

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM

FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Déardaoin, 26 Eanáir 2023

Thursday, 26 January 2023

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Frances Black,
Brendan Smith,	Niall Blaney,
Violet-Anne Wynne.	Emer Currie,
	Niall Ó Donnghaile.

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Erin McGreehan.

Teachta / Deputy Fergus O'Dowd sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Architects of the Good Friday Agreement (Resumed): Sir John Major

The joint committee met in private session until 1.45 p.m.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I welcome Sir John Major. Sir John is a former UK Prime Minister. He did exceptionally important work for peace on this island. He was a major contributor to the peace we currently have. In particular, through his relationship with our former Taoiseach, the late Albert Reynolds, and the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, Sir John was very involved in the Northern Ireland peace process in the years leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. On behalf of our Parliament and all of the members of this committee, I acknowledge the fantastic work he did and how much we appreciate his attendance here.

I will read the standard note on parliamentary privilege that all of our witnesses must listen to. There are some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practices of the Houses. The evidence of witnesses who are physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected, pursuant to both the Constitution and statute, by absolute privilege. However, witnesses and participants who are to give evidence from locations outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as witnesses giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts, and may consider it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter. Witnesses are also asked to note that only evidence connected with the subject matter of the meeting should be given. They should respect directions given by the Chair and the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should neither criticise nor make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to that person or entity's good name.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I remind members of the constitutional requirement to the effect that they must be physically present within the confines of Leinster House in order to participate in meetings.

I am sure Sir John is used to this process. The committee was very happy to receive his opening statement in advance. For clarity, we are very happy that we will have a ten-minute break after about an hour and 15 minutes. If Sir John wishes to request a break at any stage, he can just indicate and we will be happy to facilitate him. I call on him to make his opening statement

Sir John Major: I thank the Chair. It is a great pleasure to meet with the committee today. I am only sorry I cannot be with you live in Dublin rather than appearing via video. It was kind of the Chair to invite me to make an opening statement. It will take a little while, but I hope it may answer a number of the questions that would otherwise be asked.

Let me make clear, as I did before I accepted the invitation, I was only involved in the work that led up to the Good Friday Agreement. The negotiation of the agreement was undertaken after I left government. Others are better placed to respond to that than I am.

Let me go right back to the beginning. When I became Prime Minister in November 1990, I had little or no background in Northern Ireland issues. As a result, the first question is, perhaps, why did I become so concerned about what we loosely call the Troubles? The answer is simple. Life in Northern Ireland over the previous 25 years had never been free from terror and, to me, violence was as unacceptable there as it would have been anywhere else in the UK. It was for this reason, that, between 1990 and 1997, I visited Northern Ireland more often than any other location, either in the UK or overseas.

In the month I became Prime Minister, Mr. Peter Brooke, who was the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, had opened an intelligence channel to receive messages from the Provisional IRA. By November of that year, 1990, he made the important statement, which I will abbreviate, to the effect that the British Government had “no selfish or strategic interest in Northern Ireland”. At the outset, I spent a long time reading myself into the problem and its history. I did so to get into the minds of the opposing factions in order that I might better understand their fears and ambitions. It was clear the hopes, ambitions and fears of unionists and nationalists were very far apart. During the next six and a half years, my door was always open to politicians of all the established political parties as well as the churches and community bodies. Later, I had innumerable meetings with Albert Reynolds and, after him, John Bruton, many of which were informal and private rather than declared and public. One relationship already in play when I became Prime Minister was the Hume-Adams dialogue that had begun in 1988. This was in some ways helpful, but in others less so. I will come to that a little later.

In February 1992, Albert Reynolds became Taoiseach. Within a fortnight, we had a private supper at Downing Street. We discovered an empathy, which we knew was there because we had met as finance ministers some years earlier, and a shared ambition to end violence in Northern Ireland. Despite disagreements, rows, frustrations and all the things that go with negotiation, our friendship held until the day Albert died. I will make clear that his role in advancing peace should never be underestimated. He was a remarkable man who, for me, became a friend to cherish. Sometimes we disagreed. Many of our disagreements were trivial while others were more substantial. Albert would have preferred me to become a persuader for unification but that I could not, and would not, do. The reason is clear. If I had done so, it would have broken the peace process because the unionist community would never have co-operated in any way. It was clear that unification, if it were to come about, would have to be with the open consent of the unionist community. Any attempt at duress would have failed and led to renewed violence. That remains true.

At that time, the three-stranded talks were often stalled simply because the political parties would only talk to the UK Government and would not talk to one another. Unionists were intensely suspicious of the Hume-Adams talks, in part because no unionist voice took part in them. In late 1992, Paddy Mayhew, who was by then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland following Peter Brooke, promised a fair deal to all who abandoned terrorism. Soon afterwards, we received a back-channel message from the Provisional IRA that was dramatic. I am sure committee members are familiar with it. The message stated: “The conflict is over but we need your [that is, British] advice on how to bring it to a close. We wish to have an unannounced ceasefire in order to hold [a] dialogue leading to peace.” It went on to state, and the following points up a real problem that the Provisional IRA had throughout the whole of the process: “We cannot announce such a move as it will lead to confusion for the volunteers because the press will misinterpret it as surrender.” Fear helps explain why bombings went on even as the process advanced. The message concluded: “We cannot meet [the] Secretary of State’s public renunciation of violence, but it would be given privately as long as we were sure that we were

not being tricked.”

From a British point of view, there were questions to be asked. First, was the message genuine? I was assured that it came from Martin McGuinness, although he always denied it. If he did not send it, it is clear he was aware it was being sent and of its substance. We wondered whether the message was perhaps a trick. If it was genuine and we ignored it, we would have lost a chance for peace. As for me and Paddy Mayhew, the then Secretary of State, we could have lost our jobs or lost the peace process. Paddy and I consulted colleagues and decided to respond positively. In March 1993, we agreed to an exploratory dialogue, without a pre-determined outcome, and emphasised that the result could be a united Ireland but only on basis of consent by the people of Northern Ireland.

Despite this, violence continued. On the very day our reply was delivered, two small boys were killed by a bomb in Warrington. That atrocity nearly brought the process to a halt at an early stage. Bombs at Bishopsgate and an explosion in the centre of Belfast soon followed. My judgment of this was that the IRA believed that continuing violence would reassure their members - their volunteers - that there was no weakness on the provisional side, and so we decided to continue with talks. On 23 October 1993, ten people were killed on Shankill Road by the Provisional IRA. A week later, loyalists retaliated by killing eight and wounding 19 in Greysteel. These outrages caused deep public revulsion. We then received a further message. It claimed the British Government could not solve the problems talking only with Dublin and asked when we would open dialogue with the IRA “in the event of a total end to hostilities”. This message set no conditions for such talks.

I convened a meeting with senior colleagues and we agreed to spell out in detail what we needed for talks and what we wished the IRA to do to enable them to take place. This we did on 5 November 1993. We stressed there could be no secret agreement with the IRA. There could be dialogue, but only after a permanent end to violence. If that were obtained, we would open dialogue “within a week of Parliament’s return” in January 1994. That was the last message to go via a private route.

Of course, this was all related to the idea of a joint declaration. That was a good idea that sprang initially from the Hume-Adams talks in the late 1980s. Dublin had been discussing it with Gerry Adams in 1991; Charlie Haughey had suggested it to me even earlier. In February 1992, John Hume offered a text, presumably, we thought, from Sinn Féin. Albert Reynolds knew the February text was unacceptable but could not shift the Provisional IRA. He presented it to us and we rejected it. In June, Irish officials offered a different text. The idea of the declaration remained sound to us but, in truth, both texts were dead in the water. Also, in June 1993, I met Albert Reynolds and Dick Spring together. We liked the principle of a joint declaration. It could offer a way forward for unionists, nationalists and the paramilitaries. I met Albert in Brussels by which time it was clear the Hume-Adams process would never be acceptable to unionists. If any declaration were to be widely accepted, especially by unionism in the North, it would have to be negotiated by London and Dublin and accepted by the British and Irish Parliaments.

In October 1993, progress was stuck and I reiterated publicly that if the IRA ended violence, Sinn Féin could enter politics as a democratic party. Ironically, public disgust at the violence on Shankill Road and Greysteel helped move us forward. We developed our own text, with helpful advice from James Molyneaux, then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, and the Church of Ireland. Albert Reynolds initially rejected our text, but then suggested amendments and the chance of an agreement rose. We met at Dublin Castle on 3 December 1993. Albert Reynolds

and I had a fierce row - the fiercest we ever had - over the fact that we had a back channel, which was his concern, and my concern was the number of leaks that had come from the Irish side about what we were doing. Yet, we then turned to the draft and made progress. Failure would have been disastrous but slowly and surely, we worked towards an agreement. I believe if we had failed, the peace process might - and I emphasise the word "might" - have become untenable perhaps for some time.

On 14 December, we agreed the final text in a long telephone call. The next day, Albert Reynolds came to London, and we announced the agreed joint declaration. At last, we had the basis of an agreement that received overwhelming support from nearly every source. However, it was a basis only: a set of agreed principles. It was a beginning. Yet, after 70 years of partition and 24 years of bloodshed, it was an agreement both the UK and Ireland could accept. From then on, I was confident a deal could eventually be done and so was Albert Reynolds. A mini-Rubicon had been crossed. The text was convoluted but it served its purpose. It promised a fair outcome. The unionists were reassured a united Ireland would only come about with their consent. Nationalists were promised their interests would be protected. The paramilitaries were offered a route into political life. This was all an essential preliminary to the Good Friday Agreement.

On 31 August 1994, a ceasefire was announced by the IRA. I made it clear publicly that if it were irreversible, we would respond positively. To accompany the ceasefire, IRA supporters came onto the streets to declare a triumph, which carried the flavour of a victory for them, which it was not of course. This destabilised the unionists who were ever fearful of being betrayed. It was a smart, if a bit cynical move by the IRA to cover the backs of their leaders. The outcome was welcome, but there was still no commitment to permanence or - as events were to prove - to disarmament. Nor did the punishment beatings end.

To encourage movement towards a settlement, I committed the Government to a referendum on the eventual outcome of constitutional talks, I lifted the ban on broadcasting the voices of the Provisionals and I relaxed some security measures. Our intention was to encourage the Provisionals into the political process.

On 13 October 1994, the loyalist paramilitaries also halted violence and hopes rose that we might move into a permanent ceasefire. I announced a new package of measures on the "working assumption" the ceasefire would hold. I also promised that talks with paramilitaries on both sides would include "how illegal weapons and explosives could be removed from life in Northern Ireland". I promised we would convene an investment conference to inject money, essentially investment, into the North. Throughout all this, the unionists remained nervous, always fearful there could be a sell-out. They were suspicious of an IRA leadership that was apparently committed to peace but was at the same time recruiting new volunteers.

At this point, in December 1994, Albert Reynolds resigned as Taoiseach, which was a great disappointment to me, both personally and politically. I was extraordinarily lucky that John Bruton succeeded Albert Reynolds. He, like Albert Reynolds, was keen to move forward. That year - 1994 - ended positively. British officials met Sinn Féin for the first time in 25 years and also met the loyalists. The investment conference I promised met in Belfast. Officials from the Northern Ireland Office and their counterparts in Dublin were working on what became the framework documents. Let me say a word about those. Strand 1 related to the internal government of Northern Ireland and it proposed a new executive and assembly, which was, of course, the sole responsibility of London and Belfast. Strands two and three were different. Strand 2 covered relations between Belfast and Dublin while strand 3 covered relations between the UK

and the Republic. All three strands needed agreement. The mantra was: “Nothing is agreed until all is agreed”.

During 1994, before he resigned, Albert Reynolds and I, together with Paddy Mayhew and Dick Spring, had worked hard on the documents. It was hard pounding, to be frank. Progress from time to time was on a knife’s edge. At this pivotal moment, what Paddy Mayhew called “black work at the crossroads” nearly derailed the whole process. *The Times* of London was leaked an extract from the text of the framework document and wrote an incorrect report of it with the assertion that it “brought the prospect of a united Ireland closer than at any time since Partition in 1920”. We told *The Times* categorically that their story was wrong, but they printed it anyway. At that moment, nothing could have been more damaging in the UK to the peace process. I called a midnight meeting of parliamentary colleagues to brief them, in order to avoid outright rebellion in Parliament. It was, to be frank, a close-run thing, but they accepted our word, not least because Robert Cranborne, who is now Lord Salisbury, was an undoubted supporter of the unionist cause and he supported what we said about the documents. After this, we pressed ahead with meeting unionists to allay their fears.

In February 1995, John Bruton and I reached agreement. We launched the joint framework documents in Belfast and put the proposals out for public consultation. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to John Bruton for his skilled and constructive commitment in helping us get this over the line.

The unionists were hostile, the Republican bishops complained, the Presbyterians said the documents were “too green” but as the proposals were examined more closely, vocal criticisms fell away. Yet, the unionists would not accept the joint framework documents as a basis for progress, so Paddy Mayhew produced an issues paper. Shorn of constitutional prose, it helped ease the fears of a majority of critics. It seemed for a time that the frameworks documents might fail. There were no inclusive talks, nor renewed constitutional negotiations. They did not fail. Reassembled, they became the basis for the Good Friday Agreement.

Although there was occasional violence, 1995 was the first year in a quarter of a century without any terrorist killings in Northern Ireland. The problem of guns and explosives remained, which the British and Irish Governments agreed had to be addressed. The Provisionals sought entry to the negotiations but stone-walled over weapons, falsely claiming that decommissioning was a new issue. That was demonstrably untrue but from their perspective surrendering weapons, especially to the British Government, looked like a defeat. I think that lay behind a good deal of their intransigence. Mr. Adams said “we must take the gun out of Irish politics”, a sentiment with which I wholly agree, but he then argued this included the army and the police, who did not bomb, murder or knee-cap. During this convoluted discussion, some progress was made but was often then undermined.

In October 1994, we had set up a working group which was headed by Sir John Chilcot, the permanent secretary of the Northern Ireland Office, and Tim Dalton, the permanent secretary from Ireland’s Department of Justice. Its report in February 1995 suggested decommissioning should begin with “a worthwhile quantity of arms”, with parallel progress in relaxing security measures and release of prisoners. On 3 November, to further encourage progress, Michael Ancram met Martin McGuinness. A meeting between Paddy Mayhew and Mr. McGuinness soon followed. No movement on decommissioning resulted

In June 1995, John Bruton and I met at a European Union summit in Cannes and agreed to build on the idea of an international commission, as first suggested by Ken Maginnis, MP

for the Ulster Unionist Party. As Sir John Chilcot and Tim Dalton worked up the idea, the US ambassador to the UK, Admiral William Crowe, met Gerry Adams to protest at the refusal to move on decommissioning. I agreed yet more private meetings with Sinn Féin, which drew predictable opposition in and beyond the British Parliament. Critics were wary that Sinn Féin was allied to an armed militia.

Patrick Mayhew was developing a twin-track initiative based on parallel progress on decommissioning and political progress. As the first anniversary of the ceasefire approached, on 31 August 1995, threats of a breakdown led to requests for concessions in essence, for not returning to violence.

On 1 September 1995, the British and Irish Governments reached agreement on holding a summit five days later to launch the proposed decommissioning body. The Provisional IRA did all it could to block it. The Irish Government was threatened with a return to violence and bodies in the streets. At that point, John Hume supported opposition to the twin-track agreement. John Bruton tried to hold the line but it became clear that postponement of the summit was a more prudent course. The Americans tried to revive the initiative in mid-September but were rebuffed by Gerry Adams. At a meeting of European Union leaders in Majorca, John Bruton was resolute that he still wished to revive the twin-track proposals and, days later, David Trimble and Ian Paisley of the UUP and the DUP, respectively, both separately proposed an elected assembly where all parties could meet.

November brought setbacks. Unhelpful leaks from the United States suggested it wished to “knock heads together”. US proposals were rejected by the Provisional IRA. John Hume and Martin McGuinness suggested ideas that would undermine the international commission and set ultimatums for all-party talks that, as John Bruton remarked, had no hope of running.

To regain momentum, the Northern Ireland Office repackaged the twin-track proposals into a building blocks paper. Tortuous negotiations followed. Sinn Féin accused the British Government of insisting on surrender. To refute this, we published the paper in full.

On 28 November 1995, John Bruton and I met at Downing Street and agreed both the twin-track initiative and to establish an international body to assess decommissioning. We announced a three-man international body with Senator George Mitchell as its head and asked it to report by mid-January 1996. I doubt if George or his colleagues, General John de Chastelain and Harri Holkeri, realised how long they would be involved.

President Clinton arrived in London the following day. He was shocked when I showed him evidence that since the 1994 ceasefire the IRA had carried out 148 so-called punishment beatings and the loyalists 75. In speeches in Britain and in the North and South of Ireland, Bill Clinton rammed home the peace message, condemned punishment beatings and attacked terror. It was a stellar performance. The IRA responded a week later, stating there was no question of meeting the demand for a surrender of IRA weapons.

Public opinion, however, was moving against violence. Before Christmas 1995, I made my 13th visit to Northern Ireland and was greeted with John Bruton in the South with tremendous public support for what we were seeking to do.

In 1996, the Provisional IRA dug in. There was a reason for that. It was waiting for a UK general election, with opinion polls indicating the probability of a Labour Party Government.

The Mitchell report in January 1996 noted “nearly universal support ... for the total and

verifiable disarmament of all paramilitary organisations”. He further noted that the IRA “will not decommission any arms prior to all-party negotiations.” He added that “an elective process could contribute to the building of confidence”.

The dilemma of how to bring all the parties together remained, however. The IRA and other paramilitaries would not get rid of their weapons and until they did the unionists would not enter talks. It looked like stalemate and, from my perspective, it certainly felt like it for quite a few months. An elective body to bring all parties together seemed the only way forward but it attracted impassioned opposition from John Hume, who accused the Government of trying to buy votes to keep itself in power. This was an unfair attack by John - uncharacteristic and untrue. I think it resulted from his complete distaste and fear that there might be a return to some form of the old Stormont. That was not going to happen.

Matters worsened in February 1996, when the IRA ended its ceasefire by exploding a bomb at Canary Wharf, killing two people and injuring more than 100. As a matter of course, it blamed the British Government. The Canary Wharf bomb broke the peace and lost support for the Provisional IRA in Ireland and the United States. It brought London and Dublin even closer together.

On 28 February 1996, the UK and Irish Governments agreed ground rules for all-party talks and confirmed they could begin on 10 June. Elections to the negotiating body would be held in May. The elections took place, and with Sinn Féin, but a month later the IRA exploded a massive bomb in Manchester, only days after the opening of the all-party talks under the chairmanship of Senator Mitchell. This bomb convinced me we would not reach a settlement before the next election.

It was clear to me that a new Government would need to pick up the talks. Tony Blair and the Labour Party had been supportive throughout the process and I was confident they would carry it forward were they to win the election, as they did. The Labour Party and Mr. Blair did not carry the scars of 18 years of dispute in government with the IRA and I believed they would be able to build on the joint declaration, the framework documents, the united international support for the peace process, and the work of George Mitchell and his committee. It is greatly to the credit of Tony Blair and the Labour Party that they did so.

If I may, I will add one final point. The peace process did not progress simply because of the politicians and their officials. The Northern Ireland community, definitely the churches, individual clerics, groups such as the Peace Women, and so many others all played a part in framing public opinion at difficult moments and carrying the whole peace process forward at times when it looked to be in difficulty. I hope that no one person, group, political party or ideology will now risk imperilling the peace so carefully constructed by so many for so long.

I will leave it at that. Perhaps we can turn to questions the Chairman and committee members may have.

Chairman: I thank Sir John. It was very enlightening and there was great clarity in what he said. At the heart of it all is the co-operation that was evident between the British Government and the Irish Government in the first place. As Sir John rightly stated, all of the people outside the political process had a key part to play, just as they still have today. If there is one comment I would make, it is that it is important that the relationships that leaders, such as Sir John and, indeed, the former the Prime Minister, Mr. Tony Blair, had with the Irish Government will continue to improve now under the new leadership in Downing Street. Progress happens

most when the British and Irish Governments agree and work together on forming a solution that everybody can sign up to, and that is what happened as a result of Sir John's work.

To explain to Sir John, we have different political parties here and we allow 15 minutes each for questions. We are still committed to the break after an hour and 15 minutes - the clerk to the committee will tell me when that time comes - or if Sir John wants to break any time earlier. For the members, it will be: Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, SDLP, Alliance, Greens, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Independents and Aontú. The first speaker will be from Fine Gael.

Before I call on Senator Emer Currie, Sir John may or may not have known her father, the late Austin Currie, who was a prominent politician and Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive at one stage and, uniquely and specially, was also subsequently a Minister in the southern Government. Senator Currie has great knowledge and experience and her family are renowned for their efforts in relation to peace on the island. Emer, go ahead.

Senator Emer Currie: No pressure there, Chair.

It is wonderful to have this opportunity to put these questions to Sir John about the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement. We did not get Sir John's opening statement until we sat down and it has changed the experience of hearing his first-hand testimony. It was lengthier than we would normally get, and for that I am grateful. I do not think I broke my attention to it at any stage. It is an incredibly powerful first-hand account of Sir John's experiences and we are very lucky to have that today.

The biggest thread through it for me is a personal observation, and that is Sir John's feelings towards the use of violence. That seems to be what drove Sr. John through the good days and the bad days and what, as he himself says, as a Prime Minister, made him prioritise Northern Ireland in the way that he did. I am incredibly grateful.

I would share the view that violence was unnecessary. I would feel it was unnecessary. That loss of life has damaged so many people's lives on our island and Sir John's.

It is clear how high the stakes were. Am I right in saying that Sir John felt keenly how high those stakes were, the responsibility that he had at times where he felt it was make or break, and that he had to pursue peace even when the road to the Good Friday Agreement, to peace and ceasefires was not inevitable? I commend Sir John on his bravery. That is in stark contrast to the points in his account on the lack of bravery by the Provisionals when it came to what happened in the Shankill bomb, Canary Wharf and Manchester. That unnecessary loss of life over the decades is pronounced in this from when they initially contacted Sir John. That contrast, between bravery on one side and covering their backs on the other, I found startling. I am grateful for that account.

The relationship that Sir John describes with the former Taoiseach, the late Albert Reynolds, and then with the former Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, has been defined by the stakes being high but we are at a precarious point coming up to the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. How does Sir John suggest that that relationship can be recreated between the Irish and British Governments and between the three strands at this point? What does Sir John recommend or how would he like to see that relationship progress when we know the potential of success when it is priorities?

Sir John Major: I thank Senator Currie for those generous comments. It is kind of her to be so generous.

There are quite a few points there that the Senator picks up. First, I apologise for the length of that opening statement. If it is any consolation to the Senator, when I wrote an initial draft it was two-and-a-half times longer than the statement I delivered because there were all sorts of things that were relevant to setting the atmosphere that were in many cases never public in terms of problems, either with the unionists, with the British parliamentarians or with disagreements in parts of the negotiating with the Irish Government - their frustration sometimes with us - or all sorts of things there that at one stage or another could have been the end of negotiations.

Senator Currie was quite right to draw attention to the importance of the late Albert Reynolds and John Bruton. We were often frustrated but felt we had to continue. I dare say, so were they. They were often frustrated too, both with us and also with the Provisionals.

The feeling I had about violence was clear. I met some victims from time to time and I could see what it had done to their lives. When one hears that five people have been killed, it is a statistic. When one meets the family of one of those people and one realises the ripple effect of misery that spreads out from one act of violence towards one person, one realises the scale of difficulty. It scarred the whole way of life in Ireland, in the North, and had its ripple effect in the South as well. It was, quite frankly, just intolerable to contemplate that that could go on.

I was shocked, as I indicated rightly in the early part of my remarks, that there was no regular meeting between Irish Ministers and British Ministers before the early 1990s. Ireland is our nearest neighbour. We have a chequered history. There are many things that one might wish were different in the past - perhaps a bit on both sides but, certainly, I can see that on the British side - but a different relationship was built up through and after the peace process and we need that continue. Senator Currie asked specifically about that. You cannot build up that relationship unless you meet together, unless you talk together, unless you trade together, unless you work together and unless you share a similar outlook, and in so many ways Ireland and the United Kingdom have a similar outlook. All through government, not only on matters related to Northern Ireland, we really need a more in-depth relationship with Ireland, in my view. I am no longer in Parliament but, were I to be so and were I in a position to judge it, I would say that we needed to maximise the relationship with our nearest neighbour because that is in our British interest as well as the Irish interest. It is very important that that happens.

It would help a great deal too if we could have an executive that was functioning in the North as well because there is a responsibility on politicians who are elected to deal with problems. I do not only mean the problems of the Northern Ireland protocol but, plainly, they will have to reach an accommodation of some sort. However, the Executive is not meeting and there are all sorts of other political problems in the North, including those relating to the health and education services. It is very important that every effort be made to solve the problem of the protocol, perhaps the result of one of the least well-done negotiations in modern history, and ensure that problem ceases to be an inhibitor to the Executive meeting.

The Senator mentioned the bad moments of the peace process, normally after an atrocity of some sort, and why the process continued. It continued largely for this reason: after the murder of those two little boys who were buying Easter presents for their parents in Warrington - a bomb in a bin killed them - it would have been easy to stop the peace process. Many people thought the smack of firm government would result in its being said that we are not going to deal with these people anymore, but there is a reverse to that. If that smack of firm government had taken place and we had decided not to deal with the Provisional IRA anymore, the violence would have gone on and more little boys and others would have been subjected to the same sort of violence. It was possible to get behind the violence. Remember that the purpose of the

process was to end the violence, which did mean that, if I may give a quote attributed to a very great British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, “jaw, jaw is better than war, war”. We needed to continue to try to get the negotiations or party talks on track and the peace process to continue. I apologise for the length of that reply but the Senator raised a number of different points.

Senator Emer Currie: That is fine. I think Sir John for that.

I have another question. Sir John mentioned how the violence scarred our whole way of life in the North and extended across the island, and he also mentioned the importance of the in-depth relationship. I have spoken about Sir John’s personal bravery in this process. At difficult times, he continued on. I want to ask him about the legacy proposals currently on Committee Stage in the House of Lords. We have seen the amendments. Like we had predicted, they do not change the substance of the Bill. They are criticised and condemned by human rights organisations, the United Nations, the Council of Europe and Westminster’s Joint Committee on Human Rights. How does Sir John feel about the legacy proposals? Does he feel they are in breach of the Good Friday Agreement?

There is much focus on the protocol but I would argue that the unilateral moves on the legacy proposals are as much risk to the in-depth nature of the relationship. Given Sir John’s understanding of the effect of the violence, he must understand how fragile reconciliation is and, in particular, the role of the British Government in the sense that it is not an impartial observer and was part of the Troubles themselves. What is his view on where legacy issues lie?

Sir John Major: The new Secretary of State is taking a very keen interest in it and reaching out perhaps more than some of his predecessors have done. That is very wise. I am a little reluctant to go into any detail on the legacy proposals, however, but will explain exactly why. Time and again during the period 1990 to 1997, people who were not familiar with the talks going on privately said something publicly that created an impediment to what was in the course of being agreed. I am not privy to the private discussions on the legacy issue. I am no longer in Parliament and not part of any negotiations or discussions that may continue, so I am reluctant to comment publicly for fear I may do the same damage to the talks going on there that frequently happened during the early 1990s because of people like me who cared about the issue but did not know exactly what was going on behind closed doors. For that reason, I am reluctant to respond publicly.

I do take on board the concerns about the legacy proposals. Some of them are going to be extraordinarily difficult to deal with. They do have to be dealt with. There will be a need for a great deal of consultation both north and south of the Border to ensure the proposals, which are now in the House of Lords and will of course have to go back to the House of Commons, will insofar as possible bring comfort to the people bereaved in the Troubles and deal with the other issues that arose subsequently. It is another reason that reinforces the point the Senator made in her first question, that is, the point on the essential need for a close, continuing relationship, occurring as a matter of course, between Ministers in London and Ministers in Dublin. I hope the Senator will understand why I do not wish to go into details. I am not involved in these negotiations and do not wish to do anything that might unsettle them in any way. That would be possible if I spoke without knowledge.

Chairman: I thank Sir John.

I will now move on to the next political party, Sinn Féin. We rotate speakers at every meeting. Of the 18 Members of Parliament elected in Northern Ireland to the UK Parliament, ten

attend our meetings regularly, online or in person. Each has the right to attend and contribute, which they do. However, we really need to get unionists here as well. We will ask Sir John a question about that later.

We now move to the Sinn Féin slot. John Finucane is online.

Mr. John Finucane: I thank Sir John for his comprehensive opening statement. I echo the sentiments of the Chair in saying he is very welcome to the meeting. I thank him for taking part in what is a series of engagements we are having to review the Good Friday Agreement in the year of its 25th anniversary. I pay tribute to him and thank him for the role he played with former Taoiseach Albert Reynolds in agreeing the Downing Street Declaration and the framework documents, because, as we know and as Sir John articulated very well, they contributed to the Good Friday Agreement some years later.

Today I am at Westminster. I am not long inside after attending a protest, a demonstration, along with Bloody Sunday families and others in the context of the legacy legislation that is working its way through Parliament at present. I am cognisant of Sir John's comments to Senator Currie in the last section but would like to take some time to ask him about his time in the British Cabinet when he was Prime Minister for a substantial period between 1987 and 1997. That is a time when British intelligence would have been using a very high-profile agent called Brian Nelson. He had been recruited in West Germany and brought to Belfast to take control of operations on behalf of the UDA. The period in question also saw the very high-profile killing of Pat Finucane, the human rights lawyer, my father, among many other incidents. At the time, a large consignment of arms was imported from South Africa under the watch and direction of British intelligence. The weapons were used to significantly escalate and triple the killing capacity of loyalist paramilitaries.

Over recent years, this committee has spent some time dealing with legacy. Let me refer to what we now know from investigations and reports by Lord Stevens, as he is now, and also former Canadian Supreme Court jurist Peter Cory and Sir Desmond de Silva - the latter two are now deceased - regarding the scale of collusion between British intelligence organisations and loyalists from the earliest days of the conflict. In their reports, Judge Cory and Sir Desmond de Silva both referenced Cabinet papers and minutes of meetings between Ministers and senior Government officials. All reports confirmed that collusion existed between the British Government's intelligence agencies and loyalist paramilitaries. In 2012, David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, apologised privately to my family, and did so publicly in the House of Commons. Irish society is still dealing with the effects of collusion and the effects of our past. I respectfully highlight the fact that collusion was endemic on Sir John's watch, as we can see from the reports that have taken place. It is in that context that I have some questions. Was Sir John briefed on that strategy? If he was not, does he find it strange that he was not? In the case of my father, and in many other cases, fairly credible and well-supported allegations were circulating domestically and internationally that collusion was involved. Did Sir John ever make any inquiries as to whether there was substance to those allegations? David Cameron said that when a state's own actors and agents are in the dark, there is an extra onus on the state to ensure accountability and transparency. Knowing what we know now, does Sir John think he would have done anything differently?

Sir John Major: I am sorry to hear about Mr. Finucane's father. "Sorry" is an empty word. I acknowledge that nothing more awful could happen. One of the great pleasures of the way the peace process concluded was that Sinn Féin was left to sit among the democratic parties. It is now open for election and its candidates are being elected in the North and the South. Sinn

Féin has become a bona fide democratic and political party. That is an outcome I thoroughly welcome. It is an outcome we sought throughout the process.

I am surprised at the comments Mr. Finucane has made about collusion between the intelligence agencies and the loyalist paramilitaries. I am puzzled. I was certainly never briefed on that point. I was not aware of either of the things Mr. Finucane mentioned. I was not aware of arms from South Africa or anything else. I was not briefed with those details then and I have not been briefed on that point in the papers I have seen subsequently. I know how these things arise. I do not know whether Mr. Finucane's information is accurate and whether the people who have written about it have been accurate. I do not know if there is more to the story than there seems to be. I know emphatically that it was not a policy I was aware of either as Foreign Secretary or Prime Minister. That was not something of which I was aware. I do not know exactly what David Cameron said. I will look it up and find out what he said to see how far it goes and whether it provides a clear intimation of collusion, in which case I would certainly deplore it. This was not something of which I was aware.

On both sides of the Border, North and South, there was a great deal of discussion between some Irish politicians and the paramilitary bodies. That is beyond doubt. That the intelligence agencies were involved in similar discussions is a proposition about which I am much less certain. I can make inquiries, but I do not think that would help anybody very much at this stage. I can tell the committee that I was certainly not briefed about it. I did not actively approve of it because I was not aware of it.

Mr. John Finucane: I say this respectfully, but I had assumed a little more assumed knowledge on this point. I will clarify and set out the basis on which I made those comments. David Cameron's statement to the House of Commons was on 12 December 2012. It came at the end of a process whereby a senior barrister, Sir Desmond de Silva, had been appointed by the then coalition Government of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats to review the papers in my father's case. That came after a report by the former Canadian Supreme Court jurist, Judge Peter Cory. He was appointed after the Weston Park peace talks, which occurred after the appointment of John Stevens, who may not have been appointed by Sir John but who was appointed on his watch. Mr. Stevens carried out three investigations into allegations of collusion in the North. His first investigation took place when he was either assistant chief constable or chief constable of Cambridgeshire police. The third report took place when he was in charge of the Metropolitan Police. He was Britain's most senior police officer. It is the findings of those reports I am quoting. It is not necessarily using my own interpretation or words. All three of those independent analyses have confirmed that collusion took place not just in the case of the murder of my father but right across the board.

The importation of shipments of arms is a matter of record through the courageous work of investigative journalists, along with the reports I have cited. Following on from the comments made by Senator Currie, I do not think anybody would want Sir John to comment on private conversations. However, the legacy debate is very much out in the open. There is nothing secretive going on. There is no negotiation taking place. My family and many others have fought for decades. Any success we have had has been in spite of and not because of the actions of successive British Governments. Our success has been the result of reports being published or court cases being won. What we face at present is a piece of legislation that will affect families. Irrespective of the derivation of the family's loss, whether it was a result of state actions, republican actions or loyalist actions, this piece of legislation will remove their right to an inquest and deny them the use of the services and offices of our police ombudsman. It will remove their

right to initiate civil proceedings and will remove their right to see anybody brought before a criminal court to face justice for the actions he or she carried out to the standard our criminal courts demand. This is what is currently before the courts. Uniquely, this piece of legislation has united every single political party on the island of Ireland, bar none. I do not need to tell Sir John what a difficult task that is but this legislation has achieved it. To my knowledge, no political party in Britain other than the Conservative Party supports this legislation. It has been condemned at a European level by the Committee of Ministers as not being Article 2 compliant. It has been condemned by human rights organisations and the US Congress. The list goes on. Families have in some cases been fighting for more than five decades for the simple right to an inquest. In that context, I invite Sir John to pass some comment about such a draconian piece of legislation. It has been described, and I share this sentiment, as unamendable.

Chairman: I wish to make the point that our guest has been invited to talk about his work on the peace process and the issues leading up to the Downing Street declaration and the Good Friday Agreement. He has already answered a question from Senator Currie about the matters Mr. Finucane is now raising. Sir John has made his point on that matter. Mr. Finucane is obviously entitled to say what he wishes, but I point out to Sir John that he has already given an answer. It is a matter for him to decide how to reply. The Chair is here to ensure that we concentrate on the issues the committee invited our guest to the meeting to address, which are his personal knowledge and work as Prime Minister.

Mr. John Finucane: I will respond to the Chairman respectfully. The committee has spent a considerable amount of time discussing legacy. Victims are referred to in the Good Friday Agreement.

Chairman: I am not going to-----

Mr. John Finucane: Chair,-----

Chairman: Hold on a second.

Mr. John Finucane: It is difficult with the time delay on the link.

Chairman: I am very sorry about that.

Mr. John Finucane: Sir John in his opening statement mentioned that he met victims from time to time and stressed the importance of ensuring that violence did not go on. In his opening statement, he stated that the police and army did not murder, kneecap or carry out bombings. I respectfully disagree with the analysis that he cannot comment on legacy on the basis that it is a negotiation.

Chairman: Sure, that is Mr. Finucane's privilege.

Mr. John Finucane: I wish to politely correct that assertion and invite comment in the context of where victims sit in the process of not marking the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. I have made my comments in that context.

Sir John Major: I do understand and no doubt if I were in Mr. Finucane's shoes, I would raise exactly the same kind of thing, given the impact that it had on his family. I am trying to make two points. First, I made clear that I agreed to attend the committee but that I could only discuss what I had been responsible for before 1997. I cannot really comment on legislation that I have not been part of framing, and which I have not read in full. I am not on the commit-

tee discussing that legislation. I am not in the House of Commons hearings. I have no detailed knowledge of it whatsoever. The only knowledge I have of the Bill is the fact that it is going through in the House of Lords and such small amounts as have occasionally appeared in parts of the British media.

I would be commenting from a considerable lack of knowledge and that is not a safe thing for anyone to do. Either I could say something that would cause deep offence, which I certainly would not wish to do on subject such as this, or I could say something that was staggeringly stupid simply because I did not know the background and do not know the facts. That is my point.

I was surprised at what Mr. Finucane implied and asserted happened during the period when I was Prime Minister. I said and I repeat again that I certainly was not aware and was not briefed on that. I am absolutely not briefed. It is over 20 years since I left Parliament. I am absolutely not briefed. I am not unsympathetic and I entirely agree that it is healthy that these things are now being considered and discussed. I hope accommodations with it can be reached as far as possible. I can see that some of them may be difficult to deal with, not least because of the length of time that has elapsed between the event and now. I think it would be very unwise to comment on things about which I have so little knowledge, which is why I made that point.

I had to spend some considerable time reminding myself of the events that took place when I was Prime Minister. It is now 32 years since I became Prime Minister and 25 years since I ceased to be Prime Minister. In that time there is a lot of life to live and a lot of things to happen. I had to go back and remind myself and re-brief myself of all that had happened in that period. I am willing and perfectly intent to respond to those where I can, but I am not in a position to comment on things that have happened 25 years after I left Parliament.

I know that must be disappointing from Mr. Finucane's point of view and I do not wish to disappoint. If I were in a position to answer the question I would, but I am not.

Chairman: I completely concur with the points the witness has made. He was asked to speak about particular issues and we are very happy that he is doing that.

As we have been in session for one hour and 20 minutes, we will take a ten-minute break and will return with the Fianna Fáil speakers.

Sitting suspended at 2.54 p.m. and resumed at 3.04 p.m.

Chairman: The sequence of speakers will be Fianna Fáil, followed by the SDLP, Alliance, the Green Party, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Independents, Aontú and then Deputy Wynne, who is also here.

Senator Niall Blaney is a famous name that Sir John may have heard from the past. The Blaney name in Donegal is synonymous with politics.

Senator Niall Blaney: I also extend a warm welcome to Sir John Major. We are delighted to have him here today. The architects of the Good Friday Agreement giving evidence is a very important piece of work. While some may argue that Sir John was not an architect of the Good Friday Agreement, he certainly set the foundation stones along with Albert Reynolds and John Bruton. His presentation today was quite fulsome; the content is quite spectacular. Dealing with so many issues as the Prime Minister of a country can be a very onerous and tough task. It may be a measure of the individual he is that during his time in office he took the time to understand Northern Ireland issues, its people and the perspectives of both sides. In doing so he

brokered a way forward through the Downing Street declaration. We are very thankful for all the work he did and all the effort he put into making it happen. As he said, the peace process probably would not have been achieved had he not put that effort in and we are very appreciative of it.

The committee has never really discussed collusion. Collusion had many parts in Northern Ireland and it is not something we need to go into today. I would also rather if it were parked. It was never mentioned before we met today.

Regarding Sir John's term in working up towards what became the Good Friday Agreement we are trying to gain an understanding of the complexities involved in getting an agreement in the work he did. I suppose, for us, it is to try and find the lessons to be learned. As Sir John knows, the Good Friday Agreement has not been fully implemented. The North-South Institutions are not up and running. There are many issues that still remain unresolved not even to mention the complexities now with Brexit. The key question I ask Sir John is what lessons he learnt from his time in office that could be useful for the politicians of today in the future, in trying to engage and bring about recognition of each other and processes that allow sitting down around tables to get conclusions that look about all interests.

Sir John Major: It is a very good question. The lessons are actually very straightforward, at least the key lesson that remains with me from those years. There are two things I would emphasise again and again, because so much comes back to it, which are you cannot agree if you do not talk or if you do not listen or if you think you hold the wisdom of the world in your hand and those engaging with you are necessarily wrong. You have to have an open mind, you have to talk, and you have to listen and if that were inscribed in every part of government in every part of the world, we would be living in a much happier planet than we do at the moment.

As to the complexity of it, I remember many years ago remarking that the peace process was a little like trying to put together a complex Rubik's cube with a gun attached because that is exactly what it was like. There were many different pieces in the puzzle that had to be brought into the whole before we could finally get an agreement, which is one of the reasons neither the joint declaration nor the frameworks agreement, nor indeed the Good Friday Agreement itself, would have won an award for plain English. There is a degree of flexibility written into them and without that, we would never have got everybody to sign up to them. That is another lesson. The essence of negotiation is you do not get everything you wish to have. That is true for every negotiator and it is probably true of every successful conclusion to negotiation the world has ever seen. Those are the lessons I take from the discussions we had.

Senator Niall Blaney: I will conclude by saying I had the pleasure of being in the audience when Sir John was in Longford, roughly four years ago, when he gave a talk on his relationship with Albert Reynolds and it was quite an engagement on the day. The background and the talk he gave that day was really impressive. I am delighted to meet him again and will pass to my colleague, Deputy Brendan Smith.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Like other members, I welcome Sir John Major to our committee. I compliment him on the excellence of his presentation and his outlining of the chronology of events and of challenges facing both Governments over that particular period. He outlined how, as he took up leadership of his party and the role of Prime Minister, the backdrop on these two islands with 25 years of terror was that violence was totally unacceptable. I recall being at the press conference after Albert Reynolds was elected leader of the political party to which both Senator Blaney and myself belong, where Albert Reynolds basically outlined the same thing,

that there had to be a path to peace found and we had to banish terror, criminality and paramilitarism from Irish society. Both men played a huge role in bringing us the peace we enjoy in this country today and I compliment him on that work.

I always have believed the Downing Street Declaration was an extremely important stepping stone. Some weeks ago here, I was very surprised that Gerry Adams downplayed the importance of that particular strategy and document that was agreed between both Governments. I think Sir John said in his presentation today that after 70 years of partition and 24 years of bloodshed, there was an agreement between the Irish and British Governments. I note John Finucane quite rightly welcomed Sir John's role and the importance of that particular agreement.

Like my colleague, Senator Blaney, I had the privilege of listening to Sir John address a meeting in the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2013 on the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Downing Street Declaration. He spoke at that time about the trust that had been built up between Albert Reynolds and himself. He mentioned at that time the importance of both men knowing each other from his role of Chancellor of the Exchequer and Albert Reynolds' role as Minister for Finance and that they had that working relationship because they attended meetings together at the Council of finance ministers at the European Union. What importance would Sir John attach to the working relationship that had developed between both them in their respective roles in finance prior to taking on the role of Head of Government and in having that trust built up, which they had when they took on the role of Heads of Government? Was that particularly important?

I also acknowledge Sir John's generosity towards the role of Albert Reynolds, John Bruton, and Tony Blair, his successor as Prime Minister as well, in the work they did to bring peace to this island, between Britain, and a much more mature and good relationship between both Governments and both islands. When he looks back on the particular challenges that he outlined so well in his presentation, there were challenges every day. We are talking about the preservation of life and the establishment of peace. Surely it should not be beyond the political process to get agreement in regard to trade between these islands and with the European Union in relation to the protocol. The challenges he and the Irish Government, and political leaders throughout both islands faced at that time, were much more daunting than any of the challenges facing both Governments and political parties in Northern Ireland today.

Sir John Major: I thank the Deputy. The personal relationship I had with Albert Reynolds was very special. We have all had the experience from time to time when you meet someone and you think they are nice enough but are never going to be a particular friend and you meet other people and there is an instinctive empathy that exists. I found that with Albert when we were finance Ministers. We were sharing some of the same frustrations about our meetings at the European Union at the time and so when he became Taoiseach and I was Prime Minister, we had the basis of a very friendly relationship. The first conversation we had was when I invited him over to No. 10. We had a private supper for two - no officials, just us - in the white room on the first floor and it was at that discussion, when we were completely relaxed, that we turned to the peace process and the absolute inability of either of us to understand how it could possibly be tolerable to anyone. We were on the same route exactly from the very start. We did not always wish to get to the conclusion in quite the same way, and we were friendly enough to have many arguments without it upsetting the friendliness, but I would never be able to speak warmly enough of Albert. He became a genuine friend and I miss him still. I am grateful to the Deputy for paying tribute to him and to John Bruton for what they actually achieved.

I will say something that will surprise the Deputy because he very generously talked about

bravery as did his colleagues a little earlier. There is one thing which is very hard to express properly because it will cause fury in some quarters. Although the Provisionals and the loyalists continued with their violence - but I will focus on the Provisionals - at the top there was also the wish to look for a peace; albeit on their terms, whereas I was dealing with quite difficult backbenchers on the issue in London. My backbenchers were probably not as difficult as the backbenchers of those leading the Provisionals and we should remember that as well. Although dealing with them was very frustrating and although they were often very negative, often for show, it was also courageous to take the risk. There is no courage in refusing to engage in negotiations; that is easily done. There is a courage in entering into negotiations and a lot of people in politics and beyond - including Fr. Alec Reid, for example, if we go back far enough, and many others - had a finger in pushing the people who could reach an agreement into actually doing so. That is why I said at the end of my presentation that there are many people, many of them unsung and unknown, who had a role. The real heroes of this agreement are the people, North and South, who kept pressure on to make sure that it never fell away as an issue and they deserve that credit.

The Northern Ireland protocol was mentioned and of course, it is not beyond hope to get an agreement on the protocol and we must. The protocol was a very poor negotiation but I do not see any point in developing that. It has to be put right and the sooner it is put right in some form or another, the better. I doubt there is a perfect solution. So often, there is not so it does and will mean a degree of flexibility from both sides of the negotiation. With that degree of flexibility in London and in Brussels, there must be a way to improve the present circumstance, even if it is not perfect. It is very important that getting an agreement it is treated as a matter of priority because it will enable the Executive to meet again and will enable the other political problems, unconnected to the peace process, to be dealt with by elected politicians in the North. It will also go a long way towards improving the relationship between London and Dublin, which should be as close as any relationship because of the geographic proximity of the two nations but which, in the last two or three years, has not been. That is a loss to London and to Dublin as well.

Senator Niall Blaney: Before we move on, I just wanted to say that I met the former Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, this morning and he asked me to pass on his regards to Sir John.

Sir John Major: Please pass on my warmest wishes back to Bertie. I hope to see him before too long.

Chairman: Dr. Stephen Farry, MP, who is online, is next. He is the deputy leader of the Alliance Party.

Dr. Stephen Farry: Good afternoon. Sir John is very welcome. I join with others in passing on my thanks on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland for the work he did during his time in office as Prime Minister. He laid the foundations, in many respects, for the Good Friday Agreement. I want to explain to him that I am one of the Northern Ireland MPs who regularly attends this committee. It is a strange overlap but I will be seeing Sir John again in a few weeks' time at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I am getting a double hit in some respects but I will try not to repeat myself the second time round.

Sir John Major: Dr. Farry might get a day off for good behaviour.

Dr. Stephen Farry: I want to raise issues around sovereignty and to make reference to Sir John's work in terms of the European Union. I will start with Peter Brooke's comments with

regard to the UK having no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland and how significant that statement was. To what extent did Sir. John appreciate the complexities around sovereignty in the context of Northern Ireland, in terms of it being part of the UK but also the wider interests on the island of Ireland and the different constitutional aspirations?

Sir John may not have realised at the time how important his work on advancing European integration actually was, in terms of the consolidation of the work on the Single Market and the Maastricht treaty. I do not want to get into that issue too much in terms of difficult backbenchers but that work was very helpful in breaking down borders on the island of Ireland. While it was not explicit in the Good Friday Agreement, it did provide the backdrop to it in terms of allowing borders to wither away. Was that purely a parallel strand or was there any awareness of how significant that work would, in due course, be for trying to break down barriers within the island of Ireland?

To move on to more contemporary times, Sr. John Major and Mr. Tony Blair famously came to Derry-Londonderry in the run-up to the Brexit referendum and expressed concerns about the potential implications of the vote on a society such as Northern Ireland, which really works through sharing and interdependence. Was he disappointed at that time that his successors did not pay enough attention to the implications of Brexit for the complexities of Northern Ireland? Are there lessons to be learned from that?

Those are my three questions for Sir John.

Sir John Major: They are very good ones. I remember working with John Alderdice as well, of course, many years ago in the 1990s when he was leader of the Alliance Party. Dr. Farry raised three specific points, the first of which related to Peter Brooke's comment regarding the UK having no selfish economic or strategic interest in Northern Ireland, which was very important. What is intriguing about it is that his speech was delivered only a few days before I became Prime Minister and I was aware it was coming. He had told me because he was a very close friend. At one stage, we were both in the same constituency and our friendship went back a long way, so I did know about it. The interesting point about that, which not many people are aware, is that Peter Brooke was echoing something Tom King had said some years earlier. It was not said in precisely the same language but he had said it and nobody had taken any notice of it. Before Peter Brooke delivered the speech - which if I remember correctly, was actually delivered in his constituency, which is a long way away from Northern Ireland - he briefed people in Northern Ireland, including the political parties, three weeks beforehand. Having briefed them in advance, they knew what he was going to say would be significant, they listened to it and it did make a difference but it was a repetition of something Tom King had said some years earlier.

On European Union integration, the European Union in the context of the final Good Friday Agreement was of considerable importance. When Ireland joined the European Union, it changed the relationship with the UK as well because there we were, at the same meetings, with the same common interests. We did not have to artificially arrange a summit or a meeting, travel to Dublin or travel to London; there we were, together in the same place. It certainly was extremely helpful. That simple fact was extremely helpful in actually improving the relationship, letting Ministers get to know one another better and indeed, get to know each country better because each country's interests were often expressed during EU meetings and we heard them. Often we voted together or campaigned together and it helped to build the relationship. It was very important indeed and I was aware of that during the negotiations.

The Maastricht treaty negotiations were almost as complicated as the peace process but did not take quite as long. They had a long tail in the UK and still have. One cannot join a body like the EU without surrendering some sovereignty but one gains a great deal of sovereignty as well. It is not a one-way trip. One gains a great deal of sovereignty in terms of what other people do. We live in a world with China, Russia and the trading power of the United States. Unless Europe is going to work together, we Europeans will find ourselves less powerful in a competitive and difficult world. That is the basis of my wishing to be in the European Union, not because I wish to surrender sovereignty or have to do some things because of European law that I did not like. That happens, but it is relatively trivial compared with the security and interests of this generation and the next that Europe, as a whole, works together to make sure it is protected against winds from outside. One can see what is happening at the moment in Ukraine and the danger there. Economically, the competitive danger from China is evident, and so is the competitive thrust from the United States. They may be our great allies in military and other matters, but they are economic competitors. I am utterly unrepentant about my Europeanism. Europe is in the interest of my children and grandchildren because they will be more secure, safer and richer. That applies to Ireland as much as it does to the UK. Dr. Farry is entirely right that European integration is of great importance. When Tony Blair and I went to Derry in, I think, 2016-----

Dr. Stephen Farry: That is correct.

Sir John Major: We were concerned about what leaving the European Union would do to life in Northern Ireland, because it would be stranded. Northern Ireland would suddenly become the border with the European Union, with a lot of North-South trading and suddenly a trading border right down the middle. I was aware that the original Troubles way back in the 1960s actually began at a customs border, if Dr. Farry recalls. Therefore, I was immensely sensitive from the point of view of Northern Ireland about what leaving the European Union would do in changing the relationship. Dr. Farry may regard it as slightly surprising that Mr. Blair and I should go on this and say the same things at the same meeting, but it is not really surprising. As Dr. Farry knows well as a politician, the public divisions between political parties are often a good deal less when talking privately.

Dr. Stephen Farry: Of course.

Sir John Major: On this issue, Mr. Blair and I were pretty much at one. I was concerned about that. On Mr. Blair and I expressing our views about the worries about how it would impact on Northern Ireland, we were fairly roundly told by the then First Minister and the then UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland effectively that we did not know very much about Northern Ireland and we should pipe down. I would not mind revisiting that discussion at some stage, given what has happened subsequently. I am sorry on that occasion we were not able to persuade people of our concerns.

Dr. Stephen Farry: Sir John is certainly wise, in that respect anyway, and I hope that is recognised.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome Sir John. At the time of his prime ministership, I lived in London. I want to look at the Good Friday Agreement in terms of it being a living document, as we are the implementation committee of it. Obviously, the British and Irish Governments are co-guarantors of that agreement. The Good Friday Agreement and the 2003 joint declaration in St. Andrews, and the New Decade, New Approach, NDNA, all committed to a bill of rights. The gaping hole of the Good Friday Agreement or the implementation is

the lack of fulfilment of where the British Government said it would complete incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into Northern Ireland law with direct access to the courts and remedies for breach of convention, including the power for the courts to overrule the assembly legislation on the grounds of inconsistency. As a committee here and using Sir John's experience, what more can be done to be sure that what was promised in the Good Friday Agreement is delivered and that the two guarantors and indeed anybody else involved makes sure that happens?

Sir John Major: Straightforward questions are always the most difficult to answer because the answer is, to a certain extent, non-specific. The only thing that can be done is continually to argue, lobby and press for agreements that were promised to be honoured. One often had to go back again and again to get something determined that ought to be determined without frustration. Clearly, I think the Deputy is probably in that area. There is no silver bullet that can compel people to do it. It can only be done by persuasion, but the persuasion should be consistent. It is one of the many reasons I favoured the closest possible relationship between Dublin and London and why it is a good idea there are members of all of the political parties, in Westminster as well as in Dublin or Belfast, and they are all in a position to press. I have nothing better to offer than that. If the Deputy feels strongly about it and it was promised, then it is absolutely politically legitimate to press again and again, either for the promise to be honoured or, alternatively, for an explanation she will accept as to why circumstances have changed, and I am sure they have changed. I have sympathy with the Deputy's view. I think she should just continue to press it.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Looking at it a quarter of a century on the other side of the agreement, we question here what co-guarantor means and the responsibilities on both Governments to make sure those agreements are fully implemented. It is a concern. Also, many of the challenges people in the North face, even right now, would not be as challenging were those agreements to be implemented in full. We already talked about Stormont House, but even in terms of the bill of rights, if there were universal rights for all citizens in the North, that would alleviate much of the pressures that are there right now. It is important.

I have a question perhaps out of my own curiosity. When I lived in London, the North of Ireland was never a priority for people living in England. Would Sir John say it is more or less of a priority now than it was 25 years ago?

Sir John Major: I preface this answer by saying I am not in Parliament. I preface it that way because if you are in Parliament, you get letters from and meet constituents. You are in constant communication with people and you pick up a view that is a good deal wider than simply your own. I am a private citizen now and I no longer get that. I declined to go to the House of Lords, so I am not in either House of Parliament. However, because of the publicity that has been given to the dispute with the European Union over the protocol, it is probably higher in people's minds than it was in the early 1990s. That may seem very strange when thinking of the violence in the early 1990s, but I suppose if something goes on for a long time, it becomes background. The violence had gone on for a very long time and it was background. In the early days of the Troubles, if something happened, it was headline news. As the years moved on, it slipped down the news agenda a bit. It may be that the profile is a little higher now. Certainly, due to the fact we do not have a functioning Executive in Stormont, which is important to the South as well as the North, and there is this dispute that is carrying on over the protocol, probably the profile is a little higher. I understand that the relatively new Secretary of State in the North is keen to develop close relationships. There are, as Deputy Conway-Walsh said, parts of

the Good Friday Agreement, like the cross-Border agreement, that are not implemented and are not working at the moment. It may be a good time for a little flexibility on both sides that can lead to some deals. I go back to the point I made a few moments ago. To get deals, you have to talk and you have to listen. That is the only way in which we will get them.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I echo the comments the previous speakers have made in welcoming Sir John Major and thanking him for his opening statement and all the information included. I thank him for the interest, time and effort he put into the North of Ireland at that time. I thank him also for his work on what is called the unconventional approach and the openness that was demonstrated in that period.

I believe wholeheartedly in his earlier comments that we must talk, we must be able to listen and we must be able to keep the other side in mind. We could do with a lot more of that kind of language and that kind of narrative today.

I note that in a meeting with Albert Reynolds in 1992, Mr. Major said “both of us should undertake a series of unconventional confidence-building measures”. I am really interested in those comments and would like Mr. Major to expand a little on the moment when he realised we had to think outside of the box and we would have to use unconventional approaches. How exactly did Mr. Major work to build confidence with all parties throughout his time in office? That is my first question.

Sir John Major: There was no great secret about it in many ways. Some of it was conventional; some of it was not. It was to be invariably available to all the party leaders, if they wished to talk, to try to get as much of a continuing dialogue going, even if the dialogue was not complete because somebody was left out of it or somebody chose not to enter into it, as the unionists did from time to time. It is like travelling a long distance by bus. If the bus stops, you may never get there. You need to keep the bus going, even if it is only ticking over and going very slowly. From time to time we did have to produce stratagems to keep talks going when they looked as though they were at a stalemate. That was what I meant in a sense by unconventional.

I also meant, at the time I said it, the private link, which was absolutely necessary. If we had said publicly that we were going to have an open link to the provisionals, the IRA, there would have been a huge fuss in a large part of the British Parliament. It would have been unacceptable. We were breaking a convention that had been there for a long time that one did not talk to people who engaged in terror. What we were doing then was very unconventional, but, of course, the alternative to breaking that convention and talking was that the violence would have continued and there would have been no move to end it. It was things of that sort that I had in mind.

I also meant, and this is not particularly unconventional, the fact that, just as you needed to keep, as I put it, the bus running all the time, you also needed to make sure that the relationship between the two Governments in particular was continuous and did not break apart. The great virtue of having Albert and John as interlocutors was that it was possible to disagree with them and it was not going to bring anything to a juddering halt because they shared exactly the same ambition I had. It was those things I had in mind. There was no great secret about what they were.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: My other question is about the very last point Mr. Major made in his statement. I am one of the newest members of the committee. We recently had an

informal meeting with the Northern Ireland Fellowship, and through discussions at that meeting we talked about where we are now, how communities are feeling and what tensions are like at this time. I wish to state again what Mr. Major has stated. I hope no one person, group, political party or ideology will now risk imperilling the peace so carefully constructed by so many for so long. I ask Mr. Major to elaborate a little more as to what the concerns may be from his standpoint.

Sir John Major: There is one thing I missed in my response to the Deputy's first question, which I might add, in terms of an unconventional approach. It is probably unconventional for politicians to work with the church to deliver something, but Albert, John and I used the churches sometimes as an interlocutor to reassure people that we were offering a true bill and that what we were saying to them was true and would be honoured. Certainly, the churches in the North did that for me on a number of occasions, and I believe they may have done it in the South as well. That certainly was a little unconventional.

What I meant by the last line of my statement is that I do not think anybody with an ideological opposition to anything to do with the protocol or anything else should fail to understand the wider significance of what happens if the protocol problem is not sorted out, if there were to be movements under Article 16 to disapply parts of the protocol. I do not think an ideological concern about sovereignty would justify that because the sovereignty point, in terms of the extent to which it is applied in the Northern Irish question on trade, is semantic, frankly. I meant things like that. I do not think anybody on the extreme fringes of politics should be in a position to wreck what has been brought together by the mainstream of politics. That was exactly what I was implying, that I did not think anybody, whatever his or her personal concerns might be, had a moral right to break apart the Good Friday Agreement and put us at risk of returning, if only partially, to the Troubles that existed before the Good Friday Agreement was finally signed.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I will finish with this point, if only because I liked the quote and wanted to refer to it again. From Mr. Major's experience, it seems to me it would definitely play a huge part in the process.

All three strands needed agreement. The mantra was: "Nothing is agreed until all is agreed."

How important was that for all the negotiators? Was it something that kept everything in perspective and ensured they were all generous enough to continue to talk and to listen to one another?

Sir John Major: Yes. Suppose we had reached a further agreement between London and Dublin on something and had not reached a comparable agreement with the other two strands. You can quite see how you would then get arguments that the Governments were operating behind their back, that they were not really interested in the internal government of the North or the relationship between North and South and were interested only in London and Dublin. For each of those strands, if you were to choose to agree one of them in isolation, you can see arguments that would have arisen which would imperil the overall agreement. That was why we wished to reassure people that we were not going to do anything behind their backs or drag them reluctantly in a direction in which they did not wish to go because we had reached some prior agreement. It was an act of reassurance so the people we were negotiating with on each of the three strands realised they were not going to be dragged into a commitment that perhaps they had entered into reluctantly and then find the other two strands of the overall agreement did not apply. It was a form of reassurance and was necessary to keeping the talks going.

Chairman: I think everybody has spoken now. I thank Sir John for his-----

Deputy Brendan Smith: Could I ask one question?

Chairman: Of course. I am sorry; I thought the Deputy was finished.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Sir John mentioned the irresponsible publication in *The Times* of London of an incorrect extract from the framework document. I know it has been more than 30 years but does he have a recollection of any of the broadcast or print media in Britain being responsible or trying to be helpful in relation to the ongoing negotiations, instead of running with scare headlines that would give succour to the people who did not want to see an end to violence? To his recollection, were there any branches of the media that were helpful?

Sir John Major: The broadcast media were predominantly helpful and so was a large part of the written media. Although I mentioned *The Times* on this occasion, *The Times* was also, on other occasions, helpful about the process. Not everyone in the media was helpful about it. Some were not. Some did not think it would ever come to anything. Some thought we were unwise to have entered into it. Some still clung to the notion that the only way to behave was to say you would never deal with terrorists or people who use violence under any circumstances. This is a point I have addressed once or twice. It was a patchwork. No one paper was universally hostile. Sometimes there would be a hostile article, perhaps through misunderstanding or perhaps through a bad briefing. One of the problems we faced continually was that there was always the risk that somebody was going to brief privately from a particular perspective of their own and it was not really a briefing that was justified. It might be self-interested or perhaps it was a briefing without full knowledge of the facts. We did get unhelpful stories from that sort of thing but I do not think people went out of their way to block the move towards peace generally. I think there was a lot of supportive media as well as the occasional difficulty because of stories that emerged.

Chairman: I again thank Mr. Major for his attendance, his frankness, his analysis and his work. It is great to have him here and have his experience and knowledge. The final point is about where we go from here. It is not the subject of today's meeting but the biggest problem now is that the institutions are not working right, although the east-west one is beginning to work the way we all want it to. We should do anything we can to reassure the people in Northern Ireland and particularly unionism. From meeting with people within unionism, and members of this committee met with some of them yesterday, it is clear they feel isolated. They feel they are not listened to. They feel things are changing, obviously. What we need to do, going back to Sir John's point, is work with unionism. We need to sit down with unionists and listen to them to build an Ireland that everybody can agree on into the future. That is the big message I am getting from unionism. We have to be especially conscious and reach out to unionism as a result of demographic change, the potential of a referendum on the Border, and issues like that. We must be seen to respect their right to be British, the right to their identity, as we would also respect the right of nationalists to be nationalists and to believe in a united Ireland. I think that is where we have to go as a committee.

Sir John Major: It is my impression as an observer - not as a parliamentarian, which I am no longer - that the present Prime Minister and the present Northern Ireland Secretary are more open to improving relationships and dealing with the problems that are currently outstanding than has been the case of late. I may be mistaken in that but I do not think so. I think you will find the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State more open to that and I hope and believe that will prove to be the case.

26 JANUARY 2023

The only other thing I would say is to thank the committee for inviting me. I hope I have been helpful in some small way. I apologise again for the fact that I did not feel competent to answer questions beyond the period in which I was in office, for the reasons I set out. I am sure the enticement of bringing others before it means the committee will get proper answers to those questions in due course. I hope so. I thank the Chair for his care and courtesy in conducting the meeting.

Chairman: I thank Sir John.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.57 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Thursday, 9 February 2023.