

Northern Ireland Committee

Oral evidence: The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, HC 781

Tuesday 7 February 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 7 February 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.

Questions 39 - 62

Witnesses

[I](#): The Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir John Major.

Q39 Chair: Good morning, colleagues. Welcome to another session of our inquiry into all things related to the Good Friday agreement. It is a particular pleasure and honour this morning for the Committee to welcome former Prime Minister Sir John Major, who needs no introduction.

Sir John, we are so grateful to you for finding the time to take part in this morning's proceedings. You were in it from the start, and we look forward to hearing your answers to our questions, but I invite you to make some opening introductory remarks as a way of setting the scene. The floor is yours, sir.

Sir John Major: Thank you very much indeed, Chairman. I will take a few minutes to make opening remarks, because I think it may answer some of your questions right at the outset and leave us more time for other matters during our meeting this morning; I think it will be helpful. But let me emphasise that I will do so only sketchily. If I were to fill it in in detail, we would be here until mid-afternoon, and I don't see a lot of appetite for that anywhere around the table, including on this side of the table.

Let me fill in some background. By the early '90s, life in Northern Ireland had not been free of terror for a quarter of a century, and it seemed to me that violence was as unacceptable in Northern Ireland as it would have been anywhere on the mainland, and it needed to be dealt with. I spent a long time at the outset reading myself into the problem and into the history, and I did so for a very straightforward reason: it made it much easier to understand the fears and the ambitions of very different opposing factions in the disputes that were then taking place.

Throughout the years ahead, my door was open to politicians of mainstream parties—and not only to them, but to community bodies, and especially to the Churches, who were often very helpful with the negotiations on both sides of the divide. Later, of course, I had more meetings than I can remember or account for with Albert Reynolds and John Bruton—often informal and private, and very often in the midst of meetings of the European Union of one sort or another.

Let me fill in a little more background on the situation at the time. Relations between London and Dublin were spasmodic. The Prime Ministers did not meet as a matter of course. Neither did other Ministers. That seemed to me to be absurd. Unionist and nationalist opinion was far apart. Bombings, murders, paramilitary beatings and the death of soldiers were part of everyday life in Northern Ireland, as was violent retaliation by the loyalist paramilitaries.

Even when the peace process gained traction, there were innumerable setbacks and perpetual suspicion. Distrust was rife. The political parties



HOUSE OF COMMONS

would talk to the UK Government but would not talk to one another. Throughout the process, violence reoccurred. It reoccurred because the Provisionals were determined to show their volunteers that they were not weakening, even as progress was made; and that explains a lot of what subsequently happened.

The process was often slowed. It was slowed in particular by Unionist suspicion of the process, inflamed by partial leaks and unreal fears. John Bruton's Government—and Albert's Government, for that matter—faced similar problems with Provisional opinion in the south. All this was a perpetual frustration to those of us trying to find a way forward. In 1990, Peter Brooke, who was then the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, had opened an intelligence channel to receive messages from the Provisional IRA. It was not something that was public. He also made the important statement that the British Government had no selfish or strategic interest in Northern Ireland. Both those events were important to what happened subsequently. So was one other issue. There was one relationship already in play. I refer to the Hume-Adams dialogue, which had begun seriously in the late 1980s—1988, I think, from memory. This was in some ways helpful, as we shall see, and in others rather less helpful.

In early 1993, we received a back channel message from the Provisionals. It is worth reading, because it was so dramatic, and so much followed from it. It said, "The conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close. We wish to have an unannounced ceasefire in order to hold a dialogue leading to peace." It went on: "We cannot announce such a move as it will lead to confusion to the volunteers, because the press will misinterpret it as surrender. We cannot meet the Secretary of State's public renunciation of violence, but it would be given privately as long as we were sure we were not being tricked."

That was the message we received. We asked ourselves, was it genuine or was it a trick? If it was genuine and we ignored it, we would have lost a chance of peace. If it was a fake and we responded, we would have looked very naive and stupid, and the political cost of that in London would have been severe. None the less, we decided to respond positively.

In March of '93, we agreed to an exploratory dialogue with no predetermined outcome at all, and emphasised that the result could—I emphasise "could"—be a united Ireland, but only on the basis of consent by the people of Northern Ireland. Despite that engagement, violence continued. On the very day that our reply was delivered to the Provisionals, two small boys were killed with a bomb in Warrington, and that atrocity very nearly brought the peace process to a halt at the very outset. Bombs at Bishopsgate and an explosion in Belfast soon followed, and my judgment was that the IRA believed that continuing the violence would reassure their members that they were not weakening on the Provisional side. I was aware at that stage that the IRA leaders had back benchers, if I may put it that way, who were far more lethal than mine, and that was not always easy.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

On 23 October 1993, 10 people were killed in Shankill Road by the Provisionals. A week later, the loyalists retaliated by killing eight and wounding 19 in Greysteel. Both those outrages caused deep public revulsion. We then received a further message. It claimed the British Government couldn't solve the problems talking only to Dublin, and asked when we would open dialogue with the IRA "in the event of a total end to hostilities". In reply, we stressed there could be no secret agreement with them. There could be dialogue, but only after a permanent end to violence. If that were obtained, we would open dialogue "within one week of Parliament's return" in January 1994.

The idea of a joint declaration—a very good one—sprang from the Hume-Adams talks. I very much liked the principle of a joint declaration. It could offer a way forward for Unionists, for nationalists, and for the paramilitaries by bringing Sinn Féin into the political arena. We looked at text after text after text after text. We had some from Hume and Adams, and from Albert Reynolds, but by October 1993 progress was stuck on agreeing a text. Ironically, public disgust at the violence in Shankill and Greysteel then moved us forward. We developed a text with Dublin. It wasn't easy; there were many bumps in the road, but once we had done that, the chance of an agreement rose.

We met at Dublin Castle—by "we", I mean Albert Reynolds and I, and our teams—on 3 December 1993. That led to a fierce row in which Albert and I left the room to express our frustrations with what the other side was doing. He was concerned over our back channel, although of course he knew very well we had won, and I was concerned over their leaks, which he denied but I knew had come from him—so we had a very lively discussion. In one way it didn't matter, because Albert and I had formed a very good friendship. We had met as Finance Ministers, and I'm not quite sure how to put this, but sometimes you meet someone and there is an empathy, and that empathy is extremely helpful. It means you can disagree, often violently, and it doesn't leave the scars that it does with some other people. We were fortunate in that that was our relationship. So we had our fierce row and we went back into the meeting.

We then made quite a lot of progress on the draft. If we had failed on that, the peace process might have become politically untenable, but we didn't, and on 14 December, in a long telephone conversation, we agreed the final text. The very next day, Albert came to London and we announced the agreed joint declaration. At last, we had the basis of an agreement that received overwhelming support on both sides of the Irish divide. Let me be clear: it was a basis only. It was a set of agreed principles, a beginning, but after 70 years of partition and 24 years of bloodshed, it was an agreement that both the United Kingdom and Ireland were able to accept.

From that moment, I was confident that one day a deal definitely could be done. In that declaration, the Unionists were reassured that a united Ireland would only come about with their consent; the nationalists were promised that their interests would be protected, as under Stormont they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

often weren't; and the paramilitaries were offered a route into political life. These were essential preliminaries to the Good Friday agreement.

In August 1994, the IRA announced a ceasefire. When they did, I made it clear publicly that if it were irreversible, we would respond positively. In any event, to encourage movement towards a settlement, I committed the Government to a referendum on the eventual outcome of constitutional talks, and I lifted the ban on broadcasting the voices of spokesmen for the Provisionals and relaxed a number of security measures.

On 13 October '94, the loyalist paramilitaries also halted violence, and hopes rose that we might move into a permanent ceasefire. At that point, I announced a new package of measures on the working assumption that the ceasefire would hold. I also promised talks with paramilitaries on both sides, to include, "how illegal weapons and explosives could be removed from life in Northern Ireland". I promised also that we would convene an investment conference to inject much-needed money and investment into the north. Throughout all this, the Unionist parties remained very nervous, always fearful that there could be a sell-out.

At this point, in December '94, Albert Reynolds resigned as Taoiseach, which was a great disappointment to me, both personally and politically. I think the peace process owes a great deal to Albert Reynolds. I was lucky that John Bruton succeeded Albert. He, like Albert, was keen to move forward. 1994 ended rather positively. British officials met Sinn Féin for the first time in a quarter of a century, and also met the loyalists. The investment conference met in Belfast at the Europa Hotel. Officials from the Northern Ireland Office and their counterparts in Dublin were working on what was to become the framework documents. It is worth saying a word or two about those.

Strand one concerned the internal Government of Northern Ireland and proposed a new Executive and Assembly, which was of course the sole responsibility of London and Belfast. Strands two and three were different. Strand two covered relations between Belfast and Dublin, while strand three covered relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic. All three strands needed agreement. Our mantra was and remained, "Nothing is agreed until all is agreed." In February 1995, John Bruton and I reached agreement and launched the joint framework documents in Belfast. I would like to pay tribute to John for his skill and constructive commitment to getting it over the line. It was not easy. There were many setbacks on both sides of the divide—on the UK side and in the Irish Government—when it came to what needed to be done.

At first and for quite a while, the Unionists would not accept the joint framework documents. We reassembled them in a different fashion, and they became the basis for the Good Friday agreement. 1995 was the first year in a quarter of a century without any terrorist killings in Northern Ireland, although there was occasional violence. After February 1995, there was an actioned focus on decommissioning weapons. A working group had been set up in October 1994 with John Chilcot, the permanent head of the Northern Ireland Office, and Tim Dalton of the Department of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Justice in Dublin. It was a torturous process—one step forward, a step back and then stalemate. It was an extraordinarily difficult problem. It was extraordinarily difficult because of trust. One had to understand that that was why it was so difficult.

I will spare the Committee the litany of proposals, fusses, rejections, quarrels and grandstanding as the Provisionals refused to budge on decommissioning. John Bruton and I proposed an international commission, with Senator George Mitchell as its chairman. The Provisionals tried to block it. Rows were sufficiently serious on one occasion to cause an Anglo-Irish summit to be postponed because of threats of violence. Paddy Mayhew, the then Secretary of State, had also been developing a twin-track initiative. It was called “twin track” because it put together decommissioning on one hand and political progress on the other. That was rejected. We redrafted it as a building-block paper, and it removed some of the sore points. I will not say it became accepted, but it became more accepted than it had been.

In November, despite the problems around it, John Bruton and I agreed the twin-track initiative and agreed to set up the decommissioning body. Why George Mitchell? Again, a matter of trust. It had to be someone outside the UK if it were to be trusted on both sides. President Clinton at that point arrived in London, and I briefed him. He was pretty shocked that since the 1994 ceasefire, the IRA had carried out 148 punishment beatings and the loyalists had carried out 75. This happened on both sides. In London, Belfast and Dublin, President Clinton rammed home the peace message, and it was incredibly timely and helpful that he did so.

By early 1996, the rows about decommissioning having slowed everything down, it became clear to me that the Provisionals were waiting for a general election, with the polls indicating the very high probability of a Labour Government. The IRA exploded bombs in Canary Wharf, killing two people and injuring over 100. Naturally, they blamed the British Government. This both held up the process and reinforced to their volunteers that they were not surrendering their position.

Despite this setback, the UK and the Irish Government agreed rules for all-party talks and confirmed these could begin in June, with elections to their negotiating body. Only if people were elected was it going to be possible to get all sides together around the table to talk, and that was the purpose of that.

The elections took place, heralded by the IRA exploding a massive bomb in Manchester only days after the all-party talks began. It was that bomb that convinced me that we would not be able to reach a settlement before the next election. It was clear to me at that point that a new Government would need to pick up the talks. I was confident that Tony Blair and Labour would carry it forward; they had been supportive since I first raised the matter with Tony’s predecessor, John Smith, in the earlier 1990s.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There were several reasons why they were able to carry it on. First, Labour did not bear the scars of 18 years of dispute with the Provisionals, going back to hunger strikes and all sorts of other things that destroyed the ease of relationships, if I can put it that way. I believed Labour would be able to build on the joint declaration, the framework document and the preparatory work on decommissioning weapons. To their very great credit, they did. I will not elaborate on that—that is perhaps for Tony to do, if he comes here. If I may, I will leave it at that, and fill in any points that were perhaps unclear and any other points in your questions, if I am able to do so.

- Q40 **Chair:** Sir John, thank you for that. It has set the scene rather beautifully. You mentioned the segue from your premiership to Tony Blair's. Do you ever feel that not enough plaudits, for want of a better phrase, are given to your Government—to the work that Peter, and Paddy Mayhew did, and to the work that you were doing as Prime Minister—and that it all seemed to be that a year after the 1997 general election, 70 years of bitterness just managed to evaporate within a couple of months?

Sir John Major: You might say that, Chairman; I don't think I could—

My primary concern was that the work was carried on, and it was. They picked up the baton from where we were and had two very difficult things to deal with: the decommissioning of weapons and the question of prisoners, both of which were politically very difficult. They carried that forward. I think my reward was that the 1998 agreement was reached, because it did change life in Northern Ireland and it has since. There are frictions now, but we are not going to go back to where we were, despite those frictions. We may come to that later, I suspect.

My main concern was that the work was carried forward and carried forward successfully, and I warmly congratulate the Labour party on what they managed to achieve.

- Q41 **Chair:** You indicated at the top of your remarks that what spurred you to action was that things were taking place within Northern Ireland that would not have been tolerated within Great Britain—what I think we all occasionally refer to, in a handy term, as a sort of Northern Irish exceptionalism; people think, "Oh, well, it's Northern Ireland. These things can go on."

Looking forward from '95, '97, '98 to now, do you think there has been enough of the process of the peace process—and the Good Friday agreement that was the bedrock of that process—to end what many would say is still a political recognition of Northern Irish exceptionalism, whether that is the manifestation of peace walls, the manifestation of the work of the paramilitaries or, to an extent, the still very deep-rooted political disagreements?

Sir John Major: That is a very difficult question to answer. Let me try to do so as best I can. I think it divides into different areas. The first point is: have people stopped killing one another and bombing? The answer is yes, they have. Is there a much more normal life in Northern Ireland than



HOUSE OF COMMONS

anybody believed was possible at the beginning of the 1990s? Yes, emphatically, there is. Is the broad relationship between the political parties in Northern Ireland a good deal better than it was? Yes, it is. Is it perfect? No, it isn't.

The second part of the progress, where I think we should look as we look to the future, is the economic progress in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was relatively poor. It still is. The economic problems that exist in Northern Ireland are profound. The health problems that exist in Northern Ireland are profound. You can take it right the way through. There is still a huge amount to do. It is very difficult to bring people together if they are facing hardship. That is a part of the future that has proceeded less happily than I would have hoped at the time. That is partly due to economic circumstances, which have many fathers. Our economic difficulties have many fathers, none of whom wish to claim paternity. It is a factor in the difficulties that still exist, so I don't think that has worked as well as it might have done.

There are one or two questions about the Good Friday agreement that we might look at again, 20 years on, to see how we might possibly make some changes that will improve and look forward. I would emphasise that economic hardship is a divisive force. That is true right across the United Kingdom at the moment. It is certainly true in Northern Ireland, and it has to be factored into the thinking of the Governments in London and in Northern Ireland. That is why I regret so much that the Executive and the Assembly are not meeting now, because there are problems—quite apart from the peace process and quite apart from the protocol—that are affecting all sorts of aspects of life in Northern Ireland. The sooner we can get the Executive and the Assembly back into action, the better it will be for Northern Ireland, and indeed for democracy in Northern Ireland.

Q42 **Chair:** The period that runs up to 1997 was a difficult period for the Government domestically. You don't need me to tell you that.

Sir John Major: "Difficult"? I admire your capacity for understatement.

Q43 **Chair:** Challenging, maybe. But you provided brave political leadership, often in the face of opposition from your own party in Parliament, and were right to do so, for what it is worth. A huge debt of thanks is due to you and other Ministers who picked up that ball and ran with it. Looking at the problems today—you have just outlined some of them—do you worry whether the sort of brave political leadership that Hume, Adams, Paisley, Reynolds, Bruton and yourself demonstrated is there among the current senior politicians? Irrespective of party, is it there to be bold, or has everybody just become frightfully frightened of social media and their respective echo chambers?

Sir John Major: You tempt me.

Chair: Give way to temptation.

Sir John Major: First, I think that politicians today live in an even more difficult atmosphere than we did in the 1990s. You are quite right; there



HOUSE OF COMMONS

were all sorts of internal problems within my party over the peace process. That is true and undeniably the case. It is also true that for politicians generally at the moment, the advent of social media in particular—and the fact that so much of the media has now become part of the political process, rather than simply reporting the political process—makes life much more difficult for political decision making than it has ever been before. I do think that is so.

You asked whether there are going to be some brave decisions taken. Well, we are going to have a practical illustration of that very soon with the protocol. The protocol is a mess. It was very poorly negotiated. I think of some of the promises made immediately after the protocol—for example, that there would be no checks on trade between Britain and Northern Ireland. How those promises came to be made I cannot imagine, because they were patently wrong from the moment they were actually made.

The protocol needs changing. I am baffled as to how we could possibly have reached a situation in which that protocol was accepted. I think one Minister said something like this: “The UK signed the protocol on the basis that it would be reformed.” Well, that must be the first agreement in recorded history that was signed by people who decided it was useless in the first place and we would have to reform it later. It is a very novel proposition and not one that I can immediately put my name to.

Then we had a great number of—I don’t know whether the correct word is threats; we had headline after headline, where it was unilaterally suggested that London would override parts of the protocol Bill. Even if the protocol Bill was wrong, that does seem to be a strange way to proceed, because that sort of behaviour, especially when many lawyers think that it would be a breach of law as well, is pretty unwise. We, the British, would not respond to threats of that sort. Why do we think that the European Union would? It is a pretty unwise way to proceed if you actually wish to get agreement.

Now I come particularly to the point. I am not privy to everything the Government does. I am not in government, I am not in Parliament, and I chose not to go to the House of Lords. I see it from the point of view of the outsider, but I hear the odd bit that goes on here and there, and from what I hear it seems to me that the present Prime Minister and the present Secretary of State are making progress, and there is a growing degree of understanding between the two sides—three sides, really, because there is the Republic, the European Union and the United Kingdom Government—on how to move forward with the protocol. But I will make this point, if I may: there is no such thing as a perfect protocol that will have every side dancing in the streets with joy. That is not going to happen.

It could be that we do not get a protocol, with all the problems that that might mean: continuing disruption in Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland continuing without its own Government and being effectively run by the civil service under parliamentary authority—or, heaven forbid,



direct rule, which we certainly do not wish to see, as it would be a grave setback if we had to revert to that. So how do we act? A statesmanlike response would be to recognise that nobody is going to get everything they wish but to accept compromise in the interest of returning democratic government to Northern Ireland. That will not be easy for anyone in the three parties, but if they can do that, I think we can safely say that they are prepared to make very brave decisions. If I may draw the distinction, statesmen who do that will succeed; politicians who keep shouting slogans to their most extreme supporters will not.

I think that will answer your question, if they can reach an agreement on the protocol, which I profoundly hope they can, because it seems to me to be very much in the interests not only of democracy itself in Northern Ireland, but of handling the many problems that exist in Northern Ireland—deprivation and other matters—that need dealing with by an elected Assembly. It is in no one's interest to have that Assembly broken up and not meeting for a further long time. A year is too long already.

Q44 Claire Hanna: Thank you very much, Sir John, for your contribution this morning and all that you have outlined about the run-up to the agreement. It was absolutely vital spadework. I say that not to undermine it; we are very grateful for it. That institutional memory and understanding of Northern Ireland has been clear in your interventions this morning about the need for devolution, and in the run-up to the referendum in 2016.

The Downing Street declaration formalised the principle of consent and the Irish dimension. You have outlined how that framed the Good Friday agreement and the process, which I was going to ask you about, but you addressed it in your statement. I know how the Downing Street declaration and the subsequent framework declarations were received in Northern Ireland; I know less about how those within your own party felt—I wasn't politically around at the time—but it occurs to me, given the discussion you just had with the Chair, that there were other factors, but those who most enthusiastically opposed the Downing Street declaration and the principles within it tend to be those who have most enthusiastically championed Brexit and most vociferously opposed some of the compromises in the agreement. The Downing Street declaration, I suppose, recognises and softens the sharp lines around sovereignty, which I appreciate is difficult for some people to handle.

I suppose I am trying to formulate a question. Do you think that those same voices within the Conservative party, which I would say have undue prominence in this debate at the moment—people in Northern Ireland find their views secondary to how it will be received by people in the ERG—have it within them to give a little bit of space to public opinion in Northern Ireland, and the views and needs of economic actors within Northern Ireland?

Sir John Major: I think it would help enormously if the tone and oratory improved in the way it has shown signs of doing so in the last few months. If you continue to go down the route of people making unilateral demands



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and unilateral threats publicly, rather than private negotiation, then you will inflame difficulties. If, on the other hand, you handle it in a different way and you talk about the requirement for the people of Northern Ireland to make sure that we return to some normality—even a slightly imperfect normality—I think you can persuade people.

You referred to whether people objected to the Downing Street declaration. Silently, some people who opposed the fact of what we were doing at all—not all of them just in the party, but beyond it—were certainly sucking their teeth. But by and large, because of the enormous reception that the Downing Street declaration received in the UK, in Ireland, across Europe, in the United States—everywhere around the world, actually—they kept their head down. Whatever they may have thought privately, nobody was going to publicly stand up and oppose something that seemed to be progress towards peace. It is not the sort of thing that, credibly, public figures can do.

If the right sort of lead is given by the negotiators of the protocol, I think you can pull off the same trick again, but not if you have an exchange of insults, effectively, designed to fire up the feelings of your most extreme supporters. If the Government do that, they diminish the chance of an agreement. I judge from what I have seen that the present Prime Minister and the present Secretary of State for Northern Ireland are not in that business, so I am hopeful—your question links very nicely with the Chairman's question a moment ago—that we may get a clear illustration of the way in which difficult problems can be solved.

The point about negotiation is this, if I may preach for a second: negotiation is not a one-way option. Negotiation is not one side saying, "We will have this!" and the other side saying, "Oh yes." That is imposition; it is not negotiation. Negotiation is both sides setting out what they would like and agreeing something in the middle that is imperfect for both sides but an agreement is reached. That was true of the Downing Street declaration, it was true of the framework agreements, it is true of the Good Friday agreement, and it was true of the way we went into the European Union; it wasn't true of the way we came out of it, and I think we have seen which way is the best way to go.

Claire Hanna: Thank you.

- Q45 **Jim Shannon:** Thank you, Sir John, for coming this morning. We will agree on some things and disagree probably on many others, but none the less, I wish to put forward my point of view. Northern Ireland people are, by their very nature, good people. They want to trust people and they love to see honesty in people, probably above all things. Certainly, I do and I know my constituents do as well. When it comes to building levels of trust and honesty between politicians who represent the viewpoints of their people in Northern Ireland, we need to see that. I would be somewhat disappointed, Mr Chairman, if I didn't say this, and I wish to say it: I think you mentioned that the United Kingdom has no strategic interest in Northern Ireland. As a Unionist, I would disagree with that immensely. As a Unionist, I feel concerned about that. Also, as a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Unionist, we believe we want good relationships with the Republic of Ireland: economic, cultural and tourist relationships.

You mentioned health and hardship. Those are absolutely key issues; we deal with them every day. Failures in the Good Friday agreement are that those levels of trust and honesty, and relationships, have been lost on many occasions by Government's attitude. For instance, I think it was Margaret Thatcher who said that Northern Ireland is as British as Finchley. Sometimes we don't feel as British as Finchley, and that's certainly how I feel as well, in relation to some things: the cross-border issues, the collusion of the Garda Síochána, the failure of the Garda Síochána to, for instance, give the evidence that is relevant to the Kingsmill massacre—we as Unionists feel fairly angry about that. In relation to building north-south and east-west relationships, which is really important and is about moving forward, I do accept that terrorist activity has been reduced to a level—I would rather see it completely eradicated, by the way; that would be the way I would wish to see it going—but what has replaced it has been criminality. That is one of the disappointments of where we are.

I am keen to ask this question. The Republic of Ireland has to recognise that Unionism is not ignored. In relation to north-south and, perhaps to a lesser extent, east-west, we see that difficulty. Early in your contribution, you said that some things could be done differently. What would they be, in your opinion, from a Unionist point of view? You also said Unionists feel and see imposition. The people that I represent feel and see imposition. So, when it comes to moving forward in a way that is constructive and positive and trying to find solutions, at every stage my Unionist constituents tell me that they don't see their opinion being considered in the way it should be. I don't want to be negative to you, Sir John, but I have to say these things and put them on record. For Unionism, we don't see all the levels of things coming—the goodness that some have referred to. And when it comes to finding a better way of doing things for Unionism, we have to accept that we have a mandate. We have seven points, Sir John, in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol, and we see those seven points as something that we have been mandated with as an election pledge. So if we don't see those seven points addressed in whatever solutions may be coming forward, Unionism does not feel part of this process in the way it should.

Sir John Major: Let me pick up some of those points. You deal with a number of frustrations; I am absolutely sure that a nationalist politician could pick a similar set of frustrations on his side. Nobody has said that the Good Friday agreement is perfect or that you could lay down the suspicions and problems of decades and decades very swiftly. Memory, folklore, folk memory doesn't allow that to happen. They do linger. We can collectively, on both sides of the divide, keep those frustrations alive, or we can try to work to bury them. All of them won't be buried immediately. They won't all be ended immediately. They certainly won't all be ended until you have a better economic set of circumstances in Northern Ireland. Nothing breeds frustration, and a feeling that you are being ignored, more



than does hardship. That is why I keep coming back to the economic dimension of all this.

So I am sure there are frustrations on both sides of the divide, and I think we have to deal with those. You gently made some criticisms; I will gently make one in reverse, if I may. If we wish to deal with those matters and you wish to see that the Unionist view and frustration is met, it is better done in a functioning Executive than in a non-functioning Executive, which is why I hope we will reach an agreement on the protocol and the DUP will go back to its role in governing Northern Ireland. I very much hope that will happen. But what I do not want to do—anyone can list a series of things that they do not like, whether it is in Northern Ireland or probably in any democratic nation anywhere in the world. The question is, are as many people looking for a way to put those fears and frustrations to rest, or are they looking for a way to keep them alive? I think the right way is to put them to rest.

I am not here to say that everything is perfect in the Northern Ireland agreement, or, indeed, in anything else. I am not here to deny that for a very long time Stormont was very one-sided in terms of the way it treated the nationalist community. I am not here to say that there are not legitimate, long-term past frustrations that will linger in the folk memory of many people. What I am here to say is that we need to examine what they may be and see how we can put them to rest. We can only put them to rest if they are democratically expressed within a democratic embrace, which is why I come back again to the reason why we need that Executive to go back. For so long as there is not an Executive, there is a void. It cannot be with direct rule from London; that is not the right way ahead. It cannot be with the Executive not sitting and delegated authority to the civil servants. They can delegate authority, but only within the legislation and laws that have been enacted before. They cannot change the things that are wrong in the way that the Executive can. That is why I keep coming back to that point.

I do not deny, Jim, the frustrations that you set out, and I am not going to debate each one of them, because I could produce some the other side, and we could debate those as well. I am saying that we need to focus on tomorrow, not yesterday, and I think now is the moment to do it. There is a very strong case to say, not just in Northern Ireland but right across the UK, that the problems we face are an inflexion point, a point at which we have to stop and think and look at all the things we have done in the past and how we have done them, and ask "Is this the right way? Or is there some better way in a world that is changing faster than ever before? Is there some better way to deal with these problems?" I think there may be, and I certainly think it is the case in Northern Ireland.

Q46 Stephen Farry: Welcome, Sir John. Like others, I pay tribute to your contribution to laying the foundations of the peace process that we are still enjoying today, albeit with the bumps in the road that we have been experiencing.

I would like to ask you two questions, one after the other. The first



HOUSE OF COMMONS

relates to the context for the initiation of the peace process and also, in particular, the development of the framework documents. Let me ask you to talk about the importance at that stage of the joint UK and Irish membership of the European Union, both in terms of the regular contact between Ministers from both Governments and the importance of that backdrop to what was being done in relation to, in particular, strand two and strand three.

Sir John Major: Membership of the European Union was very important for many reasons. The first reason was that they were immensely supportive, in cash as well as oratory, to the development of what was going on. The second reason is more difficult to express accurately. A great deal of the negotiation went on in private and every time something was leaked, it aroused fears on one side of the divide or other. I was able to meet, and so was Paddy Mayhew, with our counterparts in Dublin privately in the margins of European Union meetings. A great deal of work and discussion got done there. We were not sitting down with officials—well, nine times out of 10—we were just sitting down with one another as people who wished to see progress. It smoothed the way for many of the agreements that might not otherwise have been made. So it was a very useful tent in which we could operate discreetly, and we used that tent to the full right the way through both the Downing Street declaration and the framework agreement.

It was very helpful that we were both in the European Union, because we faced a common set of problems. Often in the European Union, we found ourselves working together with the same opinions. The point about Northern Ireland that always struck me is quite simply this: southern Ireland—Ireland—are our nearest neighbours. It is absurd that we had no regular meetings with them and that we were not facing the same problems collectively. Of course the United Kingdom is bigger than Ireland, but that relationship matters. It mattered then, and it matters now that we are out of the European Union and Ireland are within it. They are one of the ways in which we may stretch out and recover some of the things we so wilfully threw away when we left the European Union.

I do not believe the European Union is perfect, or anything like it. Because I negotiated the Maastricht treaty, the ultras—the ultra-anti-Brexiteers—regard me as a significant Europhile. That is not actually true. I am a very practical European. There are many things I do not like, but I look at the package and say, “Would people in my country be better off and safer if we were in the European Union than if we were outside?” I reach the conclusion that we were better off inside.

There is a wider dimension to this. There are three great power blocs in the world today, and the United Kingdom is not one of them. There is America, there is China and there is the European Union. Europe is going to face immense economic competition from both America and China. It may face military and security problems with China. Is Europe better able to represent its people with the United Kingdom inside the European Union, making it stronger, or outside, making it weaker? I think that not just us, but the whole of Europe is stronger with Britain in it. When I look



HOUSE OF COMMONS

at the interests of my children and my grandchildren, I think their future is brighter if they are part of a really big bloc that could work with us if we were in difficulty.

Suppose we had a socking great row with China. If Britain decided to put sanctions on China, China would not be much bothered. If the European Union did so because we were being maltreated, they would feel quite differently about it. It is those strategic issues that make me believe that we should be in Europe and that we have made a colossal mistake in leaving. I understand the sovereignty arguments, though many of them are more semantic than real, to be frank. No country—not even the United States—has pure sovereignty. Who has pure sovereignty in NATO, for example? We all sign up to NATO. Nobody complains about that, yet we give up a degree of military sovereignty in NATO, just as we give up a degree of economic sovereignty and political sovereignty in the European Union.

It is a question of balancing what we give and what we may gain, and what we give is often frustrating and boring. There were silly stories, which were completely untrue, about square bananas or straight bananas, or whatever it was—the nonsense that was printed—and other, bigger things. Those are irrelevant compared with the economic improvement of being in Europe. I wonder how many of the cuts we have had, or the shortages of resources for our public services, would not have happened but for the loss of GDP because we have left the European Union. I just wonder how much that is, and I would dearly love an accurate assessment. The OBR reckoned it is heading towards 4%, which is an awful lot of money in terms of putting right the things that are wrong in the UK.

Looking forward, our security in a challenging economic world and a potentially difficult political world—how much safer we are in a large bloc than alone, and how much more secure we would be in times of difficulty with friends we can hug closely rather than people who may be less willing to come to the aid of a country in difficulties that entirely stands alone. Those are matters that are important for this generation and future generations, and I do not think they were given the weight they deserved in the referendum.

Q47 Stephen Farry: Thank you, Sir John. Those are very wise words, which I fully concur with. In a complete change of topic—a handbrake turn, as such—can I take you back to the twin-track comments you made earlier about the all-party talks and decommissioning? Can you talk a little about the Mitchell principles and how important they were for the commencement of the talks, and management of them, subsequent to that? Drawing from that, how frustrated are you that today we still have paramilitary structures in Northern Ireland and ongoing terrorism—albeit on a reduced scale to what we had in the heat of the Troubles? How frustrating is it that the violence is still with us today?

Sir John Major: It is frustrating, but I am not entirely surprised, after the many decades of frustration. It is less than it was, and with economic



HOUSE OF COMMONS

improvement it will continue to decline. I do not believe that it is the threat it used to be, and I don't believe it can be the threat it used to be again. So it is progress, and I hope we are going to continue to make progress with a better quality of life in Northern Ireland. Ancient frustrations die away slowly. I think we must be patient with it, and make sure we don't enflame those minority groups who will still be looking for trouble.

It is for that reason we have got ourselves into the protocol problem. Nobody wanted a land border between north and south, not least because, if you cast your mind back, it was at the customs border between north and south that the Troubles began. If I remember correctly, it began with the murder of a couple of customs officers at that time. So you can see how the protocol came about; nobody wanted a north-south border, so a notional border was put in the Irish sea. It is a frustration, but I do think with sensible policy it will continue to die away.

How important were the Mitchell principles? They were very important; they were produced because they were relevant to getting everybody to talk and agree progress. The point of them—the point of all the things we did—was to give reassurance to people. The Unionists were always worried that they were going to be betrayed, and the reasons for that are deep in their history. I can understand that, because in the past they had been. The Nationalists' concern was that in the old Stormont they did not get a fair shake. You were dealing with two groups of people, both of whom had quite legitimate grievances to be suspicious of what might be going on behind closed doors. If it is going on behind closed doors, it is mysterious. Of course, if you did it in the open, you would have had 10,000 arguments every day about the intricacies of things that were finally solved between the negotiating parties. So it was a dilemma, and the judgment we took was that we had to do a certain amount in private, agree what it was and then present a united front to people.

I have digressed from the Mitchell principles. They were important to make sure that decommissioning proceeded, and so were some of the other difficult things that had to be done.

Q48 **Chair:** Sir John, I do not know if you have watched the TV series "Derry Girls"?

Sir John Major: I'm afraid not.

Chair: It is about a group of teenagers in Northern Ireland during the period leading up to the referendum on the Good Friday agreement. There is a wonderful montage that juxtaposes the hope of referendum day with the bloody horror of before—the disruption, the economic inactivity and everything that you have spoken about.

Sir John Major: Are we talking about the referendum on the Good Friday agreement?

Q49 **Chair:** Yes, the referendum on the Good Friday agreement. Do you worry that for the two generations that have followed 1995, '96, '97 and '98,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the peace dividend is not as valued as it was then, and that it is sort of seen as a given—as something that will always be there, almost because it always has been there? Is there enough understanding of the absolute misery that went before, and of the precious prize that the peace represents, as the fundamental foundation stone from which economic activity, regeneration and everything else can flow? Without being mawkish and picking at that healing wound, how best can current politicians remind the young of Northern Ireland of the value of that prize, and of the dangers of slipping back by not recognising that value?

Sir John Major: I think it is worth reminding people of it. The older generation will not really need any reminding. One hopes that they will pass that on to the younger generation. It is not surprising. Once something happens, people tend to take it for granted; that is a natural human reaction to almost everything. You can cut a tax, and there is outrage if it goes back up again; you assume it is going to be cut forever. With the peace dividend, you assume it is going to be there forever, so you tend to write it off, so I am not surprised. There is a certain inevitability about people focusing on it less, but I think it would be helpful if prominent politicians occasionally made a speech pointing out how valuable it is.

I know I keep coming back to the same tune, but do you feel that something has succeeded if you are still living in some form of difficulty? And people are. I forget who it was who once said that money is the root of all progress, but in terms of improving lifestyle, it is; so, yes, we should not forget what the peace did. I remember the 2016 referendum. People are not listening—that is the point—when something else comes up.

To make a personal point, in 2016, in the middle of the referendum, Tony Blair and I went to Northern Ireland to warn of the dangers of leaving Europe, because of the difficult situation in which it would leave Northern Ireland; it would be on the perimeter of the European Union, on the divided island of Ireland. We did not deal specifically with the protocol problems, but we pointed out the difficulties. We were roundly told by politicians at the time that we had no idea what we were talking about, and that it was all going to be perfectly all right. Well, it was not. People need to look back to where we were, so that they can judge where we are, as well as looking at where they would wish to be. That could be done by the most senior politicians in Northern Ireland—or the UK, for that matter—occasionally talking about it, to remind people.

Q50 **Chair:** To pick up on Jim Shannon's point, this is almost, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" Unless everyone can say that the Good Friday agreement has done something for them—materially, and not just as regards the important abstract of the peace dividend—the danger is that people do not recognise the pivotal nature of the Belfast/Good Friday process.

Sir John Major: Yes. People will concentrate on the defects of the Good Friday agreement. It does have defects. It is easier, or more exciting, to point out the defects of something than its virtues. The virtues of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

agreement are very substantial and very obvious, but the defects are there, and at some stage might have to be dealt with. I can think of two or three examples of where the agreement could be improved if it were revised. One of the defects is that any one party can collapse Governments in Northern Ireland. That was not a defect that was foreseen in the Good Friday agreement.

The second example—I look at Stephen as I say this—is that the main Unionist and nationalist parties are no longer as dominant as once they were. Does that need to be taken into account in the framing of the Good Friday agreement?

The third thing is a much more emotive point, and I take my text—you might be surprised—from a speech by Peter Hain in the House of Lords: when the paramilitaries were released, the victims and the bereaved families were not really considered. That is another defect, and it is a defect that is coming back to bite at the present time. The legacy Bill is having a difficult time, and the Secretary of State is well aware of that. We need to look at that problem.

Mary Kelly Foy: Thank you, Sir John, for your account of that time, and thank you for your efforts to lay the foundations for peace.

Sir John Major: Thank you very much.

- Q51 **Mary Kelly Foy:** I wonder if you could characterise the public mood toward the prospect of peace in Britain and Ireland by the time of President Clinton's visit in '95. Although there was a real prospect of peace, there were still, as you mentioned, paramilitary punishment beatings going on. Of course, they were very different times; we did not have the forces of social media. There was also the influence that the Church and Church leaders would have had. What was the public mood at the time?

Sir John Major: I think the public mood was one of frustration. There was frustration that we had the foundations of an agreement, with the declaration and the frameworks, but that we were held up by the two things that still lay ahead and were unsolved, namely the decommissioning of weapons and the position of the prisoners, which was always going to be a politically hard thing to deal with. It was frustration. Did I think the whole thing would collapse? No, I didn't, actually. There was President Clinton's arrival, and his speeches. America is vitally important to Ireland, north and south, economically because of the degree of investment in it, and the relationship with the huge pro-Irish lobby in the Senate and House of Representatives in the United States. The views of any President, and particularly of a President as committed as Bill Clinton was, were always going to be very important. Those speeches were very, very helpful, as I said earlier. There were moments when things happened that were not so helpful, but those speeches undoubtedly were helpful, and would always have been so.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I think the peace process would have got there. It might not have got there quite so quickly. Once the Labour Government came in, the United States gave them the same support they had given us in pushing the matter forward, but it was clear when the Labour party came back into power that they were looking at the endgame. It was a very difficult endgame. No one should underestimate the problems of decommissioning, and the political problem of the prisoners—they were very real. It took some courage for Labour to make the decisions that they did. A large majority helped, as did the fact that there was a great feeling in Northern Ireland that things were coming to a conclusion, and that it needed to be pushed over the line. They were very helpful.

I think it was frustration, not despair, when we had the fallow period before the '97 election, when, for their own reasons, the Provisionals were holding back and we couldn't make progress. There were dotted, isolated incidents—quite serious, but relatively isolated—of violence on the mainland.

It is hard to cast your mind back to exactly what you thought at the time, but I always thought it was going to be done. I believed it was going to be done after the declaration. I was confident it could be done after the frameworks. I was never confident that we would get it done within our span of office. Indeed, I remember a conversation right at the beginning with Albert Reynolds, when he first became Taoiseach. He hadn't been Taoiseach for a fortnight when I invited him to come to Downing Street for a private meeting. I should mention that I knew him. We were both Finance Ministers together, so he was not a stranger to me. I invited him across. We had supper, and we ditched all the officials and went upstairs to the White Room, clutching a drink each. We found that our ambitions for the peace process were the same. We did not necessarily envisage the same outcome, but our determination to get rid of violence was very real. That was an enormous help.

I remember quite vividly that we were talking about how long it would take. We did not see in detail the joint declaration or frameworks document, but we talked in general terms about there being a whole series of things we had to do to build up confidence that we could get over the line with an agreement, and about the fact that it would take a long time. I remember that we talked about the fact that it might not happen during our period of office. We were always aware of that, and on that point at least, we were right.

Carla Lockhart: Thank you for your very considered words today, your honesty, and your desire still to see progress. It is very commendable, and the Committee thanks you for coming here and presenting to us. I have questions, but at the outset I would like to focus a little on the protocol—not the details of the protocol, because the Chair would be cross with me if I got into the details—

Chair: I am never cross with you.

Q52 **Carla Lockhart**—but obviously in Northern Ireland we do not have a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

functioning Executive. That is for one reason, and one reason only: the protocol, and the damage it is doing to Northern Ireland. Quite often there is a misconception that one party is blocking the Executive and the Assembly, but Unionists en bloc do not accept the protocol and want to see it renegotiated, changed and replaced. You said—I am paraphrasing—that the protocol needs to be changed, was signed on the wrong basis, and could be reformed. If you were now Prime Minister, and were witnessing the inflexibility of the EU, what would you do? How would you navigate the issue?

Sir John Major: Inflexibility is an interesting word. If I were to say to a Unionist, "The Unionist parties are inflexible," they would say, "No, we're not, but we're not giving away our negotiating position." The European Union was said to be totally inflexible on everything to do with the Maastricht treaty. However, by the time the Maastricht treaty was agreed, I had managed to obtain agreement that we would not join the single currency or the social chapter, or do a number of other things.

The point is that at the beginning of a negotiation, people set out their position. That position is reported; their Ministers or Commissioners are interviewed about it and say, "This is our position", and that looks like inflexibility. When you talk privately, and begin to look at the options, inflexibility is merely the path to flexibility. I do not believe in total inflexibility in anybody who believes in negotiation. The European Union spends its life negotiating; so do the British Government and the Irish Government. I have been involved in a sufficiently large number of negotiations to know that what start off as an utterly inflexibly opposed positions can be brought together. Both sides have aims, and neither side generally wishes the talks to fail, so when you engage in talks, flexibility can emerge, but only if you build a relationship with the people with whom you are negotiating. To paraphrase Churchill, "Jaw, jaw, not war, war" is a good idea. That is why we needed to talk to the Provisionals, albeit privately at first.

For years, British Governments had taken the view, "We will never talk to terrorists until they lay down their arms." Well, if you had waited for the IRA to lay down their arms and come out with their hands up, we would still be killing one another. You have to take a risk. You have to deal with people with whom you think you disagree, and you have to deal with their inflexible positions and negotiate them into something more flexible. It isn't easy, it can take a long time, and it must require compromise. You cannot negotiate and say, "This is my position, and I am utterly unmoving on it." If you say that, fine, don't bother to meet; you are never going to get an agreement. But if you genuinely want an agreement, you are going to have to concede something to get something. It is like shopping; if you go to your local supermarket, you help yourself to the food that you would like to have, but you have to pay for it, and if you don't pay for it, you're in trouble. It's the same with flexibility: you have to give something to get something.

I know the European Union, having dealt with them over a long period of time. They can be moved to flexibility. Do not believe the external oratory.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

When you get talking to them, they are deal-makers, and that is what you need. We need to be a deal-maker as well. If you are a deal-maker, you cannot stand on the head of some principle and say, "That is absolutely immovable," because if you do, you will not get an agreement.

I think Northern Ireland can be a much happier place to live in than it is. It will take time; it needs political guidance; and it will need a sacrifice of principle sometimes. Politics isn't just a game about your philosophy; it is a practical, living operation to try to improve life for the people who are generous enough to elect you. If that means having a bit of intellectual flexibility, even if it is unpopular in the short term, it is worthwhile. I dare say the EU does look inflexible from a Unionist point of view, and I dare say the Unionists look inflexible from the European point of view, but I do not believe that they cannot be brought together. I do not believe it, Carla.

- Q53 **Carla Lockhart:** Thank you. I feel that sometimes we're painted as being inflexible. I would just make the point that there has been so much time given to allow for negotiation and discussions. You talked about Northern Ireland, the impact of not having a functioning Executive, the deprivation and the cost of living, but ultimately the protocol has cost £18,000 per hour over the past two years. That is just to help businesses fill in paperwork. We have a steel tariff. We have the threat of medicines not being made available. It is hugely frustrating for people in Northern Ireland. It is having a real detrimental impact on their daily living, and it is driving up the cost of living, but I agree with you: we need a balanced way forward. I wouldn't ask my nationalist colleagues to tolerate a border between Tyrone and Monaghan. Likewise, I don't feel that we Unionists should have to tolerate a border between Larne and Stranraer. Going forward, we really need action on the protocol, because ultimately it is damaging Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland's place in the Union.

Sir John Major: Well, I think that everyone is open to a solution—and if you have one to offer, please see me afterwards and I'll pass it on, though perhaps you're in a better position to pass it than I am. If you are talking of the deficiencies in the Northern Ireland protocol, believe you me, I am with you all the way. I think it is a very inadequate document, but there's not much point in going over that.

Consider what a deal could do. A deal on the protocol could restore the trust that has been lost, not just within Northern Ireland, but between Europe and the UK. It could enable beneficial changes to be made. If I am correct—I am sometimes out of date these days; I am no longer in Parliament anywhere, so I don't hear the daily debates—the deal comes up for review in 2026. There's a whole lot of things we need to do. Take the trade and co-operation deal as a whole; we need to widen that. We need to warm it up. If you ask businessmen, artists or musicians, they want a deal on freedom of movement in Europe. We certainly need agreements to free up exports of agricultural goods. That is very important, for example, for the north.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We need—it is astonishing to me that it was left out of it all—a security arrangement. How could we possibly have agreed to a deal that didn't cover security? That seems to me to be potty. What happened to the deal we should have asked for, and got, on financial services? At this stage, the UK as a whole, including Northern Ireland, has less access to Europe than the United States—fine, they're big—but also less access than Hong Kong or Singapore to the European market. Where is the sense in that? What sort of negotiation produces that sort of outcome?

What happened to having some access to the services market in Europe? Services are more than 50% of the exports of the United Kingdom. For reasons that beggar understanding, the British Government did not seek a deal on services. I find it difficult to put myself in the head of the people who thought that was a good idea for the wellbeing of the United Kingdom. Somebody suggested a solution and I am trying to remember who it was—I think it might have been Philip Hammond who suggested recently in a speech that we should seek better access to services in the UK for our British exporters, in return for greater EU access to our labour market.

We have waved goodbye to European workers, and we are now replacing them with workers from other parts of the world. When they talked of control of the borders, they meant less immigration. What has actually happened is that we have changed the sources from which the immigration came, rather than necessarily reduced it. We also have a shortage of the skills we once had. None of this seems to me to be in the interests of people.

Put politics aside. Put philosophies aside. What the heck is Parliament here for? What is the purpose of Parliament? If the purpose of Parliament is not to improve the condition of the people, as Disraeli put it, I am not sure what it is for. I cannot think that the things that are missing from this trade agreement collectively, of which the NIP is a part, are doing anything other than damaging the condition of the people. It certainly does not help them.

The benefits of Brexit, that illusory beast, moves further and further away. Instead of happening very rapidly, with the most enormous changes the day we signed the agreement, it is now a long way down the road before we actually see this mythical beast. That is despairing. You are quite right that NIP needs changing. The trade and co-operation agreement as a whole needs to be improved.

What a loss to lose Horizon and Copernicus because of our stance on the Northern Ireland peace process. I think we lost entry to Copernicus and Horizon when we talked about unilaterally ditching part of the protocol agreement. We are pretty good in things like scientific research and space satellites. It is extremely unlikely, it seems to me, that we can fund anything the size of Copernicus or space satellites on our own, but losing entry to it is damaging us, and damaging those programmes as well. Where is the sense in that? What is the purpose of it?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

What are we here for? We are not here to produce some philosophical outcome that appeals to intellectuals. We—you, Parliament—are supposed to be here to produce something that actually improves everyday life for people in the UK. I do not think people in Barnsley or Ravensbourne or anywhere spend their time thinking about the philosophy of Parliament. They think about the things that are going to affect their daily life and the prospects for their family in the future. Sorry, lecture over.

Chair: I am going to turn to Robert Goodwill.

Q54 Sir Robert Goodwill: Sir John, we have spent a lot of time looking back 25 years and before, as we hope to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. I first went to Northern Ireland in 1979; it was a very different place then to what it is now.

It is obvious from the work this Committee has been doing that the absence of an Executive and sitting Assembly is having an all-pervasive effect on many aspects of life in Northern Ireland. I wonder to what extent the surprise is that we have had a functioning Executive for most of that time, not the fact that it has not been operational recently.

If we had had a similar situation in the UK as a whole, the 1992 election would basically have meant that you would have had to have done a coalition with Neil Kinnock, whatever the result. Margaret Thatcher would have had to go into a coalition with Michael Foot. Boris Johnson would have had to go into coalition with Jeremy Corbyn. If you put it into that sort of context, we can understand how difficult it is.

Given that the generation of politicians who will be in Stormont in 25 years from now are probably still at primary school, and probably will not have the same skin in the game as that first generation of politicians, how do you think we should allow the constitutional agreement to evolve or change over time to mean that we do not have quite so much time when there is such an impasse in place?

Sir John Major: I think that is the sort of thing I had in mind, Robert, when I spoke a moment ago about possible changes to the Good Friday agreement. Let me make it clear: I am not criticising the Good Friday agreement. I think the Good Friday agreement at its time was absolutely what was needed, but I don't think there has been an agreement in the history of negotiation that, looked at a quarter of a century later, couldn't have something added to it that would be helpful—in the circumstances of a quarter of a century later, so please don't think I am knocking the agreement. I was a wholehearted supporter of it at the time, and I still regard it as a very great achievement by the then Labour Government.

But 25 years on, you've learnt a lot and you've seen how things operate, and there are some changes. That is why I think the point I made before about the absence of one party bringing down the Executive and the Assembly is something we need to look at. We need politicians in place. The civil service cannot do it: it doesn't have the remit to, and their skills are very important, but a different set of skills to those of politicians. You're right: we need to look at the next 25 years as well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

To take a different example, the American constitution is plainly as out of date as can possibly be, and yet, because it is their constitution, by their founding fathers, they cannot change it. We have the virtue of an unwritten constitution. That is a virtue: we can change. We can change with circumstances. We can change with legislation that Parliament makes. That is a great virtue that very few countries in the world actually have, and we should use it.

It is 25 years on. I hope no one who worked on the Good Friday agreement will be upset by my saying that if one reviewed it, one might find a few things one would update, and, in the interests of the people we are talking about—25 years on—that might be a good thing, because I'd like to think that 25 years on, a generation that grew up in peace will not have the same emotional baggage as those who had to live through a huge and horrible period of violence that did the most enormous damage to relationships and to Northern Ireland generally. I think you are right that we do need to look forward and see what we can do.

Q55 Sir Robert Goodwill: Do you think that the operation of the constitutional settlement has contributed to a sort of polarisation of politics in Northern Ireland—that the UUP and the SDLP and, I suspect, Sinn Féin and the DUP may be further apart now than when we started? Has that been one of the effects of the settlement?

Sir John Major: I am not sure about that last point. The DUP and Sinn Féin have been working together in the Assembly. That would have been inconceivable certainly before 1993, so I think there is progress. I was very struck when I dealt with the politicians on both sides of that divide that there was always a very distinct difference between the position they took in public and the position they took when they came to talk to me privately about what they could do if there was some movement elsewhere.

The problem was always to get the movement in tandem or to get one side to move in order to encourage the other, but the legacy of distrust was such that nobody wished to move first because they had historical reasons to believe they would be damaged if they did. You can't just get rid of that quickly. That is sunk deep into the political DNA of Unionist politicians and nationalist politicians alike, and it will take a generation to breed it out, if I can put it that way. But the more they worked together—who would have thought that the First Minister and the Second Minister could have worked together? Who would have thought that David Trimble and Ian Paisley could have worked together? To put it as "extremely unlikely" would be to understate it by a great deal.

These things can happen, and I think they will. I mean, you don't see across the UK a different voting bloc between Methodists and Baptists—to take two obvious examples—and there is no reason why you should see a broad difference between different religions in Northern Ireland over time. But it will take time. Time is a great healer, always. Sorry about that cliché, but it is true. Things in politics evolve; they don't suddenly change, like with a thunderclap. It is evolving. Northern Ireland has been going in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the right direction. This is a setback. Leaving the European Union and the things that went with it—the problems of the border and the protocol—are a setback, but they are not an insolvable setback: they can be dealt with, and then perhaps we can move on.

Chair: I am going to the second of my triangle of knights—the three orders of chivalry or something. Let's turn to Sir Robert Buckland.

Q56 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Sir John, it is good to see you again. I just want to put on the record my thanks for you taking that calculated risk 30 years ago. Robert Goodwill has asked you about the architecture of the Good Friday agreement and, frankly, the St Andrews agreement as well. I think you made the point well about the Methodists and the Baptists. If the Baptists walk out, why can't the Methodists work with the Anglicans or other denominations? That is what a mature coalition democracy looks like.

I want to ask you another question about an increasingly concerning dimension in all this: the question marks being raised about the United Kingdom's continuing membership of the Council of Europe and the European convention on human rights, and the important role that the convention plays, underpinning the Good Friday agreement. Do you share my concern that an idea like that could be even seriously entertained by a mature British Government?

Sir John Major: I do; I needn't elaborate on it. People think it is a European Union body, so therefore they dislike it. It isn't. The founding father of it was Churchill and members of his Government: it was a British invention. We would be in pretty rum company if we were to leave. I do not think the Government would do itself any favours around the world if it were to withdraw from that, and I profoundly hope that they won't.

Q57 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Thank you; I entirely agree.

I want to take you back to your preliminary statement, where you talked very clearly about the involvement of community organisations and the Churches in helping to disseminate messages to the various communities. We have talked about the impact of social media and the echo chamber effect that it is having on the discourse of politics, but another elephant in the room is the secularisation of society. Northern Ireland, like many other parts of Britain and the west, is seeing a decline in religious attendance and observance. Would what you were able to achieve through the Churches 25 or 30 years ago now be possible? If it wouldn't, what substitutes do we have to get messages out to civic society in the communities of Northern Ireland?

Sir John Major: I do actually think it would be possible. What role did the Churches play? Well, typically a Church leader would come to me and say, "You have given these assurances to the Unionists/the nationalists. They have asked me whether they can trust you. Can you give to me the categorical assurance that what you've said to them is right, so that I can say to them, 'In my view, you can trust this assurance'?" That was not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the only thing they did, but that was typically what happened, and I did give the assurance and they did go back.

Whereas people were perhaps unwilling to take the word of a politician, they would take the word of a politician when it was backed by a Church leader, so that was very valuable, but it was valuable in other ways, too, because they would come with a different dimension. They would come with a dimension of what they were hearing from their congregations. I mean, the first person to talk to me about the important role that the Peace Women could play was a cleric.

If you go back to long before I took any interest in this, you could argue that one of the founding fathers of peace was Alec Reid in the south. Many people outside the south perhaps don't remember that he was fishing in this pond much earlier than almost anybody, in terms of bringing people together. It was something where the Churches were immensely valuable, and I think they probably still would be if, heaven forbid—perhaps literally heaven forbid—a similar set of circumstances were to arise. I would hope so, anyway.

I found the Church leaders very easy to deal with. There was another occasion, at the beginning of the Gulf war. When you're in things like a negotiation or a war, you do need to bring people together. Immediately, I saw the Leader of the Opposition, Neil Kinnock, and the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Paddy Ashdown, and the other parties as well. But I also saw the Church leaders—the Roman Catholic cardinals and the Church of England leaders—and it was very helpful.

If you're involved in a negotiation, just as if you are involved in a war, it is nice if the people who are part of the negotiation know that there is an outer band of support for what they are seeking to do from important parts of the community. Now, the people who that may be may differ with the nature of the negotiation. In an economic negotiation, it might be the CBI, the business communities and so forth. I wonder how much input there was from the Northern Ireland business communities into the negotiation on the protocol. How much consultation was there? How much consultation was there with the political parties in Northern Ireland? Was this just wrapped up quickly in order to say, "Brexit is done?" I don't know; I wasn't part of it. But I must say that one wonders.

Carla Lockhart: Just a very quick question—

Sir John Major: I am always wary when someone says, "Just a very quick question."

Q58 **Carla Lockhart:** Well, in politician-speak a quick question.

Recently, whenever you were giving evidence in Dublin, you stated that you doubted that there is a perfect solution, but would you agree that any solution—perfect or imperfect—will be one that needs the support and the consent of Unionism and nationalism? As it currently sits, Unionism is not consenting to the protocol, and ultimately the very building blocks of the 1998 agreement—although our party obviously



HOUSE OF COMMONS

opposed the Belfast agreement—is consent.

Sir John Major: I think it would be very difficult to impose an agreement and have it stand, so you do need to reach an accommodation. But if you are to reach an agreement, that requires the Unionists and the nationalists to be prepared, in the interests of an agreement, to get a great deal of what they are asking for but not all of it. Nobody can expect to get all of what they want in a proper negotiation, or very rarely in any event.

What I'm saying is that we need them to accept that any agreement may not be perfect from their point of view. If the DUP, the UUP and the Alliance party, the SDLP and Sinn Féin all wrote down exactly what they wanted, it would not be the same, so you have to find somewhere in the middle where everybody perhaps accedes to something they don't wholly like in return for gaining some things that they really wish to have. That was the point I was trying to make.

Somewhere in the middle of that, there is a point where everybody can subscribe to it, even if they don't go out cheering the outcome to the echoes. That's all I'm saying of people in reaching an agreement.

Q59 **Chair:** Sir John, throughout this it is very clear that while all the conversations go on, the role of Dublin is always very important and the relationships between Westminster and Dublin so much so, both in terms of conversations with the Europeans on wider issues but also with regard to the island of Ireland.

If I had asked you this question six, seven or eight months ago, I think we probably would have agreed that the state of Anglo-Irish relations was very poor—there was a lot of distrust and unfriendliness—but I think there has been some considerable movement. What is your assessment of Anglo-Irish relations today? What do you think that points to in terms of maintaining the process of the Good Friday agreement that began all those years ago?

Sir John Major: The people I have talked to, which includes some of the people who would be involved in this, say that the relations have improved very significantly in the last two or three months, which I think is very helpful. I know many on the Irish side, as well as on the UK side, and they are not unreasonable people—they are not people with whom you cannot reach an agreement, so I think it is much better.

The plain fact of the matter is that it is much better if the UK and Ireland have a broad measure of agreement—of course we will not ever agree on everything; we have our own national interest to protect—and support for one another, because we will both benefit from that. I think we are moving back into that position. I am quite optimistic that, the way things have moved in the last few months, we are moving closer to returning the relationship to what it was a while ago.

For a long time, the relationship—let us date it from '97 onwards—was better than we ever had at any stage in UK-Ireland history. It then fell away. I think it is now moving back and I welcome that. In part for that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

reason, I also think that we are moving closer to an agreement. Ireland will be an influential voice in the European Union for what is agreed on the protocol. The fact that that relationship is improving increases the chance of an improved protocol. That is very much to the credit of the politicians now involved in discussions.

- Q60 **Chair:** If we look around the UK now at the devolution settlements that we have in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in Cardiff and Edinburgh they are sturdy, mature trees with deep taproots. They know what they are doing, they are established in the political landscape, and they require no—I am not sure if this is the right word—nurturing.

Given the fractious, bloody, difficult, bitter history in Northern Ireland and the wider island of Ireland that we have been discussing this morning, as and when Stormont resurrects itself—I hope, as you do, that is sooner rather than later—is it not beholden on this place and Ministers across Government, not just in the NIO, and on colleagues in Dublin, while striking the right tone so it is not about the imperial mothership launching in, that some nurturing of what will still be a tender devolution plant will be required? That will ensure that it can grow from strength to strength, rather than withering up at the first sign of frost, as has happened far too often.

Sir John Major: Absolutely. That nurturing is required with Scotland and Wales as well. Let nobody tell me that the devolution settlements there are perfect; they are certainly imperfect in many ways. It would have been much wiser, at the outset when they happened, if they had taken into account the knock-on effect on the other parts of the United Kingdom, which they did not; they were dealt with in isolation: “This is for Scotland,” “This is for Wales,” and so on. The whole relationship is a bit lopsided and, at some stage, it might be worth looking at them all.

I profoundly hope that Scotland and Wales remain within the United Kingdom, but does that mean that the devolution settlement that we have got now is perfect? No, it isn’t; emphatically, it isn’t. At some stage—I simply have no idea whether that is now, in 10 years or in 20 years—they will have to be looked at again, and that will be true of the north as well.

- Q61 **Chair:** Sir John, thank you. We are hugely grateful to you for the detail of your answers, your engagement in the discussion and the length of time you have managed to find to give to this Committee. On behalf of all of us, a huge and sincere thank you. To echo what my friend and colleague, Sir Robert Buckland, said, if it hadn’t been for you, Patrick Mayhew and others, we would still be opening our newspapers—I have little or no doubt—and reading about the latest atrocity taking place, the latest blast and the latest economic setback. The history books need to record that very loud and clear. Thank you again for your time. Order, order.

Sir John Major: Can I just add a small rider to what you just said?

Chair: You can; I will just remove the “Order, order” and go back into session.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir John Major: The rider I would add is that this settlement was not delivered just by the politicians. There were lots of other people. Do not forget the enormous input of senior civil servants in my Government and in Tony Blair's Government, and in Northern Ireland and in the south, with people like Martin Mansergh; or the input of the Churches; or the input—which was particularly effective at one stage—of the Peace Women; or the involvement of the United States and the European Union. This is a settlement that has many parents. No one can claim full paternity, not even with the most determined DNA. It is important not to forget that.

It also evolved over a long time. I mentioned Alec Reid. If he hadn't started it 10 or 11 years before I got involved in the '90s, would we have been in a position where we could continue? I don't know. I would simply like to make that point because, often, many of the hidden people, who aren't public figures, tend to get forgotten. In this particular settlement—of all negotiations I have ever seen—they really ought not to be.

- Q62 **Chair:** It is interesting that you mentioned the involvement of women there. As a Committee, when we have been fortunate enough to have—purely by accident—a couple of all-women witness panels, they showed common sense: "Let's just find a solution to these problems. It can't be beyond the wit of humanity to do so." That shines out, so I hope we will have more female voices in this discussion because they usually lead to some degree of—

Sir John Major: But, you think, not necessarily in your constituency.

Chair: That would be an ecumenical matter. Thank you very much indeed. Order.