BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

SIXTY-THIRD PLENARY SESSION

Monday 6 March 2023

The Assembly met at 9.42 am.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Ladies and gentlemen, I call Members to order. The Assembly is now in public session. I remind everyone to turn off your mobile phones and other electronic devices.

We meet today in the Chamber of the Northern Ireland Assembly by kind permission of the Assembly Speaker Alex Maskey. I am pleased to invite the Speaker to address this Assembly and to open our proceedings. I now call on Mr Speaker to address the Assembly.

Mr Speaker (Alex Maskey):

Madam Chairperson agus a Chathaoirligh, good morning and welcome. Maidin mhaith daoibh. Tá fáilte romhaibh uilig anseo ar maidin. It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all here today to Parliament Buildings for this special meeting of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA). I thank your Co-Chairpersons, Brendan Smith and Karen Bradley, for the opportunity to speak to you today, and it is good to see so many familiar faces around the Chamber this morning.

I am delighted to be able to host the session in the Chamber for two reasons, actually. First of all, it is fitting that you are here during the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement period. Secondly, I strongly believe that interparliamentary relations are extremely important. You should know that we are counting your session today as the first of the programme of events and initiatives to mark this milestone in Parliament Buildings.

We cannot deny that there have been delays and disappointments over the years that have replaced much of the hope and optimism in 1998 with public cynicism and frustation. However,

we are sometimes in danger of forgetting how far we have come, how hard-won the agreement was and, indeed, how challenging achieving agreement is in a divided society.

9.45 am

Not only is it the 25th anniversary of the agreement, it is the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Assembly. That is particularly important for us to remember, because the Assembly is essentially and should be the heartbeat of our politics. We also have to acknowledge that, when the Assembly, as a centrepiece of the agreement, is not operating, it has a dead-hand impact on the other key institutions and, indeed, on our body politic as a whole. All parliamentary institutions evolve, and, while we have debate about reform at this time, in my view we have to recognise that the institutions have not been working totally for 25 years and, therefore, we have lost valuable time in which we would have evolved in the natural course of events.

This anniversary year is an opportunity for us collectively to reflect and to focus on building for the future. My reflection would be that, over the 25 years, we have understandably had much focus on the Executive, arguably to the detriment of the Assembly. Over the past three years, officials and I have frequently discussed issues in the context of enabling a parliamentary culture. The development of the Assembly is a key issue for future discussion.

Interparliamentary relations are vital to the future development of the Assembly. The Good Friday Agreement saw a transformation of relationships across and between our respective legislatures and that has been a very important means of continuing that process. As Speaker, I have also had the privilege of welcoming many international diplomats, guests and parliamentary delegations. That has served only to underline continually to me how much goodwill and support there is available to us, particularly if we have political stability established.

While the Executive and the Ministers have a key role in building our external relationships,

the Assembly has an opportunity to build on those relationships and opportunities. Connections with other Parliaments can be an essential element of doing that formally and informally. About 10 days ago, I had the pleasure of hosting discussions between the Speakers, Presiding Officers and Cinn Comhairlí from Westminster, the Oireachtas, Edinburgh and Cardiff. The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) has also shown itself to be a most valuable platform for continuing the dialogue across these islands. I would certainly encourage the Assembly to take a more strategic approach to parliamentary relations in the time ahead. I hope that we get to that point sooner rather than later.

The anniversary this year is an opportunity for us all to collectively reflect and focus on building for the future. Thank you again, Karen and Brendan; I know that you have a busy programme of sessions ahead. I look forward to hosting the lunch for you all today and to continuing our conversation. Good luck — ádh mór oraibh — at this point in your deliberations. Thank you all very much. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Assembly, I thank you for addressing us here today, for your warm welcome to Belfast and for generously allowing the Assembly to meet in these splendid surroundings. It is an honour to be here and to support your aims to instil a parliamentary culture at Stormont, of which BIPA can, I know, be a key part, so thank you.

Adoption of Proposed Programme of Business

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

We now resume our usual order of business. I ask Members, when they are invited to contribute from the Floor, to clearly state their name and legislature. If possible, Members are encouraged to stand when speaking, as that will support the broadcast of the Assembly, which is live via the Northern Ireland Assembly website. If Members prefer, they may, of course, remain seated when speaking. Noting that the proceedings are public and are being live-streamed on the Northern Ireland Assembly website, I remind Members that the proceedings of this body do not attract parliamentary privilege.

I repeat the Speaker's welcome to Belfast and echo my Co-Chair Karen's thanks to him for his welcome and for allowing us the use of this fine Chamber for our proceedings today. We are delighted to be holding the sixty-third extraordinary plenary session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly in Belfast as we mark the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. We will hear today from some of those who were directly involved in the peace negotiations that led to the signing of the agreement. We will have the opportunity to hear about the significance of the agreement, reflect on its achievements, recognise the areas that still need implementation and look to the future.

An up-to-date list of BIPA membership has been circulated to you all in your briefing packs. I have to inform the Assembly that, in accordance with rule 2A, 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: Jackie Doyle-Price MP, Baroness Hooper, Lord Kilclooney, Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick, Rose Conway-Walsh TD, Cefin Campbell MS, Cathal Boylan MLA and Deputy Chris Blin. We have received apologies for the plenary session from Alistair Carmichael MP, Lord Donoughue, Lord Dubs, Damian Green MP, Stephen Hammond MP, Sarah Jones MP, Conor McGinn MP, Nigel Mills MP, Sorca

Clarke TD, Patrick Costello TD, Seán Crowe TD, Peter Fitzpatrick TD, John Paul Phelan TD, Senator Vincent P Martin, Heledd Fychan MS, Pat Sheehan MLA and Deputy Al Brouard.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome Members to the sixty-third plenary session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. Members will have received a copy of the programme of business. It is highly appropriate that our Assembly should meet here to mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. We look forward to stimulating discussions and debates.

We will shortly hear from the former Taoiseach Mr Bertie Ahern and Sir John Holmes, principal private secretary to Tony Blair and Sir John Major during their premierships. Both will address the Assembly and then respond to questions. After a short coffee break, the morning session will conclude with a panel discussion on the Women's Coalition and the Good Friday Agreement. The panel comprises founding members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. There will then be an opportunity for questions.

The afternoon session will begin with an address from Dr Jonny Byrne, Ulster University, on policing under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Following that, Members will hold a debate on policing under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Our proceedings will conclude with a debate on a motion on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The Assembly will adjourn not later than 4.45 pm. Given that we have a full agenda, I ask that all Members keep their questions and contributions short.

I now ask Steve Aiken MLA to formally move that the adoption of the proposed programme of business be agreed to.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Thank you very much, Co-Chairs. On behalf of all MLAs, I would like to say, first, thank you very much for coming here and, secondly, we MLAs are the ones — not you — who should

be in here doing our job today, but I welcome you no matter what. Thank you all very much for coming. I formally propose the adoption of the programme of business. Thank you.

Programme of business agreed.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BELFAST/GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I now call former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern to give his address. Bertie Ahern, you are very welcome. We are absolutely delighted that you are here with us today. We are very conscious of your ongoing commitment to peacebuilding and conflict resolution at home and around the world. Bertie, when you are ready. *[Applause.]*

Mr Bertie Ahern:

Thank you very much, Co-Chairs. Thank you very much to the Speaker for the invitation to use this beautiful Assembly Chamber. On my previous visits here, I was usually up there watching down on the activities. I look forward to the day — hopefully, it is not too long away — when I have that opportunity again.

I want to hit on two or three points. I understand that there may then be some questions. If there are, I would be glad to try to answer those. First, I remember when the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly — the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, as it was then — was set up in 1990. It was after a particularly difficult period in the late 1980s when our relations were not as good as they could have been, and the idea was to get parliamentarians from London and Dublin together. It proved to be a very good body. I had the opportunity, a number of times over the years, to meet the Assembly in its original format and then in this format. I am honoured to be here again, and I wish you well for your deliberations and meetings. Over the years, I have found the Assembly to be very useful. It was a useful and successful way for us to get to know Members from the Lords and the Commons, as was, I think, its primary aim.

We were able to build up good relationships and to understand each other better than through the megaphone arguments, if I can call them that, of the 1980s that went on between us. I wish you well in all your work.

I am delighted to see John Holmes here. He and I battled well together over the years. He was with John Major first and then with Tony Blair. I always appreciated the long meetings. I am not sure that he and his colleagues appreciated the length of the meetings that used to go on, particularly in the Rose Garden and elsewhere, when we were in Number 10, but I certainly appreciated his work, guidance and help over all those years. We have not met for many years, so I am delighted to see him.

I will touch briefly on the history. This occasion is to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. It was extraordinary that we negotiated it, and I want to mention all the people who were involved in it — all the people from all the parties but particularly those who are no longer with us, such as John Hume, Séamus Mallon, Martin McGuinness, Davy Ervine, Mo Mowlam and others who were such a part of the agreement. For my part and, I am sure, everybody's part, they are always missed. Their roles and the part that they played in the agreement were enormous.

I was involved in the early 1990s — 1991, 1992 — when John Wilson was chair of the multiparty talks. Later, when I took up from where Albert Reynolds and Dick Spring had brought us to, which included the Downing Street declaration, and then on to what we were working on, it was the view that, if we could get the all-party and multiparty talks going, which we did in September 1997, we would at least have an opportunity to get discussions. I would love to bring you through that autumn, winter and spring of 1997-98, but time will not allow me to do that. However, I will say that it was very interesting — at times, entertaining but mainly difficult. One thing that I learned in that period of my life was that having breaks, even for Christmas, was not a good idea, because, as soon as you allowed a vacuum, you could be

guaranteed that you were in trouble.

We hit many problems during that winter, from political and paramilitary violence to having to put people out of talks and trying to get people back into talks and moving on from time to time. We went all the way from September to March, and I felt that we seemed to be going backwards every day. I know that there are people in the Chamber who will remember a lot of those moves back and forward, but we persevered. A Member who is here today — Paul Murphy — will well remember that, when we got to St Patrick's Day, we seemed to be going nowhere, but George Mitchell decided that he was fed up with it and we were going to get out of here in a hurry. He was going home to his wife and baby, as was then, for Easter; Tony Blair decided that he was going to Spain to meet Prime Minister Aznar; and I decided that, as the league final was in Croke Park, I was going to go back to see that. I had not got far to go. Anyway, it put a focus on the talks on where we would go.

10.00 am

There was huge commitment and huge effort, and I congratulate all who played their part. Look at the issues that we were trying to deal with. I will mention only briefly the core principles, which were to get a devolved Administration, North/South bodies and east-west institutions; to deal with citizens' rights; to start the process of agreement on police reform; recognition of Northern Ireland as a sovereign part of the UK, along with a democratic path to unite Ireland; commitment to a European level of human rights principles, protections and processes; to structure a Northern Ireland Assembly elected by proportional representation; an Executive appointed to provide guaranteed all-party and community representation; Ministers serving under a First Minister and deputy First Minister in joint roles; cross-border bodies operating North and South in trade and business; to set up structures for EU funding, food safety, inland waterways, loughs management, language promotion and international tourism; a British-Irish Council that was representative of the Administrations of these islands; a British-Irish

Intergovernmental Conference of both sovereign Governments; a decommissioning body to oversee and report on the destruction of paramilitary weapons; and a new police service in Northern Ireland to replace the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Those were the main core principles. I will not go through any or all of them; I just wanted to give you the agenda.

Extraordinarily, we managed to find a way in a relatively short period of agreeing at least the structures. Of course, they did not all happen in a day. Chris Patten took up the mantle on the policing issue, and the work that the commission did is now seen all over the world as massively successful. We struggled with decommissioning. That is probably the one issue that, if I had my time again, I would do differently. It dragged out so long that it was painful and divisive. However, most of the issues have worked out with good stability.

The peace has worked. The main functions of the whole agreement fell into two sections. First, there was the peace process — we would bring peace and stability out of the huge carnage that we had seen for 25 years — and then we would deal with the political process. I always feel that the first bit worked, maybe not totally perfectly but fairly close to it. The second bit was up and down. The fact that these institutions have been struggling for probably 60% of the time is not great, frankly. I hope that that will change in the short term.

I was talking to the Speaker this morning about this, and I must say that what has been achieved when the institutions have been up is impressive. There has been a legislative programme and private Members' Bills. It is, perhaps, an issue for Oireachtas Éireann that we do not pass many private Members' Bills; at least, in my 34 years, not that many were passed and enacted. What was done here in the years when things worked well is very impressive. My congratulations to people on that, and, hopefully, they will be able to get to that situation again. You understand the ups and downs. I will not go into them.

I want to touch on two areas that were important in my time. I feel passionately about the North/South and east-west relationships, particularly because you are all here today. The east-

west institutions are important. It worries me, at times, to hear people say that, because the United Kingdom is no longer in the European Union, our officials do not meet as they used to, which is true. Every day, there were working groups and various meetings. In the Oireachtas and at Westminster, people say that we need new institutions. I will touch on that issue, because, in my view, we do not need any new institutions. All that we need to do is work the institutions that were agreed on Good Friday. I will make a few points on that, because it is relevant and it is my one chance to make them to this body.

We all had to deal with different perspectives to make, agree and deliver the Good Friday Agreement. As we know, the island was divided in 1922 to propose certainty to different tribes, cultures and beliefs. Partition did not create those divisions, but it certainly embedded them. Out of it came a society in which different communities, in different ways, felt besieged and embattled by the other. The story of the Troubles, which I always say hardly explains the horror that it conveys, was the backdrop of my political life as a young adult and a young politician in the 1970s, and it was and remains the biggest thing that we have to deal with.

The new perspective and profound change that the Good Friday Agreement brought about was breaking through the seemingly unbreakable barriers that had been embedded since partition. There could be parity of esteem, which was the big issue of 25 years ago for different traditions. The sovereign Governments on these islands, the political parties in Northern Ireland, the international community and, above all, the people on the island who voted in the referendum of 25 years ago democratically endorsed a profoundly changed future that would be utterly different from the past that preceded it.

That future, of course, has moved on. We have had 25 years of fairly perfect peace compared with the 25 years that we had seen before that. The difference between those two periods is very much light and dark. In the grind of politics, there is understandable frustration that what was hoped for has been realised only partially or occasionally. I understand that frustration, but

I also have a sense of perspective that the past 25 years is a golden era compared with what was and could have been. More importantly, I am convinced that it is very possible that what is to come will be better yet.

In the context of Irish history, even in the past 100 years since partition, 25 years is a short time, so we must be patient and persevere. As we celebrate this year and the pluses and minuses of the period since the Good Friday Agreement was voted on by the people, we have to look at what has happened in between. Brexit was unimaginable in 1998. We discussed everything in 1998 from A to Z and back and up and down, but nobody ever mentioned that the United Kingdom could leave the European Union. If people had done, others would probably have thought them to be funny people, but nobody did mention it. The work of this week and the work of this day last week was to bring the United Kingdom to the end of the period of arguments that we have had since 2016.

The context for Northern Ireland is different in a UK outside the European Union but determined to have good working relationships with it. The east-west relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland has changed, and there is intense focus on getting the institutions back up and running in the Assembly and rightly so. The future that I foresee and the one provided for in the Good Friday Agreement 25 years ago is one with much deeper and more dynamic relations between the sovereign Governments east and west. Ironically, the changed context provides a dynamic for all of that to happen, and there is an essential Irish interest in replacing the rich ecosystem of informed British-Irish relationships that we mutually enjoyed on the margins of our shared EU business in Brussels. The British-Irish Council has to be reinvigorated, and I especially welcome the attendance of Prime Minister Sunak at its recent proceedings: the first Prime Minister to attend since Gordon Brown over a decade ago.

Of course, the United Kingdom has changed and made important decisions for itself about devolution. There is a shared community of interests across these islands, and, in the context

of a more diverse constitutional arrangement in the UK, a shared forum between the sovereign Governments and the devolved Administrations makes perfect sense. It is time for us to use the institutions as set out in the agreement, particularly on the east-west relationship.

The British-Irish relationship remains one of deep mutual interest, and it is far wider than Northern Ireland. If it proves — I hope that it does — that the United Kingdom has reached the end of the beginning of its departure from the EU post Brexit, it will, understandably, want to capitalise by normalising its relations with Brussels. In that context, Ireland will be important to the UK in rebuilding relationships with the European Union, and we can be a good neighbour and a friend to the UK. That was the whole purpose of the east-west institutions that we established under the Good Friday Agreement. In a context now that nobody envisaged then, their utility and importance seem far greater than ever. I urge people to take an interest in developing that area. I will not get into blaming anybody, but I will say that that area was not treated seriously over the past two decades. We have a shared interest in many areas. Last week, I mentioned the North Seas Energy Cooperation. There are energy interconnectors and so many other issues that we can deal with. The work that you participate in here in building up the east-west relationship will have an enormous and important part to play.

I will briefly mention two other points, if I may. First is the international reporting and engagement process in the most recent Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) report. I read that report recently, and it highlights many important issues. One area that I stress to honourable Members of this Assembly is the work on engagement with paramilitaries. It is a fact of life in this divided society that there is unfinished work to do in dealing with paramilitaries. We have seen an event recently in Omagh, but I will address the far wider process for a second. It is a fact of life that paramilitarism and the structures of paramilitarism are still there. If those who have not looked at the IRC report get the chance to do so, they will see that it makes the interesting point that there should be a process of continuing dialogue with those groups to

bring them down a road where we will see the end of them. The very good commissioners — Mitchell Reiss, who is the American representative, John McBurney, Tim O'Connor and Monica McWilliams — who give their time on the IRC have outlined in clear terms the necessity of resources, effort and commitment of politicians — the commitment of the Governments — to deal with the issue. Unfortunately, it has drifted. Little did we think, 25 years ago, that the matter would not be concluded.

I am not here to denounce any of the work or engagement on what goes on with paramilitaries; that is not the point that I am making. My point is that, in a normal society, we have to work towards them no longer being there as part of society or of what happens. It is a fact, as the IRC points out in its engagement, that paramilitary structures are still there. Some paramilitaries have moved away and that is the end of the story — people have moved on with their lives, and some have gone into politics — but there are structures and engagements where, in quite a sophisticated way, that has not happened. The IRC sets that out in its research.

I am in the business not of condemnation but of asking people to help, through work and resource, so that the issues can be dealt with, whether it is through community policing or new structures of neighbourhoods. It is an area that has been left for a considerable time. If you read four or five pages of the report — from pages 20 to 25, I think — you will see what the IRC suggests. It has made recommendations to the Government. It was discussed recently at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, so it is an important issue.

10.15 am

This is my last point. It would be wrong not to say something about the present position. I have kept a close interest in everything from the backstop to the protocol to where we are now with the Windsor Framework. Needless to say, I wish it well. I have long argued over the winter, on many programmes, that there were issues to be addressed and that it was fair for unionism to make the case that the UK's internal economy should be dealt with without European Union

oversight. Earlier last year, I also made the arguments about medicines and some state aid and VAT rules.

As I read and understand the framework — I think that everyone has had a chance; it is a mouthful of documents — when you analyse what is in the documents, which I have had the chance to read fully, and look at the five or six issues that we have spoken about for the past few years, you see that, for example, on goods moving from GB to Northern Ireland, there will be a customs-based approach based on whether goods are staying in Northern Ireland or moving into the single market. The former will benefit from an expanded trusted trader scheme with dramatically simplified procedures, drastically simplified declarations and reduced data requirements. On sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks and agri-food, retail products for end consumption in Northern Ireland will be able to move with minimal certification requirements and controls. Physical checks will follow a risk-based approach. There will be additional safeguards, including labelling. Special arrangements will apply for the movement of pets, plants and seed potatoes, which was an issue that kept coming up in debates. There is substantial facilitation for moving parcels from business to customer, business to business and customer to business, with the last being entirely exempt from customs procedures. There is a permanent solution on medicines, ensuring Northern Ireland's access to all medicines, including novel medicines, at the same time as GB. There are new flexibilities on VAT, including the ability to seek UK VAT rates below minimum for moving goods with no risks. There is a resolution of issues associated with the tariff rate quotas for steel and clarification of the application of state aid rules. There are other safeguards as well.

Those are the main points that we have been across. I congratulate the negotiators and Maroš Šefčovič and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. It seems to me that, on any fair examination, the main points have been dealt with. Of course, there are always people who rightly look at such things and want to see clarifications and that people understand it. Nobody wants to put dates

on these things, but hopefully the issues can be wrapped up in the short term.

We have had a long debate for several years now, really since Theresa May made the Lancaster House speech in January 2017, when she stated that not alone was the UK pulling out of the single market, but it was pulling out of the customs union, which was a surprise that day. We have dealt with those issues. Six years later, on my reading of the issues — I made the points personally, as I thought that they were fair points, on behalf of unionism — those issues have been dealt with comprehensively. Hopefully, we can move on successfully to a position that sees the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement set up. Whether that happens in a week or a month is irrelevant, but the sooner the better, so that politicians will again be able to move. I wish everybody well in those discussions. Hopefully, we can bring that to finality.

My last point is to say to you good politicians that my admiration is always to my previous profession and to all of you who work so hard for the people. Politics never gets any easier. It seems to be more difficult and, sometimes, even more trivial. I do not know how you deal with some of the issues that you have to deal with. Had we had social media when we were negotiating the Good Friday Agreement, I think — John Taylor would probably agree with me — that it would have been a bit difficult to do that. It was hard enough to keep everyone locked up in Castle Buildings. We managed to deal with the issues, but you have to deal with a more difficult world. The press are as pro-politicians as they always were. I wish you well in all the tasks that you have to deal with.

I salute you for your determination to make things better and to make society better, which is what politics is about. I congratulate all the parties that you represent for the effort that they put into politics to make life better. I acknowledge all of you in whatever way you helped to negotiate to seal the Good Friday Agreement. That is something that we can all be eternally happy about. It was the work of many hands. I was honoured to be Taoiseach at the time. I worked with Tony Blair and so many other politicians, but the one thing I found was that,

across all the parties, there was a tremendous commitment to making peace on this island, and I worked with former Secretary of State, Paul Murphy, to see that progress was made. All that I ask is that you keep on working. It is a process. It is never over.

We celebrate the 25 years since we negotiated, but I ask you to maintain the vigilance that is necessary because there will not be a day when you can say that it is complete. The work continues. Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Bertie, for your comprehensive outline of the negotiations leading up to the agreement in April 1998 and of the work of the Good Friday Agreement in the meantime. Among the many phrases that you used, one phrase that struck me was that what was hoped for has only been partially realised. The theme of our plenary session is very much building on the success of what has been achieved and looking to the next period ahead. It is very much in sync with your thoughts and your encouragement here today. The Ireland that we have today is transformed from what it was pre-Good Friday Agreement. Our society and our islands are eternally grateful for the good work that you and all the others did to make that possible.

We will take questions from the Floor after the next speaker.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you very much, Brendan. I am delighted to welcome Sir John Holmes here today. Sir John was principal private secretary to both Sir John Major and Sir Tony Blair during their premierships and was knighted in the 1999 New Year's Honours for services to peace in Northern Ireland. He has since had a distinguished career in public service as an ambassador to Portugal and then to France as emergency relief coordinator for the United Nations and as chair of the United Kingdom's Electoral Commission. Sir John, I call on you to give your address. *[Applause.]*

Sir John Holmes:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today about the significance of the Good Friday Agreement. It is a bit hard for me to follow Bertie Ahern, to be honest: clearly, I should be Tony Blair. For better or worse, I am not, so you will have to make do with me. It is also a bit difficult to say anything new or original about an iconic event such as the Good Friday Agreement. So many millions of words have been spoken or written about it and will be in the next couple of months. I am sure that I will not succeed in saying anything original, and I apologise for that. I also apologise for speaking very much from the perspective of Downing Street over these events and paying correspondingly less attention to the roles of the many other people from elsewhere who made peace possible. Bertie has already mentioned many of them, especially those who are no longer with us. I salute them all fully, even if I do not mention them explicitly in what I am going to say.

Why am I here? I am not a Northern Ireland expert, but I was closely involved in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement and its immediate aftermath, after I became John Major's overseas adviser in January 1966 — 1996, I should say; I am not that old. *[Laughter.]*

My role in Downing Street covered everything related to foreign policy, defence and overseas aid but also — rather oddly, in some ways, you might think — Northern Ireland. The main logic was that, historically, much of the activity of the post had been about relations with the Irish Republic and the US. In any case, I quickly discovered that Northern Irish affairs, particularly the peace process, occupied a substantial proportion of my time — probably, sometimes, up to half of it — even though I had no shortage of other things to do.

My part in all of this, under Blair as well as Major, was multiple, if you like. In addition to being an adviser, I was the main link between the Northern Ireland Office and Downing Street; the high-level interlocutor with the US Government, who were very interested, obviously; the chief contact with the Taoiseach's office in Dublin; and, last but not least, an interlocutor on behalf of the Prime Minister with the main Northern Ireland parties when they did not want to

go through the Northern Ireland Office. That last role was particularly important for the unionists, who had long suspected the Northern Ireland Office of being too close to Dublin, too green and simply not to be trusted. They, therefore, especially valued the link that I and others could provide with Downing Street. Obviously, they always wanted to talk to the Prime Minister himself if they could, but, in the absence of that, they wanted to talk to me or, later, with Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief of staff.

My time in Number 10 started rather inauspiciously. In February 1996, as you will remember, the Provisional IRA broke the ceasefire that had been in place since 1994 by setting off a bomb in the City of London against the background of the long-running and difficult arguments about the decommissioning of weapons and the failure to start all-party talks. To his great credit and in line with the huge personal effort that he had already put in to make peace possible, John Major did not take what might have been the easy way out by, in effect, abandoning peace efforts until after the next election, which he could have done, especially considering his slim majority and his troubles with members of his party. Instead, he restarted the painstaking process of trying to build a way forward again and to rebuild the trust that had been lost during the ceasefire and its abrupt ending. Despite unpromising circumstances, false steps and setbacks during those next few months, some progress was made. For example, after the controversial election of a constituent body, we had the start of multiparty talks, despite the absence of Sinn Féin.

By late 1996, it was clear that substantive progress would have to await the arrival of a new Government after the UK elections in May 1997, and attention on all sides switched to preparing for that. Somewhat unusually, I was asked to stay in my role in Downing Street by Tony Blair, the incoming Prime Minister, because I was able to provide some continuity. He arrived determined to take full advantage of his large majority in the area of Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, and to move things on as quickly as possible in a way that John Major had,

ultimately, simply not been able to do.

Many of you may recall Tony Blair's speech in Belfast shortly after he became Prime Minister. He reassured the unionists that he was not a persuader for unification and did not expect to see any such thing in his lifetime or that of anyone else in the room, but he also made an offer to Sinn Féin to join the talks quickly, as long as they renewed their ceasefire and accepted the six Mitchell principles of commitment to peaceful and democratic discussion and renunciation of violence; otherwise, in the words of what became a much-overused cliché, the peace train would have to leave without them. To cut a long, difficult and convoluted story that most of you know already short, they renewed the ceasefire in July 1997 and said enough about the Mitchell principles to join the talks in September — indecently quickly, some thought at the time.

The stage was set for the intensification of the talks with a deadline of May 1998, which, ultimately, led to the Good Friday Agreement seven months later. As Bertie Ahern said, that period was not exactly a smooth process. At times, it seemed that progress was glacial, if not in reverse, but we got there in the end. Along the way, Blair was able to do something important that Major would have liked to do but could not do politically, which was to meet the Sinn Féin leadership in person. As those of you who were around at the time will remember, that was a huge media story when it first happened but — there is a lesson here somewhere — quickly became accepted as routine.

My role in Downing Street covered everything related to foreign policy, defence and overseas aid but also — rather oddly, in some ways, you might think — Northern Ireland. The main logic was that, historically, much of the activity of the post had been about relations with the Irish Republic and the US. In any case, I quickly discovered that Northern Irish affairs, particularly the peace process, occupied a substantial proportion of my time — probably, sometimes, up to half of it — even though I had no shortage of other things to do.

My part in all of this, under Blair as well as Major, was multiple, if you like. In addition to being an adviser, I was the main link between the Northern Ireland Office and Downing Street; the high-level interlocutor with the US Government, who were very interested, obviously; the chief contact with the Taoiseach's office in Dublin; and, last but not least, an interlocutor on behalf of the Prime Minister with the main Northern Ireland parties when they did not want to go through the Northern Ireland Office. That last role was particularly important for the unionists, who had long suspected the Northern Ireland Office of being too close to Dublin, too green and simply not to be trusted. They, therefore, especially valued the link that I and others could provide with Downing Street. Obviously, they always wanted to talk to the Prime Minister himself if they could, but, in the absence of that, they wanted to talk to me or, later, with Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief of staff.

My time in Number 10 started rather inauspiciously. In February 1996, as you will remember, the Provisional IRA broke the ceasefire that had been in place since 1994 by setting off a bomb in the City of London against the background of the long-running and difficult arguments about the decommissioning of weapons and the failure to start all-party talks. To his great credit and in line with the huge personal effort that he had already put in to make peace possible, John Major did not take what might have been the easy way out by, in effect, abandoning peace efforts until after the next election, which he could have done, especially considering his slim majority and his troubles with members of his party. Instead, he restarted the painstaking process of trying to build a way forward again and to rebuild the trust that had been lost during the ceasefire and its abrupt ending. Despite unpromising circumstances, false steps and setbacks during those next few months, some progress was made. For example, after the controversial election of a constituent body, we had the start of multiparty talks, despite the absence of Sinn Féin.

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Government after the UK elections in May 1997, and attention on all sides switched to preparing for that. Somewhat unusually, I was asked to stay in my role in Downing Street by Tony Blair, the incoming Prime Minister, because I was able to provide some continuity. He arrived determined to take full advantage of his large majority in the area of Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, and to move things on as quickly as possible in a way that John Major had, ultimately, simply not been able to do.

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10.30 am

That highly abbreviated description of the lead-up to the Good Friday Agreement makes its achievement sound almost simple and inevitable. Perhaps it feels that way to some people who were not involved, as they look back at it from now, 25 years later. I want to be clear that it was neither of those things: it was not simple, and it was not inevitable. It was in many ways a miracle that we got there. That process could easily have been derailed at almost any moment and nearly was several times in those final months, weeks and even days. It was also, of course, very much the final outcome of decades of patient and difficult work to narrow gaps, reduce suspicions, draft endless texts and identify possible ways forward. Those had continued under successive Prime Ministers, with landmarks along the way such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement — astonishingly, concluded by Mrs Thatcher — the Downing Street declaration and the framework documents. John Major made a massive contribution to this towards the end through his determination to keep trying and his work with successive Taoisigh in Dublin.

Final success was possible at all only because the stars had aligned in a rare way. Key parts of the republican political leadership had concluded that they needed a political deal to prevent their children having to fight the same battles as they had spent their life on. The British Government had concluded that there was no lasting security solution available. The Irish Government wanted a deal and were even prepared to amend their constitution to achieve it. The two main political parties at the time, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP, were, in different ways and to different degrees, ready to find a power-sharing agreement. The leaders in Dublin, London and Washington got on well, and they wanted to make something happen. The talks process had struck lucky in finding in George Mitchell the perfect chair. The population was fed up with violence and wanted a more normal life.

Those were vital but, potentially, transitory conditions, and it is worth thinking about why Tony Blair was, in the end, able to build so successfully on all the work that John Major had done. It was not that their underlying views, attitudes or approaches differed in any substantial way, so

I will single out several factors. First was the political strength and authority of a large majority and the expectation, even at that early stage, that Blair would serve at least two terms. Therefore, waiting for his successor would have meant waiting for at least 10 years, and that was a powerful incentive for the Northern Ireland parties and, indeed, the Irish Government to do a deal with him if at all possible. Second was the absence in his own Labour Party of any significant opposition to his policies on Northern Ireland and the weakened position politically of Conservative politicians who were traditionally uneasy about where the talks were likely to go. Third was his willingness, like that of John Major before him, to invest huge amounts of time, energy and political capital in the search for peace in Northern Ireland, even when knowing that the domestic political dividends in Great Britain for doing so were small to non-existent. Fourth was his ability to talk to all sides and to persuade them that he had their best interests at heart, even if that meant saying different things to different people at different times and sailing rather close to the wind at times. A final factor was his close relationship with Bertie Ahern, the statesmanship shown by Bertie Ahern throughout the process — I am not saying that just because he is here — and Tony Blair's ability to channel the close interest of Bill Clinton in useful directions at critical moments.

Despite all those positive forces at work, I repeat that the Good Friday Agreement was no foregone conclusion. Lack of trust in the run-up was endemic. The irreconcilable differences over the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and the possiblity of renewed violence hung over everything. From a British point of view, that always seemed to me to be the most toxic and difficult issue. How do you deal with political violence in a democracy? Is it right to seem to reward violence? Is it not reasonable to demand a definitive end to violence and the renunciation of weapons before admitting those responsible to the political process? On the other hand, is it not better to draw those responsible into a political process even before violence is given up and take the risks for peace by, if necessary, fudging the question of weapons?

British Governments took the latter choice, more or less, but it was always an uneasy choice and was often seen by many unionists as a betrayal.

Issues such as policing, prisoner releases and the extent of North/South cooperation were also heavily intractable. In the final days, amidst the psychodrama of those of us who were stuck without sleep in Castle Buildings, the process teetered on the brink of failure at virtually every moment. The publication, just before the final plenaries, of a proposed list of North/South cooperation bodies, which John Taylor of the Ulster Unionists, who is with us today, memorably said he would not touch with a 40-foot pole, very nearly derailed the final talks even before they had started. It was only when Bertie Ahern agreed to reduce and renegotiate that list and showed his commitment by returning to the talks immediately after the funeral of his mother — that impressed the unionists — that we could get going again.

At the very end, it was not certain that either Sinn Féin or the Ulster Unionists would sign up to what had been agreed. Sinn Féin dodged the issue by effectively abstaining in the final plenary because they had not got anything like what they wanted, but they subsequently claimed the agreement to be a success, seriously destabilising some unionist opinion in the process.

The Ulster Unionists rallied to the deal only at the last possible moment, thanks to some hastily cobbled together reassurances from us, encouragement from Bill Clinton and statesmanship from David Trimble and others. They continued to worry that they had somehow lost out in the process, even though they had won their most important demand of acceptance by all concerned of the principle of consent. Control of the narrative in what was almost always seen as and perhaps remains a zero-sum game was vital, and the lack of it almost scuppered the subsequent referendum in the North. At that time, agreement seemed like a miracle, and, to me, looking back, it still does.

Obviously, as many people here know only too well and as Bertie talked about, the Good Friday

Agreement was not the end of the arguments; it was simply the continuation of a series of old ones and the beginning of some new ones. My role finished in spring 1999, but there followed years of crisis summits and knife-edge talks to try to get past the lack of progress on decommissioning, North/South cooperation and how the institutions should operate and to try to get the institutions to function as they were intended to. Implementation was nothing like what we had imagined at the time. Of course, in many ways, we are still going round that track, but that is another story.

How can we sum up what the Good Friday Agreement signified? Its biggest success was bringing a lasting period of peace to Northern Ireland. There has been a transformation in the lives of most of its people, in that they are able to get on with their lives without fear, and that alone is success enough for most political agreements of this kind.

There is, of course, a lot more. Decommissioning happened eventually, although it took far longer than anyone could have anticipated, and the arguments about how much it really mattered continued. As we heard, the Royal Ulster Constabulary was transformed into the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Discrimination on religious grounds has reduced, if not disappeared. The Stormont institutions have worked well at times: who would ever have imagined in 1997 — certainly not me — seeing Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness governing together?

At the same time, a lot of what we hoped for and imagined at the time of the Good Friday Agreement has not happened. Much of the unionist and nationalist communities still largely exists in parallel and mutually hostile universes. The two mainstream parties that had gone the extra mile to conclude the deal, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, were rejected by the electorate in favour of the DUP and Sinn Féin. Education remains largely segregated; politics remain largely tribal; and trust between leaders is low, to put it no more strongly. We had hoped at the time that the politicians of Northern Ireland could stop aiming so many of their speeches

at the UK and international audiences and get down to fixing the hospitals and the schools, but the constitutional issues still loom largest over everything. Perhaps those hopes and expectations were naive, given the history. In any case, progress towards a more integrated and harmonious society has, without doubt, been painfully slow. Attitudes in the younger generation give grounds for renewed hope for the future. I hope that that is what comes to pass, but too many seem to still cling on to the same old tropes heard from their parents.

An interesting counterfactual is to ask what would have happened if we had not succeeded in reaching agreement on Good Friday 25 years ago. The short and obvious answer is that we would have gone back to working away at it in the hope of doing better next time. The May 1998 deadline was always artificial, even though, in the end, it concentrated minds, as had been hoped. I do not think that we would have gone back to the drawing board. In many ways, the Good Friday Agreement was already, as Séamus Mallon famously put it, "Sunningdale for slow learners." The wheel did not need to be reinvented. Perhaps that would have worked in time. That underlying desire for peace would have pushed all sides into another try, but there would have been nothing inevitable about that or about success. Unionists, loyalists and republicans might have concluded, in their own ways, that the other side was irredeemably hopeless and incapable of making the necessary compromises.

The souring of relations amid the unavoidable recrimination and blame games after such a failure could have complicated a renewed peace process for years. If violence had restarted, it would not easily have been stopped again, at least not quickly. The alignment of stars that I talked about and the coincidence of compatible personalities might well not have recurred any time quickly. The readiness of some of the principals to put other things on hold and to continue to give vast amounts of time and effort to the elusive search for peace in Northern Ireland could certainly not have been guaranteed.

Look at what has happened in the Middle East with efforts to solve the Palestinian dispute.

Peace based on a two-state solution was very close 25 years ago, but the deal could not be closed because some of the principals found it easier to say no and preferred not to confront their supporters, who were likely to be disappointed — maybe furious — with the compromises that they had made. Now, 25 years later, any kind of lasting settlement for the Palestinian problems looks as far away as it ever has, and, worse, no one is even really trying.

For the Good Friday Agreement to be reached, the day had to be seized, and it was — just. One lesson for Northern Ireland — hardly original but appropriate for this gathering — is that its peace and prosperity are best assured when the British and Irish Governments work together harmoniously, even if their interests and views are never likely to be exactly the same. That is particularly the case when the Government in Washington push in the same direction without interfering too much. In the end, the parties have to be the ones who make peace and move forward, but they often need help to do so. Brexit has made such cooperation more complex and more difficult in Northern Ireland in many ways, but it has also made it more necessary, not less. I echo strongly what Bertie Ahern said about that in his remarks.

The point is that, without the cooperative relationship between London and Dublin and each capital trying to bring along and reassure the parties closest to it, with all the complexities and problems that that brought for both of us, the Good Friday Agreement could never have happened. There were still lots of rows and misunderstandings, even during the good periods. Each side often thought that the other was exaggerating the difficulties that it was having with those with whom it was working, but that habit of working together and the underlying trust, built up over the years and enhanced by the Blair-Ahern relationship that I talked about, just got us through. I suspect that that could have been managed only between two mature democracies and bureaucracies. In the end, both sides, despite the difficulties, were able to keep their eye on the bigger picture and the wider goal and overcome their often conflicting instincts and emotions.

Are there wider lessons for the world from what happened in Belfast 25 years ago? There have been many attempts to transfer the learnings to other contexts. I have been involved in some of them, for example Burma/Myanmar. Most have not really borne fruit, if the truth is to be told. Certainly, the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland are not replicated elsewhere. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a vital need to use again the example of Northern Ireland in today's world. The international community, whatever those words now mean, seems to have lost the knack of solving difficult problems and producing peace and has lost even the will to tackle them. Nationalism is the order of the day, and the great powers are too busy competing with one another to cooperate, even when it is manifestly in their interests. Conflicts are left to fester, and fester they certainly do. Protagonists who are never going to solve their problems without a significant degree of outside help and pressure are not getting either. The result is discouraging for the world and appalling for the civilian populations, who are always and inevitably the ones who suffer most.

10.45 am

The lesson is not that peacemaking is easy or usually rewarded – it most definitely is not – but that success is possible and always worth investing in. Yes, the stars or enough of them need to align. There has to be some readiness on the part of the struggling parties to accept that continuing violence and intransigence will not get them what they want. There have to be actors who are ready to invest large amounts of time and effort to bridge gaps and to find compromises, who will not take no for an answer and who are ready to risk their own reputations. If the right day arrives, the moment has to be seized when the opportunity is there, because it might not recur.

We also have to accept that any deal is not likely to resolve all the problems, as it has not in Northern Ireland or, for example, in the Balkans following the hard-won Dayton peace agreement of the 1990s. However, such problems can be tackled with much more hope of

success if there is at least peace as a basic background. If no one is even trying to make peace, the prospects are bleak indeed.

We got lucky in Northern Ireland. Our successes needed and need to stay lucky, especially in the contentious context of Brexit. We knew when we did the Good Friday deal that it was likely that there would always be some people who were not ready to accept the compromises and were ready to go back to violence. We have, indeed, seen that, albeit in a very minor way, and we continue to do so, as events of recent weeks have proved. The key to success in beating such people is making them an obviously out-of-touch and out-of-line small minority, not a group able to swim in a sea of wider popular support. That is the lasting achievement and significance of the Good Friday Agreement, but even that cannot be taken for granted. The struggle against extremism and for reconciliation has to be constant, and the readiness to keep trying, even when the prospects for success look bleak, must be there. That is also the significance of the Good Friday Agreement as we mark its 25 years.

Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you, Sir John, for an excellent speech and providing thoughts for all of us to consider. You talked about being lucky and the stars aligning, but it is clear that the luck was actually the hard work and determination of everybody involved. If it had not been for all that hard work, those stars could never have aligned.

I was also struck by Bertie's point that this is a process, not an event. The monumental agreement that was reached 25 years ago transformed lives, but there is so much more that needs to be achieved and we, as an Assembly, need to think hard about what we can do to help that process continue.

My final reflection is that you said that it was easier to say no. That is true, but leadership is doing difficult things, even if they are not necessarily popular. That leadership is what we saw

in 1998. We saw it across the board. The stars may have aligned in that everybody was prepared to show that leadership, but that hard work and the work that you, Bertie and all that team did is something that we should all reflect on. Thank you so much for giving your time.

We have about 10 minutes for questions. Lord Bew caught my eye some time ago, so I will start with him.

The Lord Bew:

First, I echo the thanks to Sir John Holmes and Bertie for their excellent presentations. I do not really disagree with a word, but there is one thing that I would like to tease out. John in particular dwelt on the drama — I am looking at John Taylor, Lord Kilclooney — of the 40-foot bargepole, when many people said in that week, "That's it; it's over. This agreement is not going to happen". I know that John's views on the subject of North/South for many years before that were actually very subtle and well-informed, so I knew some of the complexity of the thinking behind that moment. Is it the drama in itself that has a role in making the thing move forward?

In other words, is there something about that moment — something about the decision by the then Taoiseach to modify the Irish negotiating position — which somehow, in human terms, connects the then Taoiseach with the soon-to-be First Minister of Northern Ireland? At some level, it is not something you would ever plan for, nor is it that John Holmes and Number 10 said, "Let's have a drama; let's have a document that goes a bit too far and we all talk ourselves back from that". Just as a matter of accidental political drama, did that in some way make the whole project of the Good Friday Agreement at the end of that week much firmer and much stronger? Of course, the key thing there is the decision by the then Taoiseach to be flexible and to think about what was really true, which was what Ireland's real interests then were. Ireland's real interests were, above all, in stability on the island of Ireland and in a settlement that Northern nationalists could live with. It is clear that he got it right.

I was moved to reflect on the significance of a totally unexpected political drama, especially in the presence of some of the main agents, such as Lord Kilclooney and the then Taoiseach, in not only not knocking the project of the Agreement off the road but making the Agreement, in human terms — that is what ultimately matters — more real and stronger.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you, Lord Bew. I ask Sir John and Bertie to come and sit at the front. If you do not mind, a few people have caught my eye, and I am very conscious that we have to finish at 11.00 am. I will bring in Colin McGrath and then Lord Kilclooney, after which I will let you respond to those three points.

Mr Colin McGrath MLA:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair. I echo the welcome earlier to people here today to Parliament Buildings and Stormont in Belfast. I acknowledge being in this room. I have been an MLA for nearly seven years, but the Assembly has sat for only three of those years in this room. It is a bit of a novel place to be today.

I begin by thanking Bertie, John and others who are here today and who played their part in the Good Friday Agreement. As it reached its culmination, I was concluding my university degree. That was a degree that included a placement, which had to be rearranged for a few miles from here because one terrorist organisation decided that it simply wanted to shoot Catholics, and therefore I had to be removed out of that estate to conclude my placement somewhere else. The work of the Good Friday Agreement obviously brought a lot more stability here, which enabled me and others of my generation to progress.

There are two points on which I would like to ask questions. First, obviously, there is a recognition that we need to make some changes to the Good Friday Agreement. I believe that some of the changes that were made in the St Andrews Agreement have created many of the difficulties that we are currently facing. Some of that damage needs to be undone, and we need

to see more changes. I wonder whether you have a view about some of the changes that you would like to see.

I am afraid that we are going to have to keep a record of this, given that we do not have any representatives of the DUP here, but do you have any advice for them as they approach the decisions that they have to take in the next few weeks?

The Lord Kilclooney:

Madam Co-Chair, forgive me for not standing up. First, it is great to be sitting in the same seat that I used to sit on when I was Cabinet Minister for Home Affairs in Northern Ireland. This is the first time that I have been back in this Building for 51 years. I was in the Ulster Hospital just up the road and Brian Faulkner demanded that I should come here to address 10,000 people outside Stormont. The hospital said that I was allowed out for four hours, because I had just been the subject of an assassination attempt by the IRA.

Anyway, I pay tribute to Bertie Ahern, Tony Blair and Paul Murphy. They are the ones who really did the hard work that brought about the Belfast Agreement. I do not think that that is accurately recorded today by young journalists in their 20s who were not even born 25 years ago and who do not know who was and was not important. They certainly were important, and I appreciate their contribution, especially that of Tony Blair, who, in the midst of the Iraq war, gave more time to Northern Ireland.

I was amused when Sir John mentioned the Middle East, because I remember bringing a copy of the Belfast Agreement to Ramallah to give to Yasser Arafat and saying to him, “Here is the basis on which you should get an agreement between Palestine and Israel”. It has not happened.

I, as one who opposes a united Ireland, remember the very first day of the Belfast Agreement talks, under the Chairpersonship of George Mitchell, at Stormont, although they were not in this Building. He said, “I want us to agree an agenda”. For some reason, David Trimble was unable to attend, so, as I was his deputy, he said, “John, I want you to lead the unionist

delegation at the talks". I jumped up to Senator Mitchell, who was a Maronite, as was my solicitor, which gave us a close relationship, and I said to him, "You can hardly cooperate with another country south of your border" — I live near the border; I came from there this morning — "if they don't even recognise you. How can you talk to people who say that you don't exist?". I, therefore, said, "The first thing on the agenda must be the recognition of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom". The Republic of Ireland's then Minister for Foreign Affairs, David Andrews, jumped up and said, "No way will that happen. No way should that be on the agenda". He was not in favour of recognition at that time. I stood up in front of Senator Mitchell and said, "Sorry. That's fundamental. I'm now taking the Ulster Unionist delegation out of the talks". That was very serious on the first day of the talks that ended up with the Belfast Agreement. Senator Mitchell said, "Right, but stay in the building", so we stayed in the building all day, from 10.00 am until 5.00 pm, when he called us back. He said, "Dublin has now reconsidered its position, and that can be on the agenda". That was the beginning of movement that led to the Belfast Agreement.

As one who opposes a united Ireland, I say to our Irish friends who are here today and who have a great belief in and want a united Ireland: have you ever thought about what it would mean for you? I want Bertie in particular to answer that one. It would mean the arrival of one million Brits — one million Brits — in a so-called new Republic of Ireland, and their representatives would hold 15 seats in Dáil Éireann. There would have to be a coalition of Brits from Northern Ireland in the Government of the Republic, and those Brits would therefore rule Kerry, Cork and such places. Have the Irish really thought that through? There is a great call for a united Ireland, but the Irish never think through what it would mean for them. That is my question to Bertie. ***[****Laughter.****]***

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Would you like some more questions to be put before you respond? ***[****Laughter.****]***

Mr Bertie Ahern:

Thanks very much. First, on Lord Bew's question about North/South bodies, there had been a long discussion during the talks about suitable areas for North/South cooperation. A list of areas was drawn up by the Department of the Taoiseach. A few people in this room will remember that that list was agreed with the British Government. We had concluded the discussion with the British Government; they had agreed on that. The case was then made that if we could get North/South bodies and their structures set up, with a number of defined areas, then, incrementally over time, you would not need to have implementation bodies. That is what happened, and there has been great cooperation on cancer and maternity services, for instance. Of course, when Lord Kilclooney mentioned that he would not touch the process with a 40-foot pole, I decided that we would need to engage in more comprehensive discussion and come to an agreement, which we did. The late David Trimble and I agreed that list. It was a dividing point. There was no doubt about it: we were not going to make much more progress.

11.00 am

I will try to be quick about this, but people forget that we had not even agreed that there would be an Assembly. In the discussions, there was not a unanimous view that we should have an Assembly or an Executive. Lord Murphy will remember that it was only late on the Thursday night when we finally got agreement between the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP that we would have that. I then decided to move and to change the demand and refine the implementation bodies into certain areas, which worked well. For the record, I suggested that we should amalgamate the IDA (Industrial Development Authority) and Invest Northern Ireland. That may not have been loved by everybody— there was, perhaps, some opposition from the IDA in Dublin as well — but, to this day, I think that it would have made a lot of sense. Earlier this morning, Speaker Maskey made a point about having to go out to build up investment and trade. When the Assembly is up and running again, and you go on trade

missions — people will find this after Brexit — you will see that nobody really asks which part of Ireland you are from. When you go around Silicon Valley and try to get investment, you will find that they see it as the island of Ireland, so it makes eminent sense to have all-island trade, but that was not agreed.

On your point on the changes, my strong advice is that the institutions should be up and running. You should not fall into the trap of having a debate about reform before the institutions are up and running. The reason for that is that there will not be any changes unless there are the three Cs — cross-community consent — and you will not get cross-community consent on most of the issues. In the good light of day, you can have a sensible discussion about reform, as we did in St Andrews in October 2006, but to try to do that beforehand will delay the Assembly and be used as a tactic to delay the Assembly. Therefore, let the institutions be set up as quickly as possible at the end of the debate on the Windsor agreement and, if there are areas for reform, let those issues be discussed, but do not do it the other way around. It would be a fatal mistake to do that: believe me. I am not saying that cross-community consent should be used for everything, because I can see arguments for where it should not, but, if you try to get that agreement first, it will delay the institutions.

I have moved in my thinking. When I was young, I wanted a united Ireland, John. Now, I want a new Ireland; I want a new Ireland where reasonable, moderate people like you *[Laughter]* are able to play a key role, and where the 15 moderate unionists who are elected to Dáil Éireann help to make that an even better place than it is today. *[Applause.]*

Sir John Holmes:

I will add a few words. I am certainly not going to go near the third question. *[Laughter.]* Luckily, it was not addressed to me.

On the first point, Lord Bew is right: it was a seminal moment. I recall, and I mentioned it briefly in what I just said, that agreeing to renegotiate those bodies and returning to Belfast and

Dublin literally just after the funeral of your mother made a profound impression on the unionists. It showed real readiness to engage, to compromise and to work for an agreement. That infused the rest of those talks for the next few days. It was a seminal moment, even though it started inauspiciously. For the historical record, I will say that I had been part of negotiating the framework for the North/South cooperation bodies, not the list, and I was horrified when I saw the list that was published. I had been assured by the Northern Ireland Office at the time that it was non-controversial. That was not true. However, they were brought back to a reasonable level, although, of course, that was hardly the end of the argument. Many years were spent on trying to get it right after that.

On changes to the Good Friday Agreement, I do not claim expertise. I have not been involved in any way in the process since 1999. The Good Friday Agreement should not be regarded as a gospel, no word of which should be changed whatever its status. Therefore, I am not opposed in principle to changing bits of it, and bits were effectively changed by subsequent agreements. The more important thing is whether what is happening, being said or being done is in the spirit of that agreement. Its spirit was that everybody gave something, everybody got something and nobody got everything that they wanted. That is what made it possible and that is why it was miraculous in some ways. You need to have that spirit now, as you had it then, if you are to move forward. That is more important than the details. Saying, "That is what it says in the Good Friday Agreement or the St Andrews Agreement, so we cannot go back on that", is to me a bit like governing from the dictates of the Bible, which was written in a completely different context and does not take into account modern events. The spirit is the most important thing, and that needs to be there too.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

As you can see, we have not stopped at 11.00 am. As is always the way in the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, there is much of interest. I will take four final questions. If you can

keep them short, it will be appreciated. We will then let our speakers go back to whatever important stuff they have for the rest of the day. Members to speak are Kate Nicholl, Niall Ó Donnghaile, Reg Empey and John Lahart.

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA:

Sir John mentioned Bertie Ahern going to his mother's funeral during the negotiations. That is a moment that is often lost in the recounting of the process and the personal sacrifices that so many people made but especially you, and I pay tribute to you and thank you for all the work that you both did.

I was elected to the Assembly in May for the Alliance Party, so this is the first time that I have attended a debate in the Chamber that is not to elect a Speaker. I note your comments about reform and respectfully disagree. MLAs have been in here six times to nominate a Speaker and have not been able to do so because it requires cross-community consent. My party is the cross-community party, but its votes do not count in that. To me, it is very clear that we need to reform the process. If the DUP does not come back into the Assembly and we do not agree that reforming the insitutions to have a willing majority — a willing coalition — is the way to get the Assembly up and running, political uncertainty will continue to escalate without a stable Government.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:

Go raibh maith agaibh, a Chomchathaoirligh, agus gabhaim buíochas lenár n-aíonna chomh maith. Thank you, Co-Chairs, and thanks to our guests.

I had intended to ask a question about the all-Ireland bodies, and I did not realise that it would gather such interest in advance. I hope that, with the wisdom of years — hopefully, it is not too much to ask — Lord Kilclooney appreciates now that the all-Ireland bodies are positive. You see that when you look at dealing with the fallout of issues such as the dreaded B-word, Brexit, and the impact of the pandemic across the island. There is no finer example in Ireland than our

rugby team in showing that, when Ireland works best, it works as one.

In the context of re-establishing the Good Friday Agreement's aparatus and institutions, Bertie, we need a firm view on the significance and importance of the existing all-Ireland bodies. Also, the world is changing around us. I agree with you that this forum not only provides us with an important opportunity for east-west engagment but, by virtue of its makeup, allows for an important strand two North/South engagment between the Assembly and the Oireachtas. It is important that this Assembly does not send a message that our existing all-Ireland bodies are somehow contentious or controversial. They are not, and we need more of them. That is the lesson of the last 25 years. So, from your perspective, where do you envisage that we can grow that all-Ireland cooperation as, hopefully, the institutions are re-establised? How important is it for the Irish Government to act as a driver, because it is important to remember that the all-Ireland bodies work both ways and benefit everyone from Kerry to Derry?

The Lord Empey:

Chair, I want to make a point about the all-Ireland bodies. The crisis arose not because of the areas of influence that they would have had but because the proposal in the initial draft was to give them all-island executive powers, which meant that they would have operated freely without the consent of or accountability to the Assembly and the Dáil. It was not so much the areas of cooperation, it was the fact that the bodies would have had executive powers. That was the point of John's bargepole comment, for which he has been maligned because he was right. There was no argument amongst our delegation; it was just a showstopper. Had Bertie not come back from waking his mother to fix that, there would have been no deal. I assure you: it was as simple as that.

The other point that I will make is on reform. There are mechanisms in the agreement for review. When we negotiated, we were not stupid. Nothing lasts for ever, and you have to do that. I will gently point out to Kate that her party negoiated the agreement, went to the people

and recommended it in a referendum, as we all did. So, we cannot do bits and pieces to suit a particular point at a particular time. Bertie's advice is right: there is a way of doing it. It is by all-party agreement; not an agreement between two Governments. Therefore, the parties have to sit down and deal with it through the processes that are provided for in the agreement.

Finally, we are commemorating an agreement made 25 years ago, but the agreement that operates today is not the agreement that we negotiated and that went to a referendum. It has been amended, and Colin McGrath referred to that. The mechanism for electing the First Minister is why we are in trouble. What the Governments did — this is the one thing that I disagree with Bertie and Tony Blair about — is that they rewarded the people who did not negotiate strand one. Neither the DUP nor Sinn Féin participated in those negotiations. Subsequently, they changed the rules, ironically, so that instead of having cross-community consent in a joint resolution for First Minister and deputy First Minister in the Chamber, it became just the largest party, irrespective of designation. Whatever you may feel about designation, the point of that negotiation was to show that it was a genuine partnership and that no section of the community could operate without the consent of the other. We had a joint veto, which was an awkward but necessary means to bring people together to sit in this Building when many nationalists would not put a foot in it for many years. That was taken away to fix a particular political problem, and that, I think, is why we have had all these years of difficulty. When we negotiated that, we envisaged focusing people more on economically driven politics than the constitution. At every subsequent election, Ian Paisley said, "If you don't vote for me, you get Martin McGuinness". I have held the office: there is no difference. You could not send a letter out of the Department without both people agreeing to it. The mistake that we made was with the names. We looked at what was happening in Scotland at that time, which had a First Minister, but that was probably an error. I would like to ask our panellists whether they consider that to be an issue.

11.15 am

I want to make it clear that I was instrumental in establishing two of the cross-border bodies — InterTradeIreland and Tourism Ireland — and they are fine. There is nothing wrong with them. They can perhaps be adapted to fix the mess that we are currently in — use the agreement to fix things — instead of our trying to imagine new ones. I am interested in the response of our guests.

Mr John Lahart TD:

Thanks to Sir John and to Bertie. I acknowledge Bertie's presence today, as my former party leader and former Taoiseach, on what is a particularly difficult day for him. You may not be aware that he is an avid Manchester United fan *[Laughter]*, so it took a lot of courage for him to come and speak to us, and we appreciate it.

A Member:

What about Dublin on Saturday evening?

A Member:

He is a Derry supporter.

Mr John Lahart TD:

Please say nothing, Chair. We will let that one pass.

I will respond to Lord Kilclooney. It is a privilege to be with him today. As an Irish republican from the Fianna Fáil tradition, I say to you that, coming from a country that was colonised and ruled for 800 years by what we regarded as a foreign power, the idea of sharing power with fellow countrymen and countrywomen is a much more attractive proposition than what was endured heretofore. To follow on from what Bertie said about a new Ireland, this body should be aware that there is a much more mature debate and discussion going on on this island about its future. I am a little younger than Bertie, but not by too much, and, when I was growing up,

the notion of a united Ireland took the form of a recolonisation and was all about a nationalist reversal of what had historically taken place. A much more mature conversation is now taking place about that.

It is in that context that I address the question of the concept of a border poll to Sir John and to Bertie. It seems to me that much more work needs to be done. The Assembly needs to be up and running for a substantial period so that people have confidence that the institutions that were provided for under the Good Friday Agreement actually work. They should work, and be seen to work, for a time before we approach that issue. Otherwise, it seems to me that holding a border poll is about just trying to attempt a numerical win, which is not guaranteed, of course, because there are so many topics involved. It seems like a black-and-white subject: it is not. There are so many things to be considered. I therefore ask for your considered views on the border poll issue and where we should go with that as an island.

Mr Bertie Ahern:

Kate mentioned reform, and Niall and Reg made points on it as well, so I will take those together. It is true that the concern was over executive powers and the fact that cross-border bodies would not be answerable in any way to Stormont and the new Executive. There was also concern about the duration of the bodies. My view is that we should be trying to cooperate in as many areas as possible. Once the threat that it is all some hidden agenda is gone, it makes absolute sense to cooperate.

We have experts in all areas across the island. I am involved in the Epilepsy Care Foundation charity, and some of the most eminent people in these islands are here in the North. There are some in the South, but there is no centre on the whole island. The fact that people work and cooperate on an all-island basis therefore makes sense. We should have far more bodies, and that is happening almost unofficially. It was happening at least, with more and more people cooperating and working together, such as an awful lot of the business groups. The farmers are

brilliant at that. They probably leave everyone behind, because they are really good at operating and coordinating through all sectors. That should happen.

Of course, the review mechanism is in the agreement. Reg is also right: we were trying to resolve something that we had not been successful in doing in 1998. We were trying to bring all parties in. We were trying to bring the DUP into the process, and the review was about that. My memory of it is that there was an awful lot of objection to some of the things that we did afterwards, and not as much at the time when we were doing it. Maybe it was highlighted better afterwards. I accept that it made some of the issues more difficult.

I want to be clear on this, Kate: I understand totally the Alliance argument. I absolutely understand the argument that it makes. However, what I do not want to see — I feel that there could be a trap in this. I know for a fact that, if you try to get around cross-community consent and get parties to agree to set that aside so that you can make changes, it is not going to happen. It just will not happen. What I am saying is this: get the institutions up and running and functioning, and then you can debate those issues. If you do it the other way round, the institutions will not get up and running. Believe me: that is what will happen, because I know what the other parties are saying. That is a way in which you can argue out the strength of your case afterwards.

John Lahart made the point about the work. There is a case. You know my position on a border poll; I have stated it a thousand times. Look at what happened in Canada some years ago. Probably the biggest issues with referenda in recent decades have been Canada, Scotland and Brexit. The one thing that you do not do is have a vote until the work is done. If you have a vote, and you put to the people that we are having a vote on whatever it is, somebody will say, "Well, explain to us now how that will work in practice. How are the PSNI and an Garda Síochána going to integrate? How will that be run? Who will be the commissioner and the head? How will QCs and SCs operate in the legal system or the courts? How will the civil

services be integrated?". I will tell you what the result of the vote would be if you could not answer those questions. I never mentioned finance. I played under-10s football with Home Farm. I was a left full back. When the ball went over my head, my coach always said, "When it doubt, put it out". That is exactly what people do in politics, too; when in doubt, they put it out.

Therefore, two things have to happen. There must be stability of the institutions, which must be up and running for a prolonged period, whatever that is — I do not know what that prolonged period is — and the work must be done. The work has only started, and there is an argument that far more work should be going on. Universities, academic institutes and private funders are putting in considerable money, so the work is now being done. It will be done, and it will come to a conclusion. I have been asked when that will be. I do not know. It has to be said — and people forget this now — that it was an absolutely integral part of the Good Friday Agreement that there would be polls from time to time. The only reason we have not had that to date has been due to the instability of the institutions. We might not have had an agreement for lots of reasons, but we would not have had one unless there was a path by which people would be able, on another day, to vote to move towards a united Ireland. We said "a united Ireland" 25 years ago, because that is what is in the agreement. That issue is there. We must remember that. Some people now say, "You can never and should never have a vote". That is not the agreement, so you have to leave that one aside.

John, the institutions need to be up and running and stable and the necessary work needs to be done so that there can be a White Paper or a case put to the people so that they understand what the questions are. Until that is done, you would be wasting taxpayers' money by having a vote because the answer would be no. The answer might always be no, but it certainly will be if you cannot answer the questions. That is my view.

Reg has dealt with this, but the review mechanism in the agreement is there to look at a broad

range of issues. As Sir John said, the idea that the agreement is the agreement and nothing can be changed is a nonsense. If you go back to the 2006 one, Reg, you could argue that it would have been better had all the parties, along with the two Governments, been across the agreements, but we were trying to fix a particular aspect at the time. We were trying to bring the Democratic Unionist Party into the process because we thought that that was better for the long-term stability of the agreement.

Sir John Holmes:

I will be very brief. I am not going to venture into the question of cross-party consent and so on as I am not qualified to do so. On the North/South bodies, from a British Government point of view, we were sometimes a bit bemused by the argument over how many there should be and what the real problem was, but it was clearly very emotionally felt on both sides. The issue was that they were seen by one side as being the slippery slope to unification, and that is why people were worried about them. That is why it had to be clear that those bodies were not being set up for ideological reasons and were instead there for practical reasons and practical cooperation that would benefit both sides. If that is the approach that you take, you can succeed. If they become seen as the forerunners of unification or a slippery slope, opposition will continue.

On the border poll, my advice, for what it is worth, which I do not think is much, is that everybody should be extremely careful about it. You might not get more than one successful go at it. You need to look at Scotland and maybe Quebec, as Bertie said, to learn lessons about it. If you rush into it because you think you have the numerical majority, if it is a 50% plus one kind of vote, it will always be seen as something being done to one group by another. You may or may not win it, but it will not be a very successful process. Going into it in the spirit of, "If we do not win this time, we will win next time" is not the right way to go about it because that is essentially saying, "We only have to win once and you have to win every time". That creates

the wrong kind of dynamics. If the unification side is going to be successful, both in the result and in its application and implementation, it has to represent something that you have evolved towards and seem more natural that it does at the moment. I would counsel great care.

If you rush into it and lose, which is essentially what the SNP has done, it is not so easy to go back to it. I totally agree with what Bertie said: if you are going to do it, you have to do the work first. You have to be able to answer the questions first, which the SNP notably were not able to do. I am probably offending somebody around the table by saying that, but that is my view, for what it is worth.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you so much. I am sorry that we could not bring more people in to ask questions. Margaret and Emer, I promise that you are first on the list for the next session if you wish to ask a question at that point. I am sure that the contributions that we have received today from Bertie and Sir John will form part of our discussions when we have our 90-minute debate at the end of the day.

We have gone significantly over time, but I think that we all agree that it was wonderful to have such eminent speakers and that, therefore, it was correct to make the most of their time. I will close the session now. You have no more than 10 minutes. We will start the next session firmly at 11.40 am. Karin Smyth will be facilitating that and will not allow it to start late, so, if you are late, you will miss it.

Again, thank you very much to Bertie Ahern and Sir John Holmes. *[Applause.]*

The sitting was suspended at 11.30 am.

The sitting was resumed at 11.49 am.

PANEL DISCUSSION: THE WOMEN'S COALITION AND THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I welcome to our panel discussion Kate Fearon, Bronagh Hinds, Dr Avila Kilmurray and Jane Morrice, who are founding members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, which is widely recognised as having brought a central voice to the table in Northern Ireland at a very difficult time. I ask Karin Smyth, Vice Chair of the Assembly, to introduce the panel and moderate the discussion.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Brendan. In all traditions of the women's movement, we have completely changed the set-up for how we are going to run this today. For me, it is just such a huge honour. As a younger woman in the 1980s, I first came across the Women's Coalition in political discussions, particularly within the Labour Party, and knew that the work of this group of women was happening and had been since the 1970s. I watched that work as the peace process came forward.

It was a real honour for me as a member of this body to work with May Blood. We were talking, Bronagh, about a session that we had around the 2018 celebrations. May is much missed from this body, but she was a very strong voice for women and the work that you did in that time.

We very much wanted, on the steering committee, to recognise in this session the voices of women and the work that you did. The political leaders in power then were almost all men apart from my former colleague Mo Mowlam. We are delighted that you were able to come here today. We are really excited to hear from this group of women about their experiences, both then and now. We want to keep the session discursive and open and give you a chance to start with your reflections on then and now, after which we will have specific conversations.

Bronagh, I will start with you.

Ms Bronagh Hinds:

In what was a reflection of the times, it was an extremely tense and difficult period for us in the Women's Coalition. To step back a bit, on International Women's Day in 1996, I was speaking in Cork City Hall, where I was lamenting the fact that there were probably going to be negotiations and that women were going to be excluded from them. Never, even then, did I imagine in my wildest dreams that we and other women across Northern Ireland would found within a month a political party and within two months be running in and winning an election to get seats at the multiparty talks. That was significant for us.

Back then was not an easy time for relationships. The skills that women brought to the process meant that we were alert to that, and we had the ability to contribute to and manage to develop a positive dynamic in those negotiations. Sometimes, that meant using relationships and clarifying communications. Sometimes, it meant active listening and reinterpreting what had been heard, because people's minds get blocked by being focused on their own agenda. Sometimes, as people will remember, it meant challenging language, behaviour and demonisation to create the culture and ease with which we needed to go through the negotiations, as well as bringing into those negotiations not just the ability to deal with all the issues on the table — from the constitutional arrangements to the institutions, different jurisdictions, policing, the release of prisoners and decommissioning — but, through being close to the grassroots, the hope of being the voices of people on the ground. As such, we brought into the negotiations issues such as integrated education, mixed housing, community development, the advancement of women and, most importantly, victims.

Those were all essential elements for us. That is where I slightly disagree with the comment by Séamus Mallon, who was a phenomenal negotiator, that the agreement was Sunningdale for slow learners. Sunningdale was three parties anointed to take up government, but, in fact, from

1996 to 1998, we tried to make it an inclusive process, which is an international lesson to be learned. It is essential to remember that.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Bronagh. Kate, I will move to you next to reflect on your time then but also to talk about the work that you do now around conflict prevention.

Ms Kate Fearon:

First, thank you very much, Karin, for the invitation. It remains an honour for me to have been part of the negotiating process that brought us the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998. I have been in this Building many times, but this is the first time, I think, that I have been in this Chamber. I feel the weight and gravitas of what we did. This is a small but very important Chamber.

I very much feel that we were about trying to bring about an inclusive and participative type of democracy. The starting point for the Women's Coalition was very much based on our experience of being excluded from the formal political process for many years, not because of a lack of ability or interest but because of the structural way in which our society had been arranged and the layer of violent conflict on top of that. That was a great opportunity, and I pay tribute to Bronagh, Avila, Monica, Jane and others who had the imagination, the courage and the confidence to craft and bring forward the concept of the Women's Coalition.

We relied on each other a lot but we also relied very much on people outside the process. Where others had strong positions and passionate beliefs, we were interested very much in policy proposals. We were good at generating ideas because we were not wedded to positions that had calcified over a long period. In addition to the novelty of the newness of what we were bringing, at the time, certainly at the start of the process, that took a little bit of getting used to for some of our interlocutors. We stood together, and we stood with the Governments, the chair, George Mitchell, Mo Mowlam and the civil servants who were behind the talks at the time in Northern

Ireland, Dublin and London. For us, it was about a mix — a fusion — widening the debate and making the pie bigger and deeper before we divided it.

I will leave it there for now and hand over to others.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

We might come back to how that feels now. Jane, may I ask you for your thoughts and feelings? We were talking about cross-community support in the last session, so I am sure that you have some thoughts on that as well.

Ms Jane Morrice:

Thank you very much; I hope that you can all hear me. Let me explain who I am. I used to fit in that seat. That is, obviously, the Speaker's seat, but I was a Deputy Speaker in the first Northern Ireland Assembly. I was elected along with Monica McWilliams in 1998, and we were involved in the Good Friday Agreement negotiations. However, if you do not mind, I would like to start at the beginning, because an awful lot of people do not understand what the Women's Coalition was. I got a nod from over there.

The Women's Coalition was an attempt, in six weeks, to get women involved in the peace talks. It crossed the divide in every direction, bringing Protestants, Catholics, atheists, others — everyone — as well as nationalists, unionists, etc, all in together. The important part of the cross-community element, which you asked me about, is that when we had our discussions, we had to have a unionist, a republican, a nationalist and a loyalist at the table. Therefore, when we reached agreement, whether it was on thorny issues like decommissioning or prisoner releases, we had already discussed it in the microcosm of the Women's Coalition. The only difference was that we were women and very different back in those days. We were able to go to the peace talks and put that to the talks. That was our forte, if you like.

Our principles were equality, inclusion and human rights. I do not whether you can tell by the colours I am wearing — I am getting my spake in here — but I was the perceived unionist.

Monica McWilliams and I were elected and, by pure chance, she was perceived as being from a nationalist background and I was perceived as being from a unionist background. Had it been otherwise, people would have said, "Ach, they are all just unionists", or "Ach, they are all just nationalists". That incredible disdain is what we got all the time from our male colleagues back in the day.

12.00 noon

So, when Monica and I came in, I was perceived to be a unionist. The fascinating thing about that was that, because I was playing a role, if you like, I became more orange than I felt. I had to defend the unionist position, and it was fascinating. I was not, dare I say it, a supporter of a united Ireland, but Brexit has made me think twice. I am not necessarily there yet, but here is what I call myself: a European unionist, and I would like to set up a new party, if anyone else wants to join me. I do not think that I have helped very much, but it is a start.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you. *[Inaudible.] [Laughter.]* I was thinking that one through.

While other people were out having coffee, it was quite something to see the warmth with which you were greeted by friends old and new and with which you greeted them when you came in. It is also true of you, Avila. You have a long history — I would not say that it is too long — of doing work around Derry on women's rights. Take us through where we are going and what is next.

Dr Avila Kilmurray:

Thank you very much for the invitation. I apologise on behalf of Monica; she is in South Sudan. She has gone from here to South Sudan.

I want to reflect on some of the points that have been made. First, people say, "Where did the Women's Coalition come from?" It came from the community, the trade union movement and the women who, since the 1970s and 1980s, had shown a lot of courage in coming together

around issues that affected people's day-to-day lives, rather than constitutional issues, because people came from all sorts of backgrounds. It did not just spring out of the air. As Jane said, we set up the party in six weeks before the 1996 election. One of the reasons we did so was that we were fed up of parties saying to us, "We would love to stand women, but they won't stand, you know". In six weeks, we found 79 women who would stand. One of the things that we were out to prove was that women are prepared to get involved in politics.

I have a number of thoughts about where we are now. We still have quite a long way to go on the representation of women. Something like 41% of councillors in England are women, whereas it is 26% in Northern Ireland. Again, women make up 43% of the Welsh Assembly, 46% of the Scottish Parliament and 37% of Northern Ireland Assembly. Yes, we have come quite a way, but we have quite a way to go as well. I do not think that we have used some of the instruments that we have to hand to increase women's representation. Under section 43A of the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, we can improve. Parties can improve the proportion of women standing, whether by quotas or through funding for parties, as, I think, has happened in the South. That is still a challenge.

Secondly, we still have a challenge — I work quite a lot with community-based women's groups. There was probably more funding and support for those groups in the 1980s and 1990s, and certainly under the EU Peace programmes, than there is now. What we have now is a smallish programme under the Department for Communities, which funds eight initiatives for a number of years. We have an initiative in Northern Ireland that is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, but there is very little else.

We still find women saying that they do not have the information to make decisions and the space to discuss those decisions. That is what the Women's Coalition gave them. It broke down the issues and said, "OK, what is our take on that?" In the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, we argued particularly for that section on rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity, among

others. That was a section along with the related section, as Bronagh says, on the issue of the victims and survivors. Why did we raise that? We did so because we were working with organisations like WAVE and self-help groups that had been set up, with no funding or support at that stage, to deal with those issues. It brought that to the table.

It was also about bringing in such issues as the importance of trying to break down single-identity schools and single-identity housing — all of the divisions that are keeping people apart. Arguably, that is the section of the agreement that has not received attention or been implemented, albeit we had some reference to it in New Decade, New Approach. We are still waiting for the anti-poverty strategy and the proper strategies in relation to violence against women and issues around dealing with hate. In some ways, it is more difficult now for some women to come forward and become public representatives because they are dealing with social media. We saw that after the most recent election here, when women from all parties said that it was something that put them off standing. So, there are all those issues, as well as the socio-economic ones.

We need to get back to what academics call "everyday peace indicators". When you break it down, what does the peace process mean for someone in Creggan, Rathcoole or Lisnaskea? What is the impact on their lives? Back in 2012-14, we carried out a project, which was funded by the European Peace and Reconciliation Programme; Bronagh was involved in it. As part of that project, we went out and talked to women about what the peace indicators were and asked them what they felt about the Good Friday Agreement. That needs to be done again now, because they are saying, "When we had the violence, we sort of knew who was who, but, now, we don't know where to go, basically". There was still fear in communities, but there was a sense that, because of the roller coaster of our governance, real issues such as health, violence against women and so forth, were not being dealt with. Again, there was a sense of frustration that governance was not delivering properly, because it was getting caught up in one party

vetoing another party or the issues that we are seeing at the moment.

However, I will end by saying that we cannot forget how far we have come, for all the complaints about the agreement and the negotiations. I have three children. My last one was a boy, and he was born in the Royal Victoria Hospital, two days after the Shankill bomb in 1993. I remember having a conversation with myself when he was born, when I was counting his fingers and toes, and asking whether, in 17 years' time, I would rather he was a victim of a bomb or the perpetrator. That was a genuine discussion at the time; that was feasible. He is the only one of my three children who, in relative terms, has had most of his birthdays in peace.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you for that. We want to keep to discussion, but I know, Baroness Ritchie, that you have to go, so I will bring you in quickly to ask questions or to comment.

Baroness Ritchie:

Thank you, Vice Chair, for chairing this session. I am in a slightly unique position, as I used to sit in this Chamber. That was after the time of Jane and Monica. I think that I sat two seats down from where I am now. I recall the discussions around the anti-poverty strategy, back in 2007, when I was Minister for Social Development, because there was an all-party ministerial group on that issue, and we were talking about having it by the end of 2008. Sadly, some 16 years later, we still do not have it. I recall that I was also on that list system, back in 1996, for the entry to negotiations, and was elected. I was slightly in and out of the discussions that led to the Good Friday Agreement. The underlying point of the GFA was about inclusion, reconciliation and bringing people together, and that was then reflected in the institutions, whether it was the Assembly, the Executive, the NSMC and implementation bodies or the British-Irish Council, not forgetting the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which is a meeting of the Irish and British Governments.

I have a question for the women; I suppose it is one for Avila. Lately, there has been talk by

the Secretary of State of amendments to the Northern Ireland Act. We cannot disrupt the delicate balance that exists in the Good Friday Agreement. How do you respect inclusion and reconciliation and not disrupt the delicate balance between nationalism, unionism and non-aligned? That is vital to progress.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you. Margaret, I know that you have to leave. We need to pick up Margaret's point about what has not happened, why you think that is the case and how we might unblock that. Do you want to take that first, Avila?

Dr Avila Kilmurray:

Sure. Bronagh will come in as well.

I am torn when people start unpicking aspects of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, having recognised the fact that it has been unpicked in certain ways under St Andrews and all the rest. For example, I was very against going from 108 representatives down to 90 because that impacted on smaller parties such as us and the Progressive Unionist Party, whose presence here was vital. Unpicking is difficult. We need to look at the cross-community and gender dynamics of any unpicking or change.

I remember, when it was slightly easier — Jane was there — and it was a matter of getting David Trimble in as First Minister, that the Women's Coalition manoeuvred so that we were one other nationalist and one other unionist. Immediately, there was a move to stop that on the basis that we were "confused". However, that got the first Assembly up and running. We saw a big difference in representation at the last election, with the Alliance Party's success. It is not fair that people's mandates are not recognised. However, that needs to be addressed along with all the other questions at the back of our minds.

Another thing that is really important, with the Secretary of State saying that any change might clarify sovereignty or whatever, is that sovereignty is very clear in the Good Friday/Belfast

Agreement. It is democracy. It says that we are part of the UK unless a majority of the people here vote otherwise.

Ms Bronagh Hinds:

The principle of consent.

Dr Avila Kilmurray:

The other thing that has not been mentioned at all in the past 10 years or so is the concession that was made by the South in changing articles 2 and 3 of its constitution. That was a big thing, but it has been received with just, "Oh, well. We'll bank that one". Any suggested amendments would have to be looked at in careful detail.

Ms Bronagh Hinds:

I agree entirely with what Avila has said. We brought two primary proposals as well as others, both of which were about the inclusion agenda. One was on the civic forum, and the other was on electoral reform, which Kate had been pushing. We came up with a different electoral mechanism, and we did some work on it. We could not sell it to the other parties. The six-seat constituency mechanism was agreed on the basis of its being more inclusive and creating a certain amount of diversity. Reducing the number of seats was a rum deal. It has decreased diversity and killed off some of the smaller voices, and we are worse off for it.

I agree totally with what Avila said: we need a serious debate about what the changing demographics and changing voting patterns are doing. It was an issue for the Women's Coalition. We, probably not being as purist on the issue as the Alliance Party, were prepared to redesignate as the need arose to make the process work. We need to think about that, without changing the fundamentals of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

We need to see the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as an evolving process. I welcome the remarks this morning by Reg Empey, who spoke about the real issue with the North/South

bodies being their executive nature rather than their number. All of us expected more North/South bodies to be cooperating by this point, and there ought to be more.

The mischievousness that has gone on over the last while around the Brexit deal and the issue of consent is appalling, because that destabilised things. It is very clear that it is in our hands to determine the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, and we currently determine that we are part of the United Kingdom. That is very clear, and no Brexit deal, or whatever, is going to change that.

12.15 pm

To pick up the point that Jane mentioned earlier, Brexit has utterly changed the context for people. I will point out three things. First, Brexit and the manner in which it was executed by some of the UK actors practically shredded the relationship between the UK and the EU, particularly that with the Irish Government. We heard testimony this morning, as we have heard elsewhere — I have heard Sir John Major talk about it — about the absolute, fundamental importance — we agree with that — of the partnership between Britain and Ireland within the EU, as it was then, in moving them away from endorsing their separate sides to saying, "We are the Governments here. We have to take action in partnership together". There was a close relationship between the various parties.

Secondly, Brexit brought up, again, the issue of borders. We had managed to dissolve that in the EU, and it was not an issue.

The third point goes back to the equality and rights agenda that Avila talked about. People underestimate that at their peril. Someone referred to it this morning in terms of sectarianism having gone away. We have a range of equality and rights that need to be resolved. It was a fault line in our conflict, and it was helpful to see our equality and rights framed beyond the narrow confines of Northern Ireland in the European and global frameworks. We lose that at our peril.

I remember, when I was deputy chief commissioner of the Equality Commission leading the implementation of the equality arrangements after the agreement, being in negotiation with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) about the single equality Act, which was promised within a year: we have still to see it. Monica was chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) — there have been others before and after her — and we have yet to see a bill of rights. That is to mention just some of the issues.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

I will quickly bring in our European unionist. *[Inaudible.]*

Ms Jane Morrice:

I will quickly make three points. There is change, and the Alliance Party's push for reform to get a greater recognition for the designation "other" is very important. There are three other areas to look at.

First, we got peace, but we do not have reconciliation, and we have to recognise that. I declare an interest that is not on my CV: I am a director of the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), and that has been my voluntary role for decades. Integrated education, back then, was 7% of the school population; it is still 7%. I pay tribute to Baroness May Blood, who was a Member here and a great champion of integrated education. We need reconciliation, and we need to work harder for it. The Women's Coalition got integrated education put into the Good Friday Agreement — I wrote it myself — and it still has not happened.

The second point is about the role of the European Union. For example, we are talking about the great Biden trip for the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. Where is Ursula von der Leyen? I claim that Europe has done more for the peace process here than America. I am not demeaning what America has done, but America did the big political guns: Washington, presidents, helicopters etc. Europe was grassroots stuff, and Europe is still doing the grassroots

stuff. The only programme from Europe that has continued beyond Brexit is the peace programme, which I helped to set up when I was in the Commission office, so it is very dear to my heart. Why are Europe and America not sharing the stage on Good Friday and being recognised for that? Europe's role must be written into the next reform of the Good Friday Agreement. It was between the lines in the original Good Friday Agreement: here, it should be front and centre.

The last thing is unionism — again. I had a wonderful chat with the Speaker of the Dáil a couple of weeks ago, and we talked about the need for unionism — unionists, Protestants etc — to find out more about the South of Ireland. We do not watch RTÉ; we do not know what is going on down there; we do not know the names; we do not know the culture; and we did not learn the history. We have to learn more. I assume that you have all heard of Erasmus. I propose a mini Erasmus on a North/South basis: getting schoolkids exchanging on the island of Ireland. Is it not a brilliant idea? The Speaker said that he loved the idea and wanted to go with it, so, if anyone wants to back me on the European unionism party, mini Erasmus can be one of our first things.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

That will make for good lunch talk.

Ms Jane Morrice:

Thank you.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

I will bring in the next questions. We will be tight on time.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee:

It is an absolute pleasure to be here with you today and to hear our panellists speak. As a teenager who followed the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, the Women's Coalition

certainly was an inspiration to me and a whole generation of women on the island of Ireland. What you did at the time was really fresh and innovative, and the principles of equality, inclusion and human rights were forward-thinking and inspirational. I thank you for all your work and for the inspiration.

I have two quick questions that are based on the misogyny that you faced when engaging in the negotiations. I have heard Monica McWilliams speak about that and how challenging it was. How did you overcome that? You mentioned that, within your group, you came from every tradition in Northern Ireland, and you came from trade union and community backgrounds. At any stage in the negotiation process, did tensions emerge within your group, and, if so, how did you overcome them?

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

If we can be brief with the questions, you will get the answers, and we will have time over lunch. Colleagues are joining us for lunch.

Mr Ross Greer MSP:

Avila, I was struck by what you said about your youngest son, because he is only a little bit older than I am. That is exactly the conversation that I had with May Blood five years ago, and it was a privilege to have it when we marked the 20th anniversary of the agreement. It was mentioned this morning that the post-agreement generation had different priorities and that those priorities were increasingly similar and cross-community on issues like equality. That is really positive, and a lot of great stuff can come from that. How do you continue to emphasise the importance of the peace process itself, which is a continuing process, to a generation who did not experience what came before it?

Baroness Hooper:

This is my first Assembly meeting, and I am finding it a great privilege to be here on this very

special occasion. It was said in the previous session that sectarianism is no longer an issue in the peace process here. I am interested to know your views on the position of the Churches in relation to the Women's Coalition and to wider issues. The Northern Ireland peace process has been regarded as a model throughout the world. I am thinking of Colombia in particular, because I have a big interest in Latin America. Has the Women's Coalition been involved in the dialogue that has taken place with not only Colombia but other places?

Senator Emer Currie:

Thank you for the disruptor and challenger role that you played in the negotiations. It is a special occasion for me to be in this Chamber. My dad was a nationalist MP at the age of 24, and he was the SDLP Minister for Housing in the Sunningdale Government. His interest in my being here would be very fleeting, because what would consume him would be the fact that the institution is not up and running. Power-sharing — the potential of power-sharing — was one of his very firmest beliefs. We would probably have had a conversation about how fixable the problems are compared with where they were 25 years ago.

Do you feel that the Civic Forum could have played a role in insulating us from the cycle of crisis and collapse that we are in? If we are talking about implementation at this stage — it has been included in New Decade, New Approach — how would you like to see its being implemented? Thank you.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you. I am rushing people on because I am conscious of time. Kate, can you take us through the comments on the conflict in particular?

Ms Kate Fearon:

Sure. I will say something quickly on misogyny. I am not sure whether we would have framed it entirely as that at the time, but the world has moved on. We see things much more clearly

now, not just in hindsight.

The Lord Kilclooney:

Are you all still women now?

Ms Kate Fearon:

Pardon?

The Lord Kilclooney:

You are still all women?

Ms Kate Fearon:

Well, you know —.

Ms Jane Morrice:

I am thinking of changing. I will meet you in the middle.

Ms Kate Fearon:

That exemplifies the types of challenges that we received from our colleagues, in the Chambers and outside of them, on many occasions. Having the flow of one's thoughts interrupted happened many times, but, thankfully, we were supportive of one another. We kept a record. We wrote it down. We had our "quotes of the week" for whoever had made the most sexist comments towards us. It gave us strength. That is not to say, however, that it did not affect us and that we did not have to think about it: it was an additional layer to think about when we were in discussions with some, although not all, of our interlocutors.

It is absolutely right to say that the agreement needs long-term investment. I would link that to the next question, which was about the sense of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement's being held up as a model globally. I have not worked in Northern Ireland since 2001. I work internationally on a lot of different conflict and post-conflict situations. It is true to say that the

GFA is held up as a model in many places. I know that Avila and Bronagh have been particularly involved in Colombia. A lot of the time, we are asked to speak, not just to women's groups but to people who are involved in peace processes, about our process and what we think about it now. A lot of the time, the questions are about what is written in the agreement. People say that it looks and reads well but ask about how it is being implemented. We say that it is a long haul. The agreement's sponsors, who, in our case, are the British and Irish Governments, the American Government and the European Union, have to make a 25- to 50-year investment. We are at the halfway point in that. We need to keep thinking not just about what the agreement means for the political elites but about how it is knitted right into the fabric of our society.

You talked about sectarianism. Unfortunately, it still exists in our society.

Ms Jane Morrice:

Big time.

Ms Kate Fearon:

There are ways in which to address problems in our society that are taken by people who work outside the rule of law. All the kinds of issues to which Avila and Bronagh referred, such as the basket of social and economic rights, which, in the agreement, were seen as soft rights and included the rights of victims and survivors, as well as the issues of dealing with the past and reconciliation, which we got into the agreement as a hook on which to do further work after the fact, really need to be in there. Yes, it is a model, but it is not a perfect model. Others have learnt from that model and from our experience of its implementation or non-implementation, and they have learnt of the frustration that comes about when the political elites are unable to meet the expectations of society. It needs to be knitted throughout the fabric of society. It is for the long term, and it costs a lot of money. We need to understand how much it costs at the very beginning.

12.30 pm

With regard to our younger generations who are coming through, Avila mentioned her children. My youngest sister is 20 years younger than I am, and it is great that she has never had the experiences that I had, namely encountering, or having the potential to encounter, spontaneous acts of violence, sectarianism or bullying framed in conflict terms. However, there is a responsibility or duty and, in some sense, an obligation on us to talk about what it was like and understand the power of narrative, the power of story and the power of communication. Reconciliation in our society will take time, but we need to pass on that memory, not to sound so trite as to say, "So that it will not happen again" — I do not think that we are in danger of that happening — but to provide a sense of what it took to get us to where we are right now. There is no guarantee that we will stay the way we are. The war in Europe at the moment shows us that we cannot take anything for granted, and we need to keep that memory at the forefront of our minds. We cannot go back and we cannot lose, but we need to keep remembering so that that does not happen.

Ms Bronagh Hinds:

We all agree that our process has been successful, particularly if you look at other conflicts and peace agreements that did not quite make it or did not last as long. Research shows that inclusive processes, particularly those that include women and recognise civil society's contribution, are the ones that last the longest.

Kate talked about our obligation to share some things here, but we also feel obligated to share them internationally. Avila has been to Colombia, and I have also been there a couple of times. One of the last things that I did before Afghanistan collapsed was facilitate the Afghan Women Leaders' Peace Summit to try to develop a strategy in Afghanistan. I also worked for a number of years as a senior adviser in the Syrian process with women, building the women's initiative for peace and democracy, advising the Syrian Women's Advisory Board and the UN special envoy to Syria and, through those negotiations, trying to get a voice for women in those

negotiations. We feel obligated to get involved. Lots of women in the Women's Coalition have contributed, including Anne Carr, who is not here today. So, a number of women are doing that work.

I would like to just tie up the issue of misogyny in the talks, sectarianism and what is going on today. I want to say something about one of the critical issues of the day, which is paramilitarism. Avila referred to a piece of work that her organisation — the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland — led on around the border counties with women's organisations in the North and South, which reached thousands of women. One thing that it reported was the oppression of paramilitarism in local areas. We know about the extortion that is happening and we know of women's concerns and family concerns about young men being groomed and women being sexually exploited. We have research in the women's sector about loan sharks operating that are linked to paramilitaries. There is extortion, and, the weekend before last, there were threats to burn down Northern Ireland if people did not get their way. Of course, there was also the attack on DCI Caldwell. All of that is completely unacceptable.

On the other hand, we have not mentioned it here, but one of the major successes of the agreement was the reform of policing. I know that it was hard for some people and that some people found it difficult to let go of the RUC, but calling it the Police Service of Northern Ireland was positive. I can testify to the fact that they are out walking the streets where I live, creating relationships with community.

We also know that, when it first started and some political parties were not going into the district policing partnerships, they were 50% civil society and 50% women. We have evidence of women facing down opposition to the reform of policing. All of that is extremely important. And yet today, after New Decade, New Approach in 2000 talked about improving policing, with 6% cuts coming up, we will have lost 800 police officers. My view is that there should be no more money into paramilitaries for transition. Those who have not transitioned in 20 years

and then talk about young people being groomed — well, they have been grooming them. I would take that money. We need to improve policing to deal with the criminal issues that are going on, so we need to take that money and put it into the people on the margins, which is the civil society activity on the ground, who were the peacebuilders through decades before we got to negotiations and who are losing money because we have pulled out of the EU — one of their main funding sources — and into women's groups, young people and youth provision. Let us not hear any more about paramilitarism.

The last thing that was asked is on the issue of the civic forum insulating us. We are very aware of how difficult it is to govern after protected conflict, so we were trying to think ahead. We proposed a civic forum to bring together economic and social actors to assist the Assembly to move forward and focus on that agenda. We had multiple suspensions; the civic forum was suspended and never resurrected, and, between the suspension and the lack of priority given to a civic and economic forum, we actually missed the financial bounce that we ought to have had on the goodwill that followed the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Putting that in the context of today and what we are facing with the Windsor Agreement, we cannot afford to miss any more bounces. We cannot afford to miss any more bounces, and we need to take this deal and move ahead.

We are talking about economic investment, which is really important, but I want people to think about what we lost with the EU, which was a social dimension that not only supported and funded our community infrastructure but which Northern Ireland contributed to, with Jacques Delors, enormously at the EU. I want to know who is going to prioritise investment into that sector, which continues to run the projects on the ground — the education and training projects for the people who are disadvantaged and left behind, the poverty projects, the peacebuilding projects — and have the difficult conversations about what the legacy of the past means and making reconciliation.

By the way, and sorry for having a little swipe, but, as May would say, “Speak truth to power and be blunt.” I am fed up with reconciliation projects being about throwing a little bit of money at the community and doing a few reconciliation projects when we have seen the Assembly work well at times, but we have seen people not totally committed to the agreement and not constantly leading a reconciled project from the top. There is no excuse for some politicians not changing their leadership behaviour so that they exhibit reconciliation from the top down. It is not a tiny little project.

Dr Avila Kilmurray:

I will try to pick up on some of the points that we have not addressed yet.

On misogyny, my line was always, “God help their mother. I am sure she must be embarrassed.”

Youth is one that we have not picked up on, and it is really important. It is understandable that people who were born after the situation will not have the same relationship of knowing where the agreement came from. That is a challenge for our education system. I would like to see a cross-border joint curriculum project for schools, not just in Northern Ireland but in the South as well, because it is equally important for young people in the South to know about the agreement and the change and ongoing challenges. That is important. Secondly, I think it is important to point out that young people are much more aware of the equality and rights-based approach. As Bronagh said, we still do not have a bill of rights in Northern Ireland, and that was Westminster’s fault. It was to be moved in Westminster, and it was dumped back into this Assembly, where, immediately, it became yet another thing to be vetoed and thrown out. However, within the Good Friday Agreement, there still is room to move the rights agenda forward, and it is not just a bill of rights for Northern Ireland but a charter of rights for the island of Ireland, so there is nothing to prevent the South from starting to make a move around that.

The other point to mention about young people is that it is really important for us to try to re-engage young people in politics. To be quite honest — Bronagh has not been missing the wall — some of the politics that we have had in the past five years has been a disgrace in terms of democracy, truth and a politics that you can stand over. We need to get back to a politics where young people can actually feel that they can engage and where it is worth their while putting some effort into it. Otherwise, we are in real danger because we say that the value of the Good Friday Agreement is that we all agreed for democratic choice. I always think that the genius of the Good Friday Agreement was in disentangling the concepts of citizenship, and citizenship was not just unitary thing. I can be Irish and British and both. What does that mean?

Ms Jane Morrice:

European as well.

Dr Avila Kilmurray:

One of the areas of work that we have to do is to try to pad that out. What does that mean? Lord Kilclooney talked about there being a million Protestants or unionists on the island of Ireland, so we need to say that we have said that they can still be British. What does that mean? Speaking from the women's perspective, I would welcome that because at least 51% of them are going to be women. I do not think that there is any difference between what they value, including healthcare, life opportunities for their children and housing, whatever jurisdiction they are in. I have a niece who is married to a Church of Ireland Cork man, and she has the same interests as some of the women who I have talked to up here. So, I welcome that diversity. Going back to your point, the work with young people is vital because, if we are talking about the opportunity to make really important constitutional changes, whether in 10 years or 20 years or whenever else, when I am pushing up the daisies, it is people of your age who will be making the choice, and it is people of your age who will have to live with the consequences. Therefore, if Jane has a slightly off-the-wall political project, I have one too. In any

constitutional referendum, I would give double votes to anyone under the age of 25. They are going to have to live with the consequences.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

There is no shortage of commitment here this afternoon.

Ms Jane Morrice:

I will start on the youth. I have a not-off-the-wall proposal. In Scotland, the voting age was reduced for the referendum, and I would insist that there should be a reduced voting age — at least 16 — for any border poll. Everyone should accept that. I think that there should be a lower voting age anyway, in general. A referendum could be a start, but why are we not fighting for lowering the voting age? I do not know why young people are not doing that.

My second point is on the Civic Forum. This is fascinating considering the Irish in the room here. You have set up a great Citizens' Assembly down South, have you not? You all were talking about bringing the northerners in, and the unionists said, "No way, Jose". The northerners have the Civic Forum, and it brings us all together. So why does the South not push the Civic Forum in the Assembly rather than the Citizens' Assembly, which confuses unionists because they are not the major part? The Civic Forum should be back up and running, and, in fact, it would it be brilliant if the Civic Forum had taken whatever it is into its own hands and marched in here and took its positions and started operating as a Civic Forum.

Ms Bronagh Hinds:

It is in the Northern Ireland Act.

12.45 pm

Ms Jane Morrice:

I will be the Speaker for that one, if they need me. We should start doing things a wee bit more radically, which may be a polite way to describe it.

The other points are about lowering the voting age —

A Member:

Sectarianism.

Ms Jane Morrice:

— and sectarianism. People think that sectarianism is gone, but it is not. All you need to do is to take a black taxi tour of Belfast and to see that Belfast is divided by 13 peace walls. When I bring people on visits here, they cannot believe that there are still massive walls. The walls are up to stop the golf balls from being chucked over the top. It is craziness.

There are also the issues of schooling and the churches. You asked about the churches. One of my favourite phrases is:

> "too much religion and not enough Christianity".

I see a few nods. I do not know whether it is irreligious of me to say that, but I honestly wonder where the churches were. I was a teenager of 14 when the Troubles started, and I was born in Belfast, so I have seen it all. I could hear the big booming voices and everything on the television and the radio. Every day, my dad would turn the radio on and it would say that somebody else was dead. An awful lot of houses were saying, "Who was it? Who will it be tomorrow?". That was the sort of stuff that was going on back then, and, honestly, the churches were deafening in their silence. It is only very recently that the four churches got together and made a declaration. Was that a couple of years ago? Does anyone remember it? It was important at the time. A few of them came out and said, "Sorry, we took our time; we took too long to do this". I will not criticise them that much, but I definitely wish that they would do more.

The last point is on sort of misogyny but not misogyny. It is a nice wee story about my husband — I am not putting the misogony label on him at all — when I came back from the first meeting of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. We had all got together, 70 of us in a room, and said, "Let's set up a women's party". We all put our hands up. That was six weeks before the

election. I went home to my husband and said, “We’re going to set up a women’s political party!”. He looked at me and said, “What would you do if I set up a men’s political party?”. For 20 years, the 20 seats that we had in Westminster and Strasbourg had been held by men, so I said, “If those had been women, I would help you set up a men’s coalition”, and so I convinced him. He put up my posters and invited party meetings to my house. It all went well and he supported me; not many others in my family did, because I was stepping out of our comfort zone, but we got there.

I am all emotional being back in the Assembly. Thank you very much.

The Vice Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

That was fantastic. It was the most amazing trip through time with some of the most amazing women that we have had the pleasure to hear from; I think that we would all agree with that. It has been an honour for me to chair the session. We have heard lots of positive ideas for the future, as well as lessons from the past.

I asked Avila to remind me this: you found 79 women to stand for political parties in six weeks. My party ordered that shortlists force women to stand; the reason that those numbers are slightly better in some places is that we forced the party to adopt women, but we are no longer able to do that. We are going backwards. It is a challenge for us all to reflect our communities in every which way.

You women have been amazing. Thank you for agreeing to join us for lunch. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Colleagues, I thank our vice chair, Karin, for moderating an exceptionally interesting and informative session. I compliment our guests on bringing such great clarity to many issues and on the work that you did over those difficult years. Those were years that led to an agreement that has brought so much peace to our country and has literally both transformed the relationship between these islands and brought peace to our island. Of course, we need to

achieve more of that agreement and to realise its potential.

Lunch will be served in the Members' Dining Room on the first floor. The Speaker is kindly hosting the lunch, and we are very grateful to him. Before we gather for lunch, a group photograph will be taken on the main staircase, so I ask all members to go directly there.

The session is suspended until 2.00 pm. I ask for a sharp return at 2.00 pm, please. Thank you.

The sitting was suspended at 12.50 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 2.11 pm.

POLICING UNDER THE BELFAST/GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Our next session is on policing under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. One of the key parts of the agreement was the replacement of the Royal Ulster Constabulary with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, which is a police service for the whole community and one that is made up of and represents members of all parts of the community. It has been a great achievement, but we know that there are still issues, as recent events have demonstrated to us. We are very honoured to have with us Dr Jonny Byrne from the school of criminology, social policy and politics at Ulster University, which some of us were fortunate enough to visit yesterday. He is here to give us his address and to set the scene for the debate that will follow. *[Applause.]*

Dr Jonny Byrne (Ulster University):

Thank you very much, Co-Chair. Good afternoon, Members, and thank you for the opportunity to talk briefly about our experience of policing reform in Northern Ireland, with a focus on its successes and challenges.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement set in motion a series of events and decisions that led to the establishment of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in November 2001. Driving the change was a recognition of the fact that there had to be a reset in the relationship between the police and society, with the aims of securing police legitimacy and increasing public

confidence in the institutions. The vision of a new beginning to policing was delivered through the Patten report and its 175 recommendations, which dealt with many issues, including the name, uniform and symbols, along with substantial changes to structure, composition, training and transparency mechanisms, all of which were to be assessed through the indicators of effectiveness, efficiency, impartiality, accountability and respect for human rights. Underpinning the recommendations was a view that policing reform was the responsibility not simply of the police but of the entire community. Essentially, it would entail a community/police partnership and shared ownership of the process.

As we reflect on the 25 years since the agreement, it is also appropriate to examine policing reform and to consider whether it has delivered on its key aim of achieving a police service — not a force — that is capable of attracting and sustaining support from the community as a whole. I believe that, in general, the implementation of Patten fundamentally changed the leadership, composition and culture of the police positively. In that regard, there are four areas in particular that I want to focus on that best illustrate progress.

Going briefly off-script, I put this paper together at the end of last week. On Saturday, I was working with a number of young people from loyalist and republican backgrounds. They asked me what I was doing, and I explained that I was coming here to talk about policing. They asked me to talk to them about what I was going to say, and after I gave them an overview, they disagreed with everything that I had said. It got me thinking that we need to be really careful about how we benchmark success and progress. Therefore, I add the caveat that my analysis is primarily of policing from about 1998 and before that. That is really important, because there is now another generation who do not have experience of that period to benchmark progress and effectiveness.

2.15 pm

First, the organisation's approach to public order captures the differences between old and new

policing in style, tone and aesthetics. Historically, policing tactics were often defined by physical confrontation, the use of lethal force and militarised tactics and vehicles. However, over the past two decades, there has been a significant decrease in the use of force alongside a more graduated response to situations. The much-heralded “no surprises” approach employed by the PSNI has prioritised the importance of engagement with the public and the development of partnerships with community stakeholders.

Secondly, the PSNI has, for the most part, successfully managed the transition from security to community policing through its policy of policing with the community. The focus has been on prevention, engagement and problem-solving in partnership with civil society, public bodies and the political institutions. It is also really important to recognise that, in the early years, much of that was driven by individuals in the community and the police. There are numerous accounts of people taking personal and reputational risks to further the goal of police normalisation.

Thirdly, one has to acknowledge the advancement in making the police more representative of society. The policy of 50:50 recruitment, whilst both sensitive and controversial, increased the proportion of Catholic officers from less than 8% to over 30% during a 10-year period. Interestingly, there was also a significant increase in female representation in that period.

Fourthly, the oversight mechanisms, including the Policing Board, the policing and community safety partnerships, the Police Ombudsman and Criminal Justice Inspection, have ensured that there have been consistent and regular challenge and scrutiny of PSNI tactics, behaviours and decision-making processes and that the PSNI is largely seen as operationally independent. However, in more recent years, some of the accountability mechanisms have been more effective than others.

Although there have been successes, there have also been missed opportunities and challenges. Politically, there should have been more effort and commitment to construct a new police

training college, which might have expedited organisational and cultural change. Furthermore, the process around the defortification of police stations has been slow, although that must be viewed alongside the ever-present security threat. That has also meant that the speed of visible change has been variable across Northern Ireland.

There has also been a growing inconsistency in the delivery of policing, with emerging differences across communities in police engagement, visibility and partnership working. Alongside that, some of the oversight architecture surrounding policing, such as community safety partnerships and the board, have stagnated in terms of advocating and supporting the delivery of effective policing.

One of the biggest challenges has been the failure to progress the societal discussion about the normalisation of policing. To some extent, it is still discussed in the shadows, which impacts on both the public's level of engagement and the potential for those from certain communities to seek a career in the police. For example, there are growing concerns that people from nationalist backgrounds, and from working-class neighbourhoods more generally, will, in the future, be reticent about joining the PSNI. Politicians and key stakeholders could have done much, much more to encourage a public discussion about policing during the decade of 50:50 recruitment.

In conclusion, it is important to reflect upon the police's operational environment. In reality, the delivery and implementation of what amounts to a successful policing reform process has had to contend with a number of factors, including an ongoing terrorist threat, political stagnation, embedded paramilitarism, unresolved legacy issues, disputes around the celebration of culture and identity and a Policing Board that has often promoted accountability over the need to advocate for, champion and support the delivery of effective policing.

There is no doubt that, since its creation, the PSNI and the peace process have been inextricably linked. Establishing an effective and legitimate police service has been fundamental to the

resolution of the conflict. That has meant that police officers not only have been tasked with keeping people safe but with being a symbol of the new Northern Ireland. In the first 15 years, that has driven much of the PSNI agenda of distinguishing itself from old policing, alongside building and maintaining legitimacy and trust with the community, but, at some point, that will not be enough.

Finally, our reform process is rightly held up as a model for other societies that are emerging from conflict and jurisdictions where there has been a breakdown in public confidence in the policing institutions. For the generations who lived through the conflict, policing today is unrecognisable when compared with what they experienced. However, the challenge now is that policing meets the needs and expectations of a new generation whose standards and benchmarks are very different. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Jonny, for your insightful update on policing matters and the progress that has been made. It can contribute to our discussions.

The motion is:

That the Assembly has considered the progress made in policing under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

Will Senator Emer Currie formally move the motion?

Senator Emer Currie:

Sure. In the absence of Steve Aiken, I move the motion.

A Member:

I am happy to second that.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Perfect. Thank you. Who is offering to make a contribution? Are you reticent for the moment?

Mr Ross Greer MSP:

This is a question primarily to colleagues from Northern Ireland. A lot of the police forces across these jurisdictions and across the western world are grappling with institutional racism and the policing of people of colour. I am interested in the experience in Northern Ireland of trying to root out anti-Catholic discrimination within the police force. Has that made the conversation about how people of colour interact with the PSNI easier or harder than you think it would otherwise have been, or easier or harder than the conversations that we are having with Police Scotland or the Metropolitan Police, for example? Does that long experience of having to deal with a very obvious issue enable a wider discussion that our minority communities have wanted to have for a long time, or does it overshadow that and, perhaps, it is the case that Northern Ireland is not grappling with the specific issue of racism in the way it otherwise might want to because it is still grappling with anti-Catholic discrimination?

Senator Niall ÓDonnghaile:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. To follow up on Ross's question, I am conscious that I cannot speak for people of colour, but it is certainly an issue in the context of the border. I know that it has been a contentious issue over the past number of years, particularly since Brexit, but there have been groups lobbying around the common travel area and people from outside the common travel area. You will know from our previous plenary meetings that I have raised concerns around the travel waiver and the introduction of a travel waiver for non-British and non-Irish citizens travelling from the South into the North. Obviously, a major concern around any implications of that is how it will be enforced and policed. The experience that we have heard, thus far, from a lot of people from minority communities is that when people travel across the border and interface with the police, whether it is the PSNI in the North or the gardaí in the South, enforcement is usually based on how someone looks. That obviously presents major concerns.

In relation to “grappling”, significant steps have been made in relation to policing, and Jonny has outlined some of them, but, much like the broader context of the agreement, we still have some way to go in addressing the imbalance and the make-up, in terms of numbers, in policing. However, you would hope that the dynamic of introducing a community policing ethos, human rights compliance and equality would naturally complement a move towards a greater and deeper understanding and appreciation for the concerns of other minorities. I do not think that we are there yet. As with a lot of these discussions, as our society emerges from conflict and continues to change in the same way as societies across the jurisdictions change — with new communities, and with refugees coming to settle here — the police need to adapt. I, for one, would be keen to hear Jonny’s perspective on that and on how he feels that is happening, if, indeed, judging by the look on his face, it is happening at all. In the past, we have had quotas around policing and we have had training. I dare not introduce the word “quota”, but there you go; I have said it, and I cannot take it back. It is about communities across the board. I will finish on this, Co-Chair, because I am conscious of taking up a lot of time. I am interested in how communities of a particular class feel about how they are being policed. I hope that I have covered some of Ross’s initial queries, and I have stated some of my own for Jonny.

Ms Karin Smyth MP:

I am not sure if we are going back to asking questions, but thank you for the presentation. It was really helpful. In my area, like, I am sure, in many other areas, the police are trying to recruit from the community to look like the community and to maintain that. In my area, that means recruiting from the largely white working-class areas, but also a large movement of people of eastern European origin who have migrated to parts of Bristol in the past 20 years, in particular. I wondered about that group. A lot of people who are not from the old, traditional divides have moved to Northern Ireland. I am interested in perspectives on that. If those people want jobs in the police force, how will that go? We are only recruiting via the apprenticeship

scheme now. I do not know whether that is the case in Northern Ireland. I am a big fan of the apprenticeship scheme, but, as a route through, it has its problems in how we recruit people from all classes.

Mr Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD:

Obviously, policing on the whole island has been affected by the Good Friday Agreement in a very good way. Initially, debates in the Six Counties around the formation of the PSNI influenced us when we were looking at policing. It has influenced the architecture of policing in the South: we have a Policing Authority, and while an Garda Síochána was there, it was not involved in the conflict era in the same way that the RUC was. There have been some very positive influences on policing, with a greater degree and in a greater concentration, in my view, on compliance with human rights. As Karin Smyth says, all police services on the island, and maybe in all these islands, struggle to recruit from outside the male population. In Dublin, we find that a lot of the women who had joined are now quickly retiring or resigning.

One of the changes is that a former deputy chief constable of the PSNI is head of an Garda Síochána at the moment. There is, maybe, greater cooperation over the island as a whole, but the forces are not, as yet, interchangeable. Gardai can join the PSNI a lot more quickly than PSNI members can join an Garda Síochána. I remember that, in one our previous sessions in BIPA, that issue arose, but I do not think that it was fully addressed. There was a period, early on, when some members of an Garda Síochána or individuals expressed a wish to join the PSNI.

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA:

I am conscious, in having this discussion, of that awful attack on DCI Caldwell, who is, I am sure, in all our thoughts. There have been a number of attacks on police officers recently. It is a dangerous profession, and a lot of work still needs to be done. Specifically on racism, I engage with the ethnic minority police network in the PSNI. Racism is something that they actively

try to address. However, there is a problem with diversity in leadership across the board, not just here. This is an incredibly white Chamber. More needs to be done across the board to promote diversity. In Northern Ireland, we have the problem of sectarianism: sectarianism and racism are two sides of the same coin. If we had the Assembly up and running, we would be pushing strategies to address them. We are very conscious of the problem.

If Jonny comes back to answer questions, I would be interested to hear what the young people said to him. Obviously, he has given a good outline of progress, but I am interested in what their current perspective might be as we have this discussion on 25 years of the Good Friday Agreement and how we are looking to the future. What is the voice of the next generation? How are we alleviating some of their concerns?

The Hon Juan Watterson SHK:

I am contractually obliged to do the advert first of all. The Isle of Man has the lowest crime rate of anywhere in the British Isles, with 200 officers. Come to the Isle of Man for peace, safety and security. I am conscious that my question and comments are couched in a far simpler and smaller context.

2.30 pm

It has been interesting to hear the comments that go to the heart of policing. I will reveal that I am a former Home Affairs Minister. A Peel principle of policing is that the police are the community and the community are the police. That is a concept that goes back to the foundation of the British constabulary model. How does the PSNI engage with those in community groups who would otherwise be underrepresented? We have a system that has an inclusion and scrutiny group, which sits outside the governance arrangements. It is not part of holding the police to account but an outreach group that focuses on issues such as nationality, sexuality and underrepresented groups. When police stations flew the rainbow flag in 2011 for the first time, that caused quite a stir, but it showed that the police are not afraid to show leadership and

create the inclusive community that we all aspire to.

Has low-level crime here changed significantly over the past 20 years, as a benchmark of a successful society and a successful police force? I echo the comments about recruitment. The Isle of Man's police force, similar to those in the UK, starts constables on about £29,000 a year. It is not a particularly attractive profession when you could go into accountancy, finance or IT. Does the salary get the right sort of people into the profession in the first place? How does the PSNI measure police satisfaction? I am not sure how that works. We have a social attitudes survey on the Isle of Man, and, every time, the police come out on top as the most trusted institution. Parliament tends to be far closer to the bottom, probably just behind estate agents. *[Laughter.]*

We were quite innovative in giving a people focus by putting the police force through the Investors in People approach. We ended up as an Investors in People champion in developing the workforce. When you cannot offer more money, you can try to enrich the job. That was a real success. How has that worked in Northern Ireland?

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

I apologise for missing much of Jonny's presentation. We looked at the two-hour lunch gap and thought that we could fit in a Committee meeting, so, I am afraid, those of us on Committee C missed some of the presentation. My apologies for that.

I will underscore the point that the reforms to policing in Northern Ireland have had a profound impact on our jurisdiction too. We looked at the police ombudsman concept. We did not quite replicate it down South, although we want to do it now. Rather than having an individual ombudsman, we have the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission and the Policing Authority, which has transformed policing. We are now putting in place the results of the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. A lot of that was learned from the work in Northern Ireland, which has been very helpful.

I want to make three points. First, one of my concerns is the minimising, in our jurisdiction, of the role of the Garda Reserve. There seemed to be antipathy between permanent members and reserve members. There is a tremendous role for the Garda Reserve. Can we, collectively, see how we can advance that issue?

The second point is on recruitment. We tried to recruit 1,000 additional guards last year and 1,000 this year. Although there were, I understand, 14,000 applicants, 200 were recruited. There is some deficiency there that we need to look at. It is not only pay and conditions; a big part of it is the physical and online abuse that members of an Garda Síochána and members of police forces, generally, now endure. We should be aware of that collectively. The online abuse, particularly from far-right gatherings and so on, and other abuse hurled at police officers is entirely unacceptable.

Finally, and not discordantly, I want to bring up a point made by Bronagh Hinds earlier, which struck me. I was, for five years, a co-chair of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) that disburses peace and cohesion funding. Bronagh said very clearly that she wanted money to come out of transitioning former paramilitaries. After 25 years, how long do you need to transition? That might be well worth reflecting on. To be in that transition is not a permanent, pensionable position, and the money would probably be better spent on improving the pay and conditions of members of our police force.

Senator Emer Currie:

I thank Dr Byrne for his presentation. I welcome the motion. Yes, much of the work of the past 25 years, particularly the work that was done in the initial years and in the Patten report, has been about changing the culture and building confidence in the justice system and policing. It would be remiss of us not to mention the impact that the British Government's legacy Bill could have on confidence in the rule of law and the justice system. I have spoken before in this forum about how I feel that that Bill is unfixable, and I believe that the parties on the island

and most of the parties involved would agree with that. The point should be made today, and we might have an opportunity to talk about it later, in the debate on the next motion.

On Bronagh's point about funding, a decrease in funding for policing is obviously concerning when I am familiar with the challenges that we have in resources and recruitment. As Deputy Howlin said, recruitment has become difficult in the past few years. People thought that the story of the pandemic was going to be the impact on the office, but it is actually shift workers and people who work on the front line who have questioned their choices, and we are seeing more people leave front-line services. If there are funding issues as well, that is a big concern, considering what has happened recently with DCI Caldwell and the continuing toxicity between paramilitarism and criminality.

Mr Richard Thompson MP:

It is fascinating to hear about the changes in policing that have taken place over the past quarter of a century, but, while Dr Byrne was speaking, I recalled the PSNI report from 2021 on policing in south Armagh that found a model of policing that, perhaps, had not moved quite as much over the previous quarter of a century there as elsewhere. The report made 50 recommendations, but, overall, it found that policing in that part of Northern Ireland lacked credibility, mainly based on the highly fortified police stations there and some of the police tactics that were still being used. It made what I thought was the very welcome observation that, actually, the community would very much welcome a more visible police presence in a community policing sense. Across the 50 recommendations, do you have a sense of the progress that is being made, or not being made, in that area of the PSNI's jurisdiction?

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

I know that Dr Byrne will come back and say a few words. Will you reflect a bit more on how we make this the policing of tomorrow, not the policing of yesterday? How do we make sure that we, as parliamentarians, can support the PSNI to be the police force that deals with today's

problems, as a modern, 21st century police force?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I have just one comment. Approximately 32% of the present PSNI membership is from a Catholic background. The very good work of Chris Patten and others had a much more ambitious target for representation from the two communities in policing. Are there any particular measures that you think could be introduced that would make the role of PSNI officer more attractive to the broader nationalist community?

If there are no other Members offering questions, maybe I will ask Jonny to respond. Cathal Boylan MLA.

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA:

I just want to say a few things. Have we made progress in policing since the Good Firday Agreement? Absolutely. I say that from my experience over the past number of years. As elected representatives, most of us have worked with policing and community safety partnerships. We have had cross-border meetings. In the area that I represent, Newry and Armagh, border crime has meant that we have had to be involved with both the PSNI and an Garda Síochána. There had been good cooperation and work. For Jonny's sake, and to try to make it clear for the people in the room, I want to say that the issue now is that we seem to have moved away from that. We had good PCSPs and commuity policing for a number of years. However, with regard to some of the commentary around sectarianism, we have a different dynamic and diversity in the North now. Can you comment on that, Jonny? Has that become a new challenge for the PSNI? Things have changed greatly over the past 25 years. We have made progress. We need to look in the round at how all that impacts right across the board. From conversations with some of my colleagues, I know that recruitment is an issue. However, my experience and that of most of the colleagues with whom I have worked is that we have engaged with the PSNI and an Garda Síochána and have tried as politicians to make

it work over the past number of years. There are certainly new challenges out there. Maybe you would comment on that, please, Jonny. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Cathal. Jonny?

Dr Jonny Byrne:

That is quite a list. Thank you. Just when you mention south Armagh, Richard, I was there doing some stuff this morning. I will come back to that in a second.

Maybe Cathal's point captures everything. In 2002, I started work with the new PSNI officers on policing with the community. I think that a little bit of air has gone out of the balloon around policing and the momentum around policing change and reform from all sides. The community is tired. I think that the police are tired to a certain extent. In the first 15 years, it was about legitimacy and confidence and about policing not in the old way but in this new way. Now, we are into the more mundane issues. I do not mean to belittle it, but it is not about the conflict as such; it is more about the normal policing issues that the police and community need to deal with. I do not think that there is the same momentum or energy across society. I think that "energy" is the word that helps to describe the conversations that need to take place around policing.

People are good at relationships with individuals, not institutions. In the past 20 years, a lot of our work on policing reform has been personality led. It has been individuals in the police and communities who have taken big risks to make change. I am not sure whether we have actually institutionalised that in the police or in the community. As people have got older and changed, institutional knowledge and experience have not transcended through the communities or police at that broader level. I think that, around policing and criminal justice, there has been a deflation in the conversation.

Karin and Niall's points were quite similar. Niall will probably disagree with me. I am not a

fan of 50:50 recruitment, to be perfectly honest. I think that 50:50 was needed at the time, for that first decade. I absolutely agreed with it then, but I do not agree with it now as a policy. It is quite a lazy policy. It is a sticking plaster. All that it does is allow others to be complacent about numbers and representation. We need to have the conversation in communities: in working-class communities particularly; and in nationalist and republican communities in general.

2.45 pm

I come from south Down, and my family has a GAA background, and people there still whisper about the police. They whisper, "Do you know who has joined the police?" or, "Do you know who is working with the police?". It is still a whispered conversation, and that is really sad. That is what I mean when we talk about policing in the shadows. Twenty-five years on, we are still talking about policing in a whisper sometimes. That is happening across lots of communities, not in just one community in particular.

I agree that the language in the Patten report was not right around a programme via which people could join the police through a cadet-type scheme, but it never got off the ground. It never really got the political buy-in, and I do not think that the language around it helped, but I firmly believe that there should be pathways into the police through a trainee internship/cadet-type programme. I do not know what language should be used, but, through doing that, you could start to build relationships in communities, particularly in those where people do not talk about policing and where it is still marginalised.

We do not have the same schemes in England with the three pathways. Four GCSEs are still required to join the police here. We have put in a degree programme, so police officers do level 5 training and then move on to their probation. All police officers will finish their probation with a bachelor's degree in policing and criminology, but you still need only four GCSEs to enter. We provide support the whole way through that, so it is not as if they are isolated.

The money paid for being a police officer is awful. I am not sure for definite, but I think that at entry level it is between £21,000 and £23,000 a year. There is an issue around pay, but I am not 100% sure about the figure.

Young people do not realise the significant sacrifice that the public, community representatives, which Cathal mentioned, and the police have made to get us to where we are now. Success in policing is monumental. Policing and the broader accountability mechanisms have been completely transformed.

People who are 25 and below do not recognise the change, so they benchmark it against stop-and-search, defectiveness and adversarial understandings about police authority, police messaging, language and that type of thing. I can get past that, because I still remember policing pre-1998. That again feeds into Cathal's point about how we regenerate the conversations about confidence and effectiveness around policing that are relevant now without distancing ourselves from policing pre-Good Friday Agreement. It is really difficult.

The final point to make is that, for me, policing is more than the PSNI. That has got lost. In Northern Ireland, when we talk about policing, we just assume that it is the PSNI. It is not. We have lost something around our policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs), our Policing Board and our accountability mechanisms. We do accountability very well, but we do not do advocacy as well. We therefore need to go back to the drawing board. I do not think that it is about a rewrite or a change. Rather, it is about how we get those organisations and the architecture working better. It is there on paper but is not translating itself into practice, particularly as we approach the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the PSNI.

As a specific response to Richard, I can say that lots of things have been happening in south Armagh to address the issues that were raised in the review. As somebody who is not in the police and is independent of it and can be very critical of it, I think that we want normal policing in its broader sense. We saw what happened with John Caldwell. Proportionality and officer

safety often trump normalisation. That speaks to a broader question about threat, threat levels and security, which always trump engagement and normality in policing. It is like ripples in a pond. It is just one wee incident, but the ripples in the pond transcend all aspects of policing. Unfortunately, we are still very fragile.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Jonny. As an Assembly, we very much value your remarks in your initial contribution and your response to questions that were posed.

Mr Éamon Ó Cuív TD:

An issue of great concern to me is that there is a much higher percentage of prisoners on remand in this jurisdiction than in any other jurisdiction. People are waiting eight years for a trial. Justice delayed is justice denied. One issue that needs to be tackled urgently, which goes across the spectrum of people on remand, is the holding of trials in good time. We have situations where people are waiting eight years for a trial, which is absolutely justice denied.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Éamon. That is an important issue that you have also been raising in other fora, particularly in our own Houses of the Oireachtas. Maybe it is an issue that could be raised with the relevant Ministers and some of our colleagues. Éamon has been doing a lot of work on that issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly has considered the progress made in policing under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

Thank you all for your contributions. There were very worthwhile and frank exchanges of views. Again, our particular thanks to Jonny for his work. Hopefully, in the future, we will

have the opportunity to engage with you again. We will suspend for a short break. Can we resume at 3.05 pm, please, and no later?

The sitting was suspended at 2.51 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 3.14 pm.

THE BELFAST/GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT: DEBATE ON MOTION

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Ladies and gentlemen, we are now on our final piece of business for the day, which is our political debate on the motion approved by the Steering Committee as set out in the programme of business.

The motion is:

That this Assembly acknowledges the contribution made by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement to peace and prosperity on these islands; marks the contribution made by the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly to these developments; acknowledges the continuing need to address the impact of the Troubles, and looks forward to the Assembly's contribution to the future work needed to ensure that the achievements of the agreement continue to be built upon.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

I move the motion.

3.15 pm

If we were not already understanding of just how magnificent an achievement the Good Friday Agreement was 25 years ago, the testimony of Bertie Ahern and Sir John Holmes this morning underscored that. It was a minor miracle that probably could not happen again. The thing that most resonated from the comments of both was that it is not a historic event that we look back on and applaud. It is simply a milestone on a never-ending journey. The challenge for us is how we can — as we are doing — evolve our own role as a parliamentary assembly of these islands to address all of the issues that we heard about yesterday and today, particularly the

point that was made about young people, who have no memory of violence, and how they can be brought to an understanding of what still needs to be done.

The most striking thing that I heard, not for the first time, is the notion that we have preserved peace but not achieved reconciliation, and people are still in silos. There is a lot of work for us to engage in as an Assembly, but there is also a lot of practical experience and ability on these Benches that can and now should undertake an even deeper involvement in ensuring that the courage and bravery of the people whom we remember — some have passed to their eternal reward — are acknowledged with not only the preservation of peace but a true reconciliation of difference on this island.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you very much, Brendan. I now call on Members to make contributions on the subject. This is not a Q and A; this is you making your contributions. I wanted to mention a point that was made during the coffee break. Some people in this room are absolute experts in this area, and some have done nothing in their life but study the politics of Northern Ireland. Others in this room are new to this, and that is absolutely fine. This is a space in which we can all say our piece and make our points. It is a safe space; it is not a space where we will antagonise or upset anybody. Please come forward and make contributions, because we want to hear from everybody. Everybody in this room has an interest in interparliamentary relations in the British Isles, and Northern Ireland's role in that is absolutely vital. I will kick off with someone who was there and who is an absolute expert on this, and that is Paul Murphy.

Rt Hon the Lord Murphy:

Thank you very much indeed, Co-Chair. It has been a great pleasure to listen today to recollections and reminiscences of 25 years ago. Of course, a lot of people who were involved in the agreement have since died, and they were mentioned today by Bertie Ahern. I recall particularly, however, that, in May 1998, just about a month after the Good Friday Agreement

was signed, I was deputed as the talks Minister — technically, I was Minister of State for Political Development, but it was talks that I had to deal with — to go to Dublin, where I addressed the sixteenth plenary meeting of this body. That was just a few weeks after the agreement was signed, and, of course, many of the Members of that body in May 1998 are no longer Members of the body, or are, indeed, no longer with us.

It was a great occasion for the body, as it was then called — now, the Assembly — because it had, over the years prior to the signing of the agreement, done magnificent work in improving British-Irish relations at a time when it was very difficult indeed for those relations to be sustained. Therefore, the work of this body was incomparable, really. I still think that it is, and I will say a few words in a moment about what I think we could do.

With me in those heady days of 1998 were, of course, Reg Empey, John Taylor, Paul Bew and Margaret Ritchie, who cannot be with us at the moment. A quarter of a century later, we are still dealing with Northern Ireland issues in this body, and they have not changed an awful lot. We are still talking about how to resurrect the institutions of the Assembly, and I hope that it will not take another 25 years before we get them up again.

The Windsor Framework is an excellent start in trying to renegotiate the protocol and make sure that this place functions again. When I came over and stayed in the Europa yesterday, it struck me that we live in an ungoverned Northern Ireland and that civil servants have to take decisions on hugely significant issues. Some of you will have read the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ article from a week or so ago that outlined 39 separate issues of huge importance, ranging from oncology to support for victims, the environment and all sorts of things, about which decisions cannot be made because civil servants cannot make them. Priorities have to be dealt with. My fellow countryman Nye Bevan once said that politics, or socialism, is all about priorities, and indeed it is. Those cannot be resolved until this place has a functioning Assembly and Executive again, however.

Our role is important in encouraging progress in order to get the institutions up and running. The questions to John Holmes, Bertie Ahern and, indeed, the fabulous members of the Women's Coalition, who were here earlier, about what comes next were quite interesting. Is there a case — Kate Nicholl talked about this earlier — for looking again at the rules, regulations, structures and all the others issues that were resolved in 1998? The agreement itself states that we should look at it after so many years. That, of course, happened some years later at St Andrews, and it was changed. Some people agreed with those changes, while others did not. The only difference then was that they were not put in a referendum to the people, whereas the Good Friday Agreement was voted on by people, North and South. There is a case, unquestionably, for looking again not simply at how this institution should be maintained so that it cannot be brought down again or suspended in the way in which it has been but at, for example, the issue of victims. One of the things that we omitted to do properly 25 years ago was to deal with victims and the legacy of the past. Those issues have been there for a number of years. Indeed, Co-Chair, you had to deal with them when you were Secretary of State. They are still unresolved and still hugely controversial. The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill is going through the House of Lords at the moment.

Members, including, I think, Reg, touched on whether we should name the First Minister and deputy First Minister differently so that they are called joint First Ministers. There is a lot of merit in that. All those issues hopefully could be resolved through another St Andrews-type agreement. This cannot be done in a flippant way or in a short timescale. It should be done properly, with all the parties involved and, of course, the two Governments, as joint guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement. Bertie Ahern is absolutely right: now is not the time to do that. We must not give anybody any excuses not to resurrect the institutions. When they are up and running, I hope that our politicians here, who will be in this Chamber, will be able to resolve those issues by ensuring that there is such a discussion as we go along.

What about this body? One of the consequences of leaving the European Union was that the constant dialogue that there had always been between British and Irish politicians, particularly as members of the same club in Brussels and elsewhere, was gone. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have improved British-Irish relations in the past month or so, and I hope that that continues. There is now a gap in strand three, however. As Members will know, the agreement has three strands. The strand one talks, which I chaired, were on the Executive and the Assembly. The strand two talks, which George Mitchell chaired, were on the North/South arrangements. The strand three talks, which I jointly chaired with Liz O'Donnell, dealt with east-west relations. It is those relations that, frankly, have not been going very well for 25 years. The British-Irish Council has essentially been a formality, issuing communiqués that nobody reads. The Government-to-Government relationship — that is the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference — could have been much better utilised than it has been. I think that that is starting up again. The parliamentary side to that is this body. I hope that it will flourish in a special way to bring people together given that we have left the European Union, but, above all else, to encourage the restoration of the institutions so that the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement can live on.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you very much, Lord Murphy. Those were wise words. I can assure you that you were always a very wise counsel to me when I had the job that you had had previously, and I was very grateful for your wise words.

Senator Victor Boyhan:

I thank all of those involved in the organisation of BIPA. What is BIPA? To be honest, I found myself scratching my head today and asking if we are relevant anymore? We have talked about diversity, ethnicity and the role of young people, but then I look around here and see our membership. Many of us have been here for a long, long time. There are a lot of challenges.

Frankly, we are underutilised; there is enormous potential for this group. Yes, if people and politicians are talking, that is a good thing — it is important that we talk — but we need to engage outside the silo that is BIPA.

This morning, we had representatives from the Women's Coalition here, and we listened to them. It was very refreshing, and many of us will have heard them before. They brought a new dynamic and energy into the Chamber, but when they left it all went flat again. We are here to talk frankly. There is a challenge to the Steering Committee. I do not want a Steering Committee that is steering us to our next meeting, our next booking and our next hotel and venue in Jersey. I want something more meaningful, deep and effective. I put that out as a challenge. I have some ideas, and I am happy to share them: I am not here to be critical and not offer alternatives. That is the point I wanted to start with.

I welcome the conclusion of the negotiations between the European Union and the British Government in securing agreement on what is now the Windsor Framework. The European Union is important and significant. Someone suggested earlier that Brexit had ultimately changed the context. It might have changed the context, but it did not change the special relationship that we have east-west. I am minded of energy, agriculture, agri-food businesses and the environment. We have to continue to develop strongly that east-west relationship. It is in all of our interests to have meaningful political engagement, east-west and North/South. I am more confident of the North/South relationship, but I know, from our engagement in our Parliament in Dublin, the importance of the east-west relationship. I see it happening quietly, which is good — it does happen — but let us see it happening more openly.

Before I make my winding-up comments, I want to acknowledge the presence of the British Embassy staff here who come to Dublin. They engage, very meaningfully, in that slow and tedious one-to-one relationship. Talking and relationships are everything in politics, as they are in life.

Finally, I want to touch on the importance of youth and young people. We had a group of young people from Northern Ireland in the Seanad under the stewardship of the then Chathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann, Senator Mark Daly. The most engaging session of the many that we have had was with the young people: Ireland's future, Britain's future and the future of east-west and North/South relationships. What did they talk about? They talked about education, access to education, healthcare, housing, diversity, respect, ethnicity and orientation. They were young, bright, ambitious and articulate people. They are the future for Northern Ireland, they are the future for Europe, they are the future for the island of Ireland and they are the future for the United Kingdom. We need to look again at that.

I will finish with the challenge that someone made to us earlier: what does the peace process mean for young people? What does it mean for people in their homes today? What does it mean for the young people who are going home from school to their families this afternoon? That is the challenge. How can we articulate what the peace process is?

Well done to all involved. To BIPA, I say, "Let's bang our heads together and see if we can reinvigorate this organisation and make it more meaningful". I suggest one thing: let us get out of the silos, get out of the political chambers and meet people in communities. Thank you.

3.30 pm

Mr Stephen Doughty MP:

It is a pleasure to follow the Senator and my good friend Lord Murphy and Brendan. It is an honour and privilege to be in this Chamber and on this day. I am very aware of the significance of that. I share the hopes of many in this room that the new agreement that has been reached, the Windsor Framework, represents a changing point in the difficulties over the protocol. I hope that, crucially, it represents a change in relationships among the UK, Ireland and the European Union. In the UK Parliament, my party has made it clear that we support getting that agreement through and changing the tone and character of those relationships to a much more

constructive nature.That is a commitment right from the top of the party. Keir Starmer and Peter Kyle were here this week making that very clear and visiting, quite significantly, a centre named in honour of Mo Mowlam. We have been thinking today about all the greats who were part of that process, some of whom are in this Chamber, but we think particularly of Mo and the legacy that she secured as part of that process, working alongside so many others.

I want to touch on the point that has come up a few times about this being a process and not an event, and to reiterate the comments about youth and all those outside the formal political process. I am often reminded of a quote from Lester B. Pearson, the late Prime Minister of Canada and Nobel peace prize winner. He asked:

> "How can there be peace without people understanding each other; and how can this be if they don't know each other?"

I first came to this city and to Northern Ireland — indeed, to this very Building — when I was a 19 year-old, just a year after the Good Friday Agreement. It was the first time I had ever encountered people from many of the parties represented in this room and from many parts of these islands here represented. We were very luck to have young people from all political parties, of different backgrounds, to come together to get to know each other. We were lucky to hear from people like the late Lord Trimble and others who had been so involved in the process. We were inspired by the hope that the agreement had brought and we were there, fundamentally, to make friends, create relationships, break down barriers and understand each other. Many of the people I spent time with at that conference have ended up in politics and civic life. A colleague who I was with then has ended up as our Finance Minister in Wales, Rebecca Evans. We spent a number of memorable nights here in Belfast.

It was also an eye-opener for me. Despite feeling that I knew a reasonable amount about the difficulties and terrible times that people had been through over the preceeding years, seeing things with my own eyes, and meeting people who had lived a much more direct experience of the Troubles and seen some very dark periods of our history, was hugely instructive and

inspiring. It has stayed with me over the past 24 years. From that personal experience, I think that we need to do a lot more to invest in person-to-person contact, not only through this institution, but, as the Senator said, out in communities and particularly amongst young people. The last point that I will make is that that could set a very powerful example for a number of other difficult conflicts in areas where there is no peace and where there are long-standing issues unsettled. Obviously, we have heard about the challenges of the Middle East, but I have spent time during the past year in two other locations: Kosovo and Cyprus. In each of those situations it was brought home to me how critical it is for cross-community human-to-human contact, particularly for young people. It is particularly valuable for them to spend time with each other across barriers and divisions in order to truly understand one another. They are not always going to agree. We in this room are not all going to agree, but at least, if we can understand our common humanity and interests and the world that we share, that is the best foundation for peace in our political institutions.

Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

Thanks to both Chairs and to everybody who was responsible for organising proceedings today. This is my first BIPA. I am on the Joint Oireachtas Good Friday Agreement Committee, like yourself, so we have had similar discussions.

I want to speak on the prosperity part of the motion and particularly on the recent report from the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec), 'For Peace + Prosperity'. It is important to acknowledge how far we have come and what has been created over the past 25 years. It is absolutely important that the Good Friday Agreement is a living document and it is a process. We must look forward to the next 25 years and see what we need to do. Also, part of the problem with prosperity and addressing some of the gaps has been the huge data gaps in the information from the North over the years. The work of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), particularly in creating the macroeconomic model, will give us real evidence

on where we need to go. There is then a responsibility on all of us to make sure that that happens.

There is no threat whatsoever to anyone's constitutional preference from discussing those things. We absolutely have a responsibility and an obligation to do so. I am particularly mindful of challenges such as climate change, but also COVID. We know that the two islands are interdependent, and having an all-island approach to climate change or COVID helps us to focus minds. There are positive things such as the Greenlink Interconnector project, which will double the direct interconnector electricity capacity between Ireland and GB. Again, we have had to focus on energy security and what that means, and those things will help us along the journey.

I will briefly talk about workforce planning. One of the great threats to our productivity and continued growth is the lack of a labour force across the island, and GB has the same problem. Over the past few days, I have been concerned about the mooted 17% to 19% cuts to further and higher education. I really caution against that. If there is going to be austerity, we cannot go backwards; we have to go forwards. We have to make sure that we look at the gaps in education and skills and invest in the people who need those. We see the differences in that investment between the North and South, albeit we have huge challenges in the South. We have a €309 million gap in higher and further education that needs to be looked at.

We need to be confident enough to tackle those things in both the relationship between the islands but also between North and South. For example, on accreditation, we have the situation where social workers from the South go to Queen's, and their qualification is not recognised in the South for their work. The same thing happens with veterinary qualifications. We do not have a veterinary school here, and we need to address that with an all-island approach. We are waiting for the all-island strategic rail review to look at the western rail corridor and address railway provision across the island.

A good example of the work that has been done is the all-island National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI). We have enormous expertise there, and it has a framework that is working exceptionally well and can be looked at as a way to tackle other problems.

I will address what was said earlier about unionists coming South and the idea that we need to be cautious somehow. I caution against that in the sense that 115,000 British people live happily in the South — many of them in my constituency — because we have high immigration. One in four people in GB are Irish and live very happily there as well. It is not an issue. British people and Irish people can live very well and very happily together. We will continue to do so along that vein.

Thank you for this event today. I see great opportunity here to address the inequality gaps and create more opportunities. I believe that everyone in this room can do that.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you, Rose. It is great to have new members and some new faces around the table.

The Hon Juan Watterson SHK:

I will take you up on the offer of a safe space to ask stupid questions. I am not sure that the idea of a safe space and the proceedings being reported by Hansard are entirely compatible, but I will give it a go and take your word for it, Chair.

We have heard today about the value of the Good Friday Agreement and the watershed that it provided some 25 years ago. I want to pick up where Paul and Victor left off and to seek the guidance of those who are far more knowledgeable on the Good Friday Agreement and its operation than I am and probably ever will be. We heard about the unfulfilled promise that should galvanise this body into action. The Governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland are the guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, but who are the auditors? Who is checking the document against progress by all the institutions that were set up by it or are mentioned in it? Scrutiny and holding Governments to account is what we parliamentarians do. There is a

mechanism here, and if this body is tasked with that, we could do better at it. If this body is not tasked with that, perhaps it should be. If it is somebody else, I would like to know who they are so that I can write to them.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

I can assure you that the Steering Committee is considering those points. Thank you. There were some great questions there.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:

It is important for us to remember, because we are conscious of the realpolitik in this institution at the moment, or, rather, the lack of it. That has, perhaps, been a factor in what Victor mentioned earlier. We are conscious that we are looking back, celebrating, remembering and comemmorating those who did tremendous work. I am conscious that, as I walked into the Chamber, I passed the portrait of my late friend, Martin McGuinness, who, along with Gerry Adams, had the arduous task of bringing the broader republican family with them on that journey, alongside what was done by all those who were mentioned by others who have spoken today.

I know that you would not think it to look at me, but I was just 13 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. I remember the day well. I remember it in the first instance because it was snowing. We were eating chip butties at home because Good Friday is a fast day, and we were waiting, like everyone else, around the television set to see what the latest news would be. While we, rightly, reflect on that time, conscious of the conflict that it would eventually bring to an end, even as a young teenager, I was very conscious that none of it was guaranteed and that it was on a knife edge. I — people like me, Kate, Mairéad and others — and generations that have come after me, have felt the full benefits of the Good Friday Agreement. It is important to say that and to name it, but we have also felt deep frustration at the lack of full implementation and at the full promise of the Good Friday Agreement not being realised.

That is best manifested in the current reality of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, their apparatus and their infrastructure being down. I hope, as all colleagues do, that, sooner rather than later, we can get to the point at which all the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement — here in the Assembly, North/South and, indeed, east-west — function again for all.

There are other aspects of the Good Friday Agreement that remain unfulfilled, as we see when we look around the world. Ross spoke about the needs of minority communities and new communities in our society. We see the rise of the right on this island and across these islands. Still, 25 years later, we do not have a bill of rights. We do not have an all-Ireland charter of rights. The civic forum is not meeting. Those are things that yes, this institution, when it is up and running, can work on, but ultimate responsibility for that lies at the feet of the two Governments. While they are indeed co-guarantors, they should be implementers of that agreement, because that is their legal responsibility.

In looking back, it it incumbent upon us all to look forward. For me, the great strength in the Good Friday Agreement is that it not only has to be fully implemented and realised but that it has to prevail. Whatever chamber, room or event I go into, I will always advocate and champion Irish unity. That is the privilege and the ability that the Good Friday Agreement afforded me. The great thing — I have said it in this body before; I have said it in the Seanad and in other institutions — is that the Good Friday Agreement did not settle the constitutional question but asks us the constitutional question. That was the all-party negotiation, and that was what was endorsed by referenda North and South. Those of us who advocate for constitutional change should not shy away from that.

3.45 pm

In making that case, I absolutely maintain that, if I secure the outcome that I ultimately want, the Good Friday Agreement and the rights and protections that it was meant to have guaranteed

for us over the past 25 years and in the here and now must prevail. The provision for people to be British, Irish or both, and that being accepted, legislated for and enshrined, must prevail in any changed dynamic. As someone who advocates for change, I am committed to that. I hope that the Good Friday Agreement will be, forever, a living, evolving document. That is how we must treat it; not just pay lip service to it at events like this, but make sure that, in the here and now and in the future, it is realised and implemented fully.

I am deeply grateful to you, Co-Chairs; indeed, to our speakers today and, above all, to those people who negotiated and delivered the agreement at the time. There is a challenge to us all, here and now, to make sure that the agreement prevails for the next 25 years and, indeed, far beyond. Go raibh maith agat. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you very much.

Ms Mairéad Farrell TD:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Agus go raibh míle maith ag na daoine a shocraigh an ócáid seo ar fad. Thanks, Co-Chair, and thanks to everybody who participated in bringing this together and making this happen. I want to say a few things. I felt that the discussion was extremely fruitful. As somebody who was 8 years old in 1998, it was fascinating for me to hear — even yesterday at dinner — from people who were central to the Good Friday Agreement and, of course, people who have much greater memories than I do of that time. I will be honest, because you did say, Co-Chair, that we could be honest: my memories of the actual Good Friday Agreement are limited to none, but, as somebody who comes from a family with strong links to Belfast — my father is from there — what I do remember was the positive impact that the delivery of the Good Friday Agreement had on many families whom I knew. While I do not remember the Good Friday Agreement itself, I remember the impact that it had. Of course, I have seen its positive impact throughout my life as well. It has been felt greatly.

I take Victor's interesting point about us speaking to people and communities. Of course, while, as representatives, we all speak to people, the way in which the subcommittees work through great engagement with experts, as well as with people with lived experience, can be really positive.

I am concious that I am speaking here as a Sinn Féin TD when many of my Sinn Féin MLA colleagues do not have the opportunity to speak here at this time. Today, at our subcommittee that Brendan Howlin chairs, we had an interesting discussion about the impact that inflation, energy prices and increased food prices is having on people. At this time, our focus needs to be on seeing this institution get back up and running and delivering for people. I know that many MLAs would like to see that happen and know the benefit that that would have for their communities.

Today was good. It was interesting and fruitful. It is great when we hear from people who have differing opinions. That is really what the Good Friday Agreement is all about; being able to make those points. I thought that it was fruitful, but I take on board what Victor said. That level and different type of engagement, rather than us just speaking to ourselves as politicians, would be helpful.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you, Mairéad.

Ms Pauline McNeill MSP:

Karen, I want to start by thanking you for what you said, which was really important: no matter how little or how deep your knowledge is, this is an inclusive forum. As a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I am very much an onlooker. I have followed Irish affairs all my adult life, but I will value the insight that we all got today for the rest of my life because, without those insights from Bertie Ahern, Sir John Holmes and John Taylor, we would never really fully understand the sacrifices that were made and the importance of negotiation. As a former trade

union official, I understand the basics that you have to give something in order to get something back.

I have done work with John Taylor in the Middle East, and the Palestine question has been mentioned twice or three times today. Sadly, they do not have peace, and it does not look likely. I can verify that John is absolutely truthful when he says that he handed the agreement to Arafat. I hope for the day when that will come about. This is a historic moment for me.

We all have an interest in the outcome, no matter whether we are here in Ireland, North or South, Scotland or the rest of the UK, because we have a mutual interest in peace and working together. Mairéad talked earlier about the importance of the times that we are living in. In my lifetime, ordinary people have never faced such acute challenges as the current cost-of-living crisis and alternatives to energy.

On the human rights agenda, Éamon mentioned earlier that your remand times are so long. I was unaware of that. Scotland, unfortunately, compared with most parts of the UK, has the largest remand population: remand times are not the longest, but the population is the largest. There is some common interest here in human rights. The right to be tried regardless of the outcome is a basic human right. No one should be in jail for eight years — no one should be in jail for two years — on remand.

Mr Éamon Ó Cuív TD:

[Inaudible] bail after three years.

Ms Pauline McNeill MSP:

There is a difference, but it may be a subject for another day.

I will finish by saying that we all have responsibilities here. I have written copious notes because I intend to try to write something about what I have heard today. Maybe my Scottish colleagues feel this as well, but I have the privilege of being the only Labour Member who comes here to get this knowledge. I feel that I should own up to my privilege and write

something so that others can get an insight into what has happened here, especially today on this special occasion.

Going forward, I do not know whether it is a consideration for this forum to think about how we could report more widely on the importance of continuing on the same themes that arise or will continue to arise. We could maybe have a short annual report or something that we could all distribute to the Parliaments or forums that we represent so that other people can see that this forum matters and is worthwhile. Very important people come to speak to us. We get the benefit, but let us see how we can share the benefits of that more widely.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

I thank the co-chairs for their indulgence. I was not around to introduce debate on policing under the Belast/Good Friday Agreement earlier. I was detained by the Northern Ireland Office, which you will understand, and I apologise for that.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was a seminal moment in Northern Ireland. It has reached the point where, 25 years on, hopefully, Northern Ireland has a long and prosperous future ahead of it. I would not like this Assembly to go away feeling that there are no real issues with how the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is being looked at by at least a sizeable proportion of the population of Northern Ireland. It has lost legitimacy for many in the unionist community. As somebody who absolutely passionately believes in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, I believe that we should all be concerned about that.

The issue has been raised for a variety of reasons. We can talk about the protocol, Brexit and misunderstanding, but it is appropriate to understand that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is for all the people of Northern Ireland. It is for those from the nationalist community, it is for those from the unionist community, and it is for those from the other community. Indeed, with the exception of my family and me, the vast majority describe themselves as other and will continue to do so.

When we talk in the debate about where the role of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly should sit, one of the most important things to mention is the relationships that we have all developed. I look around the Chamber at people whom I have known for more than a few years, and the fact is that we have the ability to pick up the phone and talk to each other. I know that I will be making very clear, through back channels, that there is no way in which any unionist will be indulging in the Shared Island unit or anything similar, but it is important that we talk and communicate. One of the things that COVID has taught us, sadly, is that issues can arise from not getting together and communicating in, what I would say in militaryspeak, "voice primary". We probably gained more last night from sitting around the table having a few glasses of non-alcoholic wine, because, of course, no one indulged, and then later in the facilities of the Europa Hotel. That is important. That interrelationship is vital. It is something that we need to build on, because the one thing that Brexit has caused is a break in those interpersonal relationships. As we go forward, whatever we do with the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, we must make sure that we attend together as often as we can.

If I can make one plea to the Co-Chairs, it is to take Zoom out and smash it against the nearest door. *[Laughter.]* Thank you very much.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

You were definitely not on mute there, Steve. I now bring in the Father of my House, Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley MP:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I was with Peter Temple-Morris when he started thinking up the idea of perhaps getting parliamentarians together. I do not think he could have conceived how well his idea has done. I pay tribute also to an organisation that has been going twice as long, the British-Irish Association, which used to do the same kind of thing in a different way.

I did not ask to join the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, now the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, for some time, because I thought that it was important that those who knew less about Ireland and Northern Ireland should have the opportunity to come together. I was trying to check when it was that I first made the suggestion, on the Floor of the House of Commons, that it was curious that the only police service in the United Kingdom with the word "Royal" in its title was in the place where it was contentious. The only place in the United Kingdom where police stations had the Union flag flying was the place where it was contentious. In policing and politics, you have to do things that are contentious, but you do not need to do them unnecessarily. I pay tribute to Chris Patten and his team, who produced the report that decided to change the name. I had originally suggested that it should be called the Royal Ulster Constabulary/Police Service of Northern Ireland, or words to that effect, but the way in which he went further has been accepted. Given that a career in policing, like medicine, often runs through families, it will take some time for an equal kind of representation to come about in the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Two of my wife and I's children have married people from south of Dublin, so that begins to restore the kind of Irish link that I had when I first was talking to some frightful old bigot, while watching Glentoran getting stuffed at some football match in Belfast, and I reflected on the fact that only one MP from Northern Ireland, who happened to be unionist, had ever been a Minister in the UK Government. To talk about being a full part of the United Kingdom when you do not contribute any Ministers is a bit like taking one or two of the counties of the Republic of Ireland and saying to them, "You are not going to have Ministers". That would be bizarre and odd. You need to change that.

I also remember reading in the memoir of Robin Chichester-Clark about the difficulty that he had within his own party. People outside of politics often think that the difficulties are with alternative parties. It is within our own parties where we often have the most interesting

discussions.

I remember also walking down the river with James Chichester-Clark, or The Lord Moyola, as he was by then, and asking him, “Why, every 200 yards, do you have a clearing?”. He said, “I cannot tell you”. Moyra, his wife, told me. She said that he had come back from Belfast each weekend, gathered his mattock and gone and done some clearing, shouting out the names of his Cabinet colleagues as he went. *[Laughter.]* I could go on, but the key point about this gathering is the future. It is not the past.

4.00 pm

You have to understand the past to some extent, insofar as it can be understood, but it is about building a future where people in Northern Ireland can regard themselves as being Northern Irish rather than necessarily having to declare that they are British and Irish or British or Irish. It is about just being part of a community and people realising that the tradition of division in Ireland is not one that goes back all that far. We know that there has always been conflict, and those who think that that it started 400 years ago do not know their Irish history. It goes back 800 or 900 years beyond that, but that is maybe for a historical society. I look forward to helping, while I can, new people to understand the purpose of this parliamentary Assembly. We also need to continue paying tribute — I am glad that we had Bertie Ahern and John Holmes here — to those who have successively managed to draw the people in Northern Ireland together with the wider world to find the better future that they can create for themselves whilst we look on with admiration.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you, Peter.

Rt Hon the Lord Bruce:

I joined BIPA about four years ago, and I have attended every plenary sitting since. To be here today and hear what the Good Friday Agreement has meant in different ways to different

people, including those who helped to negotiate it and those who have lived under it, has been a worthwhile experience. The referendum result was declared on the morning of my wedding, so it is very much embedded in my family psyche that it was an important day, not only for us as a family but for these islands.

More practically, in those four years, the UK has gone through a period of unprecedented turbulence, which is not over and is changing. On a mundane but important basis, Lord Murphy, Baroness Ritchie and I are on a Committee in the House of Lords called the Common Frameworks Scrutiny Committee. That is the least sexy name you could think of for a Committee, but it deals with the fallout from Brexit for the devolution settlements across the UK. One immediate problem that we have been having has been getting engagement with the devolved Administrations. We can deal with Scotland and we can deal with Wales, and there are different perspectives from those two countries, but it is almost impossible to deal with Northern Ireland because the Administration is not there. It is not governed, which is a point that Paul Murphy made. As we look forward to the next 25 years of this agreement, I hope that, first, we will soon get the Assembly up and running and that, secondly, the idea of any part of the Assembly saying in the future, "We don't like what's going on. We're walking out", will become consigned to history. People fight to get elected, they campaign and they knock on doors to do a job. There are two frustrations here: for the people who voted, it is that the job is not being done, and for many of those who were elected and want to do the job, it is that they are not able to do so. We really do have to move on from that. That is the biggest democratic deficit that there is.

We have, for example, the Bill on the repeal of European Union laws going through the House of Lords today. That is very contentious and very unhelpful because we do not even know what the laws are, never mind what we are repealing or what is replacing them. We have occasional outbursts from the Government about the potential for the UK to leave the European

Convention on Human Rights, and people were talking about the importance of human rights. This Assembly has a role to play in contributing to the debate about everything that is going on in these islands and in trying to put out cross-community and cross-party ideas. Whatever happens and whatever settlements we have, people need to engage, decisions need to be taken, lives need to be lived and services need to be provided. I suppose I am just an old-fashioned, middle-of-the-road liberal. However deeply people feel about their identity, taking it to the point of denying fundamental services because your identity is threatened is, ultimately, the negation of the entire democratic process. I am not accusing anybody in particular because that is not what I mean, but there has to be a point where there is a recognition that, however difficult these situations are for me and my beliefs, I have to make sure that the people out there do get government, do get action and do get service. If this Assembly, by engaging, talking and working with that can help contribute to that, we will have justified our existence, and I hope that we will have another 25 years of making a useful contribution.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you, Malcolm. On the subject of weddings and referendum day, it was my 15th wedding anniversary, and I spent it at tube stations trying to persuade people to vote a certain way — you know which way that was — so we have something in common there.

Senator Emer Currie:

I started secondary school in Tyrone before the Good Friday Agreement and finished in the South when we had the Good Friday Agreement. I cannot tell you the difference that it made to my life. I came back to Queen's University Belfast to study history and politics, and Belfast was such a different city than it had been a few short years before. There was a feeling of elation, optimism and hope. I desperately want to see that sense of hope back again.

When the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed, that was the start of our ability to write our own future. We still have that ability. We are still in control of our future. We have only

scratched the surface of what the Good Friday Agreement can do. There has been so much emphasis on strand one today. Certainly, being in this Chamber, you feel the absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly very acutely, and I am not sure that I prepared myself enough for that. I think that we have all felt that loss today.

There are other strands as well; it is not just about strand one. There is the North/South aspect, and we touched on how that has not evolved in the way that we would like to have seen it evolve. As many have said, the Good Friday Agreement is not an ornament; it is an evolving document. The North/South aspect in particular has not evolved.

In relation to strand three, we have committee A's report on consolidating the UK-Ireland relationship post Brexit. That feeds into points that have been made about the role and the potential of this Assembly. The reality is that we do not have the opportunities to discuss issues as much as we did through fringe meetings in Europe, but we can use this Assembly to bridge that gap. That is not only in relation to thematic issues, on which there is an opportunity to bring in more communities — we can bring in different stakeholders — by focusing on things like energy, the cost-of-living crisis and whatever the issues of the day are, but we have also seen continued divergence between the UK and Ireland and the repercussions on Northern Ireland. We cannot be afraid to discuss those issues in this Assembly. We did it with Brexit, legacy and the Nationality and Borders Bill, and we must continue to do that. This Assembly is absolutely essential for airing those issues and bridging the gap that is the lack of knowledge in relation to decisions that are made in Westminster about Stormont and Dublin. The only way that we can overcome that is through communication and relationships, and that is why I am so grateful for this organisation and to all of you. Let us not underestimate the power that each of us has in contributing to better relationships in the North, North/South and east-west, and to the interdependency of those relationships.

I finish by saying that, yes, we have a commitment, through the Good Friday Agreement, to

people who are less privileged than us. We absolutely need to focus on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, but we owe it to ourselves to remember the European Convention on Human Rights — the commitments to reconciliation and victims. Thank you.

Mr Éamon Ó Cuiv TD:

It is interesting to look at the motion, which says:

"That this Assembly acknowledges the contribution made by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement to peace and prosperity on these islands".

There is no question but that the Good Friday Agreement has been hugely successful for peace. It has not been as successful as it should have been for prosperity. A large part of that is due to the fact that the Assembly has been stop-start from the beginning. Politicians, assemblies and parliaments are absolutely key to the whole dynamic of society. The great failing has been the inability, for one reason or another, to sustain the Assembly on a continuous basis. Most of us would find it hard to think of any other democratic assembly that has not functioned continuously over a period of time.

At one stage, during one of the periods when the Assembly was not operating here, I had responsibility for the Irish language body, the Ulster-Scots body and Waterways Ireland as Irish Minister. As you may remember, there used to be an Irish Minister and a Northern Irish Minister, which were opposite each other. That was during direct rule. We used to come up here for meetings. We were coming down, and a senior civil servant was with me, in the back of the car. I heard a voice say — he said it in Irish, but I will translate it — "You know what? You cannot operate without us", meaning that politicians cannot operate without civil servants. There was a pause, and then the same voice said, "If the truth were told, we cannot operate without you". In other words, he believed, and he had just reason, having watched what was happening, that everything stagnated and that there was the most cautious approach to everything — we all know this — when the politicians were not in the mix. We were always

pushing the system, and the system was always warning us that we were going too far, too fast. In that balance, we normally get it fairly right.

Our challenge is, first, to get the Assembly back. I agree that, in the short term, change cannot be brought about until the Assembly is back. I utterly agree with what Paul Murphy said, which was that, after that, we need to look at all the structures in an inclusive — it has to be inclusive — and comprehensive way, to make sure that, rather than it being impossible, no one feels that the best way forward is to not facilitate the Executive's sitting here. I honestly believe that, until we do that, the stability that the Good Friday Agreement offered us will not be there, the ownership will not be there, and, more particularly, people will not believe that politicians are serving their interests and are driving forward the agenda of change, development and prosperity that is referred to in the motion.

Therefore, it is important that we support the motion. It is also important that we recognise that the Good Friday Agreement has been very successful but that there are serious issues that we have to tackle. We must make sure that this is the last time that, after an election, we do not get an Assembly and an Executive that function.

Ms Karin Smyth MP:

As we are all recollecting, and to show my cross-jurisdictional credentials, I was on my way to a holiday in Wales that morning, and I listened on the radio. I did not think that the agreement would happen, and I stopped for a moment. It made many of us in England proud to be English Irish. It was a great moment. It was snowing in Wales also, which just shows how much we share across these islands, including, very often, the weather.

I will make one point on some of the strands. One thing that we need to watch is that the UK Government have started to talk about the east-west strand as Northern Ireland-UK. That has slipped into some of the parlance, but, as everyone here knows, the strand is about UK-Irish relationships. I pointed that out to the Prime Minister in the Chamber last week, and he

recognised it. That relationship has improved massively in the past few months from a very poor point, which is to be welcomed.

4.15 pm

I want to say a bit about today and the session that I was honoured to chair. Thank you, Chairs, for getting us here. We had discussion around how we thought that there would be quite a lot of Easter/Good Friday celebrations and whether there was really any value in us adding an extra day to that to get us here to do this. We then had a discussion about whether we should have it in this place, with the optics of this place not sitting but us sitting here. You both absolutely ran with both those ideas, and credit to you. It was a fantastic decision to get us all here. It has been a really important marker at this time.

Victor, you are right about the energy of this morning. For me, that was partly about the depth and breadth of those women's experience and credibility and their fantastic CVs, which, frankly, put us all to shame. They were able to bring to that discussion with such passion what they have done and what they still do. Another thing that we talked about over lunch was that they were pleased to be here. Not only were they pleased to be here, they were impressed by this body and the group of politicians. They have known many of you for a long time, but they were impressed to see the different parties from the different jurisdictions here. They have been invited to the Scottish Parliament. They have been invited back to Westminster. I am sure that they will be invited to Wales. Those relationships have been boosted by that experience.

It is good to hear from young people and to get that experience — I do not disagree with that — but it is also good to engage with communities and civic groups and to be challenged. As a group of politicians, we do not mind challenge. Sometimes, people out there perhaps think that we do mind challenge. They were able to make a kind of challenge. They put out some ideas for the future. We do not mind that, and we should take on some of those ideas. We can manage challenge from businesses, charities, the third sector, other politicians or whatever. We should

embrace that with gusto now that we are coming through the Brexit difficulty of the past couple of years and into a new way of being. We should look at that in the Steering Committee when we look at repurposing and what the future will look like.

It has been a great day.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

I echo Karin Smyth's comments about the leadership of the Co-Chairs in ensuring that this visit took place.

In Manchester, I was brought up to accept the occasional bomb scare in the city as just part of my childhood experiences. My mother is Irish, so there was often talk in our household about the Troubles. However, being able to sit here and look back, with the help of the people who participated in the discussions that lead to the Good Friday Agreement, has helped me to understand that no problem is so difficult that, where there is political will, you cannot find a way through it. The stand that those brave individuals took against an intractable problem in order to make progress, often against their personal political interests, has to be applauded.

Of course, this body is very important. It was a very important part of the outcome of the Good Friday Agreement. Yes, we meet twice per year and we have our committee work, which we report back to the plenary sessions on. More importantly, however, it is a body that incorporates the devolved legislatures and Parliaments of the United Kingdom. It is the only body where I have the opportunity to engage with colleagues from Westminster, the Crown dependencies, the Scottish Parliament and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Assembly frequently enough to get to know those people and understand how they tick. One of the marvellous things about BIPA is that the relationships that start here often go on into government because, of course, people are appointed if there is a change of Government or a reshuffle. I do not think that we can ever begin to appreciate how important those introductions, which often take place during the plenary sessions or around them in some of the other activities that we engage in, really are.

I was taken by Pauline McNeill's point about the need to engage our own legislatures more in our work. I know that we have all tried to do that in different ways over the years, including by making sure that copies of reports are often shared with Ministers in our own Parliaments, but we have not done a very good job of it. I like Pauline's suggestion of some kind of annual report that brings together the reports of the Committee work that is undertaken by this body annually and the outcomes of some of our plenary discussions. If those things were tabled as a matter of course for debate in our Parliaments once a year, it would shine a spotlight on the important work that we do and give an opportunity for some reflection within Parliaments and, indeed, by Government Ministers on the important things that we discuss. I want to cheer you on in that respect, Pauline, and I certainly second your suggestion.

The opportunity to rub shoulders with esteemed colleagues such as Lord Murphy and others with their political experience has been marvellously developing and enriching for me as a politician who has sat in BIPA meetings for a very long time. Just being able to learn from that experience has been enormously enriching for my development as a politician who, 16 years ago, became a BIPA Member. That is a long time to be able to rub shoulders with some colleagues around these tables. I, for one, think that we need to have more opportunities like this. If more of my colleagues in the Senedd were exposed to these opportunities, it would be a better place for it.

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair, for giving me the opportunity to spend my first full day in this Chamber. *[Laughter.]* I appreciate that.

It has been a really interesting day. In the absence of being able to legislate, I have been spending a lot of time in schools in my constituency of South Belfast, asking young people what matters to them. It is not the protocol; it is jobs, opportunities and whether they will be able to buy their own houses. I am struck that a lot of young people in Northern Ireland have

grown up feeling a bit embarrassed or not feeling much hope in where they come from. That is really sad, because there is nowhere better to live and that was the case even before we were the most exciting economic zone in the world. Northern Ireland is an extraordinary place, but some young people feel that they have to leave in order to achieve their ambitions. That is not right, and we have a lot of work to do.

It is useful to take forward a report, and I agree with Darren and Pauline. That is not just because of the practicalities of that but because what that symbolises in a post-Brexit world — seeing the different jurisdictions working together — is incredibly hopeful.

I want to close by paying tribute to the architects of the Good Friday Agreement. I have a slightly strange accent, because I grew up in Zimbabwe. My dad is from here, but my parents moved to Zimbabwe when things were bad and they wanted me to grow up in a place that was politically stable and peaceful. *[Laughter.]* I moved back here in 2000 for those very reasons. The Good Friday Agreement made this place peaceful and gave opportunity. I am indebted to the architects, including many of the people in this room, who had courage and vision and made it possible for me to live my life here in peace and to be very proud to live here and to represent it.

I also want to thank all of you for your interest and for being here. The narrative that has come through about the Good Friday Agreement and the magic within it is about the relationships and the personalities but also the trust. What is happening here is part of the magic that created this incredible peace that we are all so grateful for, and there is endless hope in that.

Connétable David Johnson:

The Members who spoke earlier have, to a certain extent, pinched my lines, which serves me right for not speaking earlier. I will deal first with the comments by the Member of the Welsh Assembly. I am, of course, so much older than he is. Whilst he was growing up in Manchester, I was working in Manchester, where bomb scares and the sound of fire engine sirens were a

daily worry as I walked to the office. I mention that because, although it was obviously an Irish problem, it seriously overlapped into mainland UK, and, for that reason, all in mainland UK are grateful that a solution was reached.

Like other Members have said, this is a valuable opportunity for me to break out of my insular life and speak to Members from other jurisdictions. That is very refreshing for me and, I hope, will be refreshing for my colleagues in Jersey when I report back. That brings me on to my major point. Other Members referred to Committee A's report from October. Having just been elected to the steering committee because Jersey is hosting the next plenary meeting, I thought that I could do worse than reread that excellent report. I invite Members to reread it. It focuses on many of the points that we have discussed and really emphasises some of the points that Members have already made. It sets out the framework for why we are here and more or less states that we cannot rest on our laurels. I agree that we are not making the most of our position. By way of example, it would be helpful if, before the next or any plenary meeting, Members were made aware in advance of what the focus might be. That would give us the opportunity to feed off the expertise of colleagues in our jurisdictions, and when the plenary meeting takes place, some of them could contribute. At the moment — I am perhaps lodging a complaint against myself here — I do not know how many Members from each jurisdiction, other than the BIPA Members, know quite what we do. I will take it upon myself to inform them of what I do. If there is anything current going on, including the various Committee reports, our scrutiny panels should be notified, and they may well have input into those, just as we may have input into theirs.

We need to open out beyond our present isolated membership. That is not a criticism; i is a criticism of myself, no one else. I hope that, when Members and the steering committee, as a whole, consider the sovereign Committee's report on what we might do next, that will be taken into account. That is my contribution, Co-Chair.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you very much. As no one else has caught my eye, I will try to sum up what we have discussed today. It is probably the right time to sum up, given that we have to finish by 4.45 pm. There have been so many fantastic contributions today. We heard from many BIPA Members in the earlier sessions and in the debate that we just had. I will try to put the contributions into three themes: the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and its architecture; the role of BIPA; and what we want to see for the political future of Northern Ireland.

The triumph and incredible success of the agreement and the sacrifices that had to be made to reach it must not be underestimated, and so many Members mentioned that. Paul, you are right about the fact that it can be reopened. In fact, it was clear when the agreement was signed that it was not expected to stay preserved in aspic for ever. It was expected to be an evolving document. This is a process, not an event. It needs to be a living document. Niall, you talked about the way in which the agreement and its implementation must evolve. Juan, I do not know who the auditor of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is, but the steering committee should certainly think about that, because it is incredibly important to make sure that all the points that were referenced in the agreement and all the sacrifices that were made are properly reflected in the future.

4.30 pm

Steve, you made a point about the Good Friday Agreement's legitimacy. It is going to have legitimacy only if it is seen to be living and working for all parts of Northern Ireland and all communities. That is something that is incredibly important.

The impact of leaving the European Union was mentioned. We cannot dodge the elephant in the room: Brexit. It has happened, and, because of that, there will be differences in how regulations work that would not have been the case when everybody in the room was a member of the EU. It is clear, however, that one of the problems is that the underpinning of the Good

Friday Agreement was based on the fact that all parties were members of the EU, so it was not necessary to codify so many issues. Trade did not need to be codified, and rights did not need to be codified, because they were rights that accrued to members of the EU. The triumph of being able to form an agreement that allowed people to identify by the nationality that they felt belonged to them was an incredible triumph, but, when the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act were written, nobody thought that those rights might need to be codified, because they did not think that they would ever be challenged. I am acutely aware of that, and I feel that BIPA has a real role to play in making sure that the legislatures across our islands understand that.

That brings me on to the role of BIPA and its relevance. We have heard so much about the purpose of BIPA and what it means. Steve, you talked about the relationships that come from BIPA and about the fact that there is always someone to whom you can pick up a phone, or even have a Zoom call with occasionally. It gives us the chance to air issues and, as Darren said, the chance to listen to people who were there at the time and learn from their experiences. The word "trust" also came up. There is trust in this room that we all have a shared interest in making relations on these islands work.

Peter, you talked about the future, saying that BIPA has to be for the future. I could not agree more. If it is not for the future, we will wither and die. We need to be thinking about the future constantly.

Pauline, you talked about the mutual interest in peace. We all have that interest, and perhaps BIPA can be the centre point. Victor and Karin, you talked about the energy that we had in the room when the representatives from the Women's Coalition were in. I say that of course we will have extra energy in the room when we have more women in the room. That is a very good thing. Perhaps that is something for all of us to take away and think about when we are thinking about future sessions: how we can make sure that we get that energy in the room. We all felt

it, and we all came away enlivened and determined to do better. That was a fantastic session. Thank you for chairing it, Karin.

I move on to the Executive. Clearly, we all want the Executive and the Assembly to return. We want Kate to be able to spend full days in here, bored senseless by debates. We want her to be voting on legislation that she is not interested in. I see that she is coming back to her seat. Kate, I was saying that we want you to be in here all day, every day, voting on legislation that you do not like, because that is what Parliaments are for. We want the Northern Ireland Assembly to be living and vibrant. We want this Building to be living and vibrant and to be there for the people of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is an extraordinary place. It captures your heart in a way that very few places do. I care passionately about this place, and I really want it to succeed. I want to use the role that we have on BIPA to help this place succeed, because it is about real people. As Malcolm said, lives need to be lived. Young people do not care about the constitutional issues. They care about their jobs and education. They want to know that there is a health service. Those are the things that politicians are elected to do, and we have got to use our good offices here in BIPA to allow that to happen.

Thank you, everyone, for all your remarks. It has been an incredibly useful and stimulating discussion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the contribution made by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement to peace and prosperity on these islands; marks the contribution made by the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly to these developments; acknowledges the continuing need to address the impact of the Troubles; and looks forward to the Assembly's contribution to the future work needed to ensure that the achievements of the agreement continue to be built upon.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Karen. I will echo the words of Karen. It has been a very good day's work, with very good contributions. Our final session touched on the work of BIPA in the future. A substantial body of work has been done on a strategy going forward. Yesterday evening, we met as a Steering Committee to discuss that issue. We are meeting again in April, and, hopefully, we will be able to bring final proposals to the next plenary sitting. It is about maximising the potential of this Assembly, as we talked about, and maximising the potential of the Good Friday Agreement.

A lot of work has been done, and our support staff have done a lot of research on parliamentary assemblies that have bodies working together across jurisdictions and whether there are models that we can usefully learn from. We will, hopefully, have a substantial strategy to put forward at the Jersey plenary. A lot of work has been done, and we are engaging on how to get more involvement from our legislatures, which was a very valid suggestion that was made. An annual report into each legislature is, obviously, a very good idea as well. We look forward to concluding that work in the very near future.

We lost two years because of COVID, there was a British General Election in 2019 and we had an election in 2020. Each time there is an election, months are lost because a Government and Committees have to be formed. Unfortunately, the past few years have been very frustrating. Steve, we all agree with you: the last thing we want are Zoom and Teams meetings. We are Zoomed out and want to have in-person meetings as much as possible because that is the way that we do our work.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the Committee work. Karen and I made a deliberate decision to not micromanage Committees. Committees have been given the freedom to do their business as they see fit, and we trust our colleagues to do that. That is where the engagement with the public and with different sectors can take place. You cannot bring an Assembly to an area to meet the public at large —that is not possible — so our Committee

work is absolutely critical.

I recall when I was first a member of this body in the early 1990s. As Lord Murphy said earlier, that was a very difficult era and Irish-British relations were very poor at the time. It was them and us when we met initially: the only members were from the House of Lords and the House of Commons and our Dáil and Seanad, and relationships were very poor. However, the relationships that were worked through at Committee level and then in plenary sessions were critical to improving that political atmosphere. Many of the people who were there in those days went on to serve in Government in Britain and Ireland. So we can never underestimate the work at Committee level. We will bring a very comprehensive report to Jersey for your consideration and, hopefully, approval.

Our business has concluded. On behalf of you all, I thank our guest speakers, our secretariat — the joint Clerks, Martyn and Regina, and their respective colleagues — the Speaker of the Assembly, Stormont staff, the Members and everyone else who helped to make this sixty-third extraordinary plenary session such a successful event. I pay particular tribute to my Co-Chair, Karen, for a lot of the work that she did in the background to ensure that we met here and that we met in advance of the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. That was very important. This is the first major political event in relation to the 25th anniversary, and I am glad that it was our Assembly that hosted it.

I call Jerome Mayhew to formally move the Adjournment.

Mr Jerome Mayhew MP:

As the newest Member of this organisation, I was not quite sure what to expect. However, over the past 24 hours, I have learnt an enormous amount about the Good Friday Agreement, its triumphs and its unfinished business. I have gained a greater understanding of where we have differing perspectives and the reasons behind them. Through that process, I have learnt so much about the common purpose that links us all together, namely our common desire to have

thriving communities across all the islands. I am proud to be a part of it.

I move that the sixty-third meeting of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly be adjourned.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I declare the sixty-third plenary session of the Assembly closed. The next meeting in plenary session will be in Jersey on 15 May. Thank you all for your cooperation. Have a safe journey home or to your respective legislatures, whichever is the destination this evening. Thank you all. *[Applause.]*

Adjourned at 4.39 pm.