

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland](#), HC 24

Monday 12 December 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 December 2022.

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Sir Robert Buckland; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Carla Lockhart; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 255 - 279

Witnesses

I: John McBurney, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; Monica McWilliams, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; Tim O'Connor, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; Mitchell Reiss, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Independent Reporting Commission](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: John McBurney, Monica McWilliams, Tim O'Connor and Mitchell Reiss.

Q255 **Chair:** Good afternoon, colleagues, and good afternoon to our witnesses for this, our final Committee meeting of 2022. Just before we start, I would like to put on record my thanks to all of my fellow Committee members, both past and present, for their attendance and their contribution to the Committee's work over the last 12 months, and to all of our witnesses who have helped our inquiries and developed our thinking and, hopefully, Government policy as well.

I am very grateful to our four witnesses this afternoon from the Independent Reporting Commission for helping to further our understanding and appreciation of the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland. Gentlemen and lady, you are very welcome, and thank you for finding the time at this busy time of the year to join us this afternoon.

I want to start the questioning by asking for a thumbnail sketch, if you will, of your understanding of the level of paramilitary activity and how it is manifesting itself.

Monica McWilliams: As you know, we published our fifth annual report last week. In that, we have said that this has been a mixed year. We had some good news to report. In fact, some of the data would show that this year there have been fewer bombings, shootings and paramilitary-style attacks. Indeed, the data on those intimidated, in terms of being put out of their own homes, has gone down.

We may want to interrogate that data, but it has come from public authorities, public agencies and published data, so it has shown that there has been a reduction, which could be good news. The trend is downwards and it has certainly been the lowest year in 10 years, so that progress is good.

There has also been progress on the criminal justice side, in that there have been more arrests and, indeed, more convictions, but it has been a mixed year and that could be of concern. We say, just to quickly sum it up, that paramilitarism is still a clear and present danger and remains of serious concern to us.

Q256 **Chair:** Just on the data point, we all know that there are lies, damned lies and statistics, and we always have to be very careful with data, as you suggested in your initial answer. Should we be wary of underreporting as a way of suggesting that the numbers are going down?

Monica McWilliams: Yes, indeed, but that would not be for this year. That underreporting would have been for all of the 10 years. We look at patterns and trends. You are quite right. As a professor of research methods, I would say that it is important to see who does not come forward, who does not speak to the police and who is intimidated. Of



course, that data will not be recorded, but these are incidents attended by the police. They are the cases that the Housing Executive has to respond to in terms of those who wish to be prioritised for rehousing. They are more effective as the years go on in terms of gathering that data.

Tim O'Connor: I would very much echo Monica there. The other piece is that part of the reason why Monica correctly calls it a mixed year is that, while the metrics are showing a decline, which is good, nonetheless we are seeing that the reaction to political developments this year, particularly around the Northern Ireland protocol, has led to speculation of a potential resurgence in paramilitary activity, so that has been shadowing a bit in the background as well. That is part of why we say it is mixed.

The biggest thing that we would be saying to you here is that, unfortunately, the infrastructure and the structures of paramilitarism remain intact, and we say that that continues, therefore, to be a real threat to wider Northern Ireland society, and also to the communities where the paramilitaries operate. It is a threat for wider peace and stability, so that is why we are using this phrase that paramilitarism continues to be a clear and present danger.

Q257 **Chair:** We started this inquiry and have, effectively, renamed it. That was based on evidence received from a number of witnesses over recent sessions where we focused in on the appropriateness of the use of the word "paramilitary", because it suggests uniforms, medals, statecraft, military and so on and so forth. We have been hearing a lot that we should be focusing on people who are grooming—there should be a child safeguarding issue, given some of the socioeconomic demographics who are preyed upon by leading people in this criminal world—and using the words "criminal gangs", "extortionists" and the like. Do you have concerns when we default to the word "paramilitary" and should we be calling it out for organised criminality, child grooming and, therefore, by definition, a child and young persons' safeguarding issue as well?

Tim O'Connor: We are a reporting body. We have a responsibility from our mandate on the treaty establishing us to report, and to report on the totality. Therefore, we stand or fall on the strength of the analysis that we try to bring collectively between the four of us. Our analysis is that paramilitarism, as we have described again in this report, is a complex landscape comprising many different dimensions, some of which you have just named in what you just said there.

The factors that you outlined are absolutely the case, but they are part of a wider matrix or mosaic of factors, all of which have to be taken into account. If we want to bring paramilitarism to an end once and for all, as is the injunction of the Fresh Start Agreement, which was the agreement from 2015 that led to our establishment, we must be addressing all of those dimensions. That is just the additional word that I would add there. There is not a single word that covers every dimension. You are correct in



what you said, but it is all under the overall landscape of paramilitarism, which we regard as this complex matrix.

Q258 Chair: If a vulnerable, possibly isolated young person thought of being recruited by some brave people to join a club or a gang to get a sense of belonging and camaraderie, might they be put off if they thought, "These people who are trying to entice me in are trying to groom me in a very predatory way", and might the attractiveness, even for very vulnerable people and groups, be diminished?

Tim O'Connor: Yes, that is fair. Again, you are describing a dimension of the complexity, and we are saying that all of that has to be addressed. I am not pushing back for a second on what you are saying. You are right.

Chair: Please push back if you wish to.

Tim O'Connor: In this report, we talk about the public health approach that is being adopted by the Tackling Paramilitarism programme, which is a very good way to go and which treats violence as a disease. You have to understand all of its constituent elements, so that is exactly what we think is the right way to do this. Therefore, this is a process for all of us who care about this.

This is a process of correctly identifying, in detail, all the different dimensions and then bringing the proper responses to bear, some of which are policing and justice responses, absolutely. We make very clear that there has to be—and there is—a robust policing and criminal justice response. We also say that it should be tackling the deep socioeconomic and other issues in the communities where the paramilitaries operate. You have just been describing some of them, so we need bespoke responses to that.

Then, of course, as you know, in our report, we also feel that there is a political dimension that connects to the conflict, which has us believing that criminal justice and those socioeconomic responses on their own, while absolutely necessary, will not be enough. To that, we must add what we are calling the additional dimension of a process of engagement with the groups themselves to bring about group transition and disbandment.

If there is not this aggressive addressing of all of this, we will not have success. The good news, going back to Monica's point about the mixed year, is that, as a result of the Fresh Start Agreement and the panel report that Monica, John McBurney and Lord Alderdice produced in 2016, which led to the executive action plan and the Tackling Paramilitarism programme, there is now a very substantial and comprehensive process going on that is addressing these issues. Because this is all so deep-seated and complex, it is necessary to very much keep at that.

Mitchell Reiss: To get back to your original question, I do not think that young people in these communities where the paramilitaries exercise coercive control are under any illusion about the criminality of these



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gangs, and so changing a label, in that sense, is not going to change much in terms of young people being groomed. There is absolutely no doubt that there is an extraordinary amount of criminality that is taking place, and you have already listed some of the ways in which these groups engage in criminal activities. As Tim said, and as our report shows, the paramilitary groups extend beyond the pure criminals, and that is what makes it complicated.

However, there is one example where the vocabulary could be changed productively, and that is the phrase that we often use or we hear reported, which is "paramilitary-style attacks". These are really premeditated assaults. This is criminal behaviour. It may be motivated by reasons that the paramilitaries can justify to themselves, but, in fact, paramilitary-style assaults are just criminality. If it takes place against juveniles, it is child abuse, so there is some room here to re-examine the vocabulary. Do not give them any veneer of justification or rationalisation by calling them PSAs. That would be my suggestion.

Q259 Sir Robert Goodwill: Good afternoon, witnesses, and good morning to Mr Reiss in Florida. You describe a "complex landscape", in your words, of paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, "comprising different categories of people", which, therefore, necessitates a multi-faceted approach. How can the authorities develop such an approach to target interventions aimed at ending this paramilitary activity? Are we talking about a generational difference between people, or is it republican or nationalist communities? How is this landscape made up?

Monica McWilliams: There is a complex landscape. There are those groups that are on ceasefire and are evaluated by the Police Service of Northern Ireland. There are those groups that are not on ceasefire, which are a national security risk and, therefore, are looked after in a different way.

In terms of the complex landscape, you have just put your finger on some of that, which is clear criminality and organised crime. Then we also have the context of the political dimension, and therein lies the difference between those that are organised on what is known as the nationalist/republican side and those on the loyalist/unionist side. There are differences between these groups. They often have feuds amongst themselves, which creates a problem for the police.

We have made an assessment of the fact that the individual transition has been going on for some time. Individuals have left groups that had an allegiance to their former paramilitary organisation. There is community transition and there are some very good examples, which we have been out to visit, of where communities have moved on and have been funded to do so.

The question remains, particularly 25 years after the peace agreement, of why we still have paramilitary groups in existence and belonging to the allegiance that initially brought them into existence in the first place.



Those are the groups that we find are complex, and we argue in our report that there needs to be engagement, and that needs to be at the group level.

Q260 Sir Robert Goodwill: You talk about the residual political dimension to this activity continuing. How does that manifest itself? Does it have links to some of the more extreme or less mainstream political parties, or is it just the heritage that goes back generations and links them to one community or the other?

John McBurney: It is very good to be speaking with you on these matters. Paramilitarism really has changed quite a bit in the last quarter century. We are all old enough to be aware of how it was back before the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It is now a situation where, using “paramilitarism” as a term to cover both republican and loyalist groupings—proscribed groupings on both sides—they are no longer, mercifully, at fierce warfare, one against the other. That makes it different to begin with.

Then you come to the question of: if they are not engaged in fierce warfare one against the other, why do they still exist and what are they engaged in now? Undoubtedly, there are organised crime groups embedded within the wider groupings, but then there are dormant members who have been members for many years, there are active members who see themselves as community activists, and there are more dangerous elements who are involved in pure criminality. We need organised crime group legislation in Northern Ireland. We do not have it. It is everywhere else on both these islands except Northern Ireland, and we constantly make a plea for that.

It is too simplistic, in my view, to say that we dispense with the term “paramilitarism” and call them child abusers, organised crime gangs or whatever, because the groupings are still constructed in a militaristic fashion. There are those who will call themselves brigadiers and be acknowledged as such, or commanders, quartermasters, provost marshals, volunteers or army council members. These are not civilianised terms, and that leaves it different from the organised crime gangs of Scotland or, sadly, of Birmingham, Manchester or any large conurbation. It creates a difference. It creates an added layer of complexity.

If a young person is drawn into one of the loyalist groupings at the present time, for example, it is not necessarily that they want to be tutored and trained to be a drug dealer. They may feel that they want to join that group in order to fight the protocol or to defend against a border poll, or some other action that has a political bent or veneer—call it what you will—to it. It is not about being recruited as an apprentice criminal to know how to counterfeit, extort, human traffic or any of those dimensions, necessarily. That is what creates this added layer of complexity to dealing with the groups.



When you then move to the republican side and the dissident groupings, they see that there is still a cause to be pursued to a greater or lesser extent. On the loyalist side, the paramilitary groupings see that there is something yet to defend. All of that is in the mix in trying to find a way to deal with those who are at the very heart of the situation and saying, "We want to bring our organisations to a better and different place". That is either true or it is false. If it is true, what is to be lost by testing that?

Q261 Sir Robert Goodwill: That probably indicates what political motivation there may be amongst people to join some of these gangs, but, of course, the financial motivation is probably also very strong. The people already engaged in this activity might find it hard to make as much money and get the same respect, as they would describe it, within the community and the jobs market. Certainly, others may see people riding about in BMWs with blacked-out windows, dining in very smart restaurants and living in big houses. To what extent does the financial incentive bypass the traditional or historical political reasons for getting engaged with these groups?

John McBurney: I am afraid that, again, it is pretty complex, in that very many of the paramilitaries themselves are not financially ambitious. You do not drive about Belfast in traffic queues of Porsches, Ferraris or Lamborghinis in east Belfast or west Belfast. Many of them are not financially ambitious. There is a camaraderie. There is the need to be seen in the community to be doing something.

There is also the fact that the communities have been very brutalised by all of the violence of so many years. Very often, these people are looked to to sort out street problems that they see are not being sorted out by the PSNI, so they turn to a more violent approach to the problem. That then becomes an affliction within the communities itself.

If you think of the term "paramilitary", we have paramedics, who play a very valuable role. We have paralegals, who play a valuable role in legal services. These paramilitaries think that they play a valuable role when the police seem to be failing in the communities to deal with drug dealing or whatever. All of that then creates a perversion of thinking around how they should be functioning and how they should be behaving in the community, and they see themselves as enforcers. They see themselves as activists who can get things done when others seemingly cannot. That gives them a standing and a place. It gives young people the possibility of joining up for no other reason than to be part of that grouping.

I am avoiding the word "gang", in the sense that the young people do not necessarily see it as a gang as you might think of a gang within London circles who are engaged in violence and street disturbance and so forth. There is an added dimension to it with our young people who get drawn into these things—a flag protest or a dispute about a bonfire being shifted from one place to another, or being taken down altogether. There seem to be these events that they get latched on to as a miniature cause, which can then blow up into something more significant.



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Q262 Sir Robert Goodwill: Mr Reiss, you talk in the report of a clear and present danger of increased activity of this sort. What factors might lead into that? Is it a political dimension? Is it an economic situation where maybe the job market becomes even worse than it is?

Mitchell Reiss: You have just touched on two of the big drivers. Certainly, if there is socioeconomic deprivation, we know that, traditionally, that often entices people into activities that they should not engage in, so that is certainly a concern. If there is an economic downturn, you have a lot more young people unemployed. These groups, not just for financial reasons but for the identity reason, as John just mentioned, might be attractive.

Politically, if the Assembly is not stood up providing political leadership, if there is not a sense of progress generally, if they are not happy with the direction in which the Government in London is taking them, if they are upset about the Northern Ireland protocol or if they are upset about statements coming out of Dublin, you cannot disengage the political from this at all.

It is a combination, and that is one reason why we are worried that, despite there being some positive progress this year, without some type of resolution, reconciliation and accommodation by all the political leadership in Northern Ireland, with leadership from London, there absolutely is a possibility that some of these groups could act out in ways that would be very disturbing, especially as we are approaching the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement.

Q263 Sir Robert Goodwill: Mr O'Connor, I wonder what information you can give us about the types of criminal activity that these groups are engaged in. Has that shifted in recent years?

Tim O'Connor: In our report, we gave a listing, because it is across the board. Drugs are a key part of it, as are money lending and extortion. Then there is wider what we call intimidation.

Monica mentioned housing. That is also one of the activities. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has statistics showing the number of people who have been intimidated out of their homes as a result of paramilitary pressure. The figure for the past year is about 142. Sadly, that is, as Monica said, a reduction on previous numbers, so that will just give you an idea. This is the kind of range.

John and Richard have just given a good indication of the backgrounds or backdrops against which people come into these spaces, as it were, and some of it has to do with vulnerabilities, mental health and socioeconomic deprivation. That is why we are concerned that, with the economic difficulties in play at the moment, history has shown that, when the economic difficulties come more broadly, they hit these communities disproportionately harder, and that can then also be a further



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accelerating factor. This is the kind of situation where paramilitaries can tighten the grip again.

In fairness to the Tackling Paramilitarism programme that is in place now as a result of Fresh Start, there is a big effort being made to address the situation of vulnerable people who might be likely to find themselves in these kinds of situations. There is a big programme under way right across Northern Ireland right now, and that is an essential part of the toolkit in tackling this, in addition to the policing and justice, which we continue to say is absolutely necessary.

You have seen the statistics from the paramilitary crime task force, which is, again, a new initiative coming out of Fresh Start. That has had another very strong year in terms of the impact that it has made on the groups. John mentioned the measures in terms of the administration of justice.

All of these are necessary parts, but we still believe that, as long as the infrastructure that John described and the structures of paramilitarism continue to be in place, which has to do also with the wider political history here, that, therefore, extends the danger. That is part of the risk for society and why we have been putting forward our view about the need for a process of engagement.

Q264 Chair: You mentioned money lending there. We took evidence last week from representatives of the credit unions, who were at great pains to tell us about the good work that they do in their communities in order to avoid having to default to money lenders within the paramilitary cycle. Given the cost of living pressures that so many people are under, are the authorities concerned enough about this being another avenue for paramilitaries to grow their business model and then to be able to recruit other people, particularly if they are unable to repay the debts that they get into?

Tim O'Connor: That is a very fair question. That is why we are saying that we welcome the progress that has been made by the Tackling Paramilitarism programme in putting in place very proactive measures that really try to reach everybody who could be under pressure. That is the kind of infrastructure that is being built up now and is making good progress.

Of course, we hear worrying words about cutbacks in public services and would be making the appeal to you, as you are a very important and influential Committee, that now is not the time to be cutting back on these things, precisely for the reason that you have just said. Unfortunately, this is long-haul stuff. We wish there were magic wands that could be waved even at Christmas time, but they do not exist. This is long-haul stuff, putting in place the programmes that reach literally into every household, if necessary.

Good progress has been made there, but, please, it is critically important that that investment continues to be maintained. This is something that



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is going to be with us going forward for quite some time, so the message, if you could pass it on, would be that now is not the time for cutting back on this, precisely for the reasons you are saying.

Q265 Sir Robert Goodwill: I am just going to move on to my final bit, which is about the independent reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007. That reviewer said that there was a symbiotic relationship between drug dealing and the existence of paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. In effect, is drug dealing the petrol on which this machine works, in many cases?

Monica McWilliams: The reviewer is correct. There is a symbiotic relationship in some localities, but not others. As the commissioners, we have drilled down and we know in which localities there is a direct correlation, but that is not the case in every area, and it is not even the case with the different groups. For instance, we now know that there is a real problem with East Belfast UVF. In other areas, they are very concerned that that name of being only drug dealers is rolling over to them, which is one of the reasons why they wish to engage. They do not wish for that to be the only legacy. We also know, in terms of the INLA, that there are problems. We know exactly the towns and the neighbourhoods in which it is working.

In response to your earlier point, it is good now to see multiagency hubs, where you have these services that know what the local problems are and that are coming together to respond to them. We have spoken to them and we have encouraged in our report the setting up of further neighbourhood hubs, because the outcomes are good, where they are in existence and where the police are working alongside the mental health workers—and, in particular, the youth service workers—and the frontline workers, who, just this past week, have been talking about the cuts and how those are affecting them.

Going back to an earlier point, not only is the context difficult in terms of understanding the political nuances as well as the criminality part of the story, but it is also complex in terms of neighbourhoods. It is not everywhere that you will find paramilitary groups saying that they want any association with being labelled as drug dealers. In fact, it is quite the opposite.

Q266 Chair: Monica, is there anything that you would like to draw our attention to with regard to urban and rural? The default is always to think of this thing as being prevalent in the pictures that we are all familiar with from our television screens—long rows of terraced houses in densely populated urban areas. That is not the case.

Monica McWilliams: It is not the case, and you are quite right to draw attention to the geographical complexity. There are many rural groups. Again, we have visited these. There is a huge difference between Mid Ulster and North Antrim, which have had very positive engagement with us, and the urban areas of Carrickfergus, Larne and east Belfast, which I



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have just mentioned, which have a name for very different and very poor reasons, because of the focus on criminality. Again, there is a rural/urban nuance there that needs attention.

We have been out to visit some of the good practice, which we also highlight in our report. Clearly, the media this week will probably focus on quite a lot of the criminality, and it is their job to do so, but what is lost often in that picture is the resilience. Two years ago, when there were the problems in Northern Ireland, in particular in the Shankill and Lanark Way, what people forgot about was the resilience of some of those rural groups that managed to keep a lid on it. That is very important, because that shows you that people are being weaned away from the influence of the chorus of controllers, who, in turn, attempt to use the badge of paramilitarism in order to continue that control.

Q267 Carla Lockhart: Thank you to the panel for your answers so far. I am going to ask a little bit on the Fresh Start Agreement, but just before I do so, I see within your report that there is a focus on illegal commercial enterprises, which I am keen to understand. In recent months, we have seen and witnessed gangland murders in west Belfast and Newry, and we also have evidence in a special criminal court in Dublin of Sinn Féin using an international crime gang for votes and money. In that context, mindful of your terms of reference, if you were to find evidence in the course of your work of proceeds of crime leaking into the political system and being used to influence politics in the United Kingdom, first, would you be shocked and, secondly, what course of action would you take?

Monica McWilliams: I am familiar with exactly what you are talking about, and this is a very current issue. Again, we would have to rely on the information and the intelligence that we get from PSNI and, indeed, the cross-border task force on that. No doubt it may be a focus of attention in the coming report.

I am not so sure that we would be shocked, because, when we first set out as the panel—John McBurney, Lord Alderdice and myself—attention came to us in relation to some of these issues, particularly the issues around quarrying and dumping. Those would, indeed, be organised and may indeed be enterprises. In terms of an affiliation to paramilitary organisations, we probably did not focus as much because much of that information was coming out just as we were going to publication.

Carla Lockhart: So the likelihood is that, in the next report, there will be a particular focus on it.

Tim O'Connor: We say at the start of the report what we are and what we are not. It was decided by the Governments and the parties in terms of our establishment that we are not an assessment body as such, unlike, for instance, the Independent Monitoring Commission, a previous body that you know, which operated between 2004 and 2011. That was an assessment body. That was doing detailed assessments on the different



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paramilitary groups, doing reports on them and, in a sense, calling them out, but that is not the role that we were given.

The understanding that we were given is that Fresh Start was an attempt at a comprehensive, innovative approach that combined policing and justice measures, but also measures addressing socioeconomic factors in communities. Our task was to report more broadly on that wide matrix. Assessment is still left then with the law enforcement and security services.

Q268 Carla Lockhart: Just to have it leaking into UK politics would be quite the wrong thing to happen. On the Fresh Start side of things, how effective has the Fresh Start Agreement been in combining the twin tracks of criminal justice measures with commitments to tackle systemic socioeconomic issues facing communities? Within my constituency, I have quite an investment from the tackling paramilitarism side of things. I am just keen to understand what your thoughts are on that.

John McBurney: It is lovely to see you, Carla. No doubt you will be back in Banbridge soon.

Carla Lockhart: No doubt, if the weather permits.

John McBurney: The twin track arose from the executive action plan, which arose out of the panel report. Also going back to panel time, which happened very shortly after the Fresh Start Agreement, there was the embryonic form of a group transition process mentioned there as well, but it did not make it into the executive action plan.

The executive action plan became criminal justice responses on one side—the paramilitary crime task force, et cetera, all of which is essential—and then the socioeconomic impact to strengthen the communities, to break free from the shackles of paramilitarism and to make urgent and positive progress. All of that was good and is rolling out tolerably well in all parts.

Then you have this missing component of what you do with the leaderships of groups who say they want to engage in a process to bring about disbandment of groups. That is a different and separate endeavour and is bedevilling the processes at the present time, because, as a society, we really are not coming to grips with that notion.

Maybe 25 years ago it was easier to think that something must be done and must be done urgently, because of the extremity of the events that were happening and the situation that was all about us. Now, we have this ongoing problem in a box marked “difficult” or maybe even “too difficult”. We walk around and past it and wonder when we would ever tackle those leaderships who say that they are prepared to move their organisations on a different journey, to de-proscription or disbandment, or to a process of ending recruitment, of allowing people to exit the organisation without repercussion, of engaging with a legacy body or bodies to provide information to victims from the past, or of dealing with



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whatever remaining weaponry is still out there, in a positive and useful way.

Then there is the thorny question of how society really feels about de-proscription. It is on the statute books, but is it ever appropriate, in Northern Ireland terms, for an organisation that is currently illegal to become legalised in some way by means of the de-proscription process? That is a very thorny and difficult question for society to grapple with, and that would be on the table in a group transition discussion or debate.

What is needed is what I describe as BAR. The B is brokerage with the leaderships of the groups in so far as they are prepared to bring mainstream organisations towards disbandment and to be fully disbanded. The A is assessment, which, as Tim has said, we do not and cannot do, but someone needs to do it. The security services, PSNI, An Garda Síochána or a combination of all three need to be asking, "Has recruitment ended? Are these organisations really on the journey?" The R is reporting, and we can do that. The reporting of progress as it unfolds is probably the easiest part of that trilogy.

The problem is that group transition as a concept has not yet been embraced or commenced, so we are in this hiatus or vacuum—call it what you will—where, if there are leaders of paramilitary groups who are getting older and greyer by the day and who are saying, "We will try to bring the organisation through a process to disbandment", why is that not worthy of being tested? That is the abiding question as we see it at the present time. It is very good that the Committee is exploring all of this, because the more minds that are brought to it at this point, the better. Otherwise, there will be a backsliding. There will be a drifting backwards by all of the groups and we will be left transitioning in the wrong direction, I fear.

Q269 Carla Lockhart: Can you give us some information on the programme sponsor group and how it will help tackle paramilitarism?

Monica McWilliams: In the other reports that we have written to date, we have recommended a whole-of-Government approach. Indeed, we are heartened to see that, in the programme development, tackling and challenging paramilitarism was a priority, but it was not getting the attention as we came towards the last report—and, indeed, we focus on it even more in this one—in terms of each of the permanent secretaries coming under the head of the civil service.

The head of the civil service, Jayne Brady, is now going to head up that sponsor group. She has taken charge of bringing all of the Departments together, because, as we have been speaking to date, there is hardly a Department that could be left out of this—health, economy, social services, and justice in particular. In the past, the Department of Justice and the Executive Office have been left to do most of the heavy lifting, when, in fact, many of these problems fall to the other Departments. It is good to see that, and we have recommended it and urged further action



in terms of that sponsor group. It is one of our key recommendations in our fifth report.

Q270 Carla Lockhart: John and Tim touched earlier on the importance of continuing to invest in financial support. Are we seeing the reward for the investment thus far? I am thinking particularly of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme. Some of it is very good, but I probably have some concerns, particularly around the fact that it is very much a revenue stream as opposed to investment in areas from a capital perspective. Have you any thoughts on that programme currently?

Tim O'Connor: That is a fair question. The spotlight always has to be kept on ensuring that the right direction of travel is being undertaken. The Tackling Paramilitarism programme, which came from the executive action plan, which came from the panel report, started in 2017. In 2021, it began phase 2 of its existence. Phase 2 has a new focus on what they are calling shared outcomes and technical terms like benefits realisation.

They all come down to trying to find, as Monica was saying, joined-up ways, so that all the different elements are coming together, you get the best outcome for the community and for the people involved, you are reaching the people who need to be reached and doing it in this holistic way, and also that this is then being joined up with what the police are doing as well. Sometimes, we have heard that the police can take an action in a place and then there is a vacuum.

With what is happening now much more through the hubs, the more joined-up working and this focus in phase 2, you are getting that integrated approach. Going back to the public health point, it is a bit like a patient with a complex medical condition who has a number of doctors overseeing them. What is critical for the wellbeing of that patient is that there is joined-up working between all the medical people involved, otherwise things fall through the cracks. That is what is happening, but you know yourself, Carla, that that is a complex process and has taken time to put in place. Each year that goes by, better results are being shown.

Just to touch on a point that Monica made earlier, in April 2021, when there were the disturbances that we know about, part of the reason why, even though it was bad at the time, it did not spread any further, either from a time point of view or geographically, was because the work of the programme swung into action. For instance, great work is being done in the youth service under the Education Authority. A lot of direct work was done with individual young people who were at risk and involved. There were interventions taken at that time through the programme, which had a real impact. That is just one example.

You are right, though, and I understand the thrust of your question. Is it enough? It is not enough. More needs to be done, and that is why we think that continued investment is going to be required. These issues have been there, as you know as a public representative, for a long time.



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The bespoke and customised approaches that are now being developed under the programme were necessary for a long time, but it is only now that they are happening. We have to continue to double down here and continue to invest in them.

Carla Lockhart: Yes. It is also that wider piece where, whilst they have tried to extend the Tackling Paramilitarism programme to areas of influence and so on, that has worked well, but in many ways it needs to go wider than what it is currently.

Tim O'Connor: I agree. That is a very fair comment.

Q271 **Carla Lockhart:** Just on the protocol side of things, you have indicated within the report that there was a potential for increased activity on the back of that. A clear message would be that politics is the way forward. I am keen to understand whether the fact that the UK Government came in with the protocol Bill helped. Does that message that politics is the way forward, and that continued political action is needed on this issue, need to go out further?

John McBurney: To my way of thinking, it was undoubtedly good that protests that were evolving and that seemed to have overtaken political debate, dialogue and endeavour were then reprogrammed, if you like, into becoming political endeavour, discussion and debate. That cannot go on endlessly, but it has been encouraging to see a phasing down of protest in the streets and elsewhere in deference, or in preference, to the political exchanges and endeavours that are ongoing.

Be in no doubt—none of us are; we are all very familiar with the territory—that things can flare up again, if an issue that seems unresolved and unresolvable then becomes such a frustration that it pours out into our streets once again, and that cannot be allowed to happen. Wise heads need to leave matters to be dealt with by the political discussions and understandings, which can be arrived at, and the sooner the better.

There is no doubt that those who are involved in the paramilitary groups on the loyalist side see the protocol as an issue that can generate a momentum for them, and that is a momentum that we can well do without. The way to do without it is by reaching a solution. It sounds very simplistic of me from Banbridge here, but there is no other way for any of us to make progress other than to find a means of solving it and getting things back onto an even keel in all respects, including in the endeavour to bring about disbandment of the groups.

Q272 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you very much to our witnesses for your answers so far. You have been really strong in your previous reports about this concept of problem-solver by day and troublemaker by night, so it is very clear that your spectacles are not rose-tinted. You are people who genuinely know the lie of the land.

John, you have spoken about the “too difficult” box and how things have



to be addressed. I just wanted to pick up on your proposals around group transition. As you know, we have discussed this before, so you will have an idea of where my head is on this, and I very much have sympathy with the need to get from where we are now to somewhere better. If there is a real, credible desire to be transitioned, our minds cannot be closed on it, but I just wanted to air some of the concerns that people have around, for example, the framing of the proposals within the United Nations parameters and in terms of disarmament and demobilisation.

There are concerns that this elevates and legitimises organisations and may add a political veneer to some groups that are involved in straight-up criminality as their main activity, while still being supportive of the concept of transitional justice and understanding that there is not a straight-up criminal justice response in this scenario that we have.

I, my party and many other people wonder when transition ends, two and a half decades on, when people, in many cases, have had the space, the time and the resources to transition, but have retained the power, the assets and even the recruitment. It links in with another inquiry that we are doing about the strand 1 institutions and where the immediate peace processing phase ends.

You will be alive to some of these concerns, and you have collective decades of experience and integrity in this, so what do you see as the virtues, the downsides and maybe the risks of this type of approach that treats these as legitimate political groups needing to be transitioned rather than as people involved with criminality not getting a soft landing?

Monica McWilliams: I can understand those concerns. As somebody involved in transitional justice, I have been following it very closely elsewhere. It is not political groups that they are talking about transitioning. It is armed groups that they are talking about, as you probably know from being familiar with other conflict situations. It has worked very well in Colombia. The difference there is that they have a brilliant monitoring mechanism following each and every part of that transition and their agreement, which we missed out on completely.

Claire Hanna: They are doing truth up front.

Monica McWilliams: They are monitoring the transition of FARC after 50 years with the Government and a new President. It goes back to political leadership, because they also went through a rollercoaster, where it went forwards, backwards, forwards, depending on who was in the leadership in their Government and supported those ideas. It goes back to this issue of exclusion.

As someone who was there 25 years ago and involved in the negotiations, it was an inclusive process, difficult as it was. The point was to keep people in from the cold. When we spoke to some of the loyalist groups, they felt that very soon afterwards they were excluded. That was either because we had not had the same electoral system that brought people around that table and we went back to the status quo, or, indeed,



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there was not the support for some of those groups to get elected to the first Assembly. Nonetheless, there were years that went past when very little attention was paid to some of the needs in that community.

That is not the only reason why you talk about reintegration. In that case, it was reintegration of people who had described themselves as combatants and went to prison, and then had to be reintegrated back into a normal society.

They use the term “civilianisation”, which is a good one, themselves. Without getting into the complexities of that UN approach—and it is a UN approach—and the way that the different contexts adapt it and amend it, it is a useful one. Quite rightly you might ask, “How long is a piece of string after 25 years?” in that some of these groups still exist, and we know from police evidence that not all of them are organised criminal groups. What about the others who are not? What is their reason for remaining? John has given a very good argument for why we need to pay attention to that.

That is why we have moved to a group transition, because I have met—we all have—those individuals who would say, “That was my past and this is my present. Do not judge me forever about my past”. They have exited and have now performed a leadership role within their neighbourhoods and communities away from paramilitarism control.

There are then the communities, as I mentioned, where groups have never been on the agenda until we put them there. Indeed, it involves risks, and some non-taxpayer money. The International Fund for Ireland, the International Committee of the Red Cross, maybe the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and others have engaged with those groups, but there has been no formal process. There has not been a mandate for engagement. Only then would you test the waters, if such a process was to be established, because we do not have those powers. We are reporters, not assessors. Indeed, it would probably need an interlocutor.

That is why we have gone further in this report and suggested an independent person who is credible and independent, and potentially international. That has been used before. We have had that experience. Given that we are now going into the 25th year, perhaps this is the right time to pay more attention and have a better focus. We are pleased that the Intergovernmental Conference now has it on its agenda. The next British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference will be looking at this. It is up for discussion. It is a recommendation.

We raised it last year and went into further detail on it this year, but we believe that these groups must go off the scene. You might well ask the question, “Where do you want to be in five or 10 years’ time?” If they say they wish to engage in such a process and that Fresh Start did not include them and was imposed on them, we say that in this case engagement would be about the groups themselves. It will have to be done voluntarily, and they should be involved in co-designing but not



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given the lead or dictating. As we have done in the past, when things have been successful, you engage the very people that you want to see the outcome in. In this case, it would be around ending paramilitarism.

Tim O'Connor: We totally respect that. It comes back down to where the starting point is on the analysis. You have made clear to us your views. We listen very carefully and we respect them. It is a troubling question, as Monica says, so it is not a comfortable position, frankly, to be holding.

If all that is involved here is a question of criminality and criminal gangs, then a process of group transition is utterly inappropriate and should not be countenanced. If it is criminality, yes, it has to be addressed, but if somehow it is more than that and it is also these other dimensions, the question is how we tackle that other dimension, that other piece, that probably continues back.

It is a fair point of yours as well about the length of time that has gone by, but we know that the 25 years has been a rollercoaster of back and forth, in and out and stop-start. It has not been a straight line. Some other things have got clogged and stalled along the way that were not in our hopes 25 years ago, but that is the reality of it.

To take John's point from a while ago, I believe that the existence of the paramilitary structures and infrastructure, against the history that we are talking about, is part of the clear and present danger. One of the challenges is that you can have robust policing and criminal justice to tackle the criminals and the criminality piece, but how do you deal with the structures, as such, where you have thousands of people involved? That is a big part, and that is going to require, as Monica said, a piece of negotiation internationally as well.

The reason we just put in DDR at this time, Claire, was because it is an internationally recognised mechanism that is used in conflicts elsewhere and is recommended by the UN. Each conflict situation is different, as Monica says, and there would have to be something customised for Northern Ireland, but we have included it simply to say that this kind of complex process is something that has to be embraced in every conflict resolution situation.

My final comment is that I know it is unpalatable. I completely accept and share that it is unpalatable that, after 24—nearly 25—years, we are having to do this, but we honestly do not see how you can get to the end goal that we want, which is a society free of paramilitarism, without some kind of residual process like this.

Q273 Claire Hanna: On the DDR thing, of course it is necessary. It is not palatable anywhere, but it is necessary. It is not the fluffiest thing. Without exception, for example, people have been out of both prison and gangs that were on ceasefire for longer than they have ever been in.

Just briefly, this is the issue about organisations. I appreciate there are



different levels of criminality and there are some that are functioning more as paramilitary with a theoretical political ethos than others, but you mentioned that there are thousands of members because people have been running with the hares and hunting with the hounds for years. They have been talking the language of peace and participating in transitionary groups, but recruitment has continued. In any proposed transition, it is how you address those who would propose to play it long, who would look at the architecture that you have set out and think, "We can get another few years out of this", in different settings.

I know there are, of course, individuals who genuinely want to make this transition work. I am completely for the possibility and the space for redemption and for people to participate in the future and all of those things, but you referred to those who want to use the protocol stuff and the general constitutional flux, which is going to be around us for the next few years to come, as a recruitment and a momentum-builder. What are the chances of them coming with us in these organisations of thousands? Is there a danger that we put in place this process and we take the few individuals who may be getting old and worn out, and we do not address the structures of these things?

Tim O'Connor: On that point, again, it is a fair question; it is a hard question but a fair question. You had the PSNI in front of you at some point along the way. I believe that you asked them the question about this and their views on group transition. They have been quite supportive of it. They are obviously responsible for the law enforcement dimension of all of this, but they, from that vantage point, believe that a process of group transition could be viable now. In our report, we address the different complexities involved in it, but they think it could be a valuable piece of the toolkit at the moment.

That has encouraged us as well, because again we do not want to be unrealistic or naive. This has to be a hard-edged action that gets us to the point, and it has to have the best chance possible. There are no absolute guarantees in advance, but we were encouraged that that is the view of the PSNI, and they did convey that to you.

That is the answer to your question. The best judgment would be that the current leaderships would be able to transition a sufficiency of people in terms of getting to that. To be clear, the endgame, in our view, is disbandment of some form or other, because that is the continuing risk with political instability; you then have that side by side with the continued existence of the groups, and one spills over into the other. That is why we are encouraged by the PSNI's assessment.

Q274 **Claire Hanna:** Of course they will support that because, like everybody, they want an end to this. The things that we have tried to date have not been working, so we want to try other things. My concern is that some of these are elements that we have tried.

I just want to reiterate that you are all people with the utmost integrity



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and experience and your views are respected. Everybody knows you are only trying to get to the best possible place.

I just wanted to pick up on one particular aspect of how a transition might look and how we avoid some of the mistakes that were made in previous transitions, including, and especially, the Provisional IRA's transition. We note that the Fresh Start assessment in 2020 was that PIRA members still believed that they were being directed by the army council, but transition there has undoubtedly been, and we are dealing with manifestation in communities and in politics.

One thing that definitely was not done, or done properly, in the transition of the PIRA was addressing its assets and financial resources. There has never been an explanation of what happened to what estimates say is hundreds of millions of pounds of assets, where they went and whether they continue looping in the process. What assessment do you have of the cash, infrastructure, front businesses or other assets that some of these groups that you are proposing to transition have? What would happen to those assets in a transition process?

John McBurney: It is very good to speak with you, Claire. I appreciate very much your depth of knowledge in all of the dimensions to these issues.

In terms of the process in which groups would be brought to a final stage of either disbandment or de-proscription, were that ever be considered to be appropriate, it is for the Governments and for Stormont, when it is re-established, were it minded to support such an endeavour. I do not see it as going into dimensions such as ownerships of properties, companies, subsidiary companies and all of that kind of menagerie. It would get terribly bogged down into almost a legacy investigation or inquiry, which could become quite endless.

If you are trying to bring about a disbandment of a currently functioning group, you look at exactly what that group's modus operandi is today in present terms. If they have weapons, that needs to be dealt with. If information is to be supplied to a legacy body or bodies, that needs to be dealt with. It is basically a brokerage, always in the context of disbandment, the ending of the group itself.

In terms of how far that needs to take you back into all of these subsidiary elements, at some point that then suffocates the process. It would be terrible if the process began and then became suffocated by extra endeavours and measures that dissipated the purity of achieving the disbandment. You could load too much on to the shoulders of a broker and make the endeavour virtually unworkable or impossible. It is that dimension that is so tricky.

Tim O'Connor: There is one other piece, just very briefly, which the PSNI is cognisant of as well. If you could achieve disbandment—let us do the heroic assumption here—whatever was left would also be then more amenable from a criminal justice, policing, and law enforcement response



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view. That would be another advantage of that: that whatever you could achieve, as John is saying there, whatever is left then would also be more amenable. The law enforcement and criminal justice focus would then be on a smaller piece of the equation.

Q275 Mr Walker: Mr Reiss mentioned earlier the issues of having the lack of a functioning Executive and the political uncertainty in Northern Ireland, and the impact of that on tackling paramilitary activity. Clearly, at the moment, in terms of the figures and what you have reported, that is the dog that has not barked in terms of the actual figures for paramilitary activity, which is welcome. Do you feel that there are initiatives that would make a significant difference to tackling paramilitary activity, which are being held up as a result of the lack of an Executive at the moment?

Mitchell Reiss: I also want my fellow commissioners to come in on this question as well, but we have been recommending some criminal justice reforms now for a while. We think that they are absolutely essential for tackling the criminal element of the paramilitary groups. As John mentioned earlier, there is legislation that is applicable everywhere else but Northern Ireland. There are some other pieces of legislation having to do with unexplained wealth as well. We think that there is some unfinished business that needs to be done.

Simply in terms of legitimacy of the NIO taking actions, if there are political representatives that are sitting and deciding, it just gives a degree of legitimacy that is lacking otherwise. The progress that has been made is remarkable. It is a testimony to a lot of good people working hard on paramilitary activities, but there is no substitute for having the Stormont Assembly up and running and having the Government functioning properly. I also want to hear from my fellow commissioners on that.

Monica McWilliams: You have answered it fully, Mitchell.

John McBurney: I would just reinforce the point about the organised crime group scenario, although, in fairness to the question, the organised crime group legislation is in Bill form, but until there is an Executive and a fully functioning Assembly and committees established and so forth, it will have to wait. It will be important legislation, because that legislation can then be used to de-badge and de-brand the organised crime group elements that are embedded within the wider paramilitary groupings.

We have scores of organised crime groups across Northern Ireland, and they fall into three categories. There are organised crime groups that are embedded within the paramilitary groups themselves. There are separate organised crime groups that have no paramilitary involvement. There are organised crime groups that have a mixture of some paramilitary involvement and non-paramilitary involvement as well; I call them hybrid. If you can get that legislation operational, you can then de-badge and de-brand these groupings, and then society can see them clearly for



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what they are as organised crime groups. That would be a helpful step forward.

I am going to try to pitch this as un-controversially as I can and choose my words as carefully as I can, but the endeavours that have caused Stormont not to be fully functional at the moment are of course within the box marked "political endeavours". I am trying to use as measured language here as I can on this. It is partly because of those political endeavours—they are political endeavours—which have caused Stormont to be as it presently is, that loyalist paramilitary groupings have mercifully stood back from any further street agitation or otherwise.

That means we are treading a very difficult, tight path at the moment. We need progress in relation to resolving the protocol scenario, and then the quick re-establishment, as quickly as possible, of the Executive and the institutions. The likes of organised crime group legislation can then flow as a consequence, and the sooner the better.

Monica McWilliams: I will add an extra piece to that, which is that, if you are going to have investors looking at a country to invest and bring in business that meets and addresses the issues we have raised in the twin track of the socioeconomic problems that some of those communities are facing, the first question they are going to ask is "Have you got a functioning Assembly?" Everything in Northern Ireland is interdependent, and that is an example of it.

Q276 **Mr Walker:** Having a functioning legal system that is up to the standards of the rest of the United Kingdom and the island of Ireland is also important in that respect. I can therefore understand moving forward with that.

Your recommendation says that it is essential that tackling paramilitarism becomes a dedicated outcome of the programme for Government. Is that really the same point: that we need the institutions there and we need this to be at the heart of their activity?

Tim O'Connor: Yes, very much so. It echoes a previous point we were making: there are so many strands to this that cut across so many different elements of Government. This is a classic piece of programme for Government work. We keep coming back to this in the course of our discussion. We believe that this is part of the unfinished business of the peace process and therefore it should really be at the heart of the next stage for Northern Ireland.

Clearly, we should be trying to find a way to bring this to an end once and for all, and that is a matter for the Government as a whole. That is why we have been arguing for it being a dedicated outcome of the programme for Government itself, rather than just having it locked away in one box, because it has so many dimensions.

Monica McWilliams: We make the point that in four out of the six years of our existence we have not had a functioning Government. That has



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really impacted on our work. Had there been one, the policymakers might have not come to us saying, "We need ministerial authority to do what you are asking of us, and we do not have it", in four of those six years.

Q277 Mr Walker: I apologise to the panel for the fact that I am going to have to step out very shortly, because I am required on another committee in about six minutes. Before I go, I just wanted to ask about transforming educational underachievement and how that could help to sustainably free Northern Ireland of paramilitarism.

Chair: I am going to go to Mitchell on that, because I know that Mitchell has thoughts on the importance of education.

Mitchell Reiss: I am sure that all the commissioners share the concern about the underachievement.

I just want to give a reference point. 20 years ago, when I was the President's special envoy to the Northern Ireland peace process, integrated education was an issue that I focused on. At the time 7% or 8% of all schools in Northern Ireland were so-called integrated. Today that number has gone backwards; it is actually less than that. 20 years on after the Good Friday agreement, despite holding data that shows many families wanting more options and wanting integrated education as one of them, the Government in Northern Ireland have not delivered on that.

Again, from the perspective of an American, we tried segregation in the United States a long time ago. It did not work very well. You are robbing from the future by not having more emphasis on getting people of different faiths together. You do not have the big factories that used to do it in the past. You do not have the big social clubs that perhaps played that role in the past. Housing is another, but education is certainly one where there is more demand out there than there is supply right now.

Q278 Chair: Mitchell, do you think that there is the understanding of the importance of education in the 21st-century Northern Irish economy? It is now so important. There are higher-paid jobs and high-skill jobs. Gone are the days where a grandson would follow his father and his grandfather into the same factory or place of work. Therefore, this cohort of people of low-ish educational attainment, low aspiration, disappearing levels of hope and so on find themselves drawn into the world of criminality as their route or road out of it.

Do you think there is enough being done with the young to say, "Focus on skills and education, because that is your path to a better life. That is the path to a better Northern Ireland"?

Mitchell Reiss: Anecdotally, the Chair is spot on. There is not enough emphasis. The same could be true of other countries as well, certainly in the United States. My sense is that in Northern Ireland it is also a cultural issue where, to borrow a phrase, there is the soft prejudice of low expectations. If people do not expect children from council flats in these



communities to aspire to go to college, if they do not think it is possible for them to go to university, they are just not going to make it. They have strikes against them before they are ten years old. Of course, Monica has seen this at her end, being a university professor.

It creates despair. It not only leads to perhaps an attraction for criminal gangs and paramilitary groups, but also self-abuse and mental health issues. Here is a little interesting fact: Covid caused an estimated 53 million cases of mental health disorders over the past few years. Why would any place on earth be immune from that? In Northern Ireland, with all its pre-existing conditions, there is still a huge problem for young people. It is just not fair, to give them the best possible opportunity forward.

Monica McWilliams: Under the previous Minister of Education, Peter Weir, there was a group established to look at educational underachievement. We mentioned that in our last report, and we hope those recommendations will be taken forward, because it is a serious issue. As someone who visited the juvenile prisons in the past, there was a huge issue of lack of numeracy and literacy, and the correlation between that and underachievement in education. As Mitchell said, there is a lack of aspiration if you are not numerate or literate.

It is a disgrace that we have children leaving school who are not numerate and literate, and it speaks to the unequal education system. I am pleased that that working group came up with those recommendations, but without a functioning Executive, they will not be taken forward. That is another issue that is going to sit in abeyance.

There is also some good work going on in the education system. We mentioned the good work of the Education Authority, which is responsible for the youth workers who have played a tremendous role, maybe even sustaining our peace in a way that many others have not managed to do, but the same should also be said of some of these schools that are located in very difficult areas. They are now linking up with neighbourhoods. Community restorative justice projects are going into the schools, doing a great deal of work on the issues of bullying and harassment.

Really important work is also taking place in Sure Start initiatives. Before the kids even get to school, they are able to tackle some of the lack of opportunity that they suffer from and that other kids have not suffered from. That is where we talk about the peace dividend.

Again, I keep using the word "interdependent", but it most certainly is. I am sad to say that we started this discussion today around those who were vulnerable, and the children who have underachieved at school are indeed the most vulnerable.

Q279 **Chair:** I am just going to pause there to have a conversation with colleagues and witnesses. We still have some quite important stuff we



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want to go through. The Minister is on his feet, and I am told we are going to have multiple votes. That could take 40 minutes. I am not keen to ask our witnesses to sit for 40 minutes waiting for the dignity of democracy to do its duties.

There are two ways that we can deal with this, and I am absolutely relaxed and in everybody else's hands. When the bell goes, I do not see much point in suspending the session; we will bring the session to an end. We can either submit the rest of our questions in writing to you as the commission and have written responses, or—this is what I am keener to do, but I am perfectly relaxed either way—we can find another date.

I appreciate we may not be able to get all four of you to find a mutually convenient date in the new year to go through the rest of the evidence. Particularly on the legal stuff, there is some stuff we wanted to tease through some more. There is probably a bit more in education and some future joint working. I am very much in your hands. Committee, I think we should ask our guests first what they would prefer us to do.

Tim O'Connor: It would be good to come back. That would be helpful. Your work is very important to us, and the fact that you are bringing this dedicated focus to bear is really important. Personally, I think it would be very helpful for us to reconvene in the new year.

Mitchell Reiss: I second that.

Chair: Who is the Shirley from "Strictly Come Dancing"? Who has the casting vote amongst the four of you, or are you all equal?

Tim O'Connor: We are a consensus. We have no chairperson, even.

Chair: Monica and John, are you happy with that?

Monica McWilliams: I am indeed.

John McBurney: Yes, totally.

Chair: Colleagues, rather than trying to rush an extra question now, I am going to adjourn until the new year. Can I thank our witnesses for your contribution and attendance this afternoon? Can I wish everybody, both on the Committee and our witnesses, the very happiest of Christmases and a peaceful new year? We look forward to taking up our conversation at a date in the not-too-distant future. Thank you very much indeed.