

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Work of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland](#), HC 264

Wednesday 27 January 2021

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Scott Benton; Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Ian Paisley; Stephanie Peacock.

Questions 125 - 155

Witnesses

[I](#): Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; and Chris Flatt, Strategy Director, Northern Ireland Office.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP and Chris Flatt.

Q125 **Chair:** Good afternoon, colleagues and Secretary of State. Thank you for joining us, Secretary of State, for act two of your appearance. The Committee is grateful to you for making up the time in a speedy way following last week.

Can I just touch back on last week, on the issue of the protocol? I am quoting here from the evidence that you gave us: "I am hopeful that they will see new guidance"—they being haulage companies—"and an outline in terms of some practical mitigations that work for them in literally the next couple of days." That was last Wednesday. Are you able to update us on that and the ironing out of creases, or the solving of teething problems, whichever analogy one cares to use?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, that is absolutely right, and that was exactly where I understood it to be. It is a pretty similar position today. Defra and the team have been continuing to engage with the haulage companies. I mentioned last week that a pilot had been run, which worked very well, but following the pilot they have done some further engagement with the sector to make sure that everything is in the right place for what the sector needs. My understanding is that it is still at a similar point. They are looking to issue guidance very, very soon, but they are working with the sector. It has been held back in conjunction with the sector to make sure that, when they come out with this, it absolutely works and all the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed in a way that the sector themselves are happy with.

Q126 **Chair:** Would it be true to summarise that by saying it is not whether but when, and the "when" is imminent?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, that is absolutely correct.

Q127 **Chair:** Would you be able to undertake that your office will let this Committee know when that is and what that is, and when it comes into effect?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, I am very happy to do that.

Q128 **Chair:** We are not going to rehearse that, but you will understand, Secretary of State, why we just wanted to seek an update. Just before we leave that issue, could you give us the benefit of a few sentences on your overview assessment, seven days further from when we met last Wednesday, with another week of its operation, of how you think the protocol is going?

Brandon Lewis: Goods are still moving across. There are some sectors that are still keen to know longer term, post the three-month and six-month grace periods. That work is ongoing. Again, we are engaged fully with the sector. Yesterday, I met the wholesale sector in Northern Ireland as well. As I say, further work is being done on parcels to ensure that we



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get parcel companies into the right place with longer-term solutions. We have the grace period at the moment, so that work is ongoing.

Q129 **Chair:** Thank you, that is helpful. Let us turn now to the issue of legacy, which is really the substantial issue that we wanted to deal with last week; as you know, we ran out of time because of COBRA. There was a written ministerial statement last March, and Covid reared its head. At Northern Ireland questions in the House the other week, I suggested a timeframe, to which you replied, "That work is now ongoing, and I certainly intend and hope to be able to fulfil the timeline that he"—that is me—"has just set me as a target." That target, if you remember, was that consultation would have concluded, draft legislation would be published and a root plan for delivery would be in the public domain by the time the House rises for summer recess. Is that still the case?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. I know that a week is a long time in politics, but that is still where I am at, yes.

Q130 **Chair:** We did not say Easter recess. You may notice we went to the summer recess.

Brandon Lewis: You would have had a different answer.

Q131 **Chair:** Just for clarity, when we say summer recess, we do mean summer recess 2021.

Brandon Lewis: I will agree to that as well. That is certainly where I would like to be.

Q132 **Chair:** You are in generous spirit. Can you give us an overview—I do not know if you want to give a percentage—with regards to where you are in the consultation undertaken with stakeholder groups on dealing with legacy?

Brandon Lewis: As a very direct answer, no, I would not put it in those terms. I am not sure I could do that. I have been clear from the beginning that we want to focus on reconciliation; we want to make sure we approach this in a way that delivers for victims. If you remember that WMS back in March, what some people forget, or did not quite pick up, is that in the very first paragraph it was clear about how the victims are at the heart of whatever we do. We have to acknowledge that there is a huge amount of work to be done. There are a huge number of people who have an interest in this area. It is very sensitive and complex, as I appreciate all of the Committee are acutely aware. We are continuing to engage. It would not be right to put a percentage on it. I just do not think I could consciously do that, but the work is ongoing and it will continue as we go forward.

Q133 **Chair:** Further to your departmental reply to the Committee's interim report—and thank you for doing so in a timely fashion, and also for the kind remarks you made about it—tonally, there was quite a marked differential between the emphatic approach of the written ministerial



statement and your Department's response to the interim report. Can you talk us through the evolution of your thinking on this?

Brandon Lewis: Obviously I cannot control how people interpret or read something but, certainly for me, the intention has always been, as I said back in March last year, to make sure we are engaging widely across all communities. Going forward, we will be engaging across political parties as well.

One of the challenges back in March last year was that, because the WMS was published on the day it was published, it was read in the context of other legislation that was in Parliament at the time, such as the Overseas Operations Bill. The statement itself was clear about wanting to have victims at the heart of it, and I have been consistent about wanting to make sure we fully engage with people across communities.

I will say again that the work the Committee has done has been hugely useful and powerful, as have things like Operation Kenova and, to an extent, the WMS of March last year, because whatever anybody thinks of any one part of everything else that is going on, it started a conversation and moved people into having a conversation. Even over the summer, even as we were all challenged, as we continue to be with Covid, there were clearly conversations going on across civic society as well. All of these things come together.

One of the things that has struck me, as I have been engaging with victims' groups, civic society and the churches, is that, over this last year or so, a lot of people have been having these conversations themselves. One of the benefits of Zoom and all of this is that, in a way, people can come together a bit more often and a bit more easily now they have got used to the technology.

My position still remains. I want to make sure that, when we come forward with any proposals that we may come forward with, they are done with due and proper consideration of people across communities, and with support for what civic society, victims' groups and communities feel is a positive way forward.

Q134 **Chair:** I know we are pressed for time, so we are going to be asking for short questions and answers. What status are you attaching to the Stormont House agreement? Again, the WMS effectively rides a coach and horses through it.

Brandon Lewis: I said at the time that the principles of Stormont House are valuable. Stormont House was 2014; we are in 2021. It has not been delivered, and we have to be alert to that fact. Do not forget that there was also a consultation that my predecessor as Secretary of State, the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands, started on this, which raised issues with some parts of Stormont House. That is why I made the point that the principles of Stormont House are good, but we have to find a way forward on legacy that can actually be delivered and does not cause



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another five or 10 years of discussion, because we have a real challenge at the moment. There is a whole new generation of people coming through that none of us wants to leave this to; I know that some of us on the Committee have discussed this before. We have a duty to find a way forward on this. There is also a generation that, just because of age, we are losing. Finding a way forward while people are still with us is really important as well.

Q135 Claire Hanna: Secretary of State, you have spoken here about engagement, and indeed in your letter to us two weeks ago, including the video-conferencing meetings that are still going on. Other than some of the meetings in December to manage the fallout from Lambeth Palace, can you outline who you are engaging with on this issue?

Brandon Lewis: I would not accept the way that you have outlined it, Ms Hanna. We had planned engagement with people before Christmas, and I have engaged with victims' groups and civic society post Christmas as well, and that will continue.

Q136 Claire Hanna: You are actively engaging on the 18 March statement, which was the start of the conversation. Is that ongoing?

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q137 Claire Hanna: Through, for example, the Lambeth Palace talks, it is clear that there is engagement with the MoD and the Army, and I appreciate that you may want to do that, but I do not have a sense from victims' groups that they feel they are being engaged. Perhaps that is a piece of feedback that you need to hear, because I do not believe that people think they are being properly involved in this conversation.

Brandon Lewis: It is always important to understand how things are perceived, because perception for a lot of people is hugely important. It is very useful to know. I would just point to the fact that some of the victims' groups I met, including those before Christmas, have publicised the fact that we met. It is very open that we have been out there and met them.

Just to be very clear, as you referred to the meeting at Lambeth Palace. That was a meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury. I was not at that. That was not an NIO-organised meeting. That was the Archbishop of Canterbury's meeting. That is entirely legitimate; the more people talk about things, usually the better. My engagement, as I say, with the victims' groups will continue, as it will with wider civic society, and, as we go forward, with political parties as well.

Q138 Claire Hanna: Victims' groups have the sense that, until the Lambeth Palace meeting, they had not had that engagement. I want to move on. Your letter also makes three assertions about the cycle of reinvestigations, but it also mentions civil actions. Can you clarify what your intentions are around civil actions, such as those pursued, for example, by families of victims of the Omagh bomb or families of soldiers



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killed at Hyde Park? Are you intending to pull the shutters down on those as well?

Brandon Lewis: In terms of the note and in terms of the review you have done more widely on legacy, and the report that you have put together, for me to outline now what I may decide to do, when I have not yet finished the engagement and looked at all the advice and what the options are, would be to prejudge the outcome of the work we are doing at the moment. I am not in a position to be able to answer that at the moment.

Q139 **Claire Hanna:** You referenced it in your letter.

Brandon Lewis: I certainly have no intention of anything like that at the moment. At the moment, we are engaging in order to be able to work through what might be the right proposals to take things forward. To comment beyond that at the moment would be to prejudge what that engagement could lead to.

Q140 **Claire Hanna:** It is worth saying that you put it into the letter. It came as news to me and many others, including families who would have been thinking about this course of action in the absence of others. I am aware that a lot of colleagues want to get in, so I just want to briefly address the issue of the victims' pension. It is undoubtedly complex, and it has had a very choppy path to where we are now, but the key thing has to be about giving clarity and some hope to victims and survivors. We pay people who are wrongly convicted and people who have been let down in things like the Windrush scandal, so it seems bizarre to me that the UK Government would be effectively washing their hands of responsibilities to victims and survivors.

It would also seem clear, given the sums that are involved and the upfront and recurring costs, that the only way to get movement on this is for the UK Government to engage in part and to cover the early years' payments. If it is about putting victims and survivors first, can you outline what engagement you are doing on this and what hope and clarity you can offer to those victims, who have worked so hard to try to get progress on this issue and should be accessing these payments now?

Brandon Lewis: Certainly on the last point, I absolutely agree with you. The victims who are entitled to this money should have already been able to have access to it. I absolutely agree with you on that. The UK Government, in the absence of the Executive, have had to deal with the legislation exceptionally. We put the regulations in place. The court endorsed that we had done everything that we could do last year. I still have huge frustration at the fact that it took a court case to get the designation of the Department of Justice. The Deputy First Minister and her team should have got that done earlier. If they had done that earlier, the scheme would be further down the line and victims may well be receiving money right now.



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In your opening comments, Ms Hanna, you were also absolutely right about something else. We need to be categorically clear. I know that the First Minister, the Department of Justice and the Minister there, Naomi Long, with whom I have literally just had a meeting, feel very strongly about this. I will be very clear about this: the victims are legally entitled to their money. When the scheme is able to be open for payments, there is no question about whether the victims get payments. I appreciate there is a discussion and debate within the Executive about how they fund this, but that is not an issue that victims should have to be concerned about. They will get their money; they are legally entitled to it.

Q141 **Claire Hanna:** Are you giving that assurance to people? We know how we got to this point, but are you going to give that clarity?

Brandon Lewis: It is a matter of fact that they are legally entitled to it. I will go a bit further as well. Huge credit is due to the Department of Justice. Minister Long has done a superb job of driving these through pretty fast from when they were designated. The Department has done that despite resistance, it seems, from the Department of Finance to properly finance that work initially, but it is now financed to do that work.

My understanding, talking to the Department of Justice, is that it will be looking to be able to accept applications in March. I understand it is still on the schedule that it set out. That is a good thing, although I share Minister Long's and the First Minister's frustration that they would have liked to have seen all this happen earlier.

We also have to look at this in the context of our getting the Department of Finance an increase of £900 million in the SR, to around £50 billion. The Executive Office estimates that this is, in year one, about £28 million, yet the Department of Finance still has not allocated a single penny in the budget for what is a priority for the Executive. I do not think that is tenable or acceptable. I have spoken about this with the Executive. I actually had a conversation with the First Minister about this just last week. It is another example of why the Executive will benefit from, and needs to hurry up and get on with instigating, the Independent Fiscal Council to help them with that transparency, particularly at a time when the Department of Finance actually has an underspend. We have to make sure that we are ensuring this money is in there properly.

I have one last thing to say on this. I know it is a long answer, but hopefully it gives a lot of the detail you need. The Department of Justice is doing a detailed piece of work. There are lots of figures out there that different people have talked about at different times. The Department of Justice is doing a detailed piece of work at the moment, working with actuaries, to understand the detailed figures and the cycle of how it will work. Once they have done that, I will be very keen to give any support I can. I am due to meet the Justice Minister on this issue next week, by which time I think they will have those detailed figures. The Executive Office has set out its estimate for year one, of £28 million, and it is right that the Department of Finance makes sure that money is available to the



Department of Justice up front. We can all be very clear that the victims are legally entitled to this money. They will get it.

Claire Hanna: Chair, I will finish on this, because I appreciate others want in. Secretary of State, that is an advance on your statement last week, which did appear to withdraw. I agree that the Department of Justice and the Justice Minister deserve enormous credit but, unfortunately, what victims still hear is a lot of the process and the wrangling. I am pleased that you have engaged, and hopefully they finally get clarity on when it is coming and how. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Claire. Secretary of State, I have five members of the Committee who want to ask you some questions on this important issue, and I know we will all be cognisant of time pressures while dealing with this in a proper and meaningful way, given its sensitivity.

Q142 **Mr Campbell:** Welcome back, Secretary of State. I appreciate you cannot go into detail in advance of spelling out the direction of travel on legacy, but I would like to get from you an underlying emphasis on where you see the direction of travel. There is a concern in many sections of the community—victims, ex-service personnel—that, in dealing with legacy down through many years, the intrinsic imbalance that exists between those who were determined to be terrorists, break the law and kill people and those who were trying to counteract them will still persist into the new regime. For example, terrorists tend not to keep paperwork; they tend not to answer questions.

On numerous occasions, I asked the late Deputy First Minister what he knew about incidents of terror when he was in charge of the IRA. He denied everything. He denied all knowledge of any incidents that occurred, whereas, on the other hand, soldiers and police officers, or ex-soldiers and ex-police officers, are expected to answer truthfully what they can remember from 40 years ago. How are we going to bring closure if that direction of travel is not emphasised by you? We have to redress that imbalance so that people who try to uphold the law are not perceived to be the people who are investigated, questioned, queried and suspected of doing wrong when others are not?

Brandon Lewis: Mr Campbell, you just have highlighted and outlined the complexity and sensitivity of this very issue and why, so long after the troubles came to an end, we are all still wrestling with this issue. That is why it is important we have really wide engagement. I have been clear, and I fully appreciate that we have a commitment in NDNA, which we are determined to deliver on. We have a manifesto commitment to give equal treatment and equal outcome for veterans as well, to which I am very alert and on which I am determined that we deliver.

As I say, the whole point of having that wider engagement, not just across the political parties and our partners, the Irish Government, but across civil society and the victims' groups, is to make sure that, if we are able to come forward with proposals, they are proposals that understand all the challenges and the complexities that you have just



outlined. I am not going to prejudge exactly what that will be at the moment, but I am sure it is a conversation we will have when we come forward with proposals.

Q143 Ian Paisley: Today is Holocaust Memorial Day, where we remember victims of holocaust and other genocide around the world. In Northern Ireland, of course, we remember the border campaign and the genocide and sectarian murder, where the IRA—the Catholic IRA—murdered Protestants at the border. We have been pushing, for over a year now, for the Irish Government to move beyond lip service that they would address issues to do with the 500 unsolved murders on the border, which were of British people in their jurisdiction and then dumped on our border. I am wondering if you are able to go any further and let us know what discussions you are having with the Irish Government. They have a second Justice Minister, but there is still no real progress on trying to get them to face up to their responsibilities on helping us address this terrible campaign of genocide that our people were inflicted with.

Brandon Lewis: Again, you highlight some of the complexities of what we are dealing with and why it is not about just one Government or the Executive. It is our partners in the Irish Government as well.

I fully support the position that the First Minister has taken in her contact with the Taoiseach on this, and I know he has agreed to engage on this. It is important that we do it. I am a firm believer that transparency is a good thing in making sure that people have a chance to understand more of what happened. As you say, there is still a huge number of lost lives—some 3,500 cases across the board, beyond the point you were just making—that people still want information on. It is important for all of us, where we can, to show transparency on that. I will give whatever support I can to the First Minister, in the work she is doing, and to the Taoiseach to encourage and develop a positive step forward on that work.

Q144 Ian Paisley: We have 150,000 veterans in Northern Ireland. There are legacy issues regarding them. A lot of them feel as if they are not being shown proper due regard in terms of the Armed Forces Covenant. Under the new Bill that was tabled yesterday on the armed forces, will it be unlawful for a local authority in Northern Ireland, the Government of Northern Ireland, a Government Department or an arm's-length body not to have due regard for the Armed Forces Covenant if that legislation gets on to the statute book?

Brandon Lewis: In a sense, yes. First of all, as you said, there are a large number of veterans in Northern Ireland, so I was very pleased, as part of the NDNA commitments, to be able to appoint the Veterans Commissioner back in the second half of 2020. I know the commissioner is very focused and is already working hard for veterans in Northern Ireland. The Armed Forces Bill, which, again, is part of NDNA, is a really good step forward and will ensure that UK-wide service personnel are not treated detrimentally in any way by the fact of having been service



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personnel. All bodies will have to give due regard to service personnel in that sense.

The passage of the Bill has just started, so the final wording of the Bill will depend on what all of us in Parliament put through, but that is certainly what the covenant sets out, and it is UK-wide.

Q145 Ian Paisley: My constituent, William O’Flaherty, lost an arm and his legs to an undercar booby trap, and his colleague who was with him lost his life. The undercar booby trap was Semtex that was brought in from Libya. Can you give us any further progress on what is happening with our getting knowledge on how the Shawcross report is going to address those issues?

Brandon Lewis: Anybody who has followed this Committee and your statements in the past knows how much passion you have shown, and continue to show, for the issues around the Shawcross report and those who suffered at the hands of Semtex, et cetera, linked to Libya. I made a slightly tongue-in-cheek comment in the opening about a week being a long time in politics, but I am afraid that in this particular area I have nothing to add to what I said last week. The Shawcross report is being considered by Ministers at the moment.

Q146 Ian Paisley: It has been a year, or it will be a year in a week or so.

Brandon Lewis: I understand.

Chair: It will be. You are right. We spent quite a bit of time on Shawcross last week. We know it is important, and I am sure we can deal with that on a separate occasion.

Stephen Farry: Regrettably, I very much want to dissociate myself from the comments about “the Catholic IRA.” It is important that we make it clear that IRA terrorism, and indeed sectarian murders, were strongly condemned by the Catholic Church. It had nothing to do with Catholicism.

Chair: Thank you for jogging my memory. I appreciate how incredibly sensitive this is, and I appreciate the huge problems and fear for their lives that the Paisley family have gone through, but, as a practicing Roman Catholic myself, I would also like to note that I did not think that the way that question was phrased was conducive to trying to move things forward.

Ian Paisley: I think it is only right. It was a sectarian war.

Q147 Stephen Farry: I would like to dig deeper into the Secretary of State’s comments about moving away from the Stormont House agreement, which goes back to 2014. I want him to clarify the rationale for, on the one hand, the Northern Ireland Office doing a fairly detailed consultation on the implementation of Stormont House as recently as 2019, and then, in terms of the New Decade, New Approach agreement of January 2020, having a section entitled “The Stormont House agreement” and making a commitment that the Government would produce legalisation within 100



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days to implement the Stormont House agreement. That does not reference the principles of Stormont House; it references Stormont House. It does not reference a different process; it references Stormont House. I am trying to understand the logic of the current Secretary of State moving away from Stormont House, given that the Government made a very clear commitment, as recently as January 2020, to its implementation.

Brandon Lewis: Part of your question highlights the point I made a few minutes ago, which is that we had this consultation run by my predecessor. It is right that we take account of the feedback from that consultation, where there were issues. If you do not mind, I am going to bring in Chris Flatt, who has been working on this going back to Stormont House. It is right, as I outlined, that we take account of some of the issues in that consultation, and that is why the engagement across civil society and victims' groups is so important.

Chris Flatt: I have been working on this for five years and have tried very hard over the years to get the Stormont House agreement implemented. I know there is a lot of good in the Stormont House agreement, and we need to remember that the legacy part of that was around four institutions.

Here we are largely talking about the HIU and the process around that. More recently, we have been trying to focus on the outcomes we are trying to achieve. We are looking for outcomes that were really there when the Stormont House agreement was put together, around trying to get information to help victims and to help society reconcile itself, and we have been trying to get back to how we can achieve those outcomes.

One of the challenges that we have been trying to address and that came out of the consultation, and that is different from what was in the original Stormont House agreement, is the sheer practical challenge of dealing with 3,500 deaths in a way that people want to see investigations happen. We are getting so involved in arguments and debates about process that we are losing sight of the original intention, which is about supporting victims. That is what we have tried to get back to. There is still a lot of good in the Stormont House agreement, but we want to get away from the debate about process and more into working out what the right outcomes are that we can aim for to support victims and civil society.

Q148 **Stephen Farry:** Mr Flatt, I appreciate that you are a veteran of these processes. I will conclude with a double-hatted question. The Committee was clear, in its interim report, of the dangers of a desktop review of cases not being sufficiently article 2-compliant. Has the Northern Ireland Office reflected on that?

Finally, given that Stormont House was agreed by the UK and Irish Governments, and at the time it was agreed by most Northern Ireland political parties—I appreciate that people may have reconsidered their



position—if we have a different system, will the principle still be applied that the Government will not legislate over the heads of the Northern Ireland political parties and the Irish Government?

Brandon Lewis: Taking the two questions and trying to give you quick answers, we are absolutely focused on our commitment to be article 2-compliant. Yes, I am absolutely cognisant of your report and of our determination that whatever we do is satisfactory for article 2. The short answer to that is yes.

In terms of Stormont House, I have already had some informal conversations. We will continue to engage both with our partners in the Irish Government and, as I said earlier, with political parties in Northern Ireland. You are quite right that not all political parties in Northern Ireland agreed to Stormont House. I appreciate your point that most do. I am an optimist, so I am going to try to find a way forward that everybody can see is the right way forward. We will be having those conversations with the political parties in the near future.

Q149 **Mr Goodwill:** Secretary of State, you have just said that we need to find a way forward. One of the most impressive witnesses I have heard give evidence to this Committee is Jon Boutcher, who heads up Operation Kenova. He is sympathetically dealing with families who just want to know what happened. This is not all about compensation; it is about knowing what happened. Given that the Stormont House agreement has not really delivered what these victims and their families want, do you think there is any merit in upscaling Operation Kenova and giving them the resource to do the job, because what I saw, at least—I am sure most, if not all, of the Committee would agree—was very impressive and was doing what it said on the can, in effect.

Brandon Lewis: Again, I do not want to prejudge where we might come to and what shape that might take. We still have a fair amount of work to do before I am in a position to give you that answer. What I would say is that, although I appreciate some people have said that Operation Kenova has been a five-year, multi-million-pound piece of work that has not yet—and I say “yet”—had successful prosecutions, it should not prejudge the fact that it has had some very important successes that we should all admire, exactly as you have just outlined.

The work it has done has been hugely impressive. One of the things that has struck me, when I have spoken to people in civic society and the victims’ groups, is their positive comments about the engagement they have had with Operation Kenova and Jon Boutcher’s team. They have done a superb job, in the cases they have been able to work on, in being able to show families information so they can understand what has actually happened, whether about an investigation actually occurring or about the information within that investigation. Whatever it has been, it has been a very important step, and the families have found that a hugely positive thing. That is a huge credit, and it is why there are a



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number of aspects of Operation Kenova that we can and should all rightly admire. The evidence they gave to your Committee underscores that.

Q150 Stephanie Peacock: Good afternoon, Secretary of State. I was hoping that you could outline a timetable for delivering on legacy. I know this has been touched on, but you referred to engaging with victims' groups and civil society, so I wondered if you could outline specifically what further plans you have to engage with those groups, and then how you anticipate bringing forward proposals, a consultation and then legislation?

Brandon Lewis: The engagement has been ongoing from the latter part of 2020, and it has been ongoing already in 2021. I have already had meetings over the last few weeks. They will continue across civic society, with myself and Ministers, such as Minister Walker, and my officials. We meet not just civic society but victims' groups and, as we go forward, political parties. I have already engaged on this, to an extent, with politicians in Parliament and, on Mr Farry's point, with the Irish Government, our partners, because obviously there are international agreements around this as well. That work will continue.

One of the reasons I am not putting a set timescale on this is that after so long, since all of our childhoods, and with the great predecessors of myself and all of us as politicians working hard and putting so much into this over the years, it is right that we take the time to get a solution that can work to move things forward for people in Northern Ireland, rather than putting a fixed timeline on it. If there is any timeline at all, the best timeline I could commit to is the one that I have already committed to with the Chair of the Committee.

Q151 Stephanie Peacock: Following on from the answer your official gave, are you now saying that information is the outcome that you are seeking to achieve? Are you ruling out any form of criminal investigation process?

Brandon Lewis: I am not saying that at all. As I have said consistently, we have not made any decisions yet about what that final page will be. It will be something that is done in conjunction with people across Northern Ireland from all communities. I am not in a position to take a view on that at the moment. No, I have not said that at all.

Q152 Chair: Can we just park legacy for a moment, as clearly urgent work in progress? We have a new Administration in Washington and an opportunity to reset the relationship with the Republic of Ireland in a post EU membership environment. What are your hopes, Covid aside, for 2021, going into 2022, for those important bilateral relationships?

Brandon Lewis: They are very positive. I will briefly say, as a follow-up point to Ms Peacock's previous question, I am absolutely cognisant of people in victims' groups particularly who feel that justice is an important part of what they want to see in the future, regardless of which community they come from. I recognise that, but, as I say, I am not in a position to outline what the final decisions will be.



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I am very positive, going forward. I have a very good relationship with the Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney. We talk regularly on a range of issues, particularly at the moment focused on Covid and working together wherever we can to have a joined-up and logical approach. We have a meeting at the end of this week or the beginning of next week to discuss Covid issues specifically, and with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister as well.

Equally, I have had good conversations with the Taoiseach. I know the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have a good relationship. The UK-Ireland relationship is a good one. It is one we all want to see develop and grow. They are physically our closest neighbour, as we share a land border. I am very optimistic that that is a very positive thing at all levels, and through Covid we have all been working together a great deal.

When we look to our friends, partners and historical allies in the US, I am equally optimistic. We have a President, in President Biden, who has a strong personal connection to the island of Ireland; he is interested in issues for both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That is a good thing. The US has always been a strong and positive influence and partner on issues affecting all communities in Northern Ireland. If we look back to the Good Friday agreement, although the co-signatories do not include the US, we all recognise the contribution that our friends in the US have made, not just to the instigation but to the longevity and the progress that peace has made.

Over the last six or nine months that I have been in this office, in the conversations I have had with colleagues in the US, with congressmen across the aisle, there is a strength of feeling and a positive passion for Northern Ireland. That is a good thing, particularly as we come out of Covid. When we are looking at how we invest and see things level up, there is an opportunity to encourage more US investment in Northern Ireland, particularly with this unique, beneficial position of the protocol, and to see investment for growth. There is a lot we can do, and around those issues the US has always been, and continues to be, a really positive partner. I am looking forward to continuing that engagement, both virtually and in person, as soon as the restrictions allow.

Q153 **Scott Benton:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State. In your piece on ConservativeHome last week, you rightly stated your personal commitment and our party's commitment to the Union. Given the fact that many Unionists in Northern Ireland will be concerned by the election of President Biden, on account of some of his previous comments on constitutional issues, will you firmly remind the new US Administration, when you speak to them, of the UK Government's firm position on Northern Ireland?

Brandon Lewis: I have continually made my position clear to our colleagues in the US. To be fair, we should also be clear that the point that President Biden, Richie Neal and Nancy Pelosi made is that they want to see the UK Government abide by the Good Friday agreement. We



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agree with that. It is absolutely sacrosanct. We are absolutely as one on that. That comment came in terms of the clauses that were in the original draft of the UK Internal Market Bill. Our point is that those clauses were there to protect the Good Friday agreement in terms of that east-west link. We are absolutely as one in terms of the sacrosanct position and the determination to continue on the Good Friday agreement.

As has been widely reported, the Prime Minister had a good conversation with the new President at the end of last week. I continue to have engagement with the US. As I say, as soon as restrictions allow, I look forward to going over to Washington to engage in person with colleagues and congressmen on both sides of the aisle.

Q154 **Ian Paisley:** On the American relationship, it might be helpful to engage the work of former President Clinton and former President Bush, who had a good and more detailed understanding of the nuances in Northern Ireland. They might be able to cajole the new President and encourage him to understand slightly better that it is really not acceptable for a President to say that he does not talk to the BBC because he is Irish. We really need a President who actually understands the Northern Ireland thing. I know he has good links with President Clinton.

You have made a speech, Secretary of State, on the centenary. What is next in the plan? We would like to know what you are going to spend this £3 million on. How ambitious is it?

Brandon Lewis: It is a very fair point. The challenge of this current wave of Covid means there has been a restriction on what we can set out and how we plan what we want to do this year, obviously working out when we might be able to see things ease. Although we are in the centenary year, the first key date is 3 May.

I would say two things. First, in the next few weeks I will be outlining what we are seeking to do over the course of the year. I will be able to share a lot more information. Minister Walker is doing a huge amount of work, so we will be able to share a lot more information in the weeks ahead.

I would also make the point that £3 million is not the total. Other Government Departments and others are doing things that will go beyond the £3 million, as we will be able to outline over the next few weeks. Within that, the next thing we will be able to outline is the Shared History Fund. There have been a huge number of bids into that. The National Lottery Heritage Fund is working through that at the moment. Again, certainly before the end of February, I would hope to be in a position to announce the allocations from that fund as well. A lot will be happening over the next few weeks. We will give a better outline of what the course of this year is, allowing for whatever restrictions Covid puts upon us.

It is also hugely important that we recognise there is a big opportunity this year to promote Northern Ireland and everything Northern Ireland



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has to offer. Just this week we have seen Netflix make that extra investment. We have seen investment in the aircraft industry, with the unmanned aircraft, and that is because of the expertise and the opportunities Northern Ireland uniquely has to offer.

Q155 Ian Paisley: Given that it will not really be starting until 3 May, will we run it for the full calendar year, or will we run it for the full 12 months until 3 May 2022?

Brandon Lewis: In light of Covid and some of the Covid restrictions, obviously we do not know exactly how restrictive or for how long that is going to be, but we will know a lot more, hopefully, in the not too distant future, as the vaccine programme continues to roll out. That is one of the things we are looking at at the moment. You will have to bear with me a bit longer on that one.

Chair: Secretary of State, can we thank you for your time and for joining us again? I know we have gone over what had been allocated. We are very grateful to you for you doing so. I would just reiterate that key point with regards to groupage and the protocol, and that you will keep us informed with regards to pilots and the tweaking of that. We are very encouraged to hear, notwithstanding the delays that have happened in the past, your reiteration of the commitment to move legacy forward by summer recess, so that all those who have a very legitimate demand to hear how this is going to be resolved will at least be able to see it and then take a judgment on it. You know as well as I do that this Committee will follow that with a very close and keen interest. We will be publishing a fuller report once we are in a position so to do. Thank you again for your time.