



Select Committee on the European Union

Corrected oral evidence: Brexit: UK-Irish relations—follow-up

Wednesday 31 January 2018

5 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Jay of Ewelme (The Chairman); Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top; Baroness Brown of Cambridge; Baroness Suttie; Lord Whitty; Baroness Wilcox.

Evidence Session No. 12

Heard in Public

Questions 99 - 105

Witness

[I](#): Sammy Wilson MP, DUP Brexit Spokesperson.

Examination of witness

Sammy Wilson MP.

Q99 **The Chairman:** Welcome. It is very good to see you. Thank you very much for giving evidence to us. Some of us have seen you in London. We are very glad to have a chance to see you here. We had a good day in Dublin yesterday, which included seeing Simon Coveney, and we have had a very good day here. We are off to Londonderry/Derry this evening and will spend tomorrow going across the border, in order to see what the implications of Brexit may be for the border. That is one of the things that concerned us in our last report and that concerns us in the work we are doing now, which is an update of the first report that we wrote.

We are very grateful to you for seeing us. Would you like to say anything to start with, before we go into some rather more technical questions? It is entirely up to you.

Sammy Wilson MP: I do not want to say a great deal at the outset, other than that we have got past the first phase of the talks, albeit with a slightly bumpy ride towards the end of it. We are convinced that Brexit can be delivered, and in a way that is not damaging to either the economy of Northern Ireland or the economy of the Irish Republic.

The point that I want to emphasise is that, technically, we believe that it is possible to keep the promise that the Government have made to deliver us from the single market and the customs union without having a hard border on the island of Ireland—or, more importantly, for both our economy and the economy of the Irish Republic, a hard border between the island of Ireland as a whole and GB. However, that requires political will. I believe that the technical aspects of it can be dealt with easily, but political will is required.

I do not know how your evidence session went yesterday in the Republic, but I have to say that, since the new Administration in the Republic took over, there has been a significant change in the way they have approached this. At the very outset, Enda Kenny realised the importance of a smooth transition from our membership to our being outside the EU. He set up a high-level working group, which was reportedly working very well. That all appears to have changed under Leo Varadkar and Simon Coveney, who now take the view that, to use Leo Varadkar's own words, it is up to the people who are leaving, and not to others, to square the circle. In reality, of course, the smooth exit of the United Kingdom from the EU is as important for the Irish Republic and its economy as it is for us.

The Chairman: Do you agree that, at least as far as the border is concerned, it is incumbent on both sides to make it work?

Sammy Wilson MP: Absolutely, although there does not appear to be that attitude from the current Administration. There was from the last Administration. A working group of officials had been set up. Good work had been done. Indeed, RTÉ News reported that the work was

progressing very well. That was even before negotiations had started. However, Leo Varadkar's attitude seems to be different. I will give you a direct quote. He says, "What we're not going to do is to design a border for the Brexiteers because they're the ones who want a border. It's up to them to say what" they want and "how it would work".

I do not believe that that kind of "close your eyes" attitude from the Irish Government serves the people of the Irish Republic well. Indeed, if we are going to have a frictionless border, there must be co-operation and working on both sides. The one message that I want to get over to the Committee today from ourselves is that we wish to work with the Irish Government and the Government in London to ensure that we put in place arrangements that do not disrupt the trade that occurs between Northern Ireland and the UK, and the Irish Republic and GB. Do not forget that GB is the biggest market for both of us.

The Chairman: If you get below the level of politicians, are senior officials and working groups working flat out to resolve these issues at the moment?

Sammy Wilson MP: I do not think that the work with officials is going on now at the same pace as before. That is because of the political direction there has been in the Irish Republic and the fact that the Taoiseach and the Foreign Minister now seem to adopt a different attitude from that taken by Enda Kenny and Charlie Flanagan. At the beginning of this month, when she went to Killarney, Arlene Foster sought to give reassurances to the opinion-makers and the people in the Republic that we do not want to put up a wall. We do not see Brexit as an opportunity for unionists to put up a wall between ourselves and the Irish Republic. We recognise the issues that affect both of us and should work to resolve those. However—she was very determined about this point, which needs to be re-emphasised—that does not mean that we are prepared to compromise on the choices that were made in the referendum: namely, that we as a country will leave the single market and the customs union. Whatever arrangements are put in place must be put in place within those parameters.

The Chairman: When we were in Dublin yesterday, we were very struck by the fact that a number of people mentioned Arlene Foster's visit and her speech in Killarney. In your view, was that an important speech? Did it help to cement—if that is the right word—or encourage good relations?

Sammy Wilson MP: I do not know how it will be viewed in the long term or what the long-term impact will be. As far as she was concerned, it was not an unusual or specific effort on her part. At the very outset of this process, we thought that, after the initial disappointment in the Irish Republic about the United Kingdom deciding to leave, our biggest ally in any negotiations with the EU would be the Irish Republic, because of the integration that its economy has with the UK economy. Do not forget that the UK economy is probably more important to the Irish economy than the whole EU economy is. We thought, maybe naively, that they would be our main ally in looking for the kind of flexibility required to have a

smooth exit from the EU. That appeared to be the approach of the previous Administration. Maybe they are looking at the short-term problems that they face with Sinn Féin in the Republic. Maybe the current Taoiseach, being less experienced and a bit more naive, thinks that by cosying up to Brussels, rather than by working with the United Kingdom, he can gain some advantage.

Q100 The Chairman: Can we go back a tiny bit and talk about the joint report? It was agreed in December and led to the movement from phase 1 to phase 2, which was hugely important in this rather convoluted process. Could you say a little about your own assessment of that report and about the process of consultation that led to the rather dramatic last-minute change and additional paragraph, and then to agreement? It would be very helpful to us to get your sense of that.

Sammy Wilson MP: There were three elements to the report. The first dealt with UK citizens living in the EU and EU citizens living in the UK. We were on record from the very start as saying that that should not even have been an issue for the negotiations. Both sides should have given assurances to people who had made their homes in, were working in, and had made contributions to, either the UK or other EU countries. The progress made on that has given at least some assurance. There are still a lot of loose ends to be tied up, even for things like the recognition of qualifications, et cetera. The EU could have been more generous on that. To have used it as cynically as some of the EU negotiators did was not a good thing.

We are not very happy about the fact that the Government surrendered so early on the payments to the EU. It is quite clear that one of the main things the EU is after is our money. Our leaving will leave a significant hole in its budget. It will mean that people who are currently net beneficiaries may no longer be net beneficiaries, that some net contributors may have to be heavier net contributors, and that some people who are beneficiaries at present, including the Irish Republic, may become contributors. Money was very important. To have given away that negotiating lever so early was probably a mistake. Nevertheless, the Government decided that, to get the process moved on, they had to do it. We were not overjoyed about that.

Of course, the last part was about the Northern Ireland-Irish Republic border. We are not happy with a lot of the language in it. The reason why we intervened was that we were alarmed at what the initial document looked like. Despite the agreement we have with the Government at Westminster, we have a duty to protect Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom, and we moved quickly to do that. I hope that lessons have been learned from that. It was not an attempt in any way to humiliate the Prime Minister, to cane her or to teach her who was in the driving seat. It was really a case of saying, "Look, we are a unionist party. We wish to see the unity of the United Kingdom maintained. We will oppose any proposal that would upset that".

There was some language about full regulatory alignment and this myth of protecting the all-island economy. There is not an all-island economy in Northern Ireland. We are competitors, for goodness' sake. They set different tax rates deliberately. They compete with us for international investment and bad-mouth us, sometimes, on international markets. They seek every economic advantage they can. Naturally, you would assume that the Irish Government would do that. It is a bit of a nationalist myth to talk about protecting the all-island economy.

Some of that nationalist language lingers in the document, but we believe that we have softened it by the assurances that were given that Northern Ireland will not be treated differently from other parts of the United Kingdom, that there will be no different regime in Northern Ireland, as compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, and that no measures will be taken that would separate Northern Ireland economically or constitutionally from other parts of the United Kingdom. It was kind of balanced, at the end of the day.

If that leads to some contradictions or conflicts, those issues will have to be addressed in the second phase of the talks. The one thing that we will not do is accept that assurances can be given simply by chats with Ministers. We will want to see what is put down in black and white, in writing. Of course, documentation is the all-important thing.

The Chairman: From what we understand, it seems clear that there will be a need to translate the agreements in the document into legal language. That will need to happen quite soon, as I understand it. Do you foresee difficulties arising at that stage?

Sammy Wilson MP: First, some of these things are options. They are options only if the main position the Government have adopted, which is to get a proper trade arrangement with the EU, is not made, or there are not some special arrangements to be made in relation to the Irish border. The most controversial parts of regulatory alignment are well down the road, as a third option. How much of that you put into a legal document, and exactly how you do it, I do not know. Obviously, we will keep a very close eye on that. We are a bit more relaxed about the fallback position, in so far as two options are available before that. We all hope—and countries in the EU should hope the same—that a proper free trade arrangement can be made with the EU. Of course, if you do that and have mutual recognition of standards, similar customs arrangements, et cetera, there is really no need for the regulatory alignment and other things contained therein.

Q101 **Baroness Suttie:** Can I turn to the six key points on which the DUP sought reassurance before indicating its support for the December agreement? Could you outline the rationale behind those points? You have already more or less said that the wording of paragraph 50 of the joint report is sufficient to allay unionist concerns about the impact of the previous wording. Could you say a little more about that as well?

Sammy Wilson MP: The six points were really to reinforce the central premise of our position on where we are going in future. First, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Therefore, as we leave the EU, we must leave the EU on the same terms as the rest of the United Kingdom. Brexit must not be used to drive a constitutional or economic wedge between ourselves and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The six points are a reiteration of how we believe that can be achieved. We will leave with the rest of the United Kingdom. Since the Government are committed to leaving the customs union and the single market, Northern Ireland will leave the customs union and the single market. We will not have some kind of status where we are still part of the single market or the customs union.

To ensure that there is no economic division between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, there will be no customs or trade border down the Irish Sea, because, of course, that would separate us economically from the rest of the United Kingdom. We will not be separated either constitutionally or politically, or economically or regulatorily, from the rest of the United Kingdom. In other words, if we get to the fallback position where there has to be some regulatory alignment, that regulatory alignment will not be specific to Northern Ireland alone. I do not believe that we will get to that position. Later, perhaps, I can talk about how nonsensical the proposal is anyhow, because it is a bit of a nonsense. Finally, there will be no special status for Northern Ireland.

All those things were designed to ensure that we were treated the same as other parts of the United Kingdom and that there would not be any rift, economically or politically, between us.

Baroness Suttie: Do you accept that, post devolution, there is a degree of difference on regulatory alignment between Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales anyway?

Sammy Wilson MP: If you asked any devolved Administration that, I suspect you would find that the answer was yes. In some areas, the local Administration will make decisions about regulations that they need specific to their own area. However, those are usually made in relation to local issues, to how they want to be governed locally and to local problems. The kind of regulatory alignment that was talked about and was being pushed by the Irish Government was to tie Northern Ireland into the rest of the EU. We were saying, "If we are going to leave the EU, we will not leave ourselves in a position where our regulations keep us inside the single market, or keep us aligned with the single market, while the rest of the United Kingdom has freedom to go and strike deals elsewhere".

I believe that Brexit presents a very bright future for the United Kingdom, where we can turn towards that part of the world where 90% of future economic growth is going to occur. We can do trade deals with those

places and look at ways in which we can benefit from that growth. Northern Ireland does not want to be left out of that.

Of course, regulatory alignment refers to only a limited range of things—the areas laid out under the Belfast agreement. First, those are quite limited. Secondly, any regulations or actions that result from decisions on those six areas have to be done independently by the Governments in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Under the current system, regulatory alignment would require unionists in Northern Ireland to surrender their veto over any of those regulations to ensure that, if the Irish Government and the EU changed their regulations, we changed ours as well. That is another safeguard. While the agreement may well say that there will be regulatory alignment in those areas where there is north/south co-operation, that will require a conscious decision by any Administration here in Northern Ireland. I cannot see any unionist putting their hand up to say, “Let’s have regulations that are different from those in other parts of the United Kingdom, if those regulations exclude us from the trade arrangements that the United Kingdom as a whole may make with the rest of the world”.

Lord Whitty: My first point is just a comment. You favour a free trade agreement. A free trade agreement itself would almost certainly require some degree of regulatory equivalence, as do most free trade agreements that the EU has made with everybody else and, indeed, most free trade agreements around the world. I do not quite see where the distinction between equivalence and alignment arises.

Sammy Wilson MP: The difference, of course, is that if we want to have a free trade agreement with America, and they require us to put in place certain regulations that they have, or equivalents of those, that is a choice the Government at Westminster will make when they balance up whether it is worth tying ourselves to some regulations in America, in relation to the trade we gain. That is the important thing. Being part of the single market and tied to the demands of total regulatory alignment does not give you the opportunity to make that choice. There may well be cases where a trade agreement requires you to do certain things and we come to the conclusion that the economic benefits from that agreement are not worth the changes we are being asked to make to our own regulations, rules or laws. I suppose that that is the difference.

Lord Whitty: Yes, but it would be for the UK Government. There would not be a veto in Northern Ireland over that.

Sammy Wilson MP: No, there would not. If the UK Government decide that there are certain EU rules on standards—or equivalent standards, or standards that can be mutually recognised—to which they feel they have to align themselves, there is no problem for us, provided that those standards apply across the United Kingdom. We would have a difficulty, of course—I think a lot of people in the House of Commons would have the same problem—if the Government simply say, “This is far too difficult. We will simply tie ourselves totally to European regulations in

order to get a free trade deal by staying more or less in the single market". To me, that would be a betrayal of the referendum result.

Lord Whitty: My main question is more political, in a sense, than technical. Everything is political in this area, but the nature of equivalence and alignment is pretty complicated. You now believe that you have received enough assurances to reassure yourselves and the unionist population that alignment, as expressed in this agreement, is not a threat. Is there an equivalent reassurance to the nationalist population, who, by and large, wish to maintain a relationship equivalent to the current one? You have rejected special status for Northern Ireland—the Sinn Féin proposition—and explained why, in fairly clear terms. What assurance do the nationalist population have in your view of the way forward?

Sammy Wilson MP: The main thing for people who are nationalists is that they do not wish to see arrangements put in place on a border that is currently fairly seamless and with which they are comfortable.

Can I say this to you, Lord Whitty? The biggest safeguard for the nationalist community is unionist politicians, because it is in our interests to have a nationalist community that is not agitating to break away from the United Kingdom and does not have a sense of grievance that, somehow or other, as a result of Brexit, there is now a hard border. That is one of the reasons why, from day 1, Arlene Foster has said that our leaving the EU does not mean that we want to break away from our neighbours in the Republic. She reiterated that when she was in the Republic. That is one of the reasons why we will work assiduously with the Irish Government, the British Government and the EU to ensure that we finish up with a border that is as frictionless, seamless and invisible as possible. I believe that, technically, that is feasible.

It is not in our interests to have the nationalist community stirred up by physical manifestations along the border. Ironically, the people who were responsible for the hardest border are those who are crying most now about Brexit. Of course, that was Sinn Féin and the IRA. We never had a harder border than when they were in the middle of their terrorist campaign and we therefore had to have manned checkpoints at almost every main road across the border.

Q102 **Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top:** Can we turn to the practical things that need to happen, and that you want to be addressed in stage 2 of the negotiations, in relation to the impact of Brexit on the island of Ireland, both north and south, recognising that this will be the border not just between the north and the south, but between the UK and the EU?

Sammy Wilson MP: You hit on a very important point. Whenever we talk about the problems, we talk about the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Actually, the border that will probably count most for the Irish Republic is the border between the Irish Republic and GB, for two reasons. First, over 40% of its market lies in GB.

Secondly, most of the goods that it sells in Europe go through GB. Therefore, it needs to have a seamless border.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: I accept that, but it will still be the border between the EU and the UK.

Sammy Wilson MP: It will. What needs to be done to address that? The Government outlined the practical suggestions they are making in the paper of last August, in which they talked about how the border arrangements could be made.

Let us look at the existing arrangements. What are people's main concerns about a border? First, if we have different tax rates, how do you collect the taxes? Secondly, if there are different standards, or we are bringing goods from other parts of the world into the UK, how do we ensure that they do not drift into the EU without some customs checks?

A lot of people have ignored the fact that, when it comes to the collection of taxes, a considerable amount of trade already crosses between the Irish Republic and the UK—about £5 billion a year, I think. On much of that trade, there are different VAT rates, different excise rates and different rates of taxation. We do not have physical checks at present to collect that revenue. In fact, most of that revenue is collected by firms that are authorised economic operators simply putting in invoices that a certain number of goods will be transported across the border. Those invoices say how much tax needs to be paid; I think that that is paid on a monthly basis at present.

HMRC has informed us that that system is working. Of course, a lot of taxation depends on trust. You could say, "Do you not lose a lot of revenue in that way?" The danger of losing authorised economic operator status is such that firms tend to put in correct amounts. Therefore, by using a virtual border, we already have a means of collecting tax revenue, if that is required. I do not see any reason why it cannot be extended when we leave the EU. If there are taxes that have to be collected on goods, it can be done in the same way.

What about goods from outside the EU, through customs? Ninety-nine per cent of the customs trade from outside the customs union that passes through the UK at present is registered electronically. Only 4% of that needs physical checks or deeper documentary checks. Even before we leave the EU, there are already systems in place for collecting taxes across the internal border here between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Most of the customs union checks are done electronically. All of that—the extension of authorised economic operator status, and the ability to pay in arrears and to have country of origin checks on bills of quantities, et cetera, read through computers—is in place at present. Indeed, the current upgrade the EU is looking at for its customs code specifically allows for customs declarations to be based on self-assessment. It is now looking at how it may extend that even to non-authorised economic operators. That is how I see the checks being done.

There is the issue of local trade across the border, where a tradesman leaves Strabane with tools in his van to do a job in the Republic. This is where there has to be some imagination and political will. If people want a seamless border, there is the suggestion in the Government's paper that that would be regarded simply as local trade, not international trade, and would not be subject to checks.

Where checks are required, there is no reason why you could not have inspection areas away from the border. It would be on less than 2% of trade, where there were more sensitive items. Those checks could be done away from the border. With all kinds of electronic means, you could ensure that there were no tailbacks.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: What things do you want to be addressed in phase 2?

Sammy Wilson MP: The ideal situation in phase 2 would be to reduce the number of barriers through a free trade agreement that allowed the movement of goods and everything else, without taxes being imposed. That is the Government's first objective.

There will have to be checking of trade; I accept that there will have to be checks. The first thing that I want to see addressed in phase 2 is the willingness of the EU to extend and fully facilitate trade, in the way in which it is seeking to do with China, America, Canada and everywhere else, through the use of electronic means of checking goods. For the more local trade along the border, I would like to see some imagination as to how you can avoid people who are trading a few thousand pounds' worth of goods a year having to go through all the bureaucracy of putting in invoices and having them checked electronically. I believe that the cost of collecting that would be far greater than any money you would ever gain from it. If people started to abuse it by saying, "I am exempt, as a small operator", and began to grow their business, that would quickly be picked up by HMRC as the business suddenly expanded and attention was drawn to it. You could have random audits of things like that.

In phase 2, those are the kinds of issues that need to be addressed. First, how can we have the freest possible trade? Secondly, where checks are required, how can we ensure that they are done in a virtual way, rather than in a physical way?

Q103 **Baroness Brown of Cambridge:** I am interested to know whether you think that sufficient progress has been made to ensure that the provisions of the Good Friday agreement—such as citizens' rights, freedom of movement in the common travel area and continued access to cross-border EU funding—are all protected well enough post Brexit. If not, what else would you like to see?

Sammy Wilson MP: First, I want to make a general point. Since I am a politician, you would expect me to make a general political point on this. It is amazing to see the number of people who have crawled out of the woodwork with concerns about the Belfast agreement and the cross-

border arrangements since Brexit occurred. For people who never had any interest in the Belfast agreement, and probably did not even know what it was, it has suddenly become a huge issue. I think that many people in Northern Ireland feel abused by the way in which the Irish issues have now been taken on by some of the remainers, who showed little or no interest in Northern Ireland affairs before, but now see this—

The Chairman: Quite a lot of remainers, including me, talked about Ireland before the referendum.

Sammy Wilson MP: They did. However, I listen to people in the House of Commons. The words “Northern Ireland” and “Irish Republic” probably never crossed their lips until Brexit occurred, but now they are suddenly all experts on the Belfast agreement. I just wanted to make that point.

Baroness Brown of Cambridge: We take evidence and do scrutiny. This has been raised as an issue with us, so it is appropriate for us to ask you about it.

Sammy Wilson MP: Yes, it is. I intend to answer the question, but I just wanted to get that off my chest.

The citizens’ rights issues are important. Can I reiterate to you the point that I made to Lord Whitty? As a unionist, I have no interest in agitating people who feel Irish and causing them to think that, as a result of Brexit, their only option now is to leave the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is important that the citizenship rights in the Belfast agreement and the issue of freedom of travel across the border are dealt with. Of course, it is important for the economy, because so many people who live in Northern Ireland work in the Republic, and vice versa. Their skills are required, so we need to see this addressed.

The significant thing is this. Although during the referendum a big issue was made of the movement of people across the border, it is never mentioned now, because people have now understood the terms of the common travel arrangement. It has been endorsed by the EU, and the Irish Government are happy with the arrangements that the Government have put in place. Reassurance has been given on all the citizenship rights, whether they be movement rights, voting rights or whatever. On the people end of the Good Friday or Belfast agreement, there is no longer an issue.

Baroness Brown of Cambridge: Have you been surprised by the number and range of people who have applied for Irish passports?

Sammy Wilson MP: No, I have not. There has been so much misinformation that, once we leave the EU, we will all require a visa to get into other European countries, and everything else. People, being canny, will safeguard themselves, if they have the opportunity to do it. Personally, I have not applied for an Irish passport—first, because I do not believe all the scare stories, and, secondly, because I am British and

wish to have my British identity registered by the passport that I carry. However, it does not surprise me.

Do you know something? As an MP, representing a strongly unionist constituency, I guarantee that I probably sign two or three Irish passport applications a week, so I know the extent of it. Very often, people who vote for me, and would call themselves loyalists, do this. They say, "Sammy, you never know. Once we leave the EU, I don't want to have to apply for a visa to go on my holidays to Spain". That is the kind of thing that may have provoked it.

The Chairman: It is very sensible.

Sammy Wilson MP: People, being canny, will do that. Mind you, in a couple of years' time, when they find that they have spent all this money on an Irish passport and did not need to, they may well regret it. However, they have the opportunity and have taken it. On the people issue, there has been assurance.

You raised the issue of EU expenditure, especially things such as the peace money. That was coming to an end, anyhow. Over the last number of rounds, it has gradually diminished. The Government have given an assurance that any expenditure that was committed until 2022 will be honoured. We are not sure what would have happened to EU funding for various projects after 2022, anyway. There is no less certainty than people would have had, had we remained in the EU, because we did not know what was going to happen beyond 2022. If, when we leave the EU, there are still projects that we believe should be funded, we will argue for that from the Government, where we see it as necessary.

Baroness Brown of Cambridge: What about the importance of the CAP and some of the European structural funding?

Sammy Wilson MP: Since we were net contributors to the EU budget, you could argue that we will now have more of the money that we contributed to the EU available to be spent. I suppose that it will be for regional Administrations to argue that that money should be spent on infrastructure projects.

As far as the CAP is concerned, farming payments have been guaranteed until 2022. After that, we will have our own agricultural policy. Some of the changes to the CAP Michael Gove has talked about have been welcomed by farmers in Northern Ireland, because they see that as a better regime than we have under the CAP at present.

Q104 **Baroness Wilcox:** The power-sharing institutions have been suspended for over a year. How can this democratic deficit be addressed so that the interests of all communities in Northern Ireland are understood and taken into account in the Brexit negotiations?

Sammy Wilson MP: I do not really know how we address that in the absence of devolution. We are mad keen to get the Assembly going again, and not just for the reason that we need to have political input into

the discussions. Obviously, we have an input into those discussions at present, because of the relationship we have with the Government. Nigel Dodds, Jeffrey Donaldson and I meet Brexit Ministers almost on a weekly basis. We now think that we have a better arrangement than we had before Christmas, because the shock of what happened just before Christmas has been a wake-up call. We do not want simply to have chats about where the Government are going; we want to see the papers, to see things in black and white and to see the agreements that we have made, so that we can comment on them.

I recognise that we represent one side of the view on Brexit in Northern Ireland. It is not an Administration view; it is a party view. The sooner the Assembly is up and running, the better, because then we can get back to a place in the joint ministerial council and have our views heard there. In the meantime, the views of government departments here in Northern Ireland are represented by civil servants, which is not really a satisfactory arrangement. I met the head of the Civil Service not long ago, and he said that there is good contact between Brexit department officials and officials in Northern Ireland. However, that is no substitute for the kind of democratic input that you would have through the Assembly.

I hope that it may be one incentive, along with many other incentives that we believe exist, to get Sinn Féin back into the Assembly and to get the Assembly up and running. Do not forget, we do not have an Assembly at present because one party has insisted that certain things be guaranteed to it before it comes into the Assembly. All the rest of the parties are saying, "We will come in tomorrow and discuss these things in the way we normally do. If we win, we will win, and if we lose, we will lose, but at least we will be doing our jobs". At present, because of the veto that Sinn Féin has, under the structures that we have here in Northern Ireland, we cannot get a majority of unionists and a majority of nationalists in an Administration, so we cannot have one. We are left with exactly that deficit, and I do not have an easy answer to it.

Baroness Suttie: You will recall that, before the Executive was suspended, there was a joint letter from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the Executive's joint position on Brexit. Do you think that common ground can still be found with Sinn Féin on Brexit?

Sammy Wilson MP: No. It is a bit of a contradiction to the answer that I gave a minute ago, but one of the reasons why we do not have an Administration up and running is that one of the very hard decisions that Sinn Féin would have to make would be to play a part in trying to ensure that the negotiations on leaving the EU were progressed. It has taken such a hard line on that that it would see any kind of input as almost a betrayal of what it has said about Brexit. I will not bore you now with why I believe that Sinn Féin is reluctant to get into an Assembly, but we know that it has run away from hard decisions in the past. One of the hard decisions would be, if not to get a joint position on Brexit, even to play a part in an arrangement that was designed to progress Brexit.

Lord Whitty: There are those cynics who would say that one of the reasons why we have not reached an agreement on restarting the Assembly and the Executive is that, due to the episodic parliamentary arithmetic for you and your colleagues at Westminster, you have far more influence directly, in your relationship with the current Government, than you would have if you had to reach some uneasy compromise in Belfast. I trust that you will refute that degree of cynicism.

Sammy Wilson MP: Nothing could be further from the truth, Lord Whitty. There are a number of reasons why nothing could be further from the truth. First, the Government have made it quite clear that they will not interfere in matters that they believe are devolved. We would have little response from the Government if we were to ask them to do things that were within the remit of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Indeed, many of the things we have talked to the Government about have been budgetary issues and issues that impact across the United Kingdom as a whole, such as some of the welfare reform stuff and the relaxation of public sector pay. We have not raised specifically things that are the responsibility of the devolved Assembly. They would resist engaging with us on those, anyway, so there is little purchase for us there.

Secondly, speaking selfishly, my days are full when I go to London, with the House of Commons and the meetings that people want from me. Now that people think that we have some influence with the Government, every Tom, Dick and Harry wants to talk to us, so we tend to find that our days are well filled. Why would I, as a Northern Ireland MP, also want to have responsibility for having to deal at Westminster with all the minutiae of legislation and regulation that should be dealt with by the Assembly, even if we had the time for it? In the past, when Northern Ireland business was dealt with at Westminster, it was dealt with in a very cursory manner, through Orders in Council, et cetera, and rushed through. There probably was not a lot of good legislation.

The third thing, of course, is that we are committed devolutionists. The last reason, being rather selfish, is that we have 28 Members of the Assembly, whose livelihoods depend on their having a role to play there. They are mad keen to play that role. If you wanted to have a war within the party, the one thing that you would do would be to say, "See you lot? We don't care about you. We want this all taken to Westminster". For goodness' sake, I would get lynched by the two Assembly Members in my own area. We are a devolutionist party.

I will make this point to you, Lord Whitty. Do not forget that we made a pile of sacrifices to get the Assembly up and running. We annoyed an awful lot of our own supporters to support the structures. We are sitting with people whom many people in my community loathe. They have not really done much to help us with some of their antics over recent months, yet we made a commitment to get the Assembly up and running. It never ran more smoothly than in the period when the DUP was the majority unionist party. We are still committed to making sure that that happens. For all those reasons, we will not stand in the way of devolution, but we

want to make sure that we do not have devolution that is put back in place simply by a surrender to one side's demands or, worse still, that almost encourages people to walk out and bring the place down again the next time they do not get their way.

Lord Whitty: I note that. I just think that, in the Brexit context, you may not have had the leverage. If the Prime Minister had had the majority she had before the last election, would you have seen her come back to the DUP to alter a draft that she had already agreed with the European Union?

Sammy Wilson MP: No.

Lord Whitty: Perhaps I will end there.

Q105 **The Chairman:** I will offer one final thought. From the conversation that we have had, it has been apparent that east/west and north/south relations have taken a bit of a knock in the last six months or so. How do you think you will get those back on track as the negotiations move into the next phase and, indeed, afterwards?

Sammy Wilson MP: I am probably not the best person to ask about this, as I tend to be a bit too robust in some of the language that I use. Maybe someone would like to quote some of my more recent comments to me.

Arlene Foster has tried to do this at a personal level, but there has to be more contact between ourselves and politicians in the Republic. That is a two-way process, by the way. I believe that there may not be the same willingness there. As I have said, Arlene went down and made a speech in the Republic. It was not specifically designed as a reaching-out speech. Nevertheless, one of its purposes was to do that.

Secondly, we will continue to spell out politically the logic of Northern Ireland politicians, Westminster politicians and politicians in the Republic working together on this project, because we all have something to gain from ensuring that the objective that Minister Davis has set out—a frictionless and seamless border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and the Republic and GB—is realised. I hope that the economic logic of having to work together on this will bring the Irish Government back to the position where we think the previous Administration was. They realised that it was important for them almost to be the allies of the United Kingdom in this project, because there are benefits for us all in it.

Certainly, our own Prime Minister and the Ministers who are dealing with Brexit realise that as well. In all the discussions that I have had with them, they have recognised the need to get the Irish on board. The Brexit Secretary is a bit like myself, actually; he has a bit of a short fuse and can shoot from the hip. On a number of occasions in the House of Commons, I have tried to provoke him to say nasty things about the Irish Republic, and he has refused. In fact, in a couple of his answers, he has said, "I have promised that I will be diplomatic. I will not go down that

route". The Government at Westminster recognise that they need those relationships.

The Chairman: I worked for him once when he was Minister for Europe, but there we are.

Thank you very much for your evidence. We are very grateful to you for taking the time to see us. Please give our best wishes to Arlene Foster and say that we hope there will be an occasion when she can come and talk to us. We would very much welcome that. However, we are extremely grateful to you for having given evidence to us today.

Sammy Wilson MP: Thank you.