

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland, HC 24

Wednesday 18 October 2023

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Sir Robert Buckland; Stephen Farry; Carla Lockhart; Jim Shannon; Bob Stewart.

Questions 558 - 603

Witnesses

I: Dr Aaron Edwards, Senior Lecturer in Defence and International Affairs, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst; Dr Seán Brennan, Independent Researcher.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [\[PNI0015\]](#) - Dr Aaron Edwards, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Dr Sean Brennan, Independent Researcher, and Dr Stephen Bloomer, Independent Researcher



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Aaron Edwards and Dr Seán Brennan.

Q558 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues. This is our second session of the week, so thank you for your attendance this morning. It is a great pleasure to welcome our two guests this morning, who are here to help us advance our inquiry into the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland. We have Dr Edwards from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and Dr Brennan, who is an independent researcher. Dr Brennan joins us online.

Gentlemen, you are both very welcome. We are grateful to you for finding the time to speak to us this morning and to take our questions. It may be helpful, both for the Committee and for those outside who follow our proceedings in this area, just to give us a very brief thumbnail sketch or snapshot as to your bona fides in this area and what you hope to bring to the inquiry.

Dr Edwards: Good morning, Chair and members of the Committee. I will begin with an introduction. My name is Aaron Edwards. I am a senior lecturer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. I should say at the outset that I am appearing here before the Committee in a personal capacity, drawing on over 20 years of personal, professional and academic experience of writing about Northern Ireland, particularly the security situation.

Prior to working at Sandhurst, I led on two major projects looking to effect what today we would call group transition. That was working primarily with loyalist paramilitaries connected to the Ulster Volunteer Force, but the later project, between 2007 and 2008, encompassed all representatives from across the piste, from different armed groups, community and voluntary agencies, and statutory bodies. That is a little bit about me.

Dr Brennan: Good morning, everyone. I have worked in the community sector for 30 or 40 years. I did a PhD in 2009, which looked at the challenges of reintegrating loyalist ex-combatants into a post-ceasefire space in Northern Ireland, and I focused on some of the challenges that they would encounter as they tried to reintegrate into society.

Q559 **Chair:** Thank you. That is very helpful, and we look forward to hearing what you have to say. Throughout this inquiry, we have been starting as a first base of questioning with the term that we use. "Paramilitary" or "paramilitarism" suggests order, structure and chains of command. It also adds a certain degree of note, if you will, or formality to an organisation. As this inquiry has unfolded, we are increasingly hearing from witnesses that we should not be using these terms, but we should be using terms such as "criminal gangs", "criminality", "organised crime",



"intimidation" or "child grooming". Can you give us a thought or two about the terminology?

Dr Edwards: The term "paramilitarism" used in Northern Ireland is very specific to Northern Ireland, in the sense that it is seen as less of a pejorative term than "terrorism", which would travel quite well throughout the rest of the United Kingdom and worldwide as a concept and a legal term. In Northern Ireland, terrorists do not wish to be called terrorists. There are various historic, cultural and political reasons for that.

"Paramilitarism" has been used as a euphemism for terror, inflicted mainly on civilians by violent non-state actors. As academics, we would look at these groups as violent non-state actors because they have a propensity to inflict fear and intimidation on civilians. Also, depending on what side of the fence they come from, republican or loyalist, they may direct some of their violence, intimidation and threats towards members of the security forces and so on.

In terms of the way "paramilitarism" is used in Northern Ireland, it is a bit of a halfway house that most people use in a way that is more sensitive to the context.

Q560 **Chair:** We are not known for our sensitivity on this Committee, so we can be as insensitive as we wish, but let me ask you this. One always thinks of terrorism as being one group or organisation trying to terrorise, as a tool for achieving something, a group other than their own demographic. Is the problem with using the word "terrorism" here that we have this peculiar situation where people flying under—we heard the phrase used yesterday—a flag of convenience of political utility and necessity are terrorising their own communities? They are fouling their own nests. They are destroying their own communities and often intimidating their own residents, neighbours and friends.

Dr Edwards: Yes, they are complex organisations. I tend to think of them as networks, and they are deeply embedded in the most marginalised and deprived parts of Northern Ireland. Some loyalist paramilitaries and terror groups have been around for over 50 years now. In fact, the UVF dates back to 1965, so it predates the outbreak of the Troubles.

There has always been a tendency within marginalised communities to have these more paramilitary and more muscular organised crime groups attached to them or embedded in them. Over time, we have seen public support, small though it may be, in some of those areas for these groups. Then, of course, depending on the type of violence they engage in, we have public outcries against them, so it ebbs and flows in terms of support.

I would not say that it is widespread. Terrorism and paramilitarism is a minority sport and always has been, but they are complex organisations



in the sense that people who become involved in them, even today, are doing it for different reasons, whether they are wanting to do it for financial aggrandisement, for social or cultural reasons, or for political reasons. There is a whole raft of people, but the group that they wish to belong to gives them the stamp of some kind of political top cover, and that is why in Northern Ireland they are unique organisations compared with paramilitary groups elsewhere in the world.

Q561 **Chair:** Would you share my assessment that the praying in aid of political utility is no longer a manifest justification?

Dr Edwards: Yes, that is inherently true. The Ulster Volunteer Force, for instance, was formed on the basis of toppling an old Unionist Government in the 1960s, and then suddenly became a defensive organisation from '69 onwards. They had all sorts of military trappings in the way that they dressed, the way that they marshalled their foot soldiers and the types of attacks they carried out. By 1994, they called a ceasefire—

Q562 **Chair:** Their roots go back further, don't they, to effectively marshalling in order to stand against home rule?

Dr Edwards: Yes, they do. They go back immediately to the 1920s. There are various militant groups in the shadow of the first world war that are loyalist paramilitary groups, as we would call them today, so there has been a tendency within that community for quite a long period of time to have that veneer of political attachment—respectability, some might say. The political dimension has lessened since the ceasefires. However, since the Brexit referendum and subsequent protest action on the streets, we have seen new life breathed into these old, antiquated paramilitary structures.

Q563 **Chair:** Dr Brennan, what are your thoughts on that series of introductory questions?

Dr Brennan: I have been reading over some of the previous evidence. I am not too hung up about what names are being given, because, whatever definition you arrive at on these groups, they will take it as a badge of honour and see it that they must be doing something right if the British state is trying to demonise them.

From a loyalist perspective, they see themselves as defenders of the people, and from a republican perspective, they see themselves as fighting the empire and as freedom fighters. When you are trying to criminalise and have arguments like that, it comes across as if they must be doing something right if the British state is moving towards them. While we recognise that there are issues, which you have already outlined, around criminality and so on, sometimes, when you demonise a group, it works for them more than against them.

The challenge that we are all facing today is, as I termed it in my doctoral thesis, how to transform defenders into menders. That is what we are trying to do at the moment. If we keep demonising those people, then it



is making life difficult for many who are trying to encourage people to transition and transform.

Q564 **Chair:** So organisations should not be proscribed?

Dr Brennan: Well, that is an argument for another day.

Q565 **Chair:** No, it is not. With respect, isn't that a demonisation?

Dr Brennan: Let me put it this way. We all recognise the criminality that is involved, but when we try to address that in a securitisation approach, we are enabling those groups to say, "We are justified in our actions because"—and then they give you a series of reasons. It is a very challenging environment in which we are working. I am suggesting to you that, when you focus primarily on the criminalisation element, you often miss the point that that enables them to survive and justify their own actions.

Q566 **Chair:** Is the corollary of that that we should just ignore them and they will go away through lack of the oxygen of publicity?

Dr Brennan: No. We need to be creative and constructive in how we address that problem. By just focusing on the criminalisation element, we tend to miss what the motivational factors are. A lot of people, when they are joining an organisation, particularly as young men and women—most of them are coming into those organisations theoretically around the age of 16, but are probably already engaged in some sort of youth movement—feel that they are defending their people. That is the starting point.

What happens as they progress through that experience is something that we are trying to address through committees like this, but it is already recognisable that they think, when they start, that they are fighting for their people and for freedom. Sometimes, when you focus primarily on issues of criminality, that tends to let them justify to themselves and to their community that they must be doing something right. It is about trying to find the balance between that.

Chair: It is hard to see how defending a community can be manifested by shooting somebody in the leg and getting them so hooked on drugs that they don't know whether it is Monday or Thursday.

Q567 **Bob Stewart:** We have used the word "criminality". Are there any paramilitary organisations that do not engage in criminal behaviour and are, in their view, altruistic? They all need funding, of course, and presumably that is where they get the funding from. As you said, Dr Edwards, the UVF started in '65. It probably was quite altruistic then, but by '69 it needed money.

Dr Edwards: I am going to add a little bit of complexity to this. The UVF started off in a politically motivated way, but it drew its members from criminal gangs and the criminal fraternity in Belfast and other areas. My view is that it has always had criminals in the ranks, because those



altruistic, politically motivated ideologues who we sometimes think of in paramilitary organisations were probably ill suited to breaking the law. This might sound like a contradiction in terms, but they needed people to steal cars, procure weapons, deal with explosives and engage in nefarious activity.

Over many years, they have been engaged in all sorts of illicit funding streams. Drugs is obviously something that has come to the fore, as well as modern slavery in recent years, but they have been engaged in a whole raft of activities. Not all members are suited to doing that. They are not homogenous actors; they are very heterogenous in the sense that their membership is drawn from all sections of typically marginalised communities. I do not think that there is a pure paramilitary group in that sense, and I do not think that today they are political actors in the way that we would have seen them at the end of the Troubles and throughout the 1990s.

Q568 **Bob Stewart:** Dr Brennan, do you agree with that?

Dr Brennan: If you look at it from a republican perspective, many of those organisations see themselves as the state—Óglaigh na hÉireann, “the army of the people”. They do not see themselves as a paramilitary structure in that sense; they see themselves as the army of the state. They have often focused on the idea of criminality as being something that they would put down within the ranks, and that justifies their actions, but the reality is that they have to generate funding to provide weapons and to provide support to their people, so they have to engage in some form of criminality to survive.

You have that mixture again where you are trying to say that you are Óglaigh na hÉireann and you do not engage in criminal activity, but the reality on the ground is that you have to, in order to get the funds, so you need someone with a criminal mind who is going to raise the funds and also sustain the funding.

We have seen from an Irish Government report in 2004 that, when they looked at the Provisional IRA, they estimated that it was worth £400 million. It takes someone with a high level of financial expertise to manage that kind of money, so there is a need for criminality, but then there is also a need to justify it and cover it up by saying that it is a legitimate way to secure the freedom of the people.

Q569 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Just to focus the issue, we have seen a reclassification of the threat level from substantial to severe this year. What assessment do you make about the prospect of an increase in paramilitary activity that is consistent with the raising of that threat level?

Dr Edwards: Looking across the piste at the various groups involved here, there is a persistence of activity—a persistence of violence—in communities and attempts to escalate that beyond communities.



Dissident republican groups have always been ready, willing and capable of attacking national security targets.

Much of my analysis of this is from open sources, but also from talking to various sources who may be close to the various groups. There is a contradiction there that some do want to escalate and others do not. You find a certain level of restraint, perhaps more in loyalist paramilitary groups, from among the centralised leadership, perhaps of the UVF. The UDA is a very different organisation. It is very Balkanised and has been for some time. It really operates on an area basis, notwithstanding the urban/rural divide. It is down to the senior leaders in those organisations, and obviously the security services and police are watching them very closely.

In April 2021, there was an outbreak of sporadic violence, mainly from within the loyalist community, and the signs were missed, I think, because most of the surveillance and engagement was with the leadership and not with the grassroots. The grassroots, according to people I have interviewed and talked to, were restive.

We are seeing attempts by these paramilitary structures to corral and channel that feeling of wanting to commit acts of violence. It is very contradictory, but we see times when it does escalate. As for the reason why it escalates, it is too difficult to put an exact science on this and say what the triggers and causes are, but there are times politically when the context would suggest that something is likely to happen, and that has been the case over 20 years.

Dr Brennan: Most people are genuinely shocked when they see an act of violence occurring. They try to understand why and where it is coming from, and they cannot rationalise why. Most people, particularly within the nationalist community, believe that the use of violence is no longer justified, and we see small micro-groups who claim that they are Óglaigh na hÉireann and continuing the fight, and that everyone else has given up on the cause. A lot of people do not understand why they are doing what they are doing.

Quite often, there is a high level of cynicism within the nationalist community about why these acts of violence happen at certain times. Obviously, there are cultural points in the year when you expect something to happen, for example around Easter, but genuinely people are surprised when they see the level of violence that occurs, because there is no support for it, and most people do not want it beyond the small group. Whenever such actions happen, people are perplexed and wonder why they are continuing to engage in forms of political violence that we all thought had come to an end.

Q570 **Sir Robert Buckland:** I absolutely accept the underlying willingness or wish to rationalise what is ultimately irrational. I suppose that makes it very difficult to predict whether there will be an uptick in violence from either end of the spectrum. Would that be a fair characterisation?



Dr Edwards: I think there are times when it is more likely and less likely for the dynamics to dictate whether something will happen. In 2012, for instance, I was involved in discussions with members of the Progressive Unionist Party who told me that they were feeling, within the community, that there were individuals—in fact, groups of people—who were becoming disgruntled and disaffected, and then we saw the flag protests break out. It is very difficult to predict whether something will happen. We cannot really analyse this unless we are looking back on it, unfortunately, but certainly there are times when it is likely that that sort of disaffection will feed into a mobilisation of some kind.

Dr Brennan: Going back to the point we were talking about earlier, quite often when you see a news story about a paramilitary organisation engaged in criminal activity, particularly if it is drugs or prostitution, you will see a new mural go up or you will see an attack on the police, and that kind of justifies the activity. Then the organisation says, "The British are trying to demonise us and we are freedom fighters." You can see that happening quite often.

Generally, people are perplexed when they hear threat levels, because most people are not engaged with paramilitary groups and they do not understand what is going on within the internal dynamics of that group. Sometimes the group has to engage in an act of violence to justify, more to itself and its members, why it is continuing with its activities. There are also competing voices within the organisation who want to be seen to be leading the fight for freedom.

Q571 **Bob Stewart:** My question concerns the approach of the British Government and Stormont to paramilitarism. In essence, the question is: how well have they done?

Dr Brennan: The whole idea of DDR has been problematic in Northern Ireland, primarily because the British Government did not view the conflict as a war. At the end, while other areas engaged in processes of DDR, it was problematic because they could not implement processes in the way that other countries could. Because most of the paramilitaries were viewed as criminals, they were unable to reintegrate back into society in ways that other DDR processes could. That has been problematic, particularly for loyalist communities.

Within the republican community, the whole idea of fighting for freedom has created a culture where you are actually seen as a hero. As one loyalist said to me in an interview when I was doing my research, for republicans there is almost a conveyor belt from prison to Parliament, but loyalists are demonised so that they cannot become elected. As a loyalist said to me, "If you are not respectable, you are not electable." Many loyalists found that the British Government not so much hindered, but did not make it easier for them to reintegrate.

Quite often, we forget that loyalists are reintegrating back into British society. They see the barriers that are put up in front of them and



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wonder why British society is not welcoming them back into society. There are barriers around employment where they cannot get a job, so that creates challenges and makes loyalists wonder why the British Government are putting these barriers in place. You hear that discussion quite often when you see reactions to how republicans are treated.

There is a quote that is used quite often that no one can really pin down: loyalists say that Tony Blair told them that the British Government would look after the republicans while the police would look after loyalists. The British Government has done many good things, but it has also created issues that have prohibited the idea of loyalists going away.

Q572 **Bob Stewart:** In short, you would say that the Governments—Stormont or London—have given a better deal to republican paramilitary organisations.

Dr Brennan: No. I am saying that, on the republican side, there is a cultural difference to ex-prisoners.

Q573 **Bob Stewart:** It is a cultural difference rather than the Government's approach.

Dr Brennan: Yes.

Dr Edwards: I am aware that the Committee has heard evidence from a range of people who can speak in a more detailed way about how Government policy is playing out, but I think that the idea of ending paramilitarism has some way to go. If that indeed is the objective of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme, we see good hard evidence of the police and paramilitary crime task force raiding, and being very successful in raiding, the various organisations that it looks at. I believe there were six paramilitary organisations, according to the last chief constable's end-of-year report: two republican and the remainder loyalist.

Among those who have been around quite a long time, have lived with paramilitarism all their lives and continue to see paramilitaries with some kind of standing or stature in their communities, I think there is a shaking of heads. All I can really see the strategy doing at the moment is mowing the grass, which is a term used in a broader strategic sense elsewhere in the world. Occasionally, there are weeds that need pulled out by the roots but, fundamentally, the grass continues to grow and we are seeing paramilitary structures continue to re-energise and rejuvenate.

If I may end with one very general statistic, I will not give any figures, but there are more loyalist paramilitaries today than there were 30 years ago. That is a really disturbing reality. Quite what they are doing is open for serious questions.

Q574 **Chair:** I have discussed this with loyalists directly. Loyalists would see themselves as a minority within the broader Unionist family. You can argue the demographics, census figures and all the rest of it, but there is every probability that the Unionist community will either stay static or get



smaller over the coming years. There is a tendency when one is feeling most under pressure—most scared, if you will, or most threatened—and operating in this arena, to think, to slightly paraphrase, “Washington doesn’t know about us. Brussels doesn’t know about us. Westminster is ashamed and embarrassed by us.” GB looks on askance, a number in the Unionist community go, “What the hell are you playing at?”, the nationalist community in the north go, “You’re beyond the pale”, and broader Irish society in the Republic of Ireland would say precisely the same.

Are they thinking, “We are under threat. Therefore, there is safety in numbers. We are going to gather together more to make ourselves feel safer,” even though the tide, whether emotional, political or demographic—call it what you will—is moving against them? Is what we are dealing with a human nature response to an existential threat over which they have no control or influence. Is that fair?

Dr Edwards: There are times when they do feel threatened. The idea of a loyalist community is a bit of a misnomer. We are talking about working-class people who happen to be Unionists, and not all Unionists are loyalists.

Q575 **Chair:** That is why I was very clear to say a minority within the wider Unionist family. I am not seeking to merge the two. They are very distinct groups.

Dr Edwards: This is where the power of history and the specifics of the context are important, because there is a long militant warrior ethos there. Twenty years ago, I was dealing with the Ulster Volunteer Force directly from a community perspective, because people in the community did not want it to be continuing its coercive control or its violence, and it was engaged in predominantly violence against its own community.

I thought at that time that that was wrong. Unfortunately, the only way to get anything done then was to work with political representatives and to talk to paramilitaries, and they were almost certainly in a bit of a security dilemma. They believed that the IRA at that point, up until 2005, had not ended its war. It subsequently did, but even after that, they remained embattled and retained a view that there was an existential threat and they needed to keep, in their language, a pike in the thatch and to guard against that.

There is definitely a tradition there, and that is why the UVF was rejuvenated in 1965. Arguably, it had existed in some form, although very hidden and secret, from the 1920s. There were individuals who had been involved with the UVF in the '20s who then became involved with the UVF later on, so there was continuity there, in a similar way to republican communities—there is a golden thread that runs through. It is about decommissioning the mindsets. That is how Billy Hutchinson, leader of the PUP, once put it, and I think that is correct even today. Trying to de-radicalise the youth, particularly, who feel that they need to



join the fray years after the armed conflict, or the major hostilities, have ended is something that we need to address.

Q576 **Chair:** Dr Brennan, do you have a thought on that?

Dr Brennan: One of the challenges for loyalists is the whole political dynamic of the post-ceasefire, post-conflict environment we are in, because they thought that the Good Friday agreement was going to end the war and settle the constitutional question. They were not really briefed or enabled to understand the wider transformations that were happening, and what the transformation in relationships between the UK and Ireland would mean—that things would not always stay the same and things were going to change. We have seen that quite dramatically through Brexit. There is a wider geopolitical context in which relations are transforming all the time, so whenever loyalists see that, particularly, they wonder what is going on.

Also, within the conflict management strategy that emerged post-2007, loyalists are constantly being told, “The reason why you don’t get a peace dividend is that the Catholics get everything and we get nothing,” so that feeds into this sense of siege and insecurity. They literally live on the other side of the wall, and they know that the socioeconomic conditions are the same, but they are continually fed this idea that the Catholics are getting everything. You see that with the Casement Park announcement. That created problems. Not far from where I live at the moment there has been street rioting between young people across the Broadway interface over the last couple of days, and people are asking, “Is this because of the Casement Park settlement?”

There is that insecurity within the wider Unionist community, in that they thought that their place within the UK was agreed, but then, with Brexit, they see that they are being treated slightly differently. Again, that goes back to that whole idea of how to justify a DDR programme that is reintegrating British citizens back into British society when you have something like the sea border or being treated differently, within a political context, from other parts of the UK.

Q577 **Chair:** Do you think they have forgotten or did not know about the whole civil rights movement and that rebalancing bit? There is always a blinkered narrative on these things, isn’t there?

Dr Brennan: There is. Quite often, when we talk about civil rights, we tend to forget—Dr Edwards is the expert on this—that the civil rights campaign began in the 1950s, when Unionists tried to advocate for British rights for British citizens. It was the internal dynamics within the Unionist community that led to problems electorally with the emergence of the Northern Ireland Labour party, the challenge to the established Unionist party and then having to bring in Terence O’Neill and his attempt to bring a transformative process into Northern Ireland. That was ultimately undermined by people within the Unionist community. As Dr Edwards alluded to earlier on, the reformation of the UVF in 1965 was an



internal Unionist split within the family, if you will, who were trying to undermine the modernising process that the whole UK was going through at the time.

Chair: And so it goes on.

Dr Brennan: That is the context in which we are working. You can see from that perspective why loyalist paramilitaries in particular feel the need to remain, because they feel that they cannot trust London, that they are going to be sold out and therefore that they have to defend the people. While many Unionists would not support loyalist paramilitaries, there is that lingering doubt within the Unionist community that they are ultimately going to be sold out, and therefore there is a need to retain the people's army to defend them from what is to come.

Q578 **Chair:** It is a peculiar narrative. The strongest advocates for the maintenance of the unity of the United Kingdom are also the strongest advocates that Westminster will always shaft them.

Dr Brennan: That is the problem.

Chair: It is peculiar. Let me turn to Dr Farry—somebody who is not peculiar.

Q579 **Stephen Farry:** Thank you for that reinforcement, Chair. Good morning to both of our witnesses. I want to move on to the wider peacebuilding agenda, and in particular the Tackling Paramilitarism programme. I want to ask your views on that programme in general, but also to focus in on what can be done in terms of investment in marginalised communities to address some of the underlying fertile ground that is created for the paramilitaries to exploit. Perhaps you will reference in your answer not just what the programme itself does, but the wider policy framework around socioeconomic interventions. Obviously, that is referenced in the context of the ongoing budget crisis in Northern Ireland, where quite a few of those interventions around youth work and post-16 education are under some degree of pressure.

Dr Brennan: When you look at the settlement that was arrived at, we did not go the whole way, and that is why I argue that what we have is a process of conflict management. We did not go on to conflict transformation and conflict resolution, because, while we addressed the direct violence of paramilitarism, we did not address the issues of socioeconomic exclusion, so I argue that what we have created is a form of what I call "peace-washing". To the outside world, it looks like we have peace, but within the communities, particularly those communities and people who suffered the most from the violence, they have not seen a peace dividend.

Particularly within loyalist communities—I refer you to a paper by Professor Colin Knox—most loyalists were asking, "Where is the peace dividend?" Because we created two political worlds, it gets divided up between the Unionist political world and the nationalist political world,



and then we have this trickle-down neoliberal approach so that, by the time it gets to those most marginalised and disadvantaged communities, there is very little left. That feeds into this idea that one side gets everything and the other side gets nothing, and that failure to address the socioeconomic issues creates the environment in which people feel that they are lost.

The whole concept of peacebuilding, which was supposed to radically transform society, then becomes challenged because it is seen to fail to deliver what it set out to achieve. That feeds back into this myth that people are being marginalised and disadvantaged, and then, when you look at the data from those areas, you see that that is the reality; it is not a myth.

When you look at those communities in which most paramilitary activity emerges, the levels of deprivation are still the same, and people talk about nothing really changing. We should be trying to bring resources into those areas and radically transform the quality of life of people who live there. That is problematic, particularly now that, as Dr Farry mentioned, with budgets being cut, people are increasingly experiencing higher levels of poverty and social exclusion. The old are dying without any support. They cannot get into hospitals or, if they do get into hospitals, they are left lying in hospital corridors. Young people have no way of finding well-paid work, so the only solution is to use drugs and just think, "Well, this is the way that life is, so best make use of what we have."

Q580 Chair: On jobs, we hear from all the business organisations as a Committee when we make our visits and all a rest of it that there are high-paid jobs and lots of opportunities: "Get rid of the university cap. Change the apprenticeship levy." We have just had a big investment conference in Belfast. Joe Kennedy is bringing over potential investors in a couple of weeks' time from the States. Isn't the thing here just a basic understanding of how the economy has changed and the importance of education has not been realised across the whole of society? The jobs are there. The employers are crying out for people.

Dr Brennan: I hear those arguments, but when you go and look at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, you see that that does not impact on those communities, and that raises the question why. That is where it goes back to my idea of peace-washing. We can hear all those great statements on the TV, but then, when you go in and look at those communities that suffered the most from the violence, they find it difficult to get employment, for whatever reasons.

We all know the issue of a lack of educational attainment within Unionist communities, particularly for young Protestant boys. If you cannot get access to those jobs, or if you are in a gig economy where you are being paid by the day or you are on zero-hours contracts, it is very difficult to motivate you into sustaining employment. That is not to say that people do not get employment. There are plenty of people within those areas



who do get employment and move up the economic ladder. That kind of gives voice to this idea that the community is being abandoned. But when you look at the raw data within NISRA on the areas that suffered the most from the violence, you see that there is not much change, and you have to ask why.

Q581 Stephen Farry: How would you rank the most urgent interventions in that regard? Is it housing improvement, job creation, youth diversion or something else?

Dr Brennan: It is all of those things, and that is the challenge. Sometimes we focus on one initiative and say, "Oh, let's all get initiatives for young people and get them educated and get them into jobs," and then you do that and they cannot afford to live anywhere or they cannot afford to progress. It is not about tackling one issue. It is about a multi-agency approach, and it is very challenging to do. There is no sense in pretending otherwise.

Again, that brings us to this issue that we are back in what is a normalised society. I heard the comments yesterday that there are similar problems in Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. On one level, you could say that what we are seeing in Northern Ireland is a reality that we have reintegrated back into society, but at another level we are not addressing the basic human needs, as outlined within peace theory, that we should be addressing to transform societies from conflict into peace.

Q582 Stephen Farry: What about the issues of drug use, drug supply and exploitation of young people, for example? Also, there is a parallel strand around things like loan sharking and how that locks vulnerable people into paramilitary structures, because they end up with de facto debts to certain godfathers.

Dr Brennan: That is the perennial problem. The drugs issue is not just connected to loyalist or republican working-class communities. It is a global issue. Again, that feeds into that sense of despondency, and then you have loan sharks feeding off that. When you see that happening within communities, it really is challenging, because quite often it is the most vulnerable. It would be young, single-parent women. You see stories in the press of young women borrowing £50 and then having to pay it back over years, and they cannot get out of that cycle. That is why we see high levels of suicide in those areas, because people feel trapped. There is no way out and, if you do get out, you are seen as leaving the community or asked, "Who do you think you are?" There are big challenges there that we need to focus in on.

Loan sharking, in particular, is something that working-class communities have experienced over generations. I do not know how we get out of that, because it is usually strong people within the community who have access to that. Whether they are hiding under a paramilitary organisation or not, they have the financial clout to sustain their activities, and it is very challenging in how we address that.



Again, the drugs issue is a global issue, but it feeds into that sense of despondency and lack of hope where the only thing you have is access to drugs. That will lift your misery for a couple of days or for the weekend, and then you can go back into your despondency for the rest of the week.

Q583 **Stephen Farry:** Thank you very much, Dr Brennan. Dr Edwards? All of the above, essentially.

Dr Edwards: Where to begin? I think the best way to think about these paramilitary groups, terror groups and organised crime is that they are competing in the same space, and there is certainly overlap and integration between them. I know that this Committee has heard about different organisations and sub-groups that may be more involved in criminality than others, but the reality is—the way that academics might look at this is dark networks—that they are hidden, covert and illegal. Both drugs gangs and paramilitary gangs, as I have said, operate away from the public spotlight, although we have very courageous journalists and researchers who put the evidence out into the public sphere so we can shine a bright light on these networks.

The reality is that individual leaders within those organisations can have effect on the ground. They can stop loan sharking. They can stop drug dealing. They can stop the violence and intimidation. Questions need to be asked about why they are not doing that.

If I can just give you an example, the Ulster Volunteer Force has a so-called peace leadership in west Belfast. Its east Belfast battalion—this is where the very militaristic language comes into the mix—is seen in some respects as a rogue element. The UVF has always had rogue elements within it and has always set itself apart from that in terms of a leadership and used language such as, “This is unsanctioned,” but they do benefit and they are still part of that organisation.

Questions need to be asked of senior leaderships about the sorts of activities that are going on, because it is not just structural. People are not just bound to this. We are in a situation where the authorities have to continually mow the grass. I think that there is agency here for those leaderships, and they need to step up. If they are intent on being criminals, then they need to be disabused of the notion that they can engage with statutory bodies, non-governmental organisations or authorities.

Q584 **Stephen Farry:** Without stealing the thunder of some of the questions that may come shortly, do you not think it is somewhat problematic, from a rule of law and wider societal point of view, that we end up in a situation where we are looking to some other elements within paramilitary terrorist structures to effectively address drugs and loan sharking, as opposed to the agencies of the state?

Dr Edwards: The coercive and aggressive operational activities of the state are having an effect, but they are not reaching right into the



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grassroots and pulling out the weeds more effectively. I know that this Committee has heard evidence about group transition and about talking to paramilitaries. In terms of deproscription, one of the barriers, with these groups being proscribed, as you have indicated, is that it would be difficult to talk directly to them, and so, for peacebuilding and conflict resolution, some legal scholars would argue that we need to look at the law.

At the same time, I would not want to suggest that we give any kind of legitimacy to that process. It would always have to be done by a third party at arm's length, but the reality is that talking directly to them can have a positive effect, as well as these more coercive policing responses. It needs to be, as the IRC has pointed out, a twin-track approach. We need to look at policing and criminal justice responses as well as the socioeconomic.

Adding a third pillar, there does need to be engagement from a suitable independent person or body that can hold these groups to account. The IRC's predecessor in many respects, the IMC, was effective in sanctioning some of these groups. Those sanctions really did bite and lead to the groups making more strategic decisions in terms of peace.

Q585 Carla Lockhart: Do you think that the funding that the UK Government, Stormont, etc. have given to different groups and to tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland has been effective? Are there proper governance structures in place to make sure that it is not going to gatekeepers or people who are masquerading as community groups in local areas?

Dr Brennan: One of the challenges with that is that, going back to the peace process that emerged post-2007, we created two political worlds, and the money is filtered down through both sides. What we have created here is what I call a form of paramilitary peacekeeping, because funding goes to groups that are perceived to be on side with the political party that is running that political world, and so some groups get funding; other groups do not get funding.

When you look at European peace funding in particular, it is very closely monitored, so I would be surprised if there were any undue financial irregularities, but it is more about who gets it and who does not get it. The rule of thumb is that, if you are not connected, you are not selected. What happens then is that the money comes through the community groups and, while one person may think that that group is legitimate and justified, others may see that as just paying off the paramilitaries.

We have challenges in that method of peacebuilding, and we need to look at different ways of ensuring that the funding is more widely spread and reaches those people most in need. Again, if you look at the NISRA data, you can see where the money needs to go, but how do you get it there and how do you get it past the gatekeepers, who are quite legitimately



seen as community workers who are trying their best under extremely difficult economic circumstances?

Q586 Carla Lockhart: Do you think there needs to be something more around the governance of funding and how it is utilised on the ground?

Dr Brennan: There is always room for improvement with governance issues. Particularly within marginalised communities, we need to look at different ways of doing things. We also need to break the dependency on peace funding. If we are trying to reintegrate communities back into society, we need to utilise the existing services and we need to enable statutory organisations to meet that need, so that we are not going to charities and community groups to sustain basic human needs within marginalised and disadvantaged communities. That is where the focus needs to move to next, I believe.

Q587 Carla Lockhart: I am a great believer in trying to do things differently. Quite often, a lot of money will go year on year to very similar groups or the same groups, and they do the same thing. For me, the way to lift any young person out of paramilitarism or getting entrapped in that side of things would be education, and giving them that pathway.

I am keen to ascertain your thoughts on glorification of terrorism and the impact of that, particularly from a republican perspective. We have heard a little bit more on the loyalist side. What Dr Edwards said about the numbers is quite stark. Have we any ideas in terms of republican numbers? What are your views on the glorification of terrorism? When people of note in high office or political office in Northern Ireland say there was no alternative to the IRA campaign, what message does that send out to people, particularly young people?

Dr Edwards: The glorification of terrorism within republican communities is a cultural and political problem, and an obstacle to reconciliation. It is a very emotive subject, but it does have an impact far beyond those small communities that engage in commemorative practices, depending on what those commemorative practices are. It resonates throughout Northern Ireland.

In my personal opinion, we do not have structural reconciliation between the two communities. I know there are various communities now, including those who have recently come to Northern Ireland in growing numbers and have no real cultural awareness of why people continue to engage in these ritualistic practices. But even though it has meaning within one side of the community, it sends out signals to the other community that they are not interested in the path of reconciliation.

Politically speaking, it is a political matter to be settled by political leaderships talking to each other and finding ways forward. We could look to have a celebration or commemoration on an international day of peace, rather than necessarily picking out these tribal dates and engaging in these ritualistic practices.



From a security perspective, those practices do feed into the mindsets of those who wish to take the law into their own hands and engage in paramilitary or terrorist activity. It gives them a sense of purpose and belonging. We should be really attuned to that and aware of that. People who engage in the sponsoring of those commemorative practices need to be aware that, even though that may not be their intent, they are bringing up future generations who will in many cases take a divisive view on the past and on the other community. The legislation is there, but it has been unevenly applied, for political reasons, in Northern Ireland. Glorification of terrorism should be a crime, but we see it used in deliberately cultural and political ways.

Q588 **Carla Lockhart:** What about the recruitment side of things?

Dr Edwards: If you look at certain areas, particularly Derry/Londonderry, it fires up the recruitment drive within dissident republican organisations. Republicanism has a history of splitting, much more so than loyalist paramilitary groups. How that is used in a ritualistic sense does feed recruitment, and we need to be very mindful of that. As I have said, that is perhaps not the intent for some, but certainly for dissident republican groups it is the intent. They would use ritualistic practices and commemorative occasions to replenish the ranks.

Dr Brennan: On the issue of “there was no alternative”, within the nationalist community there was an alternative, and people would articulate that through electoral support for the SDLP. We are caught in what appears to be a conflict management strategy—that there was no way out other than the use of violence and that was just the inevitability of what was happening to manage us through to the process of peace breaking out in the 1990s.

On the issue of reconciliation, the problem with that is that reconciliation is political by its very definition, in terms of who is to be reconciled and who is not. We find that communities are being blamed for things that were beyond their control and that they did not vote for. We have to acknowledge that, despite 30 years of violence, the vast majority of people did not want that to happen but there were stronger forces at work that made that inevitable. We found it very difficult to break out of that cycle. To say that there was no alternative is not historically correct.

Q589 **Jim Shannon:** Welcome, gentlemen. Thanks for your comments so far. I have a central question to ask you, and then I want to put forward some ideas on where we think things need to be. On the choice, Dr Edwards, of the name Ulster Volunteer Force, if it was the old Ulster Volunteer Force of 1914, which principally was a militia that fought in the Army against the Germans, then that is quite legitimate, but of course they stole that name and used it for other purposes. We understand that.

I am ever mindful to keep in perspective, when it comes to the murders in the terrorist campaign, that the republicans were responsible for by far the most murders and for a terrorist campaign that they initiated across



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all of Northern Ireland and, indeed, further afield.

The IRC says that there should be a formal process of engagement with paramilitary groups to facilitate group transition to end paramilitarism. I suspect you will say that is the right thing to do. As someone who lives in the community and understands the issues very well, there are six points that are vital for the community to bring about change. The most important is the issue of jobs. Unfortunately, young Protestants do not seem to be seeking education to the standard where they can get employment. For some time there has been a policy to encourage that. I work with the South Eastern Regional College and schools in my constituency to try to encourage them to take up those jobs.

The second thing is housing, which is also vital. People need to live in suitable accommodation, free from paramilitary murals, which is the third thing. As my colleague has referred to, glorifying terrorism with murals on the wall sends out the wrong message. Fourthly, for those who cannot get a job or do not want a job, whatever the reason may be, drugs are always available.

The recruitment of young people is also something that worries me incredibly, because I see it happening all the time. They are told, "We just want you to deliver this wee package," and then, unfortunately, they find themselves taking the drugs themselves. They also find themselves in a position where they become in debt, which goes on forever. I have been involved in some cases in my area where young people have been recruited, and parents and families are distraught with worry about their children. We have sometimes been able to engage to draw them away from that.

Those are the six points we need to address if we are going to help young people to get away from paramilitaries. I am really asking for your thoughts on the best way to do that.

Dr Edwards: Quite some time ago, I was involved in a conflict transformation forum in the east Antrim area. Paramilitaries were not key to that; they were involved, but they were not running the show. It was a political party member of the PUP, the late Billy Mitchell, who was one of the driving forces. I sat on the steering committee. There were academics on there. There were representatives from statutory bodies. There were schoolteachers and principals. We held some meetings in the community, in schools and other places, and we had considerable buy-in from the community. The idea was that the community had to take a united approach to this in trying to rid east Antrim of paramilitary activity, specifically from the UVF.

Over time these sorts of initiatives have become colonised, which was a prediction that Billy Mitchell made to me almost 20 years ago. He said that it was heading in that direction, that gatekeepers would be involved, and that the gatekeepers would perhaps be tied to those groups or associated with them in some way. They would butt up against them, living cheek by jowl, but nevertheless in some cases they were looked at



as the people who could deliver. I thought, and still think, that is the wrong way forward. Tracking back to what Ms Lockhart suggested, gatekeepers are not the way to go. If we are really to see transformative change in those six areas, they cannot be enabled to be the driving force behind this. It has to be the community, and that is people who have no truck with paramilitaries whatsoever.

There are two ways forward. The first is radical hope—people need to be given hope that they can live in a society free of paramilitary coercive control, and they need role models outwith those paramilitary groups, not tied to loyalist or republican communities with baggage. We have moved on significantly, as you heard from the Secretary of State and his team when they gave evidence. Northern Ireland has moved on immeasurably, but unfortunately we have the left-behinds in certain marginalised areas that provide the raw recruits for these paramilitary gangs.

Some academic work has been done on the age profile of members of loyalist paramilitary groups. There is disagreement between academics on this, but one report suggests that the vast bulk are from the under-40 age range—teenagers, in many respects—rather than older men. They overwhelmingly tend to be male. We have older members of those organisations, in some cases getting towards 80, who remain in control of those groups and have been in control of them for a very long time. Alternative role models are required to break the grip of paramilitary peacekeepers.

Q590 Jim Shannon: On role models, I refer to one group in my constituency, Scrabo Residents Association. These are guys who have a history. They have completely moved away from that. They lead that part of the Ards community that they are involved with, and they do some really positive work. There are role models out there, but it is how they can be introduced to others in the area, perhaps to say, "These guys are doing things in a positive way for the community and they are making a difference." When you talk about role models, there are some, but it is a pity that there are not enough.

Dr Brennan: I endorse that. I know that group you are talking about and they have done some fantastic work. Apologies; I should have said at the outset that I am employed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as a good relations officer, but when I talk about housing I am talking in a private capacity.

The six points you outlined are exactly what needs to happen. The challenge is how we do that, both from a structural perspective and from a community perspective. It cannot be left to communities to do the heavy lifting on their own. They do not have the resources or the funding, and the positive role models who come out of the ex-combatant community are literally overwhelmed and can only do so much.

I see from my own experience that many of those ex-combatants make sure that their children are well educated. That is a very important point



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that we all need to take on board. It is very easy to demonise someone who has been in a paramilitary organisation, but there are diverse motivational factors. I see in my own work that many ex-combatants from across the groups ensure that their children are well educated. You hope that that spills out and inspires other people within the community to do the same thing.

The whole recruitment issue goes back to the sense of hopelessness that exists in many of the marginalised communities. You need to find a way of living. A report came out, I think in the 1990s, that looked at loyalist communities in particular, where the aspiration of young people was to become an ex-prisoner or an ex-combatant, because that would give them definition and a role within society.

That was a dreadful thing for research to demonstrate. Within some of those marginalised communities the only way you are going to find any kind of financial wherewithal or respect within the community is to become a member of a paramilitary organisation, where people will fear and respect you at the same time and you will make money. You will have flashy cars and a nice house, you will have regular holidays and you will go out at the weekend and be able to buy all the drinks. Unless you lift the whole community up, those problems will prevail.

Again, we need a multi-agency approach where we focus on the structural transformations as well as the community transformations. Without one you cannot have the other and we will just go into an ongoing process of sustaining the deprivation that we are trying to transform.

Q591 **Chair:** On the flash cars, buying the drinks, Turkey teeth and hair transplants, which we are all familiar with—well, obviously I am not familiar with the hair transplants—should the authorities be more robust, and should the criteria for triggering an unexplained wealth order be lowered?

Dr Brennan: That is an interesting question and goes to the heart of the problem. Many people in Northern Ireland, irrespective of what community you come from, ask, "How do these people get away with it?"

Chair: They have never done a day's work in their lives, they drive around in a rather flash Range Rover or BMW, and they have a villa in Marbella, regular summer breaks and a permanent tan. They live the life of Riley and wouldn't know an HMRC tax form if it came up and bit them.

Dr Brennan: That is the problem, in all communities. It goes back to the securitisation agenda. People ask, "How does that happen?" For most of us, if you were engaged in criminality, you would be expecting the police to rap your door, but some people appear in the papers on a regular basis and they have access to wealth that no one else can.



That goes back to the conflict management process. Are certain individuals allowed to remain so that they can sustain the internal order within their own political world? That goes back to the wider structural problems of using paramilitary peacekeeping within a neoliberal peacebuilding process, which I describe as war by other means. Until we begin to address those questions, people will still be suspicious of what is going on and why certain individuals can have a lifestyle that many people only dream of.

Q592 **Chair:** Dr Brennan, you refer to the keeping of order by the godfathers. The presumption is that they are Blofeld-like, sitting stroking a cat in some dark room above a taxi rank somewhere in Belfast or wherever, giving orders that will be obeyed, come what may. They say, "Jump" and the answer is, "How high?" and not, "Why?"

It is my understanding from engagements and conversations that I have had in recent years that that is a myth. We are seeing an intergenerational breakdown of the angry young men, and they are predominantly angry young men, challenging the authority of the greybeards—the older authority figures. That assumed formality of an organisation where the guy at the top of the tree gives an order and it is obeyed throughout the organisation is an entire myth.

If you are right in your hypothesis that the strategy is to accommodate some people because at least that means they are there to keep order within their organisation, does that not need a rethink? That chain of unquestioning command has disappeared.

Dr Brennan: To tweak that slightly, it is not to maintain order within their organisation, but to maintain order within their political world. Having that stability within the Unionist political world or the nationalist political world attracts the foreign direct investment.

It is something that the academic Audra Mitchell described as "bubbles of peace". You can go into Belfast city centre and you can have this neoliberal experience of shopping and cafés, and everyone leading the good life, but a thousand feet away from that you see people living in absolute poverty.

That idea of paramilitary peacekeeping is to maintain internal order within each political world, so that you do not have the masses marching out of the Shankill and the Falls down to city hall, like they did in the 1930s, and demanding social transformation. That is the process that we are in. If you can sustain that by directing funding down through organisations into community groups, then they become key influencers, or, as Dr Edwards has written previously, agents of influence within their community, who can enable the prevailing economic system to keep going forward without too many protests.

Q593 **Chair:** It is paramilitarism as the opium of the people. Keep them full of drugs, keep them full of bitterness, and anybody who wants to have a cappuccino and an almond croissant in Belfast city centre can do so in



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some degree of peace and tranquillity. It is not the most inspiring strategy, is it?

Dr Brennan: No, but that is how we sustain our political process here. Many politicians would be elected on the basis that those communities remain in that kind of condition. As I said earlier, you are promoting this idea that “they get everything and we get nothing; vote me in to keep her or him out”. That is the model that we have.

As Lee Ross described it, it is a form of naïve realism, where the most educated in society continually vote for those political representatives and political parties that sustain this process of post-conflict regeneration. It is quite easy to blame the paramilitaries, but they are somewhat down the chain of command. It is the political model that we have created that enables this process to happen.

Paramilitary peacekeeping is recognised now in different guises right around the world. You can see it happening in places like Colombia and Liberia. It is a model of how you sustain the post-conflict phase so that some people can lead the good life while many people have to suffer on.

Q594 **Chair:** Dr Edwards, you were smiling wryly at some of that.

Dr Edwards: If I may say something about structures, these days it is often said that there is a disconnect between leaders and followers, but these paramilitary structures are run on the basis of fear, intimidation, pulling people into a debt trap and so on. Whatever levers are pulled in terms of those groups, they can affect the situation positively or negatively.

To piggyback on what Dr Brennan has said about paramilitary peacekeeping, I think that that lever is pulled on occasion to try to mop up disaffection. An example of that would be in the wake of the riots in April 2021, when young people came out spontaneously. We had some leaderless protest action that was very promptly mopped up in the following weeks and months by groups connected to paramilitaries. That fired up recruitment, in many respects, as it did during the flag protests 10 years earlier.

If you chart the trouble, the flashpoints and the outbreaks of violence, and then look at the size and shape of these organisations, they do benefit from that, for the reasons that Dr Brennan has outlined. It is worrying that that is the tourniquet we apply when there is a gaping wound. That is all it is. It is not surgery. It is not preventive; it is simply reactive.

Q595 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Thank you very much for looking at process. We all accept that sometimes we are trying to rationalise the irrational, and that there is a danger with formal engagement in elevating the legitimacy of some of these groups. The UN definition about group transition, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration is worth a look. It has never really been effectively tried. I would welcome both your views



about how far down that road we go. Do we try to introduce that element of rationalism and structure, or are there pitfalls that we will hit if we try to go down too rigid a road?

Dr Edwards: We have had a very formal process in relation to disarmament, and that was following UN best practice. We had the international body that was successful in delivering decommissioning to an extent. All the groups retained some kind of weaponry for a rainy day, as we saw in the killing of Bobby Moffett in the Shankill in 2010 by the UVF. The groups still retain some of that weaponry, but the appetite to use it lessened as they became more formally brought into the peace process. So the first D bit has been done, demobilisation really has not happened at all, and the reintegration is certainly something we are awaiting more comprehensive responses to.

I think that we have now come on. When I first looked at UN best practice, I led a community-based project where we took people from republican and loyalist communities in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry out to the Middle East to learn from others from around the world. DDR meant something very specific: an amnesty on weapons, handing in weapons, demobilising the troops and giving them some kind of paid employment, or integrating them into the local economy.

We have now moved on. We have second-generation DDR, where it is looked at more comprehensively as a strategy that ties us into an overarching political process. The UN uses examples principally from Africa—but there are other places—such as Mali, South Sudan and North Sudan. We know from what has happened in North Sudan recently that that political element of the process is fundamental. We have seen a breakdown in the DDR process and the contesting of the paramilitary forces with the armed forces of that state.

There is no certainty that DDR will work. It can help to prevent a relapse into conflict, but only as part of a more comprehensive settlement or agreement. That is what people miss. It is not a panacea. It is not the magic formula for delivering the end of paramilitarism by itself. It is a functional operational process as it is conceived in Northern Ireland, but today it has moved on. As a sophisticated international organisation, in applying it, the UN looks at it more pragmatically than it did.

Dr Brennan will have some more specific views on this, given that he has looked at DDR in relation to loyalists more specifically.

Dr Brennan: Sometimes I think, “Okay, disarmament, but the second D is more problematic.” We have to think beyond that strategy, because what we are actually doing—again, going back to something that Ms Lockhart said—is enabling gatekeepers. As I said, we are sustaining post-ceasefire paramilitary agency.

One of the big questions that many loyalist ex-combatants asked me during my research was, “How long must I be an ex-combatant before I



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can get a job or access services?" Towards the end, they were more concerned about this idea of the sins of the father: "Okay, I'll accept what I did and I'll accept that I can't reintegrate, but I want my children to be able to get jobs in the civil service or wherever."

We have to think outside the box. Ironically, the best place to look for those solutions is in the United Kingdom. People can be very critical of the UK, but some of the best ideas on population health have arisen from the UK. For example, in the 1970s Julian Tudor-Hart identified the inverse care law, where those most in need were least able to ask for help, while those in the know could maximise access to services.

We need to use the tools that already exist and start applying them on a more widespread basis. For example, if you look at the work of Professor Sir Michael Marmot on the social determinants of health, then we can begin to bring a multi-agency approach on a framework that can actually work and be measured and monitored. Quite often money is given to groups in the hope that they are sent away, but we need to have more of a population focus on what we are trying to do.

That goes back to the reintegration part. You are bringing people into a society in such a way that they are not dependent on the politician or the local paramilitary giving them funding or jobs. Again, it goes back to this idea that if you are not connected, you are not selected. If you are not connected to a paramilitary or a political structure, the chances are that you are not going to get a job or access to the health services that you need.

If we look at some of the things that have been done in Northern Ireland, one of the most successful things the British Government did was create the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. We see that we can develop structural approaches that address long-term issues. The issue of housing in Northern Ireland was dreadful until the British Government stepped in and created the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Then things started to change. I am not saying that it is perfect, but I am saying there is a model that we can use as a means to show that we can do this.

Through my research, I have come up with this idea of what I call biopolitical peace building. That is building peace from the body up. Rather than giving it to the head man or the head politician, let us focus services that begin to address basic human needs, begin to heal the individual and allow them to self-actualise their own exit out of the environment they are in.

That is possible. The British system of government has a wide range of tools that could be used and—I know that there are certain people in the room who will like this—at no extra cost. What we are trying to do is increase efficiencies in service delivery and join up the dots of the various statutory agencies and services that are already there. In partnership with the community, we can create what some people are now calling



community wealth building, so that we heal ourselves from the body up, from within the community right up through society.

All the tools are there and all the evidence is there. We just need to find a way of joining those dots, and one of the ways of doing that is artificial intelligence. We can begin to focus on things like algorithms for peace, which link up various service provisions, so if you become unemployed, or if you are a single mum and your financial circumstances change, the system should automatically correct itself. We have that possibility within the existing structures of government; it is just finding a way of making that actually happen.

- Q596 **Chair:** We are all familiar with the phrase “nature abhors a vacuum”, and we are aware that, if every drug dealer in Northern Ireland were to cease dealing drugs today, the demand for drugs would be maintained unless there were a huge programme of rehabilitation. Could you give us your thoughts on the problems of satelliting when it comes to transitioning? A group, either as an entity or a sub-group, decides, “We’re going to transition. We’re going to get out of this tawdry world of drug dealing.” The estate on which they have been operating will still have client demand and somebody, possibly from within their own organisation or from outside, fills the gap. That would then beg the question, “Well, why are we pulling out and removing ourselves from access to illegitimate funds through criminality and letting somebody else?” It is like Sainsbury’s closing a branch and giving the whole building to Tesco free, gratis and for nothing and saying, “Well, you make the profits out of this particular area.” How do we deal with that?

Dr Edwards: That is a great question and it really demands a more complicated answer than I am about to give you. There are worries, of course, within those paramilitary leaderships that, by departing the stage permanently, they will give up the brand and it will go to someone else or be claimed by someone else. We see that happening. We have seen it most recently in North Down.

The reality is that, if you are serious about transitioning and going out of business, then you make that leadership decision and you go out of business, and you order your personnel—if you believe you are a paramilitary group—to do the same. That has not been convincingly said by the leaderships.

- Q597 **Chair:** I take that, but most businesses go out of business for one of two reasons, primarily: hopeless mismanagement that renders the whole concern unviable, or that whatever they are producing or selling loses market demand to make the business viable. We can cut off as many drug dealers as we like but the demand for the drugs is always going to be there. The efficacy of the business model, i.e. the customer base, remains pretty static, doesn’t it? Are we looking at it from the wrong end of the telescope, or not enough from both ends of the telescope, i.e. supply and demand?



Dr Edwards: We are being quite general. In some cases these satellite groups are there to deal drugs; are there to tax drug dealers, because it gives them an illicit funding stream; are there because they believe they are the defenders of the community and they must, in some misguided way, control this supply. What I am trying to get across is that because the motivations are very different—the political group has said repeatedly for well over 10 years that anyone who engages in illegal activity from here on is a criminal and should be dealt with by the police, but we see that the leaderships of these groups have had to come back and manage this, they feel, to protect their investment.

What we need is a return on investment. We have been giving them the time and the money to transition, and they have not done it. It is time to go. If that means that drug dealers and organised criminals take over when they go, that is for the police to deal with. It does not preclude members of the community from throwing off the yoke of oppression by drug dealers. It has been challenged in various communities around the world through lawful, legal protest action, and also in conjunction with the police and other authorities.

That is where the aggressive, coercive arm of the state needs to come back in and not just coerce but deter these criminal gangs and break them up. More robust legislation is perhaps required, and I know that this Committee has been looking at that. I do believe that some kind of vacuum will need to be filled, but law enforcement needs to fill the gap there and work in partnership in the communities to rid them of this nightmare that many people are living in and do not want to be in. That is what we should not forget.

Dr Brennan: In addition to that, we need to look at the problem like the smoking cessation problem. We need to begin to encourage people to look at the drugs issue and the health impact it has. That is not to minimise it, but we need to see it in its totality. The drugs problem in Northern Ireland is not paramilitaries growing marijuana in roof spaces; it is a global problem. As you said, if you take one competitor out of the market, someone else is going to step in and fill that space.

It is about enabling the community to find ways to not want to avail of drugs, and that is a deeper problem. One of the models that we can look at is the smoking cessation model. It has been reasonably successful around the world. We need to look at those types of models to come into play, as well as the securitisation one, because history tells us that we are not going to police our way out of drugs. We have to find more creative solutions to address that problem. If a paramilitary leader or a paramilitary organisation is going to stop selling drugs, then someone is just going to step into their place.

Q598 **Chair:** On the wider imperatives for a transition, we had a session yesterday and a journalist who regularly corresponds with me sent me a note to say, "For God's sake, they've had since 1994. When do we say



enough is enough?"

To look at it from the other side of the table, say you are part of the loyalist community and you have a leadership role within a paramilitary structure—I accept and appreciate that there are other ways that loyalists combine and organise—and you say, "Hang on a minute; the tide seems to be turning against us pretty sharpish. We have a nationalist First Minister designate. We have growing boredom and impatience from Westminster and London. We have English constituents who are saying to English MPs that there is higher per capita expenditure on somebody living in Northern Ireland than in Dorset, Wiltshire, Beckenham or wherever it may happen to be, and that that's not fair."

This goes back to my earlier question about people feeling incredibly scared and pressured. If they start to have an internal discussion and ask, "How do we get out of this hole that we are in?" people are going to say to them, "Now is not the time. Now is actually the time for us to be more muscular and more present." Dr Edwards, you referenced an upward trajectory in recruits and memberships. Are we trying, through a lot of demographic and geopolitical pressures outwith anybody's control, to push water uphill? That effectively takes us to Dr Brennan's point—Dr Brennan, I am not trying to put words into your mouth—about the management of the status quo in the hope that, over time, things will inevitably and organically change.

Dr Edwards: The political context is such that it does feed into that disaffection, as I have said before. However, when is a good time? There is always an event, part of a process or perhaps an episode that rejuvenates these groups and breathes new life into them. It will ever be thus. If politics does not go the way that they wish, the first port of call is always through political representation. It has always been there. A lot of loyalists have been calling for more effective political representation, but it is for the political parties to try to tie up that disaffection and represent it through exclusively democratic and peaceful means.

In these loyalist groups, their predecessors in leadership roles—some of are still in positions of authority—in 1994 signed up to their own terms and conditions, and later on bought into the Good Friday agreement and, for those parties that were represented around the negotiating table, the Mitchell principles. The Mitchell principles and the idea that they should commit themselves and remain committed to exclusively democratic and peaceful means is something that they need to revisit internally, but also need to be reminded of.

For over 20 years, they have been trying to transform in a more deliberate fashion and they have received funding for that, yet we see an exponential rise in the numbers because they still feel that they have a role. It is time that a more comprehensive look at that and challenge to that was made by politicians, civil society, the entire community and the people of Northern Ireland to say, "There is no need for you to continue with your threats of violence."



That said, they do believe, for the reasons that Dr Brennan has outlined, that they are on the precipice or the edge of the Union. They would argue that my analysis is incorrect, because the Union is not safe, and that they need to retain their structures. My question would be: to what end? Strategically, I do not believe that they have a purpose any longer, and they have not had a purpose for some time. They are trying to create and invent justifications for their continuation and the persistence of paramilitarism.

Q599 Bob Stewart: The Northern Ireland Office has suggested that the three separate strands of terrorism, paramilitary activity and organised crime are a bit blurred. There are separate organisations that look at paramilitarism and terrorism, and obviously the police look at organised crime too, yet they are linked. Is there an effective organisation that overlooks those links? What would that be? Would it be the police? You are stumped, obviously. Well, you are not stumped, but you are thinking about it. Dr Brennan has a quizzical look on his face too. Who, if anyone, would do this and look over it? A security co-ordinator, maybe? Is there such a thing?

Dr Edwards: Historically there was, appointed by Government, I think, for a period during the Troubles. It is to do with how we conceptualise and understand these challenges and how we see the linkages playing out. In the UK, clearly, we would designate terrorism activity as something carried out by dissident republicans that has an effect on our national security, whereas we see organised crime as being an irritant but mainly dealt with by law enforcement agencies very effectively. Paramilitarism is a separate category. I have often thought that it is quite odd that we see paramilitarism as something different from terrorism. I started my remarks today by saying that it is the same thing.

Bob Stewart: Yes, that is what you said to start with.

Dr Edwards: It is one and the same thing from my personal perspective, but how we categorise it has meaning for how we tackle it in terms of counterterrorism, counter-radicalisation or counter-paramilitarism. A much more strategic approach is required to tackle this.

Q600 Bob Stewart: At the national level, we have an overall co-ordinating body that looks at these things—actually, we have several—but in Northern Ireland we do not. That is what we have identified. Perhaps it is something we need.

Dr Edwards: Yes, I would agree with that to an extent. We need to understand what threat they pose. Do they pose a threat to the state, the people or both? A more serious, comprehensive way of tackling this is required. We have outlined some of the ways that a taskforce might work in dealing with the socioeconomic side of things, but there needs to be co-ordination across different agencies.

Q601 Bob Stewart: Dr Brennan, you are nodding, so presumably you agree



with that.

Dr Brennan: I do indeed. For a range of reasons, I tend to leave the securitisation issues to Dr Edwards. I focus more on governance, democratisation and development. I tend to agree with what Dr Edwards tells me on those issues.

Q602 **Bob Stewart:** This is not helped by the fact that Stormont is not working either. I will ask you a yes or no question. Are we saying that it would be good for this Committee to consider recommending that there should be an overall crime co-ordinator or security tsar—police, MI5 or whatever it is—that looks at all these things in Northern Ireland? You said we had one in the so-called Troubles—I much prefer the term civil war, but politically we have to say Troubles. Is that something that you think would be an advantage? Dr Brennan has just listened to you and agreed, Dr Edwards, so I will ask him first whether that is a possibility.

Dr Brennan: Anything is possible, but it is too complex to give a simplistic yes-or-no answer.

Dr Edwards: Going back to a couple of points I have made already, I believe that the IMC, with its watchdog and effective sanctioning capability, was effective at managing some of these problems, but it was time limited. I have pointed to the independent body on decommissioning as another effective example.

The independent aspect of this would be very important for political consent in Northern Ireland, given the divisions that exist politically. How that would be managed—not just from HMG, but from the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive—would be crucial to its working. I would need to give more thorough consideration to it but it seems like a good idea.

Q603 **Chair:** I am thinking to myself that we have been discussing the importance of issues such as health, education, housing and economic development, which are all devolved. A restored Executive would help. I think that is probably the answer. It would not provide all the answers to all the questions, but it would provide a very significant proportion of them.

Dr Edwards, if you wanted to give further thought to the points that Mr Stewart has raised and communicate to us via the Clerks, we would be very glad to receive that.

Before I close the session, I am going to ask you my “Columbo” question, which I have not asked for a while, actually. Poor old Columbo has been missing from the proceedings of this Committee. Is there anything that you wanted to say to us on this issue, which your research has thrown up or your thinking has taken you to, that you are frustrated that we have not asked you about and you would like to place on the record? If there is nothing, do not feel free to fabricate anything, but if there is, now is your window.



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Dr Edwards: One point I did not make in oral evidence is that the security situation and security environment in Northern Ireland has radically changed since the 1990s. There is a tendency for us to look at these paramilitary organisations as if they have just come out of the jungle, to use terminology they used themselves 20 years ago. That is simply not the case. That is supported by some of the questions that have been put to us today.

I just feel that some of the solutions that have been advanced really are caught in a time warp. We know that there are various agencies and ways of dealing with organised crime, terrorism and paramilitary activity today that were not available 20 or 30 years ago. A much more joined-up and comprehensive approach involving political parties and political leadership at the various levels we have talked about, as well as buy-in from these paramilitary organisations, is essential.

I do believe that the Committee has considered both group transition and the proposal put by the IRC, which I see merit in, that an individual or body should be looking at thoroughly engaging and holding these groups to account, because the time has long since passed that they lost their usefulness.

Dr Brennan: One thing that has not come up is the issue of climate change. While we have talked about loyalist and republican areas of multiple deprivation, some of the modelling that is coming through suggests that within 20 to 40 years many of those marginalised and disadvantaged communities will not exist, because they will be under water, particularly around Belfast harbour, so lower north Belfast and inner east Belfast. The drug problem will be long washed away by then. We need to start looking more to the long term at what impact environmental change is going to have on Northern Ireland and how we begin to address it.

Chair: That is interesting. Thank you very much. Gentlemen, this was our last formal session in this inquiry. You have provided us with some academic rigour, for which we are grateful. The Committee will consider its report and bring it forward in due course. We are very thankful for your time this morning.