

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland—dealing with the deficit](#), HC 613

Wednesday 7 March 2018

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Members present: Dr Andrew Murrison; Mr Gregory Campbell; Mr Robert Goodwill; Mr Stephen Hepburn; Lady Hermon; Kate Hoey; Ian Paisley; Jim Shannon.

Questions 647 – 697

Witness

I: Simon Hamilton MLA.



Examination of witness

Witness: Simon Hamilton MLA.

Q647 **Chair:** Mr Hamilton, good morning. You are very welcome here today. We have been very busy this week. The Committee has been exercised about a number of issues and we have been working extremely hard. Your visit today is the culmination of all that and we look forward very much to hearing what you have to say on this particular issue, which alongside Brexit has been dominating the thinking of this Committee over the past several weeks.

If I may start with a question, it has been suggested in evidence by others, including the Alliance Party, that the Good Friday agreement has reached a point at which we need to start thinking about some changes. The agreement, as you know, was never meant to be in its final and perfect form, and set for all time. There was provision within the talks and discussions at the time about evolution in the future, as the circumstances of Northern Ireland changed. I was wondering what your thoughts were on that and whether you feel that, just as the St Andrews agreement followed an interregnum several years ago, perhaps the Government need to start thinking about something similar in the future, after we get past our current impasse, and, if so, what that might look like.

Simon Hamilton: Can I begin, Chair, by thanking you and the committee for the invitation to be here this morning? I look forward to giving evidence on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party. To answer your question, it is perfectly natural that, 20 years after the Belfast agreement, as part of a retrospective of where we were, where we have come from and what the intervening 20 years have been like, people would look back and ask questions about whether there is a time for change, alteration, amendment or reform.

At times over the last 20 years and even at the time of the referendum, I can remember it was almost like the law of the Medes and Persians; it could not be changed. Clearly there has been change, not to the agreement but to the relevant legislation that has followed on from it, in order to reflect the need for reform as it has been seen over the last while. You mentioned St Andrews; it is a very good example and there have been other examples where the operation of the Assembly, the Executive or the various institutions may not have been going according to plan, and reform was required. It is only natural that, particularly at the 20-year juncture, we should be looking at change.

That does not mean, in my view, that the principles of the agreement have been diluted in any way. By "principles", I mean that a decision has been taken collectively across the society in Northern Ireland that we want to fight our battles politically. The corridors of Stormont are where we are having the arguments and we are not having those arguments out



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on the street. We should be sharing power in Northern Ireland between nationalists, republicans and unionists. Those principles are there.

In terms of the mechanics, what a former leader of the SDLP called “the ugly scaffolding” of the Belfast agreement, we have dismantled some of that scaffolding over the years, but there is a frustration on many people’s parts that we have not advanced towards what might be described as normal politics as quickly as we would like. There was an expectation that we would be further along in the journey, 20 years on from 1998. We are perhaps not there. That undoubtedly reflects the complexity of the situation that we have in Northern Ireland. But there is an argument to keep under review the agreement, the institutions, how they operate and how they work, at all times adhering to the broad principles that have been there, not just in the 1998 agreement, but also in subsequent agreements.

Q648 Chair: Thank you. If I may say so, that is—I hesitate to say consensus—certainly an emerging view that appears to have legs. What I would like to know from you is where you think we are going with the current situation and how we can get to a position where we can avoid what I have referred to as the nightmare of direct rule. That means restoring the Executive, for the immediate future, pretty much along the lines of how it was envisaged in the 1998 agreement. Do you think there is any prospect of getting back to that position?

Simon Hamilton: It is very sad and very unfortunate that we are in the situation that we are in. Now a year has passed with Northern Ireland having no ministerial-led Government at Stormont. I was a Minister in the last Executive, so I have some sense of the scale of the challenges that were facing that Executive, whether in respect of health reform, reforming the education system, housing and Brexit, as you mentioned. There is no Northern Ireland Assembly or Northern Ireland Executive voice dealing with those issues. It is sad and unfortunate that we have got into that position.

Sinn Féin has unfortunately drawn a whole series of red lines, none of which correlate with its reasons for collapsing the Executive in the first place. We are now in a situation where over a year, 13 months, has passed and those decisions are clogging up the system. For those of us who are elected to represent constituencies in Northern Ireland, our constituents are suffering as a result of those decisions not being taken. That is not just sad and unfortunate; I think it is a disgrace.

You described it as a nightmare of direct rule, and my party is deeply and always has been deeply committed to devolution. We believe that devolution is the best form of government for Northern Ireland, having locally elected and locally accountable Ministers taking those decisions on health, attracting jobs and investment or whatever it might be. Direct rule may not be the ideal. It may not be our optimum outcome, but it is better than having no Government at all. What we need is decisions being taken, Ministers taking decisions, whether they be in health,



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schools or whatever it might be right across the public sector. We need Ministers taking decisions. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is bringing forward a budget very soon, I understand later this week even. That is absolutely the right and necessary thing to do. Again, it is sad that she has to do that. I would rather it be a finance Minister at Stormont doing that, but needs must.

We cannot simply have a budget coming forward. There are key decisions, never mind day-to-day decisions, that are building up and building up within departments. People are suffering as a consequence and we need those decisions taken.

You asked, Chair, about the prospects for a return to devolution to avoid direct rule or rolling towards direct rule. I have to say, and it gives me no pleasure to say to the Committee, the prospects of a return to devolution in the short term are bleak. There are many reasons for that, but there are three principal reasons. First is the intransigence of Sinn Féin in terms of drawing very deep red lines, which it has been unwilling to shift from. My party, as you know, has set no preconditions for a return of the Executive.

There is its behaviour, and by "its behaviour" I mean its constant eulogising of terrorists. You started off by asking about the agreement 20 years on. Many people would have thought that, 20 years on, Sinn Féin would have changed its behaviour in respect of the past. Nobody is asking anybody to forget the past or not remember people who died in the past, but the way in which Sinn Féin and a Member of this Parliament recently named their office after two IRA terrorists is a slap in the face for innocent victims, and does not show a sign of good intent or good faith on the part of Sinn Féin.

Finally, the third and principal reason is that its behaviour in recent days and weeks, after the breakdown of the latest talks process, with selective leaking of information, briefing and talking in the media, does not fill me with any confidence that Sinn Féin is serious. It was an issue and a question that many of us had before the recent talks process, whether Sinn Féin was serious about getting devolution up and running again. I think its behaviour in recent days and weeks suggests to me that it is not serious about getting devolution back. That, plus its behaviour in respect of terrorism and adherence to these very deep, very thick red lines, does not feel me with hope that, in the short term, Stormont will be back up and running again.

Chair: Thank you. It is appropriate for me to record that we invited Sinn Féin to give evidence before us and it declined.

Q649 **Jim Shannon:** As always, it is nice to see somebody from Strangford here. It is good to see you here. Thanks for all you do, just publicly for the record and Hansard, in the talks process as you try to find a way forward, but also as a fellow party member. There are two questions I want to ask you. In the response to the Chair, you have probably



highlighted some of the issues and you have certainly highlighted the problems. We as a party have been totally committed to devolution. It is the way we have always looked at things. You might want to tell us for the record, for Hansard, just how important it is to have devolution and what it brings to the people of Northern Ireland collectively, across both traditions.

Simon Hamilton: As I said in response to the Chair, Jim—and thank you for your welcome—I firmly believe, as I know you do and the party does, that devolution is the best form of government for Northern Ireland. You will recall from the expanse of your time in public life—you have been in council when there was no Government and just direct rule Ministers—how difficult it was to get decisions made and to make representations on behalf of your constituents. You and I have talked before about how devolution is far from perfect, and nobody is saying that devolution is a panacea for all of our ills, by any means, but there was at least an ability to represent your constituents, take those issues directly to a Minister who, without denigrating anybody who served as a direct rule Minister, would have understood the places and the people that you were talking about. They may even have represented that constituency themselves. It is an infinitely better form of government than direct rule.

We all still want to see devolution and we will work towards getting devolution back. We will go back into government tomorrow morning without any preconditions. In the absence of Sinn Féin taking us up on the offer, we will continue to work for a fair and balanced deal to allow institutions to be restored, but we cannot continue to drift in the way that we are. It is not acceptable that we have now gone over a year without having a Government in place. We are grateful and thankful to the Secretary of State and her predecessor for bringing forward budgets. That is the bare minimum, but they need to take other decisions.

I remember, when I was Minister of Health; we brought forward a plan for reforming the health service under the tutelage of Professor Rafael Bengoa from Spain. That has been sitting on the shelf now for the last year. I know work has been going on behind the scenes, but a lot of those big reforms that are required to turn our health service around in Northern Ireland need ministerial decisions. The team in the Department of Health has been working very hard, but it just does not have that authority to go to the next stage that would reap the benefits for our constituencies. We need to have decisions being taken. While I think that having Her Majesty's Government taking those decisions is far from ideal and is certainly not our preferred option, it would be better than having no decisions and no Government at all.

Q650 **Jim Shannon:** The second part of the question is probably a follow-on from the first one. You have outlined the importance for devolution and how it delivers. That is very clear to some of us who have served at all levels, in the council, at the Assembly and at Westminster, but how could reform of the Assembly and the Executive take place to make it work



better or to make it work? What are your thoughts on that?

Simon Hamilton: Again related to the Chair's first question, it is right and proper that we continue to look at our institutions and the need for reform. It has been pretty clear over the events of the last year and a bit that reform is required in how they operate. One thing that particularly strikes me as being necessary is that we cannot run the risk of seeing similar or the same set of circumstances happening again in the future, so I think that the institutions need to be made more sustainable.

This is effectively what happened. I do not want to look back over the history of a year and a bit ago, but one party took the decision to strategically strike against another party to call an early election, an unscheduled election, to try to reap some electoral reward from that. In my view, if you got devolution up and running again, you would hope that you would never be in that set of circumstances again, but this is Northern Ireland. We had 10 years before that where it was relatively stable, but you will remember that there were still issues around policing and justice, and the devolution of that, welfare reform and other issues as well.

These things have a habit of appearing and popping up every so often. I do not think we can have the situation again where, just because one party effectively decides it, there will be an election and there is not a longer period of time to deal with the issues that have created whatever—and I use the word advisedly—crisis there might be.

A lot of that sustainability can be done on the basis of the spirit in which parties enter government. At the minute, the spirit is not good between parties. There is a distinct lack of trust there and that will be very difficult to build back, particularly given the behaviour over the last couple of weeks, especially Sinn Féin's behaviour in terms of its attitude to innocent victims. We have to look as well at reforming our institutions to make them look better. We have streamlined them. The processes of the Assembly have been changed. We have to look at how we can make them more sustainable as well.

Q651 **Jim Shannon:** Finally, do you see a possible hybrid system as a plan B, rather than direct rule? Is there a hybrid? Is there an assembly that will have a monitoring role or a regulating role without having the legislative power? Is that an option and how would you see that working? Some people said yesterday, in response to that question, "We do not just want to be in a committee that says no to everything". You want to have some input into the change, without having the legislative power. How do you see that working?

Simon Hamilton: In the absence of devolution, there is clearly a need to look at what might be put in place. A range of options would be available to the Government. It is worth serious consideration to look at the option of an Assembly that has a consultative role or even something a little stronger than that, where Assembly Members were not taking the



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decisions but were inputting into those decisions, advising Ministers and advising the Secretary of State on a range of issues, like the budget and like some of those reforms in health and education that we were talking about.

There is precedent for doing this. Nobody is saying that this is the optimum position, where we want to be or anything like that but, given where we are, there is merit in looking at this, looking at examples from the past and even from the recent past. Again, I think of the period between 2003 and 2007 when devolution was suspended. A committee-based approach had been taken at that time, where various issues were put to different committees that were populated by a cross-section of Assembly Members. They interrogated the issues. They produced reports. They made recommendations. That type of approach, Jim, might deal with your point around not just being oppositional, with everybody coming in and saying no to the stuff that is a bit difficult and yes to the motherhood and apple pie type things, but trying to reach consensus and build a view.

In the absence of trust, in the absence of a good spirit and with a loss of good faith over the last little while, if we are working to the goal of trying to get devolution back in the medium to long term, that type of environment might be helpful in building that good working relationship again, which has been sorely absent over the last little while.

Q652 **Lady Hermon:** It is very good of you, Simon, to come and give evidence on behalf of your party. Do you mind me asking—I hope you do not—who actually represented the DUP in the recent round of talks? Were you involved in the talks yourself?

Simon Hamilton: I was, yes.

Q653 **Lady Hermon:** Who else represented the party?

Simon Hamilton: There was a range of different people. The party is a large party, as you know. We are represented in lots of different places and there was a large team of people involved in lots of different aspects of the talks. There have been different rounds of the talks, as you know. There was a relatively short period, which felt a lot longer being involved in it, over the last little while. There was a period back in the autumn as well. There was a period back in the summer and a period back in last spring as well.

Q654 **Lady Hermon:** I want to come into this year, the recent talks and the recent stage of the talks.

Simon Hamilton: Over that year, nearly, of different stages or phases of negotiations, a large number of people have been involved in the talks. Mr Campbell has even attended the occasional meeting in respect of the talks, as have I and indeed a whole range of other people within the party, from the leader down, at all times led by Arlene, of course. Arlene has been involved in the talks right throughout, at all stages.



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Q655 **Lady Hermon:** That is what I would expect, since she is the party leader. Now, you have been very critical in your comments to date about the “selective leaking” of various documents in recent weeks. Are we talking about the documents put in the public domain, very helpfully I have to say, by Eamonn Mallie about the draft agreement?

Simon Hamilton: I do not think it is just documents or the selective leaking of documents. It is not always the documents or papers themselves. The issue around it is the commentary that is attached to them and the briefings that are given to them. Even before the collapse of the recent phase of the talks, there was evidence of the Sinn Féin side mischief-making around the talks, which was not helpful and not conducive to getting a successful outcome.

Q656 **Lady Hermon:** Can we just focus on the draft agreement that has been put into the public domain? Were you party to that, Simon?

Simon Hamilton: As you know, Lady Hermon, there was no agreement reached. It is unfortunate that we were not able to reach an agreement because, if we had, we would probably have devolution up and running again now and we would be dealing with the sorts of questions that the Chair and others have posed. There was no agreement. A lot of work had been put in. A lot of effort had been made.

Q657 **Lady Hermon:** How close were you, then?

Simon Hamilton: Significant progress had been made throughout the talks. In fact, the talks ended on 14 February and, on the Friday before that, Arlene the party leader issued a statement saying that good work had been done and that progress had been made, but that there was still work to do. While good work had been done and significant progress had been made, there was still a lot of work outstanding. It became very evident and very clear in that following week that, while we had narrowed some of the gaps, there was still quite a significant gap between parties on key issues. There was not the time available to us to bridge those gaps.

That is unfortunate. As I have said before, we want to get devolution up and running again. We would be back in today, tomorrow, whenever. We are not unfortunately in the position to do that, because Sinn Féin has effectively held the country to ransom for the last year.

Q658 **Lady Hermon:** Let us just go back to the dates that you have given us. The party leader, Arlene Foster, issued a statement on the Friday. As you know of course, the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach both arrived in Belfast on the Monday, and there was general expectation that there was going to be an agreement on that day. I think you would agree with that.

Simon Hamilton: I do not disagree that some thought that. Quite why they thought it, I am not sure. That is why I mentioned the statement that was issued by Arlene on the Friday, where she made it clear that



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work had been done and progress had been made, but there was more work to do. That weekend, as you know, was the weekend when Mary Lou McDonald was succeeding Gerry Adams as president of Sinn Féin at a special ard fheis, so there was no opportunity over that weekend to do any further work. Work would have had to be picked up on the Monday, therefore, and carried on into the following week. I am not quite sure why there was this belief. Yes, progress had been made. We were working away, but I am not quite sure why there was this belief that a deal was going to be signed, sealed and delivered on the Monday.

Q659 **Lady Hermon:** The Prime Minister, who had not been in Northern Ireland since the Balmoral Show the previous year, accidentally comes to Northern Ireland and to Stormont on the Monday, at the same time as the Taoiseach. Is it correct that you, as was reported, had described the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom's visit as a "distraction"?

Simon Hamilton: I did say that, yes.

Q660 **Lady Hermon:** Why would you have said that about the Prime Minister's visit to Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom?

Simon Hamilton: The Prime Minister is always welcome.

Q661 **Lady Hermon:** Do you think she felt welcomed when she was described as a "distraction"?

Simon Hamilton: I stand by what I said. I was not the only person who said it and I am sure not the only person who believed it.

Lady Hermon: I am just asking you to account for what you said, not others.

Simon Hamilton: The Prime Minister came. She was very welcome. She was visiting Bombardier first thing in the morning. Her arrival had an impact, in that some did believe that there was a deal being done, and that was not the case. There was a significant amount of work to be done on a lot of key areas still, at that stage, and it deflected away from that work being done and being picked up. The work that had been left off on the Friday was not able to be picked up on the Monday, because of the distraction that had been created.

Lady Hermon: You have no qualms at all about describing the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is an integral part, as a distraction.

Simon Hamilton: She is always welcome. I wish she had been over more in the last year than just the Balmoral Show, when she was over for electioneering at that time. She is always welcome. She is very welcome to our constituency at any time, if she wants to visit. At this point, her visit and particularly the visit of the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic—the issues we were dealing with in the talks were strand 1 issues, from the time-honoured three-stranded approach—were a distraction, were



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not helpful and did not create the space on that Monday to pick up the work that had been left off on Friday.

Q662 **Lady Hermon:** Both of them, in your view, were a distraction.

Simon Hamilton: I think their visits were a distraction.

Q663 **Lady Hermon:** Where are we at the moment? What good news could you give the people of Northern Ireland, who will be listening to this evidence session? What good news is there? At the present time, where are the talks? Are there talks between representatives of the DUP and Sinn Féin, at some level?

Simon Hamilton: No, there are not.

Lady Hermon: There are none whatsoever.

Simon Hamilton: I think this may be in response to the Chair. I do not think the prospects of talks in the short term are good. By the short term, I do not mean just in the next week or the next couple of weeks. At this stage, in the next months, certainly this year and maybe even beyond, I do not think the prospects are good.

Q664 **Lady Hermon:** What are you saying to the people of Northern Ireland? You are saying to the people of Northern Ireland that you do not think that the talks are going to resume between Sinn Féin and the DUP, the two lead parties in Northern Ireland, this side of the summer or maybe this side of Christmas.

Simon Hamilton: On 14 February, when this phase of the talks came to an end, Arlene Foster made it clear that we still wanted to work towards devolution. We wanted to achieve a fair and balanced deal. That was our goal, because our goal is to get devolution back up and running again.

Lady Hermon: That is your goal.

Simon Hamilton: We want to do that. We made an offer back in late August of last year to Sinn Féin, a genuine, honest offer, to get the institutions up and running again immediately, alongside having devolution up and running. You could pass a budget; you could deal with the range of issues that we have on health and education. You could deal with the other issues alongside them. Sinn Féin did not take that offer up. In fact, it rejected it inside an hour.

Q665 **Lady Hermon:** Sorry, could we come to this year, 2018? Where are we this year?

Simon Hamilton: We want to get devolution up and running again.

Lady Hermon: You keep saying that.

Simon Hamilton: There is perhaps some doubt about that from your tone.



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Lady Hermon: Sorry, it is the answers to the questions, with the greatest respect.

Simon Hamilton: Chair, I am seeking to answer the questions. I am not necessarily being given the opportunity to complete my answers.

Lady Hermon: I apologise.

Simon Hamilton: I will persist. We left the talks on 14 February saying that we wanted to re-engage at some later stage. I do not believe that, in the subsequent number of weeks, the three or four weeks that have passed, the intervening three or four weeks, that Sinn Féin, its behaviour, what it has been saying and what it has been doing have been conducive to getting us back around the table. It has been engaged, in my view, in a bit of a scorched earth policy over the last number of weeks. Part of the problem over the last year has been an absolute absence of trust between the two parties. Its behaviour in recent weeks, on top of having drawn all these different red lines, on top of its disrespect for innocent victims, is not conducive to getting us back around the table, never mind getting us towards an agreement to get devolution back up and running again.

Q666 **Lady Hermon:** When the Secretary of State gave us evidence, she indicated that there would be a pause in the talks for a couple of weeks. If the Secretary of State issues an invitation to the DUP and to Sinn Féin to reconvene the talks, what is the approach of the DUP?

Simon Hamilton: That has not happened at this stage and I am not anticipating it happening in the short term. I have not heard anything to suggest that she will definitively be doing that, but the Secretary of State obviously has the liberty and the right to do that, and perhaps even a duty to do that.

Lady Hermon: She has.

Simon Hamilton: I do not want to speak for the Secretary of State, but I think she would also recognise the difficulties that there will be in getting parties around the table, rebuilding trust that was sorely absent anyway and has been badly affected by the behaviour over the last couple of weeks from Sinn Féin as well. She will know the difficulty that there will be in not just getting us around the table, but then also working towards an agreement.

The Secretary of State will make her judgment and make a decision on the basis of what is before her, but my view and the party's view is that, in the short term, the prospects of a return to devolution are not good. Unless Sinn Féin deals with those issues, in terms of dealing with the red lines and not setting down preconditions, unless it changes and adjusts its attitude, and then approaches the talks with a significant dose of realism about what is achievable and the necessity to have a fair and balanced deal coming out of the end of any talks, I do not think there is a



prospect of not only getting devolution back, but even getting proper, meaningful talks started in the short term.

Q667 **Lady Hermon:** Could I just ask the question again, please? I know that you cannot speak for the Secretary of State, but you are here to speak for the DUP. My question a moment or two ago was: if the Secretary of State was to invite the parties back, she gave evidence to this Committee that she would reconvene the talks in a couple of weeks. Speaking for the DUP, if the Secretary of State issues that invitation to your party, will you show leadership in Northern Ireland and go back into the talks? It is a straightforward question.

Simon Hamilton: We are more than happy to talk to the Secretary of State. We have been talking to Sinn Féin on and off for the last year, even in the most difficult of circumstances after last March's Assembly election and the intervening period. It is not as if we are not talking to people, will not talk to people or saying that we would not discuss things with people. The point that I am seeking to make is that the mood, the atmosphere, the context and the relationship are not good and, therefore, in my view and the party's view, this is not conducive to getting an agreement that is fair and balanced, and would allow the Assembly to be back up and running. That is sad. It is unfortunate. It is a huge backwards step, but it is an unfortunate reality of where we are at this minute in time.

Lady Hermon: This is my last question. I will come back later on after some colleagues. This is a very pessimistic account that you have given to the Committee.

Simon Hamilton: I do not like being pessimistic.

Lady Hermon: I know that you do not, Simon, so I have given you ample opportunity. I am sorry if I interrupted you when you were in your flow, but I wanted to encourage you. I actually think your party has a duty of leadership in Northern Ireland. We do need to see devolution restored and there has to be a generosity of spirit. I could, with the greatest respect, begin with your party leader. She has it in her to show that generosity of spirit and to show those leadership characteristics.

Simon Hamilton: I have worked with Arlene for many years and, if you step back and look at the accusations, the brickbats, the things that have been said and done to her over this past year, she has shown leadership throughout the past year by working towards getting agreement with people who were saying all sorts of things about her during the election campaign in this last year and have said so subsequently as well. That takes great courage and bravery, and I think she has exhibited that at every turn and continues to do so.

The party has shown leadership. As I said half-jokingly, I do not like to be pessimistic. I do not like to sit here or anywhere and say that I think the prospects of a return to devolution are bleak. I came into politics to



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try to help make Northern Ireland work and try to move on from the past that we had all endured and lived through. I have a family of my own that I do not want to see going through anything like what some of us have had to live through and endure. It is not something that I take any pleasure from, sitting here saying that I do not think we are going to get devolution back in the short term. I want to see it back.

We have shown leadership over the last year by engaging in talks, by putting forward suggestions as to how we could get back. The decision and the statement back on 31 August, when Arlene made her speech, to say, "Let us get it up and running again. Let us deal with these issues in parallel", was a common-sense way forward. It was rejected by Sinn Féin because it does not do common sense. It is digging in on an ideology, points, red lines, preconditions and all of that. It has to account for that, but I do not think it is doing anybody, including its own supporters, a service by doing that.

Q668 Lady Hermon: You have confirmed to us that Arlene is going to show leadership and generosity of spirit, and she is going to continue to do that.

Simon Hamilton: I think she has. She has continued to and she will continue to, but it has to be reciprocated. I do not believe it has.

Q669 Mr Campbell: Simon, you are very welcome to the Committee. There are a couple of issues that have featured from our witnesses and questions to them. One of them has been raised today and that is the issue of the budget. Others have said that, in the run-up to where we are now, there has been a significant degree of concentration in the minds of the public, the voters, that, whatever the controversial issues, they want to see decisions taken on health issues that you raised in answer to Mr Shannon's question, I think it was. Is that your experience of what people say their concentration of effort is and the concentration of effort they want to see on the part of their politicians?

Simon Hamilton: Those people engage in political discussion with you. I have noticed a hugeshift in more recent times. Obviously, when the Assembly was collapsing, there was a huge interest and a huge focus on that issue, in and of itself. Immediately after the Assembly election, and it has ratcheted up ever since and is almost reaching its crescendo now, people are stopping you and saying to you that they want decisions made. Primarily, they want Assembly Members back in Stormont. They want Stormont and the Executive up and running again, but they want someone to take decisions to deal with it.

I know that some of the issues that people will be experiencing with the health service are not related to the absence of devolution itself, but there is a feeling that there is nobody taking any decisions to fix the system, to reform it in the way that is required and reform it in a way that there is a broad political consensus about.



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Somebody stopped me at school the other morning and talked about one of their relatives who had a bad experience with the health service over the weekend. They were just shaking their head, not blaming us, but the absence of having anything there at all just makes them feel that nobody is really taking on their concerns. Most people do not get up in the morning and think, "How can we get devolution back up and running again?" They are worried about getting their kids to school. They are worried about their job. They are worried about their income. They are worried about elderly relatives or whatever it might be. They want somebody taking decisions that they feel are going to benefit them and their family.

Q670 Mr Campbell: On that, given the lack of the budget—and we had the head of the Civil Service indicating to us some time ago that the absolute deadline was 8 February and of course we are four weeks past that now—there was a feeling, both yesterday and in other locations, that the Government were quite reluctant to move definitively, and some might say for understandable reasons, for the fear of upsetting a party or parties in the discussions that were going on, particularly Sinn Féin. If the budget were to be announced in the middle of talks, there was a fear that Sinn Féin would either walk out, or create a controversy or a dispute. Is that a view, first of all, that you share? If you can answer that, I have a second part to that question to go on to.

Simon Hamilton: Yes, we are almost past that point now around the deadline issue. I have some knowledge of this, having served as Finance Minister for two years and taken budgets through the Assembly. It is not about dates, financial years or anything like that; it is about allowing government departments to prepare for the year ahead. If you get certainty late about what your budget is, and that was the case in the year that we are currently in—departments did not have any certainty until very late on—you get no decisions or very bad decisions being taken about where money is to be spent. There is an opportunity with the budget coming forward quickly. I still think it is on the late side. Ideally, it would have been through before Christmas, but there is still a chance that departments can prepare a little better than they were able to this year.

Your point is right around the fear of other parties, because there is evidence. It is on record. I get a bit annoyed sometimes with the criticism that my party can receive about the talks process, when people forget that Sinn Féin walked away back in November, just because the Secretary of State, Mr Brokenshire at that time, moved to pass a budget to give those departments the certainty that they required. There was a concern that moving ahead would have done that, but I do not think that is right. Effectively, the people of Northern Ireland have been held to ransom for the last year by Sinn Féin, and we should not be delaying things around the budget. Budgets are not very glamorous, but they are the oil that moves the engine and helps to make it go. Decisions need to be taken.



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Q671 **Mr Campbell:** You talked I think in answer to Lady Hermon's questions about there being some speculation about agreement that weekend. You were saying that discussions would have gone on into that week. If it was the case that the Government were indecisive during the talks process, even though they were criticised and some might say lambasted in the press for taking a definitive decision to allow the budget to be made tomorrow, if somebody had not done that, would the talks still have been going on?

Simon Hamilton: Given its track record and given what it said, I think Sinn Féin was susceptible to criticism from others back in the autumn time about what appeared to be moving towards direct rule in the passing of the budget. As was mentioned about the timeline, there was an unofficial deadline. We honour deadlines in the breach more in talks processes, but there was a deadline where Sinn Féin had made clear that that week things needed to be wrapped up. One of the issues, probably the major issue affecting it—

Q672 **Mr Campbell:** Was this the week that Gerry Adams was due to retire?

Simon Hamilton: Yes, there was that issue, but there was also the fact that the budget was looming and that they knew a decision would have to be taken on the budget. I do not think they wanted that to be taken.

Q673 **Mr Campbell:** I have just one final question, Chairman. Again, this is an issue that the press have majored on to some degree. If it was not so serious, Chairman, it would be the subject of satire, this selective use of leaks. Just to try to bring a little bit of clarity, if any clarity can be brought to it, on the issue of the weekend that you have just alluded to, was that there was some speculation that started on the Thursday of that weekend and then the Sinn Féin ard fheis was on the Saturday. Preparations began to be made for both our own Prime Minister and the Taoiseach to come on Monday.

I do not particularly want you to breach any confidences unless you choose to do so. I certainly would not like to do that. As you said, the Prime Minister is always welcome, but you would welcome it if Downing Street were to release the advice that it got from our party about whether the Prime Minister should come? All of this speculation was ongoing and we were at the point of being about to sign this accommodation/draft agreement/agreement, depending on which choice of words Sinn Féin uses and the sequence of dates. That could lead to embarrassment for us if it had been the case that we said, yes, the Prime Minister should come. I am not going to ask you to breach confidences, but would you welcome it if the press were to find out that, in fact, advice to the contrary was made, and if Downing Street were to release what advice it received about the Prime Minister coming not to visit part of the United Kingdom, but to endorse a deal that was not actually a deal?

Simon Hamilton: I think you are right; I do not think we should be breaching confidences and I do not think we should say. In response to your question about whether Downing Street wanted to make clear any



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advice that had been given in respect of the talks process, you are absolutely right to make a distinction between the Prime Minister or indeed any Government Minister visiting Northern Ireland to do their job. That is a distinctively different matter. In respect of the talks process and in anticipation that a deal was imminent, i.e. that day, it is fair to say that our party would be fairly relaxed about the release of any advice that was given.

Q674 **Mr Campbell:** You have not given any thought to why the press have not taken any interest in that concept. They seem to be interested in a whole range of other selective documents but, to my knowledge, nobody has been interested in that.

Simon Hamilton: No, but it is never too late, I suppose.

Q675 **Kate Hoey:** Welcome. Take us through day to day, not completely day to day, over the last month or so. Are the Permanent Secretaries discussing with you and are the leaders of other parties coming to you at all? You are all in Stormont still, so is there any discussion going on and advice about things? I appreciate now that the Secretary of State is getting more involved in the budget but, until then, were you being asked to agree to certain things or did they just happen?

Simon Hamilton: No, not agree or anything, but there would have been good, steady, regular engagement of party members, as I am sure is the case for other parties as well, with Permanent Secretaries and with senior officials from the departments. The one abiding message that I received in those meetings—and I can remember Mr Shannon and I had one about the Ballynahinch bypass in our constituency—was that irrespective of the budget position, which is challenging, Permanent Secretaries, in the absence of Ministers, need to take decisions. That was about an infrastructure project and the prioritisation of that infrastructure project. They are simply in a position where they can go ahead with what had already been decided at a ministerial level, they can do the stuff that they have budget cover for and ongoing authority for, but in terms of prioritising those sorts of new projects they are finding it very difficult. That is one example and there would be others as well.

I was with the chief executive of Tourism Northern Ireland last week in a constituency with some tourism businesses. His agency has developed a tourism strategy, which was not quite ready for me to sign off before I left that department. It has now been completed. The point that he is making was about the passage of time and ratifying that if there was a new Minister in place, even in the next number of months. That document is now nearly out of date already and you would have to revise it, so it might be another year before you would have something.

We are losing a lot of time and therefore we are losing a lot of impact. While it may not always feel like this, if and when the point comes that devolution is back or indeed Her Majesty's Government Ministers step in and start taking those decisions, we will have lost a lot over this past



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year and a half to two years. The momentum that had been building up over this period of time and the good work that had been done has not been completely undone, but it has certainly been badly affected by the absence of Ministers taking decisions.

Q676 Kate Hoey: Given that you said that the prospects are not good, in either the near future or the middle future, of getting talks going, it means there is very unlikely to be any kind of Executive for some time. Is your party urging the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State to get on with it, in terms of appointing Ministers? I am sure the people of Northern Ireland, while they would like the Assembly back, would rather have somebody in charge.

Simon Hamilton: You are right; they do want the Assembly back. I understand and appreciate that we are not universally loved, and I understand that, even in getting back, we would not be able to click our fingers and solve everything. People are not stupid. They realise that, but they want to have people up in Stormont whom they know, whom they have elected, who are accountable to them and are taking decisions that matter to them and to their communities. In the absence of that, and it gives me no pleasure to say that I do not think that is going to happen in the short term—I do not see it happening this year and perhaps even beyond—we need to have decisions being made.

Q677 Kate Hoey: What do you think is stopping the Secretary of State from just saying, "That is it; finish. Let us get on"?

Simon Hamilton: It is now incumbent on the Government to start moving forward and not just with the budget. I know how difficult it is to craft a budget and get a budget through. It is a key document. It is perhaps the key document that Governments produce, but it is just a starting point. There are key decisions that will flow from that budget. There are key decisions that are gumming up the works that need to be taken. We cannot persist in this. It is more than 13 months now. Even the Germans now have a Government. We are fast approaching the Belgian record.

Kate Hoey: The Italians might even as well.

Simon Hamilton: It may be a strange-looking Government. It may be stranger than ours at times, but they will at least have a Government. We cannot go on without anyone taking decisions on things other than just the budget. I am not saying that what the previous Secretary of State or this Secretary of State have been doing is not the right thing. Absolutely we should be passing the budget; that is the basic bare minimum, in a way. I am not trying to play the importance of the budget down, but beyond that there are so many decisions that need to be taken, or else we are going to lose momentum, or else we are going to have to revisit those strategies and those reform plans. I do not know who does that if we do not have Ministers leading that.



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Q678 Kate Hoey: Let us take it that eventually the Prime Minister gets round to saying, "Look, we have to change this and we will have direct rule for a period of time". Most of the other parties that have come before us have given their views on voluntary coalitions and how, if there was direct rule, there can be some involvement of Assembly Members. There have been suggestions of citizens' forums and so on. How do you see it? You must be beginning to think of what life is going to be like when direct rule comes back.

Simon Hamilton: If we are into the position where it is full-blown direct rule, we have to be careful and learn the lessons of the past. We had an extended period without any devolution at all. I suppose this place and local councils were the only places where there was any sort of democracy, and there was a huge deficit as a result of that. I am not sure that some of the suggestions that have been put forward, and indeed put forward to this Committee, around citizens' assemblies are the right way to go about it. I do not want to get into talking about the United Kingdom as a representative democracy and not a participative one, and all that, but it is an important point.

One of the criticisms of that extended period from the 1970s right through to the late 1990s and into the early 2000s was that civic society populated quangos and there was a democratic deficit. It did not assist to plug the gap in any way and there was a lot of criticism of lots of things being put down to quangos for a veneer of democracy or accountability. I do not think that worked, and we need to be careful about moving back in that direction again. That is why, in response to Mr Shannon, I would say that there is merit in looking at what role could be given to the Assembly. It has been elected by the people of Northern Ireland and represents the people of Northern Ireland in that sense, and there may be a role through a committee-style system or something like that for input, some measure of accountability and some role or function for the Assembly to have.

Q679 Kate Hoey: Do you think the time should also be used in looking at some of the structures of the Belfast agreement?

Simon Hamilton: It is completely compatible if you are into an extended period with no devolution and Ministers taking decisions from London, direct rule or whatever the way forward is. That creates this space and the opportunity to look at different things, not just the issues that have bedevilled us in the last year, say, but also those bigger issues. You have the space, the time and the opportunity to do it. Part of the problem with governing is that it does not give you the space to do those sorts of things sometimes. That is not an endorsement for having the Assembly down, but you would at least then be able to use that period of time maybe a little more productively, by looking at some of those issues that the Chair first raised.

Q680 Kate Hoey: Professor Tonge came to see us and gave written evidence, as did the Alliance Party. They talk about change itself not necessarily



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working; it is the political desire and the lack of trust. Being absolutely straight and honest, do you think that it can ever really work when one party is not committed to Northern Ireland? One party wants to get rid of Northern Ireland and wants to be part of a united Ireland. Can we ever feel that that can work in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland?

Simon Hamilton: It is a doubt that you always have, because there are a lot of differences between most parties at Stormont, even on the constitutional issue, but they want to get in there and want to work on behalf of the people they represent.

Kate Hoey: The SDLP, for example, is very keen to make Northern Ireland successful.

Simon Hamilton: I have had and colleagues have had ding-dongs down through the years with the SDLP, over a whole range of different issues. Even on bread-and-butter day-to-day issues, it can be very difficult to work with as well. I am sure it would say the same about us, maybe even worse, but there is a commonality in terms of wanting to do the best for everybody. That was certainly the case in the past, working with the SDLP and wanting to do the best by everybody, therefore trying to reach some sort of accommodation that would work for as many people as possible.

There is always the doubt around Sinn Féin. Does it actually suit its agenda that Northern Ireland is inherently and constantly unstable, and that we are in the sort of position that we are? What I cling to personally—and I am not sure that everybody does this—is that, at the end of the day, it represents real people too, who need a health service that works, who need an education system that works. It cannot go on forever that you are in a position where nothing is being done. It is not in the interests of the people it represents for Northern Ireland not to be working. The constitutional position is what it is. It is settled for the foreseeable future and there is a means by which that can be addressed, but issues around health, skills and infrastructure, do not go away. They are a constant. They are always there. I maybe vainly cling to that fact that people vote for Sinn Féin, yes, because it is a republican party, but they also vote for it because they want it to deliver on those issues.

You are right; there is an absence of trust. It has been a very tough, very difficult year. It contrasts quite markedly from the previous year when the Executive was restored after the election in May 2016. It was only us and Sinn Féin that were in that Executive, with Claire Sugden, the independent Member as Justice Member. It heralded a different era. We had legislated for an Opposition, which was one of the changes that had been made to the original agreement framework, and people thought that this was slowly but surely moving in a different direction. The working relationship had been quite good. There were always differences, of course. There always will be, but it had been working reasonably well and then, all of a sudden, it just fell apart and the relationship has soured



ever since. While efforts have been made in the talks process to try to build that relationship back up, I think it is in a worse position than it has been at any time in the last year.

Q681 Kate Hoey: Is there a bigger role for smaller parties?

Simon Hamilton: We have passed the legislation to permit an Opposition to be in place and parties can now opt to go into Opposition if they want. Northern Ireland would have benefited, had we been able to re-establish the Executive, from being as inclusive as it possibly could be. We would all have benefited from having the maximum number of parties involved in that Executive. Obviously it is the prerogative of each of those parties to decide whether they want to go into government or not. I am sure they would have sought to drive a hard bargain in terms of what the programme for government or even the budget might have looked like, as a price for going into government.

I think that the role of the smaller parties, even over the last number of months and year, has been a bit hit and miss. It is interesting that you have mentioned the Alliance Party and the Chair has as well. I am no great supporter of the Alliance Party, but it at all times has sought to be constructive. I have not always agreed with the things that it has put forward. It would worry if I did agree with everything that it put forward, but it has always tried to be constructive. It has always tried to put forward ideas and tried to find solutions to problems. The same cannot be said about the involvement of some of the other parties. Some of them are still in an oppositional mood or mode and perhaps will always continue to be, and it was maybe ever thus. But there has been a constructive role played by some of the smaller parties over the last year and there can be in the future too.

Q682 Kate Hoey: Finally, if you were the Secretary of State's adviser, would you be advising her to carry out her legal duty that she can do and call another election?

Simon Hamilton: The Secretary of State is under a duty to call an election within a reasonable time period. We have fought quite a lot of elections over the last couple of years. I do not know whether my legs could take it but, if there was an election, we would fight the election and I believe that my party would do exceptionally well in that election.

Kate Hoey: You do not think it would make any difference.

Simon Hamilton: In terms of solving the issues that are before us, no, I do not think it would. Elections tend to push people away from each other and, at the end of the day, if we are going to get a deal to get the think back up and running again, and to work on a solid and sustainable basis, you need parties to come closer together. Elections do not tend to do that. I do not say this on the basis of fearing an election.

Kate Hoey: You are probably glad you are not her adviser anyway.



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Simon Hamilton: The job would be to give all the advice and let the Secretary of State take the decision, but I do not think it would solve the problem that we have. That does not mean that we are fearful of an election. I can see Gregory looking on very keenly at the thought of tramping the streets of East Londonderry again and it would put Jim to some good use over the next six weeks or so. We would do very well in that election, but I am not sure it would solve the problem.

Q683 **Chair:** There appears to be a slightly better working relationship between the various parties at local government level. Of course, there have been local government changes recently, which have had the effect of reducing the number of councils. The thing that characterises Northern Ireland local authorities is their lack of powers compared to the rest of GB, where those powers are increasing. Do you think that part of the solution for the longer term might be to increase the amount of powers that local government has, given that it has demonstrated, at a local level at least, the ability for the parties to work together?

Simon Hamilton: There are good examples of parties working together well at a local level. There are also lots of examples of parties not working so well at a local level, even around the issues that have perhaps been to the fore, but are not our only difficulties, around issues of language and culture. There are lots of examples in the west of the province, where Sinn Féin-dominated or led councils have overreached on that issue and caused a lot of division within the local community, so I do not think it is a blanket case for local government. It is functioning well, but the relationships are not always as good as they might be in some places.

Belfast is an example of where, on some of those contentious issues, yes, they can have big rows about them, but there has been a pretty good working relationship in Belfast about taking forward regeneration and development. Different councils are at different stages of their development, and that is sometimes a function of size and scale, as much as anything else. From the review of public administration, the direction of travel had always been to devolve more powers to local government. A tranche of powers went. Not much additional expenditure went with that, but a significant number of powers moved down to local government. I guess there would have always been the desire that, over time, more and more would go down to local government.

We have always taken an approach in the past that all councils got the powers or none got the powers. There are issues where, if you take Belfast for example, because of its size and scale, there might be some powers that it could better handle and that would be more advantageous to it, having delivered at a council level, than they might be in my own council area of Ards and North Down.

Q684 **Mr Goodwill:** Mr Hamilton, this is my first week on this Committee, so forgive me if my question exposes just how wet behind the ears I still am. Indeed, before this week I thought the Brexit negotiations were the



most difficult negotiations facing the people of these islands. Having been involved in a number of negotiations myself, both here and in Europe, I always try to get inside the head of the other side to see what they want and what they hope to achieve. In politics we have a number of objectives: to improve the situation of our constituents and to advance one's political perspective. In many cases, those two will coincide.

The evidence that we have heard this week indicates that the red lines that Sinn Féin has dug very deep and very wide mean that it is almost inevitable that there will be a period of direct rule, with or without an intervening election. In that case, what is in it for Sinn Féin? It is not here to speak for itself, but how would it benefit from a period of direct rule, when the UK Government would take the credit for money being spent and when the political decisions that were made would be made in London, rather than in Northern Ireland? Why is it being so intransigent? What is in it for Sinn Féin?

Simon Hamilton: That is a great invitation to speak for Sinn Féin, which is something I have tried to resist through the years. You will learn this the longer you are on this Committee: it is sometimes very difficult to see inside, to examine what Sinn Féin's strategy and thinking is. You have to be almost like a criminologist. You are asking what is the benefit to it of direct rule. I am not sure that there is a benefit, other than perhaps the ability to point the finger of blame at others for difficult decisions and things that go wrong, or that are to its disadvantage or that of the community it represents.

That might be the only advantage that there is, because no one benefits from an extended period of direct rule. Nobody wants to be in a position where Ministers from Her Majesty's Government come and exercise power in Northern Ireland. I am sure that not even those who are picked to be those Ministers would particularly want to do that job, because it is a pretty thankless task. It is a thankless task at the best of times, so I do not think anybody benefits. I fail to see the huge significant benefits that there are for Sinn Féin in going down that path.

In fact, Mr Campbell was alluding to it earlier; at different stages in the recent talks process, the fear of direct rule or anything that looked like direct rule had a bit of a motivating effect on Sinn Féin during those talks. It is something that it clearly does not want to happen. It is joined in that by others on the nationalist side of the fence, including the Irish Government of course.

Q685 **Mr Goodwill:** Do you not think that, conversely, given the very close working relationship between the DUP and the Conservative Party, there would be tremendous potential for some good old-fashioned pork barrel politics? Rather than taking the blame for decisions, there would be a lot of opportunities to promote the way that money is spent in Northern Ireland for the DUP, which Sinn Féin would be excluded from.



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Simon Hamilton: I have heard that criticism from others and do not think it stands up to any scrutiny at all. We have entered into an arrangement with the Prime Minister and her Government in the national interest to bring stability to the country, in what are incredibly challenging times on a lot of different fronts, to try to seize the opportunities that are there for the future. The support that the Government have given Northern Ireland—and it has been given to Northern Ireland, not the DUP—is support in the form of the financial package of over £1 billion that will go to help people everywhere in Northern Ireland, whether it is infrastructure money will go to help new road projects, broadband, money for mental health, money for health transformation, for immediate pressures in the health service or in the schools system, or to deal with deprivation, which we have particular issues with.

Of course it will benefit for people who vote for the DUP. How could it not? We represent a third of the people in Northern Ireland, but it will also represent nearly a third of the people of Northern Ireland who vote for Sinn Féin and indeed the other people as well. We will use our influence to the benefit of Northern Ireland of course, but we will use it to the benefit of the whole of the United Kingdom. What we have secured so far has shown that, not only in terms of the money that we have secured for Northern Ireland, which I hope to see being rolled out further in the not too distant future, but also in terms of securing pensioner benefits around the winter fuel payment and the triple lock, which has helped people of all persuasions, right across the United Kingdom.

Q686 **Mr Goodwill:** Finally, we were told yesterday that, if the political architecture that the Belfast agreement has put in place was applied to Westminster, it would mean that there could only be a Government if Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May could work together. Given the difficulty of that, is there a fundamental flaw in the architecture that you have to operate within politically? Does that mean we need to move on in some way?

Simon Hamilton: It has taken different people different lengths of time on this. Many of us have accepted that, because of our divided past in Northern Ireland, if we want to move forward and want to govern the place, it has to be governed together. That requires my own party working with people we are diametrically opposed to. People who were involved in some of the most heinous crimes of our past sit across the table from us and sit around the Executive table with us. People are not happy. That may be too strong a word, but there is an understanding that that is the way we have to move forward. I had not thought of the example here at Westminster. The one that probably grates mostly on unionists is that we are told by successive Irish Governments that we should share power with Sinn Féin, yet both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and other parties in the south, refuse to share power with Sinn Féin.

Mr Goodwill: We heard that yesterday as well.



Simon Hamilton: It is a bit rich. We will see what the next election in the south produces in terms of results. We have accepted that sharing power is the way forward. That is difficult. It is inherently difficult because, when you use those other examples, you can see how difficult it is with the idea of the Conservatives and Labour governing together. Outside of a huge national crisis like a war or something, it is very difficult to envisage, particularly with the current personalities. It is a very difficult state of affairs.

It is the hope that gets you sometimes. We thought that we had been moving in the right direction. We had been building on the progress that had been made 10 years ago. Relationships had been improving and then they fell apart. When they fall apart in Northern Ireland they fall apart spectacularly. We are now in this unfortunate position where the prospects of getting devolution back are bleak, certainly in the short term, because of the mood, the lack of trust, the poor relationship, Sinn Féin's behaviour and its red lines. You are right in your earlier point that the drafting of these red lines and the sticking to these red lines is not a good tactic in any negotiation, in my view. To publicly entrench yourself into those makes it doubly difficult. That, plus its behaviour, its behaviour towards innocent victims, the lack of respect over the last number of weeks and the fallout from the talks process, does not help us to get back around the table, never mind reach a deal.

Q687 **Lady Hermon:** I have some additional questions, Simon, if that is alright. You have said on a number of occasions that the prospects for devolution are bleak. You have said that you do not see it, meaning devolution, happening in the short term and indeed this year.

Simon Hamilton: Yes.

Q688 **Lady Hermon:** With that being the case, and you have said yes to all those, I take it that you as a party, the DUP as a party, has indicated to the Secretary of State that you are now accepting of the fact that the salaries of MLAs will have to be reduced.

Simon Hamilton: On the issue with the salaries, and it is partly the way I was brought up, I do not like talking about these sorts of things. In fact, the system was modelled a little bit on the situation in Westminster, where independent bodies dealt with issues of salaries and allowances. That was the best way to deal with this. Having any elected Member take decisions around their salary or their allowances is not a good thing, and having that independence was positive.

The Secretary of State obviously indicated that she was going to say something on this. Was this last week or the week before? One week melds into another. If you do not have devolution, if do not have a fully functioning Assembly, of course these issues have to be looked at. I have heard some try to characterise this by saying that, because the Assembly is not functioning in the sense that it is doing its legislative or scrutiny role, Members are not doing their job. In fact, Members are



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probably filling that time with a lot more constituency work. A lot of Members, in fact probably all Members from all parties around the country, are doing a lot of work, probably a lot more constituency work than normal.

You would know from your own constituency the hard-working members who are there, people like Alex Easton and others, who are working night and day, grafting hard on the ground, serving their constituents, doing a really good job. They are not doing their job in terms of passing legislation or scrutiny. It is not the fault of many of those Members that they are not doing that. They wish to do that and I hope that we will.

I have to say, if we are in a position where the Secretary of State moves towards reducing salaries or reducing allowances for Members of the Assembly, on the basis that they are not doing their full job, it is incumbent on Members of Parliament sat around this table and elsewhere in this place to take the same view with the allowances that are given to Sinn Féin. If it is right and proper to reduce the allowances of Assembly Members, because the argument is that they are not doing their full job, the same must ring true for Sinn Féin and its allowances.

Q689 Lady Hermon: I wonder if I could just go back to the question. You are sitting here this morning and we are very grateful to you for coming. You are speaking for the DUP. Can I just repeat the question? Has the DUP leader indicated to the Secretary of State that you wish to see the salaries of MLAs reduced? It is a straightforward question, yes or no.

Simon Hamilton: I have not been at any meeting where the issue has been raised with the Secretary of State, so I do not want to speak on the basis of categorically what has been said and what has not been said. I will speak in principles around it. If Members are not doing their full job, it is an issue that needs to be looked at. The Secretary of State has said that she is going to look at it. That is absolutely the right way to do it. It should not be for me or any other Assembly Member to try to justify their salary, even in the best of times. That is the proper, rightful role of the independent body. I think you accept that Members are still doing their job or a significant part of their job. Even the report of Trevor Reaney, the former clerk of the Assembly, acknowledges that the vast bulk of the work that a Back-Bench Assembly Member will do is much more constituency representative, rather than it is legislative.

Q690 Lady Hermon: Can I refer to that independent report, which was delivered by Trevor Reaney before Christmas of last year? He recommended an immediate cut to MLAs' salaries and then a subsequent cut to MLAs' salaries. Do you as a party accept the recommendations of an independent judgment by Trevor Reaney that this is in the public interest? They are furious that MLAs are receiving a full salary. Do you not accept those recommendations?



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Simon Hamilton: I am as frustrated as anybody is by the fact that we cannot do our full job. I share the frustrations and they express them to me as well. I am not immune to it.

Q691 **Lady Hermon:** So you accept that MLAs' salaries should be cut.

Simon Hamilton: It was an independent report that was commissioned by the then Secretary of State. It was not one that was commissioned by my party or indeed any of the parties. I made the point before and I will make it again that, if Assembly Members or indeed any elected representatives—let us make it as general as that—are not doing their full job, it is right, proper and meritorious that issues around salary and allowances be looked at. It is fair and reasonable, and I believe it is, to look at Assembly Member salaries and allowances. It is also incumbent on this place to look at the allowances that are given to Sinn Féin, which does not fulfil its full duties in respect of representing the constituents in the Houses of Parliament.

Q692 **Lady Hermon:** With the greatest respect, I am just looking at your title here, Simon Hamilton MLA, Member of the Legislative Assembly. MLAs have not been legislating for over a year. It is morally unjustifiable that they receive their full salary. Could you accept that point without deviating, yes or no?

Simon Hamilton: We may be Members of the Legislative Assembly and that is the title that comes with the job, but you will know as a Member of Parliament that legislating is not the only role that elected representatives have.

Lady Hermon: I did not say it was.

Simon Hamilton: Councillors do not have a legislative role. Members of the House of Lords do not have the same legislative role as Members of the House of Commons. They do not have the same constituency role rather. There is a range of different views and, in fact, the independent report makes it pretty clear that, on the basis of some examination of the work of Assembly Members, they do a lot more work in terms of constituency representation and dealing with constituents' problems. I may be controversial in saying this. I think there are some Assembly Members who do a lot more work on that front than Members of Parliament would do. I make an exception for my own Member of Parliament.

Q693 **Lady Hermon:** Could we just rephrase the question? If the Secretary of State recommends that there is a cut to the salaries of MLAs, will the DUP be accepting that?

Simon Hamilton: Of course we will.

Q694 **Lady Hermon:** Excellent. Moving on swiftly then, you have said that you do not see devolution in the short term this year. Can I then take it that the DUP as a party has no objection to the Secretary of State



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implementing the Hart recommendations in this place, in Westminster?

Simon Hamilton: That is an incredibly important, very serious, very sensitive issue.

Lady Hermon: It is.

Simon Hamilton: In singling out that issue, there is a danger and a risk that we are moving into territory that, as I understand it, requires legislation.

Lady Hermon: It does.

Simon Hamilton: In a set of circumstances where the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State decide that direct rule is the way forward, powers are transferred back from Belfast to here. Then all those issues, including those that require legislation, will come before this place in due course. There are lots of issues I could go through, issues that I have mentioned, some around health reform but there are lots of other things we could go through as well. I have used the word before, and I think it is a disgrace, particularly for that issue.

It is an incredibly sensitive issue. There are people who have suffered many decades ago. It is not helping them to move forward, by the failure of anybody to take a decision to move this forward, so it is one thing that is in that basket, which is filling with more and more issues on a day-to-day basis, where decisions are required. I wish those decisions were being taken at Stormont but, in the absence of them being taken at Stormont, they need to be taken here.

Q695 **Lady Hermon:** Let me just ask the question. The Hart recommendations were made. They were discussed and debated by the Assembly, in January of last year, 2017, before the Assembly came down. Were all the parties in the Assembly supportive of the Hart recommendations at that time?

Simon Hamilton: I cannot remember the debate well. It was in January. I think it was very late on in the Assembly. I was dealing with a lot of significant issues in my department that were part of what was used as the excuse at that time for collapsing the Assembly, so I cannot recall the specific outcome of the debate. We have an inquiry that has come forward with recommendations. They need to be considered, they should have been considered by the Executive and an agreed way forward should have been reached. Unfortunately that has not been possible, because there has been no Executive. It is a statement of the obvious, but somebody clearly needs to take that work forward. We can talk about that issue. I have no concern talking about that issue, but there are lots and lots of other issues as well.

Q696 **Lady Hermon:** Let us come to that issue because, when David Sterling came to give us evidence, I think at the very beginning of February, over a month ago, he indicated to the committee that the legislation was being



drafted to implement.

Simon Hamilton: I think it was. That is right.

Lady Hermon: Progress had been made on the legislation to implement the recommendations of the Hart report. I am just repeating myself here. Could we just have a straightforward answer to this particular question? I do not want to look at the basket full of everything else. I am just asking if the DUP would have objections if the Secretary of State were to take that legislation, which David Sterling confirmed is well down the line of progress here, and implement it at Westminster?

Simon Hamilton: It is one of those issues.

Lady Hermon: It is very sensitive. We are talking about institutional historical abuse of people who are getting older and who are waiting for justice.

Simon Hamilton: I understand. I have met some of them, so I know the seriousness of the issues. It is one of those issues that were raised earlier. Have Permanent Secretaries and have senior officials been taking soundings and advice and discussing? I know that there have been discussions on an ongoing basis with all the parties. Some departments have been exceptionally good at this. Health is a very good example of it, which brings in representatives of parties on an ongoing basis just to say, "These are the issues. These are the problems. This is what we are doing to address them". I understand that similar meetings have taken place in respect of the Hart inquiry's recommendations.

It would be utterly inconsistent with what I said earlier, when I was saying that decisions need to be taken, for me to say that a decision should not be taken on that piece of work. There are what might be described as day-to-day routine decisions in departments, but this is a very serious issue. There are lots of other serious issues too. We should not divorce one from the other. We should be saying that decisions by whomever, ideally by devolved Ministers but in realistic terms by Ministers here, by the Secretary of State, need to be taken forward in fairly short order.

Q697 **Lady Hermon:** Should it be given a priority?

Simon Hamilton: There are many issues. As soon as you say that this is an incredibly serious issue that needs to be dealt with, I am not going to say that it is more important than another issue or another issue is more important than it. For somebody else, their issue will be the most important issue. For another person, it will be another issue. All those issues will be very serious, very important issues. My argument to the Committee and my party's argument to the Committee is that all those serious issues need to be dealt with. They cannot be sitting in the way that they have, at this moment in time, in some cases for well over a year without any decision and people suffering. I used the word



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"suffering" earlier and that is a very good example of an issue where people are suffering.

Mr Campbell: Mr Easton will be well pleased and rightly so.

Chair: Simon, thank you very much indeed for being with us today. You have had a real grilling, over a protracted period, and we are very grateful for the frankness with which you have addressed the questions put by Committee members. We are very grateful. Thank you.