



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Northern Ireland Committee

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

Thursday 16 March 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 March 2023.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 109-147

Witness

[I](#): Rt Hon Sir Tony Blair KG.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Tony Blair.

Q109 Chair: Good morning, colleagues. Good morning, Sir Tony. We are very grateful to you for attending the meeting this morning as we continue our inquiry into the Good Friday Agreement and what led up to it, and review its function since then—an appropriate thing to be doing, obviously, in this its 25th anniversary year.

Let us go back to those heady days of 1997, when you became Prime Minister. How would you characterise the state of negotiations and the relationships between the Northern Ireland parties, your Government and the Irish Government when you became Prime Minister?

Sir Tony Blair: First of all, thank you very much indeed for having me to the Committee. It is a great privilege to be with you all this morning, especially as we come to the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, or the Belfast Agreement.

I would characterise the situation as the following. There had been a lot of extraordinary work done by John Major and his team. They had investigated some of the main questions and identified some of the key issues. Unfortunately, before May 1997, the ceasefire had collapsed. The situation was in breakdown; shortly after I came to office, there were fresh terrorist attacks. There had been a start made, but it had obviously collapsed under the weight of disagreement and the activities of the IRA. When we came to power, it was a strong ambition that I had, but at the time that we actually assumed office, it had broken down. I was determined to try to revive it. I thought it could be revived, and I thought that the work the Major Government had done had given an indication that it could be revived.

Q110 Chair: It obviously required a huge amount of political courage and leadership. This is a question we asked John Major and Bertie Ahern. There was a leap of faith in order to get over the line. I think we all fall into the trap, don't we, of presuming that there was an inevitability of getting it over the line, but it wasn't until the 59th minute of the 11th hour, as those of us who followed it closely remember. Do you think that in this social media-driven age, which looks to echo chambers and so on and so forth, it could have been delivered? Would that bravery, leadership and courage have been trimmed?

Sir Tony Blair: I'm so grateful that social media wasn't a big factor when I was Prime Minister.

Chair: I think that's answered that question.



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Sir Tony Blair: It has many good things about it, but it is frankly a plague on modern politics. It makes life really difficult. The only way you can lead in these circumstances is to put it to one side.

Look, it was still a very charged atmosphere. When we came to office, there was a great first flush of enthusiasm. I don't mean necessarily from the people to the Government, but the Government felt that—

Chair: Things could only get better? We won't join in a chorus of it but—

Sir Tony Blair: Probably not the best thing to do.

We had a key ambition. It may be that when you come in as a new Government, your feeling of possibilities is greater than when you carry on over time and become a little more realistic about things. Frankly, it did require an almost unrealistic sense of possibility in order to get the thing back together again, even right up to going into the Good Friday Agreement negotiation. The thing had actually collapsed on the eve of that negotiation, because it became clear that whatever had been agreed in principle with the British and Irish officials with Senator Mitchell was unacceptable to Unionism. When I got to Belfast that day, it was absolutely apparent that unless we essentially started again, we were not going to get an agreement.

Even throughout those days of the negotiation, I would say that it came together and collapsed several times before we eventually reached an agreement. In the run-up to it, there was an appetite to have an agreement. That was the only thing that kept me going, and kept the team going during the time. You could definitely feel that people wanted it to happen. That was the difference from previous years.

Q111 **Chair:** Was that local politicians responding to pressure from the grassroots across Northern Ireland, or was it leadership telling people that people had had enough?

Sir Tony Blair: It was a bit of both. People were exhausted by the conflict. It was apparent that neither "side" could win, so the only solution was either to continue with the situation in Northern Ireland, which was obviously terrible for the people there and the whole of the United Kingdom, or strive to reach an agreement.

There was also a new generation of leaders. It is important to emphasise, as a lesson of this whole process, that it could never have happened without real leadership being exercised by the political parties. Each of them had to say things to their own followers that were uncomfortable, and that people didn't like. That is the true mark of leadership in the end. Any fool can tell the people who support them what they want to hear; it's when you are telling them what they don't want to hear that the test of leadership is forged.

David Trimble was the leader of the Unionist community. David was an absolutely devoted Unionist, but believed that the time had come to try to reach agreement. The Sinn Féin leadership was in a different position from



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the position that it had been in in previous years. Seamus Mallon, the SDLP—it is worth saying that they were people who took a lot of risks for peace. Parties that are now more significant, such as the Alliance party, the Women's Coalition and so on were also agitating for a new direction. Even though the DUP at the time was opposed to the Agreement, I think it was opposed to it but willing to wait and see how things turned out. It is worth recording that Ian Paisley also showed leadership when he finally took the DUP into government.

So there was a different generation of leaders. It is very important to understand that the Taoiseach at the time, Bertie Ahern, was also a different type of leader. He was interested in a good relationship between the British and the Irish. He obviously came from the history, and his lineage was very much dominated by the history of the conflict, but he was prepared to think differently.

Q112 Chair: One of your predecessors said the worst thing about being a Prime Minister was "Events, dear boy, events." We know that your first Government—your first Ministry—was dominated by a lot of constitutional reform: setting up the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, and obviously everything that flowed from the Good Friday Agreement. The conflagration in the Middle East took up a huge amount of HMG bandwidth. Was that a negative distraction, as it were? That is, the support from Westminster through to Belfast—to make sure that the show was kept on the road—clearly needed greater nurturing than Cardiff and Edinburgh needed. There seemed to be two big questions, which certainly other commentators appear to have suggested may have been envisaged as to be sorted out in 2000, 2001 and 2002: legacy and a fleshing out of the criteria that may or may not lead to a border poll. Is that a fair assessment? Are there things that you saw would have been more immediate in the process that began with the Good Friday Agreement that then got derailed because of larger events? Looking back, is that a disappointment?

Sir Tony Blair: No, I would say that once we got the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement up and running and in place, preserving it became a vital priority of the Government. Yes, of course, the events post 9/11 were hugely important and took up a lot of time, but they never displaced Northern Ireland as a priority. I think the record would show that I continued to engage with the issue personally and make visits. We used to have these weekends away when we would try to resolve thorny issues. It was always going to be a top priority for us. The Good Friday Agreement was a framework—a whole lot of other things had to happen. But all those things were difficult, and to this day they remain difficult, even after the events of 9/11 are long past, as it were. If people are saying we were distracted afterwards—no.

Q113 Chair: Is there anything you kick yourself about? Do you say, "I just wish that, while we had that new, enthusiastic momentum, we had sorted out this, that or the other"?



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Sir Tony Blair: We were always trying to sort things out, but the problem is that you had to get things in a certain state of readiness. The thing about a conflict such as this is that the levels of distrust are very deep, and the levels of distrust are not displaced by the Agreement, by the way. It is really important to understand that.

Chair: That is the important thing to bear in mind.

Sir Tony Blair: It wasn't that people did the Agreement then shook hands and said, "Okay, we're all friends now." No: the distrust continued.

If you take an issue like decommissioning, which was an incredibly difficult question, there was never any way you were going to have a sustainable Executive unless the IRA gave up violence and gave it up completely. On the other hand, because of what they believed they had been through, they were constantly thinking, "You are going to get us to give up this armed struggle, but not actually make the changes on policing or criminal justice or the things that are on the other side of the ledger." Likewise, Unionists would say, "Look, we are going to make all these concessions of change, but you are going to allow the IRA to carry on being the same violent organisation." There were levels of distrust between the parties and there were levels of distrust aimed at the UK Government. That is the way it is, and it probably continues in the same way today.

Chair: There's the breaks, as one of your successors might have said.

Q114 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Sir Tony, I want to ask you about the underpinning element of the European convention on human rights and the Human Rights Act as part of the Good Friday Agreement. There is much debate currently about whether or not the Human Rights Act needs reform. There is a Bill of Rights currently before the House of Commons. It does not seem to be emerging from the long grass particularly, but it is a different way of approaching human rights. Do you think that amendments or reforms to the Human Rights Act will help or hinder the process in Northern Ireland?

Sir Tony Blair: This has some dimensions that are broader than the issue under discussion. My view is that the European convention on human rights is important. It is an important obligation of the country. I understand all the frustrations dealing with it—I had a lot of frustrations myself—but I still think it is an important part of the structure that holds up the Agreement and the sense that there is always recourse to something fundamental when judging individual actions or situations. I would not be in favour myself of changing it in relation to the Agreement, though.

Sir Robert Buckland: Thank you.

Q115 **Jim Shannon:** It is very nice to see you, Sir Tony. I don't think we have actually ever met face to face until perhaps today, so it is a pleasure. Obviously, you have had a big part to play in the affairs of Northern Ireland, and we respect and understand that. I am ever mindful of that soundbite, "The hand of history is on your shoulder, Dr Paisley", and



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probably on Martin McGuinness's as well. It might have been a soundbite, but perhaps the hand of history was on their shoulders, and I think you encapsulated that very well.

It is very important, of course, that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement moved forward in a suitable way. As part of the DUP, I was part of the Assembly from 1998 right through to 2010 before I came here. I recognised through Dr Paisley's leadership—as I think you did as well—and through the leadership of Martin McGuinness that there were two people with very different points of view coming together to push forward a democratic process that could encapsulate the political views of both traditions in Northern Ireland. I recognise that as well. I supported Dr Paisley in that at that time; most of the party did, and those who did not perhaps fell in behind as time progressed and they saw the positives of it.

The point I want to make is that Dr Paisley and Martin McGuinness, from different parts of the community, recognised that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement—or the St Andrews agreement, as we had, which then took it to the next stage—was a way forward. I perceive that you recognised—and from what you are saying so far, it is very clear that you did—that the political process could never go anywhere unless the two communities were brought together in a process to move forward, and the Assembly was that process.

Looking forward to today, what are your thoughts on where we are in the process and how the Belfast/Good Friday and St Andrews Agreements have moved to where they are now—to the Windsor framework? I saw your comments in the paper, Sir Tony, and you referred to Bertie Ahern. You and Bertie Ahern are two architects of the political process. You both said that nothing can happen within the Windsor framework or in any agreement going forward if Unionism isn't part of the process. I think you recognised that way, way back in those early days.

I represent a large section of Unionism, as does my colleague, Carla Lockhart. Looking forward, is it your opinion today that we cannot move forward unless Unionism is part of the process? I am ever mindful of what you, Bertie Ahern, Dr Paisley and, ultimately, Martin McGuinness did.

Sir Tony Blair: Sure, Jim, Unionism has to be part of the process. The whole basis of the agreement is that the different elements of the politics of Northern Ireland come together and act cross-community. Working together is the essence of the agreement. I am very happy to talk about the Northern Ireland Protocol, but of course as a matter of principle Unionism has to be involved; otherwise, it won't work.

Q116 Jim Shannon: You mentioned in your comments this realism that you had—that you looked at both political parties. I am just seizing upon your introductory words. You said that the parties had to go back, although we did not agree with it at the time—this is going back to 1998—and agree on something to move forward. Does there not have to be a realism in the political process today in Northern Ireland? Your words were: a realism or start again. I think there has to be a realism with the Windsor framework, or we start again.



Sir Tony Blair: Yes, there has to be a realism. To go straight to the point, Jim, about the Windsor agreement and the Protocol, the problem is that we are trying to reconcile the inevitable two different elements that come from Brexit and its impact on Northern Ireland. Once you, for the first time, end up with a situation where the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom are in a different relationship with Europe, and a different relationship with its customs union and single market, the border between North and South on the island of Ireland becomes the frontier between the EU and the UK.

Inevitably, there is a problem, because you want the border to be open. That is always how it has been. The one point of consensus among all the parties in Northern Ireland is that the border between North and South should be kept open—quite rightly, because that makes life easier for everyone. Once that border becomes the external border of the EU, you have a problem because you are not in the same relationship with the customs union and the single market. The idea was to ensure that Northern Ireland retained the benefits of being in the single market and to keep the border open, but that leads the European Union to say, “Yes, but how do we then manage the rules of the single market?”

It was always going to be a difficult circle to square, and the Protocol and the Windsor agreement are attempts to square it. The realism is that there is no real answer to this problem. When John Major and I went to Northern Ireland during the referendum, we said, “This is going to be a problem,” because it obviously was going to be a problem. There is no theoretical answer to it; there is a practical answer, and my reason for supporting what this Prime Minister has done on the Windsor agreement is that I think it represents the most practical way forward and minimises all the theoretical objections. It doesn’t remove them, but it means that in most circumstances, they should be practically insignificant. That is honestly the best I think you can do with this.

Jim Shannon: I appreciate your answer, but I want to make sure that the Windsor framework does not become a Windsor knot for Unionism.

Q117 **Chair:** Jim, thank you very much. We mentioned at the top of the session the lack of inevitability of landing the Good Friday Agreement. Twenty-five years on, do you think that there is sufficient public knowledge, in particular among younger people, of the significance of the event? Is there an underpricing of the dividend that peace actually is for Northern Ireland?

Sir Tony Blair: Yes and yes. It is only natural. Life moves on, and that is one of the great things about it—life does move on and people don’t think about it in the same way. When I was growing up in politics, as it were, every day the news would be full of stories of fresh acts of terrorism, assassination and conflict. It was a very ugly and difficult situation that people lived through in Northern Ireland. You barely went a week in the UK without it leading the news, and virtually always in a negative way.



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If you look at Northern Ireland today, GDP I think has virtually doubled; per capita income has virtually doubled; the number of people coming through its airport has doubled; the number of tourists has more than doubled. Belfast today—if I can use it in this context—is a great European city, and recognised as such. It is a great place.

It is natural, but there is insufficient recognition. There is also insufficient recognition of the importance, therefore, of keeping this going. I did underestimate one thing. I always thought that it would be a process that took time, but I think that the difference with Northern Ireland from most peace processes or—I have had a lot to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—one difference in favour of the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that, in theory at least, there is an agreement as to the final outcome, which is a two-state solution. It has gone way off course, plainly, but if you were to ask people in the international community, they would say, “Okay, but we know where we want to get to; it’s just that it seems impossible to get to it.” But with the Northern Ireland conflict, we have never resolved the central question: a united Ireland or the United Kingdom? Therefore, the outstanding result of the Agreement was that, absent that agreement as to the eventual outcome and an agreement that people would disagree as to what the ultimate solution would be, there was none the less the opportunity to bring peace.

We did that by having an intellectual framework at the heart of the Agreement, which is in essence the acceptance by Republicanism and Nationalism of the principle of consent—that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK for as long as the majority of people wanted it—and, in return for that, the creation of institutions that people felt were just and would resolve some of the feelings of injustice. They would also reflect—this is where strand 2 and strand 3 were important to the Agreement—the Nationalist aspirations of almost half the community in Northern Ireland.

There was a construct around the Agreement that had its own coherence, and we would never have succeeded without that, but implementing each of the stages was agonising. It is disappointing that we are still dealing with many of those issues, and that distrust has deepened. By the way, you can tell there is distrust, because every time you hear a politician, including myself, speak about the Good Friday Agreement, occasionally and particularly when you have an eye on the Unionist audience, we call it the Belfast Agreement, and we try to resolve that by saying it is the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, or the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. That is an indication—

Chair: And if you are in Derry/Londonderry, it gets entirely confused, yes.

Sir Tony Blair: That’s the way it is, but it is still a world better. Whatever the problems in Northern Ireland, people should never forget that it is a world better than where it was. If we exercise common sense and realism today, we can keep the peace intact and ensure that there is a situation in which, whatever difficulties and challenges there are in Northern Ireland, they can be resolved by negotiation and agreement, not violence.



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Q118 Chair: You were often seen as one of the great political communicators of recent years. Have you got any thoughts about how that message can be distilled for, and received by, a younger audience in Northern Ireland—without scaring them with the blood on the streets, the crashing down of buildings, the bombs, and so on—in order to ensure a higher regard for the peace dividend?

Colleagues are fed up with me saying this but, if you watch the last couple of episodes of “Derry Girls”, for example, there is that wonderful montage at the end. It shows the horror and then the huge enthusiasm and hope—and worry, on the older generation’s faces—on referendum day itself, and then the joy and relief: “We’ve got something over the line. We’ve got something to work with.” If you were in No. 10 today, what would you be encouraging your Government and the leaders of the parties in Northern Ireland to do to build that understanding and prevent the risk of slipping back?

Sir Tony Blair: First, I think I would focus a lot on economic and social progress and the need to do more. There are still communities in Northern Ireland that are severely disadvantaged and, wherever there is alienation from the mainstream and people feel that they do not have hope and opportunity economically and socially, that is a fertile ground for those people who want to lure them into violence.

Secondly, look at Northern Ireland today. I still closely follow what happens. I do not go because I do not want to ever be seen to interfere. It is hard enough for your successor to do the job on an issue as sensitive as Northern Ireland without a previous person telling you what should happen.

I am a Unionist, by the way. My preferred outcome is that Northern Ireland stays in the Union.

Jim Shannon: Well said.

Chair: I think there is a new member of the Tony Blair fan club in the form of Jim Shannon. If an application form could be sent to his office, he would be obliged.

Sir Tony Blair: I am probably about to say something that is going to lose my latest member.

Chair: Don’t write the cheque yet, Jim.

Sir Tony Blair: Since I don’t have a lot of them, it is unwise to dissuade them.

Basically, the way that I see politics in Northern Ireland and how it has developed is that Republicanism, in the end, decided to change its strategy. You can agree with whether you think they are sincere or not. You can have those agreements and disagreements, but, essentially, they came to the conclusion that the armed struggle was not going to yield what they thought. Now, leave aside the fact that we believe that morally



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they shouldn't have been engaged in it, but they came to the view, politically, that it was not going to succeed, so they have shifted their strategy. Even though it has posed a lot of problems, politically, for the SDLP, who were there a long time before, I think you would have to say that, from their own point of view, it has been quite a successful political strategy.

I completely understand, I think and hope, where Unionism comes from. I always say to people that one of my earliest memories around Northern Ireland was my grandmother saying to me, "There is a great beacon of hope in Northern Ireland. His name is Ian Paisley."

Chair: Get the chequebook out, Jim.

Sir Tony Blair: I was brought up very much within a Unionist household. I understand that the fear of Unionism is that everything is a slippery slope. If you accept the types of compromises that are in the Good Friday Agreement, if you accept British-Irish relationships, if you accept North-South, you are always going to be sliding toward a united Ireland.

That strategy, I don't think, has really changed over the years, from what I have learned about it. It has always been like that. And that's why—I say this quite honestly—even though at one level it was always strange for Unionism or any part of Unionism to support Brexit, because it would plainly put the issues of Northern Ireland in a difficult context, on the other hand, I kind of accept, for the same reason that a lot of people in my old constituency voted Brexit, that some people thought—mistakenly in my view—that the more British thing to do was to vote Brexit. And therefore, if you are part of Unionism, you kind of think, "Well, why not?"

The thing is that the strategy has not really changed, but the third element that has come into Northern Ireland politics in these last years, which I think is worth thinking about, is that the Alliance party has risen. If you look at the polls, it is up 15% or something—round about there. When I was Prime Minister, I don't think there was an Alliance MP. I think the first one was 2010. If you look at the age range of those voters, I think they will probably be in the middle range. The Alliance are probably predominantly Unionist people. Well, maybe not.

Jim Shannon: Stephen is not sure; I'm not sure either.

Sir Tony Blair: The point is that if you want to preserve the Union today, the best way of doing it is to recognise that the status quo is the Union, so make people comfortable with the status quo. The more comfortable they are—I am quite sure at the back of their mind the risk that the Republicans think of with their political strategy is that if people are comfortable with the status quo, why change it? But if the status quo becomes subject to constant disruption and constant political difficulty, that middle-aged bulge that is there with the Alliance at the moment—there is going to be another one coming up in a younger generation, and then things are going to get more difficult for the Union.



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I support the positions I support because I believe, passionately, that in the end the people of Northern Ireland should decide their own future, but I come at it from the point of view of someone—you know, I want my country to stay strong. That is why I am opposed to the SNP in Scotland and why my preference is that Northern Ireland remains part of the Union. But it can only be that way, in my view, if people feel the status quo is something stable.

When you ask me what I think about the politics now, the important thing is to get over this problem of the Protocol; if at all possible, to get an agreement to re-form the Executive; to get back into power; and then, over time, to deal with these issues. But the less stability there is in the system, the more it makes me anxious about the future. Sorry, that was a long way of putting it.

Chair: That has given me a lot to think about—make the status quo attractive.

Mr Walker: Sir Tony, you have just put an emphasis on stability. We have had 25 years of the devolved institutions, but they have only been functioning about 40% of that time. As you know very well, there are various different reasons that have been given for the various breakdowns that have taken place. How big a disappointment is that and what do you think could be done institutionally? We have heard from other witnesses that the intention of the agreement was always for the institutions to evolve. Do you think there is more evolution that could have happened to support stability?

Sir Tony Blair: Of course it is disappointing. It is maybe less surprising, given all the challenges.

I would like to have seen strand 2 and strand 3 more vigorously used. The relationship between the British and Irish Governments—okay, it has been scratchy recently, but let's hope that is resolved. Ultimately, we have a lot in common. We can work together. I think we could do more to make those strands more meaningful and more active, frankly.

Q119 **Mr Walker:** On the relationship between the Governments and the relationship between London and Belfast, and devolution in that respect, how do you think the NIO and the UK Government can do more to support the stability of the devolved institutions, without being seen as the mothership lying in wait to take over? I well remember periods in the run-up to New Decade, New Approach when at the NIO we were having to look at two tracks of work—one on how to get agreement and bring the parties together, and another to think about what would happen if we did not. How can we avoid that situation keeping on coming up?

Sir Tony Blair: I am not sure you can, to be blunt about it. Look, the officials in the Northern Ireland Office come under a lot of criticism from all sides, but they are basically people trying to find ways through the difficulties. The most important thing is to try—to be fair, the Government have done this—to resolve the issues over the Protocol and try to get back to devolved Government. It is one of those things where you just



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constantly have to keep on it. It does require the time and focus of the Prime Minister, not just the Secretary of State.

Chair: Robert Buckland wants to come in quickly and then Mary.

Q120 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Developing your well made point about associating the Union with stability, it is absolutely plain as a pikestaff to me that the more the people in Northern Ireland feel that membership of the United Kingdom equals good public services and stable institutions, the more they will want to stay. That begs the question about the St Andrews agreement and the current way in which the Executive is formed. Could an answer be to go back to the status quo before the St Andrews agreement, where we had the common slate approach and cross-community agreement, which at various times various parties supported? There was one point when the DUP supported that approach in order to prevent Sinn Féin from coming into the Executive, but obviously with the elections and the change in the power structure we have now institutionalised the twin-party approach. Your point about the change in politics in Northern Ireland—it might be the Alliance in one election, or another party or group. Is this not now getting in the way of the very stability that we all want to see?

Sir Tony Blair: I have an awful feeling that the words “d’Hondt principles” might come into it, which I hoped I would never have to hear again.

Sir Robert Buckland: I know the feeling.

Sir Tony Blair: There is always a case for change, particularly now with the emergence of the Alliance party. The north Belfast Politics in Action Group for schools sent me an interesting document the other day, which set out how young people view this. The truth of the matter is, as we discovered—this is why we did St Andrews—you can only do these things by agreement.

The thing you can never do with this situation is say, “Right, I’m just going to decide what is right in principle and I’m just going to do it.” I used to be told constantly when I was Prime Minister, “Just go do it,” but you just can’t. You have to reach these changes by consensus. If you cannot get that consensus—if one part of the community feels that the change is aimed at them or is reducing what they believe are their legitimate rights—you will not get it done.

That is my experience, which is why I always used to say to people on the Nationalist and Republican side that the relationship between the British Government and Unionism is much more complicated than you think. They would sort of say to us, “Go and tell the Unionists what to do.” I would say, “Have you met these guys? They’re not just going to do what the British Government says, so you’re going to have to persuade them.” That is, from their point of view, quite right.

Q121 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Good morning, Sir Tony. Greetings from County Durham. I think my first question will be a relatively easy one. Could you tell us—you have touched on this a bit—what has pleased, surprised and



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disappointed you most about the Good Friday Agreement?

Sir Tony Blair: The disappointment was obviously the continuing instability. I am not sure anything has much surprised me, but what has pleased me is the fact of the agreement and that peace is still there. It may seem fragile, but I think it is still there. I do not think there is a desire in any part of the community in Northern Ireland with any substantial support to displace that peace. When you look around the world—as I say, I was involved, and actually still am involved, in the Israeli-Palestinian issue—you realise how difficult it is to get any form of peace agreement, so we should celebrate the fact that we did and then we should use that celebration as a reason for redoubling efforts to preserve it.

Q122 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Secondly, you will be aware of the sensitivities and the debate about legacy issues. What did you envisage on the subject of legacy?

Sir Tony Blair: You mean in relation to the victims?

Mary Kelly Foy: The Troubles—well, the legacy Bill that has just gone through Parliament. What were your intentions in terms of addressing those issues?

Sir Tony Blair: Our intentions were probably the same as this Government's—to try to find a way of resolving it; but frankly, we couldn't and didn't and it remains extremely difficult. I wish I could—I think whoever grapples with that is going to find it really tough to do. That's the truth.

Q123 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Did you anticipate that 25 years on we would still see paramilitaries in the form of criminal gangs?

Sir Tony Blair: It does not surprise me that there are groups that will try to disturb the peace from time to time. What would disturb me is if I thought they were starting to gain substantial support. You need to watch this the whole time. You need to watch it on the Republican side and watch it on the Loyalist side. Representatives here from Northern Ireland will know better than me, but I still think that the desire of the vast majority of people is to resolve issues peacefully.

Q124 **Chair:** On the paramilitaries, 25 years on, with huge efforts to transition, is there a cut-off point to the process of transition, or does it get masked by this Northern Irish exceptionalism argument?

Sir Tony Blair: Particularly when you start to get real turbulence over the process and the politics, you are going to find these groups starting, but it is important to remember that they only managed to get traction over the situation when they had real support within the community. I do not think that support exists at the moment, but I am not deep in the detail of it today. Frankly, you would be better asking that of the Secretary of State or, indeed, the Members of Parliament representing Northern Ireland.

Q125 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you, Sir Tony. I am really enjoying your inputs



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today. Thinking back to the early implementation years, Jonathan Powell, your colleague, said recently, "In retrospect, we should've been willing to be a bit tougher". That resonated with me. Do you think there was some damage sustained to the culture and to the sense of trust within the process—maybe a bit of moral hazard in allowing deadlines to slip, in allowing parties to talk about the agreement but to do things that were clearly in contravention of the spirit of exclusively peaceful and democratic means? I am thinking at this point about decommissioning and not supporting the rule of law. Do you think that that was a factor that did for David Trimble and his electoral support? Has that therefore had a knock-on impact, in that the main party of Unionism was not there advocating for the agreement? Does that contribute to some of the low levels of support we have in Unionism now?

Sir Tony Blair: It is a very reasonable question, and one that I agonised over a lot. I made a speech once about the process of ambiguity ending and acts of completion being necessary. It came to the point where, as it were, we had to say to the IRA, "You have got to stop everything. It has got to be absolutely clear—and not just the paramilitary violence but the violence within the communities." You can make the argument that we should have done this earlier, but the problem was that we were trying to manage a situation where we were trying to get to the right outcome but were always conscious of the fact that we might lose Unionism on one side or Republicanism on the other.

One of the things I found most difficult and troubling, was something I used to debate a lot with Seamus Mallon. Seamus used to say to me, "You pay attention to the Republicans because they have the weapons, and that is the very thing that is contrary to the principle that you should be trying to uphold." It is a perfectly reasonable point but, as I used to say to him, "Okay, Seamus, but if you are prepared to go into Government without them, and with the Unionists, we can have a conversation. But you know that you can't really do that." So it was always difficult.

Look, I understand it from the SDLP point of view, because—speaking for a moment as a member of the Labour party—it is the SDLP that is our sister party. I completely get it. The difficulty is, in retrospect you can say we should have been tougher, but when you were there at the time you were trying to ensure that the best was not the enemy of the good. Maybe that is the honest answer.

Q126 Claire Hanna: The squeaky wheel gets the oil, we would sometimes say.

To build on Robert's question about the changes at St Andrews, I understand the points you are making about dealing with the moment as it was, but did you foresee the polarisation that would follow and ripple on for these 20 years later, bringing those harder-line views into the centre? I appreciate that maybe the logic was that it prevented them from screaming in the windows and thwarting the implementation, as they were doing, but had you stepped out the polarisation that would probably continue electorally?



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Sir Tony Blair: My view of this has always been—I did not predict this, but when I look back on it, I think that maybe it should have been predictable—that when you first begin something completely new, as this was, both communities default to the people they think are going to “stand up for them”; so Sinn Féin gain on the Nationalist side, and the DUP gain on the Unionist side.

My view is that if the stability is there, and continues over time, then over time politics changes. Over time, the issue in Northern Ireland should be: “Who is going to make the right reforms to make the health service work better? Who is going to do best on education? Who is going to ensure that communities that are deprived are brought up to a better standard of life?” While the politics is dominated by the feeling that the thing is not really stabilised, so you have to stick with the people who will “stand up for your community” I put that in inverted commas—then it is going to be difficult, but politics is often a long game.

I think the rise of the Alliance party in this respect is important. It may be that in time the SDLP can find the right way of improving its position. You see this all over the devolved politics of the UK. Sometimes I have people, particularly on the right, who say to me, “As a result of devolution you gave Scottish nationalism a big boost.” I say to them, “Do you think Scottish nationalism was invented by the last Labour Government?” There were decades of it before. If we had not done devolution, the choice in Scotland would have been between a status quo of no devolution, and independence. In those circumstances, I can tell you that over time there would have been a real move for independence, whereas my view is that Scotland will probably in the end believe its best chance remains with the UK. But if we hadn’t done devolution, you would have put that stark choice before people.

In the same way in Northern Ireland, ultimately the benefit of the Northern Ireland Assembly should be that in the long term, people decide their own future there. Provided that the border doesn’t become an obstacle, in the end people will decide to fight the politics of Northern Ireland around who does best for the people, not who “stands up” for the people.

Claire Hanna: Indeed. And the question was motivated by looking at those dynamics of polarisation rather than strict electoral outcomes. Thank you.

Chair: Stephen.

Stephen Farry: Good morning, Sir Tony. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: I am so sorry. Forgive me—I am a terrible Chairman. Carla.

Q127 **Carla Lockhart:** Nice to meet you, Sir Tony, and thank you for your evidence this morning. We all have different memories of that time in and around 1998. One that is vivid in my mind is your visit to Coleraine and you writing on the whiteboard. On the back of Mary’s question, I have



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one about legacy and all that goes with that. One of your pledges was fairness and equality guaranteed for all. How fair on victims of terrorism were the on-the-run letters to over 200 IRA fugitives?

Sir Tony Blair: This is the on-the-runs?

Carla Lockhart *indicated assent.*

Sir Tony Blair: Some years back, I appeared in front of the Committee and went into this in detail. The problem with the on-the-runs was very simple. You might agree with it or not agree with it, but in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, we essentially were releasing the people who had been convicted. Those were people who had actually been convicted of acts of terrorism.

Then, naturally—and over time this grew—there came an issue as to what to do about the people who, as it were, had not been convicted but might be. Those divided into two categories: the ones where the police thought there was insufficient evidence to charge, and the ones where they thought there would be sufficient evidence. What we tried to do was deal with the problem of the people for whom the police decided there wasn't evidence to charge. It would be irrational if we were going after those people while we had actually released the people who had been convicted of terrorism. That is what we were trying to resolve. It was a very difficult situation, but we did the best we could with it.

Q128 **Carla Lockhart:** Given that it was a back-room deal—it wasn't written into any text—was it that that ultimately brought the IRA towards their ceasefire?

Sir Tony Blair: That was obviously a big issue for them. Again, I dealt with this when I was in front of the Committee some years back. People used to call it a secret deal, but it was mentioned in parliamentary answers, and we were pretty open about the fact that there was a problem we had to deal with.

Look, the most difficult conversations I ever had with people in the whole of the process were the ones with the victims of the Troubles. They were decent people whose family members had been killed or maimed by terrorists—who we were letting out of prison. It is a very hard conversation to have.

I can, and I did, justify it by saying we needed to do it for the peace process in order to give people a better future in Northern Ireland. Three and a half thousand people, or more, died in the Troubles; we wanted to make sure that there weren't further deaths. But I agree there is always an element of compromise there that is morally uncomfortable, and there is no way out of that.

Q129 **Carla Lockhart:** But the releasing of the prisoners was a well-known element of the deal. Obviously, we were utterly opposed to it—utterly opposed. But the on-the-runs were less well known. Ultimately, we have victims today who, every time they see and hear of those individuals who



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received the get-out-of-jail-free card, are retraumatised. In many instances, those individuals are blatantly—I know I have been banging this drum—glorifying terrorism and flaunting it in the faces of victims.

Sir Tony Blair: Yes, but the problem is they didn't have the get-out-of-jail-free card, because these were the people in respect of whom the police had said they didn't have sufficient evidence to charge them. The problem was that you were always going to end up in a bizarre situation where you were going after those people, having released people who had actually been convicted. I mean, that was the problem we were trying to deal with.

Chair: Okay, let's—

Sir Robert Buckland: Can I just ask a question?

Chair: No. I want to move on to Stephen Farry.

Q130 **Stephen Farry:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Sir Tony. Let me put on the record our thanks for your efforts in reaching the Good Friday Agreement. Obviously we are coming up to a very important milestone—the 25th anniversary. I was a very junior member of the Alliance team back in those days as well, so I came across you many times in that regard.

I wanted to ask you in a bit more detail about reform of the institutions. Your analysis of the Alliance party growth is accurate in many ways. Did you see the institutions being set in stone for perpetuity, or was there an expectation that they would evolve over time in line with changing circumstances and changing demographics? In particular, did you see some potential pitfalls with the system of community designations and the relegation of parties like ourselves to the Other category? Do you see that there is a strong case for reform of that dimension, to reflect the changes that have clearly taken place over the past 25 years?

Sir Tony Blair: Yes, absolutely, there was a case for keeping it under review. I think the Agreement actually specifically provides for a review. And yes, you should always keep it under review.

Evolution is the key phrase, because you have to do it with agreement. Yes, I think that as time goes on there will be a growing sense for change, but I still don't think you can make a change to this Agreement unless it is done consensually. If you do it and one part of the community feels that it is aimed against them, it will be problematic, but I can understand the frustrations from the Alliance point of view.

As I say, the Agreement itself provides for the possibility of review, but it can only be done if the parties agree among themselves that it is going to make for an effective form of Government. Right now, I think the priority has got to be to stabilise the existing situation, to get the Protocol laid to one side and to get the institutions back up and running.

Q131 **Stephen Farry:** Could I probe a slightly different aspect of reform, which is around the use of vetoes? If a party has a veto over the current set of



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arrangements, are they likely to consensually agree to give up that veto in terms of moving towards a sort of more modern, more normalised system of Government?

I am particularly mindful that particularly the changes that happened at St Andrews lock us into the situation of this beauty contest, as to which party has the largest on either side, but it also means the Government cannot be formed unless both of the two largest parties consent to it. And we have clearly had a situation where in the recent past Sinn Féin stopped Government from happening and more recently the DUP have stopped it from happening, and people are very keen to move away from that cycle of politics being held hostage.

Sir Tony Blair: Yes, I can completely understand the frustrations people have. The concept of veto—it's got a kind of legal meaning and it's got a practical meaning, the problem will be if, at a certain point in time, the legal and the practical completely diverge. I don't think we're at that point yet. The practical reality is that you are going to need the consent of all people in order to make change. I completely understand the frustrations. I think people will consent to a change if they feel that the pressure within the community is such that people demand it for more effective Government, but I think this is very hard.

One of the things that I learned about this peace process is that on some things the British Government can really come in and lay down a solution, but there are some things that are really going to depend on the parties themselves reaching an agreement. You can do a certain amount of facilitation; what you can't do is just order people, because the reality is still that if any substantial part of the community disagrees with a change to the Good Friday Agreement, it is going to be very hard to get it done.

Q132 Sir Robert Buckland: To develop Stephen's point, we have had some evidence about whether the designations of First Minister and Deputy First Minister should be just changed to "Joint First Minister". Now, it sounds cosmetic on one reading of it, but it might sort of open up a deeper truth about one way of unlocking the process. Do you think there is any merit in looking at that sort of change of designation?

Sir Tony Blair: My view is that there may well be merit in it, but only if people come to it by agreement. That is my point, really. My experience with this is that if a substantial part of either Unionist or Nationalist opinion is opposed to something, it is very hard to do it. It's different if they can come together and agree a way forward. I totally get the point that Stephen was making—that, in a sense, you are then saying, "Well, they've got a veto over it," but for the moment, the reality is that, without that agreement, it is hard to think of how it can work.

I think we saw one of the reasons why, in the end, the Executive did get up and running just before I left office. There was that extraordinary meeting with Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley sitting together on the settee, getting on well together to all appearances, and even when the cameras weren't there, it appeared to be quite genuine, actually. So one of the reasons was that they were both prepared to really make it work.



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With all of these different elements within the Agreement, there is the form and there is the spirit. One of the things that, again, you learn over time, is that the form doesn't work without the spirit. The spirit has got to be one where people genuinely are trying to make the thing work. If that exists, by the way, you can even devolve the form, but it's got to be—people have got to decide, in Northern Ireland, that that's what they want to do, and that they want to find a way forward. It never happens without leaders being prepared to lead—honestly, it is so important to emphasise this point.

The difference between this peace process and many others around the world is that we had the benefit at that time of leaders who were prepared to lead. If they hadn't been prepared to do that and to have— I used to have very frank, open conversations with Unionist leaders and with Republican and Nationalist leaders where we had the ability to sit down and strategise together. They would say, "Look, here's my problem. You're going to have to help me find a way around it," and I might then have been able to help them find a way around it; but I could only do that because they were prepared, in the end, to carry the burden themselves to get it over the line.

If you don't have people prepared to do that, it's never going to work—none of these things will ever work. It is very difficult, because the simplest thing, always, as a leader of any political party, as I say, is to get the round of applause. It is the easiest thing in politics to do, and, in the end, it is what a lot of leaders do. But, if they actually want to make the change, they are going to have to find a way of pulling their people behind them, and that is the difference between leading and following.

Sir Robert Buckland: You cut me off about on-the-runs, Chair. I just wanted to ask—

Chair: I was trying to make progress, but go ahead.

Q133 **Sir Robert Buckland:** I want to ask a very straightforward question. Isn't one of the problems with the on-the-run letters the source of the letters, because it didn't appear to be a wholly independent source? I know we are talking before the PSNI's creation, and I know there were issues about what the communities felt about the independence of the police, and indeed the prosecutorial authorities, but surely it would have been better for the source of those letters not be so overtly political, which is what they were, weren't they?

Sir Tony Blair: As I said at the time, you can look back and say in retrospect there were elements you could have handled differently, but you were always going to be dealing with the same essential problem, which is what do you do about those people who were not going to be charged.

Q134 **Sir Robert Buckland:** I agree, but that is an independent process. Surely it has to be, doesn't it? A process of investigation and questioning—



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Sir Tony Blair: Sure. In retrospect, it could have been and should have been handled better, as I think we said at the time. Look, the Hallett review went into this, and I think it was pretty fair-minded piece of work.

Q135 **Claire Hanna:** Obviously, on-the-run letters were inappropriate, but unfortunately we are in a much worse position now; we are having universal on-the-run under the legacy Bill as it stands.

I agree entirely with the proposal to standardise the First Minister's title; in fact, I remember we put exactly that issue to a vote on a Bill a year or two ago here.

Following on from your insightful comment about how Unionism is faring and the slippery slopes, doesn't that potentially mask a sensitive issue? Do you think Unionism is psychologically ready to be the marginally smaller partner? If they aren't, what complexion does that put on the next couple of decades of change that are coming? How do you think they can be assisted in getting their heads around that reality?

Sir Tony Blair: In my earlier comments, I broke one of my cardinal rules in this process, which is never try to offer political parties advice from the outside.

Claire Hanna: Sometimes we can all use it.

Chair: Give in to temptation, go on.

Sir Tony Blair: Given the uncertainty at the moment, Unionism wants and needs a lot of reassurance. Ultimately, it will be for the Unionist community itself to decide. I think they will want to make this work. I have seen the polls about Unionism over the Protocol and what they agree with, but I think there is probably a division within Unionism. I hope that Unionism can find a way of making it work, because if they can't, Northern Ireland will remain unstable, and as I said, I personally believe that is contrary to the best interests of the Union.

Q136 **Claire Hanna:** That's good advice. What is your assessment of strand 2 and the North-South dimension? Thinking back to 1998, do you think non-Unionists—Nationalists in particular—would have signed up to the Agreement without strand 2? Bear in mind, we don't have strand 2—it doesn't exist—at the moment; it's not functioning.

Sir Tony Blair: Strands 2 and 3 were vital parts of the Agreement. There is no doubt about that; we wouldn't have had an Agreement without them. That was a perfectly proper and correct recognition of Nationalist aspiration. Again, it was an inevitable part of the Agreement, so I am not saying it should have been changed, but it is unfortunate that strand 2 cannot operate unless strand 1 is operating. That was the reality of the situation, though.

I did put a certain emphasis on strand 2 and strand 3, and I was active and used to attend some of those meetings. Particularly over these last few years, we could have been doing more to activate those and make them a forum in which the British and Irish Governments could try to work



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out a way through things. I cannot emphasise enough the enormous role played in the whole of this process by having an Irish Government who were basically always looking to be constructive. It was a great blessing.

People forget that British-Irish relations were pretty horrible for quite a long period of time in the past. I have always paid tribute to Bertie Ahern and his leadership. I found him a very, very good person to work with, as was his whole system—his people. You could have completely frank conversations with them and you could have private conversations with them, and a whole series of things flowed from that, culminating in the Queen's visit to Ireland, which was a great event. Again, my view was always that the best thing in the interests of everybody was that the British and Irish Governments had a good relationship, because it gave people comfort that there was an attempt always to steer this process in a constructive way. I think we should have done more in these last years.

Now, it looks to me as if the relationship between the present Prime Minister and the Irish Taoiseach is much improved and better. That is good. It is a very important relationship. Even though the Republic of Ireland is in the European Union and we are out of it, none the less there is a mass of things we have in common and interests we share, and we should be working together.

Q137 Claire Hanna: Absolutely strands 2 and 3 are of huge and equal significance, and there is no attempt to create a hierarchy. It is just a matter of fact that strand 2 is currently a hostage and is not operating, and strand 3 is. Do you have any thoughts or advice for us on ways to enhance strands 2 and 3? That is a core part of the inquiry we are doing at the moment.

Sir Tony Blair: I think the best thing is that the UK Government takes both those things really seriously and gets into the right relationship to those strands, which should be a much more active one. That would be my advice. It is a decision that the Government has to take, and it has to do it while being very conscious of Unionist feeling, but in the end it will be important for us to have that means of trying to resolve some of these questions, because, by the way, as you go forward there will be difficulties.

Incidentally, I think there will be a real difficulty over the law that is now proposed—is it the Retained EU Law Bill? There are areas of co-operation that are not covered by the Protocol. That is going to cause a lot of difficulty, and it will be important to keep a good relationship with the Irish Government. I know from my own conversations in the last two or three years with the European Union, both at leadership level and at Commission level, that they will pay a lot of attention to what the Irish Government are advising them about this situation. It is just in the interests of the British Government and the interests of the Union that you keep close relationship with the Irish Government and its leadership.

Q138 Claire Hanna: I agree entirely; I think the relationship is core and the supportive structures come after. One final question from me, which is



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much further down the line—we've many fences to jump before this—but relates to thinking about the criteria for a border poll in the event of future constitutional change. I take no issue with it not being nailed down in 1998 and, as I say, we are not there yet, but I think there is a dynamic in the relationship. Have you given any thought to what would be the appropriate signals or triggers to test opinion on constitutional change?

Sir Tony Blair: I have given thought to it and decided it is absolutely not an issue for me to engage in. I mean, there is a provision set out in the Agreement that is quite clear and was very, very carefully drafted at the time.

Q139 **Chair:** Do you see it as one of those things that one will know when one knows, but you needn't write down what would help you to know?

Sir Tony Blair: This is best left for another time and in line with the provisions in the Agreement. It is a subject of huge sensitivity and it is probably not very helpful for me to opine on it, but I do think it is worth pointing out the structure of it, as set out in the Agreement. I have been re-reading the Agreement in advance of coming before the Committee, and there are certain lines that that trigger memories of long and protracted negotiation. Obviously, one very sensitive issue was around that, but the way it is set out here is the right way to proceed, and it should be for the people at the time to decide it.

Claire Hanna: Fair enough; you'll forgive me for having a crack at it anyway. Thank you.

Sir Tony Blair: If I was you, I would do the same; but if I was me, I would also do the same.

Q140 **Chair:** You touched on, with Ms Hanna, Anglo-Irish relations, which are important—possibly with a view to Dublin acting as an engaged bridgehead, if you will, into the European Union as the dust starts to settle. You obviously talk to politicians and others north and south of the border.

I think broadly our assessment as a Committee is that, from a very low point in fairly recent time, Anglo-Irish relations are on an improving trajectory. There seem to be good relations and chemistry between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister and so on, and I think everybody recognises the beneficial importance of that.

Do you have a word or two on that? What is your assessment, overlooking the peace, I suppose, from 1997 to today? What would you see as ways of improving, if indeed improvement is required?

Sir Tony Blair: One of the things you learn at the leadership level is that there is just no substitute for personal interaction—for sitting down and showing that you have mutual respect and understanding of the other person's politics.

The worst thing, when you are a leader dealing with another leader, is not to show understanding of their politics but to keep talking about yours.



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Everyone has their own politics, and they are often in diametric opposition to each other. What leaders expect you to be able to do is to understand that, and not to grandstand around your own politics when the other person's politics are in an opposite direction. The essence is to establish a relationship where you are able to say, "Let's work this out together and see how we find a way through without giving either of us a political problem that we can't handle."

The European Union, in the end, wants to make this work. I know the senior people in the European leadership. They are people who actually have a respect for the UK, even though they regret the decision to leave the European Union, and they regard the Northern Ireland peace process as one of the successes within the European space over the last quarter of a century, so they want to protect it.

If we don't engage in irresponsible politics but we engage in sensible and responsible politics, we can make it all work—I do not have any doubt about that—because there is a lot of good will. The other thing to emphasise is that the Republic of Ireland itself is a transformed country.

Q141 **Chair:** Totally different from how it was 25 or 30 years ago.

Sir Tony Blair: You have only to look at the person of the Taoiseach today to realise that. It is a changed country, and it is a dynamic country today. When I was growing up it was, frankly, not considered like that at all, but now it is. It is a successful member of the European Union. The Republic, in my view, also has an interest in stability. It does not want to create a situation in which you send a great tremor of uncertainty through the existing arrangements, because in the end it is busy doing well and creating success. Provided the border remains open and the interaction between Northern Ireland and the Republic is good economically, socially and politically, it is content with it.

Q142 **Chair:** By their own admission, the European Union's and, indeed, the Commission's understanding of the sensitivities and concerns of political and societal Unionism has developed very considerably over the last 18 months to two years, as issues surrounding the Protocol have been looked at. Hopefully, that will give heart to a section at the community of Northern Ireland.

As your earlier remarks have indicated, it is important to carry as many people as possible and to make sure that both sides are broadly happy—or, if not happy, certainly not furious. Obviously, the role of Washington is very important in the dimension of Irish politics and, indeed, Anglo-Irish politics. Does the same piece of work need to be done in Washington, given the sometimes fair—and sometimes unfair—characterisation that the White House, irrespective of who is its occupant, is less well read-up on Unionism, its traditions and concerns and the integrity of the UK? We have this hugely welcome visit of President Biden, and I think President Clinton and Mrs Clinton are intending to visit as well, which will be a huge fillip and put the eyes of the world once again back on to the island of Ireland and the importance of the Good Friday



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Agreement. Is what I have mentioned a concern?

Sir Tony Blair: First, this President is deeply committed to Ireland, and actually knows a lot about its history and the situation there today. President Clinton was immensely helpful over the negotiation of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. President Bush actually visited a school in Northern Ireland in the course of his time, and again he was very supportive of the process.

My view of the American Administration on this issue is if the UK Government looks as if it is in the saddle, riding forward and knows where it is going and what it is doing, they will just get behind it. This is why the negotiation of the agreement around the Protocol has been important.

It is also important to say—I did not say this when I was talking about it earlier—that I have looked in detail at the Windsor agreement. The truth is that, No. 1, there is an acceptance on both the EU and the UK side to find practical ways through, and both have shown flexibility to do that. The Europeans have shown quite a lot of flexibility compared to what they could have done if they just decided to take a dogmatic position, but they haven't.

Secondly, the negotiated changes that this Prime Minister has done have, in my view, substantially narrowed the potential for conflict of a constitutional sort to arise. To be fair, this is why I think when people look at it—yes, okay, you can argue about the degree to which the European Court of Justice is still involved in certain aspects, but the truth is, along with that Stormont brake, in terms of substance the issues are substantially resolved. That is why I hope people do give it support. Therefore, that is why I think the American Administration will think, "If the UK Government is back with a clear direction, we will want to support them."

The other thing, which has been of assistance over the years and I know that this President is interested in, is what America can do for the Northern Ireland economy. That will also be important.

Q143 **Mr Walker:** I think you put a great emphasis—understandably, given how the Agreements were reached—on the interpersonal relationships and the trust on a one-on-one level that has been built as part of the process.

Clearly, part of the genius of the Agreement itself is the interlinking of the different strands and the role of the balance between strand 2 and strand 3 in that respect. Do you think it is a matter of regret that fewer of your successors as Prime Minister have taken part directly in the British-Irish Council? I know you don't give advice to political parties, but would your advice in general be for Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom to take a personal and direct engagement in that?

Sir Tony Blair: Yes, and particularly now it is important. One of the benefits when something ceases to be a big issue is that it stops coming across the Prime Minister's desk, and you have always got a thousand other issues to deal with. In a way, what you want is to be able to spend



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less time on one issue than another. I think right now, particularly as we see this Protocol and how it works over the next years, the relationship between the British and Irish Governments will be very important.

Q144 **Chair:** Surely that is the case, given that those ad hoc side conversations that used to take place at the Council and Commission meetings and everything else are not taking place. That makes those formal bilaterals key.

Sir Tony Blair: That is a very good point. Obviously, when we were in the European Union, at European Council meetings, you were constantly interacting with people anyway, but we are not now. So, yes—that makes it even more important.

Q145 **Mr Walker:** To add to that, on the broader issue of interpersonal relationships and trust, one of the institutions that helped build trust in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement, even before your time as Prime Minister, was the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. Do you think there are opportunities to look at the structure of that and to broaden its reach in terms of what it could do to build trust and understanding between UK parliamentarians and their counterparts in the Dáil, and, indeed, in Northern Ireland?

Sir Tony Blair: It is always good for people to talk with each other, so that they understand where the other people are coming from. The biggest risks with a process like this are always when people misread the politics of the situation and then try and do something that is going to be hugely disruptive. So the more individual Members of the Dáil and the UK Parliament are talking to each other and interacting with each other, the better it will be.

Q146 **Carla Lockhart:** I wanted to touch on something you talked about earlier, about some recent polling. You will be aware that the LucidTalk poll showed that only 35% of Unionists would vote yes to the Belfast Agreement, with 54% voting no, if the vote was to take place again. Why do you think Unionists have really moved away from support for the Belfast Agreement?

Sir Tony Blair: One of the difficulties—I think you were saying it was 54% against and 35% in favour?

Carla Lockhart: *indicated assent.*

Sir Tony Blair: If your political leadership is giving a message that this is bad, your support will often consider it to be bad. I think it is not just a question of what people think objectively, but also where they are led. But I understand. Unionism will always feel that it is at risk to some degree—how could you not, because of the circumstances of the situation? In exactly the same way, I think Unionism will always be, in part, distrustful of a UK Government. That is my experience—

Q147 **Carla Lockhart:** Maybe it is, maybe it isn't.

Sir Tony Blair: Well, of course, and you will always say that there is a good reason for it.

Going back to Margaret Thatcher's time—

Chair: The Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Sir Tony Blair: Yes, and John Major's time. There is never going to be a situation where there isn't that distrust. That is why I come back to the question of strategy and leadership. This is important to work out.

That is why I said to you that I am a Unionist—not in order to make some great political statement of my own belief, but to explain where I was coming from. The first speech I made as Prime Minister—the first, in 1997—was to an essentially Unionist audience in Northern Ireland. When I became Labour leader, much to part of my party's dismay by the way, I moved us out of arguing for a united Ireland, and said, "No. If we want to reach an agreement, we have to be objective about it." The question is always: what is the best way to achieve your objective?

All I am saying is that, when you look at it strategically right now, in my view the best way for Unionism to secure its future is for it to stabilise the situation in Northern Ireland. Of course, you should not do that if it is in defiance of or undermining basic principles, but I think that this Windsor agreement, because it is essentially a practical way of squaring a circle, is a way that you can legitimately get the best of both worlds, which in a sense is what Northern Ireland wants to do, and then to move on.

Yes, of course, and why do I think Unionism is anxious about it? It was always anxious about the Good Friday Agreement. Your party opposed the Agreement at the beginning, but you came to come into Government. But Unionism will always be worried, because it will think, "Our position in the UK is somehow at risk." I think the disagreement between us is how you best secure the Union. My view is that you best secure it by making the status quo work.

I remember having a conversation with one of your colleagues, Ms Lockhart, early on in the process after the Good Friday Agreement. He said to me, "What have we got out of this Agreement?" I said, "You've got the Union—because for the first time, everyone is going to accept the principle of consent." Everything else is a question of how you get the right political strategy to advance this course.

I understand the concerns. Honestly, I don't diminish them at all—that is why, at an earlier stage around the Protocol, I said that the European Union should be flexible and try to take account of the sensitivities—but I honestly believe that the best thing forward, now, is to get back into a stable form of government.

Chair: Sir Tony, thank you. I have had an eye on the time. We said that we would finish at 11, and it has just chimed 11 o'clock. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you for your attendance this morning and for taking a wide range of questions from the full range of opinion.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I first stood for election, along with Robert Buckland, back in 1997, but you were successful and we were not. For what it is worth, I thank you for completing the mission that Gladstone set himself, which was to finally pacify Ireland. Thank you.

Sir Tony Blair: Thank you.