

Written evidence submitted by Professor Alan Renwick¹ and Conor J. Kelly,² UCL Constitution Unit, relating to the Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry (GFA0031)

Summary

1. This submission summarises evidence on public perceptions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, based on focus groups conducted in Northern Ireland in summer 2022.
2. Most people support power-sharing in principle, but there is widespread concern that the Strand 1 institutions have not delivered effective and stable government. Some unionists and loyalists object to power-sharing more fundamentally.
3. Those who identify as neither unionist nor nationalist do believe that the Strand 1 institutions are rigged against them. In different ways, there are feelings of under-representation in all communities.
4. Few people have strong awareness of the Strand 2 institutions. Nationalists and those identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist tend to support the principle of cross-border cooperation. Many unionists are more hostile towards it.
5. Similarly, few people are familiar with the Strand 3 institutions, and they are also generally unclear on what the purposes of these institutions might be.
6. Few people have clear views on possible reforms. But Alliance supporters and nationalists generally think that it should not be possible for a single party to collapse the Executive, and some explicitly favour ending mandatory coalitions.
7. Views on politicians in Northern Ireland and on the governments in London and Dublin are generally very negative. Finding ways to build trust and confidence—perhaps through greater popular involvement—may therefore be important, but it would be crucial to ensure that these did not themselves repeat existing divisions.

Introduction

8. The UCL Constitution Unit conducts timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions. It has recently conducted several projects examining future prospects in Northern Ireland. This work reflects a view that London needs to engage with Northern Ireland constructively and thoughtfully.
9. This evidence submission summarises emerging findings from one such project, which examines **public perceptions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland**. The evidence draws primarily on eight focus groups conducted in July 2022.³

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³ The focus groups were commissioned by the UCL Constitution Unit and conducted by the Northern Ireland-based market research company Cognisense. The project is funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

- Three of the focus groups comprised people identifying as unionist or loyalist, three consisted of people seeing themselves as nationalist or republican, and two were formed of people professing neither of these identities. Across the groups, there were participants who said they had voted for the DUP, UUP, TUV, PUP, Sinn Féin, SDLP, Alliance, and Green Party, as well as some who said they generally did not vote.
10. The focus groups explored participants' perceptions of and attitudes towards the Agreement in general and towards each of its main components. In what follows, we simply set out what participants said; we make no judgements on their perceptions. We summarise findings that are relevant to each of the six elements in the Committee's call for evidence. The full findings will be published early in 2023.
 11. We are aware of no other recent study that has examined public perceptions of the Agreement in this depth. There is some polling evidence, particularly from the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times survey. But this too has asked few questions relating directly to the content of the Agreement in recent years. We thus see the evidence presented here as offering important and unusual insights.
 12. Before presenting the findings on specific points, it is useful to comment on general attitudes towards the Agreement. Across most of the groups, we found a clear view that the Agreement had brought considerable benefits, particularly in terms of reduced violence, greater ease of day-to-day life, and enhanced prosperity. There was nevertheless also widespread concern over a range of difficulties, including ongoing paramilitary activity and sectarian division, and a perception that the benefits of peace had not reached all communities. Participants in one of the unionist focus groups, several of whom had very personal experiences of the Troubles, viewed the Agreement much more negatively, associating it above all with the release of prisoners. There was also universal frustration with the current political situation, which we elaborate on below.
 13. A note on nomenclature is valuable. We asked some groups what they called the Agreement. Across all these groups, whether unionist or nationalist, 'Good Friday Agreement' was much the more familiar term; many participants were aware of the term 'Belfast Agreement' only hazily or not at all. In what follows, we will use, as shorthand, 'the Agreement'.

Efficacy of Strand 1 institutions

14. The Committee first seeks evidence on 'the extent to which the design of the strand one institutions has succeeded in enabling: cross-community; effective; and stable government in Northern Ireland'. As on the other points below, our evidence relates to public perceptions. (A further submission to the committee, by our colleague Alan Whysall, examines the operation of the Strand 1 institutions in themselves.)
15. Members of most of the focus groups expressed support for the principle of power-sharing—particularly the more moderate unionist and nationalist groups and the groups whose members identified as neither unionist nor nationalist. There were also a few positive comments about how the institutions have worked in practice: for example, one SDLP voter praised how well the parties worked together during the Covid pandemic.
16. In most groups, however, such thoughts were not at the top of participants' minds. Rather, they were very exercised by the failure of the institutions to deliver stable and

effective government at present. Intense anger over MLAs being paid while not working—as participants saw it—arose spontaneously in every group. Participants in four of the eight groups (one unionist, two nationalist/republican, and one neither) used the metaphor of ‘throwing their toys out of the pram’ to characterise the behaviour of politicians who collapse the institutions when they do not get what they want. In light of current circumstances, such frustrations were directed strongly towards the DUP, and were evident to a degree even among DUP voters. Across most groups, there was a sense that the basic principles of the Agreement should remain, but that some changes—referred to in several groups as ‘tweaks’—were needed. We return to these reform suggestions below.

17. Rather different views were expressed by two of the three unionist groups, one comprising unionists who vote DUP or TUV, the other made up of strong loyalist identifiers. Participants in these groups were much less likely to mention positive effects arising from the Agreement. The former group’s hostility was long-standing and rooted, as noted above, in the issue of prisoner releases. Concerns in the loyalist group, by contrast, related more to subsequent developments. Several participants in that group said they had felt positively about the Agreement in 1998; but all expressed strong alienation from politics today. One said, ‘our community is being demonised further every day and our cultural identity is being eroded’. Another summed up the group’s mood:

‘Every way we turn we seem to be the ones that are giving in, and unfortunately maybe when loyalism and unionism ran NI it was maybe somewhat heavy-handed people could say and it was too, there might have been different classes or different levels of respect for both communities but I think people need to remember that it’s the PUL community that is now on the backfoot on all occasions.’

18. In short, there is widespread concern that the Strand 1 institutions have not delivered effective and stable government.⁴ There are also particular concerns among loyalists and some unionists that the institutions are not treating them fairly. But deep dissatisfaction with the collapse of the institutions and frustration directed particularly at the DUP is evident in all communities. (We reiterate that we do not express a view on these perceptions; we simply report them.)

Representation of those who identify as neither unionist nor nationalist

19. We have pointed out that our focus groups found particularly strong feelings of under-representation among some unionists and loyalists. These feelings derived from a belief that the policies pursued by those in power had not furthered their interests or respected their identities.
20. We also found different feelings of under-representation in other groups. Nationalists, Alliance voters, and some unionists all felt that their right to have an effective government was being taken from them by the DUP. One Sinn Féin voter said, ‘Because the DUP have said they’re not going to go into talks, that’s it, it doesn’t work. I

⁴ This concern is shared by many analysts: see the submission mentioned previously by our colleague Alan Whysall.

would say we're the only country that a party like that can hold the whole country to ransom. I think it's a disgrace.' A former DUP voter who had switched to the UUP expressed similar sentiments.

21. The Committee has asked specifically about representation of those who identify as neither unionist nor nationalist. Both focus groups comprising such participants did indeed highlight a particular, additional form of perceived under-representation: these participants believed that the system was rigged against them. One of the groups expressed a rather undefined sense that the DUP and Sinn Féin carved up power between themselves to the exclusion of other voices. Some members of the other group were aware that voting rules in Stormont disadvantage MLAs designating as 'other'; they also believed that such MLAs were barred from serving as First Minister or deputy First Minister.
22. We thus found different feelings of under-representation, and consequent resentments, in all parts of the community in Northern Ireland.

Strand 2 North/South Ministerial Council

23. The Committee has asked for evidence on 'the extent to which the design of the strand two North/South Ministerial Council has succeeded in developing cooperation between the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government'. Focus group participants did not on the whole have specific knowledge of the Strand 2 institutions. Some said they had heard of Strand 2 and the NSMC, but most said they did not know much about how they operated or what their remit was. A few said they were aware of specific bodies, such as Tourism Ireland. Despite this limited awareness, most participants were familiar with the principle of North–South cooperation and were able to offer thoughts when prompted.
24. A Sinn Féin participant who said he was aware of the NSMC thought that it was an ineffective body and was probably a place for politicians to have 'fine food and wine'. Other nationalists were more positive about the principle of cross-border cooperation and mentioned issues like trade, tourism, the cost of living, and protecting the peace process as areas it should be dealing with. Alliance voters also supported the principle of all-island cooperation. One talked about being able to use cross-border health services when her child was ill:

'My son took an asthma attack down in Letterkenny and...he was admitted. I had a bed, he had a bed, they gave me money to park my car...but if I'd have been up in Craigavon, I'd have sat for nine hours just waiting to see had the medication come in to settle him...Whereas when I went to Letterkenny within the hour everything was sorted. It was unbelievable, and I wasn't charged anything.'

Another Alliance supporter suggested that the governments needed to 'advertise' the areas of cooperation better. One person also said it was good that EU funds (which the NSMC has a role in managing) would still be available post-Brexit.

25. Most unionist participants were much more negative about what the NSMC's remit might be, and some opposed the principle of cross–border cooperation itself. One, for example, said, 'I don't think it [the NSMC] should be there. Full stop. [We are] two different countries'. Some unionists said there were areas where cooperation might be beneficial, such as trade, but that Ireland should be treated no differently to any other

country (one gave the example of France). A non-voting unionist participant lamented how nationalists had benefited from cross-border cooperation on the Irish language and felt that the efforts to take similar steps promoting Ulster Scots, though intended as ensuring balance, would in fact interest only a small portion of their community.

26. Across all groups, there were very few thoughts on how the operation of Strand 2 could be improved. A Sinn Féin voter said: '[I'm] struggling to [suggest how to] change something I don't really know enough about'.

Strand 3 Institutions

27. The Committee has asked 'the extent to which the design of the strand three institutions has succeeded in developing cooperation between the UK and Irish Governments'. Our evidence again focuses on public opinion. (For analysis of the operation of the Strand 3 institutions in themselves, we note in particular the evidence submitted by Dr Etain Tannam.)
28. In our focus groups, most participants had not heard of the Strand 3 bodies, including the BIIGC and the BIC. The facilitator asked a Sinn Féin voter what they thought about the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference, who then joked: 'is that the new Star Wars film?'. When Strand 3 was explained to an Alliance voter, they asked if it dealt with 'big picture stuff'.
29. Again, most participants were familiar with the concept of East–West cooperation when the facilitator elaborated on what Strand 3 was. An Alliance voter said that the Strand 3 institutions were there to govern Northern Ireland when agreement could not be reached or when power-sharing failed: 'it's like giving NI godparents. If the parents don't work out then the godparents come in and overtake'. The same participant who joked about the name of the BIIGC summed up how they thought about East–West cooperation in similar terms:

'I would just assume...it's the co-signatories of the agreement, you've got the Irish Government, the British Government. One is supposed to be representing unionists, the other is representing nationalists/republicans and it's probably an overarching, what do you call it, [they are] the guardians of it'.

30. As with Strand 2, many unionists and loyalists resented the Dublin government's influence through these bodies. Again, some unionist participants said Ireland should be treated no differently to any other foreign government. A DUP voter said:

'that's the problem – "British and Irish". I'm not Irish, I'm British, I'm just not connected to the mainland of Britain. Why can it not be just left as it is? What do we need them to interfere with us for?'

Such hostility is also reflected at the elected political level: unionist politicians have long been dubious of Ireland's influence via Strand 3 (for more, see the evidence from Etain Tannam noted earlier). Meanwhile, a non-voting unionist participant said they had little faith in British politicians, including Boris Johnson, representing unionism or loyalism in the Strand 3 forums.

31. In all three groups there was very little discussion of the detail of East–West cooperation, or how it could be improved.

Possible reforms

32. In general, few focus group participants had clear views about how the current arrangements might be reformed. This reflects the fact that they were mostly more interested in day-to-day life than in institutional details. Even among those participants who were clearly politically engaged, they focused mostly on individual politicians and personalities, not on institutions. This particularly applies to the Strand 2 and 3 institutions: as noted above, awareness of how these work in practice was very low.
33. Nevertheless, three aspects of the Strand 1 institutions were discussed. First, given that there has been some media discussion of it, we asked specifically about whether the titles of First and deputy First Minister should be changed. Interest in this question was low. Some felt that a change would be desirable: if the powers of the two positions are equal, they felt that the titles should be the same. Others felt that trying to make this change would just spark further controversy. Some, including several who recognised the case for change, resented the fact, as they saw it, that the issue was on the agenda only because the DUP did not want to give up the nominally highest-ranking position.
34. Second, the option of direct rule from London came up in some groups. One unionist who voted DUP or TUV supported it: 'Yeah, back to Direct Rule because all they want to do is argue, fight and bitch up there in Stormont and get paid to do nothing, sit at home, get paid. If you don't go to your job in the morning do you get paid to sit at home?'. Surprisingly, a Sinn Féin voter expressed a similar view: 'I think they will have to go to a sort of direct rule. They have to. Just say right, that's it, no Stormont – you are all out of a job.' The sense from both of these participants was that agreement between the sides in Northern Ireland would never be possible. But these were minority voices: other participants emphasised that people in Northern Ireland needed to find a way to govern themselves. We note that other research, such as that mentioned by Professor John Tonge in his evidence submission to the Committee, similarly points to strong public support for the restoration of devolved government.
35. Third, there was wide agreement among both Alliance supporters and nationalists that it should not be possible for a single party to collapse the Executive. Some spoke explicitly in favour of ending the system of mandatory coalitions. For example, one Sinn Féin voter said, 'I think it should be a case of it's not mandatory, I think it might start to look better if it was a voluntary power-sharing so if nobody wants to play ball they can sit on the side-lines or pitch in.' Others spoke in more general terms. One Alliance supporter said, 'I do agree power-sharing should be happening but they shouldn't be held over a barrel because one party doesn't wanna play ball.', Similarly, an SDLP voter said, 'It needs to be changed in that sense that not one party or one person can say well, I don't like that so see you later, and the whole thing collapses again'. There was no evidence that participants had thought through all the implications of ending mandatory coalitions; but the sense of dissatisfaction with current arrangements was widespread.

Mechanisms of change

36. We did not ask specifically about possible mechanisms for achieving change. Given that most participants felt very alienated from structures of power, it is unsurprising that few

volunteered thoughts about such mechanisms. One Sinn Féin voter had heard of citizens' assemblies and proposed their use – though in the context of preparing for a border poll. Others in the same group were, however, sceptical, thinking that, in Northern Ireland's context, it would become a 'bickering match'.

37. One important seam of evidence relates, however, to participants' attitudes towards politicians—in Northern Ireland and in both London and Dublin. Many participants praised politicians of the generation of 1998 for showing leadership within their communities, reaching across divides, taking risks, and thereby delivering results: those specifically mentioned included David Trimble, John Hume, Tony Blair, Mo Mowlam, and David Ervine. There was also praise for how Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness came together in 2007. But views were generally scathing towards current politicians.
38. Such negative attitudes were most vociferously directed towards the government in London, led, at the time of the focus groups, by Boris Johnson. Many participants expressed distrust in Westminster politicians, and particularly in the current government. Some felt disconnected from Conservative politicians on the basis of class. Some criticised perceived dishonesty over Brexit; some thought Johnson had betrayed the DUP over the Northern Ireland Protocol. Many thought that London lacked either interest in or understanding of the lives of people in Northern Ireland. One loyalist summed up these thoughts, commenting, 'The scary thing is you might get more sense out of the Free State than you would out of the British Government.' He went on:

'Just honestly they're so disconnected with us, they've no idea of what it's like to live where we live how we live as unionists, loyalists in NI. They have no understanding whatsoever. I just feel there's a total disconnection between certainly the Conservatives. You might have more of a chance if Labour were in power, although they obviously sometimes favour the nationalist republican side when it comes to key issues – but at least they're from the same type of community that we're from, they understand what grassroots loyalism and the issues that we face. But certainly the Tories who are supposedly on our side, certainly they're not and they've continually shafted the DUP and they've been caught with their pants down more times than enough. It's embarrassing.'

39. Though they were not as widespread, suspicions were directed towards the government in Dublin as well. As noted above, some unionists rejected any role for the government of the South in Northern Ireland's affairs. One suggested that the Irish government would 'push the lack of opportunity for us to stand on our own' in order to advance the cause of Irish unification. Some nationalists also viewed the Dublin government with hostility. One Sinn Féin voter described his feelings towards it as 'half-hearted', and added:

Micheál Martin, he doesn't want to know. In my opinion, the Irish Government showed what they think of Sinn Féin when Sinn Féin got so many seats and they run about all over the place trying to get a coalition so they could keep Sinn Féin out of power down there.

40. In thinking about possible reform mechanisms, it is thus important to recognise deep and widespread feelings of distrust towards the British and Irish governments, as well as the hostility towards Northern Ireland's politicians that has been stoked by the suspension of the institutions. Finding ways to build trust and confidence—perhaps

through greater popular involvement—may therefore be important, and ideas about citizens' deliberations have been floated. At the same time, any such processes would need to be very carefully designed and managed to ensure that they did not themselves repeat or even exacerbate existing divisions.

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