

# Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, HC 157

Wednesday 26 May 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Scott Benton; Mr Gregory Campbell; Mary Kelly Foy; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; and Ian Paisley.

Questions 859 to 882

### Witnesses

[II](#): Peter Sheridan, CEO, Co-operation Ireland.



## Examination of witness

Witness: Peter Sheridan.

Q859 **Chair:** Mr Sheridan, you are very welcome. Could you, for the benefit of the listening public, say a word or two about Co-operation Ireland, the organisation of which you are chief executive officer?

**Peter Sheridan:** Thank you very much for the invitation this morning. Co-operation Ireland, as a peacebuilding charity, has been working on the island of Ireland since 1979. If I was to put it succinctly, we are interested in three relationships: the British-Irish relationship, the north-south relationship and the internal relationships within Northern Ireland.

Our first priority is peace and stability across the island of Ireland and between the Irelands. We were first founded to build mutual respect and understanding across the island of Ireland and we have been trying to do that for 40 years.

At one end, we have been involved in the state visits of the Queen and the President of Ireland, who are our joint patrons, to both the UK and to Ireland. We helped facilitate the handshake between Martin McGuinness and the Queen. At the other end, we are involved in 29 programmes across the island around building relationships, particularly among young people, and exploring the differences, hopefully in a positive way.

Q860 **Chair:** Thank you. That is very helpful. You will be aware that there are some who see the Protocol as a constitutional issue and there are others who see it as purely a trade issue. Where do you sit on that?

**Peter Sheridan:** Personally, I don't sit anywhere on it because the bit that I am interested in is—and I could read you a number of emails where as an ordinary citizen who has requested goods from the UK I constantly get e-mails telling me, "Because of Brexit, we can't deliver those things".

There are those parts of the Protocol that are having a material, adverse impact across all of society—across all of us, not separating it out into nationalism or unionism. That is impacting. If you take the touchstone that the UK and the EU said in the implementation of the Protocol that it should impact as little as possible on the everyday life of communities in both Ireland and Northern Ireland—of course, that is not what is happening.

From a nationalist perspective, they see it as a trade border. I think there are things that nationalism sees that need to be changed. They see it as an opportunity potentially to trade in both directions but they express concerns about the UK extending the grace period unilaterally without agreement with the EU and the damage that that does to relationships.



For unionism—and I pick it up regularly from the unionist community—they see it not just as a trade border but as an identity and a constitutional issue. It makes them less British than the rest of the UK, that increasingly Northern Ireland is becoming separate and distinct from the rest of the UK and that the Northern Ireland relationship with the rest of the UK has been changed without their consent.

**Q861 Chair:** I am sure that for some this may be seen as a flippant; it is not intended to be—or, indeed, naive. Part of the challenge of Northern Ireland, part of the charm of Northern Ireland, has always been that it is slightly separate and slightly different, but so is Wales and so is Scotland. That is part of the unique charm of the four nations of the United Kingdom, isn't it? There is not a uniformity. It may be subliminal, but isn't that quite an important point to accept?

**Peter Sheridan:** Yes, of course there are differences in nations, but I think now for unionism in particular they feel less British.

If you take one example, where Northern Ireland is now in the single market for goods, including medicines—so medicines coming from the UK into Northern Ireland have to have the approval of the EU, and economic decisions will be made in the future largely in the EU where there is no UK representation or no Northern Ireland representation. That is not what is happening in Wales or Scotland. Those are very distinct to us and that is why I said there are almost separate and distinct arrangements now for Northern Ireland.

**Q862 Chair:** There are many people in the SNP and Plaid who would say that, "There are lots of decisions being taken in Westminster for which we don't feel any part of the debate, we are not in a majority, things are being done to us". Isn't that just part of—

**Peter Sheridan:** No, I think that is going to become a challenge in the future. If the UK Government are not willing to trade sovereignty up to an international treaty and international organisation, is it willing to trade sovereignty down into those devolved institutions? I think you can see some of that tension beginning to happen.

**Q863 Chair:** Mr Sheridan, I think I know what your answer is going to be but we have decided to ask this almost as a stock question to all of our witnesses; it is unfortunate that we have to do so, but it follows from last week. You may have heard my question to Dr Kyle. There are some people who don't like the Protocol. I want to take you to a position whereby Brussels and Westminster have addressed concerns as much as they possibly can and there is a residue of people who say, "I don't like this Protocol. I see it as a constitutional assault on my citizenship" or whatever it may happen to be. They have engaged in an argument, they have been heard, they have put their case but they have not won through. They have not achieved everything that they wanted to achieve. Would they be right to resort to violent demonstration to give witness to that unhappiness or should they say, "In a rule-of-law, democratic



country, we engaged and we didn't win: we have to accept"?

**Peter Sheridan:** Well, as somebody who was involved in policing here for 32 years, I can absolutely assure you that violence achieved nothing other than death and destruction and destroyed people's lives and held this place back. For those people who contemplate that that might be an avenue, that they might use violence, I think all of us need to encourage them to think the opposite. The notion that you trash Northern Ireland and that somehow trashing Northern Ireland because of the Protocol is going to secure Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom is beyond the pale, from my understanding of it.

For unionism, what will secure the future of Northern Ireland is if this place is made to work, if there is a good health service, good education service, if people have good access to jobs. If at some stage in the future there is a border poll, people will put an X where they think that they are better off economically. They may have issues of patriotism and nationalism, but people will make judgments based on where they feel secure and where their future is secure. Trashing the place through violence is certainly not going to improve that situation.

Q864 **Chair:** Thank you. Mr Paisley spoke, I thought very movingly, in our earlier session about this vacuum of understanding in the post-troubles, post-Good Friday generation, who possibly look back with slightly rose-tinted spectacles to days of bravery and bravado and derring-do and machismo and all the rest of it—a rather testosterone-fuelled environment.

What can organisations such as yours do? The high-level stuff is great with Her Majesty shaking hands with somebody or the President doing this, that and the other, but just down on the ground, is enough being done to say to our 17, 18, 19 year-olds—it is a bit like that phrase, "If you remember the '60s you didn't live through it"—"If you think that violence is a good thing, you didn't live through the troubles. If you think that violence is going to achieve anything, you didn't live through the troubles"? Is enough being done and what could your organisation do to help that education campaign? I am sure all of us recognise the necessity of that.

**Peter Sheridan:** By way of example, it is important to pinch this from the two ends, from the top down and bottom up. Those important symbolic issues of peace that the Queen and the President were involved in are critically important.

Last March, we decided that on the back of what was happening, we could see the breakdown of relationships between the EU, the UK and the Irish Government. We set ourselves to attract 500 young people across the island of Ireland to build their leadership skills, to broaden their knowledge base about the issues. We did a survey of young people and their answers to the questions about the Protocol are based on what



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community they come from without the experience of the other community.

We have a future leaders programme that we started last March. In the first year there will be 120 young people across the island of Ireland and then year 2 and year 3 will involve young people from the UK and the US. By year 5 we hope to have a cohort of 500 young people through to help build their leadership skills and awareness around this so that they can make decisions based on better information and better knowledge.

**Q865 Chair:** That is all encouraging, but this speaks back to some of the questions that Mr Benton was asking of Dr Kyle. You are all part of the establishment, you have all got titles and letters after your names, you are MPs or councillors, or you are this, that and the other and you are meeting the great and the good and so on.

How does one get into the people who feel utterly and totally unrepresented, totally out of the picture, only sustained by the echo chamber of the narrowness of their own communities? I am not being disparaging but there is a whole group of people—and we all know them and they are not unique to Northern Ireland—who don't get involved with the Duke Edinburgh's Award scheme or leadership schemes or youth parliaments or whatever, who just say, "Officialdom is not for us because it doesn't achieve anything". How does one get into those people who otherwise on a Thursday night in high summer with a couple of drinks inside them go outside and cause mayhem on the streets and it spirals into something that possibly they did not intend it to become?

**Peter Sheridan:** I think that we have to convince them that there are opportunities for young people in life out there. A lot of our work is in those very deprived, marginalised communities. It is not fair to say that it is across the board. Even during the conflict, there were many families in working-class, very difficult areas who never got involved in the conflict in that way and similarly there are lots of families—

**Q866 Chair:** Mr Sheridan, my inbox has been full of people from exactly that group, who have said, "Violence—no thank you. It wasn't part of our modus operandi 30 years ago, 40 years ago. It is not now and it won't be". I agree.

**Peter Sheridan:** The best we can do for those areas is jobs and employment. One of the downsides after the Good Friday Agreement was that when we needed about 6,000 jobs into north and west Belfast in places like Derry, the economic collapse happened around the world. Instead of young people getting those jobs and the peace dividend and opportunities, their mothers and fathers started to lose their jobs and they never got that bounce in those very challenged, difficult communities. We can't take our eye off that ball. We have to continue to work in those communities.

When I was in policing, one of the things that the Patten commission did well was what I call parish hall meetings, where they got down into those



communities and listened to people vent about the difficulties around policing at that time. I think there is an opportunity to do that now with those communities that feel most acutely that they are not being listened to. Whether that is right or it is a perception, nevertheless it is what they are saying. I think there is an opportunity to have those parish hall type events and really get in to listen to the communities so that less venting happens out on the street and more in an organised way.

**Chair:** There we are, colleagues, there may be a few parish halls that we should go and sit our bottoms in as a Committee and provide a platform for people to hear their views and so on. We can give some thought to that. Thank you, Mr Sheridan, for your answers to my questions.

Q867 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** I add my thanks for all the work that you have done in building peace in Northern Ireland.

I want to ask about one group of people we have not talked about. We are very keen to compartmentalise people into either unionists or nationalists, but in my experience there are quite a lot of people from Northern Ireland who don't see themselves in either category. There are many English people living in Northern Ireland; many people who were born in Lithuania or Poland or Romania are working in Northern Ireland and may have married into Northern Irish families. You have expressed your frustration that you can't buy stuff on Amazon and what have you. What is their view of these things or do they see it as an argument that they don't want to get into?

**Peter Sheridan:** I talk about them as hidden communities at times because they are not above the parapet in the way that you have described there. In the overall totality, they are affected by this issue of not being able to access goods and being supplied goods. That is why I said at the start that there are three parts to this. There is the wider impact that is affecting everybody, there is where nationalism comes from and where unionism comes from.

Those groups that you are talking about are sitting in that first category where they are listening to the narratives and conversations that are out there. The bit that is affecting them, that is making the Protocol visible or the border visible, is this issue of not being able to access some of the goods in the UK that they ordinarily would have been able to access to a residence in Northern Ireland.

If it wasn't for that, I suspect that they wouldn't be aware much more about it. I understood at the time that the only people that the border would be visible to is the lorry drivers coming through Larne or Warrenpoint or Belfast and the rest of us would largely be unaffected by it, but that is not what is happening currently.

Q868 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** Thank you. Do you feel that the concerns of loyalists can be addressed within the framework of the Protocol or do you think, maybe looking forward to 2024 when this is revisited, that it will have to be replaced entirely?



**Peter Sheridan:** I am not a politician, but I do listen to what Westminster says and what Europe is saying about the likelihood of the Protocol being removed completely. I suspect that is much further down the likelihood.

It would be interesting for me in the current tensions and current issues if we were able to mitigate against and remove those parts of the Protocol that are causing the most material, adverse impact to everybody's lives currently. If that was removed quickly and the pace of change accelerated in removing those things between the UK and the EU, if those things were recognised, there may not be the same tension.

I fully understand that for unionism it is still a constitutional issue, but I go back to the point that Northern Ireland's security or safety as part of the United Kingdom is still part of the Good Friday Agreement. Until there is a vote otherwise, it remains that way even though some people would argue that it is being removed by stealth. If in the first instance those things could be mitigated in a way that does not make it as visible as now, it may not be as easy for people to see it. At the minute, they can see it and feel it.

Q869 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** It could be the situation I raised with Dr Kyle in the first session: if we can iron out the glitches so that you can order things on Amazon, maybe it will be seen as the devil you know and people will just grudgingly accept it as the status quo.

**Peter Sheridan:** I can assure you that there will be people who won't grudgingly accept it because they will see that, even with medicines, Northern Ireland has to reorientate its medical supplies away from the UK to the EU, so those things are going to be constant. But hopefully they will remain in the political world and people in the political world will be able to constantly argue and try to resolve those things. That is what we want politicians to do, but if we can take the visibility of it away—I keep saying that there is already a border on the island of Ireland between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, an economic border, but it is invisible. None of us see it but what is making the other border visible currently is the issues of not being able to attract goods and food and so on.

**Mr Robert Goodwill:** Yes, but different currencies, different taxation systems and all the rest. Thank you very much indeed.

Q870 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Before I ask my question, Mr Sheridan, I have found the two sessions really fascinating and interesting. You hit the nail on the head when you look at all of these concerns and the disengagement with young people and the fact that they might be wanting to turn to violence and are not happy with their lot. You hit the nail on the head with saying it is decent jobs. I am very much an advocate of a decent job being the answer to lots of ills, giving somebody hope and economic stability, dignity, worth, all of those things and obviously that is lacking in the area. Working strongly with the Government on creating decent jobs and



levelling up those areas would be a start.

My question is about engagement with the loyalists. What do you think the Government and the European Commission should be doing to engage with the loyalists' concerns about the Protocol?

**Peter Sheridan:** Going back to my previous answer, I think there is a need for people to be on the ground and listening to those communities, not simply what they hear across the airways but properly organising events, like Chris Patten did in very difficult circumstances. I think he did about 200 of those events in trying to get a sense of policing. I attended many of them and they were very difficult conversations in very difficult communities that had not had any engagement with police before.

I heard the Chair saying about the possibility of getting people out of Westminster, out of the Dáil, and getting on to the ground, listening to people and taking account of what they are saying, and that is critically important. People feel frustrated when they are not being listened to.

Of course it is easy for some people to say, "We never hear from them, we never see a politician unless an election is happening". We all know that is not true and these things are easy to say, but there is a sense at the minute of people feeling they are not being listened to. Somehow, we have to engage with them in a professional way, making sure they are fed back to and it is not some sort of tick-box exercise.

Q871 **Mr Gregory Campbell:** It is good to speak to Mr Sheridan again, whom I have known for many years.

**Peter Sheridan:** And my MP.

Q872 **Mr Gregory Campbell:** Yes, exactly. Mr Sheridan, on the issue of the attitudes to the Protocol, there has been a lot of talk and controversy about attitudes within loyalism to the implementation of the Protocol and threats of the possible use of violence. In your analysis, from your past—you have been in the police for over 30 years and you are deeply involved in various communities—how realistic are those tensions and how likely or unlikely is the possibility of violence?

**Peter Sheridan:** There is no doubt there are tensions and strong views in unionist communities about the Protocol. What I saw around Easter when unrest happened—although any petrol bomb thrown is a danger to somebody's life; any bus that is hijacked and set on fire is a danger to somebody's life, and I am not minimising it—certainly was not anywhere near the level of violence that I experienced in the past. Nor do I believe it was orchestrated or organised by people and groups that would have organised and orchestrated it in the past.

Some of it was a reaction, an opportunity, and Dr Kyle referred to it as recreational rioting. There is no doubt about that. I saw a tweet from an international journalist who interviewed a young fellow who was rioting and because it is Twitter I cannot stand up the accuracy of it. The tweet



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said when he interviewed the young fellow why he was rioting, he said, "Because of Bobby Storey" and when the journalist asked him, "What do you mean, because of Bobby Storey?" and he said, "Because the police would not prosecute him."

That was the level of knowledge around this. There is a sense among young people who have effectively been locked up for the last year under the lockdown and have got out on the street, and it becomes a sport and an activity. The good thing I saw was lots of former paramilitaries saying young people should not become involved in violence. I have no doubt that people in those organisations were behind it and were part of it, but as a collective, the organisation was not buying it.

I do not dismiss the likelihood of further violence, particularly as we get into the marching season, if changes do not happen quickly and this becomes the constant message and narrative out there.

I work with ex-prisoners' groups and I have encouraged them to go out and play their part in making sure young people do not end up involved in rioting that will blight their own lives and their future prospects. We all—politicians or former paramilitaries—must continue to put that message out there loud and clear, and not somehow say with innuendo or out of the corner of our mouths that on the one hand we are against violence, "but by the way..."

We have to be careful not to do that because language around this is critically important. I said at the beginning of this that violence was never right in this place and it will not be right in the future. We need to persuade those people who think that violence may be an option that it certainly will not improve Northern Ireland's position within the union, if they think that is what it will achieve.

**Q873 Mr Gregory Campbell:** Thanks for that. On these attitudes to possible violence, I raised with Dr Kyle previously the issue appearing in the minds of many people in the loyalist community of responding to the possibility of violence on the border if there were to be protection of the single market by virtue of some hard border on the island of Ireland. You policed for over 30 years, so I am sure you are aware of the many crossing points even if you are not physically aware of all 300 of them.

**Peter Sheridan:** I am.

**Mr Gregory Campbell:** Yes, you are aware of many of them, I am sure, given where you served. How practical would it have been, even if somebody had been so minded, to implement some sort of border that would protect the single market in all those circumstances with 300 crossing points?

**Peter Sheridan:** It would not be practical, but I think what happened in the middle of all that was we confused a trade border with a security border. The border that was there that had watchtowers, permanent checkpoints and roads sealed off was a security border. In a lot of



people's minds, that is the image of the border they were conjuring up because that had been their experience over the last 35 years.

If you lived in South Armagh when somebody talked about a border going up again, it was a security border they were thinking because that is what their experience was and that is what they had seen, whereas this was a trade border. I do not think enough conversation happened around what a trade border meant versus a security border.

**Q874 Mr Gregory Campbell:** I think the former Taoiseach seemed to be confused in that regard as well when he took *The Irish Times* over to Brussels, but set that to one side.

The issue of, for example, Madam von der Leyen's comments yesterday in the context of potential disturbances over the next few months—hopefully they will not come about and we all have to try to exert our influence to ensure they do not: but how helpful or unhelpful do you think her comments yesterday were about the Protocol being the only way and her appearing to dismiss any alternative?

**Peter Sheridan:** What disturbed me about this is that despite all the complexity and challenge, we have had almost a polarisation between the UK and the EU and we need to rebuild trust and engagement around those things. Brickbats being fired in each direction do not help any of us.

What we need to do, particularly as politicians and people who are responsible for it, is get back into how to resolve the issues, because that is what will reduce tensions in this place. You have been around long enough to know that those things raise tensions in this place; they do not reduce tensions. What politicians and those people who are charged with responsibility around the Protocol can do is get back into building trust and relationships and seeking to reduce tensions by ironing out those difficulties that can be ironed out.

**Q875 Chair:** Mr Sheridan, you will not be surprised that Mr Campbell and I seem to be doing a double act on quotes this morning. We did it with our first witness and I am going to do it with you.

You have rightly spoken about trust, goodwill and mutual respect and so forth, as a good basis for trying to move forward, even if nothing is guaranteed in this world. You will have heard what the leadership of the Loyalist Communities Council said overnight, following what the President of the European Commission said, and you will have heard me say earlier that I have no doubt that the rather intractable approach she adopted is not particularly conducive to being helpful. But when somebody who is in a position of thought influence calls upon the Irish Government to “man up” and finishes the statement, “But be clear—the protocol has to go and will go. The people of Northern Ireland will not accept this diktat from yet another unelected German”, does that help to build trust, co-operation, goodwill and trying to find solutions? Or is it what we all think it is probably intended to be: just another incendiary piece of red meat to throw to somebody or another?



**Peter Sheridan:** It is what I talked about earlier—these brickbats being hurled back and front. I suppose some of that is frustration coming out in those groups and organisations, but it is the collective will of all of us to get beyond the throwing of those brickbats.

Unfortunately, I think that the heyday of good relations between the British and Irish Governments, between Britain and the EU, that were built up around the Good Friday Agreement and helped to sustain the peace process, seem to be a bit of a distant memory. But that is the page that people have to get back on to. I have said that our organisation sees peace and stability as a priority.

Q876 **Chair:** Slightly forget the voices off, if you will. Correct me if you think my assessment is wrong, but I think it is a fairly widely-accepted assessment that the relationship between, for example, Secretary of State Lewis and Mr Coveney and the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister is good, cordial, friendly, and has a shared vision and understanding of the need to have greater collaboration and a bipartisan, bilateral approach. Do you think that is a fair assessment? There is the noises off stuff but at the kernel of the thing, the mood is pretty good.

**Peter Sheridan:** I understand they get on very well and, knowing them, I would be surprised if they did not. It is not in their nature to not want to get on with each other, but it is the outworking of it all that is the problem. We have had the Protocol since January and this is constant mood music around this place. Some of these things need to be resolved. The relationships and building of trust between politicians need to resolve some of the issues so there is not this constant flak out there in the media every day.

You referred to President von der Leyen's comments yesterday and the LCC's comments on the back of them. That is a constant music that is feeding the tensions of this place. Those things need resolving by the people who are charged with the responsibility of resolving them.

Q877 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you very much for your interesting comments. I think you are right. The problems are around the tensions and the situation we have got into and the narrative that has been set. An earlier witness, Dr Kyle, outlined a very coherent view on where we are, including about the choices available, and I thought it was very refreshing. He advocated potentially, for example, an SPS or veterinary-based solution or a way to reduce the checks. I suppose I thought he was honest about the choices available and that there is not a magical no-border option there if only the main old Europeans and nationalists were prepared to look at it.

How widespread do you think that view is? You spoke in your opening comments about voices that are not above the parapet, and I know within business there is support for those technical solutions. But how widespread do you think they are in unionism and loyalism and to what extent is there that interest in the technical realities of the movement of



goods and services?

**Peter Sheridan:** It is across the board at the minute because that is the only conversation out there and none of the solutions has been put in place yet. I think there are potentially three solutions.

First, that priority is given to removing those parts of the Protocol that are causing the most adverse impact. Some people may talk about that as sandpapering, varnishing, tweaking and that it may not be good enough, but in terms of reducing tension that certainly helps.

The second part is about how quickly that happens. If we are talking about another six months down the line to make these changes then we will continue to have these types of conversations.

Thirdly, and this is coming from a Northern Ireland perspective, it reduces a lot of those challenges if there is much more of a common approach both to veterinary standards within the EU and the same with food safety standards. The UK already upholds high safety standards of food and animal health, so from our perspective in Northern Ireland what would reduce 80% of those checks that are happening now is better alignment of the standards.

I fully understand that for the British Government sovereignty means having control of all their own levers and not trading some of that sovereignty and making arrangements that align them with the EU. I understand that, but if you are asking me from a Northern Ireland perspective, I think those standards are high already and they could, if at least temporary arrangements were made and agreed to, reduce some tension and allow politics to work at those other parts of it that might be the constitutional or identity issues for unionism.

Q878 **Claire Hanna:** Then I would ask you about alienation and leadership. We having been discussing all morning the extent to which the Protocol and Brexit are one element of the grist in the mill. Where do we go if there is no leadership? You referred to a young man saying he was rioting because they would not arrest Bobby Storey. What if there are solutions, but if people are being told that this is all against you and all under attack?

To somebody who has spent years arguing for no border it is terrifying when it is all being directed at you that they did it, she did it, someone did it. Where do we go if there is no political leadership? Where will the people who are concerned about this go—who will they listen to if some of the sandpapering and barnacle-removing is done, but they are still being told politically that no, this is an attack on you by them? How can we supersede that when other voices are being demonised to such a large extent and is there a better way to communicate some of this?

**Peter Sheridan:** Those are still reasonable political arguments for parties to make that somehow they are now distinct and separate from the UK, and if Britain continues to diverge that is likely to be even



increased. But if we do those other things, we take the visibility out of this for the vast majority of people.

I am not saying it will not still be an issue for people, particularly in the unionist community about their identity and the constitutional position, but if it is not as visible and if there is no immediate threat—the only threat that will come to Northern Ireland’s position in the UK is if a border poll goes in the opposite direction. I think if collectively we make this place work, we supply the best jobs, the best opportunities, the best health service, the best education service, that is what secures the UK union for people who want the UK union secured better than telling people they are losing.

**Claire Hanna:** I hope you are right. Thank you.

Q879 **Ian Paisley:** Mr Sheridan, it is good to see you again and hear from you. I will never forget your closing speech to the policing board when you retired from policing: you said that relationships between people are the most important thing in your life, and I think you have led by example in working towards building better relationships, so thank you for that.

Following on from Claire Hanna’s comment, you made an interesting statement about alternatives—that we do not need any of these checks until there is divergence and only on those products where there is ultimately is divergence. Did I hear you right on that?

**Peter Sheridan:** I said that if we have a common approach to veterinary standards and food safety, and because of the high standards in the UK, there should not be any need for divergence. If those things are aligned between the UK and the EU, that removes about 70% or 80% of the checks that are already happening here. But if they do not remain aligned and the UK continues to diverge, that creates additional checks in this place, the way the Protocol is set up currently.

Q880 **Ian Paisley:** In a sentence, you have confounded those who say there is no alternative. You have spelt out very clearly that here is an alternative that addresses 70% or 80% of the problem. I think people would be cognisant to listen to that.

Could I turn to the issue of trust? Do you think that trust has broken down, or is breaking down, between the divided community in Northern Ireland, between members of the loyalist community and the police in Northern Ireland, and you think there is also a challenge to the north-south relationship?

**Peter Sheridan:** They certainly are not in the same place as they were four years ago, and distrust, mistrust, anti-trust has seeped into all those relationships you mentioned. It is between loyalist communities, working-class communities and politicians; it is across the board. You made the point I said about relationships, and I think that is where we have to energise ourselves, all of us, to building an developing those relationships.



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We live in a democracy and there is absolutely no need for violence around any of this, but it is beholden on those people who have the levers of power and responsibility to not further polarise this place. When those comments you say are made, whether by Lord Frost or President von der Leyen, that feeds into a narrative around this place.

I appreciate that those people may not have that same pulse of this place as the rest of us have, but it certainly feeds into that narrative in this place. My plea to them all is that language is critically important, that people are very politically astute around this place and that things work better when there is the kind of collaboration that happened during the Good Friday Agreement and the period after that and helped to seal the peace process. That is what helped this place grow and helped to sustain peace in it.

**Q881 Ian Paisley:** Can you recall in our recent history any other long-running sore like this period we have been going through in these last five or six months with the Protocol, that has caused any of these tensions before in the last five, 10 or 15 years?

**Peter Sheridan:** The period of the hunger strikes, the period of the Anglo-Irish Agreement; I am thinking back to my policing days to when there were the most difficult times, and similar issues appeared around Drumcree. Difficulties arise because of the impact on people's identity and their constitutional position.

**Q882 Ian Paisley:** Hearing every day about a crisis on one subject like the Protocol has a debilitating effect and it is eroding trust—of that there is no doubt.

Going back to what you said about people being more circumspect in their language, it certainly appears that in the last week or two the Irish Government have decided to be more silent, which has probably been more constructive. Do you get a sense they are picking up that where we are is not a good place?

**Peter Sheridan:** I think the Irish Government recognise, because of their closeness to this place and their understanding, that there are issues around the Protocol that need to be changed and they can see that one of the challenges around all this—sometimes people do not want to approach it—is the impact it has on the underlying principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

If we all believe that in the last 100 years the Good Friday Agreement was probably the single most significant achievement of British-Irish relationships, the potential for 50% of the population starting to withdraw or have concerns about how the agreement is impacting them is not particularly helpful to any of us, where 70% of the population signed up to the Good Friday Agreement. We do not want anybody withdrawing from that because that is what sustained peace in this place. I think the Irish Government are probably alert to that and aware of both Brexit and



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the Protocol disrupting that delicate set of compromises and relationships that underlay the agreement.

**Ian Paisley:** That is very helpful, thank you.

**Chair:** No other colleague has indicated that they wish to come in, so Mr Sheridan, thank you very much indeed for your time this morning, for the clarity and thoughtfulness of your answers, and on behalf of the Committee for the work you are doing in trying to build the responsible citizenship—can we call it that?—that is clearly so important. It is absolutely a bedrock of how democracy and the rule of law can ever hope and pray to function. Thank you for that, and thank you for your time this morning.