



Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, HC 359

Tuesday 19 November 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 19 November 2024.

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Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Dan Aldridge; Chris Bloore; Sorcha Eastwood; Claire Hanna; Leigh Ingham; Adam Jogee; Katrina Murray; Dr Al Pinkerton; Gavin Robinson; David Smith.

Questions 1 - 57

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; Fleur Anderson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; Julie Harrison, Permanent Secretary, Northern Ireland Office; Mark Davies, Director, Windsor Framework Taskforce, Northern Ireland Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Hilary Benn, Fleur Anderson, Julie Harrison and Mark Davies.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. It is wonderful to welcome the Secretary of State, the right hon. Hilary Benn; the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Fleur Anderson MP; Julie Harrison; and Mark Davies. Thank you very much for your time today. I am aware that you would like to make opening remarks and you are welcome to make them. Before we do that, I would like to remind everybody that we may be disrupted for votes. Also, for the purposes of this session, the Speaker has granted a waiver to the sub judice rule in relation to the Government's appeal against the Dillon judgment, so we are able to discuss that. Secretary of State, please give your opening comments.

Hilary Benn: Thank you very much, Chair and members of the Committee. Can I begin by saying how much Fleur and I, and indeed all the team at the NIO, are looking forward to working with you? Thanks very much for inviting us to appear before you today. As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I have three main priorities. The first is working with the Northern Ireland Executive to champion Northern Ireland as a fantastic place to invest and create jobs in and to improve



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public services. The second is implementing the Windsor framework and protecting the UK internal market. The third is addressing the legacy of the past.

Fundamental to all of these tasks is good relationships with everyone. Since taking office, I have visited Northern Ireland on—someone counted—19 occasions, involving over 100 different external engagements. The Prime Minister made two visits. He has met the Taoiseach twice. Fourteen different Government Ministers have been over to engage with their counterparts. Those relationships obviously include the First and Deputy First Minister, who I meet on a regular basis; the Irish Government, in my case particularly the Tánaiste; and the EU, with which we want to negotiate an SPS and veterinary agreement, which could help a lot with the operation of the Windsor framework.

No doubt we are going to discuss legacy. In a moment, I want to put on record my and the Government's determination to repeal and replace the legacy Act and, in doing so, to produce legislation that both is human rights-compliant and commands public confidence. I am seeking to work in a spirit of openness as I do that. I also want to thank the PSNI, who time and again exemplify their commitment to keep the people of Northern Ireland safe, as they did during the disorder over the summer, in which a number of them were injured.

Finally, the Good Friday agreement is the bedrock on which Northern Ireland's transformation—and it is a transformation—over the last 26 years has been based. The Government's commitment to the Good Friday agreement is absolute. The sense I get is that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland just want to move forward to embrace a better future. I see my role as supporting them to do that and I am really looking forward to it. If I may, I will pass over to Fleur.

Fleur Anderson: Thank you, Hilary. I will join you in welcoming all the Committee members to your positions. It will be an honour to work with you. Congratulations, Chair, on your role as well. Since my appointment 18 weeks ago, I have also counted up, and I have visited 15 times and held 70 external engagements. It is really important to be speaking to as many people as I can. I have met businesses, unions, schools, arts organisations, and community and voluntary groups and networks. I have also met with Northern Ireland Ministers and UK Government Ministers in Northern Ireland and here. We can achieve more if we work together.

There are some very real pressures facing public services in Northern Ireland and the Executive are making very difficult choices to tackle these urgently. While this issue is devolved, the Government are committed to working collaboratively to support the Northern Ireland Executive, the Assembly and local leaders to deliver better public services, especially in critical areas such as health and education.

Another pressing issue that I am focusing on is child poverty in Northern Ireland. The Committee will know that the latest child poverty figures



show a marked increase in the proportion of children living both in poverty and in absolute poverty. This is a unique situation in Northern Ireland, in that poverty, criminality and paramilitary violence are all interlinked issues and pose a serious threat not only to the tackling of poverty but also to reconciliation and stability. As part of my role on the Government's new child poverty taskforce, I am working to ensure that children in Northern Ireland and across the UK have a brighter and healthier future.

For another issue, I know that many of you will share my concern about the prevalence of violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. Since 2020, 24 women and girls have been murdered. I welcome the Executive Office's new strategic framework on this issue. I am sure that we will be talking about it more later. I also welcome the First and Deputy First Minister's commitment to prioritising tackling this appalling trend.

Finally, another area of focus is reconciliation, which is at the heart of all of our work. It is absolutely intrinsic to everything that we do. Although some good progress has been made, sectarianism, racism and inter and intra-community conflict still pose significant barriers, including for social and economic progress. We are committed to promoting reconciliation by upholding the Good Friday agreement, expanding integrated education, tackling paramilitarism and investing more than £730 million into the new PEACEPLUS programme. Across all my work, I am making a conscious effort to engage widely with all parts of Northern Ireland's diverse and vibrant communities, especially those who have previously not felt listened to or been heard by Governments of the past.

Q2 Chair: Thank you both for highlighting the key priorities for you and the Department over the coming years. Secretary of State, your ministerial responsibilities include working to ensure that Northern Ireland is fully engaged in the development and delivery of the UK Government's missions-led approach. What does this actually mean in practice?

Hilary Benn: There is a balance to be struck here. On the one hand, there is very considerable, as you will know, devolution to the Executive and the Assembly. On the other hand, the UK has, and particularly the new Government have, a great interest in ensuring that the missions are met throughout the UK. As I have reflected on precisely the question that you have just put to me, the best way to progress this is through partnership, sharing experience and offering assistance.

There are examples of what we have already done, for instance, on economic growth. Now that all the city deals are back on track, after a small pause, that is a considerable investment by the UK Government and, indeed, by the Northern Ireland Executive. I have been so impressed by the ambition and vision that all those city deals have shown for the new economy of the new Northern Ireland in so many different ways.



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On policing safer streets, we have provided some additional funding through the recent Budget in the additional security funding. Fleur has been doing a lot of work on the NHS and may want to say something about how our mission in relation to the NHS relates to the huge task that the Executive have, given that Northern Ireland has the worst—and I mean the worst—NHS waiting list in the whole of the United Kingdom.

Fleur Anderson: Each of our missions maps in a different way. For the health service, it is clearly devolved. However, there is so much that we can learn together and I would describe it as an active partnership. What are the best ways in which health service transformation is happening across different parts of the UK? How can different parts of the UK learn from Northern Ireland? Last week, I was with Minister Nesbitt, going to different types of healthcare provision, from multidisciplinary teams to elective surgery in Mater Hospital, and looking at different ways in which we can learn. It is about funding, yes, but it is about a lot more than funding. Another mission would be GB Energy as well, where we are working on the Great British Energy Bill. We are very clearly working on our missions together.

Hilary Benn: There is one other thing I would add on public service transformation. Part of the deal that the previous Government did when the institutions were restored was to set aside £235 million, as you will be aware, for public services transformation. In talking to the First and Deputy First Minister and other Ministers, they will say, "I am working really hard to keep the show on the road with the funding I have here. How do I take some of that out to invest in transforming the services so they are more effective?"

The public services transformation fund recognised that and said, "If you have proposals you want to bring forward where we can provide additional funding to help you begin to make those changes, that is the mechanism". Julie Harrison sits on the Public Sector Transformation Board. I think that there are 11 projects that you have decided should be taken forward. You might want to add a word about that, because it is quite important.

Julie Harrison: There were 47 projects proposed by Northern Ireland Departments. Just for everybody, the transformation board was part of the condition of the restoration deal under the last Government. The money is ringfenced and it is a partnership with the Executive in terms of that decision-making.

The interim board, on which I am one of three people, essentially tests the value for money. Is it really going to transform things? Will this deliver either a more sustainable budget or better outcomes for citizens? Does it change the delivery model? Forty-seven applications came in. Very shortly, the chair of the board will be writing to the Minister of Finance. At that point, the Minister of Finance recommends it to the



Northern Ireland Executive. To be clear, it is the Executive that take the decisions. We are a quality check, first and foremost.

Q3 **Chair:** I am sure that there will be further questions on that. How has that been welcomed, Secretary of State? I know that it is often difficult to have discussions with devolved Governments, who feel like you may be stepping on their toes. Have you had any of that, or have you been welcomed with open arms?

Hilary Benn: The honest answer would be that it is a work in progress, really. I am very keen to build good relationships with all of the people I have the privilege of working with. There have been one or two bumps along the way. The city deals were definitely a bump, but I have to say that we all felt joy when I went to co-sign the heads of terms for the mid-south-west deal. That is now the past and we are looking to the future.

Of course, all devolved Governments say sometimes, "This is for us", but then on other occasions they say, if they have a problem, "Can you please give us more money?" We may come on to funding, but the recent budget of £640 million this year and £1.5 billion next year is—let us be frank—quite a bit more than the Executive were expecting. They have already allocated it out in their latest monitoring round.

I would make the point that all Governments, whether it is the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, Scotland or Wales, have to make decisions about how they are going to spend money and raise money to boost their spending. There is no getting away, in any circumstance, from that choice. Quite properly, Northern Ireland gets additional funding because of its additional needs. This year's budget is 24% more. Therefore, to take the example of health service waiting lists, some people might ask the question—I wish more people did in Northern Ireland—"You have 24% more funding than England and yet you have the worst waiting lists in the whole of the United Kingdom. How exactly has that come about, but, more crucially, what are you going to do about it?"

Q4 **Chair:** I would like to turn to the Minister now and find out a little bit more about your role, which is to lead on other voices and reconciliation. What does that involve?

Fleur Anderson: There are a couple of sides of it. There is who I meet, so my time and engagement, and ensuring that some of those communities that sometimes are not heard as much as others are listened to. That is going to the mosque in Belfast. I have been working with the African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland. I have worked with Cara-Friend for LGBTQ young people. It is something that I have specifically wanted to make sure that there is a focus on. It is listening to their concerns and bringing them back in all the other meetings that I then have.



A lot of it is about connecting as well—so, when I have meetings, to be able to then go and meet with Ministers in Northern Ireland, but also meet Ministers across Whitehall to say, “These are the issues that I am hearing”, and to make sure that I have heard them in the round. Another aspect of that is about funding as well—so, meeting with disability NI, for example, and the Rural Women’s Network, and seeing the work that is going on in the PEACEPLUS programme and UKSPF, the funding that is coming from the Government, how and where that is being spent, and assessing it against not only the economic outcomes, but also outcomes in terms of whether we are working with all the communities we should be working with and what the result of that is. It is then feeding that back into future funding potential as well and making sure that it is aligned as much as I can.

Q5 Chair: That is really interesting and we look forward to maybe having a further conversation on that. It would be remiss of me not to ask what conversations the Secretary of State and the Minister have been having with the Treasury and DEFRA, especially as today we have the agriculture and farming community outside of Parliament. What conversations have you had to assess the impact of the agricultural inheritance tax on farming communities in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: I met the Ulster Farmers’ Union this morning, because it is over for the protest today, and I also had a brief conversation with a number of young farmers after a Westminster Hall debate that I did a little bit earlier. I completely understand the concern that has been expressed, because this is a big change. We have had a long period since 1992 where there has been 100% agricultural property relief when it came to farms. Interestingly, prior to 1992 that was not the case. Indeed, the inheritance tax regime applying to farming in 1991, 1990 and further back was less generous than the one that will be introduced in April 2027. One point I asked was that I do not remember there being a great kerfuffle at the time, when it was a less generous regime than the one that is proposed.

I think the second frustration for everybody is that there is an argument going on about how many estates it will apply to. The Treasury is very clear. It has done its analysis and it says about 25%, but every farmer I met today is convinced that it is going to apply to them. Both of those things cannot be true. The way I look at it is this. If, in the whole, since 1992, you have not had to think about this at all and now you are going to have to think about it, what does it mean for your estate planning? What are the various allowances, depending on the ownership structure of the farm? Do you have a spouse? Can you share allowances between you?

That is along with all the other things that farmers have to deal with, such as making a living, the weather and the challenges that they have. Of course, it is not welcome to them that they have to add that to the list. Only time will tell what the outcome is, but the farmers, as they are



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entitled to do, are making their voice heard. Speaking as a former DEFRA Secretary, farming is absolutely vital to the future of the world, the country and Northern Ireland, where it plays such an important part in rural life and the life of the economy overall.

Q6 Adam Jogee: Thank you, Secretary of State and Minister. It is very nice to see you. I have two quick questions. One is to follow on from the Chair, Secretary of State. Can you outline whether you had any specific conversations? That was a question the Chair posed and I think the Committee would appreciate hearing some more on that. Secondly, to the NIO, what assessment has the NIO made of the number of farmers who will be affected by this? Has an assessment been made by the Department?

Hilary Benn: Your first question is discussions with—

Adam Jogee: It was repeating the Chair's point, because I do not think you quite touched on the specific conversations with Treasury and DEFRA, which was the question, I believe.

Hilary Benn: I have had a conversation with the Environment Secretary. I have not had a discussion with any Treasury Ministers thus far, just to answer that question. Apologies. In terms of the assessment, I am not aware that there is a Northern Ireland-specific assessment that has been undertaken. That may be something to do with the form in which the records are held.

Julie Harrison: DAERA has done an initial assessment. I think that that went to the Assembly maybe on 6 November. It, as the responsible department for this in Northern Ireland, is trying to work that through.

Q7 Adam Jogee: NIO did not do something similar. I would have thought that it would have made some sense to do that. While things are devolved, when decisions are made in Westminster, there should surely be an element of thinking it through.

Julie Harrison: As normal practice, we certainly try to look at this stuff, but all the data is devolved. All the information is devolved, so it is right for DAERA to step back and look at this, with our support, certainly. No, it would be for DAERA to do that.

Q8 Adam Jogee: Have there been specific conversations between officials at NIO and DAERA?

Julie Harrison: We are constantly working with colleagues right across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, yes.

Q9 Gavin Robinson: Secretary of State, these questions relate to whether your role is to be the Government's champion in Northern Ireland or Northern Ireland's champion within the Government. We are going to take evidence on this issue, but I can tell you that there is a greater density of farms that remain in sole ownership or family ownership than is the case in England, for example, Scotland and Wales. Also,



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agricultural land per acre is worth more in Northern Ireland than in England, Scotland or Wales, and therefore there is a greater disproportionate hit to the people of Northern Ireland.

The question being asked is whether you have raised that with Treasury colleagues. I think that we would like to hear from you that you are prepared to do so and to indicate to your colleagues that the change in inheritance tax relief is going to disproportionately hit farmers and rural families in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the United Kingdom.

Hilary Benn: To answer your question directly, Mr Robinson, my role is to be both. I of course am an advocate for Northern Ireland in the Government. That is my job and you would expect it. I am also a Cabinet Minister who upholds collective Cabinet responsibility, as everyone round the table will recognise. As and when more information emerges about the impact—and quite properly the Committee is asking today what this might mean in relation to Northern Ireland—of course that needs to be considered by those who are taking the policy forward.

As I said in answering your first question, Chair, we are at a stage where there is an absence of some of that and a fundamental difference of view about how people are going to be affected. That adds to the concern because you have a very large number of people who think, “This is going to apply to me”. It may turn out that that is not the case. That is the Treasury’s view. In any political debate and discussion, a different starting point on what a proposition actually means is not a helpful place to begin from. If we could agree a set of facts about the implications, including the impact of higher land values in some parts of the United Kingdom compared to others, that would be a good thing because we would have a more informed debate.

Q10 **Katrina Murray:** Secretary of State, I want to take you back to the fiscal framework that you alluded to earlier on. What progress have the Government made in the negotiations on a final fiscal framework with the Northern Ireland Executive?

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Hilary Benn: This is a very important process. I welcome the interim fiscal framework, which the last Government negotiated with the Northern Ireland Executive, and the package involved in the restoration. I referred earlier to the additional funding we have made available through the Budget. The Finance Minister, Caoimhe Archibald, has met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on more than one occasion, and those discussions will continue.

On the level of the funding, the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council was established to answer this question: “Northern Ireland has greater needs. How much extra should it get compared to England?” The Northern



Ireland Fiscal Council, headed by Sir Robert Chote, looked at this and said, "It could be anywhere between 121% and 127%; 124% is in the middle. That is what we suggest". The funding this year meets that overall, in recognition of the additional needs. At the same time, part of the deal reached as part of restoration was a balanced budget this year.

The additional funding that came through the Budget will assist enormously. The Executive have had their monitoring round where they have divvied up the additional cash. I think that £350 million has gone to health, which consumes a very considerable part of the budget for understandable reasons. There is still a gap that needs to be closed, because the arrangement was that, if you do not close the gap, the Treasury will say, "I am afraid you have to pay back the overspend from previous years that you were encouraged to not have to pay back by balancing your budget this year". Caoimhe Archibald has been very clear with her colleagues in saying, "We need to do this". I think that reasonable progress is being made, but obviously the final fiscal framework has yet to be concluded and that will result from the negotiations I have referred to.

The other thing I would say about the interim fiscal framework is that it said that, if, I think, multiple credible sources of information suggest the figure should be other than 124%, the Government would consider that. That was built in as part of the interim deal that has been signed.

Q11 **Katrina Murray:** Following on from that, as you said, there is reference to multiple credible sources. What representations have you had to review the 124% figure?

Hilary Benn: The credible source at the moment is the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council. That is why it was established. It was asked to do the job and it came up with the 124% figure. People may argue, "That is not enough. Can we have more?" In my time in Government, I have never encountered anyone who said, "Thank you very much. You have given me too much. Can I hand some of it back?" That is not how it works.

At the moment, that is the credible source. The commitment was in there, negotiated by the previous Government. Of course, if the circumstances change the Government have a responsibility to look at that, but I am not aware, as I sit here in front of you today, that there are multiple credible sources saying, "No, 124% is wrong. It should be X".

Q12 **Katrina Murray:** Following on on the other part, where you were looking at the repayment of the £159 million in overspends, if the Executive are unable to balance their current year budget, will the Government enforce the repayment of that overspend?

Hilary Benn: There was a deal reached. It was a deal. The previous Government made that part of the condition. They also said that the Executive had to raise some funding themselves, £113 million. Originally,



that had to be over one year. The Executive made the argument, I think quite reasonably, "That is a bit tight. Can we do it over two?" The previous Government said, "Okay, you can".

As I indicated earlier, all politics and all Government is about making choices. There are a number of decisions that the Northern Ireland Executive have made over the years to spend money on various things or not to raise finance from various sources. There has been a long debate about water charges in Northern Ireland. There are plenty of people in Northern Ireland who could well afford to pay water charges. If you do not make use of the means that are available to you to raise funding, it is going to be more difficult to balance the budget. I welcome what Caoimhe Archibald has said, because she is quite clear with her colleagues in saying, "We need to balance the budget this year".

Q13 Adam Jogee: Secretary of State, you touched on health in terms of both the financial pressures and the pressure on service delivery. On Sunday evening, Alan Stout, the chair of BMA Northern Ireland, tweeted, "A genuine question and meant to be apolitical (but my view has changed over the past week). Can the NHS in NI survive without one of the two main parties in charge? I am"—this is Alan—"seriously worried about marginalisation, reprioritisation and excessive politicking". Do you agree with that assessment?

Hilary Benn: I am going to turn to Fleur, because Fleur has been doing a lot of work on the health service.

Fleur Anderson: I have met with Dr Alan Stout as well and talked with other medical organisations bringing together professionals in Northern Ireland. There was a recent conference at which Professor Bengoa, who wrote a report back in 2016 about how the health service can be transformed, has come back to say, "Yes, there has been some progress, but there needs to be a lot more". That needs to include the GPs, which is what Dr Alan is referring to, and the changes in financial circumstances. All of the health worker pay negotiations and, on top of that, an actual change to how the health service is structured will have to be agreed. All those have to go on and we will be supporting them as they do.

There are many healthcare professionals, just as there are many people in Northern Ireland, who are on those waiting lists. If you are on your waiting list for a knee operation for five to six years, you are asking the same thing as well: can this be fixed? We are asking that too. I am glad that the Executive are taking such big steps and we are going to be next to them all the way.

Hilary Benn: The only thing I would add, relating to the first part of the quote that you read out, is that the governance system in Northern Ireland is as it is and has been since the Good Friday agreement. Whoever is in Government in Northern Ireland has a responsibility to make sure that they take decisions that improve public services, in this



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case, not least, in respect of those who are waiting a very long time for treatment.

I find it hard to see how the argument could be made that, because of the nature of power sharing, it is not possible to do that. It is the responsibility of those in Government. That is what devolved Government is all about. As we have indicated, with additional funding and the kind of support and encouragement that Fleur has been talking about, we stand ready to support them in that process, but, ultimately, it falls to the Executive to do it.

Q14 Leigh Ingham: Secretary, what will be Northern Ireland's allocation from the £900 million UK shared prosperity fund for the year 2025-26?

Fleur Anderson: That is the part I am doing. Up until the interim budget, that was going to be finishing next March. Community organisations that were getting this funding were rightly really worried about that. Some of the delivery is absolutely excellent, getting people into work, with all sorts of programmes that have the trust of communities as well. They were rightly concerned about what was going to happen in March. I am really glad that it has continued, even though it is disappointing that it is less than it was.

The negotiations are still under way. There is a meeting with the board. The stakeholder board for that fund is community organisations in Northern Ireland. It is being done very transparently with some of the organisations that will be overseeing that work going forward. The actual allocation has not yet been decided, but we are certainly making sure that it is known how important those voluntary organisations are for communities in Northern Ireland.

Q15 Leigh Ingham: I have a quick follow-up. The NIO has been given £1 million in 2025-26 to support Northern Ireland community projects. How will this money be used or allocated?

Fleur Anderson: It is a good news story. As part of the restoration package, the issue about lots of community organisations, especially smaller ones, not being able to get some of the funding that is available was raised. This million pounds is going to be for a capacity and capability support package specifically for smaller organisations. I went to Sorcha's constituency last week and saw one of those potential organisations, a small community organisation, a residents association, doing brilliantly, but saying, "It is really hard to get funding". I am hoping that that million pounds will enable capacity development and support so that they can be addressed across different communities and different kinds of funding.

Q16 Chair: Could I make an intervention there, Minister? This is great news. It is a good news story about this funding. Will that be multiyear funding or is it just for that year? Is it a one-off? We know how difficult it is for the third sector, for charities, to plan unless they know in advance. Is



that something that is likely to change?

Fleur Anderson: It is for several years. It is early days for developing this and I hope to come back to the Committee in the future and say how this has developed, because it is early years. It is not just for one year, which is also a good thing.

Chair: It is excellent.

Q17 **Leigh Ingham:** Going back slightly, you referred earlier to the Public Sector Transformation Board and the work that it is doing. How are you planning to work with the Northern Ireland Executive on implementing this?

Hilary Benn: Since Julie sits on the board—

Julie Harrison: For now.

Hilary Benn—it might be useful to hear from her.

Julie Harrison: Both Ministers have articulated very clearly what we are trying to do. Like I said earlier, that was a condition of restoration under the previous Government. It is ringfenced money. The interim board, essentially, is receiving applications from Departments, saying, “These are the strongest ones”, and putting it to the Executive. The aspiration for that work is that it will help the Executive around some of those choices that they have to make more broadly. It is a conversation about the £18 billion, not the ringfenced money by itself. I think that Ministers will be talking to Caoimhe Archibald about that soon.

If you are so blinded by what you are trying to do at the moment, as the Secretary of State said, this is ringfenced money specifically for Departments to stop and think, “I can change that process in the following way and deliver savings, or I can deliver better outcomes for people”. To give you a flavour of some of the stuff that is coming through, we have also looked at the draft programme for Government. The alignment around things such as health, special educational needs, justice and so on is really encouraging. You can see Departments aligning with the draft PfG as well. It is about helping the Executive on that journey. The fiscal framework makes clear that this is interim. The conversation there happens about, “What would something else that really helps the Executive think this through, supported by experts, look like for the longer run?”

Fleur Anderson: In terms of how we are working with Ministers, I am working with Minister Nesbitt, going around to see some of the places that funding has been put in for and really understanding what is behind that bidding so that it is not just about that fund, as we say. That is what I am doing as well.

Q18 **Leigh Ingham:** I have one final question. You mentioned the 47 projects that have gone over to be evaluated and decided upon. What specifically



is your role on the board, if that is okay?

Julie Harrison: I am one of three. It is UK money as part of the fiscal framework. Partly, I will be providing assurance back to the Secretary of State and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that it has met the bar in terms of whether it is transformational and is going to drive outcomes. That is my role, along with Frances Ruane and Jayne Brady. We do the initial assessment. Then it is Minister of Finance and then Executive.

Just to say as well, the 47 went to 11. There are also 18 projects in the digital space where we have said that that needs expertise. There are also 18 projects that will be looked at in that, because that is really expert stuff. You did not want different Departments trying to have little tiny digital solutions instead of asking, "What is the answer here in 2024 to all that?" That will follow, but the Finance Minister will be getting the first 11 very soon.

Q19 **David Smith:** Welcome. There remains some uncertainty regarding the Government's plans on legacy. What is the timeline for the repeal and replace process, please?

Hilary Benn: The short answer is as soon as possible, but it is quite a complex process. We came to Government with a commitment to repeal and replace. The legacy Act was widely criticised in Northern Ireland. It achieved something almost unique, which was to bring the parties in Northern Ireland together in opposition to what had been put forward. I have heard that in meeting many victims' families since I was appointed.

What does that mean? It means getting rid of immunity, which was particularly objected to, and restoring civil cases and inquests, starting with the ones that were brought to a halt. In respect of the independent commission, I looked at it. Yes, you could abolish it. If you abolish it, you waste two to two-and-a-half years and all the money that has gone into establishing the staff. You bring to an end the inquiries it is already undertaking. It has had about 100 inquiries. I think there are about 12 cases that it is looking at currently. I have put this question to everybody I have met: "Do you agree that there needs to be an information recovery function, a body?" They say yes. "Do you agree that there should be the capacity to continue to investigate cases?" "Yes". That is the framework that Stormont House set out. The two functions are combined within the commission and recently the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal commented favourably on that. There are some who say that they have to be separate and some who say, "I am not really sure that that is an issue".

I am absolutely seeking to make further changes to the way in which ICIR works because I am very conscious, as is Sir Declan Morgan, that there is a problem of credibility given its parentage. It came out of the legacy Act. The legacy Act said, "The only thing that you can use henceforth is the commission, because we are taking away your civil cases and inquests, and giving people immunity". Those last three are



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gone or in the process of going, and then you are left with the body, which I would encourage people to go and talk to.

It is extremely difficult. There are some people who say, "We will never have anything to do with it". Northern Ireland's history when it comes to legacy casts a great shadow over Northern Ireland's society because of the Troubles and the legacy it has left for so many people. All those have had their difficulties. In the end, if we search for the absolutely perfect, we could still be arguing about it in 10 or 20 years' time. Many of those families do not have the luxury of the time because they are all getting older. The vast majority of those I have spoken to say, "I recognise that no one is going to be prosecuted. I just want to know what happened". If you want me to come on to the Dillon judgment, I will do so.

Q20 David Smith: Can I ask about the commission itself then? Given that that is the part that you have committed to keeping, how would you like to see it reformed? How will you engage stakeholders in that reformation process? If I may as well, how will you orientate it significantly more towards the reconciliation dimension of its remit?

Hilary Benn: That is a very interesting question. I met a victim. His brother had been murdered. He looked at me and said, "This legislation says I have to be reconciled to my brother's killers". My reply to him was, "No legislation can make anybody be reconciled to anyone. Reconciliation has to come from within". Frankly, I am not sure that the word "reconciliation" in ICRIR's title is fantastically helpful. Indeed, Mr Justice Colton, when he delivered his judgment in February of this year, commented on that and said that he did not think that conditional immunity was going to do much for reconciliation. I agree with him.

For me, its function is to try to provide answers for the families who have waited so many years without knowing exactly what happened to their loved ones. If there is evidence that might result in a prosecution, although the chances of that diminish over time because everybody is getting older and people have died, of course there should be an ability to do that. Some people said of ICRIR, "That is the end of all prosecutions". Sir Declan has been at pains to point out, "I am afraid that that is not correct, because we have the capacity to investigate. If we find sufficient evidence that might meet the threshold for prosecution, we pass it to the DPP and the DPP makes its judgment in the normal way".

I am looking at ways in which we can strengthen confidence in ICRIR, given that there is a lot of suspicion, reticence and opposition because of the way it came into being. I am trying to separate that out by dealing with immunity and civil cases and inquests by saying, "If we all agree that you need those functions, we have a body with those functions currently. Can we not make it better, rather than scrap it and start again to end up in, broadly speaking, the same place?" That does not strike me, given the passage of time, as a very sensible approach to take.



To answer the second part of your question, I am currently in the middle of a very long series of meetings with all parties that have an interest in this, in which I ask that question: "What would you like to see in the way of change to ICRIR that might build your confidence to engage within it?"

Q21 **Chair:** Sorry, could I interrupt, David? Off the back of that, I was wondering what ICRIR could learn from the Kenova process.

Hilary Benn: That is also a really pertinent question because there was scepticism about Kenova when it came into being. The thing that Kenova did was to take the families on the journey as it did its work. I can think of one person I have met who said, "I was part of the Kenova process and I can tell you that it gave me what I have been looking for". I have met countless people who have said, "At the time of my loved one's murder the police came round and said, 'We will be back in touch. No stone will be left unturned to find out who killed your loved one'. We never heard another word". Imagine that, if your loved one had been murdered.

There are reasons why, at the height of the Troubles, it was dangerous for police officers to investigate. If you are dealing with a murder now, you have to secure the scene, secure forensic evidence and all that. Things were much more difficult at the time. It seemed to me that Kenova won the confidence of the victims' families it was dealing with. From talking to Sir Declan, the commission absolutely understands that. It wishes to take a trauma-informed approach. The proof will of course rest with what the families have to say after they have engaged.

ICRIR has very considerable powers—this is the other issue—to get access to all the information it requires. It has the power to question people. It has brought in this idea of what it calls its enhanced inquisitorial procedure, which is, in effect, a public hearing. I welcome that unreservedly. Part of the reason people want to have an inquest or a public inquiry is that they want the evidence and the facts to be tested in the open. Very imaginatively ICRIR has said, "We are not forbidden to do that by the legislation, so we want to do it for certain cases". That is then the subject of part of the Dillon judgment in the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal. I think that they understand that but the test—the answer to your question, Chair—will be what the families make of it. Too many people have been let down for too long by an investigation process that, as far as they are concerned, has not happened.

Q22 **David Smith:** This is the penultimate question for me, if I am allowed. Going back to ICRIR, Secretary of State, are you saying that you see no role for ICRIR in the agenda of reconciliation and/or do you see any other role for a UK Government-supported reconciliation process in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: Reconciliation is a process. It is about people's minds. It is how people come to terms with what has happened in the past. If families who have had no answers now get answers, it may or may not



help them to be reconciled with what happened. Some will and some will not. All of us deal with grief and loss in different ways. That is the truth. It is a very important part of the process.

I had in my mind, when you asked me that question to start with, the gentleman who asked, "How can the law tell me to be reconciled?", as I told you. I gave him the answer that I did because it is what I believe, but it can undoubtedly contribute to that. I want ICRIR to succeed in that. Above all, I want it to succeed in the interests of the families who have waited for so long.

Q23 David Smith: What parts of the September Northern Ireland Court of Appeal judgment are you seeking to appeal and why?

Hilary Benn: It is a very complex judgment indeed. There were three essential elements to it. I am leaving on one side the question of article 2 of the Windsor framework, because, as you will know, when Mr Justice Colton ruled back in February, he said that immunity was incompatible with the European convention, but he also struck it down because he said it did not uphold the requirements of article 2 of the Windsor framework. That gave him the power to strike it down, so it does not operate at the moment.

The Court of Appeal said three things. One is that it said getting rid of civil cases is incompatible. That is the Government's policy, so the Court of Appeal has backed what the new Government have come in and said. Secondly, it has observed that, where ICRIR is acting as if it was an inquest—and it is looking in particular at the enhanced inquisitorial procedure I referred to earlier—there is a question of family representation, legal representation and so on. The third related to disclosure, as you will be aware.

It is complex. The honest answer to your question is that the Government are still considering this in consultation, as you would expect, with colleagues. I have said repeatedly, and I will take the opportunity of saying it again here today, that I am determined to ensure that ICRIR is a European Convention on Human Rights-compliant body. I am determined to do that and there are two mechanisms for achieving that: a remedial order under section 10 of the Human Rights Act—I have made two written statements to Parliament in July and September setting that out—and/or primary legislation. The reference to repeal and replace was of course contained in the King's Speech.

You cannot just repeal the Act and put nothing in its place. I hope that, in answering your question, I have explained what approach I and the Government are taking to try to move this forward. I would like to do it as quickly as possible but you are trying to develop the policy at the same time as the courts are coming along from time to time and expressing a view, which makes it a more complex process to manage. That is all.



Q24 **Gavin Robinson:** On legacy, very briefly, Secretary of State, I think that it is fair to say, and members of the Committee will acknowledge, that you are not responsible for the architecture that is before us. In fact, your party in opposition supported many of the proposals for change and amendments at the time of the passage of the Bill. Has the ICRIR raised with you its concerns that it will not receive information relevant to families from potential perpetrators because immunity has been removed?

Hilary Benn: Sir Declan has made it clear that, when it comes to information from the state, we are able to ask for and see everything. There is a balance to be struck on immunity. I will take a parallel example: the discovery of the locations of victims' remains. Northern Ireland wrestled with how we are going to bring forward information about where somebody has been buried. The deal was, in that case, a form of partial immunity, which said, "If you give us information, which we will then use to try to discover the remains of those who were murdered, nothing we find in the course of recovering the body, or any forensic evidence we find in the grave, will be used to prosecute anyone. Entirely separately over here, if, by other means, we encounter evidence that might lead to you being prosecuted, that is an entirely different matter".

That was the basis on which the body took its work forward. It has found a number of people and it is so important to the families to be reunited with the remains of their loved one. There are a small number who have not yet been found. The legacy Act said that you just have to give the information and that is it; you cannot be prosecuted at all.

In the end, society has to make up its mind. I came to this role. I saw the almost universal opposition to the immunity contained within the legacy Act and made the commitment that we are going to get rid of it, which is what we are going to do.

Q25 **Gavin Robinson:** I agree with that. It does not answer the next question of course.

Hilary Benn: I suppose that the question is whether there is a partial form of immunity.

Q26 **Gavin Robinson:** I am not going to parse partial or conditional, but it is one of the challenges on legacy. I think that you accept that too.

Hilary Benn: Of course, we would like to get people to come forward and provide information that they have not done in the past, but there was such a serious objection to the immunity contained in the Bill. That is why we have given the commitment to get rid of it and I am convinced that that is the right thing to do.

Q27 **Gavin Robinson:** As am I. Would you or one of your colleagues like to explain the division of responsibilities for the Windsor framework between the Northern Ireland Office and the Cabinet Office?



Hilary Benn: Yes. As you will know, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Nick Thomas-Symonds, is the co-chair of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee. His opposite number is Maroš Šefčovič, but I work extremely closely with him on a pretty regular basis. Indeed, the two of us have met you to talk about the Windsor framework. We are both trying to ensure that the Windsor framework is able to operate successfully.

The arrival of the Windsor framework was a very significant step forward compared to the protocol that existed before. We have reminded Cabinet colleagues that it is really important to take into account the implications for Northern Ireland given the Windsor framework and the policy decisions that you were making. We have done that on a number of occasions. The guidance has gone out under section 46 reminding all Ministers in all parts of Government about their obligations. I suppose you have two for the price of one who are working on it.

Gavin Robinson: That is a bargain.

Hilary Benn: You may call it a bargain, and who am I to disagree?

Q28 **Gavin Robinson:** Pay half, pay twice. For the benefit of the Committee, it is important to get the distinctions right. The Paymaster General has indicated, and you reaffirmed this morning in Westminster Hall, the desire to see negotiations commence on a veterinary and SPS agreement in 2025. Is that on track and do you think those negotiations will commence at the start of the new year?

Hilary Benn: The European Union has to decide a mandate for any such negotiations. The difference between this Government and the last is that the last Government said, "The deal we have is perfect. It does not need to be improved upon". We have arrived and said, "We can do better than this". Given the challenges in respect of the movement of, in particular, agricultural goods, food and plants across the Irish Sea from GB to Northern Ireland, a veterinary and SPS agreement would be a big step forward. It will require the Government and the European Union to agree how that is going to be sequenced, but the desire is very clear.

It is also fair to say that the EU has some things that no doubt it would want as part of the negotiation. We have already indicated the things that we are interested in. It is for the EU to decide what a negotiating mandate would be. I think that that is its process. It has to get a mandate for the negotiations so that they can commence. I cannot give you a timeline as to when that will be, but clearly we would like to get on with it as soon as possible, because it could, as I said in my opening statement, bring real benefits.

Q29 **Gavin Robinson:** There is no surety in that process, but we know that there is a cliff edge on veterinary medicines.

Hilary Benn: We do, yes.

Q30 **Gavin Robinson:** The Veterinary Medicines Working Group was



established and has met on a number of occasions, but that cliff edge is fast approaching. How will you, as His Majesty's Government, ensure the availability of the veterinary medicines that are so important for farmers, our rural community and food security and safety in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: As it so happens, the Veterinary Medicines Working Group is meeting again on Thursday, I think, this week. What is the process that we are engaged in? It is to understand what are, when all other steps have been taken, the medicines that otherwise will not be available, because there has—well, there has not been an argument. At the beginning, people said that 50% will not be available. Through the work of the Veterinary Medicines Working Group, that percentage is coming down.

The strategy has to be to say that all the efforts that can be made to ensure continued supply have been made. It is to do with where batch testing takes place, pack sizes and all those very practical points. If we end up at the point where there are certain medicines that are needed to treat certain veterinary diseases and that, it is quite clear, will not otherwise be available, it seems to me that that is the moment you turn to the EU and say, "Are you actually arguing that those conditions will not be treated in Northern Ireland, given you have a single epidemiological zone, which is called the island of Ireland? Is that what you are advocating?" Then we would have to see how it would respond at that point. That is what we are working to do. I do not know, Mark, whether there is anything you want to add to that.

Q31 **Gavin Robinson:** Those are the steps you envisage taking if no resolution is found.

Hilary Benn: It is a practical problem. If we come to the conclusion, and can persuade the EU, that there is no other way for these medicines to be available, we both have a problem, and farmers and vets have a problem in Northern Ireland, so what are we going to do about it? In the end, the EU moved on human medicines when we were in the same position and it changed its law, which showed that there is capacity in the Commission to be pragmatic while we are implementing the Windsor framework in good faith, which we are committed to.

Q32 **Gavin Robinson:** If we move on, you have mentioned the Windsor framework on a number of occasions, but you have not referred in this session to "Safeguarding the Union". To use Ulster parlance, we talk about the Windsor framework and you spoke about there being significant progress, but it did not get baby bathed. The Assembly lay in abeyance after the publication of the Windsor framework, but "Safeguarding the Union" significantly moved issues forward. Are you committed to implementing "Safeguarding the Union"?

Hilary Benn: I am indeed. I mentioned it at least twice, and maybe three times, in the debate that you and I were in earlier today.

Gavin Robinson: It is a separate session.



Hilary Benn: I know it is, but I would draw your attention to the references I made to “Safeguarding the Union” only a few hours ago, because it is an important part of the restoration package. We are working very hard on a number of fronts. Although there are difficulties from time to time, as I also mentioned this morning—I mentioned human medicines—if you take dental amalgam or the EU agreeing to delay for a year the new timber regulation, those are all examples of pragmatism where the representations and the discussions that we have had with the EU have enabled progress to be made.

It is constant work. The reason for the framework is very simple, as I set out in some detail this morning. There was a problem when we left the European Union and a practical way forward had to be found. This is the way that has been found and we have to make it work. If we do not operate it, we will not get the veterinary agreement that we all want.

Q33 Gavin Robinson: To square the circle for the Committee on supplementaries, people in Northern Ireland were given a promise on changes on parcels and on customs, and they were to have been implemented already. You have delayed the implementation of those until March 2025. Alongside that, there has been a drawback on the commitment on UK-wide labelling. Does March 2025 stand for customs and parcels? Can the people of Northern Ireland expect to receive their goods in the same way, in an unfettered way, throughout the United Kingdom internal market, by March 2025?

Hilary Benn: We are absolutely committed to that. There were practical difficulties with bringing the parcels arrangements into effect by 1 October. Then we had an election and various other things. The consequence, as you all know very well, of not proceeding with the parcels bit was that the EU said, “If that is the case, the customs easements, which are important to you and us, are not going to happen in October either”, so they have all moved forward to next year. It is really important that we do that, both to honour the commitments that we made in relation to parcels and to get the benefit of the customs easements that everybody moving goods across the Irish Sea would very much like to see.

Q34 Dan Aldridge: Secretary of State, I would like to shift slightly. We will remain with the Windsor framework. In a previous world, I worked a lot in IT and digital services, specifically with those in Northern Ireland, so quarterly I would visit and work with those companies that were trading with the UK and the rest of the world. The European Scrutiny Committee said in 2023 that certain elements of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act may apply directly in Northern Ireland under the Windsor framework, but their impact on the UK’s regulatory approach to AI is unclear.

According to a European Parliamentary Research Service brief from April, EU-UK dialogues on such issues as AI going beyond the trade and co-operation agreement have yet to materialise. Gavin raised the question earlier about the different responsibilities within NIO and Cabinet Office



around artificial intelligence. I am very aware that this may not be something that you are able to answer right now.

Hilary Benn: You anticipate my answer.

Dan Aldridge: There are wide-ranging consequences of the impact of the EU AI Act. I would like to seek some clarity on where we are with that.

Hilary Benn: Many things have crossed my desk since I took up this post, but the question that you have raised is not one of them. The lead would be taken by my colleague Peter Kyle, because he has responsibility for AI. All I can undertake to do, if it is helpful, is to drop you a line with some response to the perfectly fair point that you have raised, but I am not able to assist you today for the reasons I have set out.

Q35 **Dan Aldridge:** I really appreciate that. Thank you.

Moving on again slightly, I will leave the AI point, which we will all be pleased about. What preparations are you undertaking to commission an independent review into the operation of the Windsor framework, if required by the outcome of the democratic consent vote?

Hilary Benn: There is a clear process to be followed. I initiated the consent vote by writing to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It then falls in the first instance to the First and Deputy First Ministers, if they wish, to table the vote. It remains to be seen whether they will. If they do not, it falls to any other member of the Assembly to do so. The vote takes place. It is for the Assembly to make the decision. This is really important.

If the consent vote is passed with cross-community consent, there is no requirement to establish the independent review. If it is not with cross-community consent but just a majority, that review has to be established. I would say, because I do not want to anticipate the outcome, that we will cross that bridge when we come to it. We will of course fulfil all the responsibilities that fall upon us to ensure that that review, if it proves to be necessary, can do its work.

Q36 **Claire Hanna:** These are very interesting discussions. You may be aware that the Assembly yesterday endorsed an Opposition motion about the scope of that review and endorsed the view that it should not just take in the movement of goods east to west. It is fair to say that, over many years, the focus was largely on those transactions and comfort to one political party in particular. Those were important issues and I am glad it was got right, but Brexit did not just happen to sausages. It did a lot of other things.

It is appropriate, and the Assembly have now endorsed this view by a comfortable majority, that the review that is now mandated should cover other issues, such as some of the disruptions north-south, including on services and data, and, perhaps to Daniel's AI question, access to European funds and things such as Erasmus. A number of other issues



have been affected, such as potential representation in the European Parliament. There is precedent there with West Berlin and Gibraltar.

Some of these issues should be explored. We have minutely and acutely explored the feelings of a particular strand of identity and the movement of goods. It is fair that some of the other impacts would be teased out. Are you open to following the endorsement of the Assembly of this view to ensure that some of those issues are caught in the scope of your inquiry?

Hilary Benn: I have received a letter this morning from Matthew O'Toole, drawing my attention to the motion that was passed. There are going to have to be terms of reference for the work of the independent review. I raised an eyebrow when I saw the reference to representation for Northern Ireland in the European Parliament.

Q37 **Claire Hanna:** There is a democratic deficit.

Hilary Benn: Frankly, I do not understand how that would work. The focus of the review is on articles 5 to 10 of the Windsor framework. That is what it is about and therefore one would expect the terms of reference to ask the person who is appointed to focus on precisely that. If they wish to include other things, I suppose that that is a matter for them, but we ought to focus on the task in hand.

That is not to say that there have not been other implications of leaving the European Union, some of which you have drawn attention to. As I said in the debate this morning, personally I would not have started from here, but we are dealing with the consequence of a decision that the British people made. We have to get on with it and manage it in the best way that we can.

Q38 **Claire Hanna:** I will finish on that and say that the reason that the terms are narrowed on those roles is that the world stopped turning. Our lives stopped turning for many years to focus on the niche concerns. A lot of us, including EU citizens and many others, had to park their concerns. This is a way for this Government to demonstrate that the views of all sections of society and the impacts on them of Brexit are now going to be of relevance, and that we are going to be able to find ways to move forward productively. One other issue we could explore is investing and properly selling the dual market access proposition. These are ways to truly make these new arrangements stick. I hope that it is now, as I say, the express view of the Assembly, that review will include some of these issues.

Hilary Benn: I take the concerns of everybody who has been affected by Brexit extremely seriously indeed. I have met a number of businesses. They are well aware of the opportunities that businesses located in Northern Ireland have. They do not need a lot of selling to them because they are busy taking advantage of the dual market access. I meet businesses in my constituency that say, "I would like very much to have what those businesses in Northern Ireland have".



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It is a great opportunity for the Northern Ireland economy. It is a wonderful place to invest. Lots of companies have done it. One of the joys of my job is meeting those who are producing wonderful things with great skill and exporting all over the world. My encouragement to investors is "come, look, see, believe and invest", because they can follow in the path that others have already done.

The other point I would make, which I mentioned to Gavin Robinson earlier, is that this is a Government who have said, "We want a closer relationship with the European Union". That is a really big change compared to what we have seen in recent years, is it not?

Q39 **Chris Bloore:** Hello, Secretary of State. I apologise for dominating your time on the way to the Chamber.

Hilary Benn: We had a lovely conversation about other matters.

Chris Bloore: I feel like we had our own private meeting, but I appreciate your indulgence there. I want to go back to the topic of Casement Park. Having listened to many of your exchanges in the Chamber and having read your declaration with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, I wondered whether you had had any indication from the Northern Ireland Executive on any revised proposals and whether you are still leaving the door open, if they have arrived or will arrive, for the UK Government to also supply funding.

Hilary Benn: The Northern Ireland Executive have had the objective of building Casement Park since 2011. It is a shared Executive commitment. The prospect of the Euros slightly complicated matters, because it was an extraordinary opportunity. When the Euros were awarded to the United Kingdom and Ireland, everyone thought, "Casement Park is done and dusted", because the last Government said, "Yes, it will be built. Yes, we will find the money".

We got elected in July and nothing had been done. Nothing had been done for 18 months, apart from warm words. If I may say so in passing, it was an example of making promises with no cash to back them up. We very urgently undertook a review and asked, "Is it possible, because we are running out of time?" The review came back and said, "We have looked at this. You could spend a very considerable amount of money, upwards of £400 million". A number of other things would have to be favourable, like changing the hours of work on the site, because there has been a long-running planning battle, as you know, from local residents, and there were limits on when the hours of building work could be undertaken.

Even then, you cannot be sure that you would finish it in time. If you put all that money in and still did not build it in time for the Euros, what would people say? "What on earth did you think you were doing?" I am afraid that the only decision we could reach was that this cannot go ahead. That then left, "What are we going to do now?" The Prime Minister



has said that we need to see an alternative proposition, which is what your question alludes to. I had a conversation with Jarlath Burns shortly after the decision was taken not to proceed with the stadium for the Euros. It is reasonable to say, "Can we see it and how much is it going to cost?" At the moment, we do not know the answer to that question.

I am not in a position—to anticipate perhaps a follow-up question—at this stage to say that the UK Government would make a contribution. In the end, you are going to have to have a proposition with a sum of money that is capable of building it, bearing in mind the continuing effects of building price inflation. This is a really important project to the GAA community, because Windsor Park has been done. There have been very good results recently. Ravenhill has been done, but Casement Park has not. In the interest of respecting all of the sporting traditions of Northern Ireland, it is important that Casement Park is built also. I would hope that the building of sports stadia would be something that would unite society in Northern Ireland. I think I made the point in my first oral questions in this job that sport normally brings people together. Can we do it on this too, please?

- Q40 Chris Bloore:** I have a quick follow-up. You make a very fair point about bringing communities together, particularly via sport. It is an awful shame that the previous Government had not allocated funds for us to have redeveloped this ground in enough time to be part of the Euros. If we could stay in touch about any interventions from the Northern Ireland Executive and updates, that would be great. It is a long time since we held a football world cup among our home nations and Ireland. Would it not be fantastic if, although perhaps we have missed the Euros on this occasion, it could be part of a World Cup bid?

Hilary Benn: It is a great sadness to everyone. What an opportunity this was for football in Northern Ireland. It was great that we were awarded the Euros. There were all the stadia that were built, apart from one that was not built. If you had said, "Yes, we are going to go ahead with it", you might think that in 18 months you would have done something about it. I am sorry to report that basically nothing had been done and no money had been committed, but that is the past.

- Q41 Claire Hanna:** On the previous issue, I note your commitment, which I know is genuine, on Casement. It is worth saying that it is not just an Executive issue, for two reasons. First, it is in New Decade, New Approach that Casement will be built and, secondly, the previous Government committed to it in explicit terms with or without the Euros, and sadly it is without the Euros.

It is worth saying that there is planning permission in place that took a very long time for a stadium below the Euros spec, which I understand would be considerably less than some of the figures that were being thrown about, particularly without that kind of emergency cost on it. It is important to point out that that does exist. I know that you have engaged with the GAA.



You are also correct to say that the Executive failed to move this for many years and that is a tragedy as well. I would ask that it is considered not just an Executive project, but something that, because you and Dublin are both committed to it, you continue to take an interest in. I would hope that you would perhaps re-engage with the GAA, which I know is keen to discuss the specifics now that, unfortunately, the Euros window has been missed, through no fault of your own.

Hilary Benn: I would be very happy to meet the GAA again, definitely, having met Jarlath Burns, albeit by video.

Q42 **Claire Hanna:** Great, thank you. I will come back to you and go ahead and make that happen.

I just want to briefly touch on Assembly reform. You will be aware that our predecessor Committee produced quite a substantial report bringing together academic, political and other feedback on some potential reforms to the agreement, particularly strand 1, and the argument from both the UK Government and the Irish Government at the time was, for understandable reasons, that we should wait until the Assembly comes back.

It is now back and, 10 months on, this issue has not progressed. Sinn Féin and the DUP declined an Opposition proposal to have an ad hoc committee to explore it and said it should go to AERC. That committee has met once and reform was not discussed. The First Ministers have repeatedly declined invitations to confirm that they do not intend to collapse the Assembly, so it does remain unstable.

Would you agree with me that there are parties that have an explicit electoral interest in the status quo and therefore will not be motivated to change it? Would you agree that designing out the vetoes assists those parties as well? While the button is there to be pushed, elements of their coalition will often urge them to push it. Would you agree that it seems unlikely that it is going to be reformed without some external influence, and do the Government have a view on that?

Hilary Benn: First of all, I read your predecessor Select Committee's report and all of the recommendations you had made.

What is the truth here? The truth is that the power-sharing arrangement contained in the Good Friday agreement and amended subsequently enabled power-sharing Government to come to Northern Ireland. That was an extraordinary achievement and the fact that Northern Ireland is a very different place now to what it was 26 years ago is a testament to that. The downside, as your question alludes to, is that it also contains the means of bringing the whole house down by one or other of the two parties holding those posts walking out.

I want to say this about the Executive. I would say the single most important thing that has happened in Northern Ireland this year was the restoration of the Executive. When I became the shadow Secretary of State, I said to Chris Heaton-Harris, "Anything I can do to support you in



your efforts to get the institutions back up and running, I will do, because it is the single most important thing for Northern Ireland”.

The people of Northern Ireland have been badly served by long periods of no Government. They need their Government to be working on their behalf. I am very encouraged by the way in which the new Executive have set about their work and the relationship between Michelle O’Neill and Emma Little-Pengelly. There is now a fiscal sustainability plan, going back to the questions that you were asking me earlier. There is a programme for Government. It seems to me there is a real commitment in the work that Mike Nesbitt is doing on health service reform. We should applaud and encourage and say, “We want to back you in moving that forward”.

I do not like to dwell on the possibility that collapse may happen again. If it did, as I said at the British-Irish Association in September, we would have to find a way forward in partnership with the Irish Government, who, of course, are the co-guarantor with us of the Good Friday agreement. Of course, it makes sense to talk about this. The difficulty is how you achieve a consensus. That is the question. How do you achieve a consensus?

There are lots of things that you could point to, as the previous Select Committee report does. Look at the way the Executive works, with the rather siloed arrangements when it comes to ministerial Departments. That is a function of the way it was set up, but it does not support collective ministerial responsibility in the way that we in Westminster would be only too used to. That is an issue. The Assembly was not functioning as well as the Executive, having collapsed.

I have talked about reform to a lot of people. There are a great deal of ideas around, but my answer to your question is that you would need a consensus for change. The consensus for change has to come from the parties in Northern Ireland. It seems to me it cannot be imposed from outside. It has to evolve but, 26 years on, for any structural institution it makes sense to ask the question: could we be doing things better?

Q43 Sorcha Eastwood: Thank you, Secretary of State. It is lovely to see you in this setting. Minister, it was brilliant to have you in Lagan Valley last week. It would be completely remiss of the Alliance MP not to mention reform, considering that has been a key pillar of our policy and our party for a long time. I am only a new MP. I was first elected to the Assembly in 2022 and we wasted years. More importantly, my constituents in Lagan Valley have wasted years.

You said you do not want to dwell on the possibility of it collapsing again, but I am long enough in the tooth to remember the Chuckle Brothers and we know the way that went. We have been there, we have done this before and we have bought the t-shirt.

Alliance has been told that we have won the intellectual argument for



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reform. What I just do not understand is why my constituents in Lagan Valley are any less than somebody in Scotland, Wales or here, in this mother of Parliaments. Why do we have a system that allows my constituents to go without for years, not just once, not just twice, not just three times, but consistently? What do you say that I should say to my constituents when it happens again? There will be a “when”, because we have not changed the system. What should I say to my constituents the next time it fails?

Hilary Benn: It is a really fair question to ask, but it needs to be directed above all to those who have collapsed the institutions. When we seek elected office, and if we are lucky enough to be elected, we take on a responsibility. Being in Government, taking decisions, is tough. It is difficult. You get a lot of criticism and aggravation for perfectly understandable reasons, because we live in a democracy, and long may it continue.

One of the things I reflect on in Northern Ireland is when politicians walk off the job, because that is what it is. I know what would happen to me and Fleur if we walked off the job. Our constituents and society would have a lot to say. “Get back to work”. That does not seem to work in the same way in Northern Ireland and that is because of the history of the place and how you got to power sharing in the first instance.

The argument I am putting to you in response is that it is for the parties to answer that perfectly reasonable question—“Why, one then the other, over a long period of time, have you in the past denied your constituents the benefit of having a Government who are working on their behalf?” I hope very much that it is not going to happen again. We may have an optimistic or a pessimistic view of what the future may hold, but anyone who thought that they would collapse it again must ask, “For what? Over what?” given the huge challenges that Northern Ireland faces and also the extraordinary opportunities.

Northern Ireland has dual market access, as we have talked about. It has the skill, the innovation and the creativity. I spoke at the conference at Queen’s last week about the sheer inventiveness of people in Northern Ireland over a long period of time. If you want to serve the public and you get elected, you have a responsibility. I do not mean to lecture too much, but it is part of the job.

The second part of the answer to your question—and I am well aware, because I have discussed with Naomi Long the question of reform on a number of occasions—is that, in the end, it is incumbent on the parties to agree what reform may look like, if they are able to do so, because it was the parties coming together that enabled the Good Friday agreement to happen. It was the political courage, the consensus, the willingness to move that has changed Northern Ireland over 26 years.



The same process will have to happen for reform to advance but, if I may say so, you are absolutely right to ask the question, because lots of other people are asking it too.

Sorcha Eastwood: I appreciate that. Just to close this out on one last point, we had a conversation about financial stability at the start of this. Collapse costs. It costs in monetary terms. It costs in economic opportunities lost. It costs in terms of people's lives. I do not mean to put words in your mouth. Stop me if I am wrong; I am sure you will. You are, more or less, asking turkeys to vote for Christmas around the table in the north, which clearly is not going to happen.

In lieu of that happening, we have a situation where, as you said at the start, the Good Friday agreement is the bedrock and the cornerstone. I completely agree with you, but I would say in closing, as a wee thing to reflect on, that, if that is the case, surely we, as the UK Government, the Irish Government and anybody elected to any position in Northern Ireland, must make sure that we do not have a situation where the architecture enables that to arise again.

Q44 **Claire Hanna:** Just to close it off, it is important that people know that review is in the Good Friday agreement. We are not stepping outside of those parameters. Review is in the Good Friday agreement. None of the proposals in our predecessor report in any way propose to deviate from the principles of power sharing, partnership and compromise. It is fair to say I do not think the Government's role is to just be hands off and say, "Let them sort it out".

This Government and the Irish Government are co-guarantors. We know that the Good Friday agreement did not happen organically, unfortunately. There were ideas out there, but there was a convening. You say that there is no consensus. The way you get consensus is to talk about it. The parties have indicated that they are open to reform. You are not pushing at a very closed door.

Unfortunately, I am hearing that there is not an interest or an intent to galvanise this conversation, but I will just say that the review is designed in and, 26 years on, people would have absolutely expected that that would be triggered.

On a separate matter, how does the new UK-Ireland summit differ from the existing British-Irish Council and British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which were designed and endorsed in the agreement?

Hilary Benn: It is an addition to it and a very welcome one because, let us be frank, relations between the last UK Government and the Irish Government were pretty bad, to put it mildly. We have been through a torrid time, not least when the last Government signed agreements and apparently had absolutely no intention of honouring them. That is really bad for our reputation in the European Union, hence my point about the Windsor framework and getting to a veterinary and SPS agreement that we want. It was also really bad for our relationship with the co-



guarantors of the Good Friday agreement, as we have just been discussing.

I must confess that there is a multiplicity of bodies. I have a list somewhere of all of them and there are quite a few, but it is good to talk. I was delighted that Micheál Martin accepted my invitation to come to Hillsborough to meet me very early on in my time. I think it was 11 July, if I recall correctly, and I have met him on a couple of occasions since. There is a lot to talk about. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach are going to be meeting on a very regular basis. That is a good thing.

Q45 **Claire Hanna:** I warmly endorse talking and engagement. We had many years of plenty of it. It just does endorse my view that there is nothing that this body does that could not have been done within the Good Friday agreement toolkit and through the existing bodies. It is difficult for people to understand why we created a new one.

Reset is so welcome, but I would urge the Government not to just reset strand 3. There are two other strands in the agreement. They are interlinked and interchangeable, and one cannot prosper without the other. Do not just focus on east-west. You do need to look also at the internal strand 1 arrangements and the north-south as well, as per some of the things I outlined in the proposal about the EU.

Hilary Benn: I hope what we have said today suggests that we are focusing on all of them.

Q46 **Chair:** Thank you, Secretary of State. We will go back to Sorcha. Maybe you might have a little bit of a break now.

Hilary Benn: I am worried about Mark, who has not been able to say anything. He is probably sitting there thinking, "That's fine by me".

Q47 **Sorcha Eastwood:** Minister, you mentioned the issue of violence against women and girls in your opening remarks. That is something that is personal to me in terms of my lived experience, but also to my constituents in Lagan Valley. Twenty-four women have been killed in the last number of years and that includes one of my constituents. So many women are living under the fear of violence, the reality of violence, in their home and in the streets.

We are being so judicious in this Committee so as not to tread into devolved spaces, but the societal issues prevailing at the minute against women and girls are of such quantum that, when I had my Prime Minister's question the other week, I was wanting to start a UK-wide conversation. The issues impacting some of the women and girls in Northern Ireland will be the same in Scotland, Wales or anywhere else in the UK.

It is a difficult one, because some responsibility does lie with the Executive Office, which is leading on the violence against women and girls strategy, as well as Naomi as the Justice Minister. Do you see a role



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for the UK Government to not just support the Executive, which you are doing, but to have a UK-wide conversation, particularly about that online space, which is not devolved? How do you see that relationship working, in terms of improving that?

Fleur Anderson: I am really glad you have raised it. I know the Chair has raised this issue in the past and so have other members of the Committee. I really welcome that, because we need to talk about this issue. If we are not all talking about it, everywhere that we can—in this Committee, wherever I go, in every single space—then we are not going to tackle this because, as you say, the problem is just too great.

You are quite right. We are not saying, “This is devolved and that’s the end of it”. Instead, this new Labour Government have put tackling violence against women and girls at the centre of their programme. We have a new Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Safeguarding and Violence against Women and Girls, which highlights the importance that the Government place on this. We want to halve violence against women and girls. We have a very clear ambition to do that and will use every lever to do so.

That means that we are having a UK-wide discussion, and Northern Ireland must be part of this. This is police reform, specialist rape services in courts, piloting domestic abuse protection orders, strengthening the justice system, empowering victims with specialist support and work in schools. These are all the different ways in which we need to be having this conversation and taking really concerted action, with measurable targets that we achieve, setting ourselves that aim.

We are having this conversation across the UK. In Northern Ireland, it is great that the strategic framework is in place and that conversation is being had as well, because we need to learn from each other. If a police force in England is putting in a specialist rape court or specialist rape unit, we need to learn from that across the whole of the UK, for example, and make sure that, in those very practical ways, we are pushing forward as quickly as we can. We have waited too long for this action and it needs to be done.

You mentioned safety online as well. The previous Government brought in the Online Safety Act. We will absolutely be making sure that that is enforced to the fullest extent. That encompasses things such as harassment, sexual exploitation, intimate image abuse, extreme pornography and controlling or coercive behaviour. It also includes age limits on social media, but we are going to go further. That conversation is being held right now. There will be further work on the online space to make sure that, wherever women and girls are—if it is in their place of worship, on our streets, at school, at university, or at home—they are safe. The online space is important, but so are all of those other spaces as well.



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It is something that I am committed to doing. I raise it all the time, wherever I go. I mentioned I am also on the child poverty taskforce. That work very much aligns. We cannot tackle one without the other. That will be another area in which it is raised. That is a very high-level taskforce. It is chaired by the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. It has the Deputy Prime Minister on it and many Ministers. There was a meeting of the devolved regions and nations on child poverty as part of that taskforce as well. The UK-wide approach has been inbuilt from the start and that is very important.

The Secretary of State for Education is coming to Northern Ireland very soon to work with local community organisations and talk about child poverty. The Under-Secretary of State for Safeguarding and Violence against Women and Girls, Jess Phillips, is coming to Northern Ireland as well and will be holding a roundtable to talk about this UK-wide conversation that you are talking about and what it means in the Northern Ireland context. We want to go at pace and I am really glad that you have raised it here.

Q48 SORCHA EASTWOOD: Thank you for that response. Just before I hand over to others, there is a real risk, particularly in the online space, for children, and that really concerns me. I do, as we all do, a lot of work with school groups, community groups and the likes of Girlguiding, and the amount of comments that I have received either anecdotally or through casework from worried parents, educators or carers is so concerning. There have been recent cases highlighted in the media about the particular element of online sexual exploitation of young people.

That really concerns me. It is difficult sometimes to disaggregate all of these issues, but ultimately the end point is the same: harm. How do we get those bits in place? I would be really interested in all of that work, but particularly on the online space as well, in terms of how we look at both radicalisation of young people and the severe harm that they are coming to.

FLEUR ANDERSON: I would agree with you. As a parent, it is one of those areas in which I cannot know what they are seeing online. The Government have to step in. There has to be regulation to do this. You cannot expect parents to do that. You cannot expect teachers to do that. It has to be the Government's position to do that.

I am also very concerned about age. Some of the most horrifying evidence I have had from police forces has been about the young age at which children are exposed to extreme pornography online. That is absolutely dreadful. We cannot tackle society-wide misogyny if that is happening. It concerns me as well. It is a very live conversation that we are having about the Online Safety Act, but it does not stop there.

Q49 DR PINKERTON: As a not quite yet rehabilitated academic from my previous life, you will perhaps be unsurprised that I am going to ask you a question about education. In the Budget recently, there was an



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announcement of £137,000 for schools to achieve integrated status. I just wondered if you could update the Committee about how you see that being distributed.

Fleur Anderson: The Government support integrated education through two particular funding streams. One of them is the integrated education fund, the IEF, and the other is the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education. Together, we have delivered £1.9 million of grant funding over three financial years. The integrated education fund does the advocacy, giving parents the information and promoting the cause of integrated education. There is quite a lot of fear—"What if my school was to go that way? Would I lose out?" Instead, it would be of benefit. You maintain your identity, but have that in an integrated way.

The council is much more about supporting schools when they are going through that process and giving them the technical expertise. Change of governance sometimes needs a bit more finance. Those two are very complementary to each other. I have also been meeting with Integrated AlumNI. Some of them are parents, but some of them have been through integrated education. They are doing the campaigning work too.

Those are the two sides of it that we are supporting. I am very glad that, within the Budget just now, it was announced that there will be £730,000 of funding for 2024-25. That completes the funding cycle for those and we will be asking for that to continue as well. That is the way in which we support integrated education.

There is a really long way to go. I will highlight that only 8% of pupils in Northern Ireland go to an integrated school. Only 5% of schools are integrated. That is such a small amount. It was in the Good Friday agreement that integrated education would be promoted. We are 26 years on and there has been such a small amount of progress. It is definitely something that we want to be working on.

When the Secretary of State for Education visits, as I have just mentioned, she will be coming to an integrated school. I have been to Erne Integrated College and I have spoken with the pupils about what a benefit it brings to their lives and to their community. Some of them just take it for granted now that they are in integrated education. For those others who have not been through integrated education, they can see the benefit to those who have.

Q50 **Gavin Robinson:** I do not mind who takes this question about the defence industry; it's up to you. You will know that the Committee held an inquiry just prior to the general election and you will also know that there was a commitment in the "Safeguarding the Union" document about promoting and extolling the benefits of increasing defence spend within Northern Ireland.

Secretary of State, Minister, do you agree that there is work to be done on that commitment within the Command Paper?



Hilary Benn: There is a defence review taking place. There are two particular issues that are very close to your heart, in relation to Spirit and Harland & Wolff. It is really important that we achieve an outcome in which both of those continue to contribute to aircraft manufacture and to the building of ships. I do not know if it is helpful just to comment on those.

Gavin Robinson: I was going to ask that as a supplementary.

Hilary Benn: You were going to ask about that anyway.

Gavin Robinson: Please do. I do have a constituency interest.

Hilary Benn: Yes, of course. As you will be well aware, Boeing is buying back Spirit, because it has had some problems with Spirit's quality control—I think that would be a fair way of describing it—in the United States. That is not a reflection on any work that has been done at Spirit in Belfast, but it has indicated that it does not have a particular interest in the function in Belfast.

Airbus is very interested in the making of the A220 wings. I have been around that production facility. It is extraordinary, high-tech manufacture. Indeed, Airbus wants Spirit in Belfast to produce more A220 wings, which is a great opportunity, but it is a difficult time of uncertainty, in particular for the workforce. I spoke to the unions last week about this and the position is that Airbus wants to purchase the wing manufacturing parts. Boeing says it wants to sell the rest.

The plant makes parts for Bombardier and others, including Rolls-Royce. I have spoken to Spirit, Airbus, Bombardier and the unions. We all want the plant, all of the workers and all of the skill to have a secure future. It is a commercial matter currently. We will have to await the outcome of the negotiations.

On Harland & Wolff, the parent company is in administration, but not the yard itself. It did apply for a loan. My colleague the Business Secretary said it would not have been value for money. There clearly have been significant problems with the way in which Harland & Wolff has been run and there have been changes in the management. We are hoping to see a commercial resolution, which safeguards shipbuilding in Belfast and on the other three sites.

Navantia, as you will be aware—which has, together with Harland & Wolff, the three fleet solid support ship contracts—is currently in negotiation with the owners of Harland & Wolff. On Riverstone, I cannot say more, for reasons, as you will understand, of commercial confidentiality, but again, as is the case with Spirit, everybody would like to have certainty about the future as quickly as possible. I hope that assists the Committee.

Q51 **Gavin Robinson:** I will just confirm that the national shipbuilding strategy in 2017 was very important. The ability to attract Government



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work to Northern Ireland was incredibly important. The allocation of the award for the fleet solid support ships remains crucial for the regeneration and renaissance of shipbuilding in Belfast.

My first question—and I appreciate the constituency responses—was about the commitment within “Safeguarding the Union” or Government’s commitment more generally. Northern Ireland is receiving £60 per head of Government spend on defence, as opposed to £300 per head, which is the UK average, or £2,500 in the south-west and south-east of England. Do you as Secretary of State acknowledge that there is a good opportunity for Northern Ireland to benefit from additional investment from UK Government in a way that others have not really thought about before?

Hilary Benn: I agree with you that there is an opportunity. To take advantage of that opportunity, you have to have the capacity to make the things that those who are engaging in defence procurement want to buy. You also need to have stability to encourage investment in Northern Ireland.

One observation I would make, going back to Ms Eastwood and Ms Hanna’s questions about the stability of the Executive, is that having the Executive operating is absolutely fundamental to encouraging more investment in Northern Ireland, as is training up the skills that are needed for the industries of the present and the future. There are businesses that will say, “This is a great place with great skills”, but I had one person ask me, “Is that not the place where they do not have a Government from time to time?”

If Northern Ireland really wants to help itself, then stability of the institutions is absolutely vital in the area of defence as well as others.

Q52 **Gavin Robinson:** Yesterday Parliament passed the Second Reading of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill. You will know directly that you were involved in a process of reappointing a veterans commissioner for Northern Ireland. Can you share with the Committee where that process lies, how many applications you have received and what the timescale will be for appointment?

Hilary Benn: The recruitment process was launched on 16 October. Applications closed on 1 November. The interviews were held—not undertaken by me, but by others—on 14 November. I am currently awaiting a report and recommendations from the interview panel. Following Danny Kinahan’s resignation, I met him and thanked him for the work that he had done as the veterans commissioner, and I was determined that we got on and appointed somebody new in the post. It is a very important job, above all for veterans in Northern Ireland.

Q53 **Gavin Robinson:** Do you think it will be done by the end of this calendar year?

Hilary Benn: I would very much hope so.



Gavin Robinson: What about the end of this month?

Hilary Benn: That depends on when the report appears on my desk and the speed at which I take a decision. I am not bad in the latter. Fleur and I have the privilege of working with the wonderful NAO and civil servants. One of the things that we have found, since we have taken up the posts, is that there are fabulous civil servants who do a terrific job. I am sure that report will arrive with me—

Julie Harrison: Imminently.

Hilary Benn: We have a commitment from the Permanent Secretary. What more could you want?

Q54 **Gavin Robinson:** If you outline your expectation to this Committee, I have no doubt it will be adhered to.

Julie Harrison: Quite.

Hilary Benn: You are most kind. Thank you.

Q55 **Katrina Murray:** Secretary of State, we talked way back, earlier, about the mission-led Government, and of course one of those missions was to make the UK a clean energy superpower. One of the things that the Committee is interested in is that the Government have said they do not anticipate GB Energy funding specific projects in Northern Ireland. Are you concerned that Northern Ireland will not realise the same benefits from GB Energy as elsewhere in the UK?

Hilary Benn: I know Fleur has looked at this. Can I just make a broader observation? This is a great opportunity for all parts of the United Kingdom and for businesses. Let us take an example. Roughly 70% of home heating in Northern Ireland is oil based. A net zero transition means moving away from that to one based on electricity. These islands are absolutely blessed with what I described last week as the liquid gold of this generation: wind-powered electricity. We are in a fantastic position.

I welcome, for example, the approval by Ofgem recently of the new interconnector, which will come from Scotland to Northern Ireland. When I look at the city and growth deals, a lot of the focus in all of those—which the Government are helping to support with their funding—is green energy of the future, hydrogen and electricity generation itself. Great British Energy is a great opportunity and I know, Fleur, you have something to say about that, because you looked at it in particular.

Fleur Anderson: It is being worked out. Great British Energy, despite the name, is actually to benefit all four nations. The money being spent on setting it up is for an energy company for the whole of the four nations. Exactly what that means is being worked out because, as the Secretary of State said, it is a different market. It is an all-island grid. The primary source is oil. There is a different regulator.



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The details of that are being worked out, but it is absolutely intended to be beneficial for customers in Northern Ireland. It is very important to reach the net zero target. It is very important to bring down bills as well for families in this cost of living crisis. The Northern Ireland Executive are investing in this. They are investing £15 million in the energy and resource efficiency support scheme. They are investing £75 million via the invest to save fund.

There is money going into this from the Northern Ireland Executive. GB Energy is being set up in tandem and working very closely with the Executive and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, to make sure that it does deliver for everyone in Northern Ireland as well.

Hilary Benn: Can I just add one thing? It is quite clear that a lot more electricity generation will be required in the future. In a world of electric vehicles and heat pumps, that is obvious, but it is also vital to attracting the new industries. As it so happens, last Friday in my constituency I went to visit a data centre. As the cloud expands, we are storing more stuff. AI comes in. This is a huge business opportunity.

One of the determinants of where those data storage companies go is whether there is enough electricity supply. There is an opportunity. Seize that. That is one area in which, if Northern Ireland sought to do so, it could attract the new industries of the future. Then there are all the knock-on benefits. The future beckons, but we have to grasp it with both hands.

Q56 **Sorcha Eastwood:** Sorry, you are baiting me into this. I have thought this through. In the King's Speech, I heard "GB Energy" and in my head I thought, "We have a perfectly viable regional site". It just so happens to be in Lagan Valley. It is actually the Maze Long Kesh site. I did press, off the back of that King's Speech, and I said, "We have an opportunity here". You mentioned it yourself: the skill, the ingenuity. We are the land of inventors—people like Harry Ferguson and Frank Pantridge.

What really gets to me is that we need to bring people with us on this journey of net zero. Sometimes I do not use that language, because sometimes it puts up barriers to people. We have a really big opportunity, not just in the UK, but particularly in Northern Ireland, to harness that for the next generation of young people. We can say, "Come and be on the tools. Come and do one day in the college and get a really competitive wage as an apprentice, as somebody who is learning".

I would be very up for having those conversations about how we link. We know skills is the next battleground in terms of the war on talent and everything else we have seen in a really tight labour market. I used to work in skills and HR. It is something I am very passionate about, particularly apprenticeships, but if there is anything I can do from my end of things, in terms of having that conversation to really leverage what we have, I will do it.

You are absolutely right, Secretary of State. We have a really unique



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geographical position on these islands. We can harness that not just for environmental improvements, but for social improvements as well, bringing the next generation of people online to those really important jobs.

Hilary Benn: I agree with every single word you have just said.

Sorcha Eastwood: Great, let's do it.

Hilary Benn: It is a fantastic opportunity, but it has to be seized. That is a job for all of us.

Q57 **Chair:** I am going to be a downer. There is so much oil being used currently in heating systems. I wondered whether there is scope or need for a transition fuel. We have to get from A to Z by going through every other letter in the alphabet and I just wondered if that is in your portfolio or something that you have been looking at.

Hilary Benn: It is not specifically but, if you take hydrogen, which will power part of our industrial future, there is that debate about blue hydrogen as opposed to green hydrogen. Some people say blue hydrogen is the transition to green hydrogen. There is the debate about carbon capture and storage.

There are a lot of discussions taking place about how we make the transition, but the need to make it is beyond doubt. Look at what is happening around the world. It is seeing it as an opportunity, rather than, "Gosh, we have to make this change". It is an opportunity for people who get on board first. People are going to have to make the heat pumps. People are going to have to make the batteries, the electric vehicles and the electrolyzers that will produce the green hydrogen.

At the moment, we are turning off wind turbines when we cannot cope with the electricity on the grid. What a fabulous opportunity to say, "Just keep turning and make some hydrogen", which you can store or stick in a battery. These are all the debates that are taking place about how we will create and use the energy in future, in a way that is zero carbon and helps economic development.

Chair: I would like to thank you very much, Secretary of State.

Hilary Benn: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to the officials.