



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

United Kingdom Exit from the European
Union: Seanad Special Select Committee on
the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from
the European Union

10 March 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for The Executive Office

United Kingdom Exit from the European Union: Seanad Special Select Committee on
the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union

10 March 2021

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin

Witnesses:

Mr Malcolm Byrne	Seanad Éireann
Ms Lisa Chambers	Seanad Éireann
Mr Timmy Dooley	Seanad Éireann
Ms Eileen Flynn	Seanad Éireann
Mr Michael McDowell	Seanad Éireann
Mr Niall Ó Donnghaile	Seanad Éireann
Mr Joe O'Reilly	Seanad Éireann
Mr Mark Wall	Seanad Éireann

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Information on this session is in members' meeting packs. I ask everyone present to mute their microphones. That is really important. Could you please double-check that you are on mute?

I ask Lisa Chambers to switch on her microphone. If I say "Hello" to you, Lisa, and you say "Hello" back to me, it will bring you up into the spotlight on StarLeaf.

Ms Lisa Chambers (Seanad Éireann): Hi, Colin. How are you doing? Hi to all of the members, as well.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Fantastic. That is great. We can see you, Lisa. You and your Committee are very welcome.

It is somewhat of a return visit. We were with you a few weeks ago and found it to be a very useful exercise to converse, discuss and chat about the various issues that we are facing. There seems to be an increasing reality that, by having conversations, talking and chatting, we can work out what are the real problems, as opposed to the perceived problems. I suppose that the concern is that, if you live in a bubble, you will only find out what is going on around you in that bubble.

On that, I am disappointed that we have no representatives of the DUP present at this meeting. Some could perceive that that shows an unwillingness or ignorance to learn what are the issues and a lack of will to resolve problems and move into a problem-solving mode. Thankfully, the majority of representatives in the Assembly are in the space of wanting to find solutions to the problems. As grown-ups, we know that that involves talking to people to try to find out what the problems are.

You are very welcome. Lisa, I will hand over to you to make a few opening remarks. We will then move into questions and answers. Hopefully, that will allow more of a conversation to take place.

Ms Chambers: Great. Thanks very much to the Chair, Colin, and all of the members. I will make a brief opening statement, and we can open it up after that. Good afternoon. On behalf of the Seanad Brexit Committee, I will begin by thanking all our colleagues in the Committee for the Executive Office of the Northern Ireland Assembly and you, Chair, for extending an invitation to us, the Seanad Brexit Committee, to discuss Brexit and the EU-UK trade and cooperation agreement and other related matters.

The Brexit process, which began in 2016, has been very difficult for all stakeholders involved and has posed significant challenges for the island of Ireland, our citizens, businesses and communities. Nevertheless, we, as public representatives, have a duty to work together through those difficulties to ensure that we minimise the negative impact of Brexit for those whom we represent.

I fully appreciate that there are significant differences in opinion in how we go about navigating Brexit and protecting those we represent. That is part of the motivation to have these engagements with our colleagues in the North.

As you will be aware, our Committee was re-established at the end of last year to give a specific and dedicated focus to Brexit and to assess the damage and impact of Brexit after the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020.

To date, our Committee has had a number of meetings, spanning numerous topics relating to Brexit. In that regard, we have engaged with the United States Ways and Means Committee, through its chair, Congressman Richie Neal; the Scottish Government, through Mike Russell MSP; your Committee Chair, discussing the all-island impacts of Brexit; the Irish business sector, through the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC); the Irish haulage industry, through the Irish Road Haulage Association (IRHA); and our main ports, Dublin and Rosslare.

We have also met the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) to look at transfers of data between Ireland and the UK. More recently, we met representatives of the Health and Social Care (HSC) and Kingsbridge Hospital in Belfast to look at the impact of the loss of the cross-border treatment directive, which, as you will know, is quite well used here in the Republic.

The impact of Brexit is so far-reaching and permeates so many aspects of life on the island that we still have considerable work to do before we produce our interim report in July. The engagement with your Committee today is important on a number of fronts. It is good that we each have an opportunity to engage with each other through our own forums and that we have an opportunity to discuss candidly matters that affect both Parliaments and, indeed, have an all-island dimension. More importantly, it displays that both Parliaments are actively working together on behalf of the island, and I look forward to continuing those engagements into the future.

We are happy to take questions and to open the discussion between the two Committees. Thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to make a few opening remarks.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK, Lisa. Thank you very much indeed for that. We are becoming more used to these virtual interactions. I will start and then other members will join in with a few questions. If we direct them to you, you can pass them to members of your Committee to respond in turn or together. It will probably work the best if we operate between ourselves as Chairs to get the free flow of conversation.

I will begin with a few questions. The future relationship and the current negotiations are like any negotiations. They are based on trust and goodwill on both sides. This week, we saw the UK Government unilaterally choosing to extend the grace periods to the various timetables for trade relaxations. Extensions like that are necessary, but I feel that the approach that has been taken by the British Government is a bit clumsy. I just want to get a sense from you whether you feel that the

methodology that is used of just taking unilateral decisions is helpful or whether there would be a better way to go about that?

Ms Chambers: That is a good question, Colin. I am on record as saying that I felt that the request for an extension of the grace period was a reasonable request, and it is my understanding that the Irish Government were working behind the scenes to try to secure that extension because we could see the difficulties that were being experienced in Northern Ireland around importing goods and the pressure on business and adjusting to what is a significantly new and different trading environment.

Therefore, the extension is not really the issue, because we would have supported that in any event, but the method and the manner in which it was done has definitely created tensions and made it a little bit more difficult to implement the agreement and to work together. Obviously, any unilateral action in a situation with two partners that should be talking to each other is not the optimal way of doing business. It is regrettable that the EU intends to issue two letters, two parallel legal processes to deal with this, and the mechanisms in the agreement and the Joint Committee will be used to resolve the matter. Therefore, it feels that we are a lot longer into the operation of this agreement than just two months because so much has happened. However, I am a firm believer that, whilst there are teething problems or a bedding-in period, things can and will settle, but it will take political will on all sides for that to happen.

Interestingly, the Economic and Social Research Institute came before our Committee two weeks ago, and the witness made the point that having access to both markets is a great opportunity for Northern Ireland, and it could, potentially, lead to increased foreign direct investment, which we would all welcome. However, if there is uncertainty around the future of the protocol and continuing uncertainty about the status of Northern Ireland's access to both markets, it is difficult to encourage investment, and you might lose that opportunity. It is an interesting point that the Committee noted.

Chair, I cannot see the other participants on my screen. Can you see whether people on my side are indicating to speak? I can see only you and your Committee members.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. I can see everyone's names in the list. If members in the spotlight unmute, they can participate. If a member has something to add to what Lisa has said, they can chip in and be included. *[Pause.]* I hope that means members are happy with your comprehensive answer.

Lisa, thank you for that response. We take the points you have made, and I reiterate that the solo runs have to stop. People need to sit down in a room, work out what the issues are, bring requests into the room and try to work in a settled way to create stability. There are very difficult messages being sent out and, if they are mixed or incorrect messages, that does not help business or the economy.

Do you feel that the change in personnel has had an impact? The UK Government side changed from Michael Gove to Lord Frost. It is fair to say there is going to be a considerable difference — like day and night — potentially, to the approach that will be taken in the negotiations. Do you feel that the change in personnel will have any ramifications?

Ms Chambers: It is an interesting political question. I am reluctant to pass comment on individual personalities because, at the end of the day, we respect the appointment made by the Prime Minister. The heads of Departments, projects and negotiations is a matter for the UK Government. Of course, we will always work with whoever is in situ at any given time, and we expect the same in reverse. We can work with everyone. The main thing is that we have an open dialogue and continue the discussion.

In your first question, you mentioned trust and goodwill, and, even though, during the last four years, this has been a very fraught process and has tested the relationship between both countries. We have a very long and colourful history. A lot of trust and goodwill has been built up over the years, and that does not disappear overnight. The fact remains that the UK is still our closest neighbour, our biggest market and there are cultural and social ties. There are very few families who do not have a relative living somewhere in the UK. That link is so strong that we can overcome these difficulties. A change in personnel should not impact that. We should be big and bold enough to be able to do our jobs professionally regardless of who the people are.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I am going to do a test. The next person on my list from the Committee is Malcolm Byrne. Malcolm, will you talk to us for a moment to check that we can see you OK and that you hear us OK?

Mr Malcolm Byrne (Seanad Éireann): I can hear you perfectly, Colin.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you, Malcolm. That is good. If any other member from the Committee feels that they want to participate in an answer, they should just chip in. They will then come into the spotlight, and we will be able to hear them.

Lisa, my final question may be somewhat of a curveball, nonetheless, it is about something that seems to be a result, somehow, of Brexit and something that is being fixated on in the British press today: Boris Johnson's fantasy project of a bridge from Northern Ireland to Scotland. That is somewhat of a raid on devolution; issues such as that about the spending of public money should be taken in Stormont rather than other places. Do you have a thought on whether £20 billion would be better spent on a bridge between Northern Ireland and Scotland or on £20 billion-worth of infrastructure in the Northern part of the island? Which do you think would be best?

Ms Chambers: That is quite the curveball. I am not sure that it is wise for me to offer an opinion on that. We have similar debates in our Parliament about which infrastructure and capital projects we should prioritise and which we should not. A project that is particularly close to my heart is the western rail corridor. Members may or may not be aware of that. You could argue that either way, but many of us are passionate about it; sometimes, it can be a little more heart over head. It is a matter for those who will be impacted by it. If there is a trade-off that means that you cannot do something else because of that investment, that is, obviously, a matter for the Assembly to discuss, and you should have input in to that. At the end of the day, those decisions should be taken by the people and, certainly, on behalf of the people. A discussion about the merits or demerits of that particular project is one that you may want to have in your own Parliament. It is an interesting one. It is certainly ambitious. You cannot say that there is not some vision there. It will probably be one that you will be discussing for many years to come.

Mr Niall Ó Donnghaile (Seanad Éireann): Colin, I understand and appreciate the diplomacy of the Chair, but I will offer a view on it. Respectfully, it is a bit of a pipe dream and a distraction from the immediate issues that people are facing. It is probably also an effort to cover the blushes of some of those who advocated the Brexit that they are now dealing with the fallout of.

A number of major infrastructure projects have been agreed on a cross-border basis, so there is a responsibility for the Irish Government in terms of input into some of those big keystone projects. Of course the money could be much better spent; our infrastructure could be improved, whether that is road and more sustainable transportation infrastructure or rail and the connection, which Lisa, rightly, mentioned, into the west and up into the north-west, which would connect all parts of the island. For very logical and sound political and economic reasons, and for very justifiable reasons for anyone, that is where the focus needs to be. We do, and should, have an input from an Oireachtas perspective. The Programme for Government here in Dublin includes projects such as the Narrow Water bridge and the A5. There are also longer-term projects in this state around the Ireland 2040 programme. I do not think that any of that includes a bridge to Scotland. All of the experts whom I have heard have ruled that out of order in terms of the technical ability to do it. It is a wee bit of a distraction.

Colin, I thought that one of the issues that we could look at today, while we have the chance, is the mutual recognition of qualifications, North and South, and between Ireland and Britain. I have had some engagement, and I know that other colleagues across the parties have done so, with the CBI. Our Committee is hoping to hear from them about this anomaly and unresolved issue. Certainly, the Irish Government have made very clear commitments, as did the British, although I am not so sure whether they are credible. However, commitments have been made about protecting the all-Ireland economy and the Good Friday Agreement. For me, an obvious outworking of that has to be assurances that there will be mutual recognition of qualifications, and that will be resolved so that people can work freely across Ireland and move between Ireland and Britain. This is a North/South and east-west issue. As well as us doing our own bit of work on it as a Committee, Colin, it is something that both Committees could take forward as a joint project. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Byrne: I certainly agree on the question of mutual recognition of qualifications, but the whole area of cooperation in the higher education and research space is something that will be crucial. Investment in Derry and Strabane, particularly in the medical school for Derry, is very welcome. There is a lot of

investment in artificial intelligence and future technologies in the region, and there can be great synergies operating North/South. One of the things about these islands is that we share an awful lot in common in the higher education and research space. Peer reviews are carried out and academics freely move between institutions. It is important that we look at ways in which we can continue to do that, both North/South and east-west. Any help in supporting that would be welcome. Rather than, necessarily, the Boris Bridge, we should look at how we can provide educational opportunities, particularly given the pace of technological change. That will be crucial.

One other issue, which Lisa mentioned, is the Data Protection Commission here. That will be an area of concern. The European Union will shortly be making an adequacy decision on the UK's data protection and storage regime. We work on the basis that the UK's data regime will remain roughly the same as the Irish regime, but if there is any divergence, it will present huge difficulties for cross-border business, sharing medical information and so on. I know that our DPC was talking about the administrative burden. That is something that will really have an impact. If there is any divergence between North and South, we will be in trouble. It is certainly an area that we need to watch.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I will pass on to questions from other members of the Committee. I will first ask the Deputy Chair. Doug, have you any questions?

Mr Beattie: Thank you all. It is always good to engage. As the only unionist here, I feel that it is important that I put across my points candidly and forthrightly, so that people understand. I want to say something, and be absolutely clear about it. If I thought that this was going to be a meeting where we were going to denigrate my Government about a bridge or a study of a bridge, I would not be here. That is a sovereign decision. Whether you agree with it or not, they will make that decision. I thought that Lisa's answer was absolutely as it should have been given. We should not have been talking about this. I think that was pretty disgraceful, and I want it put on the record that we should not have been talking about the bridge. That is not what this meeting is for.

Lisa, you are going to make an important report. Can I ask how you will reflect in that report unionist concerns, particularly about the protocol, and how unionist concerns have been sneered at and their opinions have been ignored by your Government. How do you intend to reflect in your report how your Government used the threat of violence to influence the outcome of the Brexit negotiations on the trade and cooperation agreement? How do you intend to reflect how the alternatives to the protocol were looked at and dismissed so candidly?

Ms Chambers: Thanks very much, Doug. It is great to have you in the meeting. I appreciate getting a unionist perspective. As I said in my opening remarks, I fully appreciate that there are quite significant differences in the viewpoints on those issues and on how we go about navigating Brexit. I respect that, and I fully appreciate that you are coming from a different perspective on those matters. It is good to hear that.

I will be able to answer some of your questions better than others. The first point was about how we reflect unionist views of the Northern Ireland protocol. First, even the fact that we are engaging with you today, Doug, will make a difference because I will have at least heard direct expressions of views from somebody from that community. When we met your Committee a number of weeks back, there was an invitation to our Committee, but we did not have a unionist voice. The majority of our members expressed disappointment that we did not get to hear from somebody from that community, because we really wanted to hear that side of things.

At that meeting, we said that we very much understood and respected the differing views. I will certainly do my best, as chair of the committee, to make sure that those views are reflected as best I can. As I said in my opening statement, we have yet to have a number of other engagements before we report in July. We hope to have more engagements with organisations that span North and South with a view to getting those perspectives. Hopefully, we will have a bit more to put into the report than we have to date, if I am honest about it.

The difficulties that the unionist community has with the protocol have been quite well publicised. I understand them; I get where you are coming from. I am not living your experience, but I understand why your community is not happy with it. It makes sense from your perspective, but I am not sure that the Irish Government can do a whole lot to address all those concerns. However, I think that we have to try to do something. I expressed views previously that the difficulties that we have now with trade in and out of Northern Ireland have to be fixable. That seems like a solvable problem, and we just need to lock heads together. Rather than challenge one another, we should try to work together to resolve

those issues. I appreciate that there are complaints, but that is why the extension of the grace periods was a sensible suggestion from the UK Government and I very much support it. I might not agree with how it was achieved, but it was the right outcome for giving that extra time to communities and businesses in Northern Ireland.

The Irish Government's actions leading up to Brexit are not really the focus of our Committee. We were established towards the end of last year, now that Brexit has happened and that the trade and cooperation agreements are in place, to look at the impact of that across all business and community sectors on the island. We are not looking back, because we have had that debate and argument. We are looking to the future to see how we can make things work and minimise the negative impacts that we see of Brexit on all communities, including the unionist community. We have a responsibility to reflect that in our report as well. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, Doug, when the report is published. We will certainly take on board your views today, and we thank you for expressing them. I will do my best to make sure that they are reflected in our report.

I am not sure whether other members want to come in, Chairperson.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Do any other members wish to come in?

Mr Ó Donnghaile: In the last Oireachtas term, one of the great strengths that we had in the Seanad and, indeed, in the Brexit Committee was that we had a unionist member who reflected, although not uniformly, Doug, a unionist analysis and perspective. In the upcoming by-election to the Seanad, we have the opportunity to put a unionist voice back into the Oireachtas, and I hope that members across the board take up that opportunity. The committee here and, indeed, the institutions overall would benefit by tangibly putting those words into action in order to ensure that we have those unionist voices represented there, or at least some of them — the more, the merrier, says I.

Mr Michael McDowell (Seanad Éireann): I want to go back to what Doug said about the concerns of the unionist community. I do not sneer at all at those concerns. I agree completely with what Lisa said. We are listening, and we are sympathetic to any group on the island of Ireland that feels discomfited or worse as a result of the outworkings of Brexit.

I agree with Lisa on this: it seems that the political process leading to the decision in December and the terms on which Brexit was finally accomplished created a time emergency. It was possibly a bit naive to think that, from 1 January onwards, the new arrangements would come into effect smoothly. From that point of view, I agree with Lisa that the relaxation of the implementation periods and the grace periods is probably sensible. However, regardless of whether it was done unilaterally, which I do not like very much, or by agreement, there should be common sense to easing the new arrangements into existence.

I watch quite a lot of BBC Northern Ireland, and I saw the footage of empty supermarket shelves. I will ask Doug this question: is that still a serious problem? Are there empty supermarket shelves now or was it a temporary blip due to Sainsbury's or Marks and Spencer and others not getting on top of the paperwork and administrative issues?

The idea that plants cannot be moved from Britain to Ireland, and to Northern Ireland in particular, without the soil being removed from them is the kind of issue that should be addressed with common sense. I do not feel under threat from British soil that comes into Northern Ireland on the tyre of a truck or on a plant and goes into the South, thereby prejudicing the European Union. Likewise for Scottish seed potatoes, for instance. I know that there are people in the Republic who are seriously affected by problems with the importation of those products. It is not as if those are the concerns just of unionists; all the paperwork concerns apply in Dublin and Rosslare as well. We are not on opposite sides of the experience in those matters.

I stress that practical outcomes are the important thing. Lord Frost's appearance might betoken a slightly frostier approach to what Michael Gove might have done. I do not think that starting legal action in the European Court of Justice (ECJ) would add very much to the price of eggs. We should sit down and work out exactly what the problems are and the common-sense solutions to them. It is, as Lisa said, very important that Northern Ireland has the best of both worlds by virtue of its status under the protocol.

Doug, you said that we should not go back over it all, and I agree with that, but there were alternatives, and they were rejected, particularly with the support of the party that is not represented at

the Committee today. We know that the previous Prime Minister tried her best to avoid some of the things that have happened since.

We want to hear, listen to, understand and see the reality of all this. You mentioned the threats of violence that have been made in the past, and we have seen graffiti on walls. We have also heard about loyalist paramilitary bodies becoming concerned about the whole matter. That is surely not of much help. Surely, the priority now is for us all to simply concentrate on ironing out all the administrative problems that exist and take common-sense decisions in order to minimise disruption to trade between these islands and ensure that there is no disruption between the two parts of the island. That is my tuppence worth.

Nobody is sneering at the unionists, as far as I know. There is a genuine understanding that this is unsettling, if I may put it like that, for unionist sentiment. If it is all a matter of paperwork and the like, apart from soil samples and *[Inaudible]*, let us just minimise the problems and address them in a common-sense way. If you want to know, Doug, that is how most people in the Republic want to deal with this. They are not hostile to the unionist community on this; they might be critical of what the DUP has done in the past, but that is history, so let us get on with it now.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Martina, I will ask you to come in at this stage because I know that you need to get away. We had a lot of replies there, so I will let you in now. We can then go back to Doug and move on from there, if that is OK.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Doug, for letting me in; I have to pop out.

There should be no no-go areas for conversations about anything that affects the island, North or South. It is just commentary, and I welcome hearing the views that are being expressed, whether they are about a bridge, Brexit or anything else.

The scale of the damage that has been done to lives and livelihoods by Brexit and the Brexit mess is breathtaking not just in the South of Ireland but in the North of Ireland in particular. Some of that, Lisa — I say this to you, as the chair of the Seanad committee, and to other members — is yet to be played out. The British Government have already binned the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which prevents, as you know, discrimination on various grounds, including disability, across the North regardless of what community you come from. In the North, we have the lowest standards of human rights protection and are very dependent on EU directives, even though they are the floor and not the ceiling. We have the Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights on this Committee, who knows more about that than any of us. The EU protections that are under threat are maternity leave, workers' rights, consumer rights and environmental protection. We hear people across a number of sections of society engaging about their concerns on all those.

Obviously, there has been a focus on the border in the Irish Sea. Any of us who were really interrogating that knew that there was going to be a border somewhere. Unfortunately, we were accused of scaremongering when we outlined what was going to happen. We need to try to deal with that in a way that will take us all forward.

I have been following some of the meetings that you have been having, and I know, Lisa, that your Committee has met to discuss the cross-border healthcare directive. That is making people on the ground, regardless of whether they come from the unionist community, the republican community or any other tradition or none, start to realise the impact of Brexit. For example, those who would have looked to go to Navan from the North for a hip replacement are realising that they can no longer do that. You had a meeting recently on that, so I would not mind finding out more about that.

The recognition of qualifications, as Niall said, is crucial to my Derry constituency. For example, educational institutions in Derry and the Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) are working hand in glove. When we are dealing with the potential opportunity from investment in hydrogen, we will need the recognition of qualifications across the island.

Then we have SMEs, which I will end with. Ninety per cent of SMEs in the North trade across the island on an all-Ireland basis, and 90% of the economy here is made up of SMEs, so it is crucial that we try to ensure that the all-Ireland supply chain is maximised as we go forward so that we can get trade. People have talked about shelves, and, whatever about the initial reaction, because of the lateness of the deal that was done, in my constituency, we have not had many problems with people going into supermarkets to find empty shelves. As it has rolled on, a resolution seems to have been

found, and that seems to be how trade and business will find a route to resolve the problems that they have encountered.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Lisa, can I pass that to you for one or two of your committee members to give a response?

Ms Chambers: Yes, thanks very much, Colin. I will respond to a couple of the issues that Martina raised. We have heard the concerns of citizens in Northern Ireland about the potential reduction in access to certain rights, and that was a significant part of the debate in the lead-up to Brexit. We do not have huge control over that in the Republic. I am not so sure that the UK Government are that intent on removing maternity rights or workers' rights, but that is one of the things that will require monitoring over a period of time.

You are right, Martina, that we had a discussion on the cross-border healthcare directive on Monday. We heard from the HSC, Kingsbridge Private Hospital in Belfast and the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association (PDFORRA), which is the representative association for the enlisted ranks in the defence forces; it has a scheme that was set up on the basis of the directive. There is an administrative process that is there as kind of a sticking plaster, if I may refer to it like that. You can still access cross-jurisdictional healthcare and get reimbursed. A system has been put in place for these 12 months until we can find a more permanent solution, but there seem to be fairly positive indications from the Department and from government that there is a desire and an intention to put something on a more permanent footing beyond those 12 months.

We are keeping a close eye on that, because I agree that it is a concern to everybody. Regardless of your political affiliation or whether you have none, access to healthcare is a top priority. That is one of those things that we can solve with common sense and by putting a new system in place.

On Monday, we discussed putting in place an improved system. Since we are not confined by the directive, let us do something that makes the system work better for the patient. We have a little bit of time, but we would certainly like to see something permanent put in place before the end of the year so that we do not run up to a cliff edge or a deadline when that expires.

I will hand over to other members who may want to come in on that.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Thanks, Lisa, and thanks, Colin. I appreciate what our Chair is saying about having to navigate some of this, and through our work as Committees, it is good to identify some of the issues and then perhaps help formulate some of our future work. One of the key things to remember is that the British Government have already removed the Charter of Fundamental Rights. It is gone. That is a loss, as Martina rightly said. They have already stated publicly that they are looking at a lower standard of workers' rights. That is an immediate issue of concern, and I do not know that we can just tinker around the edges of that. We need to be upfront as Committees and, indeed, as political representatives in how we work to address that loss of rights and entitlements due to a political decision that was actually contrary to ours.

Going forward, much like the mutual recognition that I suggested, it is perhaps worth doing a bit of engagement with the trade unions, for example, and even with the relevant departmental officials North and South to get some regular engagement and regular updates on this gradual, steady continuation — as I say, the charter has already gone — of the removal of rights and protections for workers.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. Thank you, Niall. Nobody else wants to respond to that.

Mr Beattie: Martina, thank you for being brief. Lisa, apologies: you are stuck with me for a little bit. Being the only unionist here, I think that it is really important to get a point across while I have the opportunity. You will hear lots of friendly voices after me, I guess.

One of the big issues — this has been explored before, but it probably needs to be explored again — is identity and the fine balance that we have in Northern Ireland that was brought about by the Belfast Agreement, which my party helped to negotiate with the SDLP. That fine balance would have been upset if we had put a hard border on the island of Ireland, and it has been upset by the Irish Sea border and the protocol. Huge damage has been done to community relations and to North/South cooperation. You can see that today. The DUP is not here. I wish that it was, but the reality is that that is an outworking of a protocol that it does not support. We can argue that we wish that it was here to

give a really strong unionist voice, but it is not. That is an outworking of that, and North/South cooperation is being damaged.

The Belfast Agreement is also being damaged on a day-to-day basis. Let me give you an example so that you understand where I am coming from. Michael will be interested in this, because it is about where we apply common sense. Say that a fishing boat in Kilkeel leaves its berth and goes out to fish. Because it has left its port, it is classed as being in a third country. To return to Kilkeel, its crew have to fill out a customs declaration. That is not only ridiculous but absolutely against the Belfast Agreement and the spirit of that agreement. I got that example by speaking to people in the fishing sector, who are making inroads into making the protocol work for them, but that is a real travesty.

How will we reflect that in your report and look at it as we go forward? How will we look at the fact that a dog going from Northern Ireland to a Crufts show in England will need a passport when it returns? That does not affect the single market. Soil does not affect the single market. If the issue is chlorinated chicken, we do not want that in the EU single market. I baulk at the thought of that, but thousands of people from across Ireland and Europe go to America. I am sure that they eat chicken while they are there and do not have a problem with it. If the issue is chlorinated chicken, we should ban it.

Can you see the concerns that people have? How do we look at the damage to community relations — there is damage to community relations, which are going backwards rapidly — and to the Belfast Agreement, because the protocol does not protect the Belfast Agreement but damages it. How do we look at, reflect and understand that slightly better?

Ms Chambers: Doug, I do not disagree. I just do not have an answer or solution.

I agree that had the protocol not been there and we had a border on the island, we would have damaged the Good Friday Agreement and had that tension. I also accept that having what is effectively a border in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Great Britain causes damage. I fully accept that, but I am not sure of the solution.

I had it put to me previously that we should put the border between Ireland and mainland Europe and that that would solve all the problems, but it would create a problem for the Republic. As you know, we are a committed member of the European Union and value that free access. We are quite proud of our 45-year membership of that club, and we want to stay there. That is what we have been racking our brains about for the last four years: how do we square that circle? That is why I get it. The UK Government had a very difficult decision to make, because they wanted to get a trade deal with the European Union. That was the compromise that was reached, but I fully accept that it does not suit the unionist community. I am not going to lay out the platitudes and say that it is all going to be fine. There are things that we can work on. The idea of a customs check because you have taken your small boat out from the port and want to come back in to dock is ridiculous. Michael McDowell pointed out the issue around soil being attached to the plant. That is just daft, is it not? Those are the kinds of things that we can fix.

For the unionist community, if you do not mind my taking liberties by saying this, as I am not a member of that community, those are annoyances, but it is really the ideological aspect and the fact that there is a border. No matter how big or small it is, there are extra checks. I am concerned that, even if we fix all those annoyances, if I can call them that, that will still not fix the problems that we have discussed of the tensions between communities in Northern Ireland and in North/South relations. Today, I do not have an answer to that, except to say that I hope that we can get past it. We have been through worse in the past and come through it, but I fully understand why you are saying the things that you are saying and why you are feeling them. That is why I join Senator McDowell in saying that we are not sneering, because we know it is a big problem, and we are concerned and really sympathetic about it. Tea and sympathy are not going to fix the problem, however.

Mr Beattie: I will quickly come back in on that, Lisa, and anybody else who wants to come in after can do so. To be absolutely clear, I am saying this to you, but, equally, if it were the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee here, I would be saying it to them. I am not directing it at you because you are the Irish Government. I would be directing it at anybody who had created this Frankenstein solution when other solutions were available: solutions that we have put forward. The Alternative Arrangements Commission released its report only in July 2019, yet, by December 2019, we had come up with the protocol. You are right when you say that, even when you fix all the small issues, the fact remains that, within our country of the United Kingdom, we have a border. Fixing the small issues is not going to fix that. I say that as someone who voted Remain. I voted Remain and wanted to remain, but I have not stopped being a unionist just because I did not get my way. I am still a unionist, and it is the union of

Northern Ireland and Great Britain that makes up the United Kingdom. Somebody has put a border in between the two. You are therefore absolutely right: we will not rest until the protocol is gone and got rid of. Even the vote in four years does not allow us to get rid of the protocol. It allows us only to get rid of articles 5 to 10 of the protocol, for something else to be reinserted two years after that. That will be in 2026.

It is about trying to come up with something that better meets the aspirations of people in Northern Ireland, regardless of what community they come from. There are alternatives out there, but those have not been looked at. I am concerned that people thought that they were just too difficult and thus got rid of them, because they were too worried about violence along the border. They were not worried about violence in Larne, Ballymena or anywhere else, just along the border. That is my concern, but you are right: until the protocol is gone, unionists probably will not stop shouting.

Mr Byrne: I will move slightly away from the issue, Colin, if I may? Doug might be able to input on some of this as well. We are looking at the impact of Brexit on the Republic and particularly its impact on the island, but we also have to be conscious of the bigger questions around the constitutional make-up of the UK and particularly the future of Scotland. There are very strong connections between the unionist community and Scotland, but, equally, there are very strong connections among everybody on these islands. Should the future constitutional position of Scotland change, what consideration do you think that we should give to that?

Mr Beattie: That is a huge can of worms, Malcolm.

Mr Byrne: Sorry for throwing it in there.

Mr Beattie: I do not think that I can answer that. The first thing that I will say is this: I am an Irishman. I am a very proud Irishman. I have always identified as an Irishman belonging to the United Kingdom, and I am a United Kingdom unionist. I am therefore a unionist in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, so the loss of any one of those component parts of my country would be a huge loss to me.

I do not know which way Scotland will go. That will be for it to decide. It will be a democratic vote if it happens or when it happens, in the same way in which leaving the European Union was a democratic vote. As I said, my party and I were for Remain, but we accept the democratic outcome of the vote — that is what democrats do — and we would have to do the same with Scotland. I could not give you an answer on where we would be if that were to happen, because I do not know whether Scotland will even have a referendum any time soon.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Doug, you are doing well. It is unfortunate that the other unionist members of the Committee are not here, and it perhaps feels as though questions are being directed at you. Thank you for your questions and answers, however.

Mr Lunn: I have listened with interest to all of this. I am afraid that I missed the previous meeting, and I apologise for that, but I would not want anybody to think that that was part of a DUP or unionist boycott. I am an independent Member of the Assembly now and am perfectly happy to be described as a slightly soft unionist, but that is about as far as I go.

The Scottish question was asked by Malcolm. Let us not beat about the bush: I do not know what way the Scots will vote when they get the opportunity, but if they are allowed to leave the Union, the Union is finished. It just would not stand up to scrutiny any longer, and we would have to work out, as we probably will have to anyway, what happens to this part of the United Kingdom in the event of that happening, or even if it does not happen.

Senator McDowell mentioned the supermarket shelves, and Martina responded to him. At the start of January, there certainly were spaces on our supermarket shelves, particularly those supermarkets that are supplied in large measure from England: Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury's in particular. I remember my wife bemoaning the fact that she could not get Somerset Brie anymore. I did point out to her that she could get French Brie, Irish Brie, Cornish Brie and probably half a dozen other Bries, albeit not Somerset Brie. I am happy to report, however, that Somerset Brie is now back on supermarket shelves. I think that the big operators were being a wee bit cautious, but the situation has been resolved now. The independent supermarkets did not seem to have much of a problem at all.

I will get to my real question in a moment, but the issue around soil is fascinating. All over the Belfast 'News Letter' today, we have one of a cloud of problems that have been produced by unionists other than people such as Doug. They are bringing up problems that really do not exist. One problem is with the type of soil that cricket pitches need over here. You have plenty of good cricket pitches down South, probably more than we have, but apparently the wicket has to be laid from a mixture of soil and clay, known as loam, which, as far as I know, is imported from the UK. It is imported from the UK, but it is sterilised. I am sure that if we have to continue to import it, it will still be sterilised, so I do not see a problem there at all, but that is the type of thing that is being thrown up as an impediment to progress.

Business here is starting to adapt pretty well to our perceived problems. Given the short notice between the time that the agreement was signed off on and 1 January, it is hardly surprising that business had certain problems immediately. I think that it was Manufacturing NI that did a survey at the end of January, and its findings were surprisingly positive about resolution of the problems and optimism for the way forward. I am looking forward to reading the survey that it completed at the end of February, because this is to be a monthly operation. I expect it to show further progress.

Lisa, you mentioned that you had undertaken consultation with all the business operations in the Republic. What is the feedback from Southern businesses at the moment? Is it positive, or have they encountered problems similar to ours? That is the question. I just want to know what Southern business thinks.

Ms Chambers: Thanks, Trevor. Thanks for your comments. We engaged with IBEC and the food and drink sector more than a month ago. A big part of the discussion was about transit in and out of the country, the fact that the land bridge was still posing a difficulty, with some blockages there, and the fact that the country of origin issue was posing a difficulty for some component parts, particularly food produce. The difficulty for the Republic was slightly different in that it was more focused on the import and export of goods, the issues with transit and haulage, the additional cost of getting goods in and out, and the fact that it may be more expensive or difficult to get products from the UK, given the country of origin issue. For example, we were made aware of an issue with flour, which was subject to additional levies because of Brexit and the fact that a certain percentage of flour was not coming from the EU. Those are the types of issues. They said that it was a little bit too early to assess the overall impact on the business sector. We will be engaging, hopefully in two weeks' time, with InterTradelreland (ITI) and the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium (NIRC) to get a bigger picture of the all-island impact on business. Businesses' biggest concern is the impact of the UK being a third country, given that it was a big market for them. They were still waiting to see what the outcome of that would be, so it will take longer to assess.

The Economic and Social Research Institute said the same. It said that it was still assessing the impact, because these are such early days. We had those engagements when the protocol and the agreement were four or five weeks in operation and therefore in their infancy. The difficulties are slightly different from those that the North is experiencing. I am interested to hear that there seems to be a positive outlook. Trevor or other members, is there an ongoing discussion about the potential benefits of having access to both markets? Is that conversation happening, or is it still too early for it?

Mr Lunn: It is happening amongst people who are positive about trying to find the best way forward. The potential for all-Ireland trade and for trade between this part of Ireland and the rest of the EU is unlimited, but we seem to be concentrating on particular problems with cross-channel trade, particularly from Great Britain. Other members have said that those things should be capable of resolution, and I think that they will be, one by one. If you look back over the past two months, you see that we have resolved several of the problems that people thought were insurmountable: VAT on steel, VAT on second-hand cars — complete nonsense anyway — and various other smaller things. You have to work your way through such things. I think that the majority of the population up here and, in particular, the majority of the business community are looking at the way forward, not backwards, and that is positive.

Ms Chambers: That is good to hear.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Does anyone else wish to respond to Trevor's questions? If not, we will go to Pat and then Emma.

Mr Sheehan: First, Lisa, I want to commend you on your restraint and diplomacy when you described the British Government's unilateral decision to extend the grace period as:

"not the optimal way of doing business."

I must remember that one. In any event, up here, we are well used to British Governments doing their own thing, renegeing on agreements and so on. You just have to look at the state of the New Decade, New Approach agreement and all the parts of that that the British Government have not fulfilled to date.

We have covered quite a bit of ground here. I will focus on the Erasmus scheme. You will be aware that Simon Coveney has said previously that students from the North would be able to access Erasmus and that the Dublin Government would sort it out. Do you know whether there is any update on that, Lisa?

Ms Chambers: Not any more than that, Pat. I am aware that there was a desire to maintain the benefits of Erasmus and the European medical card. The information that I have to date is that that is going to happen. We had the Minister before our Committee in its first week. That was back in December, and we had not got much information at that point. We will have an engagement with the Minister of State for Higher Education, hopefully in the coming weeks, and exploration of that and the mutual recognition of qualifications will be on our agenda. We therefore hope to have a meeting on that topic, and it will form part of our report as well. All that I can say to you, Pat, is that the Government are committed to doing it. I do not have the full details of the ins and outs of it for you today, however.

Mr Sheehan: OK. Thanks for that.

On a broader issue, Malcolm opened up the discussion about constitutional change. Michael, you said that you have sympathy for all those who feel discomfited by Brexit. Everyone on this island has, to some degree or another, been discomfited by it. There are ways and means of resolving the problems that have arisen, one of which is constitutional change. The demand for independence in Scotland has been brought up, and that may or may not happen in the future. The ground is also shifting in the North, however. Demographic changes are taking place here. There will have to be a referendum on Irish unity at some stage in the not-too-distant future. The EU has already said that, in the event of Irish unity, the North can re-enter the European Union. Will that issue play any part in your report?

Mr McDowell: [*Inaudible.*] Our terms of reference do not go as far as to consider the possibility that there will be a cross-border poll or a particular outcome from that. The way in which most people in Dublin see it, and this is a view with which Niall Ó Donnghaile will probably not agree, is that a poll in the near future —. First, I do not think that there will be a poll in Scotland, because I do not think that Downing Street will allow it to happen. That is my first observation on that. [*Inaudible.*] I am very sympathetic to the Scottish Nationalist Party, so I just want to make that point.

In Northern Ireland terms, Pat, one of the first, crucial questions that those who support a united Ireland and are calling for a poll on Irish unity should ask themselves is this: has it chance of success in the near future? All the opinion poll evidence is that, despite the demographic changes — I wrote about those demographic changes in 'The Irish Times' recently — the majority of those of voting age show no inclination to vote for Irish unity when they are asked the bare question.

The second crucial thing is something that unionists in particular should take on board. The idea of Irish unity is not simply an all-Ireland unitary state. Even your own leader, Mary Lou McDonald, has spoken about the possibility of a confederal Ireland, as a form of united Ireland, with that confederal Ireland sharing, say, membership of the European Union. Some people have a very simple, black-and-white view of what Irish unity could or would be. Other people think that this is a more complex problem. What I am saying, however, is that, until those who are asking for a poll to be held have in mind even some vague understanding of what form of Irish unity it will be, the chances of a "Yes" vote for Irish unity North of the border are very slim.

I have looked at the democratic data that you referred to there, Pat. If you want to do a religious headcount, it appears that Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland will both be in the 45% to 48% bracket fairly soon and that the Protestant majority will be confined to two counties. That is if you want to do a religious take on it. Religious outlooks will not dictate how people will vote in an Irish unity poll, however. I believe that the people of Northern Ireland will want to know exactly what is being put to them.

I support fully what Micheál Martin says, which is that, instead of identitarian politics and concentrating on the possibility of an early poll being held on Irish unity, it would be far better if we were to concentrate on making the Belfast Agreement work and on bedding in the new arrangements, which are a huge opportunity for Northern Ireland. If I can put it this way, we should take the foot off the accelerator on the constitutional question, because the constitutional question will not be resolved in favour of Irish unity for the best part of 10 years, at least. I just want to say that so that Doug will hear it. People in Northern Ireland might sometimes think that what they hear about demands for a border poll are all one-way traffic in the Republic, but they are not. Most people in the Republic want the Good Friday Agreement to bed in and work. That is the priority —.

Mr Sheehan: Michael, may I come in on that point? We all want the Good Friday Agreement to work, but one part of the Good Friday Agreement is the provision for a border poll. Let me just say this: you are right that there is no prescribed model for a new unitary state, and that is all the more reason that we need to be talking about it now. We must not do the same as was done with Brexit, when nobody knew, understood or was able to foresee what the actual outcome of Brexit would be, not least the DUP, which is in a bind because it was a cheerleader for Brexit and now wants to cover its blushes because of the consequences.

We should not put everything on the long finger. Ten years is not a long time, Michael. I think that there will be movement before then, but, even if we go by your timescale, 10 years is only a blink of an eye. Let us start the discussions now. Let us start the preparations now. That is the way in which to resolve a lot of the problems that have been created by Brexit. I know that we could continue this discussion all day, but I am sure that others want to have their say as well. Thanks.

Mr Lunn: Chair, may I say something on the back of Pat's point? What has ignited the discussion up here about the possibility of a united Ireland or a change in the status of Northern Ireland is what we are talking about today: Brexit. That has upset all the calculations. I am slightly involved with the Ireland's Future organisation at the moment, without taking a stand, one way or the other. The information that it is garnering is that there is a real interest in this now and that it is time that people discovered what it would actually mean for their well-being and daily lives.

It is a nonsense to equate it to the religious balance here. It would only matter if three quarters of the population started to go back to church, but they do not. Church attendance here is pretty miserable at the moment, on both sides of the fence. As well as that, there is a section of the population, which must be at least upwards of 30%, who do not vote; so there is no point in looking at voting records. However, those are the sort of people who would vote in the event of a referendum. I agree with Mr McDowell that we are not likely to have one within the next five or 10 years, but it will happen. Public pressure will do it.

I am a wee bit disappointed by the attitude of the Southern Government at times, because they seem to distance themselves from the very notion of having a discussion about it. That is it.

Mr McDowell: I agree with you. There is no problem in discussing things. Going back to what Pat said, the Belfast Agreement provides for a border poll, but in the circumstances that it appears likely that a majority want a change. I think that you agree with me, Trevor, that that precondition is not satisfied yet. There is no harm in discussing things, as long as it is not seen as a threat to people's identity even to have the discussion. I am very happy to discuss it and have done so at length in various locations, but I believe that anybody who thinks that there is going to be a border poll, when we do not know what is on the table or what has been proposed, is very *[Inaudible]* to think that some people *[Inaudible]*.

Ms Chambers: Senator Joe O'Reilly is on the call. He sent me a text. Can you add him to your list? I cannot see him on the screen. Stick him on your list.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I can see him. Joe, give me a good wave when you want to contribute.

Emma, please ask your question.

Ms Sheerin: Go raibh maith agat. It links in closely with what has just been discussed with Pat's point and Doug's comments earlier in the meeting. I do not think that we should take so sensitively criticism of a decision or potential decision made by the British Government. People's reaction is that it is an insult to have criticism of something that they are talking about. We are now having a discussion about

Brexit and all the implications that it has for all the constituents whom we represent. It was a decision made by a Government in another place, by a majority of people in another place, that has impacts for us all on the island of Ireland, regardless of how you identify or what you regard yourself as. There is definitely merit in having conversations about these things.

The idea of a bridge or tunnel linked to Scotland or England is an insult, considering what we are going through, the context of the year that we have had and the fact that there is so much infrastructure missing in our own country, North and South. I think about the likes of Donegal, which has no rail network. Fermanagh and vast swathes of the North, west of the Bann, lack infrastructure. We fight every day with local and regional infrastructure managers about potholes and the upgrading of roads and resurfacing works that have real impacts on our constituents. In trying to get to their work, they are having burst car tyres and facing these everyday problems. To say that we dare not criticise the British Government, when they are basically insulting us by trying to distract from the reality of what is happening and their handling of COVID-19, is wrong.

Following on from that, we had a conversation about the potential for Irish reunification and about going into that debate with our eyes wide open. I got involved in politics because I believed that Irish reunification is the most sensible outcome for all the people of Ireland. As someone who advocates for Irish unity, I have not met anyone who talks about a border poll or having Irish reunification and wants that without knowledge of what we would be walking into. We are talking day and daily about preparing for reunification and its outcomes. We want to have a sensible debate that includes everybody, regardless of their background. Doug said earlier that he is a unionist who is also Irish. However, we have unionists who do not identify as Irish, and we need to have that debate in a way that allows everyone to feel safe.

I do not know what polls Michael was referring to. We can see from successive polling in recent years that support for Irish reunification has grown, particularly among younger voters. The exit polls from last year's Free State election put support for Irish unity somewhere in the region of 70%. We can see all the problems that have resulted from Brexit, and that was because people made an uninformed decision. Regardless of how long it takes us to get to the point of having a referendum, we need to have an informed debate about all the issues. This engagement is really good, and it is an opportunity for us all to look for solutions and the best ways to represent the people whom we represent. All those things have to be on the table, the conversations have to be open, and representatives need to feel able to raise whatever has been raised with them by the constituents whom they speak for.

Mr Joe O'Reilly (Seanad Éireann): I am delighted to join you. Sorry, I arrived late. I was using the test link rather than the link for today's meeting. A lady from your secretariat was very helpful in sorting that out for me. She identified the fact that I was using the older link. I am at the disadvantage of not having heard some of the initial contributions. I arrived at the point when my colleague Senator Michael McDowell was speaking.

I will start by responding to Emma. Michael made the point earlier, and it is generally made, that, ultimately, we will have to be more imaginative than in a unified physical area. We will have to imagine new forms of confederal-type solutions and joint authority. A number of options will have to be looked at, before we arrive at, ultimately, complete unity through gradualism. In the process, we have to avoid creating a paramilitary movement that opposes a united Ireland and gets us into a cycle of violence. Emma made the point, and it was made earlier, that there is nothing wrong — there is everything good — about having discussions. Today's dialogue is excellent, and it should happen a lot more. We should have a lot more exchanges, and, when normality returns post-COVID, we should be up and down to each other regularly. We did some of that last year, and my colleague Niall Ó Donnghaile was a co-host at that stage. We did a very successful trip to Northern Ireland, and we should do a lot more of them.

We need a gradualist approach. Essentially, I agree with Michael McDowell. It is not because we all do not desire Irish unity or the cultural riches, interaction and everything else that will come with unity. As a person from the border, I very much look forward to that. Yes, we can have a dialogue and conversations about unity now. However, the building of practical areas of cooperation, such as health, which was referenced earlier and is an obvious one, education and ERASMUS can achieve an effective unity in practical terms, and then we can look imaginatively at structures. I subscribe to the view that an immediate poll would not be prudent now and might actually damage the cause. However, I subscribe equally to the view that we should be talking about it openly. Recently, the Taoiseach in the South launched the shared island initiative. While that might not seem enough for some people, it should be built on. We certainly should be trying to converse with each other and work together. That is one of the things that I think is important.

On the protocol, I came in on the discussion when my colleague Michael McDowell was saying that he thought that dialogue, rather than court cases, was the way to go. Of course, that is the case. I hope that the court case is more of a shot across the bows, in an attempt to establish positions, and that, then, discussion will ensue. Ultimately, it will have to be solved at a practical level and will have to be the subject of negotiation. I think that the court case is to establish the right and the breach of agreement. There is merit in the announcement of the court case while trying to resolve the matter in a sensible way. What Martina and, I think, Doug said earlier about the shortages was interesting; that they are not the kind of issue that they appeared to be at the beginning.

I will finish by saying that the meeting is a wonderful exercise. What I have heard has been so interesting and encouraging. My essential response to Emma, as I am coming in after her, is that, yes, we should be talking, interacting, looking at imaginative solutions and building bridges, interaction and commonalities around health and in every economically practical way possible, and, building on from that, ultimately, looking at structures and then to a referendum that has a real chance of success, without creating a paramilitary movement for the destruction of the ultimate united Ireland or its Northern involvement. That is the balance that you have to strike.

We will not resolve it today in this forum, online like this, but we should be talking and interacting. I will finish by saying that I am convinced that, post-COVID, we need to start travelling up and down across the border and to be physically meeting and talking about those things. I do not subscribe to the view that we should shy away from the discussion; far from it. That will not get anyone anywhere.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you, Joe. Niall, you were looking back in.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Yes, Chair. My colleagues will not be surprised that I want to come in on this one. I will be brief, because I am conscious of people's time.

Senator McDowell referenced me because he and I have discussed the issue, mostly, actually, in plenary sessions of the Seanad as opposed to with each other. Nevertheless, does it not tell us something that the conversation here has veered towards the issue? That is really reflective of conversations in boardrooms and club rooms and at kitchen tables all around the country on that issue. I am glad that Joe O'Reilly made it onto the meeting, because I always value his considered and tempered remarks and input to meetings such as this.

It is important to remember that nobody is advocating for a jolt or knee-jerk approach. While demographics, which were discussed earlier, are an element of it, there is also the issue of the ending of the political unionist majority over a series of elections now. There is the added dynamic of Brexit. I suppose that, fundamentally, as Pat, rightly, said, for the work of this Committee and what we are discussing today, the EU Commission sent us and the world a message when it said that a reunified Ireland, in line with the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, would be welcomed back into the EU as one unit. That, of course, has to be a consideration in our thinking and work as we move forward in the Seanad Brexit Committee and, indeed, our own political work. It is an important one, which, I think, does not always get the platform or consideration that it deserves. It is good to hear that part of the conversation has now been replicated in this Committee. We all agree — well, we do not all agree, Doug. I appreciate that you are still on the call. Nevertheless, there is a broad range of views about the outcome, and some divergence of views about the timescale. If Brexit has shown us one thing, it is that that work needs to happen and needs to be considered and inclusive.

I have two final points, Chair. The Seanad is ideally placed to play a central role in that, because, unlike other institutions, we can be nationally representative. We can have Members from right across our 32 counties and beyond in our diaspora. We can have Members from across political and cultural communities.

Finally, the core element to this is that we have to not be à la carte about the Good Friday Agreement or deem parts of it to be negative, contentious or divisive and to remember that the Good Friday Agreement did not settle the constitutional question. I often remind colleagues that it asks us the constitutional questions. It gives us the opportunity to democratically and peacefully, and in a considered and informed way, change the constitutional status. If there are signs — I disagree with Michael; I believe that there are signs — pointing towards a desire for constitutional change, there is an obligation on us with the Good Friday Agreement and in the South with its constitution. He would be much more familiar with that than I am in our responsibility to do that in the best way possible.

Those are my points, Chair. It is interesting and a bit telling that this is where the conversation has gone, because that is the live dynamic that is out there, regardless of where you fall down on the

issue. You are perfectly entitled to take whatever view you so wish. Sin an méid. That is me, Colin, thanks.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you, Niall. Malcolm, you were looking to come in.

Mr Byrne: Thanks very much, Colin. Briefly, I am quite struck that a lot of the conversation, which has shifted, and the issues have been around identity. I was struck that, when Doug introduced himself, he defined himself as an Irishman who is a unionist. Trevor talked about himself as a soft unionist. I define myself as somebody who is Irish but, equally, as somebody who is passionately pro-European.

Niall said that some of the constitutional questions are coming up at kitchen tables. I am conscious that there are probably two significant groups who are not in this discussion. We do not have DUP representatives here. There is a significant body of unionist opinion who are threatened by some of this conversation. I put this question, particularly in the context of our Seanad report: what can we do to engage those in unionism who come from a very anti-European or Eurosceptic perspective and equally feel threatened by a lot of this discussion? How can we progress to allow the DUP and others to feel part of the conversation?

A lot of the discussion is always around green and orange, but there are huge numbers of people who do not define themselves by green or orange. Some of them are people who were born and grew up here, but, increasingly, because of migration across the European Union, we have significant numbers of people on the island whose families were not originally from Ireland. It is important that, in any future discussion, we talk about those minorities and the rich part that they play in all our communities.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much for that, Malcolm. Is there anybody else who would like to come in? Eileen, would you like to come in?

Ms Eileen Flynn (Seanad Éireann): Yes, please, Chair. I am new to the Brexit Committee. This has been such an eye-opener for me. I am probably one of the youngest around the table. I noticed that one important voice that is not represented in either Committee is the voice of young people from both sides of the border. It is something that both Committees can look at. We spoke about the importance of education for all children, but, for me, there is an even bigger issue. I represent Donegal, and Emma, rightly, talked about people having problems with the roads and everything that goes with that. For me, at the core and the heart are the people. Michael talked about what happens 10 years down the line or maybe sooner or later. Where are the young people in this conversation? Both Committees need to look at engaging with youth services on both sides of the border, so that we can hear the voices of young people and people from ethnic minority groups as well, who do not even really understand Brexit. I am a member of the Travelling community, and a lot of people go back and forth between Ireland and England and up to the North and back down South.

It would be interesting for us to keep meeting. For me, this meeting and listening to everybody was so educational, but this is only a starting point. Many more negotiations need to be had, but with the inclusion of young people, so that, hopefully, we can get young people to come to both Committees to say what they want to see and to explain their vision of an all-Ireland unity. It is important to look at doing something like that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I would swear that Niall was in school only a few years ago and is still a young person, so he can have a good debate with you about that.

Eileen, as a former youth worker, I take entirely the point that everything that we do should be cascaded down and the voices and views of young people sought if they are not part of the representative forums.

Another element of our work — it is in our correspondence today — is the development of a youth parliament within the Northern Ireland Assembly. There is a real value if discussions that we are having on important matters such as this could be passed to a youth parliament to have its discussions, with its views and thoughts considered and shared back and forth, to get the strong voice of young people. This is about shaping their future, and it is better to do that with them rather than simply for them. Those are important conversations.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Colin, how is it that you are a lock of years older than me and have much darker hair, though? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): The good looks are natural, Niall. I can do nothing about that.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Fair play to you. *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Less of the 20 years nonsense.

Lisa, that is our Committee finished with questions. Is there anything else that you or your members would like to say or maybe we could just agree that we will meet again?

Ms Chambers: The Seanad Brexit Committee would like to thank you for the really worthwhile engagement. It was quite a robust debate back and forth, with good questions and good participation. I am gathering from around the table that there is a desire to do this again and to keep this link going. I thank you, Chair, and all the members for extending the invitation to us, and we would love to do it again.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much indeed, Lisa, and thank you to all the members who attended. No doubt, these conversations will continue, so we will meet up again to discuss any further movements.