

*Monday 17 July 2017*

*The Assembly met at 9.25 am*

## **PLENARY BUSINESS**

### **PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS**

#### **The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Good morning. I remind Members that the proceedings of this body do not attract parliamentary privilege.

It gives me great pleasure to formally congratulate our colleague Mr Andrew Rosindell MP on his appointment as the new British Co-Chairperson of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA). I wish him well in his new role, and I know that we will continue to work in a genuine spirit of openness and friendship. On behalf of all Members, I put on record our thanks to Laurence Robertson, who was the British Co-Chair for over four years and oversaw several memorable plenary sessions, including a visit to the First World War site in Flanders in 2014 and the meeting at Cheltenham racecourse the following year. Also, Members, as some of you are aware at this stage, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here today to my home town of Kilkenny for the 54th plenary session. Everyone has been circulated with an up-to-date list of BIPA membership in your briefing packs.

I have to inform the Assembly that, in accordance with rule 2(a), the following Associate Members have accepted the invitation of the Steering Committee to assume the powers and responsibilities of Members for the whole of this session: Viscount Bridgeman, Lord Empey, the Rt Hon John Kilclooney, Stephen Hepburn, James Dornan, Pauline McNeill, Gordon MacDonald, Tim Crookall, Eamon Ryan and Aengus Ó Snodaigh. We also have apologies from Deputy Joan Burton, Senator Catherine Noone, Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile, Senator Denis Landy, Nigel Evans MP, Nigel Mills MP, Stephen Hepburn MP, Paul Farrelly MP, Rosie Cooper MP, Andrew Bridgen MP, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson and Conor McGinn.

Members, we are going to have a minute's silence, particularly to remember all those who lost their lives so senselessly in recent terror attacks in Britain — at Westminster, London Bridge and Manchester. These utterly horrific attacks were attacks on all of us, and I condemn them in the strongest possible terms. I take this opportunity to reiterate our truly heartfelt condolences to all those bereaved, and I call on Members and assembled guests to observe a minute's silence as a mark of respect to all the innocent people who lost their lives.

*Members observed one minute's silence.*

I will now pass over to the Co-Chairperson Mr Rosindell.

#### **The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. First, may I thank Kathleen for her kind remarks. I hope to work with her in a spirit of cooperation and partnership to make the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly even more relevant and topical in the years ahead. Thank you for your confidence in me in being appointed Co-Chair of this Assembly today.

9. 30 am

Before we commence, I would like to refer to a decision taken by the Steering Committee yesterday to consider a motion to amend the rules of the Assembly temporarily, and that will be considered on Tuesday morning.

Members will have received a copy of the proposed programme of business. In light of the current political developments with Brexit, the European Union and the mobilisation of the youth vote in the recent UK general election, we have devoted the day to exploring the significant impacts of those fundamental changes. We have a strong panel of speakers over the next day and a half, including a newly appointed Minister of State, who is a BIPA stalwart, the European Ombudsman, eminent academics and panels of youth speakers, who will, I am sure, have interesting, stimulating and perhaps challenging things to say about the pertinent issues of today. In particular, I look forward to hearing the voices of the young people who are with us today because they are our future.

The result of the UK referendum on membership of the European Union continues to have repercussions, and some of those will be referenced throughout our debates. We will finish our session with a debate on the recent political developments in the BIPA jurisdictions. We expect today's sessions to conclude around 5. 00 pm. That will give Members an opportunity to freshen up ahead of travelling to the reception at the town hall, which will be followed by dinner at Kilkenny Castle.

On Tuesday morning, the Assembly will get progress reports from Committee Chairs. The Assembly will then hear from Professor Michael Marsh on the perils of political polling, which will, I am sure, be of great interest to all Members. That will be followed by an update on the work of the BIPA Committees from the various Committee Chairmen. The Assembly will adjourn at 12. 15 pm on Tuesday.

It is very fitting to have a plenary in this beautiful city of Kilkenny as we discuss the future challenges impacting not only on politics but on all our citizens' lives. History can teach us a lot of lessons, and we look forward to the future with confidence.

Ladies and gentlemen, I now move formally to the adoption of the proposed Programme of Business.

*Programme of Business agreed.*

## OPENING ADDRESS

### **The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

I will introduce our first guest speaker today, who is John Paul Phelan TD, Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Local Government. As a lot of Members will be aware, Minister Phelan is a former member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, and this is also his local constituency, so we are very pleased to have him here with us today. I would like to take the opportunity to formally congratulate him on his role, as it is a recent appointment, and to wish him all the best in it. I now ask Minister Phelan to please come forward and address the Assembly. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

### **The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Mr John Paul Phelan TD):**

Thank you, Kathleen and Andrew, for your welcome. I must say, first off, that I am delighted to see the sense of calm that is present here this morning in this room in Kilkenny — if you look around you, you will see that this is one of the biggest meeting rooms in the city of Kilkenny — because most of the events I have been at here over the years with regard to politics have not been particularly calm: raucous constituency meetings, selection conventions and the usual hullabaloo, I suppose, that goes with politics, which we are all too keenly aware of. I am also delighted to look around and see so many people whom I know very well.

Needless to say, I was a child politician. Fifteen years ago, I was elected to the Seanad, and for nine years, I was an Associate Member of BIPA. I often wondered why I never got an invitation to substitute for some of the Members, but when I became a full Member nine years' later, I discovered that the discussions tended to be so interesting and in such interesting places that substitutes were not frequently required. I was delighted to be a Member of this organisation for five years and to see at close hand the work that goes on and has gone on for many years. I wish you well in your visit to Kilkenny.

I do not know whether it was Andrew or Kathleen who, in their opening remarks, referenced the fact that parliamentary privilege does not apply. I wondered, if it did apply, how our discussions would have progressed over the years. Parliamentary privilege is a very topical issue here in Ireland at the moment. I know our system is slightly different but I have never noticed that people have held back their views at this group over the years for absence of parliamentary privilege.

I hope that while you are here you get to see some of our city and our county. Kilkenny is a place steeped in history. This weekend, just on Saturday, we celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the election of W T Cosgrave as the MP for Kilkenny City in 1917 — the third Sinn Féin by-election victor after Count Plunkett and Mr de Valera in Clare and Roscommon respectively. Mr Cosgrave, who was a councillor in Dublin, was elected MP for Kilkenny and that was the start, I suppose, of a process that led to much upheaval on this island and in these islands.

It is because of that, or as a result of that, that the work of your group, BIPA, that I was privileged to be a member of, is so important. It is an honour and a pleasure for me to address you as a former member and a newly-minted Minister. It is amazing after 15 years in the

Oireachtas or in Parliament how, when you suddenly cross to the other side of the fence, the game changes completely. It is something that I am still, I suppose, coming to grips with.

Local government is not a naturally attractive subject to discuss or be Minister of, but it is a very important part of any functioning democracy and I am delighted to hold that position. However, I was a member of this Assembly for five years and I know the passion and experience that you all bring to bear from your different walks of life and different parts of these islands to this grouping. Since the Assembly was first established, relations between Britain and Ireland have grown better and better and BIPA has played a leading part in supporting that process.

Little more than a year ago, however, we found ourselves in a new and unprecedented situation with Britain taking the decision to leave the EU, and Ireland committed to remaining a member of the European Union. It is no secret that the outcome of the vote is not what we in Ireland would have wished for but we have been clear since July of last year that we respect the decision of the British people. We are now focused on maintaining and indeed strengthening our good relations with the UK during a time of many changes.

I would like to make a few points about the UK's impending departure from the Union and its implications for Ireland and for British-Irish relations before touching on a theme that is close to my heart, and which has been mentioned by the Co-Chairs, youth engagement and politics. There is an irony in the fact that Britain's move to leave the European Union has come at a time when, as I have said, bilateral relations between our countries and everybody on these islands have never been better. Building on the success of the Good Friday Agreement and our close partnership within the EU, our two neighbouring countries have grown closer in recent decades. Political and economic ties have strengthened, with considerable interaction between our two Governments and substantial two-way investment and trade and tourism between both jurisdictions.

There are 700,000 Irish-born people in Britain and there are millions of people of Irish descent. Because of that, and because of the importance of the people-to-people ties between and across these islands, I welcome the British Government's recent commitment to the status of Irish people in Britain. This is in large part based on the Ireland Act 1949 and will be unaffected by the UK's departure from the EU. Allow me to share some statistics. I love sharing statistics. I have worn many different hats in my life but one was as a maths teacher and I am addicted to statistics. The British market now accounts for less than 20% of Irish goods and services exports. However, over 40% of Irish-owned companies' exports go to the UK. For some firms in the agri-food sector in particular — the south-east of Ireland is one of the prime areas for agri-food production in the country — more than 80% of what they produce goes to the UK.

Moreover, almost half our food exports are destined for the UK, while some 40% of the food that we consume in Ireland comes from Britain. These new figures alone should show that we all have a major interest in maintaining our mutually beneficial relationship. The intensity of these trading ties with the UK underlines the importance of geography as a facilitator of trade flows. While faraway markets have great appeal, there is nothing like proximity as a facilitator of productive business ties, and it is no accident that the trade flows between these islands are so strong.

Sadly, whether we like it or not, for Ireland the horizon is now clouded. It is clouded by the prospect of our closest partner leaving the European Union. Our ambition at this stage is to make the best of it from our perspective; to make the best of what is a difficult and unfortunate situation for us. We accept that the UK has made its decision to leave and we must cope. It is our job, particularly as politicians in this island, to cope with those effects. Our strategy is to seek to minimise the negative effects of Brexit for Ireland, Irish/UK relations and the EU, of which we will continue to be a member.

The result that we wish to achieve, however, will not be easily achieved. In Ireland, we can do everything to facilitate good relations between Britain and the EU, but an agreeable outcome to these ongoing negotiations is not within our gift. Achieving the outcome that we desire will require major give and take on both sides, on the part of the EU and on that of the UK. There will need to be a willingness in the UK to explore compromise solutions that will not necessarily appeal to everyone, and the future arrangements we devise will need to benefit both sides. It is not a zero-sum game.

In Ireland, the unique situation exists with regard to Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement — where everybody born in Northern Ireland or, indeed, born to a parent who is legally resident in Northern Ireland or with one Irish-born grandparent — is entitled to be an Irish citizen and, therefore, an EU citizen. Furthermore, the border in Ireland will be the only land border between the UK and the European Union. We must remember that the openness of that border is one of the key achievements of the Northern Ireland peace process and we must endeavour to protect that. The Irish Government are determined to protect the provisions of the agreement and to keep the border invisible. We have the full support of our EU partners in that aim, and the British Government have made it clear that they, too, share this as a priority.

The European Union has played an important role in consolidating peace. Protecting the gains of the peace process and reflecting Northern Ireland's unique circumstances are clearly in the interests of the EU 27 and, indeed, of the UK. I hope that the negotiations will succeed in devising arrangements for Northern Ireland that reflect its unique circumstances.

In relation to the negotiations between the EU and the UK, I will not be the first, or indeed the last, to tell you how much is at stake or how critical they are. I would like to outline the approach briefly from an Irish Government point of view. First, just to be clear, we will be taking part as a member of the European Union team in the EU/UK negotiations. We will, of course, have our own interests to protect and we want the negotiations to arrive at a sensible set of arrangements between the UK and the European Union that will minimise disruption for our country.

Following intensive engagement with them over the past 12 months, our EU partners have taken Ireland's views on board. In the negotiating directives, Ireland's interests are fully reflected. In fact, in a previous existence, I was chair of the Select Committee on Arrangements for Budget Scrutiny and we were visited by most of the other such committees from across the European Union. All those discussions primarily were dominated by the issue of Brexit and the impact of it on the Irish economy and economic recovery.

The directives that have been issued contain a commitment to the Good Friday Agreement, and one states that avoiding a hard border in Ireland:

“would require flexible and imaginative solutions”.

The EU document also acknowledges the common travel area and Ireland’s unique geographical situation.

The creation of a new relationship and partnership between the UK and the EU will be an incredibly complex undertaking, and I believe that it will take longer to achieve than is allowed for in the article 50 timetable. From Ireland’s perspective, it will be desirable to allow an adequate transition period in order to avoid effects on bilateral trade, something that is in everyone’s mutual interest.

In terms of youth engagement, how can we foster the engagement of people from an early age, in all walks of life, in politics? I think that Andrew, in his opening comments, referenced the numbers of young people who participated in the recent British election. How can we, as politicians, listen more attentively when they speak out? How can we encourage them to stand up and speak out on issues in which they believe strongly? We are in the midst of a communication and technological revolution and we need to evaluate whether our political operating systems are still fit for purpose. I am not advocating that every politician be photographed with customised socks or, indeed, speak in Downing Street about their love of Hugh Grant films, but I think that there is a method for us to interact, and examine how we interact more, with younger people in terms of the promotion of politics in the future.

Is our engagement a dialogue or a monologue? Do we just talk down to, or talk at, younger people, rather than engaging with them on the issues that they are really concerned about? It is not a straightforward issue and there is certainly not a straightforward answer to it. It will give the Assembly much food for thought over the next few days.

To finish, I want to say again, as I look around, that there is a wealth of experience in this body. There are people from all walks of life, many of whom I have grown to know very well over the past 15 years and, indeed, the last five years in particular. I am greatly encouraged by the fact that three of your four Standing Committees are looking at, and examining closely, the Brexit matter. I understand that there will be a report from the fourth Committee today on childhood obesity. The reports of such Committees — I look down at Alf Dubs who has produced many of them over the years — are often taken on board by Committees in the Oireachtas and, indeed, I am sure in Westminster and by the Governments in both jurisdictions. The work which you will undertake here over the next few days is important because, more than most other things, it has ensured the normalisation and the growing maturity of the relationship that exists between people on all of these islands, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and, indeed, Britain and Ireland. I wish you well, sincerely and genuinely, in your endeavours and I hope that you enjoy our beautiful city and county of Kilkenny. Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much, Minister Phelan. We have some time for questions, so I will take a number of questions for the Minister, if people have them, before we move on to our next session. If people want to indicate that they have a question, we will maybe take two or three contributions together.

Everyone is very quiet this morning. Somebody surely has a question out there, somewhere.

**Ms Margaret Murphy O’Mahony TD:**

I have a comment rather than a question. I would just like to congratulate the Minister on his recent elevation. It is the first time that I have had the chance to congratulate him publicly and just acknowledge how helpful the Minister is to all of us, across all parties. Well done to him.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Deputy Murphy.

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

I thank the Minister very much for his opening remarks. As one of the authors of the Belfast Agreement, I am anxious that it is honoured in every respect. In the context of Brexit, as you know, and you mentioned it, we guaranteed that people in Northern Ireland who wish to become citizens of the Irish Republic could do so, and many have done so. They, of course, will have the title of European citizen. Can we have an assurance that the European citizens living in Northern Ireland will have votes in the Republic of Ireland elections, especially European elections? Secondly, has the Republic signed up yet to the integrated defence and security system that the European Union launched two months ago, which will lead to a European army with conscription for European citizens? Are they prepared for Irish citizens to be conscripted into the European army?

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Minister, do you want to take that question and then —

**The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Mr John Paul Phelan TD):**

First, Paul Bew — I will take the three.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Lord Bew, do you have a question?

*9. 45 am*

**The Lord Bew:**

Yes. First of all, Minister, you have been a great friend to BIPA. It is wonderful to see you in this new role and thank you very much for your remarks this morning.

You said:

“an agreeable outcome to the ongoing negotiations is not within our gift”

— that is to say, the Irish Government’s gift. You also talked about the agri-food sector and 80% of its exports going to the UK. Does the European Union leadership understand how

important that is and how disastrous it would be for the agri-food sector in Ireland, according to ESRI and other recent reports, if there were an unsatisfactory outcome to these negotiations? Have the Irish Government managed to convey to them how many vital Irish interests are at stake in these negotiations and in favour of a civilised outcome, if I can put it like that?

**The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Mr John Paul Phelan TD):**

Thank you, Margaret, for your kind words. I suppose, as I said earlier, it is amazing. I was a perpetually disgruntled Back-Bencher for most of my life, and now to be a happy-clappy junior Minister is to be in a completely different place. I am delighted with the opportunity, at least. It is ironic, in one sense, that Mr Cosgrave was elected MP for Kilkenny 100 years ago and, in 1919, became the first Minister for Local Government; 98 years later, I occupy the position. I am privileged to have it and I intend, for however long or short it may be, that I will leave my mark in the role.

Lord Kilclooney spoke about honouring the Belfast Agreement. Absolutely: that is the full intention of the Government in the Republic. As for EU elections and votes, a number of referendums are under consideration. One is about lowering voting age; another is about giving Irish citizens votes in the presidential election. Voting in the European Parliament election has not been considered yet, to be honest. I suspect that, in the overall consideration of those two referendums, that it would be. I know already that that is forming part of that discussion. As to how it would actually work, in terms of registers of electors and things like that, it would be, perhaps in ways at least, a difficult process to undertake but there is certainly no reluctance, from an Irish Government point of view, to examine it, and it may well form part of the overall negotiated agreement on Brexit. It has not been discussed in any huge detail yet.

As for Ireland signing up to an EU army and conscription, I do not foresee it as a matter that we will be signing up to any time soon, in the sense that, as with the euro currency, there are several examples where different member states have opted out. Britain and Ireland opted out of Schengen together; and different member states can partake of some particular institutions and organisational features of the European Union. You will understand from your years in public life that, in the context of the Republic, the issue of conscription and involvement in an EU army would be not just problematic but, I dare say, would not have the support of the people.

Lord Bew, I thank you for your kind remarks and your friendship over many years. I think that the European Union has an understanding and it was interesting that, in the British Government's original letter, Ireland received a strong mention; particularly Northern Ireland, but also the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Equally, when it came to the European Union directives on opening the negotiations, Ireland received very strong mention in those documents. Indeed, in the letter from Mr Tusk, there is a realisation. It cuts both ways, as I said: 40% of what we consume in food is produced in some part of the UK, and up to 80% of what we produce goes to some part of the UK. I think that most people were struck by the fact that those opening documents had such strong reference to Ireland. There was a huge effort put in diplomatically by the Irish missions in different parts of the European Union and also politically.

When it comes down to individual Committees in the Oireachtas lobbying and speaking to their counterparts in European Union countries, I remember addressing the budget Committee from the German Parliament, and most of the meeting was about Brexit. It came down to the micro level as well as the macro level of broader diplomacy. It has been reflected in the opening documents, but whether it is reflected in the outcome of the negotiations depends on how those negotiations are carried out and what the overall result will be. Thank you.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Minister. Senator Feighan has indicated that he has a question. Does anyone else wish to ask a question?

**Senator Frank Feighan:**

We are in a discourse here that there is an opinion by some that the Republic of Ireland might have no alternative but to leave the EU with the United Kingdom. I want to put on the record again — I do not know how many times I can put it on the record — that that absolutely will not happen. We are committed members of the EU and intend to remain as committed members of the EU.

You said that political and economic ties in the last 20 years have been absolutely incredible, and I think that, because of Brexit, we must do an awful lot more to ensure that those economic, political and cultural ties are maintained.

What is happening here today is absolutely the right way forward, but we need to do more. I am saying that because, in Europe, virtually every day, there are 26 meetings between EU and Irish delegations, and that will not happen following the next few months or the next two years. We need to replace that vacuum.

I raised this in the Seanad last Wednesday; I have raised it numerous times. I have talked about the Republic of Ireland's relationship with the Commonwealth of Nations. I say this because there is a golden opportunity. We are not members of the Commonwealth but I say that we should have associations with Commonwealth nations. The United Kingdom accounts for, I think, only 3% of the population of the Commonwealth; 70% of people who were born on the island of Ireland but reside overseas do so in Commonwealth countries.

There is an opportunity here. The Commonwealth Games, which are absolutely huge, costing over £500 million to stage, have been withdrawn from Durban. The Conservative Government have said that they will fund a city in the United Kingdom to host the Commonwealth Games in 2022. Would this not be a wonderful opportunity to locate the games in Belfast, which is in Northern Ireland and is a member of the Commonwealth? Belfast could not host the games alone but the island of Ireland could do so, with all its facilities, including Croke Park and Páirc Uí Chaoimh, and its hotels. I think that it would send out a very powerful statement that the island of Ireland can deliver such a great opportunity here. It is cross-border cooperation and east-west cooperation. I am not saying that we should join the Commonwealth, but we should have much greater association now that the United Kingdom has decided to leave the EU.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Senator. As always happens, no one has a question and then everyone has a question. I will take a few together: Baroness Suttie, Senator Coghlan and then back to the Minister.

**Baroness Suttie:**

I am a member of the House of Lords, and this is my first BIPA meeting so I am finding my way. I would also like to add my congratulations to you as a new Minister.

This question just occurred to me this morning: if the agreement that is finally decided on is a mixed agreement that has to be approved by the 27-member-state Parliaments, would you anticipate that the agreement would also have to be put to a referendum of the Irish people?

**Senator Paul Coghlan:**

Congratulations again, Minister. You stated that Ireland's position, which I accept — I think we all accept — is:

“fully agreed and taken on board”.

Michel Barnier has made that clear on a number of occasions when he has spoken publicly. Given that position, with the North/South arrangement of no border or a seamless border, the east-west arrangement and the fact that the British Government agree to that position as well, where do you see the obstacles? That is my question. I accept that there must be give and take, as you say, in negotiations, but presumably there will be obstacles. I am wondering where precisely those will be.

*10.00 am*

**The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Mr John Paul Phelan TD):**

I will start with Paul Coghlan. If we foresaw the obstacles, Paul, it would be hugely beneficial, but generally, given the nature of politics, obstacles do not tend to be foreseen automatically. Many of the foreseeable ones have been dealt with already, such as those concerning Irish citizens in the UK and British citizens in Ireland, but it is hard to see where the other huge obstacles will obviously come from. There was an original sense, I think, in parts of the European Union that we must favour a hard Brexit in Britain just to ensure that the rest of the EU member states would stay in line, so to speak, but that has softened dramatically because of the large-scale lobbying from an Irish perspective on a cross-party basis and across the *Oireachtas* to explain the unique nature of our relationship here on these islands. It is difficult to see where the other obstacles will come from.

I will move on to Baroness Suttie. Whether it will have to be put to a referendum is a very good question. The legal position is that, if there are constitutional implications and changes, it will have to be put to a referendum in Ireland. In 1986, when I was seven, eight or nine — I cannot count for a maths teacher — there was the Single European Act. It was put to a referendum because a Mr Crotty from Kilkenny took a very famous case. There were constitutional implications, so we had to hold referendums on all EU treaties thereafter because any ceding of power or granting of additional power would have a constitutional

implication. Therefore, that was the case, as it is with this and any potential agreement on Britain leaving the European Union.

Frank Feighan, my old sparring partner of 15 years, spoke about Ireland not leaving the European Union: you are certainly correct. Personally speaking — I have not spoken to anybody else in government about it — I would enthusiastically support your point about Belfast hosting the Commonwealth Games and the rest of Ireland supporting and playing a role in supporting. I would not be — not that I have considered it very much — a hugely enthusiastic supporter of the prospect of immediate Commonwealth membership. Over time, if the relations between Britain and Ireland and, indeed, between North and South in particular continue to progress like they have, that might well come on the agenda for discussion, but I absolutely agree with you on the Commonwealth Games and supporting it from the Republic's point of view.

**Senator Terry Leyden:**

*[Inaudible.]* — also to Andrew Rosindell, as Co-Chairperson. Congratulations on your election in the very sudden and unexpected general election in the United Kingdom. You fought a good election and won it, and I am delighted because of your work here as well. I met you in your constituency office in London and knew you were well geared up, and any man who is born on St Patrick's Day is fairly close to Ireland.

Minister, you are very welcome indeed. I am delighted, and thanks for the way the Committee is looking after us in this beautiful city of Kilkenny, which you are very proud of. We look forward to going to Kilkenny Castle tonight. I wish you every success. I commend your speech, which was excellent and rounded on where we are at this point. I like the closeness between us and the United Kingdom. We joined together but we are not leaving together: that is basically the message. Our closeness is there but we cannot leave 26 other countries and break the link.

My colleague Frank Feighan has strong views on these issues. We have to respect his views because they are sincerely held, but I think that, at this point, it would be the wrong message to our 26 colleagues if we decided to stay within the European Union but rejoin the Commonwealth, which we left in 1949. I do not think that it will happen; there is no great appetite. The Commonwealth of Nations is a group but, quite frankly, the potential of joining them is not really that great. You are entitled to your opinion, and the public will decide on these issues in due course, but I do not think that it is a runner at this stage.

Finally, I say to John Paul Phelan: nobody is better geared to be a Minister than you. You have served in the Seanad, the Dáil and, indeed, with great distinction, in the Council of Europe, which gave you an opportunity to attend council meetings with representatives from all 48 countries of the Council of Europe. You are certainly geared to that, and I know that you will embrace this job with great enthusiasm because you have set a good standard in public life and one that deserves recognition. I wish you every success. Everyone should serve as a Minister for a period. It is an enlightening and exciting opportunity for any Member of Parliament to get an Executive role as a Minister.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Senator. We have about six people indicating, so I will run through them all, Minister, if that is OK.

**Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:**

Thank you — *[Inaudible.]* — time in Kilkenny. I was very disappointed with Kilkenny, and I will tell you why. I went for a walk last night and was hoping to meet Brian Cody. I never met him. *[Laughter.]*

**A Member:**

They have no football team here.

**Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:**

On a more serious note — *[Inaudible.]* — the UK/Ireland relationship has never been as strong. I agree with you. I come from a border town, Dundalk, and grew up in the Troubles. In the famous year of 1998, we had the Good Friday Agreement, which to me changed the whole complex of the country. One would hate to see it go back to the way it was.

We are talking about a hard border. We had a general discussion last night in the local hotel, and the bottom line is that nobody seems to know what is going to happen, whether it is going to be a soft border or whether it is going to be paper-free. Nobody seems to know.

My big concern is that we are part of 27 countries that remain in the EU. In fairness, it is the UK's decision that they are leaving the EU, and the bottom line is that we have to look after ourselves and the UK has to look after itself. We are very lucky, however, in that we have a special and unique situation with the UK, and we also have a special relationship with the EU.

You were talking earlier about exports and imports. Those have taken generation after generation to get going. I will ask this open question: is this decision — leaving the EU — definite for the UK? Jim Wells, you are only one name, right? *[Laughter.]* Minister, what do you think? Do you think there is a possibility that the UK might have another general election? Do you think that there is a possibility of the UK changing its mind? What do you think of the Northern Ireland Assembly getting back together before Christmas? *[Laughter.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

There were a number of questions there. I ask Members to be brief, please.

**Mr Brendan Smith TD:**

I welcome the Minister's comments on the importance of trade between our two islands. We should emphasise that not only is Britain a very important market for Ireland but we are a very important market for Britain. Bilateral trade amounts to €1 billion a week. Forty per cent of our agri-food products go to the British market. It is a huge market on our doorstep, so our two economies are very interdependent in that respect.

I welcome Lord Kilclooney's comments on the Good Friday Agreement and the potential for it to build relationships on our island and between Ireland and Britain. The Good Friday Agreement was not just about the island of Ireland; it was also about relationships between both islands.

As the Good Friday Agreement is the overriding political architecture of governance on our island, one clear message is that, whatever the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, under no circumstances can we countenance any diminution in the workings or the potential of the Good Friday Agreement. That is the message that has to go out clearly from the start to the very end of the negotiations.

Different European commissioners have been at Oireachtas Committees or parliamentary Committees at Leinster House, and the First Vice-President, Commissioner Timmermans, accepted that there could be no diminution or adverse impact on the Good Friday Agreement in regard to the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. That is one clear message that has to go to Governments and to the EU.

**Pat 'The Cope' Gallagher TD:**

Thank you, Catherine. I just want to touch on fisheries. I am not expecting a Minister with other responsibilities coming from a landlocked county to have all the answers but I want to follow through from Deputy Brendan Smith's reference to trade. Of course, since our last meeting, the British Government decided that they were going to withdraw from the London fisheries convention. It is not important in the short term, but the signal has been sent out to me and to others on the island of Ireland – a very clear message, if maybe coded – that it is going to be a hard Brexit. Of course, it is understandable because after Brexit, if Britain did not withdraw from the London fisheries convention, it would still be in place.

It is important today to remember the past. Back in the early '60s two great Irish leaders at the time, Captain Terence O'Neill and Sean Lemass, took risks and put the Voisinage Agreement in place. We should remember that.

I ask the Minister, whether or not he can commit now, to say whether the Government will ensure that trade and fisheries are inextricably linked. I know that some people feel that fisheries should be negotiated in isolation. Of course, I would understand that if I was on the other side, but we should consider the fact that 70% of the UK's fisheries products are being exported into the European Union, which is a free market of 500 million people. I want the Minister to ensure that he brings back the message that fisheries and trade are inextricably linked. It is my understanding, having spoken with Michel Barnier, that that is the intention. I am not going into the detail about how many mackerel are caught off the west coast of Scotland or how many prawns are caught in the Irish Sea, but it is somewhat worrying.

Of course, I am a committed European, and unfortunately I have to say here that fisheries did not get a good deal from Europe. I am a committed European, as are the majority of people on the island of Ireland. North and South, the majority are committed to Europe, but in short I am looking for a commitment that the Government will ensure that fisheries and trade are linked because I believe that is to our advantage.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Deputy. James Dornan.

**Mr James Dornan MSP:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I congratulate Andrew Rosindell on his promotion to Co-Chair and the Minister on his promotion.

The Minister talked about unknown obstacles. One of the obstacles is around the fact of the border. During the independence referendum campaign, one of the big issues was that the border between Scotland and the rest of the UK would be a hard border. We would not be able to pass without passports or armed guards and some of the papers were talking about ludicrous stuff like that. I do not see that the UK Government, which knows there is going to be another referendum on independence in the near future, are going to be too accommodating around the border between the United Kingdom and Ireland. I do not see how they are going to be able to fill in the holes in that argument because without a doubt, one of their main concerns — I agree completely that it will be a hard Brexit; there is no argument about that — is about what is going to happen after that. It does not look to me like Ministers are looking any further than Westminster. They are not looking at what is going to affect other countries throughout the European Union.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks. We just have two questions left, Minister. Lord Dubs, did you indicate you had a question? Maybe not. I thought I saw you indicate. Did you indicate that you had a question?

**Lord Dubs:**

No, I did not have a question.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

That is OK, sorry. Deputy Breathnach.

**Mr Declan Breathnach TD:**

Thank you, Kathleen. The all-Ireland dialogue and the sectoral breakouts have clearly identified the problems from the Twenty-six County perspective. Is the Minister satisfied that the degree of involvement in the business sector and the various sectors that were looked at in the all-Ireland dialogue have been represented from a Northern perspective in terms of the all-Ireland economy? I am saying that in the context of the instability of the political situation in the North. It is my firm belief that a lot of the sectors have not had an opportunity to have their voice expressed in terms of an all-Ireland economy. Would you comment on that?

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Deputy. Minister, I know there is a huge amount of questions there.

**The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Mr John Paul Phelan TD):**

I will try to answer them. I do not think Terry Leyden had a question but thank you for your kind comments, Terry. I agree with you by the way. I am sure that everybody here who has not been a Minister agrees that everybody should be the Minister at some stage but the nature of relationships does not always permit such. *[Laughter.]*

Deputy Fitzpatrick should have gone out to the Bennettsbridge Road and he would have met that man last night.

10.15 am

I grew up during the Troubles: this is the great success of the Northern Ireland peace process for me. As a kid, I was unusually interested in politics and current affairs. Growing up, having breakfast before school with my mother, I would turn on the radio and listen to the stories of who had been killed or murdered or whatever in the North or in some part of Britain or in some part of the Republic the night before. The horror of that is that we became, particularly at this remove from the border here in Kilkenny, almost immune to it. The fact that it is not something that dominates our lives any more is a testament, I suppose, to what has happened in the last 20 years and how we need to protect it. The close relations that exist will help to protect that. You spoke about how no one seems to know what the outcome of the negotiations will be. You are dead right because we are in completely uncharted waters. Article 50 has never been invoked before. A member state has never sought to leave before, so it is very difficult.

I do not mean this in any disrespectful way to the British Government but there were so many different reasons why people voted Leave. It was, and is, very difficult for the Government to distil those down into specific and achievable objectives. Is the decision to leave definitive? I believe it is. I believe that if there were a referendum now, it might even pass by more votes. I have lots of family across the UK, as I am sure many of my Irish counterparts here have, and we must respect the right of people in Britain to vote as they please in any election, including a referendum.

Will there be another election in the UK? Well, I cannot answer that, Peter, but a lot of people in this jurisdiction thought that, after the 2016 election, there would be an imminent general election again but it has not transpired. I would not be surprised if the same outcome happened in the UK too.

Brendan Smith is absolutely correct. It is the position of the Government, Brendan — you are hidden down there — that we should not countenance any diminution of the Good Friday Agreement. Lord Kilclooney mentioned it earlier. That is our position, and we will not be countenancing any change to it.

Pat ‘The Cope’ Gallagher mentioned the London fisheries. Believe it or not, Deputy Gallagher, can you name the only inland county in Ireland that has two ports? [*Laughter.*] It is Kilkenny. The port of New Ross, in County Wexford, is where I come from. That area is mostly in County Kilkenny.

**A Member:**

Every diocese is — [*Inaudible.*].

**The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Mr John Paul Phelan TD):**

That is true. I bow to your superior ecclesiastical knowledge, but the port of Waterford is in Kilkenny and will remain in Kilkenny as well. You are right about fisheries. Most of the fishing done in Kilkenny is on the River Nore, the River Barrow and the River Suir, whether it is done with a snap net or a line. The Government’s position is that negotiations should not be held separately. These are all-encompassing negotiations and there will be no agreement

without reaching agreement across the board. That means that single issues such as fishing will not necessarily be separated from the broader negotiation.

James Dornan does not see how the UK Government can support an invisible border. I suppose it is unclear yet as to how the negotiations will go in that regard but there have been positive comments from several Members, including the Prime Minister, on this issue. I suppose that it stems from the Ireland Act 1949, which allowed free movement of people between Britain and Ireland. However, there is no definitive answer to your question yet, to be perfectly honest.

Declan Breathnach asked whether I am satisfied that the business sector in the North is heard. I was greatly satisfied the night after the UK general election. I do not know; is Jeffrey Donaldson the MP for Lagan Valley? Yes?

Along with Terry Leyden, I got to know him very well when we were members of the Council of Europe. He gave an interview on RTE in which he said that were he an Irish Government Minister from the Republic, he could not have outlined a better position in terms of North/South relations on the border issue and on the Brexit negotiations in that specific context. It largely went unnoted in the media in the Republic but it was everything that we in this part of the island could have wished a leading representative in the North to say. Government structure in the UK now is such that his position on that matter and, perhaps, others will have even greater credence. For that reason, I hope that the voices not just of the business community but of others will be strongly heard in the context of the upcoming negotiations. Thank you.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thank you very much, Minister. Thanks very much for being with us this morning, for your contribution and for answering all the questions. I am now going to pass back to our Co-Chair Mr Andrew Rosindell. I am sorry; can we first thank the Minister for being here?  
*[Applause.]*

## **UK/IRELAND RELATIONS**

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

I am now pleased to welcome His Excellency Robin Barnett here today. We are all looking forward to hearing him share his views on UK/Ireland relations. Ambassador, you are very welcome. When His Excellency has concluded, there will be questions from the Floor.

**The British Ambassador to Ireland (His Excellency Robin Barnett):**

Co-Chairs, distinguished parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to have been invited to address the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly here in the historic city of Kilkenny, which recently hosted so warmly, as I saw for myself, Their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall.

In opening, I would like to pay tribute to the role that the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has played over many years in promoting cooperation between politicians from the UK and Ireland and in building relationships across these islands, as well as on the island of

Ireland. That has contributed significantly to the transformation of the ties between our two countries in recent years.

We, in the British Embassy in Dublin, are actively committed to supporting your valuable work and to promoting parliamentary dialogue more broadly. In the last eight months alone, we have facilitated two visits to Ireland by the House of Lords European Union Select Committee, one by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and one by the Exiting the European Union Select Committee. We are very keen to encourage further exchanges in both directions; visits not only by formal Committees but by groups of parliamentarians with shared interests. I believe that there is a common interest in ensuring that such exchanges reflect the full range of our shared priorities. That could include issues such as trade, science, education and healthcare, to name but a few. It could also have the positive effect of enhancing the number of parliamentarians actively engaged in the bilateral relationship both North/South and east-west.

My own team also engages actively with Irish parliamentarians from across the political spectrum to understand your issues and concerns. My first public engagement in Dublin was to address an EU symposium organised by the Ceann Comhairle earlier this year. I have also addressed the European Affairs Committee in formal session and I have spoken to the CHAMP group of parliamentarians at a reception in Leinster House.

I hope that that underlines just how seriously we take the role of the Oireachtas, the Houses of Parliament and the representatives of the devolved legislatures.

Before I go on to speak about what I am convinced will be the enduring nature of the close and special relationship between the UK and Ireland, let me turn to the issue that understandably continues to dominate many political and parliamentary exchanges, namely the UK's decision to leave the European Union. I acknowledge and understand that Ireland is particularly affected by our decision to leave the EU. We have spent much of the last year seeking to better understand Ireland's specific concerns related to Brexit through active engagement and listening. We have spoken to business, civil society and, of course, parliamentarians. Since the issue of the border is so central, I have spoken at a Brexit seminar, organised by Minister Heather Humphreys with Minister Michael Creed in Monaghan, to hear at first hand the issues around topics like agri-food, road haulage and healthcare. I also visited Letterkenny, County Donegal, for the presentation of a joint report by the CEOs of Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council on the potential implications for cross-border collaboration. Recently, I was very pleased to see that the two CEOs were in Brussels to discuss their report there.

The Prime Minister and a range of Ministers, including the Chancellor, the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, have visited Ireland and heard directly from stakeholders about the issues involved. That the Prime Minister understands the Irish dimension was captured rather well by the headline of an opinion piece that she wrote in 'The Irish Times' earlier this year. It said, "I know what is at stake for Ireland in Brexit". The UK Government have consistently given very high priority to issues such as the importance of preserving the common travel area, continuing existing reciprocal rights for UK and Irish citizens, maintaining our strong trading relationship, and ensuring that peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland is protected.

I know that some in this room today represent border counties. We get that the ability to move and trade across the border is an essential part of daily life for people and businesses both North and South. We are committed to finding practical solutions that reflect the unique economic, social, cultural and political context of the land border. Nobody wants to see a return to the borders of the past, and it is our priority to ensure as frictionless and seamless a border as possible.

We also have a shared interest in protecting our bilateral trading relationship, which amounts to over a billion euros per week and supports 400,000 jobs on our two islands. It is in nobody's interests to see this trading volume diminished. Bilateral trade flows east-west and North/South are significant and important to both the UK and Irish economies. So we must find a solution that protects both and benefits all parts of our two islands. That is why we are seeking a bold, comprehensive and ambitious free trade agreement with the EU. Let us not forget that we start the negotiations from a position of tariff-free trade and regulatory convergence, rather than having to seek to lower barriers and to bridge gaps in standards and regulations.

The Brexit negotiations have begun, including a dialogue on the Irish dimension. Both sides agree on the importance of the issues. There is a lot of hard work ahead, and we also well recognise the impact of uncertainty, but we are determined that our unique relationship with Ireland should not be damaged by our exit from the European Union. One good example of this is our paper on the future position of EU nationals in the UK post-Brexit, which underlines our commitment to maintaining the status of British and Irish nationals in each other's countries, which long predates our common EU membership.

*10. 30 am*

The relationship between the UK and Ireland is special and, in many ways, unique. As the Prime Minister has noted, the close family ties and bonds of affection that unite the UK and Ireland mean that there will always be a special relationship between us. Indeed, as some have already said this morning, it has never been closer. The state visits by Her Majesty The Queen and President Higgins were undoubtedly transformational and have been backed up by ever-closer collaboration right across the political and economic agenda. By way of example, in the finance sector, in the last few weeks alone, there has been a seminar to discuss fintech and a financial services dialogue, and we are looking forward to the next visit by the Lord Mayor of London. There is huge scope for productive partnerships.

Parliamentarians, including the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, have also made sustained efforts over the last decades to contribute towards this step change. Our modern relationship is one of equal partners, based on trust, mutual respect and friendship. It is not a relationship that we take for granted. Having come so far, we need to continue to move forward. Both our countries are committed to finding positive and creative ways of enhancing our relationship after the UK leaves the European Union.

There will be many facets to that relationship. I have already spoken about the importance of our trading partnership, but our relationship is about much more than trade. It is about social ties, family links, cultural and sporting relationships, shared values, political and parliamentary ties and much more. We also have a shared interest in the future of Northern Ireland. There are opportunities in the area of defence and security cooperation; for economic collaboration in areas such as tourism, science and innovation, medtech and fintech; for

cooperation in support of shared values in the area of human rights, democracy and the rule of law; for engagement with civil society organisations through groups such as the British-Irish Association; for cooperation on sport, for example, in support of Ireland's bid for the 2023 Rugby World Cup; and for drawing on the expertise and reputation of the British Council in support of cultural and artistic exchanges. I could go on. My point is that, notwithstanding the inevitable challenges ahead, our relationship need not be defined by Brexit. I realise that some might consider that statement to be somewhat naive, but I genuinely believe that there are real opportunities to bolster this already special relationship.

On the theme of the world beyond Brexit, I wanted to say a few words about the UK's role in the world. I often read about the Brexit referendum result as signalling a pulling up of the drawbridge, of Britain turning its back on Europe and the rest of the world and becoming more isolationist. Nothing could be further from the truth. The UK will continue to be the outward-looking and global nation it has always been. We remain steadfast to our international commitments and obligations. That is demonstrated in our commitments on defence and international aid. The UK is the only country in the world that meets both its NATO pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence and the UN target to spend 0.7% of our gross national income on development spending.

We are proud of our permanent membership of the UN Security Council, a responsibility that we take with the utmost seriousness, and we are committed to upholding a rules-based international order. We are proud to be actively engaged as members in the UN Human Rights Council. We continue to take seriously our responsibilities towards the security of Europe's eastern flank.

For example, the Foreign Secretary recently co-hosted a Ukraine reform conference in London to help reinforce outside assistance for Ukraine in return for accelerated progress on reforms. We have also recently hosted a highly successful conference on Somalia. So, we remain active and take a leading role on a range of big global issues, including climate change, poverty alleviation and modern slavery, all of which, I know, are very important here in Ireland too. These actions demonstrate the point that, far from being isolationist, the UK remains truly internationalist and that global Britain means what it says.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Northern Ireland, given the UK and Ireland's shared interest in ensuring its peace, stability and prosperity, as well as the presence of parliamentarians from Northern Ireland in the room today. You will all be well aware of the intensive efforts that have taken place since March to restore devolved government to Stormont. I would like to place on record the UK's gratitude for the significant contribution to these efforts being made by Foreign Minister Simon Coveney and by his predecessor Charlie Flanagan. While it is disappointing that agreement cannot be reached in the immediate term, all parties have emphasised a desire to remain engaged and to find a way to resolve outstanding issues. As the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Brokenshire, has said, the Government welcome this and will do all they can to work with the parties to achieve a successful outcome. The Government remain steadfast in their commitment to the Belfast Agreement and to governing in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland.

I understand that youth participation in politics will be the theme of today's plenary. As a civil servant, I will restrict myself to noting and welcoming the increased turnout of young people in the recent general election in the UK. More generally, I should stress that youth

engagement is an important priority for my embassy in Dublin. One of the high points of this year's visit to Ireland by the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall was a reception for youth groups hosted by President and Mrs Higgins at Áras an Uachtaráin. For my own part, I have been consistently impressed by the creativity and energy of the young people I have met across Ireland. Anyone who visited the BT Young Scientist competition in Dublin in January, as I did, cannot but be optimistic about the future and slightly scared by the talent on show. The passion of the next generation of Irish young scientists and entrepreneurs is amazing, and they have many counterparts across all parts of the UK.

Before closing, and on a personal note, let me say that I have now been in Ireland for several months. Not only have I been struck by the warmth and hospitality of an Irish welcome — not to mention, sadly, the effect on my waistline — but my engagement with people and organisations has shown me the desire on all sides to build on our collaboration. The strength of the personal ties between us leaves me convinced that our unique relationship has a bright and positive future. Thank you very much for your attention. I wish you productive discussions today. *[Applause.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Ladies and gentlemen, on your behalf, I thank the ambassador for his insightful and interesting speech this morning and for the remarks he has made. I know that many of you will have comments and questions, and, I think, ambassador, you are willing to stay for a little bit longer to respond to those. So, can I see those who would like to make a comment or ask a question?

**The Lord Empey:**

I thank the ambassador for his remarks. He obviously mentioned Brexit and the relationships on the island. In the absence of a functioning Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, who is putting forward Northern Ireland's view in these Brexit discussions, because that is a great worry to many of us? Who is actually putting forward our position in these meetings?

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

We will take a few questions in one go, and then the ambassador will respond. The next question is from Senator Paul Coghlan.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:**

Thank you very much, Co-Chair. Ambassador, I greatly welcome the positive thrust of your remarks. You talked about a close and special relationship, and you said, in fact, that it is unique. I think that we all accept that. You stressed that relations must not be damaged, and, again, we all agree. In that regard — you stated again that we must find a solution — do you think that that indicates that there will be sufficient give and take in the nitty-gritty of the negotiations when they are reached in that regard, because, again, as you say, the ties that bind are so many? In regard to that — this is close to the Co-Chair's heart as well — when Brexit is finally put to bed in whatever number of years' time, and we are still in the EU and Britain is not, given our relationships, this body must look at other ways of strengthening those ties. That is something that you would agree with. Thanks.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you, Senator Coghlan. Before I go to the ambassador, the next question is from David Ford MLA.

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. May I also thank the ambassador for his contribution? He mentioned some of us who represent border constituencies on issues like trade. I represent South Antrim, which is not a border constituency. You see an articulated lorry taking milk from County Antrim to County Sligo for initial processing, some of which is returned to Northern Ireland and some of which goes further south. We need to be aware that it is not just a direct border issue.

Going back to my past life, I will ask the ambassador about one area that has not featured much in any discourse so far: justice and home affairs cooperation, specifically between Northern Ireland and the Republic, but also to a wider extent between the UK and Europe. Will he give us any indication as to whether the UK Government are making any progress on issues like the European arrest warrant and other aspects of cooperation based on EU legislation?

**Ambassador Barnett:**

Thank you. Lord Empey identified the issue of Northern Ireland and consultation in the absence of an Executive. That, of course, is why one of the top priorities is to attempt to restore the Northern Ireland Executive as soon as possible. Also, UK Ministers and officials are in constant dialogue in Northern Ireland, not least on some of the economic challenges. Therefore, in the short term, part of the role of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is to make sure that Northern Ireland's interests are fully represented as we enter this negotiating period.

Senator Coghlan, it is clear that this is a negotiation — absolutely. What is encouraging about this negotiation as it refers to issues relating to Ireland is that there is expressed in the EU negotiating mandate, as previous speakers pointed out, in very clear terms, a commitment to resolving issues like the common travel area and the border, and there is a similar commitment in the article 50 letter from my Prime Minister. Therefore, that is a demonstration already that we start on these issues from a position of considerable convergence.

*10.45 am*

David Ford raised, first of all, the complexities of the border. Those, I think, are very well understood. When I went to Monaghan, I had conversations in the formal plenary and afterwards when people pressed upon me just how many times in a day a milk product, for example, might cross back and forth across the border.

On justice and home affairs (JHA), as you will know, the negotiations are operating in a sequence. So, at present, the focus is on dealing with a range of issues regarding our leaving the European Union, but I think that the Prime Minister was very clear, in her Lancaster House speech and in the letter triggering article 50, that we are extremely keen to remain

close partners with the EU on issues like security, justice and home affairs. I think that we are all clear that issues like crime and terrorism know no borders. Thank you.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you, ambassador. I call Joe Carey.

**Mr Joe Carey TD:**

I thank the ambassador for his contribution here this morning. Given the fact that the Executive are not in place in Northern Ireland, which is a matter of huge concern to everyone on this island, the fact that they are not going to reconvene talks until September, and that it is your stated position that you want to see the Executive formed as soon as possible, should parties, in your view, return to talks now instead of waiting to September?

**Mr Seán Crowe TD:**

Good morning, ambassador. I do not know if it will do your career any good but I also want to wish you well in your new role. Can I also use this opportunity to comment on the previous ambassador? I think that he played a huge, positive role in bedding down the peace process, working on relationships, and in a huge amount of outreach work. I think that he played a positive role.

You are coming to Ireland at a difficult time. I think that we will all accept that a post-Brexit decision creates fear and uncertainty and will lead, inevitably, to greater division.

You talked about the importance of expanding and enhancing relationships. How important do you see this sort of organisation as one of those structures? We have east-west and North/South structures. Post the Brexit decision, how important do you see these types of bodies? You talked about the exchanges between the Dáil and Westminster, and so on. Again, they are fairly fluid arrangements. Do you see that there is a need to expand those structures? For instance, we meet, I think, in plenary, twice a year. Do you believe that there is political appetite for expanding structures in view of what is facing us coming down the track?

As I started off saying, I wish you well in your role. It is a difficult period. I think that organisations such as this do work, but we need to build on them. Maybe that needs time and thought. We can expand a lot of those organisations.

I was on the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. I think that that does a lot of huge, positive work. Sadly, unionists do not attend. I do not know whether you have a view on that, but it would be useful if they were involved in that Committee. What are your ideas in relation to those new structures or new enhanced cooperation? Thanks.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell):**

Senator Frank Feighan.

**Senator Frank Feighan:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I am following the same line as Deputy Seán Crowe. First, in 2015, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly unanimously endorsed the all-Ireland bid for the Rugby World Cup in 2023. It was a very powerful statement, and it certainly helps our bid for the Rugby World Cup in 2023.

Moving on, the relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland has sometimes been taken for granted. The 2011 visit by the Queen to this country changed a lot of things. I remarked that despite the UK being our largest market, the British-Irish Chamber of Commerce was set up for the first time in 2011. That shows what we took for granted and how we need to work now.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has been set-up since 1990. I was talking to a man who was an ex-Taoiseach — Enda Kenny. He claimed that the first meeting was very fractious. There had been a bombing in London, and you had the UK parliamentarians at one end in a corner and the Irish parliamentarians in the other. In 2001, we opened it up to the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and, indeed, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. How far we have come in the last 27 years is absolutely incredible.

I am saying that because we have the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council, but we also have the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association, which I do not think people realise. That is made up of Stormont MLAs and members of the Oireachtas, who have met every six months since October 2012. That is significant. We talk about issues that are probably anaemic in some ways, but it is incredible, and it has effectively gone unreported. We have had meetings in Stormont and in the Seanad chamber, and, I think, more.

I am moving on from what Seán Crowe was saying. This is a very powerful organisation. We need to do more of this. Ambassador, can you see any ways in which we could set up even more groups, associations or assemblies to carry on the great work? With the United Kingdom leaving the EU due to Brexit, that is more important than ever.

**Ambassador Barnett:**

Thank you. On the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive, everybody here knows that there was agreement that the right thing to do was to pause the formal talks. So, that is what happened. It is also clear that everybody is well aware of the importance of trying to restore the Northern Ireland Executive, and I know that that is very much the focus of my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office and the British Government more generally.

In reply to Deputy Seán Crowe and Senator Frank Feighan: absolutely, and I hope that we share the view that it would be good to find ways of further expanding all forms of parliamentary ties. I hope that came across in my speech. Institutions like BIPA have played a very, very important role in the past, and, as we move towards a role after the UK has left the EU, we should indeed be looking for ways to ensure that BIPA and its committees can play a full part.

One thing I want to stress is that formal meetings are incredibly important, but it seems to me that that is not the only role that BIPA and its members can play in promoting relationships.

One of the things I have been reflecting on is how we can upgrade even further our engagements and discussions on, as I said in my speech, specific themes. That may be on how we can do more together in the finance sector.

You may not be aware, but the secretary general of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Niall Burgess, went with Simon McDonald, permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office, just the week before last, to Kampala. What they were exploring there is what more we might be able to do together to tackle some of the incredibly important issues around Africa. I certainly think, for example, that there is scope for more collaboration between the Department for International Development and Irish Aid. That is something I am looking forward to taking up very soon with the new head of Irish Aid.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you very much, ambassador. I now call Lord Dubs.

**Lord Dubs:**

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you, ambassador, for your very interesting presentation. You mentioned the importance of parliamentary links. There is one issue on which you are clearly helping but we at Westminster have to do more. It has not been mentioned yet. You see, some years ago, there was among politicians in Westminster quite a high level of awareness of Ireland, Northern Ireland and all those issues. As things have calmed down, mercifully, in the North, the level of awareness among British parliamentarians is, I believe, much lower. The exceptions are sitting around the table here. I think we have to do more, because we now have a generation of politicians at Westminster who, frankly, know very little about Ireland, know very little about the politics in Belfast and are not particularly involved. With your help, ambassador — you have already indicated that — we have to do more, otherwise there is a vacuum in British politics as regards understanding, which is not healthy.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Deidre Brock.

**Ms Deidre Brock MP:**

Thank you, Co-Chair, and I thank the ambassador for his contribution. I welcomed the fact that you mentioned the border and it being important that it be as frictionless and seamless as possible after Brexit. Is there an update on the practical realities of that and what would be involved? I know that there was talk at some point of number plate recognition, for example, being of assistance, but I wonder if the ambassador can give us an update on that situation as to how, practically, on the ground, that might work in the future.

**Ambassador Barnett:**

In reply to Lord Dubs on awareness, absolutely. I certainly feel that there is always more we can do to raise awareness, and I can only speak for my own part, but if there is anything I can do in terms of coming and speaking to parliamentarians in the UK, I will be delighted to do that. I suspect there will be others in the system, including colleagues from the Northern Ireland Office, who will also be willing to do that. However, I also slightly suspect that one

thing probably already has raised awareness somewhat, and that is the prominent place that Irish issues are taking in the Brexit negotiations. I think we have all seen a significant increase in the amount of headlines on Irish issues, not only in the Irish media but also in the UK.

On the customs point, I am afraid I have not got a great deal that I can say this morning. At the moment, we are focused on the movement-of-people issue through the common travel area, which is already a topic for the negotiations. I can assure you that an immense amount of practical work is going on behind the scenes with respect to the issue of the free movement of goods, and customs more generally.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Are there any further contributions from Members this morning?

In which case, may I, on your behalf, thank His Excellency for his contribution today and for answering so many questions, and thank him for the work he is doing to further the relationship between our two countries and wish him every success in his role here in Dublin and the Republic of Ireland. Thank you very much.

We now have time for a short break. Please be back in the room by 11. 15 am. Thank you very much.

*The sitting was suspended at 11. 00 am.*

*The sitting was resumed at 11. 35 am.*

## **YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

**The Co-Chairperson (Kathleen Funchion TD):**

As we said earlier, we will discuss youth engagement and politics. We are moving on to our first session on that. I am pleased to invite the first of our youth representatives today, the appropriately named Young Voices from the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI). They will address the plenary and then will take questions from members. The three speakers are Paul Dockery, Vanessa Mulhall and Cárthach Ó Faoláin. I really hope that I pronounced that correctly, but I have a feeling that I did not. You are very welcome. Thank you for being here with us. It is a very important topic and we are very much looking forward to hearing what you have to say. Each of you will speak for about four minutes and then we will take questions from the floor. I will hand over to you, Vanessa, to speak first.

**Vanessa Mulhall (National Youth Council of Ireland — Young Voices):**

Members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, my name is Vanessa Mulhall. I have been a member of Young Voices for the last four years. I am one of its longest-standing members. I became involved in Young Voices because I was a young person growing up in youth work and heard about it through the youth organisation that I was involved in. I thought that it sounded interesting. I had the passion to be involved in politics and decision-making and to bring the voice of young people forward.

The first of the cycles that I have been involved in and that we have worked on was about inclusion of everybody and diversity. It also looked at employment and entrepreneurship. Its outcomes were focused on career guidance and skills. The interesting part of it was that it was the first time that a group of young people actually got to do a presentation to the Department of Education and Skills. Young Voices went to the Department and put the views of young people from all over Ireland. At most of our consultations, we have 110 young people attending. The age range is from around 15 to 30. We get a wide spread of what young people think and want, which is really interesting. From that, we were put onto NYCI's submission to the Government for them to look at, to keep career guidance on the agenda in schools and to make it better.

The next cycle that we worked on was the empowerment of young people in political participation. This one focused a lot on how to get that engagement. Do young people want to be involved in politics? What does that mean to young people?

For each cycle, we have loads of different conferences. The first one looks at exploring the topic, coming up with different questions and getting information from young people. The way that Young Voices works — sorry; I should have explained this at the start — is that it was a European initiative called “structured dialogue”. We renamed it “Young Voices” because that sounds a bit more attractive to young people. If we went into a room and said, “Hello. We are going to talk about structured dialogue”, you would not have 110 young people in the room.

There have been three EU youth conference in 18 months. It goes by the EU presidency. The first conference looks at exploring the topic. Then, you go to the consultation phase and, then, the implementation stage. I attended two conferences on the political participation topic. I was at the consultation stage in Latvia and the implementation stage in Luxembourg. We came up with a lot of different ideas, and we came back with an implementation toolbox. One of the main things that we learned from this was the need for that whole collectivity and creativity to be implemented when we came home.

We have been doing a lot of work on a topic called Youth Check, which we also call Check Óg. Basically, this is an impact assessment tool for the Government and Government Departments when they are designing policy or legislation. We came up with around 25 questions, and basically, they check the questions against the policy and legislation to see if it will have negative impacts on children and young people. It is to make policies more inclusive, supportive and to better reach the needs of young people. There is a policy document called, ‘Brighter Outcomes: Better Futures’, and we used the five national policy outcomes in that policy document to design our 25 questions because we thought it would be a good resource to bring to our Government to say, “Listen, we are using one of your documents that you gave us. We really want to partner with you on this and have your support”.

I think we have got a lot of support and backing for our Youth Check initiative, but we always look back to where the idea came from. It came from one of those conferences, and the fact that other European countries have what we said, “Listen, it is working here. We really want to see it happening here”.

Just two months ago we had a Youth Check conference in Dublin where we brought our European partners together. We sat in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs' office, and we were going through different recommendations. We worked together collectively with them to get their support. It is still a work in process, but so far they are the two success stories of Young Voices.

The most recent cycle, which is just finishing, looked at a more connective and diverse Europe. It was about being more inclusive and looking at undocumented young people — their thoughts, opinions and wants. A lot of that looked at the whole free travel thing, such as going from the Republic of Ireland to the North of Ireland. For example, if they were going on a school trip, they maybe would not be able to go. There are different question marks based around that which a lot of young people have concerns about. Basically, that is what we are working on now. Our next conference will look at the next steps in relation to that topic.

The topic that is coming up for this cycle is called, “The Future of Youth in Europe”. All the topics are really diverse, really open and out there. When they come back to you, as our consultation groups did, that is where the recommendations are made, because that is when we reach out to young people and we say, “What do you want? What do you make of this topic?”. I think that is where the political participation comes from. When you use open spaces and try to mobilise young people and you change the language to language that they understand, they are like, “Oh, actually, I do know about this. I do understand this”, and that is why our group is unique. We facilitate everybody to be involved. We do not exclude anybody. It is open to 15- to 30-year-olds, which is what makes our group unique, because we do understand and appreciate that other organisations have the space and structures, and we just say, “Be involved with them, but do open your mind and your eyes to young voices because we can achieve a lot more when we work collectively”.

I am going to tell you briefly the four outcomes that came from the empowerment of young people in political participation conference. This is what we have been working on: involving young people in political decision-making; developing youth-friendly tools for political participation; increasing synergies between different actors — I think that is happening today — and strengthening the role of youth work for political empowerment for all young people.

*11. 45 pm*

When I was preparing to give this speech, I reflected back on those and was like, “This is a work in progress.” A lot of those are happening now. We are invited to speak at these events, and, when you look at it, that really shows that we live up to all we say we are going to do.

What else? I just wanted to say something about young people being involved in politics. When I was looking at the independence referendum in Scotland, I looked at the breakdown and saw that 54% of young people aged 18 to 24 and 75% of 16- to 17-year-olds came out to vote. That shows how powerful the youth vote is and that, when you are on the ground mobilising young people, they will get involved in politics, but we need to meet them where they are at.

I am going to leave you with a quote from a book I am reading that I thought was very fitting for today:

“If you picked up this book, you are likely to be relatively young — or at least youthfully optimistic. You are likely to be someone who cares and believes that it is still possible to shift from ‘me’ to ‘we’ in order to change the world”

Thanks very much. *[Applause.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Vanessa. Paul is going to speak now.

**Paul Dockery (National Youth Council of Ireland — Young Voices):**

Distinguished members of the Assembly, thanks very much for having us here today. It is really encouraging that you have made the effort to engage and not only with the Youth Council; we are very grateful for the opportunity.

My name is Paul, and I will be speaking briefly on the Vote at 16 campaign, which is ongoing in Ireland, and more broadly about why we believe that 16- and 17-year-olds should have the right to vote afforded to them.

We believe in creating a habit early on by engaging young people in politics. As Vanessa said, 75% of 16- and 17-year-olds voted in the Scottish independence referendum, and it is likely that many of them went on to vote in subsequent elections and referenda. If you can create and instil that habit early on, the engagement rate in coming years will be far better than it will be if you wait until a person has to move away from home — maybe to university or college — as happens across the British Isles. It is very common for young people to leave their homes aged 18 and not register — it is more of an effort and is more difficult — so getting in there early will help that.

Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are, as is often pointed out, liable to pay tax and eligible to work, and 17-year-olds are eligible to drive. If we are trusted enough to do those basic and everyday things, why are we not trusted enough to vote and have a say in our own future and our own present? Many of you will recognise and acknowledge that there has been a recent disconnect across the world, and elections and referenda everywhere have shown that there is an imbalance between what young people want and what young people get with, say, the extremities of Brexit and President Donald Trump. We had near misses in Austria and France, where a mobilised youth vote came out and staved off extreme outcomes.

We are calling for more engagement with young people at all levels, and we appreciate this chance today, but extending the voting right to 16- and 17-year-olds will be putting your money where your mouth is and showing that you are meaningfully engaging with us. The right to vote is the most basic and fundamental pillar of a democracy, so that opportunity should be given to younger people. That move has also become increasingly common; as I said, it has been made in Austria and Scotland. It is backed by the European Parliament and driven by the European Youth Forum.

Extending suffrage has never proven to be a bad thing in any country or democracy, despite any prior hesitations or scepticism there have been about it. The sky has not fallen in and the world has not ended, so all we are asking for is that opportunity. We do not ask that our voice is the only voice that is heard, but we do ask that it is heard.

To briefly speak on the Irish context, the constitutional convention was in 2013. The constitutional convention was made up of elected representatives, expert academics, civil society groups and ordinary citizens. The NYCI presented to it, asking for the voting age to be lowered to 17. The convention, made up of those experts and representatives, said, “No, we acknowledge that 16-year-olds also have certain rights and certain maturities and responsibilities, so we will go a step further and recommend that the vote should be extended to 16- and 17-year-olds”.

We were really pleased with that outcome. What followed was maybe not as fruitful. Earlier this year, a Bill in Seanad Éireann to extend voting rights in local and European elections to 16- and 17-year-olds was amended and delayed by the Government, so the issue will not be discussed again until early 2018, thus making it virtually impossible for young people to vote in the local elections in 2019.

That was incredibly frustrating for young people, and we felt that it was very cynical. It went against the word of many parties to engage with young people. As I said, we are just asking for the chance, and we do not feel that what we are asking for is a lot. It was really cynical, but we are not done; we are still here and still fighting. We are still strong, and we are calling on our Irish Members in particular — senators and TDs — to meet us, engage with us and open their mind to the idea. It was said in the debate in the Seanad that individual Members were in favour of it but that their party line was to oppose it. We therefore ask that parties maybe consider the opportunity to change, which might not come quickly enough in politics sometimes.

That is all that I have to say. One common misconception is that young people are not mature or responsible enough to vote. The only argument that I will make back to that is that it was not 16- and 17-year-olds who elected Donald Trump to be leader of the free world, so we feel that we cannot do much worse. Thanks very much. *[Applause.]*

**Cárthach Ó Faoláin (National Youth Council of Ireland — Young Voices):**

A dhaoine uaisle, distinguished guests, mora daoibh ar maidin, good morning, bore da. My name is Cárthach Ó Faoláin. I am delighted to be with you. I further express gratitude as a representative from Young Voices.

I do not want to keep you too long, because I know that you have a long day of work ahead of you. What I want to get across is that the majority of young people between the ages of zero and 30 are members of what we would consider to be “Generation Maastricht”, named after the European Union agreement from the early nineties. We have not known anything different since then, so this Brexit craic that will shake our countries is probably the biggest difference in a long time. It represents a massive change to the political landscape. I was recently reading through the key findings of the report on the implications for the Good Friday Agreement. I know that you have a lot of work ahead of you, and that is not going to be easy or simple, but it also going to be the biggest challenge for us as young people and you as policymakers in the coming years. Whether you love or hate the thought of this changing tide, it should be accepted that your actions are what will determine the course of the journey.

Paul showed that the clear indication of the referendum is that there is a big difference and a distance between the older generations and the younger generations, and that should be respected. A recent study shows that, in the UK, voting is divided now by age and not class,

as it used to be. That is mainly between Conservative and Labour. It is not about working class and middle class; it is now more about the age group. When you are old, you go Conservative; when you are younger, you go Labour, and the other parties too. That is a big change that we should acknowledge.

Recently, there was an event in Croke Park that was organised by Katherine Zappone, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The title that it was given was, “Sectoral Dialogue with Children, Young People and Other Stakeholders Regarding the Impact on the Lives of Children and Young People of the UK’s Decision to Leave the EU”. That is a bit of a mouthful, but it made sense to include all those people. We work with the older young people, and there were also members from Comhairle na nÓg there, which is the younger representative group of young people in Ireland. When we went there, it was a challenge, because other young people had chosen the topics that we would work on, but it was very difficult for us to work when we were boxing everything into different categories.

Brexit is not a certain thing where we know what is going to happen. I am sure that there is confusion in this room never mind among the general public. It is very confusing for the public to know exactly what Brexit is, what they were voting for or what is going to happen now.

Thankfully, while some topics were good to start us off, we noticed that there is a nexus and connection between all the different areas. I will try to give an example of what I mean. I am sure you are all familiar with this, so I am not trying to lecture you at all. An Irish citizen living across the border on this island is an Irish citizen like myself or anyone in the South. They should enjoy the same rights and food standards that I do. However, with Brexit, a different set of standards will come in; better or worse, I do not know. Maybe our citizens in the South will benefit if it is better up there. You cannot deny the complexity. There is a necessary dialogue to be had and there are legal issues that need to be addressed, and young people identify them.

It is also really important that when you engage with young people, which we hope you will, you are not just talking about education and other youth issues. One person at my table was only 10 — he was probably the youngest there — and brought up that he was from a farming background. He was afraid that he might not be able to take over the farm if there is a big trade difference. You might be thinking, “Why would a 10-year-old be thinking of that?”, but that is the reality of rural Ireland and it should not be forgotten.

We should remember everyone, from Dublin, Cork, Belfast, Glasgow and London to the Outer Hebrides. I am glad to see people from the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands here. It is very important that we remember them when we are engaging with young people. I was actually in the Isle of Man once, and it is a beautiful part of the country. I was talking to people there and they said that, for a lot of the young people, if they want to go to university, they must go to Liverpool or somewhere on the mainland. They will not return until they have finished their working lives. It is very worrying if Brexit is going to limit them in certain ways. A lot of my friends are studying in the UK at the moment. What is going to happen with them? A lot of them are in Scotland, in particular. Good friends of mine from the North are studying down in Cork with me. We do not know what is going to go on from here. The complexity is completely outrageous. We cannot start anywhere and see that this is going to be simple.

I do not want to keep you too long. There are a few issues that came up at the conference that would make you think of what young people think and not just what young people are expected to think. On the whole issue of the eighth amendment being repealed — I am not giving a stance on it, and Young Voices are completely neutral on it at the moment — some people say, “What is going to be the difference in access to abortion in the UK after Brexit? Is it going to be more difficult or easier?” We are not sure.

There is an opportunity here. Young people must be listened to on an all-Ireland basis and we must include people in the North in all our discussions. Brexit could be used as a tool to connect people differently. We know that the Good Friday Agreement is good, but the implications of Brexit change it completely. Vanessa spoke about the success of the structural dialogue system and, of course, we know that that is one way that you can reach out to young people from all sides.

I do not want to keep you any longer, so I will just say that there are other things apart from the economics that we should remember, namely identity and culture. There is the Irish language and Irish culture, and there is English culture in the Northern Ireland. There are issues about immigration, and we see hate crime. We want to engage with all young people. Young people are very concerned about the issues that are more worrying and more open to us as well as the quieter issues. I should probably let you go now. We will take a few questions. Thanks very much. *[Applause.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much to our three speakers. We have a number of people indicating that they have questions. I am going to have to ask everyone to be really brief. Sorry. I feel like I am always the person saying that, but we are running so tight on time. I am going to start with James Dornan.

**Mr James Dornan MSP:**

Thanks very much. Could I just say congratulations to the three speakers? If ever we needed persuaded that young people should be involved in the political process, we have just had the arguments.

*12.00 pm*

I am the Convener of the Education Committee in the Scottish Parliament, and one of the benefits of that is that I get to meet a lot of young people and see how engaged they can be. I will keep my questions short. There are a number of things I want to say, but my questions are about the schools. Do you interact with schools to try to get people involved in the political process? Secondly, do the schools interact with you? Do they allow political discussion and, for example, allow politicians to come in to the schools on a regular basis? In Scotland, certainly in some of the local authority areas, we have found that quite difficult at times. I think that it would be really useful for young people to get involved in the process.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:**

I want to thank the speakers today. You all touched on the issue of youth and Europe. We are in good company today; I can tell you. We have had three amazing and inspirational young

people share with us. I agree with 16- and 17-year-olds voting and I supported it in Seanad Éireann. It was disappointing that a number of people who initially committed changed their minds.

I want to touch on a few issues and ask one specific question. In terms of Europe and new voices and young voices, the areas that you touched on were diversity, inclusivity and future youth in Europe. The first speakers talked all about language, and we all know that language is so important in politics. That is a key message that I will be taking away from here. You then talked about participation and political empowerment and all of that. I would like each of the panellists to come back to us with a specific idea on how best young people can have an input in local, regional and national politics. Do you have a specific idea that you suggest would assist and give greater empowerment to young people in terms of local, regional and national politics? Again, well done and thank you very much.

**Ms Ann Jones AM:**

We did a presentation in Cardiff back in November, where the Assembly showed its outreach work. We have progressed from that. It was mentioned that we are looking to have a youth parliament. We are progressing with that. I am very keen to see votes at 16, and I will be trying to work with that. I wonder whether, if 16- and 17-year-olds had had the vote in the referendum, we would have seen a different outcome. I do not want to go back onto that.

I would like to say thank you to the three people who made the presentations. Perhaps you will expand on this when you come back: why is it that we think that it is only education that we can talk to young people about? Why do we not ask young people for their views on farming, health, training and all sorts of issues? I wonder whether you have had the opportunity to talk to your colleagues across the European Union, including those in Wales and Scotland, about how we can make it so that any youth parliament that we create will be your youth parliament and not a parliament that we think you should have.

**Baroness Blood:**

While I was listening to the three young speakers, I was thinking that a real breath of fresh air had come into the room. One thing that annoyed me was when the first speaker spoke about 15 to 30. Why am I excluded? I do not like that idea.

You said that language is very important, and I agree with you. I remember some years ago I was asked to do a Harvard lecture tour. I asked what the subject would be, and they told me it would be on new models for social cohesion. I said to myself, "I wonder what that is?" I waited a day or two and then I rang the office back and said, "Would you like to broaden that a bit?" They wanted me to talk about my cross-community work in Belfast. It would have been simpler to tell me that at the beginning. Language is very important, and I certainly think young people today are very undervalued. I work among young people and sometimes they frighten me because they are so bright and getting on. In the House of Lords, we have a Bill coming up on 16- to 18-year-olds getting the vote, and I will certainly be in favour of that. You started off at the beginning, Vanessa, by saying that diversity is all about inclusion, and you are perfectly right. Keep up the good work; I was really happy to hear you this morning.

**Lord Dubs:**

Thank you very much indeed for your three presentations. In the interests of brevity, can I ask you to elaborate on just two points? You mentioned abortion; could you say a bit more about that? Secondly, you talked about immigration. Could I ask you about the issue of child refugees, which, certainly in the UK, has been quite a big issue? I wonder if you could elaborate on where you stand on those.

**Lord Empey:**

Could I ask the panellists what they believe most young people feel about training and skill-giving schemes that governments tend to run? Do they feel they meet the expectations of young people, or do young people feel that they are not delivering the skills that they need?

**Mr Ross Greer MSP:**

I had the privilege of leading the Votes at 16 campaign in Scotland for so long that I was 19 by the time that we won, but it is now reality. It now works. Not just in our independence referendum but in the last Scottish Parliament election and the last local election, in May of this year, 16- and 17-year-olds voted. It is such an overwhelming success that there is consensus in the Scottish Parliament from left to right on the political spectrum. No one disagrees with it anymore, because the reality is one of resounding success.

I just wanted to pick up on a point you made about this idea that we have in public debate that young people are somehow apathetic, that they do not really care. That is utterly incorrect. Young people are alienated by political and economic systems that failed them. I often think that Mhairi Black and I must be two of the very few people our age in the UK with any hope of ever owning our own home, because we work in politics and are paid enough. But very few people our age have that level of aspiration because of the system they live in.

I was wondering what the next stage is for you in your campaign for votes at 16 here. How do you build on that narrative that young people are alienated by a system that is failing them but do care about issues, and the right to vote has to be part of that? Also, how do you follow on from that, because voting is just one expression of democracy?

In Scotland, we are pushing for young people to be on various local government committees for joint work between the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Scottish Parliament's committees, areas that turn young people from stakeholders who are consulted into decision-makers themselves. How are you building on that broader agenda of genuine participation?

**The Co-Chairperson (Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks. OK, we have just three more questions. Just to advise people, Vanessa, Paul and Cárthach are staying around for the lunch, so people can engage further with them and discuss other issues as well, because I know it is a little bit rushed.

**Deputy Kevin Lewis:**

In Jersey, we have an annual youth parliament, which is extremely well-attended. Every seat is taken, and the Ministers are brought in and held to account. It is very successful. It is streamed live on radio and the Internet.

As I say, it is very successful, but about four years ago now the voting age was reduced to 16 and, sadly, that has not translated into the youth coming out to vote. How does the panel think that can be addressed?

**Mr Gordon MacDonald MSP:**

As Ross Greer said, we have accepted that 16- and 17-year-olds should have the vote in Scotland. In the Scottish Parliament elections in 2016, we saw the turnout increase, and part of that will be because of young people voting. Similarly, although the turnout for the Scottish local government election was relatively poor, it was seven percentage points up on the previous election.

We have the Scottish Youth Parliament, and every constituency can elect two members of the youth parliament. I am just wondering what engagement you have had with the Scottish Youth Parliament to identify how they got the success that they did in getting votes at 16, and what lessons you could learn from that.

**Mr Colin McGrath MLA:**

This is building on some of the questions about those who are maybe not interested in politics and policy, and building on the statement that democracy is for those who turn up. What can you do to reach out to other young people who are maybe not interested, and how can you encourage them to participate?

**The Co-Chairperson (Kathleen Funchion TD):**

OK, I am going to pan back to yourselves. I know there is a huge amount of information and questions there but, as I said, the speakers will be here during lunch and we can have further engagement. Sorry, but I am going to have to limit you to two minutes each. Thanks.

**Cárthach Ó Faoláin:**

Starting with the question about schools, the National Youth Council of Ireland is an umbrella body that includes all the youth groups across Ireland. One of those is the Irish Second-Level Students' Union. I am the outgoing deputy president of that at the moment. They always show up to our events. Most of our members are in school or are school leavers; we include them too. Particularly on schools, we have those who are involved in student councils and those who are not. Some people do not like that model and some people do, if that answers your question. In school, we push for civil education and informal education and tell children that books are not the only way to learn. I will just leave it there.

**Paul Dockery:**

Just briefly, some of the questions there touched on similar themes, such as the one from Mr McGrath on how best to engage young people who are not engaged already in politics. The point was raised there that young people are not apathetic; they are alienated. One of the campaigns and ideas that we are working on at the moment is a project called Youth Check, which Vanessa mentioned, or Seic Óg as Gaeilge. It is a policy impact assessment tool specific to young people. It will reflect and review policies that have been implemented and

their effects, positive or negative, on young people in Ireland, and make amendments to those policies and practices as necessary. We feel that that will reduce the alienation and the gap that exists, and that will help young people feel that they belong in politics, that politics belongs around them or that they feel that they have their place in society that is respected. That, hopefully, will answer and give light to some of the other questions.

Another big campaign of ours is to constantly improve the standards of civic and political education in schools. We are happy that, in Ireland, from 2018 or 2019 onwards, politics will become an optional leaving certificate subject, equivalent to an A level. Again, it is not perfect. The junior cycle definitely needs to be revamped, improved and stepped up and to be more relevant to today's world.

To generate an interest where there is not already an interest and encourage young people to become more active, we feel that policies have to be friendly to young people and not alienate young people, and we need an education system that is conducive to good engagement and strong engagement in future.

**Cárthach Ó Faoláin:**

Can I just add one point to that? We are in connection with the European Youth Forum, and it has a project called Youth UP. If you look it up online, you will see that it has workshops that you can do with all ages, and it shows how young people want to change politics. A lot of it is about language and things that young people are not really interested in. It is also worth mentioning that, with Brexit and things such as that, a lot of young people feel disengaged with politics now. You have to show that there is a general change that can happen with voting and politics. It is getting the engagement back after a disappointing fall.

**Vanessa Mulhall:**

On the question about employment schemes, the National Youth Council supports quality, sustainable employment schemes. The one that we all know is the youth guarantee. In some cases, we say "What guarantee?", because we still see the huge rise in youth unemployment. There was a study done, and there is a breakdown for each county in Ireland to show how many young people are unemployed and for such a long time. We do a lot of lobbying work with the European Youth Forum around quality sustainable employment and internships and to make sure that young people are not more than six months out of training, employment or education.

*12. 15 pm*

As far as employment schemes go, if they are quality and sustainable, we will support them, but, if they are not, we will not. Young people need a sense of security, and that often does not happen through employment schemes.

**Cárthach Ó Faoláin:**

In reference to the question about abortion, immigration and child refugees, there are campaigns both to repeal the eighth amendment and to keep it. Only recently, they have been saying that there may be a referendum next summer. What I meant when I was speaking was

that, at the moment, a lot of women travel to the UK — I am not sure of the number, but it is a lot a day anyway —

**Paul Dockery:**

Nine a day.

**Cárthach Ó Faoláin:**

Nine a day, they say, travel to the UK. They say that abortion services available to Irish people are only for those who can afford them. We know that, with Brexit, the free movement of services will most likely be removed. Whether we remain part of any pre-EU trade deals, I am not sure, but we know that there will be some issues of who can access abortions in the UK. Will that push people to vote pro-abortion — pro-choice, as they say here — or will they keep their current stance? That is all we really want to say on it. How available will the services be to Irish people in the UK?

On immigration, we have people from refugee and migrant backgrounds involved in all our consultations. Paul, do you want to take the one on child refugees? We have a few workers who set up their own campaign to tackle lost children, as they call them.

**Paul Dockery:**

Yes. NYCI Young Voices is an umbrella of different views and backgrounds, as Cárthach mentioned. At every meeting, we engage with members from refugee and migrant backgrounds. It is a reoccurring issue at any European conference that any of us have been to across Europe. We are motivated and encouraged by the cause for concern that exists among young people and different youth groups. There is unanimity in worry and eagerness for more work to be done in that area.

**Cárthach Ó Faoláin:**

I would just add —

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Sorry, unfortunately we are going to have to wrap it up. I want to say a very sincere thank you to yourselves. As I said earlier, the speakers will remain here so we will have further engagement with them. There is also a further session on youth engagement in politics after lunch. For now, can we say a massive thank you to our three speakers, please? *[Applause]*.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON THE EU AND BREXIT**

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell):**

Ladies and gentlemen, we now open the next session, which will be on perspectives on the EU and Brexit. We have Emily O'Reilly here, and she is the European Ombudsman. Welcome, Emily. Transparency will be a key issue as all the consequences of Brexit come

into sharper focus. It will be of interest to all members to hear about the work of the European Ombudsman in that regard. So, I call on Ms O'Reilly to give her address.

**The European Ombudsman (Ms Emily O'Reilly):**

Thank you very much indeed for the introduction. Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you very much for the invitation to address you here today. I very much hope that our visitors greatly enjoy these few days in this very lovely part of our country.

This Assembly has witnessed several decades of history being made between the islands of Ireland and Britain. In its first tentative years in the 1990s, I doubt that too many people could have imagined what eventually became the peace process and what flowed politically from it, even if it remains somewhat imperfect.

As a journalist from the early 1980s until 2003, I covered major events, from the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement through to the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. For several years after that, as the agreement became embedded, I covered its ebbs and flows. I lived in Belfast for a period in the late 1980s and witnessed what happens in the absence of peace. Looking back, I see that what gave momentum to what eventually became the peace process and what gave eventual concrete reality to the process was the willingness of political and other leaders from both sides to, at times, step away from the tight chains of their tribes and truly give leadership.

Some did it knowing they might, and, indeed, did, pay a heavy political price. Others did it, aware that the price might be even deadlier than that. You come together this week at a period of great political uncertainty in many parts of these two islands and on a day when the second round of the Brexit negotiations begins in Brussels. I cannot, therefore, think of a time in recent years when your collective work is of such urgency and of such importance and where the collaborative leadership that this Assembly might be able to contribute to this turmoil is so needed. I wish you well in that work.

As European Ombudsman, I stand apart from the political cut and thrust of Brussels politics, but the work I do exists in the political environment and is not hermetically sealed from it. As the watchdog of the EU institutions, agencies and bodies, I see their flaws just as I see the benefits that they bring. It is largely through that prism that I observe Brexit.

My office was created by the Maastricht treaty in 1993 — the treaty that also created formal EU citizenship. The intention was to give to people at an EU level what most have at a member state level: easy access to an independent office with significant powers of investigation that can find out for them whether an EU body has breached either a law or a principle of good administration and make a recommendation for redress. Unlike EU commissioners, auditors and judges, the ombudsman is not nominated by his or her Government but rather goes forward as an independent candidate and is elected by the European Parliament. My office deals with everything from simple failure to reply to complex competition or infringement cases where the Commission is alleged not to have followed proper procedures. I deal with small businesses that have run into contract difficulties with an EU body and NGOs alleging conflicts of interest in Commission expert groups and other bodies. I deal with transparency and other matters in the European Central Bank (ECB), for example, and the European Investment Bank (EIB), and I also touch on issues concerning gender equality, disability rights and possible breaches of the Charter of

Fundamental Rights notably concerning asylum and migration issues or trade deals. I chair the European Network of Ombudsmen, which includes good colleagues from the UK — Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales — and where we work or share advice on issues involving either domestic or EU competence and sometimes both.

Just a few months ago, my office held our first-ever awards for good administration to acknowledge the often unseen work of the EU institutions and to share good practice among them. The overall winner was the Commission's health directorate and its work on bringing together what are called reference networks in 24 member states to collectively work towards finding treatments and perhaps even cures for people suffering from rare diseases throughout the union. In some countries, only a handful of people might suffer from a particular disease, and the benefit to them of this collaborative approach, which also includes encouraging the pharmaceutical companies to engage in this area, is obvious. When I met with the winning team some weeks ago, they remarked on how important the involvement of their British colleagues has been and how they hoped that, even in a post-Brexit landscape, some way could be found to continue that important involvement.

I also work on investigations on my own initiative on cases of significant public interest but where I either have not received a specific complaint or I have received a string of complaints on an issue and it, therefore, needs a systemic approach. The first one that I rolled out concerned the transparency of the negotiations between the EU and the United States on the transatlantic trade and investment partnership deal, otherwise known as TTIP. I am also working on the transparency of the Council which brings together member state Ministers, the consent of whom is needed alongside the Parliament as the co-legislator for the passing of laws. My aim is to allow people greater access to and understanding of the workings of the Council so that they can see what the EU Commission is responsible for and what is agreed by their own democratically elected Ministers, accountable solely to their own Parliament and electorate. It was, therefore, in the context of the public interest that I began my work on Brexit immediately after last year's referendum.

I judged that something that was likely to have such a significant impact on people through all 28 member states needed to have the greatest possible transparency and openness attaching to it so that no one could be surprised when the negotiations eventually end. Many people's individual lives, the lives of their families and the future of their businesses depend on what is happening today in Brussels and what will happen over the next period of time. At the very least, they have the right to know, to the greatest extent possible, what is being negotiated in their name.

The response from both the Commission and the Council has been positive. Indeed, the Commission spoke of allowing very high levels of transparency in the negotiations, which did not surprise me. While much of Brexit is highly technical and bureaucratic, it is still being played out on a political stage and, if greater transparency is seen to be useful to one side, then greater transparency we shall have. It will not have gone unnoticed in Brussels that, certainly before the general election, the British Government was urging secrecy around the talks process and counselling in very strong terms against leaks. In a divided, divisive and febrile atmosphere, uncontrolled leaks risk undermining both the negotiating team and the Government themselves. However, and this is a point that I made in the letters to the Commission and the Council, it is inconceivable that leaks will not happen given that many documents will have to be shared between all member states. It is, therefore, better to publish as much as possible proactively in order to keep some control over the spin.

However, what is happening today in Brussels is only one fraction of what will eventually influence the overall outcome of Brexit. By that, I mean not just the legal and other arrangements that may be eventually agreed between the UK and the EU but the hundreds of other outcomes, seen and unseen, that will affect day-to-day lives from trade to human rights to environmental protection to working conditions to public services and to every area of regulation that affects us citizens. In a sense, everything is up for grabs. We see it in the bidding for the EU agencies currently sited in the UK. We see it in the “will they, won’t they?” moves of banks and other financial services institutions. We see it in easyJet opening an Austrian hub to be on the safe side or Dublin duelling with Frankfurt for trophy businesses or public institutions. We see it in the UK reaching out to possible future trading partners, the outcome of the deals from which no one can possibly know.

In that context, another part of my work is allowing people to see, as much as possible, who is attempting to influence the EU-UK negotiations. You will all have observed the heightened activity of legal firms and all sorts of consultancies as they try to grab a piece of the Brexit cake for themselves in a world where, at least at the moment, there is much that seems chaotic and bewildering. The EU chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, is being transparent in relation to his meetings, but there are attempts to pedal influence at all levels and by every member state with a stake in the outcome of these negotiations. The transposition of EU laws and regulations into the UK legal framework is an area that is also ripe for lobbyists. While that, of course, is none of my business, I expect that this is where UK politicians will be keeping a very close eye.

All of you will have witnessed, and indeed been part of, the shifting political sands, both European and British, since the referendum. Those sands continue, and will continue, to shift from a position last year where the so-called hard Brexit was deemed to have been what the collective majority voted for. I acknowledge the different individual outcomes in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We now appear to have several options floating before the eyes of the people under the general title of soft Brexit. Anything less than a hard Brexit, exiting the single market and customs union, would imply the continuing jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and freedom of movement of EU citizens. Given that opposition to both was one of the strongest hallmarks of the Leave campaign, how will that go down? Will such a scenario, even during a transition period, be palatable to everyone? On the other hand, we also hear the increasingly loud voices of British industry added to the voices of those who want to retain the regulatory and future human rights protections of the EU urging a softer approach. Added to that mix are what many in Brussels hear as mixed signals coming from the Cabinet in relation to the direction in which they wish to take the talks.

*12. 30 pm*

We also hear increasingly, at least sotto voce, of what I call the singing horse scenario. I refer to a story told after last year's referendum about a man condemned to death, who goes to his king to beg for mercy and, in return, he will teach his horse to sing. The king agrees; the man goes back to his cell; and the cellmate asks why he has made such a nonsense deal. “Well, you never know”, he replies. “A lot can happen in a year: the king might die; I might die or the horse might sing.” The Brexit equivalent of the singing horse is no Brexit; although even those who would wish it, and even those who take heart from the political disarray and doubt and confusion around the process, have to consider the consequence of the anger of those who believed that last year's referendum was the final word. Political leadership is

challenging and, as the late Irish Prime Minister Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald once remarked, politics itself is the most ethically challenging of all the professions.

In all of this, you, as politicians, have to, and do, take the interests of those people you represent at front and centre of your work. Irrespective of your views on Brexit, the people at the very least deserve honesty, at every stage of the process. Both Remain and Leave have had to resile over this past year from certain positions struck and claims made during the referendum campaign; yet it was those positions and claims that led to the most seismic event in recent British history.

A political campaign is, by its nature, often written in bold and brash strokes but, as the next two years unfold, people need to be given as much neutral information as possible about what is emerging or may merge, and what the consequences of that might be. Certainly, as far as the Republic of Ireland is concerned, a singing horse, no Brexit or a soft Brexit would be the best outcome. I have yet to see any sign of what a “soft border” might look like concretely, and the economic and political consequences of a hard Brexit have been spelt out by the Irish Government and particularly to the EU negotiators.

In a sense, we are all involved in the chess game of our lives. The EU side believes itself to be in the driving seat, with its hand further strengthened by: the alleviation of the 2016 and early 2017 populist fears; the emergence of a strongly pro-EU French President; and the political uncertainty caused by the outcome of the UK general election. Equally, Brexiteers such as Nigel Farage insist that the UK has the upper hand and perhaps does not realise this, while tempting tales of future trade deals are still being dangled before what must be a somewhat bemused public.

Before I conclude, and take any questions you may have for me, I want to describe a moment just last week which, to me, encapsulated much of the emotion, including great sadness, that surrounds the Brexit process. I happened to turn on the TV last Thursday evening just as one performance, on the opening night of the Proms, was coming to a close in London. The performer was the Russian-German pianist, Igor Levit, who had been called back for an encore after a stunning performance of Beethoven’s ‘Piano Concerto No 3’. What he chose to play, with “quiet intensity” as it was described, was the final movement of Beethoven’s ‘Symphony No 9’, otherwise known as ‘Ode to Joy’, otherwise known as the anthem of the European Union. In case anyone missed the point, Levit also wore a small EU pin on his jacket. For me, and for some at least of the audience, it was both a sublime and a sad moment: sublime because of the music and the sheer joy of that quintessentially British event, the Proms; and sad because of the looming sundering, at least politically, of that union with the UK.

Some might dismiss that emotional response, or question the restrained politicisation of the concert by Mr Levit, but people cannot always exist in the un-transcended world. The history of the EU, its *raison d’être*, often changes with the teller of that history. For some, indeed most, it is a redemptive tale: the building of peaceful unity from the human ashes of the Second World War. Others cast it differently, and with emotions that range from cynicism to loathing.

For me, as an Irish woman, I owe the chance that I got to play a role in the public sphere, as a journalist and then in public service, to Ireland’s accession to the EU in 1973. That same year, as part of the conditions for entry, Ireland was forced to lift the marriage bar for women

working in the public service. I left school just two years later. My human rights had been gifted to me, not by my own sovereign Government, but by what people so casually like to describe as “the faceless Brussels bureaucrats”, the same people who, in the next few decades, would also make us clean up our rivers and lakes under EU environmental regulations and enable so much else that we had not done, or had chosen not to do, with our full sovereignty intact. Losing control had its upside.

In between the dreamers and the cynics, when it comes to the European Union, are the people on both of our islands caught up in the political play, desperately casting around for some firm anchor on which to hold fast to their dreams, for their futures and for the futures of their children. We owe it to them to make sure that the anchor that they find is not just real but also very, very firm. Thank you for your attention.

**The Co-Chairperson (Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you very much, Emily, for that extremely interesting speech this morning. I hope it is possible for you to take comments and questions. Who will go first? Lord Dubs.

**The Lord Dubs:**

Thank you very much indeed, that was brilliant. I wish you had been part of the Remain campaign in Britain; the result might have been different if people had spoken the way you have done. Can I use your singing horse story in England? Do you mind if I repeat it? I think it is a great story. Thank you for reference to the Proms. I was in tears at that point.

**The European Ombudsman (Ms Emily O'Reilly):**

You can certainly use the story. I plagiarised it from Martin Wolf in the Financial Times, so we can continue the cycle of plagiarism.

**The Lord Dubs:**

I thought your reference to the Proms was very poignant. I was watching it.

**The European Ombudsman (Ms Emily O'Reilly):**

Yes, it was.

**The Lord Dubs:**

I am not totally clear about how wide your remit is. Can I ask you something about child refugees? I am talking about Dublin 3, the treaty whereby a child in one EU country has the right to join family and relatives in another EU country, and that seems to be happening very slowly or not at all. Linked to that, what is your ability to influence the post-Brexit situation so that treaty will go on being adhered to by the UK?

**The Co-Chairperson (Andrew Rosindell MP):**

OK, we are going to take several questions in one go. John Scott.

**Mr John Scott MSP:**

Thank you for your talk which was very interesting. I may have missed what you said, but I did not catch you saying anything about the possibility of transition. So much of the detail you talk about, and it is so vast what needs to be done. What are the realistic prospects of a transition period emerging for what we hope to be a worthwhile Brexit for everyone?

**The Co-Chairperson (Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Brendan Smith.

**Mr Brendan Smith TD:**

Thank you very much, Co-Chair, and, as always, I welcome Emily's very fine contribution. Michel Barnier and the first vice-president of the Commission, Mr Timmermans, both speaking in the Oireachtas, gave a very clear understanding of the importance of the Good Friday Agreement and that there could be no diminution in its workings or, indeed, of its potential. Do you get the same opinion and feeling from your interaction at official level and political level with people in the Commission, the Council of Ministers and in other European institutions? The public messages that we have been given by Mr Barnier and by Mr Timmermans are reassuring, but I would like to know if it well founded in your work?

**The European Ombudsman (Ms Emily O'Reilly):**

Thank you for those questions. In relation to asylum and refugees, my sole remit is with the EU institutions. A complaint has to be against the Commission, or the UCB, or the EIB or whatever. If there is an issue involving refugees or asylum seekers which have to do with the responsibility of one of those agencies, then yes, I can take a case. For example, one of the agencies I deal with is Frontex, which is the border agency, and one of the cases I dealt with involved the human rights of people who were literally being brought out of the European Union and back to third countries. What we looked at was how they treat people on the flights, and how they make sure that people who land back in Nigeria, or wherever they are going, are treated well. I could take that issue because it directly affected a European agency.

Equally, I did work on the EU-Vietnam trade deal, bringing into it the Charter of Fundamental Rights. I was critical of the Commission for not having done a prior human rights assessment of the deal before it was launched. The outcome was that it was too late to do one at that point, but the Commission will be doing follow-up assessments.

Therefore, theoretically, I can deal with all those issues, but only if one of the institutions, agencies or bodies has a remit in that particular area. I do not think that I used the particular word "transition", but it was implied in what I was saying. Leaving aside the politics, there is a lot of talk at the moment about transition deals, if for no other reason than that the deadlines are so tight. We have seen with the repeal Bill that was published last week in the UK the sheer volume of work that the UK has to do, and the amount of work that has to be done in a very short timescale. Leaving aside the politics of it, the logistics to some extent imply that there has to be a transition period. Of course, politics would then happen in the transition period. How long should that period be? How long can it be? What would be the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

We are sitting down in July, after which people will break for a period. The next round of talks will not be until late August, and then in October, there is an EU Council meeting, where the countries will decide whether sufficient progress has been made on the top three issues in order to move on to discussing trade, and so on. Therefore, logistically, it is highly likely that there will be a transitional deal, but we shall see.

Mr Barnier, and certainly the Commission, will have a very strong sense of the border issues. Mr Barnier did a tour of the border area when he was here. I have to say that I think that the Irish Government and diplomats have done an excellent job in bringing the issue so far up the talks agenda, given that it really was not an issue during the Brexit referendum campaign; that is commendable. We know, however, that we have to have as frictionless a border as possible, for all the reasons that everybody here is very aware of, yet Mr Barnier said the other day that there cannot be a frictionless border. I know that, when he was on his visit here, he looked for ideas as to how this hardly frictionless but as easy as possible border can be achieved, but I do not think that it is enough for politicians or diplomats — I am sure that they all know this — now that the issue is in the top three on the agenda to be debated, certainly during this period, to assume that it does not still have to be pushed all the time. A delegation came over from the Oireachtas to Brussels some time ago, and I made that very point. You have to keep lobbying and keep sensitising people to the issue. I was pleasantly surprised, however, at the extent to which many Members of the European Parliament and others are very highly sensitive to the border issue, and not just the economics but the politics of it. That is all good.

I use the metaphor of a chess game. I wonder to what degree the border issue is a pawn. Everything can be used. Everything can be monetised to some extent, so it very important to keep the issue out of that arena and instead to keep it front and centre of any discussions that you are having with the EU negotiators.

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

Thank you very much indeed for your address, which, as a former MEP, I found to be of great interest. My colleague Lord Dubs said that you should have been involved in the Remain campaign in the United Kingdom, thereby implying that you are not neutral on the issue of Brexit. Can you tell me what role your office would have in the United Kingdom in two years' time, after Brexit?

*12.45 pm*

**Deputy John Le Fondré:**

Are all parties, in your view, now going in fairly cool-headed to try and achieve, basically, a mutually beneficial arrangement or do you think that the EU is still out to punish the UK? The point that I am making is that surely a win-win arrangement has got to be the best outcome for both sides rather than the alternative, which, I would say, would be a lose-lose one. The example that I will use is from Jersey, where we obviously have a strong interest in the issue. In terms of financial services, for example, if there is too much messing around, too much trying to gain individual advantage at a national level, is there not a risk that business will just go to the US or Asia instead and not remain even within the UK or European spectrum at all, which would obviously be bad for both sides involved in those negotiations?

**Ms Pauline McNeill MSP:**

I took from what Lord Dubs said about your speech that if you had to have been on the Remain side — I do not know which position you took; it is not my business — you eloquently put the case, I have to say, for the European Union. You make a quite stunning point, which is that the faceless Brussels bureaucrats gave you your human rights. The problem, I think, for many European citizens is that they do not see that side of Europe. I would describe myself as a reluctant Remainer, and one of the issues for me was that Europe is in deep need of reform. Perhaps if more citizens had seen that they had the ability to go to someone like yourself and challenge the institutions, then perhaps there might have been a different result.

My question is about what you said about bringing transparency to the negotiations. I wonder whether you could elaborate further as to what could be done to bring transparency. The British ambassador was asked a question that has been mentioned by virtually everyone, certainly from the Irish Parliament, and everyone's concern about what will happen with the Irish border. He answered by saying that there is stuff going on behind the scenes. I felt that he should have had a more candid answer than that. How do you think we can bring transparency or what can your role be in bringing transparency? At least, as politicians, we have the right to ask questions. We can take part in debate. I am interested in how that can enlighten the ordinary EU citizen while we are still members during the negotiating period.

**Mr Eamonn Ryan TD:**

Thank you very much indeed, Chair, and thank you very much, Emily. We had people last week talking about some people whistling through the Brexit negotiations or other people referring to the clock ticking. Do you have any sense in Brussels that maybe in the European side there may be some people who are quite happy with that ticking-clock approach in terms of putting pressure on the British Government and, in a sense, not being unhappy if there is a crash-out Brexit if it can teach someone a lesson? What is your sense in Brussels? What is the attitude? Is there a slight sense of punishing the British and, maybe, slightly enjoying the tension as the clock ticks and the British Government do not seem to know what they want or what they are going to do?

**Mr Seán Crowe TD:**

Good afternoon. You mentioned possible trade agreements and so on. Does your office have any concerns around some of the trade agreements, and possible ones post-Brexit that the EU is currently engaged in? I will give an example of the Philippines agreement in relation to sharing information with the authorities there on criminal intelligence and so on. It is a country with a president who boasts of being involved in assassinating people who were allegedly involved in drugs. As a country in the European Union, we are going to be sharing information with the likes of that regime.

As far as other countries such as Israel, Morocco and Columbia are concerned, there are usually trade agreements wrapped around an element of human rights, but there does not seem to be any trigger in relation to it. I suppose that leads on to the following question: Do you have any concerns about EU citizens' access to the Court of Human Rights and the European Convention post-Brexit for those citizens who are living in Britain or the North of Ireland?

**Mr James Dornan MSP:**

You seemed to imply during your contribution, which I enjoyed thoroughly, that you had not heard any negotiations going on about that, which highlighted some concerns.

The other point that I want to make is this: will your job be harder through the transitional period that John Scott was talking about when the UK is moving out? So, you will have one EU organisation where you would have had two making a deal with each other. You will now have one that is either out or heading out. Will that make your job more difficult or will you still be able to do the job because one of those involved is an EU country?

**Senator Terry Leyden:**

I welcome Emily back to Ireland again. I know that your work as a press journalist is outstanding in the Irish press. You were a political journalist for a time. You then became Irish ombudsperson in 2003 and were elected ombudsperson of Europe in 2013 and then re-elected. That shows the extent of your work. I want to flatter you and say well done. Your speech today was outstanding and will be transmitted around Europe today. You put an awful lot of thought into it. You said exactly what situation is: it is a very difficult time for everyone. It is the most damaging situation to the Irish Republic since the foundation of the state. That is a fact. We were going along very nicely.

Quite frankly, the United Kingdom was doing very well in the European Union. I was there at the time of the Single European Act when John Redwood and others were negotiating and were given tremendous respect. The loss of the UK will be very damaging to the European Union and very damaging to our remaining in the European Union, because my personal experience has been that we were very close in relation to Council of Ministers and Prime Ministers. This is regrettable but it is a fact and we need to get the best deal possible. All I am saying is: please show respect to the United Kingdom. Do not be talking about dispensing with the English language in favour of French. Those are provocative statements that do nothing to enhance the negotiations. Show respect. By the way, the United Kingdom is a full member of the European Union until it leaves, and, in that period, it has to be given the proper recognition at all events in the European Union. I do not like the exclusion of the Prime Minister from different events in the European Union. If they want to discuss issues pertaining to the negotiations, let them meet separately if they wish, but do not exclude the Prime Minister of a member country until that country leaves the European Union.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

We will complete comments from members, Emily, and then come back to you to round everything up, because, otherwise, we will not get everybody in who wants to speak.

**Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:**

Emily, thank you very much for your presentation. Brexit means uncertainty. Twenty-seven countries v the UK, right? The bigger the break between the UK and Britain means the bigger threat to trade. It is estimated that £1 billion in goods and services go on a weekly basis between the UK and Ireland. Irish exporters to the UK would pay a tariff and importers from

Britain would pay a tariff. What are the chances of the UK and Britain getting an agreement that there will be no tariffs between the UK and Europe?

**Ms Deidre Brock MP:**

Thank you for a great address; that was really hard-hitting, very honest and I really appreciate it. It was needed, in some ways. You mentioned legal firms and consultancies and their heightened activity as they try to grab a piece of the Brexit cake. Could you expand on that a little bit, perhaps outlining any cost implications for all the parties concerned?

**Senator Frank Feighan:**

Thank you, Emily. I am delighted with your perspective on the EU and Brexit. I have two questions. We would not have peace on the island of Ireland and, indeed, in the United Kingdom only for the EU, and I think that its role in helping stabilise and underpin peace through the various programmes has been absolutely immense. I wish to put that on the record. You talked about the threats and opportunities regarding the various agencies, including the European Medicines Agency in Canary Wharf and the European Banking Authority. There are over 1,000 highly skilled jobs. I understand that the Republic of Ireland is trying to locate those skilled jobs in the Republic of Ireland.

I want to talk about the upsides. What are the upsides for, let us say, the island of Ireland, and for the United Kingdom?

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

OK, thank you for your comments. Emily, would you like to round up, please?

**The European Ombudsman (Ms Emily O'Reilly):**

In relation to my neutrality, I am pro-EU. I am sad that Britain took the decision that it did but, given my work and the complaints that I deal with, of course, I work entirely neutrally. I have many good British colleagues and I continue to hire them. They are greatly valued throughout the EU institutions, and people are sad for the EU that the British have decided to leave. Equally, however, they are sad that they are maybe going to be losing British colleagues over the next while. That is where I stand.

Is the EU out to punish the UK? The EU is a big place and there are some people who do, perhaps, feel somewhat vindictive, but that is not the negotiating standpoint. That issue was encapsulated best in the leaked account of a famous dinner in 10 Downing Street attended by Jean-Claude Juncker and Mrs May. At some point, she is reported to have said, "Let's all get together and have a good Brexit", and Mr Juncker was reported as having said, "Madame, there cannot be a good Brexit", meaning that it has to be bad for you guys in some ways so that it is good for us. The question is this: where does one draw the line and who are finally going to be influencing this incredibly important and sensitive political play?

You do not damage the EU by, if you like, encouraging the others, but, equally, it is important not to damage the UK or the rest of the EU. The UK is not just any old EU country; the UK is the UK and it is a very powerful beast. That has to be and is acknowledged. Of course, we are at the early stages of the game. It is a bit like the beginning of a boxing match when everybody comes and makes shapes and trades insults and so on, and

then they get down to business. Any time I use that metaphor, I realise that they get down to the business of kicking the heads of each other, but you know what I mean, I hope.

In relation to the need for reform and human rights and what I mentioned about my own personal experience, that is true, but I should say that it was not done because the EU wanted to give me my human rights. It was in relation to the whole labour market and making sure that one country did not have an advantage over any other in relation to its laws. As Irishwomen, however, we were happy to get it, so we took it. I make the point that my generation in Ireland benefited obviously and visibly so much from that, so our experience has been good, but that experience has to be replicated for all the new sets of 20-year-olds and 30-year-olds and for those countries that have been most hit by youth unemployment, particularly Spain, Greece and Portugal and so on.

I hate quoting Bono, but a couple of years ago, God bless him, he was at a European People's Party (EPP) conference in Dublin where he said:

“Europe is a thought that needs to become a feeling”.

I can go round with nice, warm, fuzzy feelings about the EU when people in other countries might not feel so warm and fuzzy about it. Of course, within all this, there is also the play in relation to Germany, its politics and its decision or otherwise to take the brake off austerity, which feeds into the whole piece. I agree that reform is needed, particularly in the area of employment and other social rights.

I have described transparency to some degree as a political weapon of these talks. Certainly, the letter I got from Mr Juncker, in which he talked about unprecedented levels of transparency, was a new one for the European Ombudsman. Usually, we have to fight a little bit for transparency but, of course, it is a political play; the more open the EU can be in knowing that the UK cannot match it politically — because you see what happens when there is the slightest leak of any sort of resiling from the Brexit that some people wanted — the more upset and anger it causes, and it adds further to the febrile atmosphere around government, the Cabinet and British politics in general at the moment.

*1. 00 pm*

I did go over. I went to London a couple of months ago and spoke to the UK Information Commissioner. We talked about how, within our respective jurisdictions, this process can be made more transparent for citizens. Obviously it is not a question either of whether Mr Juncker or Mr Barnier chooses to be transparent or not; of course they can be proactively transparent, but they still have to follow the EU regulation and the law in the UK, Northern Ireland, Scotland and so on. What I have been trying to get across to my colleagues is that citizens should know that they have a right to request records from within the UK under FOI legislation. Equally, they can seek to get very often the same records within the EU because they are held by both. If they do not get them, they can obviously go to court or — perhaps a more accessible route — come to me.

As regards trade deals, human rights and so on, as I explained earlier, we certainly had a role in the EU-Vietnam trade deal. I was very critical of the Commission for not having done advance human-rights proofing of the deal. That is something that it will have to take into consideration. I certainly hear what you are saying about the deal with the Philippines.

I know that there is incredible activity in legal firms and consultancies at the moment. There is activity here and in Britain and great activity in Brussels. It has been a bonanza for those firms. If you have a business and you do not know what the heck will happen to your company, and somebody says, “Come to me and I will help you through this legal or administrative minefield,” obviously you will get to them. The thing is that nobody really knows. Politicians, in a sense, do not really know what the outcome of this will be ultimately, so I am not too sure how second-tier consultancies and legal firms can know. As for a price, obviously I have no idea.

As regards the European Banking Authority; yes, obviously people want to get their hands on that for employment and other things that may come from it.

I think that I have answered pretty much most of the questions — yes. Thank you.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Ladies and gentlemen, on your behalf, I thank Ms O’Reilly for her interesting and illuminating speech. I shall look out for the singing horse. Thank you so much for that. We will now move on to final comments by Kathleen before we break for lunch. *[Applause.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Andrew. I have just one comment about the group photograph. We are breaking for lunch now. The group photograph will be taken immediately, outside here in the gardens behind us. There is a door just here to my right. If people make their way out there, we will have the group photograph. We will reconvene at 2. 30 pm after lunch. Thanks.

*The sitting was suspended at 1. 04 pm.*

*The sitting was resumed at 2.36 pm.*

**MOVING FORWARD: ISSUES AFFECTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN IRELAND AND THE UK TODAY AND OUR ENGAGEMENTS WITH POLITICS AND SOCIETY**

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to take your seats. We are about to commence the afternoon session. Welcome back, and I hope that you enjoyed your lunch. I am pleased to open the session now, which is a panel discussion with youth representation from across the different BIPA jurisdictions. Welcome to our young friends who have joined us this afternoon. I am pleased to invite them to join the panel. They will share their views on issues affecting young people and on their engagements with politics and society. On your behalf, I would like to welcome the following to our panel discussion: Danielle Gayson from Youth Work Ireland — will you stand up, please? — Mark McLaughlin from YouthAction Northern Ireland; Kate Seary from Youth Cymru, Wales; Reece Harding from Youth Scotland, and Brendan Quirke from UK Youth. Who is the blonde lady?

**Kate Seary (Youth Cymru):**

I am Kate.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

OK. Sorry. You have all been introduced. Welcome to you all. Thank you for taking the time to come. I suggest that each of you speaks for two or three minutes. That should leave time for contributions and questions from the floor and any responses. Thank you very much. Who would like to go first?

**Danielle Gayson (Youth Work Ireland):**

I would like to begin with a little exercise that was suggested to me by a member of this Assembly. We are aware that it is just after lunch and everyone might be a little bit full and tired. I would like to ask everyone to stand up and give themselves a little shake about. It is just to wake everyone up again. Then, you can sit back down.

I am from County Tipperary, and I would love to welcome you to the fabulous Kilkenny, which, unfortunately, is not the true home of hurling, as many might think. I hope that you are all enjoying your trip here so far and that it continues to get much better.

I would like to thank you all for having us here again today to speak with you. We are speaking about issues that we feel greatly affect young people across all five nations. We began this project thinking that these problems were isolated to our own country and nation, but, through working together, we soon realised that we are a united front and that these issues are cross-national. Some of you may remember speaking to us in the Welsh Assembly last November. Today, we are continuing that same work.

The group began last November and, through a mock parliament, we decided on the issues that are greatly affecting us. I was part of the health committee. We are looking to provide education by professionals to young people, beginning at the age of seven. We want to introduce a text-based mental health service based on area and jurisdiction and also to ensure the equality of the provision of services in urban and rural areas. A few months ago, I had the opportunity to make a presentation on this topic in Leinster House. On that topic, I discussed the steps that it would take to achieve these calls. The event was very successful. Unfortunately, due to my leaving cert exams, I could not follow up with any of the Oireachtas members who were in attendance, but I intend to do that as soon as I can. That meeting was held with the hope of meeting the health committee in the future to further these calls. We also had our member Fintan O'Dwyer, who is sitting down at the back with us, attend the debate on the "vote at 16" Bill in the Seanad. Unfortunately, the Bill was voted down. On mental health, we are pleased to see that, this week, a new Jigsaw project that provides services for young people with mental health problems is opening in Cork. We are very proud to see progress like that being made, and we hope that we can influence this further.

I would like to thank you all again for having us here, and I hope that we can provide you with an insight into the problems affecting us. This is one of many opportunities that we hope we can continue, and we hope that it will be continually funded throughout the Brexit process along with many training and education programmes across all topics. Our project is funded by Erasmus, but we are now faced with a slight uncertainty due to Brexit: we do not know whether we can continue this project into the future. I would also like to extend a special and

very sincere thanks to Kathleen and to Dervila Flynn for inviting us here and for arranging for us to be back again today. *[Applause.]*

**Mark McLaughlin (YouthAction Northern Ireland):**

I am the Northern Ireland representative of six young people from Derry. We are from all different backgrounds and communities, and we are all from working-class families. Before getting involved in BIPA, we were passionate about young people's issues but were unclear on how to make a change. Through being part of BIPA Youth, we have been able to connect the dots between our passion and the structures that are in place to promote positive change for young people.

In Northern Ireland, the political landscape has changed, with the Assembly falling and new elections. We, as a youth organisation, felt that the best method of engagement was to support and encourage young people to register to vote. We developed a five-step guide to voter registration. This was a simple guide that we put out on social media, in newspapers and anywhere where we thought we could get youth to see it. We believe that this had an impact and increased the number of young voters in the election.

As part of BIPA, I would like to tell you about two of the calls that we have developed as a collective group and which I feel strongly about. The first one is related to Brexit. We call for freedom of movement for study, work and travel in the UK and Ireland, including the clarification of citizenship. Being from Northern Ireland, it is a massive worry for us, especially for the likes of me, from Derry. We have a border with Donegal and have concerns about freedom of movement. We also call for the Government to implement full LGBTQIA+ inclusive education, to provide sex and relationship education and to promote positive body image. Those are the two calls that I am here to speak about, but I would also like to tell you about a conference that we have coming up on 15 and 16 September in Belfast. It is called Islands of Innovation. We have the wee leaflets with us and will pass them round. We would like your input on this project. *[Applause.]*

**Kate Seary:**

Prynhawn da. Good afternoon. I am from Cardiff and am representing Youth Cymru in Wales. One of our calls is that every young person should have the opportunity to take an active role in democracy. We call for greater opportunities for young people to engage in democratic structures at a local, regional and national level; the introduction of a statutory political education; and the implementation of a vocational curriculum to promote active citizenship. This leads on nicely to our Brexit calls, one of which is ensuring that young people's voices are heard when going forward with EU negotiations. It is vital that our voices are heard as it is our future, and we are the next generation of politicians who will steer the UK and Ireland.

Thanks to the work of BIPA and the Cynulliad's Elin Jones, Wales has been promised a youth parliament. The consultation on the youth parliament closed recently. It gained a few thousand responses, surpassing all expectations, so we are really happy with that. The official figures are yet to be publicly announced but will be released in an official report.

On the subject of political education in Wales, we have been in contact with the Children, Young People and Education Committee, and built a strong and ongoing relationship with its

Chair, Lynne Neagle AM, and Llyr Gruffydd AM, who have personally supported our events in the Senate and pledged to support all our calls. Using social media, we have contacted Kirsty Williams, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, who has pledged to introduce a new curriculum to prepare students for life after school in Wales, including political education. This comes at a great time for us in Wales, as Wales is committed to changing the curriculum for young people for the better. In addition to this, Andrew RT Davies AM, on behalf of BIPA and Youth Cymru, submitted written Assembly questions to Cabinet Ministers, including Vaughan Gething, Alun Davies and First Minister Carwyn Jones. The topics for these questions included careers, mental health, and young people and Brexit.

2.45 pm

Young people have shown increased engagement with politics in recent years, especially in the Scottish independence referendum, the Brexit referendum and the recent general election, where, I believe, young people had a massive impact. We now think that it is time for politicians to play their part in engaging with young people and forming a strong relationship going forward. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

**Reece Harding (Youth Scotland):**

Good afternoon. Back in November, when we met in Dublin, we decided on six calls. I was part of the youth unemployment committee, where we came up with two calls, which were as follows: we wanted to tackle age-related employment inequalities by introducing structures to reduce youth unemployment; and equal skills in jobs that match equality of pay for all regardless of their age. As a follow-up from this, at our youth parliament, known as the Scottish Youth Parliament and the national youth voice of Scotland, with over 150 members — it is important to note that it is one day older than our Scottish Parliament — we passed motions on youth unemployment and inequality. In fact, it is in our Lead the Way manifesto, which was designed by young people in Scotland on the issues that affect them, and we had over 75,000 responses. The manifesto states that 83% of young people believe that there should be an end to the gender pay gap and gender discrimination in the workplace; 58% of young people believe that there should be an end to zero-hour contracts; and 78% of people believe that youth unemployment should be tackled through job creation and access to training programmes, modern apprenticeships, vocational training, work placements, quality work experience and paid internships.

Finally, on the issue of Brexit, as Kate said, it is vital that young people are given a voice and represented at the table for discussions. Every young person from every nation has to deal with the consequences of Brexit. It is also important to note that 16- and 17-year-olds were not allowed that vote. It is important to mention that Scotland, out of the five nations that are here, is the only nation that allows 16-year-olds to vote, which has proven that young people are engaged in politics. At our recent local government elections, more than 57% of 16- and 17-year-olds turned out to vote. That is why I think that it is vital that they are listened to and represented.

On a more personal note, I still think that there is much more that we need to do to get our voices heard around the Brexit table. So I urge you all to go back to your home Parliaments and to ensure that young people have that representation. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

**Brendan Quirke (UK Youth):**

First, I would like to apologise: I do not know any language other than English. I represent UK Youth, which sent six people to Dublin for the first time in November. Those six people were from UK Youth's national voice board. UK Youth is the umbrella organisation, and the way that the voice board works is that we have youth services and youth clubs, and each of us represents each of our nations. Obviously, if you cannot already tell, I am from the north-east.

One of the calls that we agreed on was the restoration and protection of youth services. Over the past few years, youth services have been diminished and are seen as the easiest thing to cut when there are cuts to local authorities. However, I cannot stress enough how important youth services are. In youth services, there is a big stress on education, employability and the personal development of young people, and we should not be willing to compromise on this.

Another call that we agreed on was the environment. We will shortly be exiting the EU and with that comes the uncertainty of whether the environmental regulations will be carried forward. Without a doubt, more can be done in the UK and Ireland to make us all more green: for example, the UK broke air pollution targets by 2 January, although it probably lasted longer than my new year's resolution.

After BIPA, UK Youth went back and did a large-scale questionnaire on finding out what the biggest issues were for young people. From that, we produced a manifesto; I can discuss that with any of you who want to see it. We delivered the manifesto to 10 Downing Street, and we got a reply stating that it had been sent to the right Departments.

In that, there are five calls. Those five calls are simple, but they are what the young people want. As Kate mentioned, young people want to get involved in politics now more than ever, and I believe that we should be listened to. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you for all your contributions this afternoon, which were excellent. I will now throw it open to the floor for Members to make comments or ask further questions. Who would like to go first?

**Ms Pauline McNeill MSP:**

First of all, thank you all for your excellent contributions. I will take time out to read the manifesto, because I am really interested in its contents. I know Reece; I am from the Scottish Parliament. One of the things I am concerned about in my work is poverty across all ages. It is quite clear that younger people now face more poverty than older people. One of the things that strikes me as an area of policy — I would be interested for an answer to this — is around public transport for young people. I hope that that is in your manifesto.

I support votes at 16, but one injustice that strikes me, certainly in Scotland and I think it is the case across the UK, is that when you reach your sixteenth birthday you have to pay full fares on public transport. That is one of the most unjust things. You could still be at school; most 16-year-olds have no earnings, although some will be lucky enough to have a job outside of school. That is what you are greeted with.

Reece will be familiar with Scotland's anti-poverty adviser to the Government, Naomi Eisenstadt. She said that early years is important but being in the age group between 14 and the early 20s is the most important time in a person's life when they make decisions about becoming independent. That is why transport interests me. I am interested to know what your views are around public transport. I am involved in a Member's Bill in the Scottish Parliament that will look at whether there should be some free travel for 16- to 18-year-olds or whether that should apply to an older age group. In fact, Naomi Eisenstadt said recently that there should be free transport. I know that all the politicians in the room will say, "My goodness, how can we afford that?". There are issues around mobility, independence and justice for young people, and I wonder whether anyone wanted to say anything about what was in your manifesto concerning public transport.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:**

I want to thank Danielle, Mark, Reece, Kate and Brendan for another series of excellent and very informative dialogue conversations with us. I am an independent Senator in the Irish Parliament, and I have always been committed to the idea that 16- and 17-year-olds should vote. I have voted for that in the Seanad, but clearly we did not have the numbers.

One of you spoke about a five-step guide to registering to vote. That is really important, and I would say to young people in all the jurisdictions outside Scotland that they should not give up. They should keep going and keep asking the hard questions and lobbying the bigger parties. What better way is there to do that than to engage with those parties or join them or go to their public meetings and keep the pressure on. I do not understand why the established politicians — there are many of us sitting in this room — fear allowing 16-year-olds the vote. We have 17-year-olds paying tax and the universal social charge (USC) and a whole range of other things. Why do we not give young people the vote? I welcome it, and I am fully committed to it. I am going to recommit myself to it when I leave here.

What is really interesting is that the same themes reoccur; the themes of mental health, diversity, equality and inclusivity, all of which are key. All of that is very refreshing from my point of view. The last speaker was the only one today who spoke about the environment. That pleased me, because I was beginning to wonder whether the environment had gone down the Richter scale of young people's issues. That was really important.

Maybe you might share with us the best way to engage with more young people. I encourage you to keep mobilising, but you might share with us your five-step guide to registering to vote. I am particularly interested in the Scottish experience and how that is working.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Would you like to answer some of those questions? I do not know whether you all want to answer or whether you will take it in turns. How do you want to do it?

**Danielle Gayson:**

We will take it in turns.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

OK. You decide yourselves.

**Danielle Gayson:**

I want to address Pauline's comments and questions on public transport. When we had our mock parliament in November, it was one of the very strong issues that we discussed. The way we worked in our groups was that we each came up with four or five topics under the heading of public services. In the mock parliament, we voted on our specific one, which was youth services. However, it was a strong tie between youth services and public transport. We all feel that public transport is a strong issue. Even today, some of us struggled greatly to be here because of public transport. We definitely agree that it needs to be addressed and that some sort of subsidy or price reduction needs to be introduced for the younger age groups because it is vital to get to work and education. Everyone says, "Oh yeah, you need to go to work. You need to go to school", but how do we get there? We would definitely like to go forward with the issue and try to address and solve it, and find a resolution.

*3.00 pm*

**Mark McLaughlin:**

I will address Victor's point. I have a copy of our five-step guide. I can get your email address afterwards and email it to you and anyone else who is interested in seeing it. It is more about getting a message out there and trying to connect with young people to vote. It turned out well.

**Reece Harding:**

Thank you both for your questions. I will go to Pauline first. We all welcome the fact that you have put forward a Member's Bill, and I am sure that we are all happy to respond to that. As Danielle said, it was a very strong case between public transport and youth services for us. Transport is definitely included in the Scottish Youth Parliament's manifesto. I represent — I am trying not to sound too "parliament-y" here — a very rural constituency, Clydesdale, and transport there is lacking and very poor. I understand that some places are better than others.

Victor, I welcome your comments, and, as Mark said, we are happy to send you a five-step guide. If you want any further discussion, I am sure that we will be hanging about at the end of the session for a while.

**Kate Seary:**

Victor, I want to talk about votes at 16 and pick up on your comment about people being scared of young people being able to vote and having a say in politics. I think that they should be scared, really, because we have a voice and want to make changes, and many politicians may not like that. Many think that we are not wise enough, but, if we are being represented, we should have this voice. The general election result may have consolidated some of those fears. Votes at 16 are great, but we need that education side by side to help people to come through and vote.

**Brendan Quirke:**

I will go back to Pauline about transport and poverty. Although transport was not in our manifesto, equal pay for an equal day was there. You mentioned the fact that a 17-year-old is being taxed and has to pay an adult fare, but we believe that, for doing exactly the same job at exactly the same time, we will be paid £2 or £3 less an hour. Until we get to 25, we are not getting our living wage, yet you can start a family at 16. At 16, you have all these rights. At 18, you have more rights, but you are still not paid exactly the same as a 26-year-old. I work at McDonald's; the job is paid by the hour, and it is also a zero-hours contract. There is a lot of negative stigma about those contracts, which I can understand because sometimes that job is your job. However, I am at college studying and, in September, hope to do medicine at university, but I am still paid £2 less an hour than somebody doing exactly the same job even though I have worked at McDonald's since I was 16.

Victor, we had democracy cafes with UK Youth, which were about youth engagement and voting. UK Youth is an umbrella organisation. We have youth services and youth clubs. We toured the UK and Ireland, and we got people who would not normally be involved in politics—they did not want to talk about politics and did not think that politics related to them—and we sat them down, got them registered to vote if they were 18 and got them to discuss things about which they were passionate. I feel that, when it comes to voting, the issue with young people is that they do not feel that they have a voice or that it affects them, but, in reality, given the 72% turnout of young voters in the general election, it is clear that we have a big voice, and we should be listened to.

**Mr Colin McGrath MLA:**

Thank you very much for the contributions today. I can declare that I grew up through a youth club: I took part in it and became a senior member and trainee leader. I was then a youth worker for 18 years, before moving to the Assembly last year, so that is much more my background than being on this side of the room, and I am delighted that we have had these presentations.

Among the concerns is that, when policymakers interact with young people, they tend to say, “Tell us your top issue” or “Tell us your top five issues”. In reality, if you take all young people, there will be dozens and dozens of issues, and it is a bit unfair that we constantly ask you for the top three or four. If you were the policymaker and able to put the structures in place, what structure would you put in place to ensure that the voices of young people were heard and responded to. If you got your utopia, what would it look like?

**Baroness Suttie:**

Thank you all very much. All the presentations were short, to the point and excellent. I have also consistently supported 16- and 17-year-olds having the vote, not least because of the positive Scottish experience and the experience of my two nieces, who were able to vote for the first time in the referendum.

I want to ask about the media and whether you feel that there are media outlets that adequately represent your views, or do you feel that you have to bypass the mainstream media entirely and use social and alternative media methods to get your point of view across?

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

It is good to hear updates from our meeting in Cardiff from across the five jurisdictions. In that respect, thank you, diolch yn fawr and go raibh maith agat.

In the context of the work in Youth Parliaments, you talked about debating issues — clearly, parliaments are at different stages — and about preparing manifestos. As a Minister, I had the pleasure of being invited to meet the Pensioners Parliament in Northern Ireland; actually, it was more like a summons than an invitation. Have any of your Youth Parliaments invited Ministers to come and answer questions, rather than merely lobbying them, and, if not, what kind of response do you think you would get if you did ask?

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

If you would like to answer those points, we will then come to more questions.

**Danielle Gayson:**

First, I will address Colin McGrath's question on what structure we could have to ensure that the youth voice is heard. The biggest structures will not work unless we address public transport first. Once that is addressed, the best way to connect young people is definitely through social media and different online outlets such as WhatsApp. We all live in very broad jurisdictions, and I feel that having a forum on Facebook or something, where everyone is a member, is the best way to upload a file or throw ideas back and forth between meetings. Especially for us, it is very hard to meet up, what with flights and everything, so we always use our forum to go back and forth.

On whether media outlets represent us, I find that I have to bypass every sort of traditional media — the radio and the newspapers — because, in this age, we do not know what to trust. It is the same with Facebook, yet that is what catches our eye the most. To get young people interested and active, it definitely needs to be social media, because that is what we are more likely to pick up. We all have our phone right in front of us at all times, whereas we are very unlikely to go out and buy a local or even a national newspaper every day, especially the broadsheets, because they have a lot of information that we do not necessarily need, such as court cases and all that, whereas, if it is online, we can get exactly what we want very, very quickly.

David, Youth Work Ireland has a political briefing every year in Buswells Hotel, across from Leinster House. That is the way we interact with our Ministers. We invite them all — TDs, Senators, Ministers, everyone — to come over and have a look at all our different activities, what we are doing around the country, and get them to see what we do and ask them to engage with us further.

**Reece Harding:**

Hello. Again, very good comments and questions. I love it when folk ask questions, because it challenges me a wee bit. *[Laughter.]*

Anyway, Colin, to your question about if we had structures, I think — I can't remember where everybody was, by the way. If I were to be allowed to choose how the structures were designed, I think I would make sure that every nation had some sort of youth representation,

like a youth parliament. I think that youth parliaments and places that represent young people work very well. That is my comment on that.

To the question on the media, as Danielle says, we all have smartphones and access to Facebook and Twitter. To be honest, the only time I read a newspaper is in the morning when I am going to work. It is the 'Metro', because it is a free newspaper. You do not know what to trust. Personally, I think a lot of young people turn to social media because that is the thing that they grew up with.

And to David, about the Youth Parliament: our Youth Parliament in Scotland is completely youth-led. We elect a board, and we have got staff, but they do not do anything; it is completely youth-led. All the issues that we decide, debate and discuss, as I mentioned when I was up on the podium — look at the manifesto. We can choose campaigns out of that. We recently chose a new campaign, which is young people's rights. With our campaign, what we do is lobby our Members, Ministers, Cabinet secretaries over the two-year period that the campaign runs for. I think that, if we had to invite Ministers, they would be welcome to come along, but I think that we engage with them a lot outside Parliament. Does that make sense?

**Kate Seary:**

To Colin first, that sort of utopia — if you go back in history, utopia has been laughed at, really. I think that as long as young people and old people — “old people”, sorry — politicians are apart, it is not going to work. I think we really need integration. There needs to be some sort of middle point, and I think that kind of covers David's point as well: we should have people from all the parliaments coming together with the Youth Parliament, so that it can be like a mixed chamber where we can actually debate the issues together. As long as we are fighting against each other, I do not think that this is going to work. We have shown, just working within BIPA, that we can have these sorts of debates where we can show that we are knowledgeable and we can debate with people who are our seniors and we can be respectful of each other's ideas. I do not understand why that cannot go further, into a kind of mixed chamber.

And then for the Youth Parliament in Wales, as I said in the speech, we are about to have a new one. We have got this blank slate that we can build upon. To have AMs coming and debating with the young people in our new National Assembly for young people would be great.

**Brendan Quirke:**

I have just a point about systems. I think it is really hard to build a system for all constituents to be able to voice opinions. I feel that the issue stems from young people not wanting to be able to thingy. It's the negative stigma of politics. Obviously, young people in the past have felt like they are being ignored and that the issues that they address are not important to them because, obviously, there was not a huge turnout in previous things. I feel that to address the issue is to destroy the stigma, to make sure that all constituents — not just young people — feel that, even if they just shot an email, they would get a proper reply and they would get their voices heard.

With the media, for me it is hard because you pick up a newspaper and it is very rarely, if ever, centred. You get the far left and far right. It is hard to read a newspaper and get an

unbiased opinion. It is just that young people are so negatively portrayed in media that they would not want to cover any news that would not sell. And the Ministers: UK Youth actually delivered this manifesto to Rob Wilson, and Rob Wilson sat down with us and gave us a full report on each of our things and what he thought of them.

I felt that that restores the faith in Ministers being approachable, being able to give a balanced opinion and being able to address us in the right ways to where we can go with our opinions. I think that the negative stigma of politics has destroyed the ability of young people to bridge out to their MPs and to say, “This is what we think. This is what we need.”

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Another big issue is that young people do not know where to go. It is fair sitting down and saying, “Here is what we want”, but it is about how we actually get these things. In projects like BIPA, where we sit down with people from all nations, we can collectively write a manifesto, meet with you and discuss these issues. Obviously, it has not been like this before.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you very much.

**Mr Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD:**

Following on from what you have been discussing already about representation of young people, do we go down the road of having specific quotas to try to ensure representation? At the moment in this state, there is a big campaign to encourage women into politics. Parties have quotas set for the number of women to contest elections. Is that a consideration, or is it that you set up a separate constituency that elects young people to ensure that their voices are heard not just outside Parliament but in Parliament? In our case, we have a Senate, which is a different electoral body. In some ways, we are patronising you by saying, “Oh, we will listen to you” when you come with your voice and your manifesto but not giving you a voice in the Chamber or in the Government that make the decisions. I do not know whether you have discussed trying those types of mechanisms. Sometimes quotas have worked in the past and sometimes they have not.

**Baroness Blood:**

I have a quick question. What is the biggest obstacle that you meet in your work? Is it the system and the bureaucracy? Is it elected politicians paying lip service to you? Is it engaging more young people in what you are trying to do?

**Mr James Dornan MSP:**

I am the convenor of the Education Committee in the Scottish Parliament. [Inaudible] I think that we should be welcoming it, and I think that those who are scared of it are those who are — this is not party political — small-c conservative, who do not like change and who do not like the possibility of pressure coming from a different source. I think that that is what it is. We have been fortunate in Scotland. The referendum has been talked about a lot. From late 2012 or 2013 onwards, we saw for ourselves the benefit of interacting with young children — sorry, young people. That is my age showing.

For anyone wanting to make sure that young people get involved, make sure that there is subject matter that they can get their teeth into. The one thing that motivated every young person in Scotland was the fact that they knew that their vote was going to matter when it came to the referendum. I think that that is really important.

Do the rest of you take away the example that Reece gave of the Youth Parliament and say that it is something that you think would work well in your jurisdiction? Do you take it and other pieces of good practice that come from one jurisdiction away and try to get their implemented in your own youth organisations?

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

OK. Over to you.

**Danielle Gayson:**

Lovely. First, I would like to address Aengus's questions. Taking the gender quotas from last time as an example, quotas are something that people will be for and against. Personally, I was strongly against them because, as a young woman who was strongly interested in politics, I kind of felt that I would be added just to make up a quota rather than added for my politics or for my policies. I feel that, instead of quotas, we could introduce a system in Ireland like the Scottish Parliament. We do have our Comhairle na nÓgs, but they are not elected by constituents, whereas the Scottish Parliament is much more democratic. I definitely think that that is a system that we could introduce here.

The Baroness asked questions on obstacles. Bureaucracy is definitely a large part of it. We are blessed that we have our youth workers here to help us with all that bureaucracy, but, to follow on from that, it is something that we could learn to do. It is also something that is sometimes unnecessary, however. Often, the politicians can be an obstacle in a way — not them as themselves but the way in which they can interact. We interact more through social media and email, whereas some people prefer to interact through letters. There needs to be a system in place to narrow down communication so that everyone is on the same path, because no one really knows what the best way to communicate with someone is and where something can get lost in between.

*3.15 pm*

On James's questions, I definitely think that we should have subject matters for everything, but it is very easy to say that and then ignore everyone's point of view on a subject matter. It could very easily be relevant to one group of young people but not another, so it needs to be carefully considered, in my opinion, and should definitely be looked at and strongly included. We have all learnt from each other. We in Ireland have definitely learnt from the Scottish Youth Parliament on how it is run, and it is something we would like to look at in the future. Our whole experience here has been a complete and utter learning experience. We have learnt much more here, I would say, than we have in education for the past number of years.

**Mark McLaughlin:**

I would just like to address the issue of the obstacle. I was not engaged in politics at all until BIPA. I was so uneducated and refused to vote, because I did not know what I was voting for.

My first vote was in the referendum. I was uneducated, but I felt as though I did the right thing, given that I voted Remain. Perhaps if politicians interacted with youth more, and we got more education in school, and maybe if I had some kind of insight, I would have been more engaged. In school, for me, politics was an option for GCSE, so you had to want to do it before it was taught to you. We did have citizenship and all that, but I thought that it was more about life issues than having your voice heard.

**Reece Harding:**

I would say, for me, I am just aware that we obviously come from five different nations. The biggest barrier for me was getting an understanding of all the different issues. As I say, every other nation has different issues and problems compared with Scotland. The biggest barrier for me would just be learning about them and trying to get them in my head. At the same time, I found it dead interesting, because I learned something new. I love learning new things. Every day is a school day, as they say. That was my biggest barrier: just trying to get my head around different issues.

To James, do we learn from one thing and take it to another? Yes, definitely. I think of lots of things I have done outside this. Things that I have done at school, I still use today. I remember, when I was at primary school, a teacher taught me how to remember how to write “because” — big elephants can always understand small elephants. I still use that today.

On a more general issue, I think that we do take things from one place and take them to another. It definitely is a system that I will use.

**Kate Seary:**

First, to Aengus, about representation of young people and on the question of age, I think that we are breaking a barrier for young people in politics. We have Ross Greer in this room, who is the youngest MSP, and that shows that we are breaking down barriers and that the age of the people who represent us is coming down slowly. One idea that I have for a youth assembly is anonymous ballots — no age, no gender, no name on those ballots — so that you are voting for what the people have to say, not for who they are, as such. That is one idea that we could go forward with.

To James, as a comeback on being scared about young people, maybe politicians should be scared of our power but welcome what we have to say.

**Brendan Quirke:**

My point is for Baroness Blood, and it is about barriers. Obviously, with BIPA, one of the biggest barriers for me was all the different accents. I still wish that Reece came with subtitles. I feel as though, in the past, politicians have been more for photo opportunities with young people. I spoke to my MP. My MP is great: Andrew McDonald, Middlesbrough. I have talked to many young people who are constantly nagging their MP to make their voice heard and actually to represent them, which is their job.

For me, all that the politicians wanted in the end were photos to put on their social media accounts so that they can feel that they are listening to young people.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

OK. Thank you all very much. That, I am afraid, is the end of our session, but it has been fascinating to hear you speak and answer questions so eloquently. I assure you that we are very interested in hearing your views, and if we could have a photo opportunity with you afterwards that would be excellent. *[Laughter.]* In all seriousness, it is great to have you here. It is also great to have so many different accents on the panel.

On Members' behalf, I say a big thank-you to Danielle, Mark, Kate, Reece and Brendan. Thank you all so much for coming. *[Applause.]* We can all agree that this has been a very worthwhile part of our deliberations today at BIPA. Thank you very much indeed.

You are welcome to stay and listen to the next session. We are going to be talking about recent political developments, so there may well be some interesting points made that you would like to hear.

I hand over to Kathleen, who will chair the final session of the day.

**RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BIPA JURISDICTIONS**

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Andrew. I would also like to say thank-you to the young people. It is great that we have more engagement to try to get young people more interested in politics, if possible.

This session is sort of an open debate for Members, which might be a bit dangerous. It is to consider different political developments in the BIPA jurisdictions so that people have an opportunity, if they wish, to air their views on any recent political developments. Obviously, the whole idea of the Assembly is for people to be able to engage, discuss and have dialogue, so we thought it important that there be a session for people that is a little bit more open.

I will throw it open to the Floor, so if there is anything in particular that people want to raise that might create a bit of discussion, be it Brexit or any other political issue, please do. I am not saying that we have the answers, by the way. I want to stress that first, but it is important for people to have their say at an event such as this.

**Senator Frank Feighan:**

There is one issue that I would like to raise. The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly should have more of a role to play in congratulating people but also in holding them to account.

Last week, we had probably the most successful marching season ever in Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to all the people involved, particularly at the flashpoint at the Ardoyne. It is great to see it, and I know that a lot of great work has gone on behind the scenes.

Other people may bring up other issues, but one issue that I felt very uncomfortable about concerned the Eleventh night bonfires, on which you had Irish flags, EU flags and Ivory Coast flags. Moreover, very worrying was the fact that you had on them election literature from many of the major parties, including Sinn Féin and SDLP, and from independents.

There was also an effigy of a coffin containing the former deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness. As an Assembly, we should highlight that and absolutely say that it should not happen again.

I understand the complexities in Northern Ireland — it is a very difficult situation — but there is one aspect that I felt was very bad. We have video evidence now. I remember the Love Ulster march that came to Dublin in 2006, when people of no political persuasion or affiliation attacked that march. Six or seven weeks later, the Gardaí, because it had looked at video evidence, knocked on people's doors.

I am not saying that it is the same in Northern Ireland, if someone wants to say that. I really think that this Assembly should not end without us bringing this, to me, deplorable situation to attention. Also, I think, we should highlight all the great work, because I hear from the PSNI that this has been one of the most successful July Twelfths ever. That is a very good sign and is very positive.

**Mr Jim Wells MLA:**

I think that I am perhaps a one-man minority here today because my party is, unanimously, extremely enthusiastic about Brexit, extremely happy with the decision, looking forward to the United Kingdom going out into a new world, and throwing off the restrictions of European Union membership and the meddling from the bureaucrats of Brussels and Strasbourg.

It is unfortunate today that all the speakers are obviously worshipping at the shrine of the Good Friday Agreement and are in love with the European Union. Do remember that there are millions of people in the United Kingdom, in all the jurisdictions, who voted to leave and that the majority of people in the United Kingdom voted to leave. I do not subscribe to the view that Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to stay makes any difference. The Republic had a referendum and Roscommon took a different view, but Roscommon had to obey the view of the majority of the people of the Irish Republic. Similarly, we are integral parts of the United Kingdom and a clear majority of our community have voted. They voted to take us in and now they are voting to take us out. Many of us think that this is a very exciting and fascinating time for the United Kingdom. It is a time of enormous opportunity and one that many of us are very happy with.

One of our leading members of the Assembly said that if all that he had achieved in his 42-year political career was to see Northern Ireland as part of the UK leaving the European Union then he will die happy. What I would like to say is that that is the view held by many millions of people in the UK — obviously not too many in the Irish Republic from what I can see. I think that those views should be reflected better in the make-up of speakers at these events in the future. We have to attain some balance on this issue because today I have sat here thinking, “Is there anybody else in this room who is happy that the United Kingdom is leaving Europe?” If there is anybody, would they please come forward and give the majority of the people in the United Kingdom a bit of support.

**Mr Declan Breathnach TD:**

I think that in the discussion on Brexit we should not lose sight of the great prize of peace. In the uncertainty, vacuum and volatility that exists around Brexit, the fragility of the peace

process should not be forgotten. It is important to comment on the degree of paramilitarism that is continuing to happen on both sides in the North and, indeed, the massive increases that have been reported by the PSNI and, more recently, by Michael O’Sullivan the Assistant Garda Commissioner in relation to the activities of the New IRA. It needs to be highlighted here today in the context of making sure that we keep our eye on the ball in relation to what has been that great prize of the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process. We should not lose sight of that and it is important to make comment on that here today.

**Mr James Dornan MSP:**

I just want to respond to the comments that Jim Wells made. I will say two things. There was an opportunity for a number of people who supported Brexit to be here today, and they are not. I do not really think that you can blame this meeting for the fact that there is a limited number of supporters of Brexit here when many of them did not bother coming. The second thing I will say is this: Scotland, as a nation, voted 62% to 38% against leaving. I do not think that they should just be pooh-poohed aside as being, “No luck, you’re part of the United Kingdom. Your voice shouldn’t be heard”, which is kind of what I heard from Mr Wells there. Scotland is entitled to have its voice heard. Scotland is entitled to make sure that that voice continues to be heard. I do not think you should be silenced in this place either.

**The Lord Empey:**

The Assembly did a report some time ago on smuggling and other illegal activities. I want to know what progress has been made with it, because, whether there is Brexit or no Brexit, or whatever, smuggling was a problem before all this and will be a problem after. Given that a lot of work was put into the report, I wonder what follow-up is being undertaken and what steps have been taken to implement its recommendations or to monitor what has been happening. It might be useful to get some feedback after the event so that the Committee that did the work on it can see whether it was listened to by the various agencies and Governments involved in the different jurisdictions.

*3.30 pm*

**Deputy John Le Fondré:**

I want to pick up on and perhaps reinforce the comments from Senator Leyden earlier about the president of the European Commission’s comments on the diminishing use of the English language in the European Union. Wearing a different hat, I attended two French-speaking conferences in Europe over the past eight to 10 weeks, and, at both conferences, one of the member states brought a proposition to the European Union in some shape or form to remove English as a language of the European Union which was raised more as a probability rather than a possibility. I particularly wonder what the views of colleagues from Ireland in this room might be, because it did not just seem to be an unguarded remark that has been published in ‘The Guardian’? I am interested in Members’ views.

**Mr Brendan Smith TD:**

I want to refer to the political stalemate in Northern Ireland at the moment. Far too often, we have seen crisis politics in Northern Ireland, with it going from one difficulty to another. We need to get away from that. We need to see an Executive functioning and an Assembly

functioning. At a critical time, when there are so many challenges facing all of this island and Britain as well, we have an Assembly that is not sitting and an Executive not in place. We have a jurisdiction being run by civil servants by and large. That is not acceptable. In politics, it should always be the case that we try to ensure that the people who are answerable to the people through our parliamentary system are the people making the decisions that affect us daily.

Since, I think, 2013, we have had the Haass talks, Stormont House and the Fresh Start Agreement. What we want is those agreements implemented, and we want an Executive up and running. There is a huge burden of responsibility on the two Governments, as the co-guarantors of an international agreement, to ensure that the talks are brought to a successful conclusion. It is absolutely ludicrous and unacceptable that there will be no talks until September. That from the early part of July. You are talking about at least six weeks without talks. That is what we are being told in the public domain anyway. It is a very bad message to send to the electorate. It is a very bad message to send to Europe. We can talk here about Brexit, but you then have key players not doing their job. I think that it was my colleague Deputy Breathnach who, in reference to the ongoing talks and negotiations, asked earlier in the day, "Who's speaking for Northern Ireland?" At a time like this, you need all Administrations, be they the devolved Assemblies or the British and Irish Governments, working together to try to deal with the huge challenges that lie ahead. A vacuum or a lacuna in politics is very dangerous. Deputy Breathnach referred to the quite alarming comments from our assistant commissioner last week about a new threat from another paramilitary organisation. These people are commonly referred to as dissidents. The political process not working gives momentum to that negativity and that type of violence, and I think that the Government should be giving a clear message to the parties in Northern Ireland, particularly the DUP and Sinn Féin, that it is time to reach agreement. Everybody has to show respect to one another. It is also time that all agreements put in place in the past are honoured and put into effect for the good of the people of all Northern Ireland, and for the good of the people of all this island and Britain as well.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Deputy. Does anybody else want to come in on any of that? There are no further contributions. This session was just for people who wished to express their views. I reiterate that if people have any ideas or suggestions for topics or for speakers for plenaries, those can be put through the steering committee for consideration. Lord Empey, in relation to your point, we are going to try to get an update and include it tomorrow in the committee report section. I could be wrong, but I think it was committee A; we will try to get that for you tomorrow.

Are there any other comments? Everyone is very anxious to get out of the room.

**Viscount Bridgeman:**

With reference to the use of the English language and its possible abolition as an official language, I have a feeling that that will find its own level, in fact. If it was officially downgraded, as it were, that would be deeply offensive to the Republic of Ireland.

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

I thought that this session was going on until 5.00 pm, but we seem to have no subjects of interest, which is a sad reflection on this Assembly.

There are two points that I would like to make. First, on the bonfires in Belfast, it was great that the parades went so successfully last week in Northern Ireland. Certainly, some of the bonfires were distasteful. However, as one of the negotiators of the Belfast Agreement — I say this to all here — we were adamant that there were three strands in that agreement. I sense that some people who have spoken here do not even know what those three strands were.

Strand 1 was the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. The then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Andrews, was expelled from the room every time strand 1 was discussed. Yet here today, I see people from outside Northern Ireland discussing the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. That is damaging relations within Northern Ireland, and I ask you to desist from breaching the Belfast Agreement. That applies to your former Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade in the Republic, who annoyed people right across Northern Ireland in the last six months by interfering in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland on such subjects as the Irish language, same-sex marriage and things of that nature. Those are matters that are the internal affairs of Northern Ireland and are not to be discussed by the Republic or anyone else.

Secondly, the European Union Brexit is going ahead. I really think there is a lack of realism amongst those of you here from the Republic of Ireland. Your former Prime Minister, Enda Kenny, was quite right in saying that the country that would suffer most from Brexit was the Republic of Ireland. It is a big challenge to the Republic, and I do not hear anyone here seriously facing up to that challenge. We saw only last Thursday your equivalent of the CBI going to Brussels and saying, “Our industry is going to be so severely damaged that we need £1 million at once to save us over the next three years.” That is realism beginning to sink in with the business community in Dublin.

We heard earlier today that agriculture is going to be damaged severely. Five mushroom plants have already closed and others are combining; they cannot sell their mushrooms in England any more. Beef farmers are demonstrating in Tullamore because beef prices have collapsed and they cannot sell their beef in the United Kingdom any more. There are serious challenges in the Republic. Thousands are coming up every day from the Republic to Newry, Armagh and Londonderry to do their daily shopping because of the depreciation of sterling. There is challenge after challenge to the Republic of Ireland. I know that you want to keep the border and that is why you are staying in the European Union, but if you left the European Union there would be no border problem whatsoever.

What you have got to do is face the realism that, when the United Kingdom joined the EEC – not the European Union. I was a member of the European Youth Campaign and worked so hard in that referendum campaign to keep the United Kingdom in the EEC. When we did that, the Republic of Ireland joined on exactly the same day, and the same reasons that applied then apply today. If the United Kingdom is leaving, it is in the best interests of the Republic of Ireland to leave also and to not run away from that challenge.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Senator Coghlan.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:**

Thank you very much. In fairness, with respect fully, Chair, to Lord Kilclooney, we do not want to keep the border. We definitely do not want to keep the border. We want, as the UK wants, the situation we have at the moment. We want the continuation of the seamless border. I think, North, South and east, we are all agreed on that, so let us stay with that. We have assurances from Barnier and from Brussels and from the Prime Minister in Britain, despite her difficulties. I notice Mr Hammond said that he is being sniped at and opposed by colleagues within his Cabinet, but hopefully that can be got over.

London has been drained — the financial services, the City of London, JP Morgan, Barclays and others. Some of them want to come to Dublin, because we are English-speaking and all the rest of it, and more of them are going abroad. So, there is no doubt, as we have said, that there are huge obstacles, and there are dangers to both of us. We had better stick closely together on this one and surmount the difficulties.

I am a firm believer that, when you get into negotiation, as they will drill down, there will have to be give and take on both sides. Hopefully, as you both said, Co-Chairs, we will strengthen this body, even post-Brexit. We must, because of all the ties that bind us, and that is frightfully important. However, with respect to Lord Kilclooney, do not worry about it. We will not want the border, and we are all united on that.

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

You are helping it to stay.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:**

What?

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

You are helping it to stay.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:**

No, no. As I say, with the utmost respect, I have to take an entirely opposing view to you, but we will see how things get on. I do not want to get too argumentative, Chair. Anyway, thank you.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Is there anybody else who wants to come in on this? Deputy Ryan.

**Mr Eamon Ryan TD:**

It is a pity that we are not using the opportunity to have a really detailed discussion of Brexit from both sides. It would be good for us to hear each other, because that is the main reason I was kind of hoping to hear different views. In my constituency, probably the biggest problem with Brexit will be that all those banks will be coming to south Dublin, and we do not have

enough places to house them. That may lead to a huge over-emphasis on financial industries. Each constituency is different.

The EU chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, came to the Oireachtas, and he made it very clear, it seems to me, in terms of the European negotiating position, that when it comes to the free movement of people — North/South and, I think, to a certain extent, east-west, which is our common travel area — that will not be a problem and will be retained. But what he also made absolutely clear was that there will not be free movement of goods and services if there is a hard Brexit. The biggest problem, I would have thought, from that will be for the people of Northern Ireland. The biggest economic effect is going to be in Northern Ireland. No one knows until this plays out, but that is a fear and a concern I have.

To a certain extent, we have a common interest. When I saw “we”, everyone — Scottish, Welsh, British, English, Northern Irish, Irish Assembly people — has a common interest in making sure that we minimise our damage or maximise the benefits, whatever your position is. I cannot think of many other assemblies or places where we can do that. Even if we do not do it here today, we should try and make sure in any future Assembly meetings that we get into the details of this and have people from all sides so that there can be an honest dialogue and exchange of opinion.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Deputy. Anybody else?

**Senator Paul Coghlan:**

That is an essential item for the October plenary in Liverpool, because they will still be negotiating. I agree with Eamon that we should have a full say on the matter.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

OK, thanks for that, Senator Coghlan. John Scott?

**Mr John Scott MSP:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. There is an opportunity here. We have heard a lot of analysis. There is a huge amount of experience gathered in this room, but we are long on analysis and short on solutions. As often happens towards the end of any meeting, in my experience, people want to define the problems at the beginning of a meeting. However, I actually think that, given the collective wisdom in this room, which is manifest, we ought to be trying to come up with some solutions and a message that goes out from this group as to what we would like to see as solutions to the well-defined problems. That would be helpful, and it would show this gathering in a positive light if we could find something positive to say about what we would like to see happen.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks. Anyone else?

**Mr Darren Millar AM:**

I have been quiet in this plenary session — unusually so, as you will appreciate — partly because I have been a little bit disaffected by the lack of balance in some of the presentations that have been received. I voted for Brexit, so did Wales; and that is something which, irrespective of the views on either side of the campaign, the UK Government must now follow through on. To be fair, both of the major parties in the UK have determined that they will follow through on the will of the British people in delivering on Brexit.

I think it is important that, as an Assembly, we take an interest, debate these things and attempt to come up with solutions which we can present to our respective legislatures and the Governments in them. However, it is also very important that we receive adequate and balanced information when we gather, with both sides of the Brexit debate and argument having equal opportunity to inform our discussions. I do not think that we have quite achieved that this time. Whether that is by design, I doubt. I am sure that it is just the nature of the speakers who have contributed to our sessions this time around. However, I think that it is important that we have more balance in the future and that we stop going over old ground and complaining about the fact that United Kingdom has taken this vote, because it has done. We have to respect the fact that that is the vote that was taken and move on from complaining because some people were not happy with the outcome. That is probably most people in this room — I understand that — but that is the decision that the British people took.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks. Anyone else? OK, if there are no further — Lord Kilclooney, go ahead.

*3.45 pm*

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

I welcome the contributions that have been made since I spoke. I think that there is beginning to be more realism about the challenge facing us. Insofar as we in Northern Ireland are concerned — I live a few miles from the border and this is my first time in the Republic for a year, which says something in itself. It does not give us in Northern Ireland any joy that the Republic will be the most seriously damaged country in the European Union if Brexit goes ahead, and I believe that it is going ahead. There is nothing worse for Northern Ireland than an impoverished Republic south of the border. We want to see the Republic prospering. It is terribly important that the Republic, as well as the United Kingdom, prospers. The United Kingdom and the Republic have a joint interest in helping each other in the present Brexit negotiations. I know that some politicians in the Republic have said: “No, we are not getting involved; we are leaving Brussels to negotiate on our behalf.”

Quite honestly, that is washing your hands of the terrible challenge that faces you in the Republic in your trading, your fishing industry, your agricultural industry and all aspects of your economy.

I do wish that, as we look ahead, since politically it may not be possible for you to decide to exit the European Union — I know that it is anathema to you to suggest that — as an alternative, you recognise the tremendous importance of the Republic having special status within the European Union. We know that the European Parliament has now rejected overwhelmingly the idea of special status for Northern Ireland. In that decision, it was of

course correct. We want to be treated as an ordinary part of the United Kingdom. That is the majority view across Northern Ireland. However, the Republic does need special status, and you need to face up to this challenge. You have not much time to face up to it, and I hope that your new Prime Minister in the Republic seizes the challenge and begins to open up the debate in the Republic about the real implications if Brexit goes ahead as it is at the moment.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:**

Co-Chair, I am amazed listening to Lord Kilclooney here today. He must think that we have all buried our heads in the sand. You have talked continuously here today about us burying our heads in the sand or about the people in the Republic not engaging. I do not know where you have been for the last six, eight or 10 months. We have had a Seanad Committee on Brexit that has sat for months. We have had the Ulster Farmers' Union down. We have had at it all sorts of people from all aspects of the islands that are represented here today. There are reports at the back of this room, and you might care to take one away and have a read of it this evening.

We are working, and I am amazed that you are here today talking about a jurisdiction that seems to be oblivious. Of course we are not. Brexit will affect the island of Ireland, and I would rather hear more constructive talk about greater cooperation on the island of Ireland. I want to share this before finish. This struck me that when I was at the agricultural show at Balmoral. A member of the Ulster Farmers' Union came up to me and said that we need to concentrate on what unites us. He said, "I thought I was — and I am — loyal to the Crown, but I am more loyal to the half-crown and about the money that is in my pocket and the prosperity of the people and the farming community that I work and live with".

You suggest that somehow the impact is different for the North of this country versus the Republic or the South. The reality is that it will affect the island of Ireland, and I see greater opportunities for us on the island of Ireland working together for the prosperity of all its people; equal prosperity, equal opportunity. I am just astounded from what you are sharing — correct me if I am wrong — that you seem to think that none of this was going on.

I have been up in Northern Ireland 15 times this year, I think, and I know what people there want too. People want an end to the comparisons. At the end of the day, they just want bread on their table, a few bob in their pocket, a bit of peace and equal opportunity of place. I think that that is important. Sometimes, I think that we can make all of this thing terribly, terribly complicated when, in effect, it is very simple. The challenge for us, representing all of the different jurisdictions in this body, is to bring a sharing of that. It is about prosperity. I cannot let that comment go without saying that there is a report here. There are copies at the back of the room, and I encourage everyone to take one away.

**Mr Colin McGrath MLA:**

Thanks very much, Co-Chair. I have a comment on balance. I think that the programme has been well presented and that there are views on both sides. I have heard both views. From the point of view of members participating, the greatest problem that there has been is Theresa May's inability to win an election because the close result in the Commons has meant that most of the MPs are not here. If they were in the room, there may have been more balance in the contributions. Maybe what is leaving the sense that it is a bit more one-sided here is the big gap in representation from one of the legislatures. If people considered that, they may feel

that that is what is resulting in the conversation being particularly one-sided. You need to take it in the round. I am holding back in some of my contributions because this is only the second plenary that I have been at, but some are arriving in with a couple of hours' experience and making comment. I think that it is better to take a wider view.

**Ms Pauline McNeill MSP:**

First, I am a substitute for Mr Mark Griffin, so this is my first time being here. We are in parliamentary recess, so when I got the invitation I thought that Britain and Ireland have never faced more complex and difficult times. I really welcomed the opportunity to come here. I have to say that I have learned so much over the last 24 hours, but what I remain convinced of is that the question of Brexit is as complex as it was to me in the beginning. I said earlier that I was a reluctant Remainer. I have to say to Jim that I was not complaining. I have made speeches in Parliament, you can check, and we have accepted the democracy of the British people. I hope that what unites those who believe that we should be in the EU and those who do not, is that we have to find solutions and we have to discuss the complexity of untangling ourselves from this union. I wondered if we could follow up on John Scott's very important contribution. I do not know if it is going to be me in October or whether it will be Mark Griffin. If it is me, I will certainly be here because, and I think someone else said it, I cannot actually think of a better forum for parliamentarians across the parliaments to actually have this exchange about probably the most complex issue of our political time. Whatever your position is, I have not heard, so far, much that encourages me that there is a solution. It perplexes me a lot. It may well be that it falls to people in this room across the countries to try and find some solutions going forward.

Can I just mention an issue for Scotland, just to put it in the context of some of the issues for Scottish people? We are not in charge of immigration policy. Jim and I differ about the constitution but, essentially, we want the same for our country. We rely heavily, as lots of parts of the United Kingdom do, not just on EU immigration but immigration outwith that. If we have too many people leaving Scotland, we will not be able to run our public services. I have been very vocal in our Parliament about Theresa May and the Tory party conceding that the nations and regions across Britain need to have more say about Brexit and who is allowed into Britain. If we do not get the numbers or the skills that we need for our part of the country, which is the northern part of Britain, we will not be able to make the best of Brexit — if you see my point.

In conclusion, Co-Chair, it seems to me that, though I do not know much about what about the Steering Committee does as I am new to this, it might want to think about structuring an agenda for October about a more balanced debate — in terms of speakers — and around John Scott's suggestion which is to look in some detail at some solutions and some of the problems. I am just giving you a flavour of some of Scotland's problems; I could go on. I think this is the forum where there should be an airing of the many, many issues. We might be able to discuss some solutions for. I do not know if that is possible.

**Viscount Bridgeman:**

Thank you, Co-Chairs. My understanding is that when Monsieur Barnier visited Dublin a few months ago he was reasonably optimistic. I wonder whether there is any member of this Assembly who had more direct experience of that visit who can enlighten us further on it?

**The Lord Bew:**

Thank you, Co-Chairmen. I have been listening to the debate and it is clear that we have widely varying assessments of the impact of Brexit on the Northern Ireland economy and on the Republic. I wonder if it is helpful to suggest that the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin, whose research is increasingly admired as being of high quality, might be asked to speak to us at the next Assembly; not just to talk, as it has done, about the likely impacts of Brexit on the Irish economy, but it has also produced very interesting research on the likely impact on Northern Ireland as well. I hope that might be a helpful suggestion.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks. I am just going to take a few more contributions. We are having the same people coming in, and we are trying to avoid repetition if possible.

**Mr Eamon Ryan TD:**

I will respond to the Viscount's question because it is a very important question.

*4.00 pm*

I would say that he was very optimistic because he goes into negotiations with a completely unified team of 27 countries which took five minutes to agree the negotiating position. That is a real strength. He knows exactly what hand he is playing and what cards he has. The clock is ticking; and he is as comfortable as anyone. He does not have to do anything. He just has to play his cards, and he senses the other side. No one knows what their position is or what cards they have. Well, you can see their cards: they have the two of clubs, the six of spades, the three diamonds. They have nothing, in my view. Yes, I think his position was very strong.

From an Irish perspective, my concern was that, while the talk was that we would manage the Irish aspect of this, a difficult and complex issue, as I said in my earlier contribution, when it came down to trade issues — this affects Wales and Scotland too — Barnier will not change his cards at all. He will play his cards exactly as he has been given them by the 27 countries, which is to keep everything as it is. That means that, if the UK is not in the customs union, if it is not in the single market, trade is going to be absolutely and completely impeded. Particularly for us in agriculture, but also in every other area. It will be incredibly difficult in digital and financial services — in every area. He is comfortable; he has agreement from his 27 Governments. They know exactly what they want. I would say that he is feeling strong in negotiations. The other side does not seem to know. The biggest thing here is that we do not know what the other side wants.

**Mr John Scott MSP:**

What is the message?

**Mr Eamon Ryan TD:**

Work out what you want. *[Interruption.]*

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

There are a few other people looking to come in before you.

**Mr Jim Wells MLA:**

First of all, I thought that Pauline's contribution, from the Scottish Parliament, was very helpful.

People often ask me whether there was any split in the DUP, which is the largest party in Northern Ireland, when it came to making a decision on Brexit. There was a split. There was a split between those who were enthusiastic about leaving Europe and those who were very enthusiastic about leaving it. The decision was a very quick, simple one.

The question that everyone in this room has to ask is why, when we were a member of that organisation for over 40 years, it found itself totally impossible to convince the majority of people in the United Kingdom that it was a body worth staying in. I think that, if there was ever a day when this organisation, BIPA — which I was on previously for eight years and I am glad to be back — if there was ever an opportunity for this organisation to show its worth, it is with this. I think that even today's debate has shown that this is a vehicle that could be incredibly vital and useful in thrashing through what I honestly believe are incredibly difficult issues.

I am not on the Steering Committee, but I would have thought that it should be a case of dropping everything for the next two years. This organisation should concentrate entirely on the biggest issue that we will ever face: an issue that faces every delegate from every jurisdiction in this room, plus Gibraltar of course. Nobody is immune from the effect of this. I think that there is enough experience in this room that we can make a major contribution to solving the huge difficulties we face.

I accept the problem about the English MPs; it is a very difficult one. Our own MPs are in the same position. Because we are now in agreement with the Conservative Government, our people are basically camping out in London to be there for important votes. However, I think we should organise our timetable around that to ensure that there is a balanced view on this. Because all we have had here today is a weeping wall of people going up and saying how terrible and difficult it is, but we have not really heard the other side at all. It is important that you understand why we are in this position and why there are so many people disaffected with Europe within our community. I think it sad that nobody in the Irish Republic seems to hold that view. It seems to be entirely one-way traffic, as far as the South is concerned; but I think that we can show our worth big-time in the next 18 months.

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

Obviously, I will be very brief, but am glad that this debate has developed in the last half-hour or so. On the question of Herr Barnier, or Monsieur Barnier or whoever he is, I listened intently to every word he delivered at Leinster House. It was live on television. I can tell you without hesitation that, having spent 17 years in Strasbourg, that he was very slippery in the way that he dealt with the subject of the border.

He basically said that there can be free movement of people but, “Hard luck Republic, you’ve got to erect customs posts”. That was the real message. There will be trade barriers. He really said that but in very diplomatic language, and I do not think that it has sunk home in Dublin.

On the issue of our friend the Senator across the way, that maybe I have my head in the sand: far from it. I watch Europe very closely because, as I said earlier, I was a member of the European Youth Campaign, and I campaigned strongly to join the European Economic Community (EEC). But, after 17 years in Strasbourg, I realised that the European Union was not the best way ahead for the United Kingdom.

You talked about agriculture and your reports. I will take a report and I will read it with interest. I will want to see what you say about the Republic now going to have to make a bigger contribution to the EU Budget once the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. I will want to see your answers as to how you are going to finance the farmers of the Republic once the common agricultural policy payments are reduced across Europe. These are the kinds of challenges that the Republic faces, and you are not giving us answers.

**Mr Seán Crowe TD:**

I think that sometimes there is a time to not say anything and a time when you have to intervene. I know, for myself, and I can probably speak for many of my colleagues, that there is not a week goes by when we do not have a meeting about Brexit. I am on Committee A of this organisation, and we have actually had meetings with all sorts of organisations. I was at a meeting last night and we were talking of a report, possibly an interim report, for our next meeting. That is all on Brexit issues. There is work going on. Should we have had that draft at this meeting? It is not ready, but it will be ready, hopefully, for the next plenary or maybe the next meeting in Dublin.

It is not true to say that we have not been doing our work. I am on the Foreign Affairs Committee and the European Union Affairs Committee. At the moment, the bulk of our work is that we have been out with Mr Barnier and the European Parliament and we have met all the players. We have met with the people in Westminster, the Foreign Affairs Committee in Westminster, the Northern Ireland Committee in Westminster, and so on. It is not true to say that we are somehow in the dark. A lot of us just do not see the positives for anyone, be they the people of Ireland or Britain, in relation to this. It was sold on the basis that it was going to be a hugely positive thing, but it is difficult, through the lens that I am looking through, to see that and I do not see those huge benefits, certainly not for the people of Ireland.

It is understandable that people are frustrated, particularly in relation to the issue of consent. People in Scotland voted to remain. People in the North of Ireland voted to remain. That does not seem to matter in the big scheme of things. We have huge problems facing us down the line, and that is why I was saying to the British ambassador about structures that are there at the moment — east-west, North/South — and even this structure and that we need to step up to the plate in relation to this. If we genuinely believe that this can work, are those structures there, or maybe we need to look outside the box at different structures, moving forward. That is not taking away from whoever is going to be negotiating and so on.

I want to have a say on the final outcome of this. I presume that everyone else in the room feels the same. At times we can be quiet and at other times we can speak up. We can all talk about our concerns. People talk about the Executive. I know that my party is prepared to meet. I would expect that there are going to be meetings over the summer, maybe the one-to-ones etc. There are going to be meetings or attempts to have meetings about the Executive and the outstanding issues. There will certainly be meetings with the Irish Government. I

presume that there will be other meetings as well. So, there is stuff going on that does not necessarily have to be announced every week. People are up for an agreement.

The difficulty is that agreements have been made in the past and have not been implemented. This summer was appalling in relation to the 12th stuff. I do not want to get involved in this stuff, but I was appalled at some of the images. We listened to young people speak here today, but what is the message that those bonfires, the images, the effigies and the religious symbols that are being burnt sending to those young people about the shared future that we are supposed to all be moving forward to? That is the big difficulty that I have. As I say, there is huge work ahead of us. Let us think about what we, as BIPA, can do constructively to move us forward.

**Mr Ross Greer MSP:**

Lord Kilclooney's questions for the Irish Government were interesting because they struck me as some of the many, many questions that the British Government need to answer but do not yet have an answer to, despite having started negotiations. We had a similar discussion to this at this time last year in Malahide, when we talked about the need for some level of clarity before article 50 was activated. That has not happened. Eamon Ryan was absolutely right in saying that a message that should be coming out of this forum is the need for clarity. If people feel the need to ask the Irish Government the same or similar questions that we are asking the British Government, then so be it, but there is a desperate need. The public in the United Kingdom, whether they voted leave or remain, have a desperate need for that clarity. Businesses need that clarity. Farmers need that clarity. Universities need that clarity.

John Scott made a point about getting something concrete out of this. Having been to a few of these assemblies now, I have sometimes wondered what concrete actions come out of them. When we were having the discussion this time last year, I suggested that a message that should be coming from BIPA is the need for a well-clarified, well-defined, agreed-early transitional arrangement. It is quite clear that a number of these issues are simply far too complex to be fully and adequately resolved within the two-year negotiating period. There is a need for the UK to go through what will probably be a considerable transitional period of a number of years. In the last few weeks, we saw the issue with Euratom. That is a single issue with a single agency, but it is immensely complicated and there are no answers yet.

Issues have come up with the legislative consent motions that will go before the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Irish Assembly, if there is one. The Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly will reject those legislative consent motions. At that point, we are not sure what will happen next, but it is quite clear that the two-year period that we are now a few months into will not be long enough to resolve all this. The need for an adequate transitional period is urgent and needs to be agreed as early as possible in this two-year period.

**Deputy Kevin Lewis:**

In Jersey and the Channel Islands, we were as stunned as everyone else when the result came through that Brexit was actually happening. But, correct me if I am wrong, the United Kingdom has well in excess of 65 million people and that is an absolutely huge market, so I cannot really see Europe thumbing their nose at the UK and saying, "You are not getting any

more BMWs or Mercedes”, etc. However, if there is one thing that markets really hate, as Ross alluded to, it is uncertainty, so the sooner we get solid agreements in place, the better.

**Mr Darren Millar AM:**

*[Inaudible.]* To be fair to the UK Prime Minister, she set out very clearly what the UK wants to achieve from Brexit, including control over our own laws, control over immigration and the ability to do free trade agreements with other countries of the world that the EU does not currently have free trade agreements with. They are three aims at least that could give significant benefits to the United Kingdom as a nation. I represented a party that was split down the middle on Brexit. The Conservative Party was the only party that reflected truly the views of the British people, if you like, because half of us were campaigning to remain and half of us were campaigning to leave. I think that it is quite refreshing in politics that there was not a firm line for the Conservative Party and that people were not whipped into different positions.

I think that, yes, we need to discuss these issues. I think it is important that we get a Brexit deal that is beneficial to the UK, Ireland and the rest of the EU. I am actually quite confident that, because of the size of the UK market and its importance to the rest of the European Union, there will be a decent deal. You would expect, of course, the different sides at the negotiation table to be playing their cards close to their chest this early in the game, and you would suggest that there is a significant amount of bluff on both sides. But, at the end of the day, I think that there is a will on both sides of the table to make sure that this deal is something that is of benefit to us all.

As has been said, it may well mean that there needs to be some sort of special status for the Republic of Ireland within the EU to achieve things like the common travel area and remove any trade barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the island of Ireland. I do not know, but I think that these things need to be discussed by us and we need to explore how we can contribute usefully to the debate and not simply regurgitate points that have been made in our legislatures already through some of the work that has been done. We need to add value to the debate rather than simply repeat, parrot-fashion, things that we have heard other people saying elsewhere.

**The Lord Dubs:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I find this discussion rather depressing; I do not know whether I am the only one who feels that. I very much agree with what Ross Greer said a few minutes ago. It looks as though the problems of negotiating everything we have to negotiate within two years is just beyond our ability and the ability of the EU to agree to. I do not think we can do it. We are either going to be left with no deal at all, which would be a disaster, or we are going to have to beg for a transitional period. I do not know whether the powers that be in Brussels would be sympathetic to a transitional period. If they are, that will give us some breathing space; if they are not, it looks as though we will be out of this thing without any deal at all. Despite what our Prime Minister said, the worst outcome is no deal. I cannot think of a deal that is worse than no deal for either Britain or Ireland.

On the comments that have been made saying that the Irish should tell us where they stand and so on, I have to say to my good friend Lord Kilclooney that that is a bit rich. The British

Government are giving no sense at all of knowing what they are at. They are simply sending a message of total confusion.

**Mr Darren Millar AM:**

That is nonsense.

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

It is playing politics saying that rubbish.

**The Lord Dubs:**

I am sorry; I cannot hear. They are sending a message that is totally confusing.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:**

Read the papers.

**The Lord Dubs:**

I do not believe the Government know exactly where we are.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

OK, we will have one speaker at a time; we are not going to have people talking over each other.

**The Lord Dubs:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I am happy to take a heckle, but it has got to be a clear heckle. *[Laughter.]* A confused, mumbling heckle does not get you anywhere, Co-Chair; it is simply that I cannot hear it.

I just want to repeat this: if I knew what the British Government were trying to achieve, I would be at least understanding of what is going on, but the messages they are sending are very confused, and there is no clarity. If there is no clarity on the British side, how can we expect the Irish to know what is going on? We cannot expect the Irish to respond to a situation that it is not clear even to us. I am afraid that I find that all rather depressing. I think the issue is too difficult at the moment, and the sad thing is that the British Government have come to a halt; there is nothing else going on except Brexit, which means all the things that need to be done in our country and our society are just not happening. All the energies of the Government are involved with this one single issue. I find that deeply depressing.

I am absolutely certain that if we can get a transitional period we can, at least, pause to breathe, but I have no idea whether there is any positive likelihood of a response from Brussels if we ask for that. I think that, at this stage, they would probably say no. I am sorry to sound so depressing, but that is what I feel.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Lord Dubs. Senator Feighan.

**Senator Frank Feighan:**

Thank you for your information. A little over a year ago, I was asked to help launch Alasdair McDonnell and the SDLP's manifesto on the Irish for Europe — that was part of the Remain campaign. I appreciate that this was a sovereign decision, but our job in the Republic was to convince Irish citizens who had a vote in the United Kingdom that it was in the best interests of the island of Ireland.

*4.15 pm*

I did say that we held 27 referendums in, effectively, 27 years in the Republic, and, normally, when people are asked a question in a referendum, they never vote on the question that is put to them. They vote on something like turf cutting or immigration or whatever.

While we are talking here today at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, we feel that the peace process and the island of Ireland was not considered by the people, certainly on the mainland in the UK, in their deliberations on that referendum. We feel a little let down, although we did try to highlight it. There is anecdotal evidence that even the Irish in Britain voted for Brexit, so the question was about other emotive issues. I say again that a bad deal for the UK is a bad deal for the island of Ireland.

This has been a very worthwhile debate, and I think that this British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly can come into its own by trying to articulate some issues. I want to say one thing. There are companies, politicians and people who will have dined out for the last two years and will be dining out for the next 20 years on conferences, meetings and meals out on Brexit. Sometimes, we will talk ourselves into a corner, so it is an interesting place.

**Baroness Blood:**

Let me start by saying that I have no intention of making any reference to Brexit, because I am not smart enough. When I first heard the word “Brexit”, I thought that it was a new breakfast cereal, and I was looking in the supermarket for it.

I want to make a point. Two people here today referred to bonfires, and I think that that is the wrong thing to have recorded. In Northern Ireland, on the eleventh night, there are hundreds of bonfires, and there were four that these images appeared on. The very fact that they appeared got them publicity through the media and through the television, so they heaped on more. Nobody is more appalled than me by the very fact that images of other political parties were burnt. I found the thing with Martin McGuinness, who I worked very closely with, absolutely abhorrent.

However, let us face the truth here: this is just a very small issue, and I really do not think that it should be a matter that this assembly should be dealing with. It is part of the culture in a lot of the communities that I work in. Young people collect wood for months, and then it is taken over by other people, so let us not just blame the culture for what happened. What happened on the eleventh night on those four particular bonfires should not have happened, and, hopefully, there will be work done on them for next year.

We have come a long way in Northern Ireland. I am long enough here to remember us talking about the Good Friday Agreement and about whether or not it would work out. I take opposition to Jim when he says that we worship at the shrine of the Good Friday Agreement. As far as I am concerned, the Good Friday Agreement was a good Friday for the people of Northern Ireland. I think that it brought peace to Northern Ireland that we had not had for years, but let us not blow it out by saying, “Oh, these things are still there. Look, they are burning these effigies and all on bonfires”. That is a very small issue in Northern Ireland, and we have come across bigger ones and got them settled.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much. Andrew will come in to make a few concluding remarks, but before he does — Deputy Gallagher, are you looking to come in?

**Mr Pat “The Cope” Gallagher TD:**

As one who lives in Donegal and has represented Donegal since 1981, I am extremely fearful of the outcome of Brexit. Following on from the contributions of Frank Feighan and Lord Dubs, if 1% of the energy that we are using up debating Brexit now had been used to highlight the implication of Brexit before the referendum, we would not be talking about this today. I am convinced that it would not be on the agenda at all. Of course, it happened in Ireland. I am not being critical of those who voted, voting for something that was not affected. I want to ask our UK colleagues: is there a chance that, when the United Kingdom realises that this is not going to be good for the United Kingdom — it will not be good for Ireland — it will consider *European Free Trade Association (EFTA)* or European Economic Area (EEA) membership, which would give it access to huge markets?

It is said that there is a big market in the UK. Of course, there is a big market in the UK: nobody better knows it than Ireland. As I said this morning, the UK exports 74% of their fish products. It might not be huge in terms of GDP — it is only 0.7% — but, by the same token, where do they export those products without a tariff? Going through the WTO, the rate might not be that high, but it would still be high enough to make it difficult for them to do that. I just wonder whether there would be a situation whereby they would follow the Norway, Lichtenstein or Iceland example. I know that if they do that, they cannot dine à la carte: payments will have to be made and they will of course have to take on board other restrictions.

How can anyone tell me that there will be a common travel area and there will be no problem? What about those who come into Ireland from other countries? They will go to Lifford, Armagh, Newry or Dundalk. That has to be policed. That will create major problems. Of course you will have to have custom posts for shipping goods out of the Republic of Ireland through Northern Ireland. In my political lifetime, the greatest change that I have seen of course has been the peace process and, after that, the removal of economic borders. I cannot see anything other than the return of those. My question is about EFTA.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thank you for that, Deputy Gallagher. I would just like to thank everyone for their contributions and for being respectful of everybody else’s opinion. I want to make some

points. I think that some good suggestions were made about a solution-focused debate at the next plenary in Liverpool. I just want to mention in relation to speakers and the agenda that the plenary dates were changed on two occasions. It was supposed to be in April, then in May. The dates were actually set. The hotel and everything was booked for May. You will appreciate that it is difficult to change things at the last minute. We actually had an ESRI speaker down. Hopefully, they may be able to make the Liverpool dates. Unfortunately, with the change of date, they could not make the new dates. Can people bear that in mind? Again, I encourage people to be active, get in contact with the steering committee and put forward their suggestions and ideas to be looked at. I will hand over to Andrew to make some concluding remarks.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you, Kathleen. I will just make a few remarks. I am Co-Chair, so I cannot make political remarks. It would not be appropriate to do so from a partisan point of view, but I would just like to say a few things.

First, one issue with this assembly, which was rightly pointed out by Colin, is that we do not have many UK MPs here. In fact, there are only two of us, which is very disappointing. Without MPs here, it is always going to be tricky to have meaningful debate. Many more MPs would have been able to enliven these discussions and answer a number of questions. I have been sitting here dying to answer lots of the questions that I have been hearing, but, being in the chair, it is not appropriate for me to sit here and answer every question in that sense. It is a shame that there are not many more MPs here.

In the light of the situation in the UK, the steering committee may have to consider whether we have to review the days of the week that we actually have our meetings. I am afraid that this is now going to be a permanent problem, probably for the next four to five years, because of the very finely balanced majority in the House of Commons. It will mean that MPs have to be there on Mondays and Tuesdays. I have been given special permission to be here. I actually pleaded for it. If I were not here, it would have been really bad because there would have been no one here at all from the governing party. The steering committee will have to address how we approach that in future.

Equally, the point has been made by several people that we need to have meaningful discussions. We will certainly take that on board for Liverpool. We need people who are controversial. We do not want to keep regurgitating the same discussions. I will say that it is no good going back on this: the decision to leave the EU has been made and that cannot and will not be reversed. Whatever our views are, the relevant thing to discuss is where we go in the future. From my own point of view, what I believe is needed is for everyone here to be a bit open-minded about how we evolve the future.

The same goes for representatives of the Republic of Ireland. Lord Kilclooney made the point. You need the kind of debate that we have been having for the last 30 years. If you have that debate, you might realise why we made that decision.

*4.30 pm*

I really think that there needs to be a much more open-minded discussion on this and a willingness to be more flexible because the world changes: Europe is changing and our future

markets are not just in Europe; they are global. That applies to Ireland as well as it does to Britain. As Britain is negotiating individual trade agreements around the world, particularly with English-speaking countries, you need to consider Ireland's flexibility in not being able to join us in those agreements in the future.

There is also the issue of tax harmonisation and whether you are happy with the fact that your corporation tax could be harmonised in the future and, as was pointed out earlier, Ireland will be a net contributor rather than a recipient. You need flexible thought on where Ireland is going as well as Britain. We should have that discussion together because we have so much in common and our peoples are intertwined in so many ways. We cannot be split. We will have to find clever ways to still work together and move forward but, at the same time, try to persuade the EU to allow all of us to be a bit more flexible in how we work with the EU as well as with each other and, most importantly, the wider world.

I have tried not to be too political in those comments, but I think that I have got the message that, at future meetings, we need to really make progress on this; have genuine, heartfelt debate and come up with solutions because it is no good if we disagree and argue from our different perspectives. We all have different opinions. We need to find solutions and feed those back to the people who have the power to make decisions. Thank you.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much, Andrew. Just before we conclude, I would just like to thank all our guest speakers today and also yourselves, members, for being so cooperative. This evening, we will have a reception in the town hall. There is an opportunity now for a short break. A coach will leave here at 6.00 pm. The reception is being hosted by the mayor, Councillor Michael Doyle. Then, we will go on to Kilkenny Castle for dinner. There is the option if people want to take a later coach at 7.15 pm and just go directly to the castle. However, I know that I will be accused of being biased, but I would encourage people to come on the 6.00 pm coach to get the opportunity to see our town hall. We will also visit the Medieval Mile Museum. I encourage you to take that opportunity while you are in the city of Kilkenny. The plenary is suspended until 9.30 am tomorrow. Thank you.

*The sitting was suspended at 4.34 pm.*

*Tuesday 18 July 2017*

*The Assembly met at 9.41 am*

## **PLENARY BUSINESS**

### **MOTION TO AMEND THE MEMBERSHIP RULES (ON A TEMPORARY BASIS)**

#### **The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Members, we are going to make a start. First of all, good morning everybody and welcome to our second day of deliberations. We have our annual reports this morning and our updates from Committee Chairs. We will also be hearing from Professor Michael Marsh on the topical issue of political polling. I know that all Members are very interested in this subject. We will have a coffee break at around 10.45 am, and, following this, we will hear presentations from the Chairs of Committees D and C on their reports to the plenary. Copies of those reports are on your desks. There is also a copy of the group photograph that was taken yesterday for everybody.

Yesterday we spoke about a motion on a temporary amendment to membership rules. I will read that motion, and then Andrew will give an explanation for it. The Steering Committee agreed that the following motion will be put to Members of the Assembly for approval:

That, with effect until 17 October 2017, the following amendment be made to the rules of the Assembly. In the proviso to rule 1(d), line 3, leave out

“until the end of the next session” and insert  
“until the end of the next but one session”.

Members have been circulated with copies of that, and I am going to ask Andrew to explain the background to and reason for the motion.

#### **The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you, Kathleen. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The motion is intended as a precaution to ensure that there is a Westminster delegation in place for the Liverpool plenary in October. The new British delegation has not yet been appointed following last month’s general election. Under the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) rules, a delegation from one of the participating institutions remains in existence after a dissolution of that institution until either a new delegation is appointed or until the end of the following plenary session, whichever is sooner. Thus, the UK delegation from the last Parliament is still in place for the present plenary session, but it will lapse after the final proceedings in the Assembly on Tuesday, which is today. The British executive board has put forward proposals for the new delegation to our party Whips, and I am confident we will have a new member appointed if not this week, then in September. Just in case of any unanticipated delays, what I would like to do is propose that the Assembly should agree to the motion I tabled, which would extend the life of the existing British delegation to the close of the Liverpool plenary — just in case. This is purely a temporary change to the rules, which will have no effect after the Liverpool plenary.

Would anyone like to comment? Is the motion agreed for presentation?

**Ms Ann Jones AM:**

Sorry. Good morning, Chair. I think that, for clarity, we should have the words as a temporary measure added. It was added on the draft I saw on Sunday at the Steering Committee. I think it should be put in the motion so that nobody is under any illusion that this is a temporary measure.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

OK. So, with that amendment, can I ask whether the motion has been agreed to? Agreed. Thank you very much.

*9.45 am*

## **ANNUAL REPORT 2016**

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

The draft annual report on the Assembly's activities is available in hard copy. It is complete apart from the review of recent political developments. This review will be added shortly in the version to be published on the BIPA website, subject to the approval of the two Co-Chairs.

Can I seek your agreement on that? Agreed. Thank you very much.

## **PROGRESS REPORTS FROM COMMITTEE CHAIRS (A, B, C and D) AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO PREVIOUS COMMITTEE REPORTS**

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

I am going to ask each Committee Chair to update the plenary on their reports. I am going to start with Committee A, which is Deputy Joe Carey.

**Mr Joe Carey TD (The Chairperson of Committee A):**

Thanks very much, Co-Chair. I am delighted to provide a progress report for Committee A on sovereign matters. Committee A has focused on the inquiry into trade and the border in the context of Brexit. Since the last plenary, it has held meetings in Liverpool, London and Belfast and, informally, at the plenary session in Cardiff. The first meetings for the inquiry were held in Liverpool and included meetings with local government, civil society representatives and academics. At subsequent meetings, the Committee met with Kris Hopkins MP, then parliamentary undersecretary of state for Northern Ireland, Owen Paterson MP and the Irish ambassador in Great Britain, Dan Mulhall.

The Committee's most recent meeting was in Belfast in January, where we met with trade union officials, academics, civil society representatives, farmer representatives and a senior PSNI officer. Committee A plans to continue our examination of the potential consequences of the UK leaving the EU under the specific areas outlined in the terms of reference formally adopted at our meeting in London in December 2016.

I look forward to working with all the members of Committee A on this important and relevant work in the coming months.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Deputy Carey. Does anyone have any questions for Deputy Carey? OK. We will move on to Committee B, which is for Andrew.

**Mr Andrew Rosindell MP:**

Thank you, Kathleen. Committee B's work is continuing on our report, which is regarding British-Irish relations following the UK's departure from the European Union. We hope to have the report completed by the Liverpool plenary. So far, we have had visits to London, where we met Government representatives and representatives of the Crown dependencies. We also went to Dublin where, again, we met officials and Ministers dealing with the issue.

We now have plans to visit Brussels to go to the European Commission and the European Parliament to talk about the relevant points with people there, after which we hope to conclude the report and have that ready, fingers crossed, by the plenary in Liverpool. After that, our next report will be about European security and cooperation post-Brexit and how we can ensure that we have security arrangements across Europe.

So, those are the two reports we are working on, and I look forward to giving you further news of our Brexit report when we meet again in Liverpool in October. Thank you very much.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks, Andrew. Does anyone have any questions relating to Committee B? OK. We will move on to Committee C. David Ford is going to give the update for Committee C.

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I am standing in, as Senator Denis Landy is unwell and Helen Jones has been unable to make this particular plenary. Following the Cardiff plenary, we had one evidence session in Cardiff for the Committee's ongoing work on the implications for the agri-food sector arising from Brexit. I will shortly present the interim report on behalf of the Committee on that, so I do not need to say anything further except that it is very much an interim report. We hope, having taken evidence in Belfast, Dublin and Cardiff, to also continue to Edinburgh, London and Brussels in the coming months and to have a full report as soon as possible.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much, David. Are there any questions for Committee C? OK. Lord Dubs, we are moving on to you for Committee D, please.

**The Lord Dubs (The Chairperson of Committee D):**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I shall report later this morning on the work we have completed, which is our report on childhood obesity. At our meeting, we agreed the report, which we are putting to you later this morning, and then we agreed on the next topic for discussion, which is slightly more controversial than some. It is, and I will read it carefully, the cross-jurisdictional implications of abortion policy. I appreciate that it is controversial, but we will certainly take evidence from all sides of the argument. We think it is an important issue and are all agreed that we should be doing it, even if I think our conclusions will not be unanimous.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much, Lord Dubs. Does anyone have any questions in relation to Committee D? OK. I will pass back over to Andrew now. Thanks.

## **THE PERILS OF POLITICAL POLLING**

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you very much, Kathleen. We will now move on to what I am sure will be the highlight of our morning, which is the address by Michael Marsh, emeritus professor from the Department of Political Science, Trinity College, Dublin. Professor Marsh will be our speaker this morning. He will talk about the topical issue of the perils of political polling, which is of great interest to all of us, particularly in the light of the British general election, which was an example of the perils of political polling.

I will ask Professor Marsh if he would be kind enough to address the Assembly. *[Applause.]*

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

Thank you. What a pleasure it is to be here, and it was a pleasure to have dinner in such stimulating company yesterday evening. I think I am your reward for wading through all that procedure. I will try to be more interesting than procedure, but I know that, for people of your persuasion, there are few things more interesting than procedure.

The “perils of polling” — I thought that was nice. Lots of p’s. One of your Members, who is not with us at the moment, Mrs May, would probably agree that there are definitely perils in political polling.

I have given you a few pictures and a couple of tables, which you may or may not refer to as you wish. I was asked to talk for a relatively short time. If I can find my phone, I will set a timer. I can see a watch there; that will do. I want to make a few factual points to begin with and then point to certain areas where there are problems. It was suggested that I then throw it open to questions, so I can deal with all sorts of things in questions and answers.

I will begin with polling error. There is polling error. You do not need me to tell you that. Presumably, people are particularly sensitive when their party is misestimated, particularly when they are misestimated in the wrong direction. Actually, polling error is relatively small. There are some numbers on one of the slides in your package from a study published a couple

of years ago, but the data was drawn on for the report into a now very old polling disaster — the polling disaster in 2015 in Britain, which we have probably forgotten about now. In the report on that by the survey organisations, they drew on some of that data and found the average error across 42 countries and 212 elections between the average of the last polls and the outcome for each party was less than 2%. That is not bad. I think that is quite good. If you did not have polls, you would never get that close. Some of those parties are quite small and, if you only get 2%, 2% off is quite a lot. It is just over 2%. It is 2.3%, if the 0.3% really matters. Again, that is quite small. In Britain, the average error for Labour and Conservatives is 3.3%. That is getting a bit bigger, but they would say that they are a bit bigger usually. The average error in Ireland for Fianna Fáil and —

**Mr Jim Wells MLA:**

Sorry, are you using percentage points rather than percentages? There is a huge difference. If my vote goes up from 2% to 4%, that is two percentage points, but it is doubled.

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

It is two percentage points.

**Mr Jim Wells MLA:**

Therefore, it all makes sense if you use two percentage points or percentage, where applicable.

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

Thank you.

In Ireland, it is 3.5 percentage points. If Fine Gael were expected to get 26 and it got 29.5, that is the sort of error. That is quite big comparatively, and the parties there are not particularly big. Those errors have been growing in Ireland over the last several elections, and, in terms of the gap between the two largest parties, they have grown and got more serious. In Britain, it seems to fluctuate and go up and down. The last American election, which attracted a lot of attention, actually had an error of 1%. There, the polls did a pretty good job. It is just that the strange intermediary between the polls and the outcome was not so effective.

There are problems that the solutions to which can improve these estimates or, in some cases, probably make them a lot worse. To begin with, we can say that polls are wrong because of random error. They are random samples, and we know that random samples are not always accurate, so that is all that is happening. There are two reasons why that is not a very satisfactory explanation. The first is that, if they are random samples and we have lots of them, they should average on the right answer, and they do not; they average on the wrong answer, as I have already said.

The second and more serious point is, of course, that they are not random samples at all. They are relatively haphazard samples, with some randomness in them but undermined hugely in two ways. Where polls are done, going face-to-face, door-to-door, as they are done in Ireland but not done in the UK any more, and as they are done by phone, ringing up random

numbers, the problem is that not everybody answers and not everybody agrees to be interviewed. I saw an estimate in the US, where the response rate for a phone poll is less than one in 10. So we have to ask, “Are the people who agree to be interviewed really a random sample of all those who were asked?”. Quite often, it is patently obvious that they are not. Most of the polls in the UK and US are done over the Internet. They are done by drawing randomly from panels of people who have signed up to be polled, probably tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. We still do not do that in Ireland for political polling because the sample base is considered too unreliable. Again, are those people who opt in really random samples of everybody? Are there differences between the people who opt in to YouGov polls and the people who do not? The answer is yes. There are big differences, and some of those big differences helped to account for the disaster of a poll in 2015 in the UK. People who were interested in politics, oddly enough, were more inclined to be interviewed. Sometimes that would not matter; sometimes there is no link between party choice and interest. But, in the UK in 2015, there was a big impact and that helped to account for — in fact, that was the major factor in — the polls getting it wrong. So, random sampling is a problem.

The usual answer when pollsters get it wrong is that there was a late swing. Maybe we see changes over elections, but polling is increasingly done closer and closer to the final outcome. Whilst very late campaign shifts can sometimes account for some of the difference, it is quite impossible to put all of the error down to a sudden late shift in the ballot box.

A third major problem is the undecideds: those who do not know how they are going to vote. There are various ways around that. One way is to use a number of questions. So, you ask people if they are going to vote and who they will vote for, and they may say, “I don’t really know”. Sometimes companies leave it like that; other companies push a bit harder and say, “If you did make up your mind, what are you most likely to do? Who are you inclining towards?”. They will do anything they can to get people out of that “undecided” category. Once you have done that, what do you do with those people? You can do two things. One is to leave them out of the calculation, which really means allocating them proportionately across all the other responses. You assume that the undecideds are just like everybody else. That is the simple thing to do.

The alternative is to be cleverer and say, “Well, they don’t know how they’re going to vote, but we’ll work out how they are most likely to vote if they do”. Perhaps that could be done by looking at their demographics, their past voting patterns, their attitude to who is the best party leader and all sorts of things like that. Then, you predict how they will vote, or how some of them will vote, and you add that in. You hope that that will get you closer to the truth.

*10.00 am*

The final thing I want to mention is turnout; there are others, but maybe they will come up. We interview people about future behaviour. That is very difficult. We are not great at knowing what we will do tomorrow, and what people say they will do and what they actually do are sometimes different things. We hope, again, that that cancels out. But with voting intention polls, particularly in countries where large numbers of people do not vote — sometimes very large numbers of people — it is arguable that we should make some adjustment to filter out those who are not going to vote. Again, there are two basic ways to do that — well, there are three. Most companies in Ireland do not do anything. They make no adjustments at all.

If you are going to make adjustments, you ask people, maybe on a 1-to-10 scale, how likely they are to vote. Then, you pick a proportion of those. You pick everybody who says 10 or everybody who is above five, and you use that group to make your estimates of what would happen if there were an election tomorrow. The other way to do it is to look at the other information you have about those people — their demographics, for instance — and say that, “In general, only 40% of those aged 18 to 24 actually turn out. We will use some kind of weighting so that the 18-to-24 group in our sample carries much less weight than the over-70s who tend to turn out in large numbers, maybe because they have nothing else to do”.

The problem with the first version is the same as when you ask people after an election if they voted and all sorts of people will tell you that they voted when they did not. It is hard to believe that they have forgotten when it was only three weeks ago. It is a good thing to say that you will vote. Those who want to be thought good will say that they are going to vote even when they will not. So, you might introduce some bias that way.

Estimating on the basis of likely turnout by demographics and other things runs the risk that what worked last time might not work this time. I put a picture — Figure 7 and Figure 8 — in your little package, and it shows the change in turnout in the UK between 2015 and 2017 by age. There were some fairly dramatic shifts amongst the younger age groups, with young people much more likely to vote than they had been last time. That has consequences because young people tend to support different parties to those supported by older people, at least these days. If more young people vote, Labour will do better. If more old people vote relative to young people, the Conservatives will do better.

The sample problems in 2015 in Britain partly came about because the companies ensured they had the right number of people in different age brackets, and so they had the right number of people for the 65-and-over age bracket. Unfortunately, most of those people were 65 to 70 whereas most of the people in that age bracket were over 70 and there was a difference in party allegiances between those in their late 70s and those in their late 60s and so the sample was actually wrong.

Anyway, we can do that. The problem is, as I said, we do not know that those sorts of age differences in turnout will persist from election to election to election. Looking back over past elections, there is variation in Britain. The gap in turnout between the oldest and the youngest had been rising rapidly over several elections and was reversed at this one.

I also included a little picture for, I guess, the Irish members here to show what would happen if we had an election and there was no age differential in the vote. In Ireland, young people are much less likely to vote than older people. Using the exit poll as the basis, you will see that Fianna Fáil would have got significantly fewer votes, Sinn Féin would have got significantly more, and we might be in a different political position to that which we are in. Whether new politics would have lasted that long or whether new politics would have even given us a government, I do not know. I suppose that is food for thought when talking to young people and getting them to turn out.

Finally, I turn to the perils of polling, which is perhaps the other side of the coin. One of my favourite stories about polling was the Irish election of 1977. I do not think of that as a long time ago. Some of you do, and some of you do not, I guess. In 1977, we had had a coalition government for four years, I think. The feeling amongst those in the know was summed up I remember by a famous ‘Irish Independent’ journalist who announced that, if Fianna Fáil won

that election, it would be the greatest comeback since Lazarus. ‘The Irish Times’ got three polls done by a British company. We had not had polls published; some had been done previously but not published. The polls said that Fianna Fáil would win more than 50% of the vote. That is not more than 50% of the seats; that is more than 50% of the vote. “Ho, ho, ho”, they said in ‘The Irish Times’. “What rubbish. We won’t publish that”, and so it did not publish that. What happened? Well, Fianna Fáil won more than 50% of the vote. The polls were right, and the experts, the people who spoke to one another in the Dáil bar and on the doorsteps got it wrong. It is not always the polls that are wrong. Sometimes, it is the experts.

I am open for questions.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Do we have any questions to the professor? Who would like to go first?

**Viscount Bridgeman:**

Have you any statistics on the effect on the margins of error from the countries that have compulsory voting, like Australia?

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

No, I do not. They were not singled out in the analysis that I saw. I think that, if you were to do analysis of Australia, you would see that many of the problems, of course, are still problems. The only one that they sort of solve, I guess, is the turnout problem. The problem with having 100% turnout is that you do drive to the polls an awful lot of people with no interest whatever who really are genuinely likely to decide what to do when they arrive in the polling station. Whilst you will clearly reduce your turnout error, you might have a bigger error on the undecideds. I do not know whether Australian polls are better or worse than others.

**The Lord Dubs:**

Thank you. That is pretty interesting. As you talked, I tried to relate it to canvassing experiences and so on, but maybe that is not for this occasion. Do you think that the difference in the electoral system in Ireland compared with the UK has an effect on the way in which the polling companies come up with their conclusions?

Secondly, do you think that there is anything in the argument that a good canvasser with experience of knocking on doors gets a sort of feel for things, which, in some ways, adds a dimension to the more dispassionate, colder view of the polling companies, especially if they are doing it on a non-face-to-face basis? In the 2015 election in the UK, when the polls were saying one thing — I am not trying to be cleverer than anybody else — I kept getting things on the doorsteps. If things are moving towards you, people will say, “Oh, yeah, I used to vote Conservative, but I am voting Labour this time.” If things are moving away from you, they will very seldom tell you — except in Scotland, where there are different attitudes and people are much more open. They will happily say to you, “Oh, yes, we always used to vote Labour, but we are voting SNP this time. Thank you for calling.” They do not do that in England. They are not as polite as that.

I could go on with anecdotes, but I had better not. The fact is that, in the 2015 election, what I picked up — and I ignored it because opinion polls were so consistently saying something else — was the number of people who were saying, in contrast to the usual experience, “We used to vote Labour, but we are not sure.” There was enough of that happening in a very small sample to make me think, “What will I do with this information?” I did not know what to do with it. I went with the opinion polls. Those little comments were actually better than the opinion polls in that election.

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

Thank you. I will take the first question on the consequences of the electoral system first.

When Irish polling companies started to do polls on votes, they were rather concerned because there was a perception that the candidate factor would be much more important in Irish elections. Obviously, people select a candidate from a party, but, in the 1970s, there were two big parties, each of which would run several candidates in each constituency. People would choose between them. Companies were concerned that a question like, “Which party will you vote for tomorrow?” would not do justice to the sort of decisions that voters were making. I know that one polling company ran monthly polls most of the way through the 1970s just to see whether the outcomes then tallied with elections when they happened. It seemed to be fine, more or less.

Then, they started doing published polls, largely from the 1980s onwards, which I think is quite recently, but, again, it is not that recent. Concerns were still there that the polls were sometimes getting it wrong. In 2002, the two major companies that did polls both came out with the same super solution to ensure that they got it right. What they gave people was a mock ballot paper; the ballot paper that they would be faced with on election day. This was just through the campaign. People could indicate on the mock ballot paper how they were going to vote. The companies were pretty keen on that. They thought that it would be much better because people would then be aware of that independent candidate who was standing and who they had forgotten about, who the candidates were and so on, which, normally, they might not be aware of until very late in the campaign. It did not work very well. I think that one company — probably both companies — made the biggest errors they had ever made. I remember being in a newspaper office at the time when one poll was giving Fianna Fáil close to 50%. All the experts knew, of course, that that could not possibly happen. On one account, somebody was told in Fianna Fáil headquarters that that could not possibly happen. In the end, they were far too high. They were not making the sort of adjustments that I have talked about, which some of the companies had been making before and went back to making afterwards. That experiment was short-lived.

The second question was about experience on the doorsteps. I bow to your experience on the doorsteps. It is not something that I have done. I can imagine that sometimes your experience on the doorsteps contrasts with what the polls are saying and your experience is right, but, of course, the experience on the doorsteps sometimes contrasts with the polls and the experience is wrong.

I do not know what sort of response Tory canvassers were getting on the doorsteps at the last election in Britain, but the Tory party was still sending its leaders into constituencies it hoped to gain from Labour, not constituencies that it hoped to hang onto against Labour. If they were listening, they were not.

10.15 am

**Mr Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD:**

I have two questions. One very brief one is this: what is the margin of people who are polled who blatantly tell porkies in their responses? You mentioned that some of those who are polled would be politically minded. If you are so politically minded, you might give an answer that moved the poll in a different direction from what resulted.

My other question is about the effect of polls on the result, and I know that there has been discussion about that in Ireland and other countries. In some countries, polls are banned altogether; in others, it is a few days out. Do polls or their presentation have an impact on those who are considering, especially the undecided, and move them in a certain direction, which adds to a momentum that a party had or might not have had? I know that it feeds into the view that polling can have a negative effect on an election campaign. Rather than the discussion we have on the door or in the media or whatever, all of a sudden, from the left field, a poll comes about, and the whole focus of the election campaign goes on the result of the poll rather than on the content of manifestos.

**Senator Terry Leyden:**

I would like to welcome Professor Marsh. It is always a joy to listen to you on radio during election times. You particularly come to the fore in relation to predictions.

What is your situation regarding the difference between the system in Britain, where it is a direct vote, and proportional representation in Ireland? It is very complicated, to say the least, to predict the outcome in multi-seat constituencies to the extent of that, say, in Britain, where it is a single-seat constituency. So, if a poll gives the Tories a lead, it is more than likely that their candidate will win; that is more or less within reason.

Furthermore, I will point out that I was one of the beneficiaries of the 1977 swing to Fianna Fáil. I recall that campaign very well. It was at a beautiful time near June. The weather was perfect. It was after a period of a disastrous Government. ‘Hall’s Pictorial Weekly’ was a contributor to the life of that Government. Nevertheless, you could feel the atmosphere on the doorstep. We had a manifesto — I practically did not read it. A lot of —

**Mr Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD:**

It was a wish list. It was not a manifesto; it was a wish list. *[Laughter.]*

**Senator Terry Leyden:**

We delivered on it, by the way, very effectively. *[Interruption.]*

The point is that there was such a swing to Fianna Fáil at that election that the manifesto was not the key point. It was such a wish. Nevertheless, we had a terrific leader in Jack Lynch. “Bring back Jack”: we had all the slogans and that sort of thing. It was tremendous. I am not surprised that ‘The Times’ did not publish that, because it would have benefited Fianna Fáil, probably, at that time.

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

Ok. Lying to pollsters. As far as voting intention goes, I do not think that we have any decent evidence that people lie. The difficulty is finding out whether they have lied. You can go back to them afterwards and ask them how they voted, but, of course, they may have changed their mind. You can look at systematic lying, which may favour one party over another, and you may guess that there was lying going on — people refusing to say that they voted for Trump, even though they were going to vote for Trump. However, pinning it down to that rather than something else is, I think, very difficult.

Certainly we know that people lie in opinion polls on all sorts of things. There is a mountain of evidence about that. But even on turnout, probably about one in six or one in seven of the people who say they have voted did not. Most polls after elections find very few people who did not vote; partly because non-voters do not answer polls, but also because people want to be seen as good citizens, so they say that they voted. There are, almost certainly, lies going on, but whether those lies are systematic in some way is another matter.

The effect of polls is an issue that comes up regularly. Fianna Fáil, I remember, wanted to abolish polls in the last few weeks, and I think it was Shane Ross, in the Seanad, who put an end to that. I remember the only time in my life I have written the editorial for a newspaper, I was invited in to write the editorial on that. There has been discussion of that. It does happen in some countries. When it happens in some countries, information leaks out in all sorts of other ways. People will say, “Ah, well, whatever the polls say, the view on the doorsteps is wonderful, and there has been a great swing to us since the last poll.” Parties will manage, if there are no polls, to put over their own version of the truth to help them. Personally, I do not think it is a good idea to ban polls, but there are views.

Looking at the effect of polls is, again, very difficult. Most of the political science that I know and have come across that has looked for so-called band-waggon effects shows that, certainly in very candidate-centred elections in the United States, polls showing that you are doing well are great because they bring in money, and money brings in more support because elections are about money. But in most parts of the world, they are not about money to anything like the same extent, so you are not going to suddenly have money pouring in through the letter box because you have good poll ratings. It changes the sort of narrative of newspapers, but I have not seen evidence that there are clear band-waggon effects for parties. If there were, how on earth did Labour go up so many percentage points in the last British election, when the polls for the last year or two, and most of the newspapers, were saying that they were a complete disaster, it would be a disaster and would get the lowest poll ever by a Labour Party, and once the election was called, they went up and up, despite the polls, and the polls, even though they were going up, were indicating a small increase?

There is some evidence in the United States, where it takes so long for voting to take place that you get results issued from one coast before people vote on the other coast. Even more so than a poll, that is a sort of band-waggon effect. However, they have not been able to pin down an impact of that on people who were aware of what the vote was on one side of the country.

Votes into seats. That is tricky here. It is tricky in Britain as well. It is not just a question of how many votes you get; it is where you get the votes. Even though there are fewer marginal

constituencies than there used to be in Britain, it is still tricky to move from votes to seats. It is even harder here. One can make estimates. I have made estimates; other people have made estimates, and it is a tricky thing to do. You hope that one cancels out the other. It is probably easier to predict the number of seats a party will win than which individual is going to get elected. There is a difference between votes and seats, and polls are, for the most part, only talking about votes.

There was a YouGov poll at the last election organised by a very eminent professor from Stanford in Britain, which came out with almost the right result about two weeks before the election and continued to come out with that sort of result, based on a lot of complicated statistical analysis and a lot of cases. In general, people said that they would eat their hats, eat their books or eat something unpleasant on television if it turned out to be right and, of course, it did.

**Mr Jim Wells MLA:**

First of all — [*Inaudible.*] — asking about percentage points. Just to give you an example, about 20 years ago, it was said that my vote increased by 4%. It had actually doubled, because it had increased by four percentage points, so 4% is neither here nor there but your vote doubling certainly is here or there. It irritates me when well-known pundits on BBC keep referring to percentages when they actually mean percentage points. A three-percentage-point failure on an opinion poll is a huge issue, because that could be a 10% change in the vote. That is why it is important to get these things right.

During the Brexit campaign, there were undoubtedly hundreds of thousands of people who lied about their voting intention because they had deep concerns about issues like immigration but felt that, if they had admitted that they voted to leave, they would be branded as racist. It was a very unpopular stance to take but, in the privacy of the ballot box, they had a chance to exercise their mandate to vote and express their concerns. The more unpopular the position and the party is, the less likely people are prepared to say that they voted for them.

For many years, the DUP was very popular in the elections but extremely unpopular in the opinion polls, and the reason for that was because we were seen as quite right-wing and people were embarrassed to say to the pollsters, “I voted DUP”. [*Interruption.*] We are right-wing. I do not think that we make any bones about it. The problem was that we always knew that an opinion poll would underestimate our stance, and Sinn Féin probably had the same problem in that people often would not admit that they voted for Sinn Féin because that was seen as something not quite nice to do by some people. It was the same with our own position.

The problem is why, then, the exit poll is so accurate. This is what I cannot understand. In four of the last five elections, the opinion polls got it terribly wrong but the exit poll got it absolutely right. Why are people less likely to lie or exaggerate when coming out of the ballot box than when going into it?

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

It is even more difficult to explain your contrast, because the vast majority of polling is either done over the telephone, when you cannot see someone, or through an Internet poll, where

you are sitting in the privacy of your own home on your own computer. What we see written on social media suggests that people are in a bubble of their own in front of a computer and are hardly likely to be too concerned about what the person who might look at their questionnaire might think of them. There is clear evidence of interviewer effects in polling, but you might expect it to have more impact when it is face-to-face and you are talking to a real person. As you say, that is the way exit polls are done, and exit polls tend to be fairly accurate — not always, but they have had a very good record in the UK in recent years and a pretty decent record in Ireland.

*10.30 am*

**Senator Frank Feighan:** [*Inaudible.*] I suppose that we are all guilty of this. When the poll comes out and it is good for, let us say, Fine Gael and it is RED C, we will say, “Oh well, that is quite accurate”, and if it is not good for Fine Gael and it is MRBI or something else, we will say, “Well, that poll normally does not get it right.” In the Republic, are there polls that have been consistently better than others? Has RED C been better than MRBI or something else, or has it been better for various parties in that, if it is a RED C poll, it can get the Fine Gael or Sinn Féin numbers right?

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

Chairman, first of all, on Jim Wells. The ‘County Down Outlook’, his local newspaper, always gets his victories accurately reported.

But seriously, looking ahead to the future, on the basis of the Belfast Agreement, at the next European elections we will have about 300,000 Irish citizens in Northern Ireland who will be European citizens. If the Dublin Parliament does the honourable thing and gives them votes in the European election, we will have an extra 300,000 Sinn Féin votes transferred into the Irish election for the European Parliament. Will it be practical to take into account these extra 300,000 voters in a public opinion poll?

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

If I can take that one first, I suppose it would be practical because the companies could ring numbers in Northern Ireland and ask them if they were likely to vote in the election in the Republic. I think it is more fraught because probably there will be fewer people who will take the opportunity of voting. In principle, it can be done, and it will be interesting to see whether anybody does it.

On differences between polls, do some companies seem to get it right and others get it wrong? I think it does vary over time. For the last two elections in the Republic, the Irish Times MRBI poll was closer than anybody else — the first time fortunately, I think, and the second time they just got closer. There are systematic differences across polls, partly because they use different methods both in how they do the sampling and what they do with undecideds and, probably, the biggest thing — whether they control for turnout or not. Behaviour & Attitudes and RED C control for turnout. Behaviour & Attitudes and RED C tend to give smaller support to Sinn Féin than do the other companies, because there is a control for turnout.

There is also a question of wording. Millward Brown and MRBI do not poll as often, but they do tend to give less support to a large group of others than RED C and Behaviours & Attitudes. Now those differences are not huge on the major parties: one or two percent on average, controlling for all sorts of other things. The larger group of others can go up to four or five percent systematic difference. Which of those is right at any one time? As I said, MRBI did get the last election right on the day, but they introduced controls for turnout in their final poll that they had never introduced in any previous polls. Even though they may have got the result right on that day with the control, it does not mean that the poll they did three weeks before with no controls for turnout was equally right.

**Mr Ross Greer MSP:**

Thank you. I am interested in the difference between methodologies. I believe that over the last few elections in the UK, and I think it is increasingly the same case in the US, the difference between the results of online polls versus phone polls — I think there is only company in the UK that still does face-to-face polls, which is TNS — is counterintuitive. You would expect the online results to more accurately reflect voting intentions, including those of young people, because it is simply harder to reach younger people on the phone these days, as less and less young people have landlines. The opposite was the case. Phone polls consistently more accurately reflected both the level of youth turnout and the corresponding support for parties that young people were more likely to support. It was online polling that was getting both youth turnout and the parties they were likely to support slightly further off. What are your thoughts on the difference between the methodologies?

**Mr John Scott MSP:**

Remarkably, I was going to say something similar to what Ross just said. My view, too, is that, as you discussed, Internet/online polling, with people volunteering to tell you their voting intentions, involves a self-selecting group of people and is therefore flawed. That is my first comment.

On telephone polling, an awful lot of people, in my experience, simply will not answer their phone. A lot of people who will not answer their phone are, again, a particular group of people, namely the elderly, who, for a variety of reasons, are targeted by people trying to sell them double glazing, central heating or something that they do not really want. Therefore, unless it is a number they know, they simply do not do it. In my experience, which is much longer than Ross's, through no fault of his — I wish I were his age and not mine — the best way by far is knocking on doors — which I am surprised to hear you say, sir, you have not done at all. I have knocked on many tens of thousands of doors in my political life, and you certainly get — I am with Alf on this one — a sense of what is happening. You may not be able to gauge it exactly, but the experienced canvasser can certainly tell you what is happening on the street. I think that going to talk to people is easily the best way of finding out what is going on.

**Mr Seán Crowe TD:**

Normally, when you talk to people about polls, the first thing they turn around and say is, "I've never been polled, and I don't know anyone who has." That is usually the first reaction. Some constituencies are much more volatile than others. I will give you an example. In my own constituency of Dublin South-West, for the last, I think, six elections, the candidate who

topped the poll has lost the following election, including myself in one of those elections. It is just one of those quirks, strangely enough. The constituencies are all different and are all made up in different ways.

There is also the impact that a manifesto might have on a campaign. People talk about what caused the big swing to Labour. Was it the manifesto? How does a polling agency pick up on the fact that that has created a bit of energy or whatever? Maybe it was the leader of that party, the candidate or whatever else — they are all different things.

I agree with the Member who spoke previously about the fact that, again, you will only get a certain cohort if you are expecting people to have a landline, but I suppose that that is all taken into account. In Ireland, some parts of the country have great access to the Internet while other parts have dial-up, and in some areas, it is almost impossible to access the Internet. All those quirks and differences have to impact on polling itself.

You talked about the analysts and experts in the Dáil bar; again, they are a breed of their own. You see them there — they drink together, they eat together and, who knows, they probably sleep together. You see them all. I have been elected three times now, and you see the same analysts. I have never had a conversation with most of them. It is just bizarre, but maybe they do not need to talk to me or to some of the smaller parties. They have a huge influence on elections and possibly on the polls as well, because they are the ones brought on to radio and TV to interpret the polls, but they usually come up with their own prejudices and do not give the raw data or whatever. That was more of a comment than a question.

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

On phone polls, to my knowledge, the companies that do phone polls— RED C goes on and on and on about this — use random-digit dialling, but they have a balance of landlines and cell phones, so they are not only talking to people with landlines. It is quite the reverse: they are probably talking to more people with cell phones, and that is balanced. Of course, once they do the poll, they then try to adjust for age, sex, class and how you voted last time to make it look as much as possible like how they imagine the population looks.

In terms of differences between phone polls and internet polls, in the main you would not think that phone polls would be quite as interested in politics as those who sign up to do YouGov polls on a regular basis. That can have its impact. That was one of the things, particularly in the Internet polls in 2015 — getting a sample that was far too interested in politics and behaved in a way unlike the electorate. This applied particularly to people who had voted Liberal in the previous election. If you were interested in politics and had voted Liberal, you moved to Labour. If you were not very interested in politics and had voted Liberal the previous time, you moved to the Conservatives. Unfortunately, the polls were full of very interested people, so they thought they were going to move to Labour, but they did not. It is a tricky balance to make.

Increasingly, there are fewer polls by any other methods. In Ireland, three of the pollsters still knock on doors. That has its own difficulties. It is probably more expensive to send interviewers out into the wilds, and of course they do not select houses randomly, because that would be unbelievably expensive. What they do is parachute them into about 80, sometimes 50, sometimes 100, sometimes 120 different localities, randomly chosen across the country. Then they go on a random walk, which is the sort of thing you do coming home

from the pub in the evening. Turn left, turn right, knock on the third door and see if there is someone in the house who fulfils their quota, and then they go on. If you have knocked on the second house, you have probably got to knock on the tenth house. That is fine in built-up areas. I do not know what they do in other parts of the country; I have never investigated it thoroughly. Sometimes, I guess, it is a long walk to the next house, and you think, “Do they really do that?” But they are checked up on; whoever is controlling the interviews will check that they did the interviews they were supposed to.

Anyway, they do that. The error, then, in that sort of method can be much bigger than the error in other methods, because localities — in Ireland, at least — tend not to be random selections of voting preferences. Fianna Fáil might be very strong in this area; Sinn Féin might be very strong in that one. The area you pick, then, can determine the colour of the votes expressed. Many people would say that the margin of error — which is a bit of a fiction, anyway — with those sorts of polls is not really 2% or 3%, it is 6% or 7%, but nobody admits to that.

The never-been-sampled — yes, I have heard that one. I have been interviewed, not in an election poll, I think, but in other polls. I was interviewed in the US once by a computer, because they have quite a few computer polls. The computer will ring you up and talk to you, and that may be part of the future, but it is a very strange experience talking to a computer. I think I am temperamentally incapable of talking to a computer as if it is a computer. So you make jokes, and the computer does not laugh. It is very difficult.

We take companies at their word. They fulfil standards; that is the way they do things. I do not really think they just ring their friends. It is as easy to go through the random digit dialling. But it could be that some of these people who have never been polled never answer their phone, or, if somebody did knock on the door, they would tell them to go away.

With respect to manifestos, that is really getting into what it is that determines how people vote. I very much doubt that it is the manifesto, because very few voters could tell you what is in a manifesto. Once there was a time when parties released lots of copies of the manifesto; in general, now, I think they print relatively few of them, and it is really for journalists and media commentators to tell the people what is in there.

*10.45 am*

If you did quizzes on what is in the manifesto you would find most people failing badly. However, they can pick up a picture, trend or notion from the manifesto and that may indeed have an impact as does, perhaps, one leader over another. Most voting remains habitual. People tend to vote in patterns and move a little bit from time to time.

**Mr Declan Breathnach TD:**

Thanks, Michael, for your presentation. You said earlier that one in eight people polled do not subsequently vote. That is quite a high percentage, in terms of the outcome of the poll. To what degree is that analysis done by looking at the marked registers subsequent to an election and comparing them with those who were actually polled? You sounded as if you were saying that it is a supposition that it is one in seven or one in eight.

Secondly, the content of the books that are published, particularly more recently in the South, have been less than satisfactory in terms of the content and information about candidates. Equally, how is the content of those books decided upon? They are quite important books in terms of the history of each of the constituencies and sometimes, in my view, they do not reflect what has happened in some of the constituencies.

**Ms Deidre Brock MP:**

Thank you, Michael, for a really interesting presentation. Peter Hitchens, the media commentator, said a year or so ago:

“Opinion polls are a device for influencing public opinion, not a device for measuring it. Crack that, and it all makes sense.”

That is an interesting point and I would be interested to hear your thoughts on it. He also went on to say that it is:

“Quite unusual to find regular consistent series asking the same straightforward questions.”

I want to hear your thoughts on the questions asked by the surveys. I have seen a survey, for example, in Scotland that seems quite startling, but then you look at the question that is asked and, to my mind, there is a subtly leading aspect to it that could, potentially, lead people to answer in a certain way. I would be interested to hear more of your thoughts on the nature of the questions asked and the differences between the different survey companies.

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

I begin with marked registers. I know the analysis of that because I did it myself. We had a large pot of money to do an election study with as close as we get to a systematic random sample. In 2002, we interviewed 2,700 people. We asked them if had they voted and about 2,400 of them had. Then we compared that to the marked electoral registers and, in some cases, you could not tell because there were a number of people with the same name, in the same household and all sorts of other things. I am sure you are familiar with that. Leaving aside the few cases that we could not locate, I think that 1,750 voted, which is a long way from the number that said they had. It was close to the actual turnout on the day. That, as far as I know, is the only analysis done in this country on that. Similar analysis done in other countries finds exactly the same thing. There is an over-reporting; it is a well-known problem.

On the books, I am not quite sure which books you are referring to. I hope that they are not books by me, because I am sure that they are all right; but in books by other people I am sure there are errors. Those books come out afterwards, of course. I do not know how far they affect the vote at the next election. I would be sceptical about that.

Polls done not to measure but to influence? Well, possibly. Some pollsters are simply commercial undertakings, but people give them money to ask particular questions and sometimes that might be done with the hope of moving public opinion in their direction or not. On the whole, they do not seem to be very effective at doing that, and it is very unpredictable if you want to use a poll to influence public opinion. Public opinion sometimes seems to move in directions against polls.

We have seen that in many referendums here, where we know that there was an overwhelming majority to vote for a certain European treaty when the first poll was done, but, by the time that the last poll was done, all of that support had disappeared.

Polling companies, with the exception of their standard voting intention question, do not tend to stick to a particular survey question series. Where those are paid for by newspapers or by parties, some bright young thing comes up with a different question every week. That is unfortunate because the answer to a question about political attitudes is utterly meaningless. There is no such thing as a neutral question: all questions have bias. If you change the wording, you change the outcome: there is no way round that. That is the reality. There are patterns within the responses to that that may be pretty fixed, regardless of the wording of the question. Some questions may be a lot more leading than others, but it is very difficult to come up with something that is completely neutral. Our election studies, certainly going back to 2002, have some nice series. The great thing about a series is that even sometimes when you do not really like the question any more, you go on asking the same question because you have something to compare it with. You can compare it with last time and the time before and the time before that. We need more of that, but, on the whole, the people who pay for those have no interest in paying for long series, so those tend to be, by and large, academic studies, which, by their nature, of course, do not have any impact on public opinion because nobody reads them.

**Deputy Al Brouard:**

Michael, is there any particular age group, gender group or economic group that statistically is always nearest the result that actually turns up?

**Professor Michael Marsh:**

The very simple answer to that is that I do not know. The more complicated answer is that it is the ones in the middle of the class and age group. I do not know about differences in the middle of the gender profile, but it is almost certainly men because more of them vote. In simple terms, who is the average or the median voter? Who is the voter that best represents all other voters? If I ever discovered that for one election, I have forgotten about it. It could well be different at different elections in different places.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

That concludes our session with Professor Marsh, so I thank him for his interesting and illuminating talk, and I thank all of you for participating in this discussion. I ask you to give Professor Marsh a round of applause. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

I will now hand over to my Co-Chair to deal with the rest of the business. Before we do that, we have a tea break. However, so that we can continue with the meeting and to speed things up, please go off and bring your teas and coffees back so that we can restart the Assembly and conclude the final couple of items on the agenda as quickly as possible. I know that some people would like to conclude as early as we can.

*The sitting was suspended at 10.55 am.*

*The sitting was resumed at 11.12 am*

## **PROGRESS REPORTS FROM COMMITTEE CHAIRS (D and C) AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO PREVIOUS COMMITTEE REPORTS**

### **COMMITTEE D (ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL): CHILDHOOD OBESITY**

#### **The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

I call the Chairman of Committee D, Lord Dubs, to update the Assembly on his Committee's report on childhood obesity. Could we have a bit of quiet in the room for that, please?

#### **The Lord Dubs (The Chairperson of Committee D):**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I feel very passionate about this report. It can really achieve something in the jurisdictions in our areas. As a Committee, we owe a lot to one of our members — unfortunately, she is not here because of the change in dates — and that is Senator Catherine Noone, who was very keen on this report and, indeed, encouraged the Committee to have a look at the issue.

The situation is pretty desperate. I think that, among 35 OECD countries, the UK is the eighth-worst for childhood obesity; Ireland is the 12<sup>th</sup> worst. Although it is not in the report, medical people have said to me that the rise in childhood obesity may well bring the National Health Service to a halt over the next 20 or 30 years, such are the dangers of what is happening. Therefore, urgent action is necessary.

Let me give you some of the key points in the report. It is expected that in about 20 years' time in the UK, 60% of males and 50% of females will be obese. In Ireland, obesity has doubled over two decades. These are serious problems in all our jurisdictions. What happened was that we began to hear evidence in London, and then we went to Wales. We were thinking of going to Dublin but, in Wales, one of our witnesses said, "You really ought to be looking elsewhere, where there is more interesting practice from which you can learn". So, to cut a long story short, the Irish members particularly agreed with that, and we went to Amsterdam. That was a very enlightening experience because, although they also have problems with childhood obesity in the Netherlands, they are doing things that I do not think are being done in any of our jurisdictions, and we can learn quite a lot from them. That was pretty interesting. I want to give my thanks to the Committee, our many witnesses and our Clerks for their excellent work on this report.

Let me go through some of the key points. There is a need to keep good records — on children's health, weight and so on — so we know whether what we are doing is working or not. We need to look at the availability of foods that are too sugary on healthcare premises, particularly vending machines, or perhaps near schools.

*11.15 am*

It is very important that action should be taken as early as possible; that is to say, not just in early years, but in women's health before conception. I think it is important that there should be a non-judgemental approach to all this. We should not stigmatise or demonise the parents whose children are overweight because that is just depressing for them. I think it has to be positive and helpful.

We think there should be healthcare assessments in the school inspection criteria. The Dutch particularly impressed us — I know this sounds a bit corny — when they said, “We are trying to get kids away from all these miserable sweet, sugary drinks and make water a cool thing to do”. I think they were perhaps more successful than it sounds the way I am describing it.

I think it is important that teachers should be educated and trained so that they can respond to this and know what the situation is. We need to increase education in nutrition, diet and cooking, physical education, sports and other practices. You can look at the design of school playgrounds and at school foods and see that you should stop selling unhealthy products in school vending machines. You go to schools and see that they have all these unhealthy products.

One of the interesting things we saw in the Netherlands was the cooperation of the food and drink industry. They told us that one of the big supermarket chains, Albert Heijn, was cooperating and taking groups of kids round to see the supermarket shelves so that they could spot foods good and bad for health, particularly ones with a high sugar content. I think it is important that the food and drink industry cooperates in meeting targets for sugar reduction, and we welcome the possibility or likelihood that there will be taxes on sugary drinks.

We are concerned about advertising and the need for advertising regulation. We are worried about the new forms of social media, which children can watch rather easily. We need better information on nutritional content for consumers. I think it is important to look even at local planning powers to have controls over not having fast food outlets too close to schools.

Other things can be learned. Leadership is important. In the Netherlands, it is actually a mixed picture. Where there is good practice, it is because there is good leadership, particularly at a local level. That seemed to make a difference. There is also a very good NGO in the Netherlands called Jongeren op Gezond Gewicht (JOGG) which stands for Young People at Healthy Weight, that is also working very hard at this.

I think there is a need for action at a central government level, a local authority level and to get NGOs involved in this, if they are not already. It is a vast programme, yet what is at stake is the health of the next generation. Somebody said — this was not in the Committee; it was at another event I attended some time ago — that the next generation will not live as long as us, mainly because of obesity and its consequences. The time to tackle that is in early childhood. I ask Members here to not just take the report on board but to see whether they can spread the word in the various Parliaments and jurisdictions that are represented here. I am very keen on local authorities having a part to play. In the Netherlands, that works very well indeed where there is good leadership, so I would like to take the message over to local authorities and NGOs in our areas. There is a lot we can do. I think this can really can achieve something as a report, and I feel pretty passionate about it, as you can hear.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much, Lord Dubs. Does anybody have any questions or comments in relation to the report?

**Ms Deidre Brock MP:**

Thank you. I really just want to say with Alf, who has been a tremendous Chair of this report and all the evidence-taking sessions, that urgent action is required here. Our citizens will not have the opportunity to lead long, healthy, happy lives as a direct result of this, and we are failing as politicians if we do not take strong action on this. That is one lesson that was learned.

Unfortunately, I did not go on the trip to the Netherlands but the message that came back very strongly is that political leadership is required across the board from local authorities and national governments and, without that, we simply will not have the strength needed to push these changes through. It is vital. This is a really serious crisis facing our citizens and we must lead by example and be strong about this.

**Baroness Blood:**

I think that this is an excellent report because this is one of the big issues for health in coming years. For instance, in Sure Start in Northern Ireland, a number of these things are already happening. Breastfeeding is a big thing; we are promoting it as well as we can. Drinking water is a big issue and we try to promote that. Also healthy meals are another big issue; we try to train parents to cook healthily. Running through this whole report and its recommendations is one stark fact: all this work will take funding. What we are finding is that funding is being cut from early years and Sure Start programmes. That is not the answer. We have to put funding in, if we want to start from the beginning, so that children do not get to the stage where they are obese. Thank you.

**Mr Declan Breathnach TD:**

I spent 35 years teaching at primary-school level. During that time, the whole issue of Learning for Life has been very much to the fore. The curriculums, particularly from an Irish perspective, have been controlled with regard to the three Rs, as opposed to the whole issue of Learning for Life. Obesity is just one of those aspects.

There is a myriad of programmes, right across the UK, some of them sponsored by food companies. There are many in Ireland. For instance, many years ago, the North Western Health Board had the Bí Folláin programme. That obviously means “healthy eating”. The reality is that the programmes are out there and, despite the fact that they have been paid for by many Government Departments, the copyright on them, with regard to schools using them, has disallowed them from being circulated. I venture to suggest to Lord Dubs and the Committee that the whole issue of what is out there be looked at, with a view to ensuring that they can be used and that the proper curriculum space is found for the whole issue of Learning for Life. If that were done, I think that we would move a step further on the whole issue of obesity and many of the mental health issues that are to the fore today.

**Viscount Bridgeman:**

Alf, did you address the more favourable experience of the Mediterranean countries with regard to obesity?

**The Lord Dubs:** — *[Inaudible.]*

**Ms Ann Jones AM:**

Thanks very much. I have not read the report in detail; I have skipped through the recommendations and a few of the paragraphs. For me, the emphasis will be on the child's environment. We have to be mindful, as people have said, about cutting budgets. A cut to a budget, or the selling off of a playground or public space for housing, will have a detrimental effect on children's well-being and health. In Wales, we have focused on well-being through the Well-being of *Future Generations* (Wales) Act 2015, which we are attempting to foster amongst our local authorities and third-sector organisations. I think that that is the way forward. It is not necessarily about telling people how bad a food is, because a lot of people in deprivation who have difficulty in keeping to budgets cannot always buy organic or fresh food because they can buy processed food a lot cheaper. We have to address those issues. The wider environment of a child growing up is the best place to start to educate the child and, hopefully then, the parents behind that child.

**Mr Ross Greer MSP:**

Thank you. My question is on the education side of it, Alf. In the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee, we recently completed an investigation into personal and social education, which is like Learning for Life. We found that issues like drugs and alcohol education were very consistently delivered. I do not say that they were delivered consistently well, but I think that every young person in Scotland gets a considerable amount of education about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. However, with issues like healthy lifestyles, diets and exercise, the education around it was not there. I see that the Committee has noted some of the new initiatives in Scotland; things like The Daily Mile.

That is an interesting and broadly successful initiative, but, if it is not backed up by the classroom education about how to lead a healthy lifestyle, how to prepare healthy food etc, you are not taking a holistic approach that is successful. I was wondering what the Committee found out about parity of esteem given across the BIPA jurisdictions to learning about a healthy lifestyle, as opposed to what has already been mentioned — the three Rs.

**Senator Frank Feighan:**

I congratulate and compliment Committee D for the work that it has done. The fact that the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly took the time to go to the Netherlands, outside its jurisdiction, showed some initiative. Members are right that obesity and diabetes is a ticking time bomb, and we need to do something about it. There is no place worse than Britain and Ireland. In a lot of our Committees, we need to sometimes look at broadening the opportunities. Congratulations.

**Mr Colin McGrath MLA:**

Thank you very much, Chair. I want to build on some of the remarks from Baroness Blood about the influence of parents and the work taking place on healthy lifestyles at the moment. It could be that, when those children become parents, that will start to have its impact, but it is nearly too late then if they have got the taste of chocolate, crisps, sweets and fizzy drinks, and it will be very difficult to start taking that from them at the age of eight, nine or 10.

I recollect from my years as a youth worker when I did one residential that, as the leader in charge, I was called down because one of the young people who was aged about 12 was

grasping on to a three-litre bottle of coke, which he insisted he took to bed with him every night. I said, “I am ringing your parents because that could not be true”, and, when I spoke to the mother, she said, “Yes, that is what we do. We let him take that to bed every night”. If you are battling against that, it really is the parents with whom work will be required as well.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks. Anybody else? Lord Dubs, do you want to come back in on some of those points?

**The Lord Dubs:**

One of the frustrations of all our Committee work is that we cannot go into things in as much detail as we would like. We cannot meet as often as we would like, and we cannot do it with the intensity that we would like. That is just the nature of having membership across various jurisdictions.

Let me just deal with some of the points. I think that the argument about space in the curriculum and the way things are taught and not just relying on league tables in schools is really important. This has to be given much more space in teaching and education in schools than is often possible in at least some of the schools and maybe in all of them. It is a very vital point.

As regards Mediterranean countries, the reason that we went to the Netherlands was that their climate is not that different from here. Therefore, the diet, in theory, need not be all that different. If we had all the time in the world, I would love to have gone to a Mediterranean country and had a look there to see whether some of the views we feel apply to Mediterranean countries are borne out by the facts; in other words, is there a different diet and so on or are they healthier? I am afraid that, by the nature of things, that was beyond the scope of what we could do.

The child’s environment, their whole environment, is absolutely crucial. Let us look at everything, not just one little bit of it. You cannot just say, “Let’s deal with fizzy drinks and problem solved”. It has to be the totality of the environment, including exercise and all the things that happen.

I think cost is very important, both in respect of schools being able to do it and in respect of people who are disadvantaged. There tends to be a higher rate of childhood obesity among disadvantaged families, and they must not be stigmatised because economic pressures often make them go for the cheaper foods, and, unfortunately, the cheaper foods are the ones that are not that healthy. Therefore, it is a matter for the food industry and of being as helpful as possible to disadvantaged families.

Another comment was about healthy lifestyles. It is important that healthy lifestyles are communicated not just in schools, which is important, but also before schools. The whole campaign or the whole educational process should probably start for mothers almost before conception, if that is possible. In other words, as early as possible, one has to find methods of intervention. Clearly, parents play a crucial part. The problem is that parents who have been brought up on not the best diet will not have the knowledge to say to their children that they should not be doing it.

11.30 am

There is an enormous education job to be done. I repeat that all the evidence we found in the Netherlands is that, where there is good local leadership at the most local level, it works. That was sometimes done despite one of the Ministers who was not that keen on the whole thing. Local leadership is important, which is why I am very keen that this message should go not just to our jurisdictions but to local authorities, because every local authority that has some responsibility in this area could do something about it, have a look at it and see what they can do. Some of it costs money and some of it may not cost much money, just a change in the way that things are put over.

I think we have something that can really, in the end, improve lives, save lives and make the well-being of the next generation better than that of the present generation. With your help, and with your missionary zeal, I commend the report to the plenary.

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

Thanks very much, Lord Dubs. I ask the plenary to formally adopt the report of Committee D. Is that agreed?

*Motion agreed.*

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

I commend the Members of Committee D for all their work in completing the report, and the joint clerks will arrange to send the report to the British and Irish Governments.

### **COMMITTEE C: INTERIM REPORT ON BREXIT AND AGRI-FOOD**

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you, Kathleen. I call on the acting Chair of Committee C, David Ford MLA, to update the Assembly on his Committee's report on Brexit and agri-food.

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I was not quite aware that I had become an acting Chair of the Committee; I am merely a rapporteur. Anyway, in the unfortunate absence of Senator Denis Landy and Helen Jones MP, I have the pleasure of presenting this report, which is just an interim report, on the implications of Brexit for the agri-food sector across our different jurisdictions.

The Committee launched the inquiry in the aftermath of the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU but is acutely aware of the fact that circumstances are rapidly changing, and that has driven the decision to produce an interim report for this plenary.

The Committee still hopes to take further evidence in London, in Edinburgh and in Brussels before reaching the final conclusion. That is in addition to evidence already taken in Belfast, in Dublin and in Cardiff. On behalf of the Committee, I thank all those who have participated so far in assisting us in those three sets of meetings, including officials from the Department

of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) in Dublin and representatives of different aspects of the agri-food industry North and South. The Cabinet Secretary in Wales met us personally. Unfortunately, we did not meet either Minister or officials from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) when we were in Belfast.

The significance of agri-food to all our jurisdictions has already been mentioned several times in this plenary. I will give a brief summary. In Ireland, agri-food accounts for 7.6% of GVA as the largest single industry group in the country. In the UK, agri-food amounts to 7.2% of GVA, which is perhaps higher than some would have thought in the UK compared with Ireland. There is no doubt that we also have the situation that our different jurisdictions tend to be the largest import and export markets for each other. Thirty-seven per cent of Ireland's food and drink exports go to the UK, and 17% of the UK's food and drink exports go to Ireland. Clearly, there will be major implications for all our jurisdictions from the type of deal that is eventually agreed between the EU and the UK. To give a single example, if we ended up with WTO rules, we would face potentially 40% levies on dairy and agri-food produce. These are clearly very significant potential dangers.

In the interim report, we highlighted five key issues. Trade, as I have just mentioned, is the first. The second one is the issue of the border on Ireland, which again has featured significantly in this plenary, including the fact that raw materials travel backwards and forwards across the border quite frequently as part of the processing. Labour is a third key issue for all of us. There is no doubt that there is very significant reliance on outside labour, particularly from other EU countries, in areas such as fruit and vegetable growing and meat processing. There are serious questions as to what will happen around that particular point. The fourth issue we highlight is currency volatility. We have already seen the fall in the value of the pound sterling affect trading relationships between Ireland and the UK, and there is no doubt that that volatility is going to continue to create difficulties. The final key issue is the matter of EU funding and the current operation of the Common Agricultural Policy.

There may be opportunities for the UK to reform CAP, but there are significant questions as to exactly what the level of future support will be, particularly for the traditional grassland areas that feature in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and, indeed, as to the question of how much policy is retained by the UK Government and how much is returned to the three devolved nations.

We have a couple of conclusions and recommendations at this interim stage. First, we welcome and recognise the collaborative work going on in the agri-food sector on establishing the opportunities and challenges, and we trust that that work will continue. Secondly, we have noted the issue of the border and its significance and welcome the fact that the European Council has acknowledged that at a very early stage in its guidelines for negotiations. Indeed, it has been mentioned significantly in the negotiations that have already happened. I trust that members will think that the interim report, whilst only interim, is a useful statement at this point, and the committee will be continuing its further work to produce a final report as speedily as possible.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you very much, David. Do we have any questions for David on the interim report?

**The Lord Bew:**

Thank you very much, acting chairman. That was a very interesting and helpful interim report. In committee A, we have heard some economists saying that, as far as the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland is concerned, the new dispensation that we seem to be heading towards might actually be quite a positive one. Do you have any views on that? Is there any of the research that you carried out that bears on the question of the agri-food sector, specifically within Northern Ireland, and its prospects?

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

We do not have specific information on that, partly because we were unable to meet anybody from DAERA at one of our first meetings in Belfast, but there seem, at this stage, to be too many imponderables, largely related to the issue of cross-border trade, which will be a major determinant. There are certainly some fears that, if the UK Government do not repatriate policy back to the devolved nations, as has been the case up to now, we will not necessarily do well in Northern Ireland, given the political balance of where agriculture lies for the UK Government as opposed to the Celtic fringe.

**Mr Joe Carey TD:**

Did the committee look at a replacement scheme for CAP for when the UK leaves the EU? Did you look at that whole question? Did you make any recommendations in relation to it? Did you identify where this money is going to come from to support farmers?

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

I have a horrible feeling that I am going to end up saying, "This is only an interim report" in response to every question. No, we have not seen that, but there are significant concerns. We know that there will be short-term maintenance of existing CAP support levels, but we have no idea at this stage what will lie beyond that interim period.

**The Lord Kilclooney:**

Briefly following up on that last question, I think that that is the most important issue that this committee needs to address. It applies to us all, whether we are from the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. In the United Kingdom's case, clearly we will be outside the CAP altogether, and it is important that whatever Government we have in London and in the devolved nations give assistance to the agricultural industry after 2020. I think that the committee should have some ideas as to what way a future Government, whether it is Labour or Conservative, should address this issue.

Likewise, in the Republic of Ireland, we have to face up to the fact that, although it will continue to be in the CAP, if the Republic remains in the European Union, nonetheless, the European budget will be less £20 billion when the United Kingdom withdraws. Therefore, the present agricultural budget from Brussels will be reduced, and the support for farmers in the Republic will be reduced unless the Dublin Government begin to support their farmers more than they are doing heretofore.

So, the issue as to how Southern Irish farmers are going to be supported after Brexit needs to be addressed as well.

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

I am not sure that the committee would, at this stage, agree that support is the significant issue. There are long-term issues of a decline in agriculture support across most Western developed economies. Whilst I think we would not wish to go down the New Zealand route of effectively withdrawing all support overnight, there are also issues of trade that are potentially just as significant as the issues of direct support. That is the kind of thing that we will need to work through as we go through our further meetings and discussions.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Are there any more questions for David Ford?

**Mr Seán Crowe TD:**

We know about the impact on the mushroom industry. Some of it has to do with the changing rate of sterling. Has the committee identified any other industry or group that will face possible dangers down the track in relation to this?

**Mr David Ford MLA:**

Mushrooms are a particular example of something that has suffered instantly because of the issue of the currency variation. Bluntly, County Armagh mushrooms are now better for the GB market than those from County Monaghan. We have not identified, sector by sector, what we see as long-term trends. Clearly, some depend on exactly what proportions you engage in the cross-border trade. Some are involved in further processing on a cross-border basis. We would need to look with some of the sector organisations in more detail before we produce the final report.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

That is all the questions we seem to have. Could I, on your behalf, commend members of committee D for their work in completing this report? The joint clerks will now arrange to send the report to the British and Irish Governments, but I am assured that it is also being sent to the devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, if we have one, and to the Governments of the Crown dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.

That concludes the committee reports. I need to ask the plenary to formally adopt the interim report of committee C. Is that agreed?

*Motion agreed.*

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

I will hand over to the Co-Chair Kathleen to conclude the business of the Assembly here in Kilkenny.

**ADJOURNMENT**

**The Co-Chairperson (Ms Kathleen Funchion TD):**

As Andrew said, the business is now concluded. On behalf of everybody here, I just want to thank all our guest speakers and everybody involved with the organisation of BIPA. There is a huge amount of work that goes into it and I would like to thank all the staff and the secretariat from Westminster and the Oireachtas, the staff and management here at the Newpark Hotel, Kilkenny Council, Kilkenny Castle, the Office of Public Works, and everybody who basically helps to make this such a success. I think that everyone will agree — I hope that everyone will agree — that it was a successful event.

Andrew Rosindell is going to say a few words before he calls Lord Dubs to move the adjournment.

**The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I want to say again a word of huge thanks to our hosts here in the Republic of Ireland, particularly to Kathleen in her home town of Kilkenny, and to everyone who worked so hard to make this Assembly a success and a very worthwhile couple of days. As the new Co-Chair of the Assembly, I would also like to add that a lot of remarks have been made in the last two days about how we can progress BIPA and make it more relevant and more able to be at the cut and thrust of the discussions and debates that we know are taking place and will take place in the coming two years; and how we ensure that BIPA has a leading role in working to strengthen and cement all the relations we have been discussing between the peoples of these islands. With that in mind, the Co-Chairs have decided that in September we will be calling a steering committee, which will take the form of an away day. Hopefully, that will take place in Jersey.

*11.45 am*

We intend to come forward with new plans to ensure that BIPA is given the revitalisation it needs to ensure that we are fit to deal with the next few years, when we know that vital decisions will be made affecting all of our futures and all the peoples of these islands and territories, the devolved Assemblies and both nations. I hope you will agree that that is the best way forward so that we can actually ensure that BIPA has a leading role in the years ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen, in closing, I would like to say thank you again to you all for your attendance and for your support over the last two days. I look forward to meeting you in Liverpool at our next plenary, which will be in October. Details will be sent to you all in the very near future.

It is my great pleasure to ask my good friend and my parliamentary colleague from the House of Lords in the UK, Lord Dubs, to move the adjournment.

**The Lord Dubs:**

Thank you, Co-Chair. I shall not keep you long. Can I first indulge a little bit in a story about myself, but against myself? I was elected to the House of Commons away back in 1979. In those days, the House of Commons used to sit very, very late indeed. A few weeks after I had been elected, there was a late-night debate. I had been to a meeting, and I came in again at

midnight. I was not a night-shift worker, so starting work at midnight was a bit unusual for me. In I walked, and a policewoman at the Members' entrance said, "Good evening, sir." And with all the pomposity of a newly elected MP, the most pompous type of human being there can be, I said to her, "Good evening. I am hoping to speak tonight." "Yes, sir," she said, "Will it make any difference?" And I picked myself off the floor, and it stayed with me. I thought to myself: if we do not make a difference, there is no point. We might as well go home and do other things. Our job is to make a difference. I will come back to that in a minute.

Let me just add my thanks to the fantastic hotel staff, for the good food we have had, the great work of all the BIPA staff and the clerks, and the wonderful feeling I have about Kilkenny. What a great place. God, Co-Chair, you are lucky to have come from here. It is a great place, and we all think it is fantastic. What we saw yesterday — the castle and museum and so on — is absolutely terrific, so thank you. Irish hospitality, as ever, at its best.

I just want to say a quick word about the Co-Chairs. I realise that, because of the oddities of British politics, Andrew had no support for his position on many issues because none of the other Conservative MPs were here. And Andrew could not answer, so in a way he had to be very quiet about issues on which he feels strongly. I think that puts him in an unfair position, and I hope to heaven that the Whips in Parliament have a bit more sense and make sure that we do not denude the British delegation of important voices from the House of Commons. I think it was very unfair on the Co-Chair. I disagree with the Co-Chair on most — well, a few things, but I think it was very unfair. My thanks to both the Co-Chairs, who I think have handled us extremely well, with forcefulness, skill and sensitivity.

Just a closing comment or two. I have gone to other international bodies — I am a member of another international body — and I have to say that BIPA, for all the things we may want to change, is a much more effective international body than any of the others I have been to, either on a regular basis or on an occasional basis. I think it does work better, it is more effective and it has the potential to be even more effective. We have two particular strengths. One is that we can discuss issues that matter fairly, objectively and dispassionately. We can disagree, but we can disagree on good terms with each other, and I think that is important.

Lastly, a very personal thing. I value the friendships here. I have made a lot of friends over the years, and I do value them. I feel very warm when I come to a plenary or go to a committee meeting, because I know that, even if people disagree with my politics, there is a sense of friendship that transcends political differences. That is one of the many things that I value about BIPA. *[Applause.]*

### **The Co-Chairperson (Mr Andrew Rosindell MP):**

Thank you very much, Alf. Ladies and gentlemen, I now declare the fifty-fourth plenary session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly closed. We will meet in the plenary session in Liverpool in October. The plenary session now stands adjourned. Lunch will be served in the restaurant, and I wish you all a safe and pleasant journey home. Thank you very much indeed. *[Applause.]*

*Adjourned at 11.50 am.*