

# Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: [The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#), HC 781

Monday 23 January 2023

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Sir Robert Buckland; Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Carla Lockhart; Jim Shannon; Bob Stewart; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 1-38

Witness

[I](#): Bertie Ahern, former Taoiseach of Ireland.



## Examination of witness

Witness: Bertie Ahern.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, colleagues. Thank you for making a Monday meeting rather than our usual Wednesday and for braving it through freezing fog, ice and everything else—thank you for doing that. It is my special pleasure this afternoon to welcome former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. A quick trawl of the NIAC records, Bertie, tells us that you are the first either serving or former Taoiseach to come before this Committee, so today we are, in our small way, making history. We are very grateful that you are here and we look forward to what you have to say. You are going to make some opening remarks, which we look forward to hearing, and then I will throw you open to the tender mercies of the Committee. The floor is yours, sir, and thank you for coming.

**Bertie Ahern:** Thank you very much, Chairman, and thank you for allowing me in on a Monday afternoon, which seems very fine. Thank you for inviting me to the opening session of this Committee's inquiry looking at the effectiveness of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. As we approach the 25th anniversary of this historic agreement, reflection on the past is important and we should also highlight the important potential that remains to be explored for the people of Northern Ireland.

The agreement established the promise of an Ireland that offered perpetual peace through consensus, and that consensus was brought about through a mutual respect and shared commitment to making people's lives better. It created a process that has delivered an incalculable benefit to both our islands in terms of reduction of violence and deaths here in Britain and in Ireland.

The generations who are now growing up in an environment of an imperfect but perpetual peace are the real treasures that this agreement has brought to this point, in my view. I continually say that we should hold this generation up as our greatest triumph. Far from criticising them as a generation who do not remember and therefore will never understand the Troubles, we should celebrate them as our singular success. For only if we continue to be successful as civic leaders in continuing on the commitment of the agreement can we ensure that they do not have to witness the horrific acts of violence that scar both our pasts. We all have an ongoing responsibility to continue to ensure that this generation's pathway in life is a perpetually peaceful one.

Chairman, beyond the personal, social and political changes the process has delivered, there are other benefits, including a growing prosperity and an improved quality of life as a direct result. While it is impossible to put a single number on the scale of the peace dividend, the results are clear. The peace and the consequent stability that has followed the agreement 25 years ago have allowed greater prosperity right across the island of Ireland. The peace dividend has been witnessed by Irish business, north



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and south, for the last two and a half decades in substantial ways that have benefited our ability to invest not just on our own island, but globally. The growing commercial, cultural and social ties across the island of Ireland continue to offer the promise of an all-island economy that is not only politically stable but economically strategic, offering growth of employment and prosperity across the entire island.

There has been north-south co-operation to develop trade, critical energy, transport, skills, supply chains and important regulatory regimes. They have all been enhanced because of the working relationships formed out of the agreement. That at times is forgotten in the heat of political discourse, but it is the drumbeat that continues to offer the tangible proof that together we are better. Business has long recognised north-south opportunities of mutual benefit. It is now 31 years since Sir George Quigley, at a Confederation of Irish Industry conference, promoted the idea of an all-island economy. He suggested that following the creation of the single market, the European Community should regard the island of Ireland as one economic area and support the idea of developing a Dublin-Belfast economic corridor. Following the ceasefires and the agreement, it became increasingly possible to explore and deliver on those opportunities of mutual benefit.

The agreement has allowed universities and firms across the island to collaborate more closely through their research and development programmes, supported by EU funding. That has created greater employment opportunities with the chance to seamlessly work in one jurisdiction and live in the other. The creation of high quality employment opportunities would help to further raise the standard of living across jurisdictions as economic conditions improve.

As the world shifted during the pandemic, borders and barriers have never seemed less redundant. By making the island a more attractive place to live and work, and a more stable place to invest, allowing the growth of all-island trade and brands by integrating infrastructure in key areas, the island has benefited economically from peace, although Northern Ireland has still to realise its full potential dividend in my view. While that peace dividend is significant, there remain opportunities of mutual benefit that the Northern Irish and Irish business community will continue to pursue in the coming decades. Peace on the island, underpinned by the agreement, has been central to prosperity and the success of many businesses. Business must therefore play a central role in the further development of an island economy that has the evolving principles at its core.

Looking back should not prevent us from looking forward to the promise that a perpetual peace can deliver even more for our island. I think we can assess the successes to date and acknowledge what did not work in the manner that we had hoped. I know your Committee, Chairman, wants to tease this out. I suppose there are obvious areas to look at. We have made much progress in the equality agenda, in everyday life, tourism and investment, but the institutions of the agreement have, unfortunately,



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been down as much as up, and we are in that position today for numerous reasons.

First of all, there was the decommissioning of arms for a long period of time. Then it was cash for ash that caused delays, and now it is the protocol. These difficulties have meant that, unfortunately, the institutions—the Executive and the Assembly in the north—have now been redundant for almost a year. The north-south bodies have been up and down with, again, very little happening. Thankfully, recently, east-west has got back on track, but that also suffered. These are the pitfalls, but, if I can say this to your Committee, I don't want us to think that the 25 years have been about the protocol. So much has been gained and achieved and there is much prosperity.

I spend a lot of my life at Queen's and you see a vibrant, young community—local, national and international—thriving and bringing new ideas and a whole new way of life to the island of Ireland, so we have to take all these things into account when we consider marking the start of a new dawn. Rather than simply appreciating peace, this is a generation dedicated to demanding a perpetual peace for all of us.

**Q2 Chair:** Thank you; that was a good scene-setter. You mentioned in your opening remarks the mutual respect that led up to the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. There was also political bravery and leadership among the parties, both north and south, and indeed in Westminster, which can in great part easily be attributed to a living, real-time memory of the horrors of the Troubles and the disruption, and the blood and the death, and the maiming and so on. That required political leadership and bravery. Do you think that is still there, or have politicians become a little less brave and therefore show a little less leadership? Allied to that, do you think the Good Friday agreement would have been possible had the siren voices of social media been around?

**Bertie Ahern:** Sometimes, Chair, I think that nothing would have been possible in the past if social media had been around. It definitely would have made life very difficult. I do think there was a group of politicians across the nationalist, republican, Unionist and loyalist communities who were prepared to work incredibly hard to try to see if we could get compromise. Some of them had been doing that for decades, such as John Hume, who did not really change his message for 30 years. He was saying the same things when I was leaving school as he was saying when I was sitting across the table from him.

You know, Chair, that I ended up a great friend of the late David Trimble. He made incredibly brave decisions. He could have not gone into the talks in the first place; he could have walked out of the talks when other Unionist parties walked out. When some of his own party walked out, he could have given up the ghost, so I think a number of times he was prepared to keep going forward. Then, when decommissioning came—such a difficult issue for him and everybody else—he still stayed in.



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I think across the era we had people who were prepared to work hard, whatever political party they were from. I look back to 1991 when we had the all-party talks. It was not that we solved anything, but for the first time I understood what people wanted rather than what they did not want. I grew up in an age where I knew what everyone didn't want in Northern Ireland, but I wasn't sure what they wanted, and 1991-92 gave us the position papers of where it was possible to build consensus with the commitment that Prime Minister Tony Blair was prepared to put in, the late Mo Mowlam, all the parties, and the multi-party talks. Then I think we were able to make business.

If you ask me today, I think the same political leaders of the new generation are around, but what has created so many problems for them are things outside their own control. I do not want to come before this Committee and say anything about the rights and wrongs of Brexit, but it has created huge problems for six solid years now. Whether it was the backstop, which we had for a few years, the protocol, the withdrawal agreement or who said what—you will all know the issues—it has been very testing. The difficulty for the parties in Northern Ireland today is that they do not control that position. They do not control the British Government policy on it, and they do not control the European Union policy on it. That makes life difficult. Of course, they all have views on it, but ultimately they cannot settle that issue.

**Q3 Chair:** You mentioned compromise, which suggests pragmatism and the give and take of negotiation. We have gone through a rather peculiarly populist period of politics where compromise, pragmatism and give and take have almost been terms of abuse or dirty words. Do you fear that that might have become endemic and, looking to the future, will therefore make things far harder?

**Bertie Ahern:** Chairman, I have always felt that politicians can opt to be on the side of not finding solutions because sometimes it is safer to do that. You are saying, "I am against, I am against" because invariably when you compromise, it means there will be one group that says, "You were wrong to compromise" and another group that says, "That was the right thing to do." Whereas, if you do not make any decision, they will all say, "You are wrong" or "You are right". I watched serious compromises. I watched all the parties in the north, whether it was Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, the Unionist leadership or my friends in the Alliance, or people like Seamus Mallon who were always trying to forge and were prepared to compromise. People were very strong about that. I worry that sometimes people think if you don't make a decision, you can't be criticised too much.

**Chair:** Yes, the buck seems to stop nowhere.

**Bertie Ahern:** When you make a decision—I have been victim to this most of the 40 years I have been living this life—you can be sure you are not going to get a unanimous view. Sometimes people do not make that decision. In the case of Northern Ireland, we are talking about a divided society still; we are talking about divided communities still. Therefore the



only way that the system can work is through compromise, because if you come down on one side or the other, you are alienating a whole community. To make progress in Northern Ireland, it has to be based on compromise. I know what you mean by compromise being seen as a bad word, but, in the case of Northern Ireland, a compromise is a sign of strength, leadership and building for the future. The only way that Northern Ireland will work for the foreseeable future is based on good compromise.

**Q4 Chair:** You referred to Northern Ireland being a divided society still, with the emphasis on the word “still”. I am sure we would welcome your thoughts on this. I am always keen to point out to people that the Belfast-Good Friday agreement started a process. It wasn’t a free-standing event or the ten commandments coming down from on high, and that was it—it would always be revered. I wonder now, and worry, whether there is a whole generation who take that golden prize of peace as a given in Northern Irish society without realising the intrinsic link between that and the Good Friday agreement, and how we should still value that prize of peace. I would welcome your thoughts on whether it has been an event, and not enough of an evolutionary, organic process.

Many of us will have heard—both in this Committee and in meetings in Northern Ireland—that there is a little bit of thinking like that. It is not quite “What have the Romans ever done for us?” However, just as there were those in the Brexit debate saying, “We don’t see the benefits to our everyday life of the single market, free movement and so on, because that is not our world, economy, community or societal base,” there are those in the loyalist community who would say, “I don’t see the benefits of this Good Friday process. It hasn’t changed the dial in my opportunity circle. We can see these good jobs coming in from American investment, in IT, fintech, pharma and so on. We have seen the deindustrialisation of parts of Northern Ireland, which has left us slightly stranded. We seem to be separate from this process. Why should we vest any of our good will and energies towards that, if we are left behind?” What would you say to that community?

**Bertie Ahern:** I have huge sympathy and respect for the loyalist communities. I should quickly say that there are many nationalist communities that have not benefited greatly either; I met some people from Derry yesterday who feel, even under the recent funds, that none of the funding has gone to that end of the Province. I understand the loyalist communities, and I understand that whatever we do going into the future, we have to try to invest through education, training and skills development, and try to attract more industry. I have continually said that it is the international view of the world that people want to see places that are safe, peaceful and open to investment. I continually say to loyalist people that this is where we need to work. We need to work hard so that the peace dividend is seen in some of their communities. I totally accept that they feel they haven’t got their fair share.

I think you know this as much as anybody, Chair, but part of the difficulty is that it has not been as easy to attract investment into some places. It is



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25 years since I offered to David Trimble that we amalgamate the IDA in the south and Invest Northern Ireland to promote investment. I understand why that was not possible, but I think I have been involved most of my life in trying to get investment into the south—international investment, whether from the rest of the UK or Europe or America. That is an issue we have to help loyalism with. We have to help it with education as well. I am not for a second saying that there are not very educated people in loyalist communities, but you have to be able to attract these companies by showing that the skills are there. That is very much a question that we still have to work hard on.

**Chair:** We discuss quite a lot in this Committee the perpetual need to stress the importance of education, given the requirement of modern jobs both now and going forward.

Q5 **Jim Shannon:** You are very welcome, Bertie. I do not think we have ever met over the years, but it is nice to meet you today. I want to ask a generic question, then I will give you a speculative interpretation and a quote from someone you work with on the agreement. Then I will ask my question. That sounds a bit convoluted, but we will get there in the end. The first question is: is there sufficient knowledge within the body politic of both Britain and Ireland of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement?

There has been speculation in the press back home today that the EU and the UK could be coming to some sort of agreement in relation to the protocol Bill. I would suggest that if that is correct and if it ignores the Unionist bloc and the largest party, of which I am a member, it would be a step in the wrong direction. It would, in my opinion, go against what the Good Friday agreement was trying to achieve, where both political sides were together in a political process to try to move forward.

The Chairman has hit upon it, and he is absolutely right in his perspective, if that speculation is correct, that the Government could take it a stage further and go over the heads of the Unionist bloc in its totality and bring forward a different political process, which would ignore Unionism. That is the speculation in the provincial press back home today. It certainly would raise much passion and fire among the Unionist community that I represent; I am very strongly of that tradition.

I will just quote what you said on the day following the announcement of the agreement. You said, "With the full political settlement now about to be implemented, we have the strongest possible basis for permanent peace in the country such as has never before been experienced in our history." All of that peace that you referred to—the peace that we all want—is at this moment in time very much hanging on where this Government goes in relation to the EU and the Northern Ireland protocol Bill.

**Chair:** I hope it is not—there is the peace settlement.

**Jim Shannon:** Former Prime Minister Sir Tony Blair launched a series of recommendations last June about solving the protocol issue, and you worked closely with him. I would not agree with everything Sir Tony Blair



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says—far from it—but I found it interesting that he said that “both the EU and the UK should show maximum flexibility in order to reach an agreement” over the Northern Ireland protocol. Tony Blair was a key architect, like yourself, in 1998. I would like to get your perspective on the next part of his statement, where he says, “it is not a matter of technical work but political will and leadership.” So you have the speculation in the press and the facts from Tony Blair. Do you agree with Tony Blair that technical talks will not solve the problem, and that it will require political generosity from Brussels?

**Bertie Ahern:** I do—I totally agree. The technical talks are necessary to protect the single market, and I can understand the technical talks around that. I have said this at Committee meetings in Brussels: the people involved in these talks—the European Union and the British Government and officials—have to understand the unique position of Northern Ireland if they are to find a solution. If you don’t understand the unique position of Northern Ireland, then I don’t think you can solve the position. I do not expect the European Union to throw out the single market. In fact, it was the United Kingdom Government that really made the single market; they were the main architects of the single market in 1987. The United Kingdom understands it better than anybody else. By the way, I do not think for a minute that a solution that bypasses Unionists and ignores the party and community who would support Unionism is the solution to this. The solution is to find a compromise that we can all move on from.

Neither do I think that the seven points that have been drawn up all have to be resolved. I think some of them would be impossible to resolve—there comes the compromise. If Europe and the UK understand the fundamental issue that there is such a thing as the UK internal market, which must live beside the single market, and that there are unique differences between them that require a solution, then that is the way out of this. I do not believe—you have probably heard and read me saying this for a long time—that that is impossible, but it does require some compromise.

I would not read too much into reports from back home today that we are very close to an EU-UK solution. My information, which is not as perfect as it was at one time, says that we are not that close. There are still difficulties. Let us be clear: Unionists’ concerns cannot be railroaded—that would be stupid. The demands of Unionism cannot be fully adhered to in the seven points; I think they should all be answered, but I don’t see how you can answer all those points. It is a matter of persuasion for both sides.

I will just add this: if we do not get a compromise from the UK Government, as the primary leaders of the discussions along with the EU, then we run into a position where in the longer term—I am not talking about the next British general election, because I do not think that solves the problem, and whoever wins or loses is not my business—we have not got a solution and we do not have institutions. There lies the problem. In the absence of compromise, we are building a future on quicksand. That is my concern. I am 100% for compromise and 100% for trying to





accommodate the concerns of people, but I do not think we can long-finger this—and I am not talking about April; that is not the issue—into the dim and distant future. That would be a grave mistake.

Q6 **Jim Shannon:** I appreciate your answer; thank you. I think it would be unwise of any Government, whether here, in the Republic or in the EU, to ignore the significant bloc of Unionism and their opinion. It is an opinion that is mandated by the people on those parties to stand strong. I said that I would mention it gently, but I feel that if Unionism is ignored then the fires of that anger will be detrimental for not just this process but for Ireland, north and south.

**Bertie Ahern:** I have heard nobody on the island of Ireland, north or south, saying that the solution to this is to ignore Unionist support and the concerns of Unionism. People might take issue with whether these things are constitutional or not—I would probably do that—but that is not the issue. The issue is that we must find an accommodation, as far as possible, that can have everyone moving forward in a win-win position. That has to be the challenge. I have said this to Šefčovič and I have said it to others, and I think it is what the Irish Government have been saying, certainly in recent weeks.

**Chair:** What I would say at this point—I say this ex cathedra, which means I cannot be questioned by anybody—is that we all appreciate that on these issues, passions and beliefs and commitments run very strong and very deeply. But I pray to God that fires of violence and everything else do not reignite, because that would be such a bad step. If we have all learned anything, surely it is about the exercise of peaceful democracy and protest. But to hold people to ransom with threats of x, y or z is not how we do politics in 2023 anywhere in the United Kingdom.

Q7 **Claire Hanna:** It is good to see you here, Mr Ahern. I want to talk about a potential review of the structures. Obviously, the agreement itself had the possibility of a review plumbed in, and that was the pretext for the changes at St Andrews, for better or worse. But both Governments seem quite averse to an open review at the moment. I don't know whether you think that is perhaps because of concerns about a run on the agreement, given the way the politics are at the moment. What do you think would be the best approach to a review? Obviously, a context where all three strands are functioning would be the best place to start that discussion. But if that is not the case and the standing orders of strand one themselves are holding the agreement down, how might we initiate and conduct an inclusive review like that in the coming months?

**Bertie Ahern:** Sometimes people say that given the way the Good Friday agreement was negotiated, written and signed by Tony Blair, you cannot change it, so if something is not working, you scrap it. But nothing could be further from the truth. The review clause was built in. I remember well the discussions, with the great Senator Mitchell saying that it had to be in and that he would not be surprised if there was a review every year. That is now my thought. October 2006 was the last review.



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My preference—if it was my call today, which it is not—would be that the review will take place when the institutions are up and stable, but there is no reason why, in general discussions or negotiations, the review cannot cover those points. It would be wrong for anyone to think that a review of an agreement that is as important and wide-scale as the Good Friday agreement cannot be looked at every now and again. Twenty-five years on, I have no difficulty with that. There are probably several areas that I can think of that could be looked at.

The difficulty with a review is this: everyone has to agree. Because of the way we built the whole agreement, if you have a review and people do not agree, they can stop it progressing. That is a practical problem and it means it is more challenging, but if the institutions were up and running, it would be easier to do that. To do it as part of trying to get the institutions up and running would probably mean that you will have red lines all over the place. I am not ruling it out; I just think that is the difficulty.

The idea of a review—let's be frank about it. I should say it straight, Chairman: it is both disappointing and unsatisfactory that we have had the institutions stopped and stalled. Let us blame nobody or blame everybody if we want, but we have not been able to run it, so how could anyone sit here and say, "You shouldn't have a review to look at some of these issues."? They have to be looked at. Over the next 25 years, we want to see institutions that are continuous. It is not good in a democratic—I can't think of another country in the world that has institutions that have been down more often than Northern Ireland, and that is not good. It's not good for investment, it's not good for the people and it's not good for anybody. A review is something that has to look at why we reach those issues, but I cannot see a way out of having a review that doesn't have agreements. That is the problem.

**Q8 Claire Hanna:** It is a bit of a chicken and egg situation, I suppose, and I know colleagues are going to pick up on some of those structures and whether—whatever the flaws—there were any alternatives to get us from the place we were at in 1998.

I suppose the AERC should have been a forum to do a lot of this for the last 15 years, but it has not; the Assembly has not chosen to reform itself in that way. Briefly, if we aren't in a scenario where the strands are functioning—hopefully we are—do you think there is a useful scenario where the Governments can convene an inclusive review, maybe using the 25th anniversary, but one where those who have vetoes and don't want to part with them may have to be overridden if we are locked up?

**Bertie Ahern:** If we are getting nowhere—I wouldn't rush into it, but if we were getting nowhere—then the alternatives are fairly stark, looking at the review. I just want to repeat that I have no problems whatever with fairly regular reviews. Standing orders in Parliaments all over the world are forever changed. That is really what a lot of it is—they are just standing orders.

**Q9 Claire Hanna:** They are, and I think if the principles are protected—



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colleagues are going to pick up later on strand two, but one of the consequences of that not functioning is that essentially we are dealing with what, in terms of '98, would have been called an internal solution. I am not confident that even the SDLP would have signed up to the agreement without north-south mechanisms within it that we don't currently have.

Obviously, plan A is getting those mechanisms back up and running, but the political context that we are in—between Brexit and, I suppose, devolution being withheld—is, as you know, causing and prompting a lot of people who maybe haven't considered a new Ireland before to do that. Do you think we are on the page enough, and are there useful contexts and conversations that we should be properly having to prepare and manage the conversation around constitutional change over the next years and decades?

**Bertie Ahern:** There is no doubt that the SDLP would not have signed up. You will remember that in the last week, strand two was one of the central issues, and John Hume and Seamus Mallon would not have recommended to your party if there wasn't a strong strand two. There is no doubt about that.

Would I have made the constitutional changes in the south if there was no strand two? I think the answer to that is no, as well. Therefore, strand two is absolutely vitally important. It was a fundamental part of the agreement. When people signed and it was voted on, it was probably one of the things that was spoken as much about in the referendum on 22 May 1998 as the referendum itself.

On the last part of your question, there would not have been an agreement in 1998 if there was not the aspiration. It was built on two things: it was built on consent, but it was also built on the fact that there would be an aspiration to look at a new Ireland. We have been talking about this since 1921, but at last there is at least some proper work going on, mainly led by academics—in the Royal Irish Academy, Notre Dame University and other universities—who are now looking at what it means.

I will quickly say that I don't advocate us moving to referendums until two things happen. First, the institutions should be up and running for a prolonged period—and don't ask me to define that.

**Chair:** Define prolonged.

**Bertie Ahern:** A prolonged period. Secondly, the groundwork needs to have been done. Having a referendum for the good of it is a waste of space, so they are the two things that have to happen. The concept of an early referendum doesn't arise in my view.

Q10 **Mr Walker:** You alluded earlier to the bravery of the late Lord Trimble, and the bravery that it took for a number of parties to reach a decision. You also talked about wanting to avoid a situation where there were red lines all over the place. It is worth recalling that, in the run-up to the agreement, there were red lines all over the place, and many of those red



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lines were crossed. What do you think were the specific circumstances that allowed different parties with those red lines to reach compromises and change their positions? Do you think there are any lessons to be learned from that for the current situation with the protocol, and for legacy and other issues where there are some very firm red lines?

**Bertie Ahern:** We have mentioned the protocol. On the legacy issue, all the parties on the island of Ireland are on the one page, which is—I can tell you—very unique. But anyway, that’s where that is. The big thing in front of us in 1998 was that this was an opportunity to stop the violence once and for all. By and large, that has been successful. There have been a few notable, terrible events, but by and large it has been very successful. I think that was the issue for people; they had to see that it was a fair compromise that took into account all the big issues. Seven or eight months out, Tony Blair and I decided that the best way of dealing with this was to have one go at it and deal with everything, not dodge things. It is always easier to dodge a few things, but we said, “Let’s put down policing, let’s put down prisoners and let’s put down decommissioning.”

We didn’t find solutions to them all on the day, but we never believed 10 April 1998 was the end of it. George Mitchell said on that final day, “Now you have the agreement, now the work starts.” That was always considered. People said, “Well, this is fair. There are issues in this for everybody.” Okay, the Democratic Unionist party did not agree at that time, but we came back to review at St Andrews and they agreed. Although it did not fundamentally change, there were changes. There was a great spirit. If I may say so—I don’t want to cast any aspersions on any politicians today—there were very feisty politicians there who had been at this for a long time. There had been truly horrendous times. They had spent their lives going to funerals and condemning acts of violence until they ran out of vocabulary for what they could say about them.

They came to the conclusion that the agreement wasn’t perfect, but it was fair, and we could sign up to it and stand up behind it. That was a brave move by them all. I have great admiration for them all. There were tough, tough decisions, and it wasn’t that any of them thought that it was perfect. If they did, it wouldn’t have worked. There had to be a sense of, “I’m giving a bit here, but I’m taking a bit there.” I dealt with them for hours and hours, and months in advance, and I began to see that they were up to a fair compromise. Did everyone honour everything that they said they would honour, exactly the same as they said? Well, you know the answer to that. But at least we got there, even if it took several years.

Q11 **Mr Walker:** It is an interesting point. It relates to a point you made earlier about the reviews being an important part of the process as well. Of course, the agreement wasn’t designed to settle everything. It was very much designed to open up a process and move on from that. There is a particular challenge when it comes to negotiations on or around the protocol. The UK pressed the EU very hard over many years to make sure that any agreement it signed was checked to the nth degree and went into absolute legal detail, and now we are in a position of asking for a



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degree of compromise. That is institutionally challenging for both sides.

With the common travel area, we had something in place—and had been for a long period of time—that was challenging to justify on a purely legal basis. But at the start of the negotiation process we were able to have clear pressure from both the Irish and British Governments that it should be protected and maintained, and the EU signed up to it straight away without that level of detailed scrutiny. Is there something to be taken from that discussion that can apply to solving the challenges on the protocol?

**Bertie Ahern:** There is. Earlier on, the Chairman put that question. If you want to find a solution to this that is purely related to the strictures of the single market, and is regulatory 100% and technically 100%, we are not going to solve this. That is my sense of it. We are going to have to have imagination that allows for the UK internal market.

I like to be fair in these arguments. I cannot explain to a person in the Unionist community that if something comes from Manchester and into Bangor, that is not the UK internal market and that is different from the single market. If the EU says, “Well, no. That’s the single market”, then we can’t solve it. But I really believe that this isn’t rocket science. Think of the things that we have resolved. We got the IRA to decommission their arms. We released prisoners, and I signed my name to orders of people who had killed policemen and got out of 40 years. We reformed the old RUC into now a very competent international PSNI. But we can’t find a way of working out how sausages and rashers will work in the internal market? It is beyond comprehension. There has to be a solution that is unique to Northern Ireland.

Of course, I can understand if an official dealing with this and looking at what regulation 116354 says on the document might think that maybe some other country will object. I meet a lot of ambassadors; I do not hear a confident argument being made by any of them as to why we shouldn’t do that. But it is a bit of a problem. I spent over 25 years going between the social affairs council, the ECOFIN council, and the European Council for 12 years. When I went to meetings in Brussels, I used to have one legal official, and I was always envious of the fact that you guys always had about 40. So I do understand—

**Chair:** That might say more about you than it does about us. Safety in numbers.

**Bertie Ahern:** And my one was never up to your 40. Anyway, it is a difficulty, but in this case I think EU officials understand the history of Northern Ireland well enough to know that it has to be a bit different. If it is not the unique circumstances, how will we solve it? I hope that people see that. Can I quickly add to that, because someone could take this one bit and not the other bit? If somebody from the Unionist community or elsewhere wants to say, “Well, we have to win all seven tests and everything has to be done on the EU side,” that won’t find an agreement



either. You are not going to get the EU to do that, so I think we will go back to where we were.

**Jim Shannon:** What about six of the seven?

**Chair:** I do not think we should open a Dutch auction on that, but I think we should ask Mr Walker if he has finished.

**Mr Walker:** I am happy to move on.

**Chair:** In that case, we will turn to Sir Robert Buckland.

Q12 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Thank you. Listening carefully to your answers, Mr Ahern, what you are telling us is that, with imagination and leadership, anything is possible.

I want to come back to the time immediately prior to the signing of the agreement in April 1998. We know about the involvement of Senator Mitchell and the Mitchell principles, and how, from '95-96, he helped to set the framework and all the relevant parties, including Sinn Féin, were able to come to the table. But in those last days before Good Friday, how important was his role, particularly in his famous setting of a deadline? Of course, we slightly overran it, into Good Friday. We all remember that as quite a seminal moment—a sort of now-or-never moment for everyone concerned. How would you assess his role, and what lessons can be learned from that for today's circumstances?

**Bertie Ahern:** If I remember correctly, it was the Alliance leader at the time who actually said we should set a deadline, because, as often happens, Alliance was in the middle and it was looking at both sides. The Alliance leader said, "Let's set a date." I think George Mitchell, in fairness to him, was getting to the stage that he was getting a bit fed up as well; he had his wife and baby back home and wanted to get out. It did help to be able to focus, because you do go around in circles. I suppose it is a bit different now. If I was to say now that the deadline has to be such, people would say, "It is better that we get a full solution." I am quite happy if this takes a week, a month or three months; the main thing is that we get an agreement that people can live by and that we can move on. That is the main thing.

The initial question was about George Mitchell, as an honest broker in the middle with international credibility, saying, "We have to do this." He was somebody in the middle. I am not sure who is in the middle of the EU and the UK; I think that is your point. It is a dilemma. If they keep batting back and forwards for however long, ultimately you need somebody to say "check".

**Chair:** Is there a role here—

**Sir Robert Buckland:** I was going to ask, actually—can I ask it?

**Chair:** Yes.

Q13 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Is there a role for a George Mitchell of 2023 to



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come in now? Senator Mitchell is sadly now physically quite immobile, but he still talks a lot, incredibly powerfully, about dispute resolution. I have heard him speak so eloquently on it. Do you think there is a role for somebody like him, of similar stature?

**Chair:** Robert, I was going to add that President Biden has just appointed a new US envoy to Northern Ireland. Given the States' historic interest in the politics of the island of Ireland, do you see a role for him as a way of acting as an honest broker between—

**Bertie Ahern:** I think the envoy they have appointed is primarily to deal with trade and investment. It is slightly different. I think that is a very important role, because, to come back to what we said earlier, bringing in more investment and trade is crucially important. Somewhere in the debate between the UK Government and the EU, you have to come to a position and say you call it. I worry that, if that gets into total legalese, I do not know how you can call it. You can see where the arguments are. The arguments are that the single market is built on a set of legal principles and regulations—we understand that—and that the protocol itself, which is part of the withdrawal agreement, is based on legal principles. To be honest, as we have talked about today—and I have been through this in my head so many times—I cannot see that we are dealing with the impossible. With a bit of flexibility and a bit of uniqueness—if you move off legalese—this can be resolved.

Q14 **Sir Robert Buckland:** I am a lawyer, I'm afraid—I plead guilty. This ultimately seems to be a conflict of laws issue. But you are saying that looking at it as dry words on a page is not really going to be enough to reach a long-lasting solution. Am I right? I do not want to put words in your mouth.

**Bertie Ahern:** The single market has been built up and the whole European Union is based on—you know better than I do that everything has a legal base. You could argue that the protocol and withdrawal agreement are almost the same, because again, all the legal hands were across that. But the Good Friday agreement isn't based on that: the Good Friday agreement is based on bringing together divided communities and bringing John Hume's "hearts and minds" together around a fair compromise whereby everybody is prepared to share. That is not legally based; that is based in a different way, and I think that is what you need.

Q15 **Claire Hanna:** Robert's initial question was about deadlines, and you referred to some of those periods of delay in the early years, particularly around decommissioning and signing up to the rule of law. Jonathan Powell, who is coming to see us in a couple of weeks, said a few years ago: "In retrospect, we should have been...willing to be a bit tougher". Do you think damage was sustained to the culture of how we did things and a bit of a moral hazard created in allowing deadlines to slip all the time and, I suppose, in allowing parties to say that they were still acting on and upholding the agreement while disregarding parts of it? Did some of that culture seep in early?



**Bertie Ahern:** It did, and let's be honest: if all the commitments in the early period, but particularly after the signing, after the vote and after the Omagh bombing in particular—I thought, after the Omagh bombing, that that was the time to deal with decommissioning and to get it finished, but unfortunately Tony Blair and I spent months and hours and weeks, until 2003, to get to that stage, and that led to the early years of the disruption. I would have loved to find a way, and to this day I would still like to find a way, that means you can have institutions whereby everyone agrees but nobody can bring them down. That is easier said than done, but I think you do need it.

As we go forward to the next period, we have to find a way that means this cannot be stop-start. That is not in anybody's interest, because then you are asking people—let's not blame either side, because a number of people have been involved in this, but you cannot ask people to vote for an institution that is going to be moribund for the next period. It is bad democracy and it leads to difficulty. We are where we are, but I think we have to try to find solutions that do not have us back in that position.

Q16 **Stephen Farry:** Welcome, Taoiseach. I think, at the start, it is worth reflecting back on Good Friday week itself. You have made some references to the deadline, but it is important that we recognise that it was also a very difficult week for you personally, with your mother. We appreciate the sacrifices you made in that particular regard to get things over the line.

I want to talk about some of the detail around strand one. There is some degree of controversy around the use of designations and the voting system, and also the use of d'Hondt for forming the Executive. Could you set out the background as to why that particular model was chosen? Some people regard it as a very rigid form of consociationalism—if I can get that big word out. What alternatives were considered at that time?

**Bertie Ahern:** The reason why we went for that system was that we thought the main parties could live with that. The smaller parties did not love it, as you will recall, at the time. We rolled on, I think, on the basis that the support of the larger parties would probably carry it forward, although I did realise at the time that we were going to have problems. You will remember in your own party that—you were very helpful in your party in changing designations to try to, at various times, get things—

**Stephen Farry:** It was very controversial—

**Bertie Ahern:** I can understand it being very controversial, but it was us trying to find ways forward, and I think you probably sacrificed some support in trying to do that at the time. But that was why—it was very much about trying to get people used to living together. There were alternatives, but it was not possible to get any of those across the line.

Q17 **Stephen Farry:** We were a small party once. Obviously, Alliance has done slightly better in more recent elections, and there are now 18 MLAs—17 Alliance and one People Before Profit—who do not call themselves either Unionist or nationalist. Do you feel that that reality





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now reaches a tipping point where reform of particularly the voting system needs to be considered in the near future to ensure that, for example, there is proper equality of votes? Presumably there are few Parliaments elsewhere in the world that would tolerate a situation where there is a second-class type of MP or TD.

**Bertie Ahern:** You are now in the position that—those parties were against the change at that time, so you’ve clearly a strong hand now, because if it had not been those figures at the time, you would have been on the other side of that argument.

Q18 **Stephen Farry:** Absolutely. We look forward to a potential change in that regard. On Executive formation, do you see the potential for some move away from the very rigid mandatory coalition towards perhaps a form of coalition formation more akin to what you see in other European countries, albeit with maybe a higher threshold for support?

**Bertie Ahern:** I am of the view that if I had been here 25 years ago, I would have thought that within a 10-year period we would be in a position where there would be an Opposition. Although we tried that—some parties tried that along the way—that did not really work either, but we thought that it would grow that way. I would be a bit slow to try that immediately because it might prove it more difficult to get the institutions up—or maybe not.

To carry the day, at the time Tony Blair and I believed that was the only way to deal with the big issues—for example, at that time, the implementation of Patten. If there had been an Opposition and a Government-type of arrangement, would we have got some of those things through? Would we have got the equality Acts through? People forget the huge changes that have happened: the equality agenda, the parity of esteem, the legislative system. Most issues to do with justice have changed. There are, I think, 15 or 16 major changes that happened, apart from institutional changes. Probably you needed everybody in Government, so to speak, to achieve that. It is a bit different now.

Q19 **Chair:** Can I just clarify something? If there were to be changes to Executive formation—you can create an argument on both sides of that issue—would you still think it important to ensure that there was Unionist political representation as much as nationalist political representation as part of the coalition? In essence, it does not necessarily have to default to the largest nationalist party and the largest Unionist party if smaller nationalist and Unionist parties, and the middle, can form a working coalition to deliver a programme. Irrespective of how you do it, both traditions need to have seats at the table.

**Bertie Ahern:** Yes, because the whole agreement is based on having both sides of the divide—it is terrible that we have to use such terms, but both of them have to be there. It would be impossible to make progress if we did not have Unionist and nationalist parties there. I always believed, even at the start when we did not have the Democratic Unionist party there, that ultimately we were leaving out a large section of the community. Maybe they were bigger later on, but you had to try and find a way of



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bringing them in because, for Northern Ireland to work properly, you need everybody to be part of it.

We are talking about the bigger parties, but one of the things I regret was the arrangement that we had for the smaller parties at the time—not Alliance, but the smaller parties, the Ulster Democratic party and the Progressive Unionist party, under Gary McMichael and David Irvine, and the Women’s Coalition. For the election before the Good Friday agreement negotiations, we pitched that they would, on a very small percentage of the vote, have representation. It is certainly an arguable case that, had we not done that and not had them there, we may not have been able to get the Good Friday agreement through in the first place. Maybe we should have kept some of that representation, because they were a community that felt that they were or were not represented—it depends who you talk to from those areas. It would have been, in my view, a better thing had they continued to have elective representation.

**Q20 Carla Lockhart:** I want to push a little more on what you have previously said. In 2017, you outlined that a mandatory coalition would be “crazy” and “dangerous”—I think those were the words that were used. Considering the calls in recent weeks, particularly from the SDLP, Alliance and Sinn Féin, to move forward without Unionist consent or by excluding my party, would you still describe that as crazy and dangerous?

**Bertie Ahern:** To?

**Carla Lockhart:** To exclude the DUP—to exclude the voice of Unionism from any change to a mandatory coalition.

**Bertie Ahern:** You are not going to get agreement if you do not have all sides involved. The agreement is based on the fact that you have everybody involved in the decision. The mandatory coalition was on the basis that the best way of getting agreements was if everybody was in. If you leave people out, they will feel isolated.

**Q21 Claire Hanna:** I just want to clarify that you would differentiate between parties excluding themselves and parties being excluded by others, which I do not think anybody is suggesting.

**Bertie Ahern:** If you make the decision to be outside—people are entitled to do that, and have done so, under the agreement.

**Q22 Claire Hanna:** Yes, and any of the proposals on the table around reform allow for people to choose not to be in but for nobody to be excluded against their wishes.

**Bertie Ahern:** I do feel that, for the foreseeable future—I did not think I would be saying this 25 years ago—I would rather people being in, because you get a greater sense of agreement, and inclusion helps the world in Northern Ireland.

**Q23 Sir Robert Goodwill:** You said earlier that no country has had its institutions down for so long, although I think Belgium had a 589-day coalition negotiation.



**Chair:** That is nothing by comparison with what we have had.

**Sir Robert Goodwill:** It was characterised to me that the Northern Ireland settlement is a bit like, whatever the result of an election, you have Jeremy Corbyn and Jeremy Clarkson having to form an Administration together. In some ways, the surprise is that they have had a Government for that long. As the bloodstains fade and the politicians and new generations come through, do you think that it will be more and more difficult to get agreement and that, whether it be flags, the Irish language or whatever, the parties are looking for reasons to fall out rather than for reasons to co-operate? Do you think that, in another 25 years, we will still have the same type of constitutional settlement for the institutions to operate?

**Bertie Ahern:** I sure hope that it is not even in five years that we reach that position. It is perhaps useful, or maybe not so useful, to remember that in those final weeks of the discussions, it was hard enough to convince some of the parties—and more than one—that the idea of a Stormont Assembly and an Executive was the right way to go. Some of the parties did not see it that way, and we had to convince people that a local elected local elected Assembly, where they had control of their own position, was the right way to go. Nobody really talks about that now, but it was a big issue at the time. It was the persistence of John Hume and Seamus Mallon who, going back to their experiences of Sunningdale 24 years earlier, believed that to make it workable we should have institutions. They had a job to convince parties on the nationalist side and the Unionist side that this was the right way to go. That is why I said to the Chairman earlier that it worries me if this goes into a drift—do you go back to that position where people did not really care if you have elected institutions? I would really worry, not if it is a matter of weeks or months but if it was to drift on, that you would go back into that mindset again, which would be very worrying.

Q24 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Obviously, the politicians are obliged to work together, but do you feel that the communities are coming closer together or moving further apart because of the way things work? Will it perhaps not be until we get things like integrated education across the board that we actually see more of a settled view about how things are going to work in Northern Ireland?

**Bertie Ahern:** I would love to live to see the day when you can have Government and Opposition in Northern Ireland and people can abide by the issues, but I think that for now it is too easy to get polarisation and division. There is certainly an input from the parties—they need to be together and working together for another period—and even internationally it will look far better. The Belgium example isn't a great example: they were just fighting about who was going to be Prime Minister; in Northern Ireland it is different.

Q25 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Would you agree that it has in some ways forced the political parties to become more polarised? You have the DUP as opposed to the UUP and Sinn Féin in the ascendancy as opposed to the



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SDLP. Does the situation tend to polarise politics in Northern Ireland?

**Bertie Ahern:** It does, but that can happen anywhere, particularly where—

**Sir Robert Goodwill:** It has happened here.

**Bertie Ahern:** Yes, but at least your electoral system gives a clearcut position. Even in my jurisdiction you have multi-party and multi-seats, and you do get these more difficult positions. The fundamental point is that you are best having, as of now—not forever but as of now—representation from nationalism, republicanism, Unionism and loyalism working together as best they can. Of course, there will always be political, ideological and policy differences, but for the foreseeable future it is best that they are working together. Should that be the way forever? No, I don't think it should, but certainly so that we can try to go out to the next stage. We have made huge progress, as I said at the outset, but the next phase of progress needs everybody there to bring that on. Hopefully, that will happen.

I said I would not say anything about Brexit, but if we can find a solution to the protocol, the one good thing is that Northern Ireland has the huge advantage of being part of the UK internal market; its relationship with the south of Ireland, which is growing all the time from a business point of view; and being in the single market. It is a phenomenal opportunity—I get tired of saying it to people—for growth, stability and investment in Northern Ireland. It is a huge opportunity if we can get across this side of the fence.

Q26 **Bob Stewart:** It is very nice to meet you, Mr Ahern. I have never met you before and it is a real pleasure. My question is rather big: what were the difficulties of setting up north-south institutions? That is such a big question—it covers everything—but I am particularly interested in your observations on the interdependence between strand one, on setting up the institutions in Northern Ireland for local government, and strand two, which was fundamentally about enabling that to happen. My question boils down to that: can you give me your observations on how that has worked?

**Bertie Ahern:** The intention, and it was working very well, was that members of the Executive in the north—the key people—would meet the Government in the south on a regular basis and deal with all-island issues. Some of them were specified and some were unspecified because there was the difficulty about implementation bodies. To give you an example, cancer care on the island of Ireland would work on an all-island basis, and there are the agricultural and fisheries issues. Rather than just having differences of opinion, we would sit down and try to make progress on an all-island basis, and it worked very well. The idea was that there would be regular meetings.

Q27 **Bob Stewart:** How regular were those meetings?



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**Bertie Ahern:** At the start, we were meeting about every 10th week, so within a three-month period. The full Cabinet, or more or less the full Cabinet, would meet the full Executive in the north and discuss a fixed agenda, and then there were sub-groups. There was, say, an agricultural sub-group or a health sub-group, where it would just be the relevant Minister responsible in the north and the relevant Minister responsible in the south, and they were working extremely well. They were working on an all-island basis, not talking about constitutional issues but just dealing with practical issues, whether it was education or health. There was the all-island energy market. There are so many examples of good progress that was being made.

Q28 **Bob Stewart:** This was a good thing, and presumably the officials on both sides, north and south, were in constant contact in between meetings.

**Bertie Ahern:** All the time.

Q29 **Bob Stewart:** So this was a really good thing that was set up.

**Bertie Ahern:** The whole idea of it was that it would be a progressive agenda. It would not be limited to those items that had been agreed 25 years ago; it could be on any issue. It was very much on co-operation and seeing where we could exchange information, and it was working extraordinarily well.

Q30 **Bob Stewart:** I presume that was actually quite easy to agree. It seems to make absolute sense. Is that your view?

**Bertie Ahern:** It was once you allowed the agenda to grow. There was difficulty if you said, "These are the areas of north-south co-operation" and they were designated and formalised. To be honest, after a few years, I think most of the Ministers did not realise the items that were designated or not designated; they were just dealing with the everyday issues. It worked extremely well.

The foot and mouth issue is an example where there was a huge threat to the agricultural economy, north and south—you know how big that is in the island of Ireland. Bríd Rodgers was the Minister in the north, and there was the late Joe Walsh in the south. They worked absolutely cohesively dealing with foot and mouth, ignoring borders, ignoring Ireland-England and just dealing with the issue, and it worked really well.

Your point about the officials just reminded me of something regrettable that I should mention. In all my years and dealings at various councils in Europe—for over 25 years, I think—there was great co-operation between civil servants of the Republic of Ireland and the British civil service. They had built up extraordinarily good relationships. They were meeting at sub-committees. They were back and forth to Brussels. They were socialising together. When somebody was in trouble about something, they were able to tic-tac with each other. That all ended with Brexit. That daily or weekly co-operation of our officials—the permanent Government—is gone. I certainly regretted that, because I had built up great contacts with so



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many Chancellors and Ministers and so on. That is gone across our systems.

It is all well and good bemoaning that, but the way of keeping that alive is the third strand, which we have not discussed. That is the intergovernmental conference. In fairness to the present Prime Minister, he attended a meeting just before Christmas. I was delighted for him, because unfortunately Prime Ministers in recent times have not attended, so there were no meetings. It is not that the Prime Minister has to be there every month. I think there could even be one or two meetings a year, and other Ministers could meet, because otherwise that connection between our systems that has been there for 45 years is gone. I treasured that as a Minister. I always found your civil servants at senior level to be very helpful and co-operative. That totally died a death with Brexit. That connection that had been built up over the years has totally gone. I am not saying that it is as good as the old way, but at least the intergovernmental conference, which is a strand of the Good Friday agreement, if it is developed and evolved, can replace that loss of contact.

**Q31 Bob Stewart:** It was John Hume who said that what we really needed was practical co-operation, and that was fundamentally strand two, wasn't it? That is what he was always banging on about, as I seem to recall.

**Bertie Ahern:** It was. As I said earlier on in reply to a question, John Hume and Seamus Mallon were the two key people, and if there had not been strand two, the SDLP and the Irish Government would not have been in the agreement.

**Q32 Mary Kelly Foy:** Nice to meet you. I think you have answered my question in the main. I was going to ask to what extent you think that the strand two institutions have succeeded in enabling co-operation, but from the examples you have given, it looks as if it has been quite a success. Are you saying with Brexit now that there are changes?

**Bertie Ahern:** It is Brexit on one side, but the real problem is that the institutions of strand two are not operating at all, because the institutions are down. With strand two you have the Ministers from the Executive and the Ministers from the south working together. It really can do good, practical work without any difficulties.

**Q33 Sir Robert Buckland:** You have largely answered my question on strand three, but from a Unionist point of view strand three was always very important, wasn't it? It was very much part of the way in which in 1998 the parties were able to come together. I think from my perspective it has been probably the least well known of the strands. If you ask members of the public what the British-Irish Council is, I do not think they would be able to tell you the first thing about it. Do you think that that perhaps underlines what is very much unfinished and undeveloped business when it comes to the institutions in strand three?

I think you have already said that with Brexit it has clearly become even more important if we are to have official-level engagement. What more



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now can be done to embed that? We have had the Prime Minister come to Blackpool for the recent Council. Over and above ministerial engagement at a high level, what more can we now do to embed and improve the way that strand three operates?

**Bertie Ahern:** I would like to see the Prime Minister and his officials attend the intergovernmental conference at least once or maybe twice a year. I understand the agenda for Prime Ministers; they do not have to be at every meeting—that is not necessary. But if there was a quarterly meeting where the Departments—Health one quarter, Education another, and then industrial Departments—and relevant officials met, that would replace what we have lost. They would not be meeting as much, but they could evolve. There is no objection. That east-west strand is something that we had no difficulty with in the Irish Government. In fact, it did not matter when the UK was in the European Union, because I was meeting Tony Blair or Gordon Brown or whoever at several European Council meetings. But now there are no meetings.

I saw some paper comments saying, “We need to invent something new”. We do not need to invent anything new—it is there. It is part of the institutions and the Good Friday agreement.

Q34 **Sir Robert Buckland:** And you have got the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, the Channel Islands—

**Bertie Ahern:** That is the British-Irish Council.

Q35 **Sir Robert Buckland:** You have got the two institutions—the intergovernmental conference and the BIC.

**Bertie Ahern:** There is no reason why they cannot be beefed up and extended. At least, nobody could object to that. But I have to say, not all Ministers and Prime Ministers saw their relevance.

**Carla Lockhart:** Are we finishing now?

**Chair:** We have the Northern Ireland Budget Bill before the House. I have just dropped a note to the Speaker’s office to say we are in Committee, so I am hoping for a degree of leniency. Do you have a question? I have a sum-up question, so I encourage snappiness.

Q36 **Carla Lockhart:** I will try to be as snappy as possible. Obviously, I assume you would accept the central principle underlying the Belfast agreement and its successors, that there is the absolute requirement of agreement from both sections of the community for any major decision that impacts on either community. Can you tell me why having a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland would be a breach of the Belfast agreement, but having one from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK would not?

**Bertie Ahern:** On the idea of a border down the Irish sea, I do not consider there to be any border down the Irish sea. I know why people fear that, but I think what you need is a trade solution that deals with the UK internal market. Having a border on the island of Ireland is something



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that nobody, from any side or party, wants to see. We would be going back generations.

I will answer your question very clearly. I never agreed with the argument of having no border on the island of Ireland, and then replacing it with a border down the Irish sea. I do not agree with any border down the Irish sea. What I believe is that we have to find a solution to the UK internal market issue. Some people think that there is a line out in the Irish sea, and there is a guy in a little boat with a flag stopping big ships coming over. That is never what was meant. I accept that language was used, and people started talking about a border in the Irish sea, which was a disaster. But what we are talking about is having a frictionless border all round. Once there is a guarantee that the single market has not been breached, and that products, goods and services are not moving on, then we will have it.

It might have been said, but it was never ever thought that you would replace the land border across Ireland with the Irish sea. The great thing is that for the last 25 years there has been no border on the island of Ireland. Everyone can come up and down. I can drive from Belfast to Dublin and I do not even see a security man doing traffic duty, which is the way I would like to keep it.

**Q37 Chair:** Let me bring this session to a close. We have had the Prime Minister's attendance, as you have mentioned. We have had the apology from Minister of State Baker, which was heartfelt and sincere; my understanding is that it was received very well in Dublin. I am hoping the answer to this question is yes, but would you agree with me that as a result of the trust, friendship and mutual respect being restored in our relationships—Anglo and Irish—the Governments are in a good position, on a whole variety of issues, to work well and collaboratively to deliver for the people of the island of Ireland?

**Bertie Ahern:** Listen, trust, confidence, good will and trying to find solutions that get us on into the next stage of development is the only way forward.

**Q38 Chair:** This is my final question for this sitting: 25 years down the line, what one thing did you—a seasoned practitioner of these things—think might have happened as a result of the Belfast-Good Friday agreement that has not, but you would still like to see?

**Bertie Ahern:** Stability of institutions. It is of deep regret that we have had so many stop-starts with elected people not being able to carry out their job—there have been numerous reasons for that, unfortunately, but let's not get into them—for such prolonged periods. This was never envisaged. It was not something I ever thought we were putting to the people. It leads to instability and unnecessary rancour, and ultimately it will damage the democratic position.

If I could put it back the other way, imagine if your election in Westminster in December 2019 had led to a position now, more than three





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years on, where you had only met for less than a third of the time. You could imagine what people would be saying outside.

**Chair:** Yes, without a shadow of a doubt. Committee members were all in Northern Ireland last week. At a time of economic pressures and the cost of living and all the rest of it, coming through loud and clear was the call for a delivery time now for people who need it. I think we all hope that, if there is any silver lining in the horror cloud that is Ukraine, as you almost intimated, it is that it has contextualised the size of the problem. If the sophisticated, mature statecraft of Brussels, Westminster and Dublin cannot solve this, I think we will all have to begin to wonder what the hell we are doing, but that might be for another day.

Thank you, Mr Ahern—I know you have a busy schedule. The Committee is hugely grateful. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to hear your thoughts. On behalf of the Committee, thank you for all you have done over your active political life in helping to get everything to at least where we are, which began the road of peace on the island of Ireland, which was long needed. Thank you very much indeed.