



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 9 June 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 June 2021.

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Scott Benton; Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Fay Jones; Ian Paisley; Bob Stewart.

Questions 883 - 918

Witnesses

I: Councillor Billy Hutchinson, PUP Leader and Belfast City Councillor.



Examination of witness

Witness: Billy Hutchinson.

Q883 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues, and good morning to our witnesses this morning for our ongoing inquiry into Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol. You are both very welcome. For those tuning in to see other witnesses, as a result of unforeseen circumstances they are having to rearrange. We look forward to hearing from Debbie Watters and Stacey Graham on a later occasion.

We are going to start this morning with Councillor Billy Hutchinson. Councillor Hutchinson, you are very welcome. Thank you for finding the time to talk to us today. I am going to kick off the questioning by dealing with the elephant in the room first. What would your message be to those who might be considering violence, either as a last resort or, indeed, as any form of resort within the democratic process?

Billy Hutchinson: I have been very clear about this since Brexit. From my point of view, I say that this is a political problem. It is a trade deal with the EU and has to be treated as such. It is a political problem and can only be resolved by political solutions.

Q884 **Chair:** Thank you for that. That is welcome to hear and very clear. For those who disagree with you, within a faction, I suppose, of the loyalist community, who say, "No, when push comes to shove, we have a right to resort to violence", what do you say to them, if you are sitting across the table from them in the same room or whatever?

Billy Hutchinson: We need to be very clear that any threat of violence in Northern Ireland is coming from the republicans. We need to be clear about that first. I do not think that, at the moment in Northern Ireland—how do I describe it?—a threat of violence is being used. Historically, we all know in Northern Ireland that, if you create a political vacuum, you create a vacuum that will be filled by violence. I do not think we have reached there yet. There is a lot of work to be done by the MPs, MLAs and everybody else to actually try to resolve this.

People will say to you that, if the threat of violence was used to actually move a border, that was carried out by republicans. We need to be careful about where we base all this and what premise we are using. It was removed because there was a threat of killing. It is a border that has been there for 100 years and that threat apparently was made by republicans. We do not know the level of threat. We do not know what the PSNI puts it down as. All those questions need to be asked.

The focus has shifted to loyalism because loyalists are not happy about all this. They are not happy about the protocol. They are not happy about being a region in the UK and being treated differently to other regions. Those are things we can discuss as we go along and we can explore.

Q885 **Chair:** We will come to that. There is a final question from me on this



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point and then I will ask colleagues if they have anything on this point to ask Councillor Hutchinson. You probably will have heard, either in real time or in media comment afterwards, the evidence we heard a week or so ago from, among others, Mr Keys. A number of people have commented subsequently about the danger of a generational lack of understanding of the actual physical impact that violence and disruption can have in communities. Those of us of a certain age who either remember it from the telly and the media on the mainland, or were in Northern Ireland at the time, will know all too well of the horrendous situation that it was. Do you have that concern about this intergenerational differential?

Billy Hutchinson: The concern I have is about how all this plays out and the perception. I know that there are MPs from Northern Ireland on the call, and they will be very clear and understand this. The difficulty in Northern Ireland is that perception is as bad as reality. The perception being given by the EU, the British Government, the Americans and everybody else is that this is all the fault of loyalism. We need to get to the bottom of this.

Loyalists feel threatened at the moment and they feel threatened for a number of reasons, far too many to go through here. There are a plethora of them. Let us be very honest and frank: the protocols are a threat to business in Northern Ireland. The biggest threat is that we are sitting in the single market, as the only region in the UK that is. That means that all our autonomy would be aligned elsewhere and not to the UK. That is a threat to people's Britishness.

We were always told that the principle of consent would count. It seems to me that this actually breaches the principle of consent. It is forcing people down a road where they do not need to go. We need to be very clear and I want to make that clear. I am British. I was born in the UK. I still live in the UK. I have a UK passport and a UK driving licence. I have all those things. I am British. For me, the biggest threat to my Britishness is the single market.

I do not know where the British Government will take us. If it takes seven years to get out of Europe, where does that leave Northern Ireland? I do not know whether these questions are being asked, but I certainly want to put that today. We need to manage this. It needs to look like we are managing it and we are seriously trying to deal with it. That is the issue.

Chair: Let me look to colleagues now to see if they have any questions to Councillor Hutchinson on the point of violence, the use thereof and what Councillor Hutchinson has had to say. Then we will turn to other points.

Claire Hanna: I am happy to come in on more general questions for Councillor Hutchinson on the context.

Ian Paisley: Can I declare that I have an interest? I am involved in a legal case involving the protocol.



Chair: Forgive me; I should have asked that beforehand. That is my fault, not yours, and I am grateful.

Q886 **Ian Paisley:** Councillor Hutchinson, Billy, it is good to see you. It would be very helpful if you could put on the record for us how you think unionists and loyalists could be made to feel less British as a result of the protocol.

Billy Hutchinson: The difficulty is that, in terms of that understanding out there on what the protocol is, for me, I see it as a trade deal with the EU, which was supposed to be done to get us out. It has raised more issues and concerns than it has settled anything. In terms of my Britishness, I do not see why the protocol bars British goods from coming into Northern Ireland, or Northern Ireland from being able to take anything from the UK, without having to go through something else—so unfettered access.

We all know that Asda, Sainsbury's and everybody else deliver food to Northern Ireland on a daily basis. I cannot see how that is a threat to the European Union or a threat to anywhere else, but we have that. From my point of view, it is about my Britishness. This is what I am saying to you and I want this put on record. We were told, and we have always been told, that it is enshrined in the principle of consent where people go in Northern Ireland. It seems to me that that principle of consent is being dumped, or at least being tampered with to try to scare unionism.

We can see that the Republic of Ireland, America, the EU and everybody else seem to think that, if they solve the problem in Northern Ireland and there is no border, it is over. I would remind people that there is a very large minority, no matter what way it goes, whether that is a pro-Irish minority or a pro-British minority. That is a very difficult thing. We live in a divided society and we need to remember that we live in a divided society. We need to be working at that.

I do not have a problem with having relationships with the Republic of Ireland, but it is not about the sovereignty of the UK. It is about how we co-operate on an island that we share. That is what it should be about. From my point of view, I am waiting to see what dilutes my Britishness. I have to be honest: I heard the breakfast news this morning and they are now talking about not letting chilled goods into Northern Ireland from England. How far does this go?

Q887 **Ian Paisley:** I am going to come to that in a wee bit with my third question, but it is just dealing with this issue of the impact this has on the sense of Britishness and the sense of being part of the same state as the rest of the UK. Is it the issue that we, or the people of Northern Ireland, literally have no say over these regulations, and yet Europe will have a say? Whether it is a positive or a negative say, the fact is that it will have a say, the UK Government will have a say, but for us, the people of Northern Ireland, our consent has been removed from that. Is that the bit that starts the fear that there is an erosion of our sense of



Britishness?

Billy Hutchinson: The protocols seem to be the manifestation of it and that is what people believe, but my concern is the single market and how that plays out. We are not represented in Europe by anybody. The single market suggested that we were represented by the Republic of Ireland. We are not. We are not looking to vote for people in the Republic of Ireland. We are not looking to vote in terms of people from the Republic of Ireland representing us anywhere, let alone Europe. Those are the things that are telling.

We talk about a border in the Irish Sea. The border is in UK ports. They are not in the Irish Sea. They are in UK ports. If you want to come through Liverpool, Stranraer or anywhere at all to Larne or Belfast, you are restricted. People are saying that that restriction is a diminution of people's rights in terms of the UK Government. I say to you again: my biggest fear is that, if we are left in the single market, we are being aligned with Europe and not aligned with the UK. Where does that leave us in seven years' time, when all of this would seem to be resolved in seven years' time? Where does that leave us?

There is no doubt about it, Ian. The difficulty is on the streets. I will talk for my DEA, which is Court, with Shankill and part of the Falls. There is no question but that people are angry and people misunderstood how Brexit was going to play out. People did not realise that Brexit would have a bigger impact in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. The protocols are the manifestation of people attacking their Britishness or taking something away.

Q888 **Ian Paisley:** You would agree, then, that there should be no checks on any goods that are going to be consumed in Northern Ireland and come into Northern Ireland from GB. There should be no checks on goods leaving Northern Ireland to be consumed in GB.

Billy Hutchinson: Yes, that is our party's position and my position. We always say that it is twofold. We have businesses that are struggling and we have some businesses that are not struggling, because they have been able to come to terms much more easily with the paperwork. Yes, it will probably be different. You will have people who own companies and are doing well at the minute, because they have the paperwork sorted out. Then you have smaller companies that cannot get the paperwork sorted out and are not doing so well.

Q889 **Ian Paisley:** Mr Hutchinson, you must be aghast when a company like B&M, which is one of the largest shop stockists in the UK, announces that the checks on, say, shipping Pot Noodles across the Irish Sea have now been increased. They have to issue veterinary certificates for them. The head of it has said, "Why do we have this friction? It makes no sense". George Eustice, our Minister for the Environment, has said that up to 300,000 certificates would now need to be granted each year, five times more than current levels, as a result of the protocol. That must alarm you



that this situation is only going to get worse.

Billy Hutchinson: Of course it does. That is my concern, unless unionism gets together in this. We had a call here for a convention. You know that my view is that we need a convention to sort this out. The unionist people need leadership and the only way that can happen is if we all agree.

I could not walk out the door of my office here and find anybody who would say to me, if I talked to them about the protocols, that they were not aghast. They may not know all about the protocols in the depth that you went into, but we do. The point about that is that it needs to be resolved and it needs to be resolved very quickly. It is these sorts of things that are heightening the tension in Northern Ireland.

Q890 **Chair:** Councillor Hutchinson, I do not know if you heard the evidence that we, as a Committee, took from HMRC. One of the people on the panel there who is working with HMRC had been one of the early advocates of what came to be known as alternative arrangements, something that was not the protocol and not the backstop. He told us, and I think this came as a shock to some, that those alternative arrangements could financially cost more, but, whatever you alight upon, given that the island of Ireland is the only land border between the UK and the EU, there would always have to be checks.

Even if one was to get rid of the protocol today and replace it with something else—let us call it alternative arrangements for argument's sake—there would still have to be checks. If people are defining citizenship and a sense of belonging by checks or not, as a result of leaving the European Union, for those who take that view, that is always going to be the issue, is it not?

Billy Hutchinson: It depends on what agreement there is between the EU and the UK, in terms of checks. We would need to know what they are. I understand what HMRC is saying, but we have to be realistic about checks. It cannot be ridiculous, like a Pot Noodle—you know what I mean—going through animal welfare or whatever. It is ridiculous. If the EU wanted to do this, it could do it and protect its borders. It has every right to protect its borders, but it is a bit pedantic. I remember when we talked about the shape of a banana and they wanted it to be straighter.

Q891 **Chair:** They did not. That was a *Daily Telegraph* construct on a quiet news day, but we are not going to go into bananas. Let me ask you this, because I am now a little confused. Is it the principle of checks or the scope of checks that is the bone of contention?

Billy Hutchinson: It is probably a bit of both, but it is the principle. It is the principle of why we are in the UK and we have to have goods coming from the UK—

Chair: If one accepts that, protocol or alternative arrangements, there would have to be checks of some sort—



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Billy Hutchinson: We already have checks, and we had checks when we were in the EU.

Q892 **Chair:** Indeed, on agricultural issues, yes.

Billy Hutchinson: They were done in a different way. The council is responsible for the port health and we have always had staff there who did that. Now you are talking about something very massive. Even if the council wanted to do it tomorrow, we would probably have to find £5 million from somewhere to employ people to do it. From that point of view, it has gone haywire. It just went all over the place.

We are now seeing checks that we do not really need to have. When we were in the EU, we still had to have checks. There is no question that anybody bringing anything into Northern Ireland needs to be checked. What about criminality? We need to make sure that that criminality is stopped. There are all those things, but a lot of this is done by technology. We are being told, and were told, that technology could not be used at the border. Technology works at quite a lot of borders across the EU.

Q893 **Chair:** That is interesting, but it almost, I think, helps to make my point, which is this. Checks were taking place, and have always taken place, in a whole variety of products. Nobody in the loyalist and/or unionist community felt that that in any way threatened their sense of citizenship and identification.

Billy Hutchinson: That was because it was for the whole of the UK, not for one region. You have missed the point. Here is a point: if I buy a house off you and you say—

Q894 **Chair:** Let me ask the question. We were talking about the principle of checks. The principle of checks was established. The fact is that there may be different checks, more checks going on or checks being done differently, but the principle of checks being undertaken is long established and nobody felt threatened. Their sense of loyalty or identification did not come under threat as a result of those. Could you help the Committee to understand why it is that these suddenly, as a matter of principle, are important, but the others were not?

Billy Hutchinson: Beforehand, the checks were for the whole region of the UK and for Europe, so they were not there in that sense. There were checks, but they were health checks, checks against criminality or illegal goods coming in. All that was done. If I lived in Leeds or London, anything coming into the UK was the same as what was coming into Northern Ireland. It was not changed. You have changed it. It is a bit like saying to me, "I will sell you the house, but do you know what? You cannot pick the furniture. I am picking it for you". This is what is happening. We are now being told, "We are telling you what you can eat and what you cannot eat".



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Mr Paisley, it might have been at the DUP conference. When the Prime Minister said there would be no checks down the Irish Sea, he was not too long changing his mind. From my point of view, this is about a British Government that is sitting in Westminster. Can they tell what is going to happen? You are saying to me that I live in Northern Ireland, which is a part of the United Kingdom, "But do you know what? You are going to have different checks from us".

I want to be very clear about this, so you understand my position. Any unionist is not among 900,000 but among 62 million. I believe in the union. I have a daughter who lives in London, who is at university in Cardiff, but since moved back to London. I travel to Yorkshire quite regularly. I do that as well. It is not as if I am never in England. I know what happens in England. I talk to people in England and I know what is going on. People in England are confused about the protocols. They are confused about what happened to Northern Ireland and what is going on. If people in England are confused, people in Northern Ireland are more confused.

Anybody can adopt the principle of anything, but, if that principle changes, it is not the same principle. That principle, in terms of checks, has changed greatly for this country. For Northern Ireland, it has changed greatly.

Q895 **Chair:** I agree with you on the confusion point. Do you think it is recognised in Northern Ireland that GB businesses are also having to undertake new checks, paperwork and everything else to trade with the EU as a result of leaving?

Billy Hutchinson: Yes, everybody would know that.

Chair: Okay. That is helpful.

Billy Hutchinson: Whether they would understand the full detail is another thing. I have a question for you. Tell me what happens if you go through Wales and you are transporting goods from Holyhead into Dublin. Are you not telling me that Dublin is not affected by this as well? Are you not saying to me that Dublin has not lost billions of pounds' worth of trade with the UK? Nobody is talking about it. They are keeping it very quiet. From that point of view, I cannot understand why Dublin is not complaining about this as well, although Dublin will say, "We can trade with 26 other countries and forget about the UK".

Q896 **Chair:** I have not heard Dublin say that, but who knows.

Billy Hutchinson: Dublin has suffered economically from the trade it did and does with the UK. There is no question of that. It was very high, in terms of the amount of money that was spent between the UK and Dublin on an annual basis. We do not hear them complaining about it, but it must affect them.

Q897 **Chair:** I do not want to rerun the arguments of the referendum. In part,



that is why I did not vote to leave, because of trade disruption and everything else, but there we are.

Billy Hutchinson: You are making an assumption that I did.

Q898 **Chair:** No, I am not. No, I am just saying what my—

Billy Hutchinson: As long as you are not making the assumption of how people vote, that is okay.

Chair: No, I am not making any assumption. I am merely saying it was that reason that motivated me to vote how I did. I am not presuming how you voted at all. It would be presumptuous of me and irrelevant to this inquiry.

Q899 **Mr Goodwill:** Good morning, Councillor Hutchinson. We have seen some appalling scenes of violence and unrest on the streets of Northern Ireland, which echo some of the most difficult scenes we saw historically. In some ways, this Committee has been trying to analyse what is behind these. Was it just orchestrated to bring political pressure to bear? Was it as a result of the Bobby Storey funeral situation? Is it just that Northern Ireland is a tinder pot and any spark would set off some of what has been described as recreational rioting, possibly? Is there any merit in trying to determine what has caused these things, or should we try to just concentrate on the political agenda?

Billy Hutchinson: We need to accept that those riots happened. You also need to accept that they were not orchestrated in a way that people would think. People who got involved in those riots were frustrated. They were angry. That is what they did. They showed their anger. From that point of view, people could say it is nothing new, but I was watching TV screens and seeing scenes in London, where there were peaceful protests and people were being [*Inaudible*].

We need to remember that there is not just one thing in all this. There are a plethora of things that caused those riots. I suppose the death of the Duke of Edinburgh calmed that all down, because people backed off from that. They had a time of reflection, I suppose, and respect for the Royal Family, in terms of that burial and how big that was. All that happened. People have had time to reflect.

I would say to you now that there are more people who are involved in protests, and they have all seemed to be peaceful, from what I can see. That is a move in the right direction. People have the right in the UK to protest. People need to remember that, when you have a right to protest, you have responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is to ensure that those are peaceful. That would be my view and that of my party, and I know it is the view of the other unionist parties as well. From that point of view, people have a right to protest, but remember that that right to protest is about doing it in a responsible way. I think people are moving in that direction, from what I can see.



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Q900 **Mr Goodwill:** Those pictures were beamed around the world. We heard from one major employer in Northern Ireland that its head office in the United States had got in touch and said, "Can people get to work? Is the factory going to burn down?" It was disproportionate, in terms of the impact it had. There will be benefits to Northern Ireland of being in the single market and maybe investment can be brought in. Are you confident we will not see recurrence of this type of rioting take place, which could stymie many of those opportunities that the protocol presents, as well as the difficulties we know well about?

Billy Hutchinson: You are talking to somebody who lived through the Troubles and somebody who was a perpetrator. I do not accept all that. From that point of view, businesses set up in countries because they are looking for green labour. They set up to get the benefits of the UK and to get to their goal. From that point of view, we need to be very careful about employment.

I want to see employment in Northern Ireland. I want to see our companies grow. I want to make sure that we invest in our companies and grow small companies into big ones. We try to make sure that we help them to be able to export and do all those things. You need to be very careful talking to me about America. Irish America funded the death of British citizens across Europe. We need to remember that as well.

From my point of view, we are in the UK. You need to give me guarantees that, whether we have the protocols or not, the principle of consent will remain. On being in the single market, yes, we have been told that we can be the Singapore of Europe. That is fair enough, but I do not see anything from the British Government that is encouraging British firms to set up in Northern Ireland so that they can actually compete in the EU. At the minute, all that is pie in the sky. We need to see how that goes.

From my point of view, I still want to remain part of the UK. I would hope that the British Government would actually start to tell us that and say things that actually prove it, that they support the principle of consent and that the principle of consent will not be upset or tampered with because we are in the single market.

Mr Goodwill: I am a member of the Conservative and Unionist Party and that does not just apply to Scotland. It applies to Northern Ireland as well. Please be reassured that there are many on this side of the water who feel as strongly as you about the union, but also have concerns about the way Northern Ireland is being portrayed around the world because of these unfortunate incidents and the effect that could have on investment.

Q901 **Mr Campbell:** You are very welcome, Councillor Hutchinson. Councillor Hutchinson and I both served on the Northern Ireland Assembly many years ago, so we go back some way. On the issue of violence, you were very clear in the intro part of your contribution this morning that you are



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opposed to violence and do not want to see it—and that is welcome—as all of us are. If we look back over the last few months, protests recently, thankfully, have grown in number but have not been violent. They have been very peaceful. That is good and welcome.

There is the threat of violence, which I think you alluded to earlier, from republicans, in terms of any hardening of the border on the island of Ireland being met with a renewed threat of violence. I think I heard you clearly say that, in your mind, many people would believe the only reason there was not any move on the island of Ireland was as a response to that threat of violence. Is that an accurate summary of what you said?

Billy Hutchinson: It is an accurate summary. You will remember that there were a number of protocols around the political parties and you had to hold to them. If an organisation that you represented was caught using violence, and you had members in the Executive, in the Assembly, they would have to be removed. From that point of view, I thought that was how the Irish and British Governments should have handled it. We cannot be threatened by violence all the time.

We live in a divided society and we need to recognise it. Living in a divided society means that we have to have ways to move forward. As you will know, and so will Ian Paisley Jr, at the time of the Belfast agreement, you were opposed to it for a number of reasons. You know that the whole framework of that was to set up a way that people who were divided by violence in the past could try to run the country together. I have to say that your own party did that for a period of time very well, in terms of being able to run the country and get things moving.

We understand where Northern Ireland sits. We understand that we are a divided society. We do not understand that, every time there is a threat of violence from the republicans, the Governments seem to move. That is a bad place to be in, in Northern Ireland, that people move for one. Then, when we hear about threats of violence from others, we hear comments about international trade and how it goes round the world.

Of course I want to see jobs here. I want to see jobs that will last for a good while. Of course I do not want to see violence, and I do not want to see it on the TV screens, going round the world. We need to be covering that and making sure that these Governments know this is not a lifestyle that happens every day of the week in Northern Ireland. This is because of Brexit, in terms of the trade deal with the EU. We have all called for it and I will continue to. This is a political problem and needs political solutions. I would encourage not only the Executive in Northern Ireland but also the British Government to resolve this as quickly as they can.

Q902 **Mr Campbell:** To be clear on the issue of violence, you have been very clear that there is no place for it, as the rest of us have been clear. There was the threat that emanated from dissident republicans and others, in terms of any physical infrastructure that they talked about, although nobody actually described how that could be carried out at 300 crossing



points. The impossibility of it did not seem to land any blows on people. Set that to one side. You are clear that that was a response to the threat of violence. How difficult does that make it for those of us like you, me and others, when unionists who want to object and protest peacefully say to us, "Peace does not work. Violence works."? How difficult does that make our job in trying to keep protests political and peaceful, in the context that you have outlined?

Billy Hutchinson: It makes it very difficult. The difficulty here is that the unionist people on the ground, because the Bobby Storey thing was not sorted out in terms of the funeral—whether it was or was not, they believe it was not sorted out—then believe that they can do something next that the police cannot do anything about. That is not the case, as you know. As you know, the police have been gathering intelligence and information around the protests. That is their job, but it is perceived as a two-tier policing system. That is the difficulty.

I go back to the term "perception". Perception is a bad thing in Northern Ireland. We need to get through all that. I am saying to colleagues who are not from Northern Ireland, the people among us who are from England or wherever, that the reality is that it is the UK's job to make sure it is working with the Executive to move forward and make sure it is easier for politicians to argue that there should be no violence. There is no question about it.

I have met with this from 78-year-old women and 80-year-old men, who say to me, "This is a disgrace how this country is run" and all the rest of it. They will always go back to the threat of violence and to Bobby Storey's funeral. There is no point in me trying to convince them any different, because of their mindset. They have listened to the media and to everybody else, and they have their mindset. There is no doubt about it. When trying to convince people that violence does not pay, you say that, and they come back to you and say, "It paid for the IRA".

Q903 **Chair:** On that point of listening, which is often the hardest thing for all of us to do, we, and you, will have heard the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State, Michael Gove and Dublin say that the only way that the constitutional settlement of Northern Ireland can be affected, changed or adjusted is through a border poll. You mentioned in an earlier answer to a question from me that you carry a UK passport, you carry a UK driving licence and you identify as being British. Should an assurance from, effectively, some very senior people in Government, up to and including the Prime Minister, that the protocol is not about a constitutional assault, challenge or change at all, not be enough?

Billy Hutchinson: I am not sure it is enough, and I say this for a reason.

Q904 **Chair:** What would be?

Billy Hutchinson: What happens when we are in the single market and when the Brexit thing is done needs to be outlined. What happens? There will still be a border between us and the UK. There will be no border



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between us and the Republic, because we are still in the EU, but there will be a border with the rest of the UK.

Q905 **Chair:** It will not be a border for people, merely a regulatory check. I do not ask this question flippantly, but I know that a lot of my friends and others do not get how anybody can identify their sense of national belonging and identity by the customs arrangements that move, for example, their cornflakes from the Tesco warehouse in Daventry to the Tesco shelf in Belfast, and that people would define whom they belonged to and whom they identified with as a result of that.

Billy Hutchinson: Maybe I did not make myself clear when I was speaking earlier on, saying to you that the protocols are a manifestation of all this. The difficulty is that somebody needs to explain to us, if we are in the single market and are still in the single market after the deal between the UK and the EU is completed, where that leaves people in Northern Ireland, in terms of their Britishness. Nobody has answered that question. People are thinking ahead about what sort of pressure that puts on them or where that leaves them. Nobody has told us.

At the minute, you have dealt us a hand of cards, but the game is not over and you do not know how you have won or lost until you finish the game. I want to be clear about this: we are in the single market. If we are still in the single market after Brexit is done, what does that mean for Northern Ireland? We are aligned with the EU economically.

Q906 **Chair:** Northern Ireland is also in the UK internal market, with that unique trading position. We have heard from others in the loyalist community about the lack of a widespread benefit of the prosperity agenda flowing from the Good Friday agreement among the loyalist community. You referenced the Singapore metaphor. We are hearing from business organisations that the opportunities presented by that access to the UK and EU markets could present, if played right—there are some conditionals there—a golden opportunity for the economic prospects of Northern Ireland. That would have a trickle-down benefit to all communities. That would be, of itself, I would suggest, a good thing. Not enough focus has been played on that as a benefit, surely.

Billy Hutchinson: Can you tell me what the British Prime Minister or any of his Cabinet has done to ensure that happens?

Q907 **Chair:** It is there in the protocol, because Northern Ireland businesses have access to the EU single market and the UK internal market. They have far more distinct advantages to trade than the constituents of Ms Jones, Mr Benton, Mr Stewart, Mr Goodwill or my constituents.

Billy Hutchinson: You can have all these things, but nobody is telling us what they are going to do. Will the British Prime Minister now say to British companies, "Go to Northern Ireland if you want to trade with the EU"? Is he saying that? Is he encouraging British firms to come to Northern Ireland and set up to trade with the EU?



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Q908 **Chair:** My experience of business is that business never needs any encouragement to access something that is beneficial to its balance sheet. The big question here is certainty, is it not? From all the business organisations, we have been hearing, "We just need damned certainty. We need to know how this works, that it is here for a period of time and then we can set some investment decisions". While the ball is up in the air, that certainty is lacking.

Billy Hutchinson: That certainty needs to come to the people who do not even have a business, those people who are suffering from deprivation. That is a point and we are not giving certainty to them. They are looking for certainty on their Britishness. I do not want to say it is simple, because nothing is ever simple.

Chair: No, it never is.

Billy Hutchinson: That is the certainty that is needed. Let me explain to you. It does not matter whether you live on the Shankill, the Falls or anywhere else. People who live in those areas do not have a stake. They do not own their own houses. I am talking about a majority, not everybody, but they do not own their own houses. They do not believe in politics because they do not believe it works. The stake in society that they have is a union flag or a tricolour. That is their stake. That is how they describe themselves. That is what their political identity is and they hold on to it. That is the issue. We need to resolve it for everybody. The difficulty is that we need to give those people certainty.

Chair: That is an incredibly powerful point that you make. It is one that I certainly support and agree with. Unless or until everybody feels some benefit from something, there are always going to be issues.

Q909 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you, Councillor Hutchinson, for coming to us today. Before I get on to the protocol, I want to go back a wee bit and ask you about some of the other issues that are concerning loyalists and the community you represent. What sorts of other things would have come up on the doors, I suppose, in the last couple of elections you were involved in?

Billy Hutchinson: I suppose, in the last couple of elections I was involved in, it was around Belfast City Council. You will always get questions about investment. People will talk about bins and rubbish. They talk about the price of a grave or what is happening. We need to be realistic, and you will know this. You will know that, in the council, people think that our responsibilities are collecting the bins, burying the dead, leisure and a wee bit of economic development. That is how they see it. Those questions are directed in terms of what we are putting out. We are putting out what we are trying to do on the council.

People will get into other things, like educational underachievement. People will get into being stuck in a low-paid job and they cannot get on. I am assuming that it is the same everywhere. In my own DEA, in the last election—there are not as many now—we had 33 pieces of derelict



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land, 13 of which belong to DfC. I think DfC has got rid of about six or seven, so we are starting to see that investment. We are seeing people building private houses and affordable houses. From that point of view, some of it has improved a bit.

On the things that are raised with me, people keep pointing to the Falls or the Springfield Road, which is where the peace line goes down. They continually say, "Look, they have that. They have all this and we have not". Some of the young people I talked to after the riots at Lanark Way actually said to me, "We walk through there to go to the hospital or wherever, and all we can see is people doing this, doing that, buildings going up all over. When we walk out on the Shankill, all we see is dereliction and shops that are 100 years old and have never been repaired". That is how the young people see it.

From that point of view, people judge people on other things. For the point of this, they are talking about a Catholic community, right? You will know we talk about Catholic, nationalist and republican and we talk about Protestant, unionist and loyalist. Those young people were talking about the Catholic experience they were getting. Those are just stories from them. The point I am making to you is that, in terms of the peace process and the political process, it seems that we have not got to grips with some of these communities. Some of the argument is that we cannot have housing-led regeneration.

Q910 **Claire Hanna:** You are talking about a general dissatisfaction with politics, I suppose, and what people feel their prospects are.

Billy Hutchinson: It is a plague on all their houses.

Claire Hanna: It is a plague on all their houses. Is there a sense within maybe your electorate that there is a political elite in Northern Ireland, whether it is nationalist or unionist, whether it is a high-profile Sinn Féin funeral, RHI, luxury holidays or whatever? Is there a perception that politics has left them behind, more generally, in a way that probably predates Brexit even and certainly the last five or six months?

Billy Hutchinson: Of course there is. We talk about young people, but if we were talking about 1969, and people started talking about what happened in 1969, the children in the houses would hear what their parents said. Now it is probably their great grandparents because it was so long ago. We still have that.

Remember, there are families who traditionally voted in a particular way and they are now questioning that because they have not seen benefits. I do not believe that educational underachievement only happens in Protestant areas. I believe it is everywhere and we need to deal with it. As you will know, we continually talk about Protestant boys, rather than everybody. We should be honest about how far that goes, and it applies to Catholic communities, but we are talking about loyalism today, or unionism.



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The education system has failed. If you take somewhere like Cushendall, when I went to school, at the school I went to, a secondary school, people went on to university and hopefully to Queen's and stuff like that. Those schools are gone now. There is not even a secondary school. You have to go to north Belfast to go to a secondary school and they are not sending anybody to university. They probably go off to a grammar school and they probably have to be in the top stream to get anywhere near a university.

I want to be clear about this. It is the three As. We need aspiration, accessibility and achievement, and it has to be done in those ways. Unfortunately, in working-class communities in Northern Ireland those young people do not get that chance, and they deserve it, because they are quite capable.

Q911 Claire Hanna: We were discussing before the fact that Hume used to say that the best peace process is a job. It seems to me like you are talking about young people who maybe do not have a decent job or have a precarious job, who feel that a conviction for riotous behaviour is worth it for making a point and will not affect their prospects, because they do not feel they have them. The phrase that was used in a previous evidence session a couple of times, and I think we have heard it a lot in the last few months, is that the protocol was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Understanding the opposition and concern that there is, and you have outlined your perception that it is maybe where you think the protocol might go or a difference to another UK region, do you think, if all these other issues around educational underachievement, the perception of elites and a lack of prospects did not exist, we would have seen the response that we have seen from some communities to this trading arrangement? Is it the perception that they are always losing and another community is doing better? Is that potentially at the heart of this?

Billy Hutchinson: That is very clear in the unionist community. People's confidence and other things are low, on the basis that they cannot see any benefit in the peace process. That is the difficulty with this. It does not matter whether it was in London or Northern Ireland. For the last 50 years, not much has changed. It is the same people and their families who continually climb the ladder and other people are locked out. That is part of society. We need to change that. We need to give people those opportunities so they have some sort of relationship, in terms of being able to get good jobs and all the rest of it. We have failed in that. We have failed for 50 years.

You look at academic studies. Those academics who have studied it know that that is the difficulty. In the area that I represent, on the cusp of a world recession, the Ulster Unionist Party at the time removed 70,000 people from our community to go and get jobs elsewhere. When they moved, those who were left behind in places like Rathcoole, Craigavon and Bangor and Ards ended up in estates where there were no jobs, and



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only those who were upwardly mobile were the people who moved forward. That is a problem of mobility. It has not changed in 50 years.

Chair: This is an important discussion about economic empowerment and engagement, and having a stake. We could spend many hours on this. I am conscious of time.

Claire Hanna: I suppose I am making the case that there has been very serious disenchantment.

Chair: Indeed, that is a very important point to make.

Q912 **Claire Hanna:** By accident or design, it has been directed at the protocol. On the issue of divergence from Britain, do you think the backstop or another arrangement that has similar rules throughout the UK would be more satisfactory to the communities that you represent?

Billy Hutchinson: The devil is in the detail, to be perfectly honest. If you look on paper, Theresa May would never have got it through Westminster anyway. My view is that, if we were all in the same single market, the problem would not have arisen, because none of those questions would have actually happened, but we are not.

People had a democratic right and they voted to leave. It is no longer an argument about leave and remain. That should be gone now. The reality is that it was a democratic vote. Whether one region voted to stay and another region voted to leave does not really matter. The point about it is that the people spoke. They went to a ballot box and said, "We have to leave".

Now we have to manage the problems that exist, in terms of the UK exiting the EU. That is what we are dealing with. That is what we need to deal with.

Claire Hanna: Absolutely, but of course the protocol was the result of four or five years trying to deal with it.

Q913 **Stephen Farry:** Good morning, Councillor Hutchinson. I will try to be very brief, just with a few questions, given the pressures on time. To pick up on Ms Hanna's last few points there, could I clarify something with Councillor Hutchinson? Given where we are now with Brexit, as you have outlined, what is your alternative to the protocol, as such? What is it that you actually want to see happen? We know what you are against, but what do you see should be the plan from here?

Billy Hutchinson: The plan lies with the British Government. Lord Frost is in there, trying to change things—if he can change them, great. We are asking that movement between the UK and Northern Ireland will not be hindered. There are too many checks on different things and we are getting down now to individual itemised items, which is going to make it worse. For anything coming from England into Northern Ireland that is



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not going on into Europe, there should not be a problem, but we continually hear of different things.

We need the protocol to work. This is the solution. My view is that Belfast and Dublin need to sit down and work out what they need to do. Then they need to talk to the EU to say, "If we do not do this, we cannot work this". There has to be a change, but everybody needs to sit down. I have to say that particularly the EU, over the vaccination stuff at the start, behaved like children.

Q914 **Stephen Farry:** You are in the space of fixing the protocol, rather than scrapping it, given that the latter is probably unrealistic.

Billy Hutchinson: No, that is not what I am saying. The EU is concerned about what gets in and out of its borders. I am saying that we need to be giving them guarantees that those things that do not need to or should not go into their borders will not. How do we do that? This is about having discussions and seeing what there is.

At the moment, we are seeing that the protocols are causing too many problems. They are causing too many problems because we are not dealing with them. This is important. We need to remember that we have moved the border from Killeen to UK ports. We need to work out why that happened, why we needed to do it and why we need a hard border at all. The protocols have been placed in a position because they need to deal with this now. If we had not moved the border in the first place, it could have been controlled in Killeen. It was there for 100 years.

Q915 **Stephen Farry:** There will be a school of thought that says that trying to manage the issues on the land border was always going to be challenging, or next to impossible, particularly with agri-food. Could I ask a slightly more broad-based, speculative question? You will be aware that, since the Brexit vote happened in 2016, with all the controversies over the past number of years, the issue of a border poll has moved up dramatically, in terms of the political agenda. There is a lot more talk of that constitutional change happening potentially in the next few years, which obviously you and your colleagues will be concerned around, if that was to happen.

Billy Hutchinson: No, I would not be. If we have a border poll in the next couple of years, we will remain in the UK.

Q916 **Stephen Farry:** Do you recognise that there is a school of thought that says that, if we end up with a situation where the protocol is properly implemented and fixes are put in place, it would actually stabilise the situation in Northern Ireland? By contrast, if we see a situation where the protocol was scrapped, we would end up in more chaos and uncertainty in Northern Ireland, which could, potentially, accelerate the move towards a united Ireland. From the point of view of loyalism, do you see the argument that seeing the protocol as an economic instrument, trying to stabilise it, getting it to work, could work to stabilise the union in the



short to medium term, rather than leading to a situation where it could be further unpicked?

Billy Hutchinson: That is why we are arguing about the protocols. That is why we are arguing about them. For me, they should not have been there in the first place. Listen, Stephen, we can talk all we like about a border poll. The difficulty is that I have not heard anybody who does not want to stay in the United Kingdom tell me why they would want to leave. It is okay for the very rich, and I am talking about the multimillionaires who are nationalists. It might be all right for those people who do not have a stake in society, but tell the middle people, who probably vote for you, Stephen, or vote for your party, who are in that middle bit. It does not suit them.

I am not talking about your voters, but about that middle bit of unionism who do vote Alliance. There is no question of it. They are not the very rich. They want to stay in the United Kingdom, not to have that taken it away from them.

Q917 **Stephen Farry:** It may well be true that there are many people of that opinion. I am just saying that the opinion polls are very fluid and the debate has accelerated. There is an argument that loyalism could be a bit more strategic about its long-term view.

Billy Hutchinson: I agree. We are going to be more strategic about the long-term view, Stephen, but just let me tell you about polls, opinions and all the rest of it. I went to bed the night before Brexit being told it was not happening. I went to bed before Trump was elected President of the United States and I was told it was not going to happen. Both mornings when I got up they were wrong.

Q918 **Stephen Farry:** That happened with my election to Westminster as well. The polls told me I was not going to get elected too, so it works both ways. Is there a recognition that, every time people take to the streets in Northern Ireland to protest, in particular if things are unpicked, from the point of view of unionism and loyalism where they then pick up the debate at the next level, you are in a worse position? Do you recognise that the history of street protest in Northern Ireland, from the point of view particularly of unionist and loyalist protestors, has been counterproductive?

Billy Hutchinson: I would not say it has been counterproductive. There have been protests that people have listened to and done things about. Stephen, we need to be careful when we talk about protests, because protests are caused by an action. Do you know what I mean? People would not have to protest if they did not feel that there was an action, so those actions that have happened, like moving the border from Killeen to UK ports, have been really serious.

It is also based on the premise that there was a threat of republican violence, which is not good in any society. I know that your party is in the middle of all this, but maybe you need to think about how it is not always



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good for republicans to demand what they want and get it. If we live in a divided society, Stephen, I do not need to tell you this, as you are in a centrist party, but you have to see both sides.

Stephen Farry: I can assure you we are. We are trying to find workable solutions.

Billy Hutchinson: I am not accusing you of anything. We are working for solutions. There are two MPs here from the DUP and I am not here to plead to them for anything, but I am saying that our strategy needs to be done through a convention. I do not care who calls it or who runs it, but what I do care about is that we get a move on and we actually do that, because unionism needs to be seen as it is in terms of its greatness and we are not being seen like that. We continually are behind the eight ball and we need to push the eight ball out of the way. We need to go out and talk about how wonderful we are.

Stephen Farry: That is great. Thanks, Billy. I am happy to carry on the conversation offline sometime.

Chair: I am not sure we have ever finished a session with how wonderful we all are, Councillor Hutchinson, but that is something I might start putting in needlepoint to hang on my study wall. On behalf of the Committee, can I thank you for your time and for joining us?

Billy Hutchinson: Thank you for inviting me.

Chair: We are very grateful to you for your input and your thoughts, particularly on the social inclusion, if I can use that phrase, economic agenda. You are very welcome to stay for the next session, if you wish to listen to what Susan McKay has to say to us.