

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 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 919 - 940

Witnesses

II: Susan McKay, Journalist and Author.

Examination of witness

Witness: Susan McKay.

Q919 **Chair:** Let us now turn to Susan McKay. Good morning. Thank you for joining us. Ms McKay, you recently published a book—other authors are available—*Northern Protestants: On Shifting Ground*; it was published last month. What is your take? What is the rub? What is the actual issue here? What is the beef?

Susan McKay: Thank you, Mr Chair. That is an extraordinary question in its breadth. One of the reasons why I wrote the book is that I am from the Protestant community myself in Northern Ireland, from Derry, and I have been working as a journalist, mainly in Northern Ireland, for the last 30 years.

Over that time I have observed that there is an immense variety and diversity of people within the Protestant, loyalist and unionist communities and I felt that that was not widely enough recognised. For example, when we talk of loyalists, people often conflate the idea of loyalists with loyalist paramilitaries, which is so wrong. The loyalist community is extremely diverse. It includes people who vote for the unionist parties; it also includes people who vote for other non-unionist parties and many people who do not vote at all. Some of them are activists on issues like women's rights, housing rights and LGBTQ rights. There are a lot of health workers who are from loyalist communities. There are lots of sportspeople.

In many ways, there are a lot of people in those communities who are frustrated by what they see as a narrowness in the representation that they get from their political parties, but there are also people within the loyalist communities whose entire lives are completely taken up with simply trying to survive poverty, so there is a huge diversity of people there.

One of the problems at the moment with the loyalist community is that they are very confused. They have had very mixed messages from their political leaders. They saw the DUP fight very hard for the hardest possible Brexit. They saw them appear to welcome the protocol, and then they saw them calling for the protocol to be ditched and blaming it on everybody else except the DUP and the British Government.

There is a huge amount of confusion and there certainly is anxiety. That anxiety is being stoked. I recently heard something that was said by the sportsman Carl Frampton, who is a world-class boxer from north Belfast. He said that people had been stirring the pot again and young people are being manipulated, and that makes him overwhelmingly sad. That is one of the things that I felt when writing the book. People feel that they are being told all the time that they are at risk and under threat. They are



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not quite sure what they are supposed to be under threat from, but it is very unsettling.

Q920 **Chair:** Would you typify talking about constitutional impact as a dead cat strategy?

Susan McKay: I will just quote a DUP councillor, Dale Pankhurst. He talked about how loyalists have what he called a spectrum of grievances into which Brexit landed like a grenade, to use his term. He described a paranoia in the psyche and said that people felt the Good Friday agreement had been against loyalists; they feared a united Ireland; and now they feel that, post-Brexit, Northern Ireland is being used as a football by the Irish Government, the British Government and the EU. He is representing a mind-set there, which is of people who feel that they are being victimised, and there is a very strong sense of grievance at the moment in the loyalist community, but a lot of it is not actually based on fact and there is not enough emphasis on discussion.

Q921 **Chair:** We have had the Storey funeral, the impact of which does not need to be reventilated. We have started to hear, probably at its clearest in the last few weeks, of this: the Good Friday agreement, the single market, etc, is fine if you are a middle-class Northern Ireland suburban-living professional. All the benefits are there and it is all rather good, but if you are an “ordinary family” struggling to make ends meet in an area that may have relied on heavy industry or the hereditary principle of employment, etc, the whole world has been turned upside down and you are seeing none of the benefits. It is a rather bullet-point assessment. Is that a fair assessment?

Susan McKay: That is certainly a narrative that is pushed, but the primary thing that people do feel very strongly in the loyalist community and in all the communities in Northern Ireland is grateful for the fact that violence has stopped, which is a product of the Good Friday agreement. There are problems about the fact that economic benefits have not flowed to working-class communities, but those are primarily to do with the political application of the Good Friday agreement rather than the content of the agreement itself.

In relation to the Storey funeral, certain politicians among unionists have seized upon this notion of two-tier policing, and they are promoting this idea that disadvantage is now all on the unionist side and that we are the discriminated-against community. There simply is not evidence to back that up. There is a lot of disadvantage in Northern Ireland, but it is very broadly spread among all the communities and I do not just mean the two communities; I mean all the communities. To say that it simply applies to one community is just not true.

Q922 **Chair:** You are plugged in. You have done a lot of research for your book. You have listened to a lot of voices and opinions. Within the cohort of opinion that we are talking about—let us refer to it as the loyalist and unionist community—what is your guesstimate with regard to the percentage split to those who say, “Look, we would not go out and buy



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the protocol if it was on the supermarket shelf, but if it is working speedily, I can get my stuff delivered, and effectively it is an invisible thing that does not impact on the operation of my daily life, I will put up with it”, to those who say, “You cannot make something that has this so-called constitutional status impact. There is nothing you can do. It is like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. It just has to go”? Where do you think the split is with regard to opinion on that, because at the moment it is not sounding very nuanced?

Susan McKay: I do not think there is such a split, because a lot of people see the protocol as simply being a figleaf for Brexit. A lot of people feel that what is being blamed on the protocol should more properly be blamed on Brexit, which was enthusiastically championed by the current British Government and by the DUP.

The protocol has become a fetish with unionist politicians. I heard Paul Givan, the incoming First Minister, describe it as being a punishment inflicted upon the unionist community. It is not. It is a way of dealing with how you protect the Good Friday agreement and its need for a soft border in Ireland when you have opposed every other position. A lot of people I spoke to from all communities within unionism talked about what a mistake the DUP had made in rejecting Theresa May’s form of Brexit and instead backing Boris Johnson, the current Prime Minister, which he then went ahead and implemented regardless of what unionists thought about it.

An awful lot of unionists feel we are dealing with Brexit and an awful lot of people feel we really need stability now. They are uneasy about the fact that a summer is approaching with people threatening not to abide by the law in relation to the Parades Commission and so on. People are uncomfortable and they feel that the protocol is simply being used as a scapegoat for all kinds of other problems.

Bob Stewart: Morning, Susan. I have to say, I rather liked your analysis at the start. I am most grateful for it and I look forward to reading your book now I have been directed to it by the Chair, who says we all have to read it.

Chair: I am not on commission yet.

Q923 **Bob Stewart:** Clearly, from what you say, the protocol is a trade issue and a constitutional issue. Is there anything else that is bad about it from your point of view, looking at it from rather an impartial point of view?

Susan McKay: A lot of the anger that is being directed at the protocol is actually anger about something much more fundamental in unionism. I went to a demonstration in Portadown, which is a very militant unionist town in mid-Ulster, at the weekend. What I was hearing there from speakers on the platform, and people I was talking to and listening to in the audience, was that they are actually against the Good Friday agreement. They feel the Good Friday agreement has just let them down. They feel they have tried this power sharing. They do not like it.



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There is a direction being given by the DUP at the moment that is backwards. It is encouraging people to look backwards towards the days when things were simpler and unionists dominated. It is very foolish, because that is not going to be the future. Unionists are no longer in a majority. They need to learn to be a respected minority community. They need to form partnerships instead of trying to dominate.

The protocol is being talked about as though, if it was solved, everything else would be solved, but it clearly is not. The protocol is a trade agreement. It is a business agreement. It is a political solution or an attempt at a solution. People are impatient with it. It is presented in cartoonish terms: how ridiculous that you cannot get Cumberland sausages in Belfast. Obviously there are issues about food standards and veterinary practices, given that Britain has left the European Union, and this is the outworkings of those. There is a huge range of attitudes that people are expressing, but a lot of the anti-protocol demonstrations are not really about the protocol at all.

Q924 **Bob Stewart:** Fundamentally, it just meshes into the general dissatisfaction since the Good Friday agreement, so it is just another thing to stir the pot. I think that is what you kind of said just now.

Susan McKay: One of the people I spoke to, whom I have come to know very well over the years, is Eileen Weir, who works in the Shankill Women's Centre. Over the years, I have often sat in on discussions there and I have been incredibly impressed by the level of conversation that goes on there among women from working-class communities on both sides of the peace line in west Belfast.

Those women are talking about all the issues. They actually talk about what the protocol is, what Brexit is, what a border poll might consist of, what we can do to mitigate the effects of austerity cuts to welfare and so on. They are really talking about these issues and they are not frightened about them. They do not have that sense of grievance. During the riots in April, Eileen Weir talked to me about what she called community propaganda, which she saw as emanating from elements of unionism and loyalist paramilitarism, which was promoting this notion that "them'uns are getting it all now and we have been disadvantaged; we have to fight them again", and all that. It is a very outmoded way of looking at the world.

It is possible to go into loyalist communities and see people having sensible conversations about things. It is quite interesting that the Chairperson has referred to Joel Keys, whose evidence was given a couple of weeks ago and who came to a lot of attention because of what he said about violence. Joel is one of the people I interviewed in my book. I found him to be a very progressive young person, but a very vulnerable young person in some ways, because he has an open mind in a place where a lot of people are watching out for open minds.

He talked about how he felt that there was a lack of energy, dynamism and activism within working-class unionist communities, and he



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compared that with the energy that there is in, say, republican communities. He knows about that because he has taken part in BBC programmes that bring young people from all sides of the community together. That is one of the reasons why you might notice dereliction or lack of animation in certain working-class loyalist areas. It is to do with a lack of energy, dynamism and leadership within those communities.

Bob Stewart: Thank you so much. That was very interesting. Sorry, I have to leave. If my screen goes blank, forgive me.

Q925 **Chair:** Ms McKay, just picking up on the point you were discussing there with Bob Stewart, you spoke a moment or so ago with regard to changes in demographics, numbers, minorities and majorities. Minority groups, smaller groups and groups that are under pressure always seem to manifest a phenomenon of being more engaged, more active and more vocal. It is a way of making more noise to deflect against the size, and I do not use that in a disparaging way. Therefore, should what you say about the demographics prove to be true, one should not be surprised if in actual fact hitherto silence from some in the loyalist and unionist community changes into a more animated dialogue because the writing on the wall is read, as it were. Would that be a fair proposition?

Susan McKay: It is very important that there should be such conversations in loyalist communities, but they are not going to happen if they are simply being told all the time by their leaders, "We are being sold out. We are being betrayed". That kind of way of looking at the world does not lead you anywhere.

I am speaking to you from Derry this morning. Derry is a city in which very many contentious issues have been resolved through long-term engagement and discussion. Partly that happened because the unionist community was in a minority here and it engaged with the nationalist majority. Now we have, for example, parades that attract people in a festival way, which previously used to be the scene of riots and trouble. In fact, the Apprentice Boys parade here was arguably one of the sparks that started off the Troubles, but nowadays the Apprentice Boys parades in Derry are approved of and supported by not all elements of the community but substantial elements of the community, so it can be done.

Q926 **Chair:** Taking that point that conversation is better than platform shouting, what role do you think the perfectly legitimate restrictions of Covid have had in acting as a real block towards advancing that: sitting across the table and having proper conversations?

Susan McKay: Covid has damaged everything in terms of social intercourse. People have not been able to get together and have the discussions that they might otherwise have had.

Q927 **Chair:** Do you think people have fallen out of the habit beyond repair, or do you see a real pent-up appetite to get back to that way of doing community politics that existed prior?



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Susan McKay: That way of doing community politics did not really ever exist within unionist communities. Over the years, over and over again, I have talked to people in working-class unionist communities who have talked about the absence of community meetings that they have. As a journalist, I have attended many meetings in out-of-the-way places in the mountains, villages and towns around Northern Ireland, where you will find people from the nationalist and republican communities gathered together to discuss some big political issue. Their politicians will be there. They will, in many cases, have invited unionist politicians, who will not have come.

You do not see those kinds of discussions going on so much in unionist communities anyway, except in the women's sector, which is a thriving working-class forum for discussion. That is possibly why they are in a much more advanced state in terms of discussing peace, the Good Friday agreement and the future.

Chair: Certainly, we as a Committee are conscious that, on this issue, to hear a range of female voices is hugely important for that. What is that phrase? If you want something talked about ask the men, and if you want something done ask the women. Maybe we should all bear that in mind.

Q928 **Mr Campbell:** Good morning, Ms McKay. It is good to hear you say you are speaking from Londonderry; you probably meant to say that, but did not.

Susan McKay: I am quite happy to call it Londonderry, Mr Campbell, if you prefer me to.

Chair: Let us not get bogged down in that.

Q929 **Mr Campbell:** That is fine. I am glad we have something in common today. Just for the other members of the Committee, Ms McKay, you have indicated you were born in the city, but can you just indicate to us how long it is since you left from your primary residence? Is it in Dublin now or in the Republic somewhere?

Susan McKay: I am what is known as a cross-border worker, in the sense that my primary residence is south of the border, but I actually am in Northern Ireland pretty much every day of the week and often over weekends. My family is still here. I spend a great deal of time here. I am extremely well informed about Northern Ireland.

Chair: Mr Campbell, I need to be persuaded as to the relevance of this line of questioning as to where Ms McKay lives.

Q930 **Mr Campbell:** The relevance is just to establish how long ago it is that Ms McKay actually left Northern Ireland. That is the relevance.

Susan McKay: I have never left Northern Ireland. I am here all the time.

Q931 **Mr Campbell:** You do not live here and have not lived here for many years. That is the bottom line.



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Susan McKay: I am sorry; that is not actually the case. I have lived for long periods in the north during the time that I have been a journalist.

Mr Campbell: We will beg to differ, but I will move on, Chair.

Chair: Mr Campbell, let us have a question.

Q932 **Mr Campbell:** I am going to try to ask a question and hopefully I will get some answers. You have written a number of books, Ms McKay, about Northern Ireland. Have you ever written about the utter decimation of the Protestant population from the west bank of the city when you were growing up?

Susan McKay: I have written a great deal about my city, and I have written a great deal about the decimation of the Protestant community by the IRA and by other republican forces, including in my current book, *Northern Protestants: On Shifting Ground*. One of its chapters is focused on the border in Fermanagh, where a lot of Protestant people were murdered. I talked to many people there who were bereaved.

One of my books, which was called *Bear in Mind These Dead*, was specifically about the aftermath of the conflict in terms of the impact on all communities here. My work has consistently been praised over the years for the fact that it is anti-sectarian, engages with people from all communities, represents fairly people from all communities and listens to their voices.

One of the reasons why I often use lengthy interviews with people in my books is because I like to let people speak for themselves. So yes, I have. In fact, one of the people who was interviewed in *Northern Protestants: On Shifting Ground* is Kenny McFarland, the chairman of the Londonderry Bands Forum. Kenny McFarland spoke to me about his childhood on the Cityside in Derry and the upheaval when he suddenly was brought from his school by his father one day and they moved into the village of Newbuildings that day. He never went back and never met his school friends on the Cityside again. He described Newbuildings as being like a Protestant refugee camp. The interview with him is very lengthy and very interesting.

Chair: The answer to the question is yes: you have.

Q933 **Mr Campbell:** No, Chair, the answer is no: she has not written exclusively about that decimation. She has referred to it in a number of other publications, but not the issue that I raised. I will move on. Ms McKay, would it be fair to assess your characterisation of the unionist Protestant community in a particular way? For example, you talk at length and quite regularly about working-class unionism. I live among working-class unionists. I regard myself as a working-class unionist and my office is based in a working-class unionist area. Would your assessment be that someone like that, who lives there, works there, represents there and gets elected there, would know at least a bit about what is happening in working-class unionist communities?



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Susan McKay: I would certainly assume that anybody who is an elected representative of working-class communities would know about those communities, but I would also say that a lot of working-class Protestant people I have spoken to over the years feel that they have been poorly represented by their politicians. They talk about their politicians just using them when they want votes, and not coming back to them when they need services and things changed in their communities. There are exceptions to that.

For example, I spoke with Dawn Purvis, who is from a working-class area in Belfast, and she talked about how, back in the old days, when it was an almost entirely unionist Government, she had never met their local MP, who was an Ulster Unionist party MP, Martin Smith. People did not see their MPs. They did not come into working-class areas. There is a woman called Amy, whom I interview in my book, who is from a mid-Ulster town, and she talks about how the politicians, the Ministers and other people just do not bother to come into her estate, except when they are looking for votes.

Q934 **Mr Campbell:** Ms McKay, do you accept that there are some of us who are immersed in those communities? For example, when I finish this meeting, I will be out on the ground today, as I was yesterday, as I will be tomorrow and every day. It is unfair to give a characterisation, as you have done, that implies that there are many who are not. There may be some who are not, but it is unfair to make a general sweeping characterisation that you do. If I could maybe elaborate a little bit to try to get your response, how do you perceive and present the wider unionist community?

Chair: Mr Campbell, this is an inquiry, as we know, about the Northern Ireland protocol.

Mr Campbell: It is indeed, yes.

Chair: We are trying to hear loyalist and unionist perspectives on it. We could dilate at great length and enormous interest on a whole range of issues, but the Committee and this process will benefit from focus on the issue at hand.

Q935 **Mr Campbell:** Yes, you are right and hopefully we can do that. Ms McKay, in one of your previous books, *Northern Protestants: An Unsettled People*, you used a quote from a Protestant. "I'll tell you one thing. There's none of them any good—only the dead ones", giving a projection of a Protestant saying that there was no such thing as good Catholics. Do you think that was a fair generalisation to make of the wider Protestant community? Does that in itself not feed into some of the senses of frustration and alienation that are being played out on the streets?

Chair: Mr Campbell, there is no point me saying what the inquiry is about and you saying, "Yes, I agree", and then just proceeding with the questions that you want to ask, which are not particularly pertinent to this inquiry.



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Mr Campbell: They are if you listen to the end of them.

Chair: We are trying to hear from Ms McKay about how she interprets and what her take is on the current situation with regard to the loyalist perspective on Brexit and the protocol. It is her interpretation and her view, and we will critique it in report and all the rest of it.

Mr Campbell: That is why I posed the question the way I did.

Susan McKay: Could I just respond to that question, even though I completely agree with the Chair that it is largely irrelevant? Since it has been put, I wish to reply to it.

Chair: I am not doing very well as an authoritative Chair today, am I?

Susan McKay: I was just going to say that that quote is a historic quote. It was an elderly lady quoting her father.

Chair: Excuse me. If this goes on, we will draw the proceedings to a close and that will not be particularly helpful. I am flagging a yellow card here—not a red card but a yellow card. Let us have questions and answers, but let us not have—

Susan McKay: Mr Chair, could I just say that I do not like having things attributed to me that are quotes? In that case, it was a quote from somebody quoting somebody else—a long since dead father.

Mr Campbell: I was not inferring it was your quote.

Chair: We have dealt with that as an issue. Mr Campbell, do you have a question relevant to this protocol inquiry?

Q936 **Mr Campbell:** Yes. Given, Ms McKay, your research, however it may be viewed, into the unionist community, do you believe there is a prospect of renewed violence for whatever reason? You said you were at the Portadown rally, so you would have seen the numbers of people there, however they were assessed. Do you think that there is the prospect or possibility, however much all of us try to maintain peace and good order, and maintain a demand for peaceful protest, of the outbreak of some violence?

Susan McKay: Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland there is always the possibility that there could be violence. I do not feel that there is a prospect of widespread violence at this point. However, if you look at, for example, the way that dissident republicans in Derry or Londonderry murdered young Lyra McKee a couple of years ago, it does not necessarily take a lot of people to be killed for it to be incredibly disturbing, upsetting and sad for the community.

I would be concerned about some of the statements being made by, for example, the Loyalist Communities Council, which was a previously unheard of all-male body that I only first heard of when the DUP started talking to it relatively recently. I spoke to one member of the LCC, Russell Watton, who is also a Progressive Unionist Party councillor, and



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he told me that people were seething. He said that the loyalist communities were absolutely seething with anger.

He said, "The DUP has used the paramilitaries and abused them for years". He claimed that he had been radicalised by the Reverend Ian Paisley, who had urged them to take up arms and then denounced them. He said, "There's no appetite to get back to violence because there's no clear-cut enemy". However, he went on to say, "If Scotland went independent we are absolutely beaten". "I would never, ever rule it out".

Another member of the DUP, who used to be an MLA, Sammy Douglas, said that the loyalist ceasefire had been predicated on the idea that the union was safe and that, therefore, if the union was not safe, he would have fears that loyalist violence could resume. He was talking about fears rather than aspirations, I stress.

I would like to say, though, in relation to that, that I do not feel loyalism has a huge capacity for violence. One of the reasons I went to that demonstration in Portadown on Saturday was that I wanted to see who was there. Most of the people I saw there were people who had been at Drumcree in the 1990s. They were older people who are still angry about the Good Friday agreement.

One of the people I spoke to when I was writing the book was Mark Langhammer, who was for a long time a councillor and is now a sports coach in a loyalist working-class community. He said that fears of loyalist violence in response to the protocol are based on an exaggerated view of the capacity of loyalist paramilitaries and an underestimation of the role of collusion between British intelligence agencies, the police and the paramilitaries. He said, "Without such support, they will be policed in ever-diminishing circles. They don't have any politics. They don't want power sharing. Their outlook is largely nihilistic. They don't have a world view".

I met with young people who had been caught up in those riots in April, and I feel that those were young people who had been groomed and radicalised by people who were exploiting them. Very few of them even knew what the protocol was. Those riots were orchestrated. I cannot be told otherwise, from what I have learned and from what I witnessed.

The reason why they petered out was because there was no communal energy of anger behind them and, as a journalist, I have witnessed a lot of riots over the years. You can tell when a riot is really dynamised by the raw anger of a community and when it is not, and those riots were very like the riot that the dissident republicans had stirred up in Derry when Lyra McKee was killed. They were artificial and that is why they fell away. It took a long time for the energy for them to be whipped up and it died down very quickly.

However, unfortunately, there are people who have an appetite for violence and I hope that we do not see them use the volatility of the marching season to try to frighten us. Too much attention is given to



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those who threaten violence. I know that there are a lot of people in loyalist communities who are angry about all kinds of issues. They are angry about poverty. They are angry about our lack of abortion rights in Northern Ireland. They are angry that women in the United Kingdom have abortion rights that we do not have in Northern Ireland, despite the efforts of the British Government to give them to us. The border in the Irish Sea exists as far as reproductive rights are concerned, and is condoned and upheld by the DUP.

There is a lot of anger, but the only anger that seems to be listened to is anger that comes from people who are saying, "You never know; we could get back to violence". I do not think there is any appetite for violence in the wider community or in the wider loyalist community, and I hope that people are responsible in terms of telling people that there absolutely must not be violence. It is undemocratic, and most loyalists and most people in Northern Ireland are democrats.

Mr Campbell: Chair, in the interests of impartiality and non-partisanship, the case most certainly rests. Thank you.

Q937 **Stephen Farry:** A very warm welcome to Ms McKay today. I just want to focus on the protocol, but in doing so to stress that I have never come across an author who has written on every single topic that the world could ever imagine, so it is important to put our witness's very excellent work in that context. I would also say that what Susan McKay has outlined is the antithesis of sweeping generalisations. The central point to her work is very much about breaking down those sweeping assumptions, seeing people as individuals with different perspectives on the world and not seeing Protestantism, unionism and loyalism as a monolith.

In that regard, I would just ask two questions. The first one relates to something she was touching on there just towards the end of her answers to Mr Campbell around some of the different gender perspectives in what we are hearing. In particular, a lot of the voices that we have heard from unionism and loyalism have been male. As a Committee we are very keen to hear a wider divergence of views, so, if you could, maybe reflect some of those views, particularly on the protocol. There are other issues you just mentioned around a number of social rights.

In terms of the protocol itself, to what extent does she perceive some degree of pragmatism across the unionist and loyalist spectrum around how we move on from the current stand-off on the issue? Does she see potential for flexibility? Are some people more focused on fixes versus scrapping? Do some people see the need to maybe think more long term about trying to provide some landing zone for the protocol that could stabilise communities and the political situation as opposed to ongoing tensions, etc?

Susan McKay: People need leadership on issues like the protocol. So far from the DUP we have had "ditch the protocol", but that is not actually a strategy. It is not an explanation of what the protocol is, why we need it or why it cannot simply be ditched. People need to have a much more public conversation about what the protocol is and what can be done



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about it. In terms of the mood of the people I met, yes, there is a huge amount of pragmatism in the loyalist and unionist communities, certainly among businesspeople whom I spoke to, whom you will have heard from and you can form your own opinions about.

They talked about, "We just need to get on with things. We did not get the Brexit deal until Christmas Eve. We were up 24 hours a day for about a week trying to get things in place. We are trying to find ways of making the protocol work for us. The last thing we need is for it to be scrapped and for us to have to start somewhere else again". Businesses need stability and businesses impact upon working-class people to the extent that a lot of people may not own businesses, but they certainly work in them. There are fears in loyalist areas, as in other areas, that there will be loss of employment as a result of the disruption caused by Brexit, the protocol and the resumption of normal life after the pandemic.

Yes, there is a lot of pragmatism. There are a lot of people who are very open on a lot of issues. I found, when writing the book, that there were very few people who were not willing to talk about any issue. They wanted to talk about things like, "What might a border poll do? What would be the effect of all of the UK being back in the single market? What would be the effect of re-joining the EU via being in a united Ireland?" People are not afraid to talk about things, but people who are not educated in economics or politics need leadership. They need their leaders to be explaining these issues to them and, if they are just getting these scare stories, that is not very helpful.

Q938 Stephen Farry: On the gender point, is there anything further that Susan wants to say around the gender differences, particularly in the protocol debate?

Susan McKay: I discovered when researching this recent book that a lot of women in loyalist communities are getting fed up with the fact that their voices are not listened to in the public realm. They are not threatening violence. They are not threatening anything. They are asking that their concerns be taken account of. I noticed, for example, last week that the website Her Loyal Voice was putting out statements from people saying, "We want to be listened to on the issue of reproductive rights. We are not happy with being represented in this way".

Quite a new thing is that women are coming forward more and more and asking to be listened in the public domain. A lot of people were very angered when the LCC suddenly became a prominent voice for working-class unionist communities, because it is not and it is all men. The communities sector is actually largely made up of underpaid and overworked women.

You see it as well in the way that a lot of women are perturbed by the way that Arlene Foster was disposed of within the DUP. There is a sense that politics is done here in a very masculine, aggressive and confrontational way. That is a difficult environment for women to break



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into, but they want to get in there and they want to get their points of view heard.

Q939 **Chair:** Ms McKay, I was going to ask you that point. Do you think the fact that, certainly up until the next few hours or whatever, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have both been women has been a positive imperative on saying to women across Northern Ireland, "You have a right to speak. There is a duty to be heard. You can achieve things. You can do things"? Do you think the two occupants of those positions have helped?

Susan McKay: Yes, it helps when women are visible, and when women are there and are party to public debates. What women need is feminist action and, unfortunately, that is not something that has been a particularly strong dynamic within unionist political representation. Feminist activism puts an emphasis on getting more women in there. The DUP, for example, has always been opposed to the use of quotas to get more women into politics, but most of the evidence does show that you are going to need special measures to encourage more women into the public domain. We live in a very patriarchal and traditionalist society. It is the same in other professions. Women have to be extra good at everything and they have to struggle to get their voices heard. It is not just in politics.

Chair: Certainly, it was very encouraging to see that really lovely photograph yesterday of all the female MLAs on the steps of Stormont. If a picture speaks a thousand words, that was a picture that was very vocal.

Q940 **Fay Jones:** Good morning, Ms McKay. Thank you very much for joining. I was going to ask about Lyra McKee. You mentioned her earlier on and I wanted to ask whether you feel that the violence has been more intense towards journalists during the last 12 months or so, as discussion around the protocol has intensified?

Susan McKay: There is a huge problem for journalists here. The thing that you have to remember about Lyra McKee is that she was not really killed as a journalist. She was working as a writer, in that she was there to witness, and she would probably have written something about it. She was not there as a working journalist on an assignment, to the best of my knowledge.

Yes, there have been horrendous threats against journalists here. Journalists have been threatened by loyalist paramilitaries, for example. Journalists have been warned to get out of certain places. A photojournalist was attacked during one of the riots in north Belfast recently by men who called him a "Fenian c**t" and told him to go back to his own area, which is where I get my evidence that a lot of sectarianism was part of the motivation of those who set up those riots.

Northern Ireland is a risky place for everybody at the moment and certainly journalists need protection. They do not need a narrative, which is often promoted by the angrier fringes within unionism, that journalists



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do not ever listen to loyalists, do not ever talk to loyalists and do not ever go where loyalists are.

When I was writing the book I tried to write some good news stories about the fact that, during the pandemic, there were some loyalists and members of the loyal orders in some working-class areas around the north who were delivering food parcels to the elderly and the housebound, and they would not talk to me. You get this dynamic where you find people who will not talk to journalists, but then criticise journalists for not expressing their points of view. A lot of that is about confidence. A lot of loyalists are not confident about speaking themselves, so they get angry with journalists and do not want them to speak on their behalf.

Would it be possible for me to just add something in relation to what Mr Farry was asking me about? It relates to your question as well, in that it is about violence and violence against women. There are some very macho attitudes towards women being in public life, including in journalism, and a lot of people really welcome the fact that Mr Farry's party, Alliance, has started to broaden the notion of what politics is, to include issues like violence against women, and not to simply see it as being one issue, but to see it as being a wider societal issue.

Fay Jones: Thank you very much. I look forward to reading your book.

Chair: Can I thank you, Ms McKay, for joining us this morning and for taking our wide-ranging questions? That is possibly the best umbrella under which to describe them all. We are grateful to you for that. Thank you very much indeed.