be for education reasons; they are not being taught about it. That is the evidence you have given us so far.

You have also given us evidence about involvement in Europe and that your voices are not listened to in Europe. Yet we are no longer part of Europe. In European Union protocol terms, we do not have a voice. We do not have a role to play in law-making or anything like that, yet we are the subjects of it.

The only reason I interject is that it seems to me, from what you are saying, that young people are recognising things. They are probably recognising food prices increasing, which is, in part, a direct result of Brexit and the protocol. The protocol is adding costs. It is about working out why things are happening that attract their interest. I listened, too, to what you said about community identity. If people are unaware of the protocol, it is not going to have an impact on their community identity. Other social forces are driving change.

How would you assess the impact of the protocol and our withdrawal from the EU on the peace process and the Good Friday agreement? In that context, is the protocol compatible with the Belfast/Good Friday agreement?

**Brian Dougherty:** It has impacted on the peace process. Without repeating myself, it was not just the protocol; it was all those other ingredients. As well as the young people, the adults in the communities I work in are feeling that the way the process has evolved has exposed what they felt was an imbalance in how the narrative was being portrayed internationally and locally.

In terms of the technicalities, in the lead-up to the Brexit agreement the sense was that the threat of violence due to a land border seemed to take precedence over the threat of instability in east-west relations. That is creating a great deal of frustration. If you look at the two main strands of the Good Friday agreement, the east-west relationship is as important as the north-south one.

There is a sense within the community that there has not been a level playing field in that respect. I would not go so far as to say that the Good Friday agreement is dead or the 25th anniversary is going to be a funeral, as others may have mentioned. Certainly, as indicated earlier, the fractious three-tiered system that has been created within unionist communities is very dangerous. It has the dangerous potential to take us back to a level of civic instability and violence that we have not seen since before the Good Friday agreement.

**Chris Quinn:** It is a really pertinent question. I have just returned from the US, where we talked a lot about the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. In opening, Nicole spoke about how she is a Good Friday agreement baby. I have a question for all of us: as people who voted in that referendum, is the peace that Nicole experiences the peace that we signed up to?

That does not answer your question at all, but the point I am trying to get to—this is my own opinion and not necessarily the opinion of my organisation—is that it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge that what is going on around the protocol has had an impact on the peace process and has destabilised our communities. It is really important, therefore, that people, whether they are young, old or otherwise, have the chance to try to untangle this and link their contemporary lives to all of this.

I am thinking about things we have done in the past around republican and loyalist flute bands or republican and loyalist bonfires. We have given young people the chance to tell us, in their own words, why these things are important. They are very important, but it is not helpful when others try to tell civic society, the media or the international community why these things are important.

I am thinking particularly about Protestant and unionist working-class young males, which is not to discriminate against other sections of society. I recognise how difficult a time we are in right now because of all these social issues but also because of identity. Where do you fit in this big world? Where is my future in all this? Unfortunately, lots of young people do not see their future here. Lots of the young people we speak to see their future overseas.

To answer your question, it is really important that we give people that space to untangle this and to be proud of their identity, regardless of what that is. If you feel that your Britishness is threatened by a protocol, that is ultimately a bad thing, and it is going to destabilise our peace process.

In my opinion, regardless of your political identity and national sovereignty, we need to instil confidence in the young people we work with that they have a voice and that their voices and opinions matter. I have probably gone around the houses in trying to answer that, but for me it is really important that people like Nicole are in these forums talking directly to you about why these things are important to them.

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** Linking back to the trip we had in March, it was very educational because we got to speak to different youth organisations and people from different backgrounds from all around Northern Ireland. We picked up on a shared narrative among the group that different political wings have capitalised on the hysteria that has been created by Brexit and the protocol. That is why it has become an identity question for a lot of people.

These youth workers were telling me that they have spoken to young people and asked them what the protocol is. They have said, “We don’t know but we think it’s bad”. They go with the narrative that is being spread to them.

In terms of engagement, there are young people like me. In the youth forum, we have a number of fantastic young people who are so engaged

with politics and who really want to be part of building up our society here in Northern Ireland and making it strong. Particularly on those social issues more than anything else, they want to make it a safe place for everybody to live, with democracy and representation as a massive part of our society. There is an ongoing and continuous issue, as you were talking about, with the lack of representation there in relation to the protocol itself.

On the UK side, from my personal understanding, when I was on this trip, there was a lot of focus on sovereignty, pushing things through and getting results. That did not necessarily consider the young people living here and the impacts of that. On the EU side, I understand that the vote ended up being that we would leave, and therefore we have no representation there.

That leaves us asking, "Where can these young people voice these opinions, solutions and ideas?" There is no civic forum; there is no way for our own politicians to have those platforms to speak on their behalf. The UK has created the provisions for young people to feed into those conversations, but in the opinion of the EU we cannot, because we are not technically part of it any more.

In my circle, where we do enjoy talking about politics, there has been a growth in understanding and interest. It is the voice of the average young person out there, at school or at work, who is just trying to get by in society, that is lost in all of this. They are the ones who are coming back and saying that they do not have the understanding and that they are being forced to rely on the growing—how would you describe it?—lack of reliability that our media channels produce. That is my experience, at least.

**Baroness O'Loan:** If the existence of the protocol is putting pressure on young people, and older people too, to take Brian's point, in terms of identity, does it represent some sort of incompatibility with the Good Friday agreement? Is the Belfast/Good Friday agreement threatened in this situation?

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** If young people feel like it is, that point is completely valid. If we look back at the Good Friday agreement, a lot of it has not been enacted. We know there are flaws with that. If young people feel that their identity is at risk, that is a valid point to raise and should be heard. How can we make sure that they feel protected in their identity, in their opinions and in their communities, and that their rights are not being threatened?

**Baroness O'Loan:** It is also about the ability to reach across communities.

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** Yes, of course.

**Chris Quinn:** Can I add a personal opinion here? As a strong advocate of the Good Friday agreement, one of the things I love about it is that it gives us the right to identify as British, Irish or otherwise.

In that context, I would argue that there is compatibility here. Look at what happened in Larne and in other places. It is the same as the flags protest. For me, the flags protest was a time when a pressure valve needed releasing. People needed to understand and untangle this big thing that was being played out on the streets. As I say, the Good Friday agreement tells us, "You have the right to identify as you wish". I do not see how it could not be compatible.

Q72 **Lord Empey:** You talked about how young people feel disengaged. In 2021, I served on the Youth Unemployment Committee during Covid. We were able to engage in different parts of the country. It was confined to England, but we had pre-organised engagement with young people, through Zoom and stuff like that, and got some very good responses at that stage. Engagement, even in those circumstances, is doable if the willingness is there. On that point, are you suggesting that the civic forum be re-enacted again?

**Brian Dougherty:** I was a member of the very first civic forum after the Good Friday agreement. That structure is not necessarily the best way forward. It was cumbersome; there were people there with political and personal agendas; it did not get the political buy-in it should have had, and so forth.

There are opportunities for other civic platforms. What we have now in Northern Ireland compared to 1995 and the time of the Good Friday agreement is a really professional and well-resourced community infrastructure. That is right across the board. I do not buy into this sense any more that it is imbalanced. If you go to Protestant or loyalist areas, Waterside, the Shankill or anywhere else, you will see the community centre; you will see the MUGA pitch; you will see the youth work; you will see the community sector. In the last 20-odd years we have gained a real knowledge, professionalism and understanding of how to deal with civic issues.

**Lord Empey:** At one minute to midnight on the final day of the Good Friday negotiations, one particular group was saying, "We want this, we want this" and so on. Everybody was saying, "Okay, give it to them and forget about it". It did not work, because the people here felt, to some extent, that their role was being duplicated. It probably needs to be reconfigured to some extent.

**Brian Dougherty:** The point is that there are other regional platforms through the organisations that Nicole and Chris are involved in. We have the skill and the mechanisms to gauge opinion and be that advocate more readily than it would have been in the civic forum times.

Even within loyalism, the whole basis of the organisation I work with is using a constituent body of young people who are involved in violence,

for example. As you know, there are 664 bands in Northern Ireland and 30,000 musicians. It is the largest artistic and cultural movement in western Europe. Why have we never used that constituent base? That constituent base is at the heart of loyalism and could be readily exploited and used. That is what we do through the Londonderry Bands Forum.

It is possible to regionalise that hub model, which is the idea of our organisation, across Northern Ireland to ensure we get steady feedback into this.

Q73 **Lord Empey:** Starting at your end, Chris, how would you assess the overall understanding of and engagement with the ongoing dialogue between the EU and the UK? Is it registering with people that it has picked up again in the last couple of weeks after a six-month gap?

**Chris Quinn:** Could I answer the question about the civic forum and then come back to that? From my perspective, the civic forum is part of the architecture of the agreement that we did not deliver on. I was not on it so I do not know what it was like, and I do respect that. I agree with Brian that we have a very strong, vibrant community and voluntary sector here.

When I travel, I can see that vibrancy. I can see how we are linked so well. Sometimes our politicians get a hammering. You know that better than I do. One thing about our politicians is that they are very accessible and they work closely with our sector. In those scenarios, I can see how we can get things done.

I sat for a long time on the joint forum that was chaired by NICVA. That was part of the outworking of the concordat. I saw the value in that. If it was invested in and we got the methodology correct, with the right people around the table, we could make real change. When things stall here, that would be a vehicle to keep things moving.

I am segueing a wee bit, but, linked to that, we lobbied hard for the establishment of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. That youth assembly was set up about two or three years ago. We do not have legislation for that youth assembly to exist. It caters only for young people aged between 13 and 17, but it is an example of how civic society can engage. There is a bit of work to be done.

My position is that a civic forum, or something like it, should and could absolutely be part of the architecture. What was your second question?

**Lord Empey:** Is the fact that the UK and EU are now re-engaging in talks after a six-month gap registering with people?

**Chris Quinn:** My opinion would be that it is not. However, I could be incorrect.

**Nicole Parkinson-Kelly:** It is not really headline-making at the minute. I am not aware that any drama has unfolded just yet. It has not been

discussed much in my circles at least. They know it is continuing, but there has not been much further discussion than that.

**Brian Dougherty:** I would slightly disagree. People have started to recognise this. It is at the forefront of discussions again. Again, maybe that is simply because of the communication the Northern Ireland Office has done through our own organisation. It is also in the national media.

**Lord Empey:** I am glad they are communicating with you because they are not communicating with the rest of us.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much indeed to all of you for giving evidence to us this afternoon. I am very glad we ended on that note somehow. It is always best to end with youth, in a way. It is good to be able to look forwards and not always backwards.

We are all very grateful to you. We are very grateful to you for circulating the papers that you have done. That is really helpful. It is something to read on the flight back. Thank you very much on behalf of all of us.