



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance and Personnel

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill:
Coiste na nIarchimí/Tar Isteach

28 November 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Daithí McKay (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Leslie Cree
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Culbert	Coiste na nIarchimí
Mr Thomas Quigley	Tar Isteach

The Chairperson: I welcome Michael Culbert and Thomas Quigley. Do you wish to make an opening statement to kick things off?

Mr Michael Culbert (Coiste na nIarchimí): Yes, thank you. I was here for the evidence of George Quigley and Nigel Hamilton, and, on their way out, I thanked them for the evidence that they gave to you. They are two honourable men, who tried their best to emphasise the need for equality of treatment of citizens here. It almost sounded as if they had been engaged in something nefarious or wrong or whatever. They are two decent men, who did their best, and the work that they have done, a lot of it under the radar, in bringing people together and promoting the concept of an equal society in the future is probably not appreciated in this room. The baseline is that we object to the Bill, *[Inaudible.]* and we urge people not to support it on the grounds of equality of citizenship in the spirit of moving forward to a shared future in which citizens are treated equally. We all have pasts, and we may all have changed in certain ways, but we are either going to move forward in a spirit of equality and progress or we are not. I hope that politicians will consider the good of society for the future as opposed to party political positions.

I also add that, from my point of view, I imagine that there should be a good reason for every action that anyone takes and, I hope, a positive reason. I am at a loss to figure out the full background to the Bill being put forward by a particular political party. I do not know whether it is for public relations, whether it is genuine, whether it is directed towards support issues for victims or whether it is directed towards a degree of vengeance against people who were opposed to the state and took actions against the state. I really do not know. I hope that it will be in a positive spirit of moving forward, but I just cannot find it in the Bill. Roughly speaking, that is our position.

Mr Thomas Quigley (Tar Isteach): Tar Isteach is an ex-prisoners' organisation set up by ex-prisoners. It works in north Belfast with ex-prisoners, relatives of ex-prisoners, victims and youth. It provides services in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the North of Ireland under very difficult circumstances. The people we cater for not only live in areas in which they are disadvantaged because of social and economic deprivation — ex-prisoners have to deal with those issues as well — but have to deal with discrimination in employment. There are barriers to their being part of what, we hope, is becoming a normal society. They are excluded completely from employment in the Civil Service, and most major firms refuse to give them employment. They are corralled in certain areas and employment sectors. They have to contend with the same barriers as everyone else, but they also have those additional barriers.

We work in those areas providing services on welfare rights, counselling and youth programmes. We work on the interfaces. We work with loyalist prisoners and with the PSNI. We are doing our best to try to turn this into a normal society. There was a conflict here that many people were involved in, many people carried out actions that were deeply regrettable, and many actions should not have been carried out by a great many people. We have done a great deal of research for the people I work for as part of our remit. In one piece of research, we found out from those ex-prisoners that around 75% of them are what people would legitimately term "victims". They have had their relatives killed — their brothers, their mothers — by state forces or loyalists. They have been injured themselves and have been brutalised in jails. They have come through all that and are now working, trying to improve society and the lot of people in their areas, homes and communities.

We are working towards those ends, and we see the Bill as another piece of discrimination that seeks to pick out and demonise ex-prisoners. Out of all the people who perpetrated things in this society over the past decades, they are the ones who are being picked on. They are an easy target in most cases. There are people who committed crimes and were not brought to court, right from the lower levels of the state forces to the top of the state, who were promoted, given medals and received all sorts of accolades. We work for people who were victims of their actions, and there is very little sensitivity towards their views on any of those acts. A British soldier returned to duty after serving a life sentence of 18 months or two years for murdering a person on the New Lodge Road. Having been found guilty of that, he was brought back to his regiment and given all his back pay and promoted. He is still in that regiment. There are no sensitivities there.

We want the sensitivities of all victims to be catered for, such as the victims from our areas, including me. My brother was shot dead by the British Army. My mother, to her dying day, never stopped thinking about him and never stopped talking about him. No one ever considered her sensitivities. No one ever did anything or came to her to say sorry for her loss and that that should not have happened. We saw no regret or remorse.

We are trying to move on and work for the people in our areas and are trying our best to ensure that it does not return to conflict. It has been very difficult for us. At times, we have been threatened by dissident forces and by people who are opposed to the peace process and a new society. We have kept our organisations and our services going in very difficult circumstances, trying to provide services in some of the most disadvantaged areas in the North of Ireland. We see the Bill as another barrier to the people who are carrying out that work and who live in those areas.

The Chairperson: What has the reaction been among ex-prisoners in general and their families to the legislation? Is there a fear that this could be the thin end of a bigger wedge?

Mr Culbert: I mentioned equality. We consider the legislation to be targeted at a specific section of the community. We support the peace process, which is still, let us face it, a foundling. It is still very much under way. I feel that people such as you, who are heavily involved in the political world, are slightly detached from the thinking of people at the grassroots, and I am glad that you asked me about that. Our people need to see a peace dividend to support the peace process. An international agreement was signed in 1998, in which certain commitments are given. You probably know what the commitments were, but, to summarise, one of them was to take measures to support the political ex-prisoner community into work and training. In subsequent years, that was supported by subsections or annex B of the St Andrews Agreement. We emphasised that need, out of which came the working group that Nigel spoke about. Those commitments were given by two Governments, and we were very hopeful that the commitments would be an added value to the release of prisoners, the building of a new society and new political structures, and the emergence of a political party that has similar aims and objectives to us. There was a feeling of moving forward and of positivity, although there have been knock-backs in that process. The Bill looks as though it will be supported not only by unionist parties but by some nationalist representatives. It is quite disturbing for us that people would move

against people who support the peace process. As my colleague Tommy said, we have been threatened by people who are opposed to the peace process because of our current interactions with policing and other agencies in the state. We are up front and open in our interactions. We still hold the views that we held in the past, but our means of achieving our aims and objectives have totally changed.

The Chairperson: You referred to those in the community who are opposed to the peace process. Could they use this legislation to their advantage in any way?

Mr Culbert: It is out there as a negative. In base terms, such people would say, "What did we tell you? What's the use of that?" It is another bit of putty stuck to another that gradually builds up to the extent that something negative is building up; there is nothing in it for us, and people may look to other ways of dealing with society or achieving what they are trying to bring about. We are very aware of that. We are wary of it, and we want it to stop. That is the key issue. There has to be a dividend for people. I am not saying that people have to be bought off, but they have to see substantive change in society.

We are among the most unemployed sector of society. On the island, there are approximately 25,000 former IRA-connected political prisoners. There are somewhere in the region of 17,000 people connected with loyalism. Those are rough figures based on the most recent research carried out by Queen's University in 2010. It is a pretty big sector of society, particularly if families and other relatives are included. Our role is to promote the peace by working with individuals involved in the conflict and trying to get them to buy into and promote the peace. It is a cumulative thing. The short answer to your question is that we are very wary of negative legislation being introduced that is directed at the constituency that was promised — under the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement — hope for the future.

The Chairperson: When the Human Rights Commission gave evidence here last week, it flagged possible legal flaws in the Bill and the risks that it runs of infringing the European Convention on Human Rights. Were the Bill to be passed, do you foresee it being challenged by ex-prisoners through the courts here and in Europe?

Mr Culbert: George Quigley spoke about the case that was taken to the House of Lords — nowadays it would be the Supreme Court — in London. I was involved in that case. We did not win it. We won a moral victory but not the issue. We are a pretty big part of society who can be legally denied our entitlement to goods and services, be those employment, travel or whatever. In a modern, democratic society, it is quite amazing that a small sector can be subjected to that. If we were talking about the Gulag in the 1970s here, I imagine that the British Government would be shaking a stick at it, but we can have a degree of internal exile here. That is our situation.

Now, it is not that high profile. Not all employers are inclined to discriminate against us as a sector. Many employers are pretty smart and know that we have talents, ambition and are finished with the conflict. A lot of employers do the right thing when in theory they need not do so. I do not want to go on about that too much, but it is the very serious situation that we are in at the moment. Do you want to expand on that, Tommy?

Mr Quigley: I think that we would have a strong case before the European Court of Human Rights. I read some of the commission's comments, including the blanket ban and other elements, such as penalising current advisers, being on dodgy ground. The trend is to move away from legislation that provides blanket discrimination against people. The trend for international derogation is heading in the same direction; countries do not like those types of bans and retrospective penalties. There is also the time factor. It is now 2012, and the agreement was signed more than a decade ago, so trying to bring in legislation now that affects people from all those years ago is dodgy. All those elements are on dodgy legal grounds. I think that we would have a strong case and, most likely, win it.

The Chairperson: On the demographic of ex-political prisoners, what is the average age, profile and gender of ex-prisoners?

Mr Quigley: The average age is in the 50s or 60s.

The Chairperson: Are most of them male?

Mr Quigley: Most of them are men.

Mr Weir: Gentlemen, thank you for your evidence. I suspect that there will not be a great meeting of minds between us on a lot of issues, so it would be fairly pointless for any of us to flog too many dead horses on that front. Different definitions and terms are used, but, basically, your organisation represents conflict-related former prisoners. Is your membership exclusively that? You mentioned that you had contact or regular interaction with people from a loyalist background, but is your organisation specifically for republican conflict-related prisoners?

Mr Culbert: Mostly, yes, but my organisation formally employs two former loyalist prisoners. The baseline is yes; my organisation represents a republican constituency.

Mr Quigley: I will expand on that slightly. We work in north Belfast. We not only have contact with loyalists there but have a working relationship with loyalists, as well as the PSNI. We deal with places such as the Limestone Road. Ex-prisoners are out on those roads regularly; they are working with the youth in those areas and trying to divert them into positive activities rather than the activities they would normally be engaged in. The level of violence on those interfaces has diminished greatly because of the work of republican and loyalist ex-prisoners. We are not exclusive.

Mr Weir: I understand that, and I am not questioning the ongoing work. I am trying to get at the perspective of the evidence and where it is coming from.

The Bill deals specifically with a particular category of work, but what about the broader area of employment rights and employment law? Do you draw any distinction on what the employment rights or rehabilitation should be for conflict-related prisoners and those who have been convicted of other criminal offences but would be described as non-conflict?

Mr Quigley: As it stands, you cannot legally discriminate against a person who is described as an ordinary decent criminal, but you can discriminate against a political prisoner. The House of Lords case ruled that you can refuse employment to an ex-political prisoner from the conflict in the North and sack such a person, but you cannot do that for an ordinary criminal.

Mr Weir: Do you accept the need for any level of employment restrictions on any ex-prisoner of any description?

Mr Quigley: I see that as being relevant in the case of a person who had been found guilty of dishonesty in some form going for a job in a bank, or someone with a conviction for an abusive crime going for a job in a youth club, for instance. I see relevance in those cases.

Mr Weir: So they would be needed in quite specific examples.

Mr Quigley: Yes.

Mr Weir: I do not necessarily agree with a lot of stuff, but I suspect that we could be here until Christmas and not make a great deal of progress in that regard. I think that it was Michael who mentioned motivation. Neither the Bill's draftsman nor anyone else could look inside anyone's head or heart in relation to the issue. The only thing that I would take exception to is the fact that you said that you did not know where this was coming from. Clearly, this case has been at least sparked by one appointment, which was that of Mary McArdle. Last week, Ms Travers gave evidence. Do you at least accept that that appointment showed a lack of sensitivity towards the victim concerned?

Mr Culbert: I do not want to speak about Mary McArdle per se, but I will talk about the concept of catering for victims, if you want to do that. I will not beat this back at you, Peter, but if the mobilisation for the Bill has come from sympathy for victims and attention to their sensitivities about appointments, where has that sensitivity about victims been over the decades? I can quote numerous cases in which people who have been convicted of murder by the courts — Diplock courts — have served very short sentences, have been called liars by the judges, have had their pay paid constantly during the prison sentence and have returned to the Scots Guards regiment. This is not tit for tat because that does not go anywhere, but I ask you this, Peter: where is the sympathy with those victims and families? Where is the legislation to ensure that that does not happen again? It is not fair. If a former British soldier has done his time, he should be OK to seek employment when he gets out of jail. It does not work every way, Peter.

Mr Weir: Leaving aside the details, Michael, if you take your case at face value, you are saying that, since certain wrong actions were tolerated in the past, we should tolerate wrong actions now. It is almost an argument that two wrongs do not make a right.

Mr Culbert: That is not my argument. My argument is that I do not really know the motivation behind the Bill. I appeal to people to look to a shared future as opposed to party political interest or where your vote should go in the future. If a person is so moved and feels so strongly about the issue, why has it appeared now for one specific case? It should have been there as a concept. If it had been, I would have said that it was genuine.

Mr Weir: Without defending Mr Allister, I suppose that he would say that he is in a position to put forward a Bill at this stage, since he is a Member, but previously he was not.

Mr Culbert: He is not really a stranger to the world of politics.

Mr Weir: That may be the case, but simply being involved in politics does not mean that you are in a position to do a particular thing.

Mr Culbert: I agree with you. In the same way, political parties that have been engaged here for decades may move in support of the Bill. Perhaps those parties should think about the concept or the underpinning reasons before they move.

Mr Weir: Our position has been fairly consistent. Sammy Wilson introduced different regulations, which the Civil Service brought in recently. I appreciate that there is some political disagreement on the issue. We could ping-pong the issue back and forward, but I suspect that Michael, Thomas and I will not be on the same page on a range of matters, so I am happy to leave it at that.

Mr D Bradley: In your preamble, Michael, you implied that the SDLP supported the Bill. If you read the Hansard report, you will see that we expressed our view very clearly. We voted for it at Second Stage, but, at that stage, we said that that did not imply support for the Bill at subsequent stages. I want to put that clarification on record.

We can talk about the general concept, and it seems that there are competing rights, as the recent case illustrates. As you said, there have been cases in the past, and so on. Another political party in the Assembly could appoint a former member of the security forces who was involved in what you and I would consider to have been an atrocity. Presumably, if that were to happen, I would object, you would object, and others would object to it. That is the general concept that is at the heart of the issue. There is a competition between the rights of ex-political prisoners and the rights of victims. In your view, is it possible to square that?

Mr Culbert: George Quigley highlighted the fact that it is difficult to square it as you must remain sensitive to all aspects. Without sounding aggressive on the matter, there is a moral high ground from a particular perspective on our past. I respect their right to take that moral high ground, but if I were to attempt to do the same thing, I do not know whether they would allow me that. By that, I mean that there is a naturalness about who the victims are, who the perpetrators are and what went on. There is also a moral high ground about what constitutes violence. Does a lack of appropriate investment in a particular geographical area constitute structural violence against a community as opposed to somebody who shoots a bullet?

We will not go into a historical analysis, but there had to be reasons underpinning the conflict here. All I am trying to do is broaden out the picture of why people did what they did. It is not all because of madness or something that was put into the water. If we take a broad view of our past, I hope that that might lead people to having a more open interpretation of people and their actions.

There is a Commissioner for Victims, a victims' forum and a lot of stuff in the new Victims Service. I have some issues with the new Victims Service, but victims are being catered for to some degree. The people who constitute the political ex-prisoner community are citizens, and they have bought into the peace process. If a major sector of different geographical communities throughout the country of Ireland is going to be marginalised, that is a seedbed for future conflictual situations. I suggest that we have to try to tidy up whatever we can here and now, while at all times keeping an eye on ensuring that the sufferers and the relatives of the deceased are catered for appropriately.

Mr D Bradley: I am not disagreeing with you. I expressed my views about the work done by Sir George Quigley and others who worked with him, and I said that it was good and useful. To get back to my question: in certain circumstances, there seems to be a competition of rights between victims and ex-political prisoners.

Mr Culbert: You will relate victims at all times with the political and ex-prisoner community, and that is where we would differ. The most obvious people to whom individuals look when they talk about victims are the people who have been processed through the courts.

Mr D Bradley: I gave another example. I said that another party might appoint a former member of the security forces who was involved in work that you and I would consider to be an atrocity, so the rights issue of victims comes up there again.

Mr Culbert: I would not object to that person, male or female, being able to pursue a career or to seek employment. That is where there is a difference. The naturalness of the moral high ground — I do not mean that to be derogatory — is in our society in a "how dare they" way. Why is a scenario being created for people to have a problem with? What is the big deal about someone being a special adviser? What about being a cleaner here? What about being a door person? What is the big deal? What would a special adviser know or have access to that a Minister would not know if they were thought to be a danger? There are Ministers who are also former political prisoners, so where is the issue? Why are we creating something that will probably cause problems with a lot of people in our society who are ready to find a problem. That is not being aggressive to you, Dominic.

Mr D Bradley: People have drawn a distinction between people who are elected to positions and others who are appointed to positions. We did not create this situation; it arose. Certain actions arose as a result of that, and we are now trying to deal with them, but the people around this table did not create the situation. Perhaps those who took the decision to make a certain appointment also had a role to play.

Mr Culbert: It might not have occurred to the individual who made the appointment of a particular person that it would have been a major issue. I do not know.

Mr D Bradley: I would like to reach a position at which that type of situation does not arise in the future, whether on one side or the other.

Mr Culbert: What you are saying, Dominic, if you will excuse me for paraphrasing you, is that there are categories of citizens here who should not have particular jobs. Is that what you are saying to me?

Mr D Bradley: No. A person's appointment has caused severe trauma to people who were victims as a result of the actions of that person. I would prefer to get to the position in which a senior public appointment, whether the person is from one side of the community or the other, does not produce that sort of situation in the future.

Mr Culbert: I suggest that the appointment of somebody as a Minister is a much more senior appointment than that of somebody as a special adviser. I could not tell you who Nelson McCausland's special adviser is now or who the previous one was. I could not tell you who the special adviser is to —

Mr D Bradley: Some of the DUP men might not be able to tell you either.

Mr Culbert: I could not do it. What we have is a spotlight being shone on a particular person from a particular background. I come back to my point: why are we creating a situation that highlights one sector of our society?

Mr D Bradley: As I said, we did not create the situation; it has arisen and now has to be dealt with.

Mr Culbert: Fair enough.

Mr D Bradley: I want to deal with it in a way that allows political prisoners to pursue whatever avenue of employment they want to pursue, but I also want to protect victims from having to endure or re-endure trauma that they experienced 15, 20 or 30 years ago.

Mr Culbert: Dominic, I am batting back at you every time, and I apologise. Who would have taken offence at a former member of the UDR being a Minister here? You never hear that. In the community in which I live, the UDR had a particular resonance that was similar to that of the B-Specials and the RUC. We either accept that we have moved forward and that we will make major efforts to be accepting of all aspects of our former society, or we do not, in which case we have second-class citizenship. That is the way that I will keep coming back at you. We must have sensitivity to the victims; there is no question about that. Hopefully, the new victims' service will cater for that. I could not have predicted some years ago that a particular relative of a particular victim in the conflict would take such a major public stance. I do not think that any of us could have predicted that. I suggest that a particular political party did not envisage that.

Mr D Bradley: As you say, we could bat this back and forth all day long. I suggest that you could have envisaged it, and that political party could have envisaged it had it thought more about the actions in which the person had been involved.

Mr Culbert: Perhaps.

Mr D Bradley: Anyway, thank you very much. We will leave it at that.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Thank you very much for your evidence. It is important to tease out these issues. At the point that we are at as a society, there are clearly still very raw emotions and feelings. Although I do not think that anybody would deny that there has been movement and progress, it is evident that it is very easy to knock people back into their cultural safety zones. It seems to me that the issue that we should address and be guided by is whether reintegration and ensuring equality across the board is the safest ground — it is very easy for us to get knocked off it. I am interested to know because I think that we might find some interesting illustrations in discussions within the ex-prisoner community. Thinking across the spectrum and about the dynamic between you and former loyalist prisoners, has there been any discussion about this issue in particular, which is one that has divided parties in the Assembly? Has any discussion moved outside the established position — sometimes described in the media as the "tribal" position? Have people considered this more objectively and suggested a different way so that the situation that arose over Mary McArdle's appointment could have been avoided? However, that would have meant that the issue remained unresolved. In a sense, the Mary McArdle controversy has provided an opportunity for the parties to stand up and face the issue.

I imagine that the decision to nominate her took into consideration that we were 13 or 14 years into the process, and ex-prisoners were already operating as special advisers quite effectively and efficiently. Certainly, they did so with none of the issues that we are discussing now. However, perhaps the controversy has been aided and abetted by those in the media more interested in sensationalist coverage than how we help society to heal its wounds and move on.

Has there, either before the Mary McArdle incident or since, been any discussion with groupings from across the community's political spectrum?

Mr Quigley: Most of our relationships with loyalists are on the basis of dealing with reconciliation issues or major interface issues. As far as the people whom we deal with are concerned, they see progress. We see progress in steps and starts. Sometimes, it gets pushed back a bit. We see this Bill as pushing it back another little bit. However, in the main, the trend has been one of steady progress. When we saw the likes of the guidance coming into play, we thought that it was a very positive move. However, as far as we were concerned, it was not enough. We would still like to see the expunging of records, as would loyalists. We also have lots of contact with ex-British soldiers. Those people, who were on the ground here, are very candid about what they felt that their role was and how they feel about it now. Funnily enough, most of the ex-British Army people with whom we have contact now work in their communities with, for example, disabled or disadvantaged people. Sometimes, their contact with us has come through that. They have seen the work that we do, our literature or our website. We have some very good relationships with ex-British soldiers — people who are dead honest about what they did here and the role that they played, a role into which the state put them. Standing back from the situation here, they see progress. They express admiration for the work that we do. They have contacted us to state that.

Loyalists do the same. They are of the opinion that they played a role in the conflict. Their very strong view is that they were on the other side, which was that of the British state. As far as they are concerned, they were allies, and they were hung out to dry when the conflict ended and, during the conflict, used as scapegoats many times. They believe, like we do, that, whenever something like this comes up and tries to push progress back, we just have to keep on pushing.

There was a time when we did not have as strong a voice as we do now. In my opinion, and lots of people disagree with me, we have never had a normal society here. So "normalisation" is something that we hope to achieve rather than get back to. When we talk amongst ourselves, to loyalists and even to ex-British soldiers, we see progress. They would see this as another barrier to that progress. They would see it as a retrograde step in what is generally positive progress towards some sort of normal society. We all work for and want the same thing. We do not want a return to violence; we are working against people who want to return to violence. In difficult circumstances such as these, we try our best to convince people that the peace process is real and that there is a real possibility of achieving a normal society in which everybody can be equal, have equal citizenship, be treated the same and have the same rights. That is how we view things, and that is the position that we feel we are in. Do we want to move forward or go back? Should victims be considered and taken into account? Absolutely. I wish that somebody had taken my mother into consideration. She faced insensitivity every day of her life until the day that she died — what was in the news, the way she and her family were treated, the way that her son's body was treated, and so on. No one ever took account of her sensitivities. She did not want ever to return to those days and nor do we. This Bill will push back that progress a bit. We will do our best to prevent it and everything in our power to argue against it.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that many of the comments have been general. I am looking at the generalities of what can or cannot be dealt with. The point is that there are about 19 special adviser posts affected by the Bill. It would be a different matter if we were proposing Civil Service-wide legislation. We have accepted that the guidance from Sir George and Sir Nigel is there for the right reason: to try to normalise our society. Nobody is trying to rule that ex-prisoners should not have jobs.

Coming from my background, I know of probably hundreds of loyalist ex-prisoners, many of whom were convicted of murder. However, it would be totally insensitive of me — were I in the position to do so — to appoint one of them as a special adviser who would, in turn, steer government policy because advisers play a key role. I appreciate that Ministers with previous convictions were mentioned, but they have a mandate to be in post. Others appointed political advisers could rub salt into the wounds of people whom they, ultimately, made victims. I accept the variance in opinion of what a "victim" is. That debate needs to be brought into the open and engaged in properly. Unfortunately, some shy away from it. I am not one of those, but I feel that we need to be very careful about the reason why we are dealing with the Bill. It is because of the way in which this appointment was made and the sensitivity of the family who were the victims.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: We are also dealing with it because of the response of an avowed enemy of the peace process. There is no disputing that.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that, but the family came forward and stated that they were appalled by what had happened. They sought reasons for the appointment but got no answers. Such sensitivities have to be considered, and that is part of the reason why the Bill was drafted to deal with 19 very senior posts for which large salaries are paid, perhaps twice what MLAs sitting round this table are on. That is the way it is. I would have a genuine difficulty in saying that we should not be looking at and introducing this Bill. I come from a family who were victims of republican terrorism. I have had to swallow that, and I am willing to move forward — I accept that I have to. On that basis, there is room for improvement, but ex-prisoners groups behind the scenes must understand that they cannot get everything that they want. I am talking about both sides because, in my community, there are those who say to me that they are looking for this, that and the other. Some have to realise that although they feel that they have rights, we have to consider, weigh up and balance how this is felt and measured by the general public and by people who are the victims.

The fact that 13 years has passed was mentioned. Maybe 13 years is not long enough because the scars still run deep. This is generational, and it could take a long time. The normalisation of our society will not be a short process. This is a long game, and it will not be driven on in three or four years. I appreciate that you have your views on this, but we have to be sensitive to the whole issue. I

am not saying that, in 10 years' time, you could not revisit this, but, at present, things are too tender in a lot of areas.

Mr Culbert: I appreciate your views, Mr Girvan. Your party and the other unionist parties have, pretty much since your inception, been supportive of your Government's — the British Government — positions. I suggest to you that the Bill goes against the will of the British Government. It was not you, I or the DUP who made the Good Friday Agreement or the St Andrews Agreement. This is your Government. Those agreements enshrined, hopefully from my point of view, a way forward for the people whom the agreements targeted as being participants in the conflict. By the way, as we all know but sometimes need to be reminded, the jails were not emptied as a result of the Good Friday Agreement. They were emptied of people who had been put in prison on the basis of particular types of charges — political charges. First, they were given an undertaking that they would receive assistance in moving towards employment opportunities, and, secondly, in the St Andrews Agreement, an undertaking was given to reduce barriers to employment. Your Government signed up to those undertakings.

Why would those who express that they definitely want a shared future here, and a better and equal future — I assume that they are genuine — move in support of putting up barriers? That will allow people to point to those international agreements not being worth a toss: they must have been lies; they can be overturned. That could undo at least a decade of building relationships in our society. I know that the relationships between the UUP and Sinn Féin, and between the Alliance Party and the DUP, are not great, but they are much, much better than they were. I would like to think that the electorate in republican areas will not see this as another chipping away of what was agreed and voted for across the country.

Mr Girvan: Do you not believe that the guidance to deal with the normal Civil Service went a long way to addressing some of your points?

Mr Culbert: It certainly did go a long way, but why would someone then bring in legislation to say that it should not go as far as that? It is a bit like saying, "You lot are victims but less so than those victims. They are definitely very worthy victims." That was the type of language used here some years ago. I do not think that it is right. That is my view.

The Chairperson: Thomas and Michael, thank you very much. It has been a very worthwhile contribution, and it will go towards the Committee's report on the Bill, which will be published in the new year.