



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Pension for Victims of the Troubles:
WAVE Trauma Centre

25 January 2017

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kennedy (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Phillip Logan
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Mr Paul Gallagher	WAVE Trauma Centre
Mr Stuart Magee	WAVE Trauma Centre
Mr Alan McBride	WAVE Trauma Centre

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): We welcome Paul Gallagher from the WAVE Injured Group; Alan McBride, the coordinator of that group; and Stuart Magee, who is a barrister advising the group. Alan, are you speaking first, or is it Paul? You are all very welcome.

Mr Paul Gallagher (WAVE Trauma Centre): Thank you for having us here today. As a group of people who have experienced harm and suffering at the hands of others, we can truly empathise with those who suffered harm and abuse at the hands of those who were supposed to provide protection, like the group that you have just had in. We commend the Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA) on their quest for truth, justice and redress and hope that, as with us, the Assembly can help to put things right. You have waited long enough, and it would be a travesty if this were to continue.

We would like to thank the Committee for giving us — the WAVE Injured Group — the opportunity to speak today. The WAVE Injured Group represents a group of people who came together many years ago because we had something in common: we were all seriously injured during the troubled past of our country. As a result, we were left with serious life-threatening and life-changing permanent injuries that include the loss of limbs or sight and paraplegia. I have some examples that could be replicated many times over.

Jennifer was 21 in 1972 when she and her sister, who was shopping for a wedding dress, went into a Belfast city centre cafe for a coffee. A no-warning IRA bomb tore both of Jennifer's legs off. Her sister lost both legs and an arm. Peter was shot by a loyalist gang in a case of mistaken identity in 1979, when he was only 26 years old. Because of the configuration of the flat where Peter lived, the ambulance crew could not manoeuvre a stretcher. They brought Peter down in a body bag. His father, Herbert, arrived at the scene and thought that Peter was dead. He had a heart attack and died as Peter was carried to the ambulance. Peter is paralysed and confined to a wheelchair. Margaret,

who is here today, was a 38-year-old mother of four young children in 1982, when an IRA bomb blew the windows of her office into her face and body and she was stone blind in that instant. Glass was also blown into her mouth, and she had to undergo years of painful dental reconstructive work. Nearly 35 years later, fragments of glass still work their way to the surface and break the skin on her arms and legs. Alex was injured when a booby-trap bomb exploded under his taxi in 1991. He, again, suffered horrific physical injuries and lost a leg. He came out of hospital after a year to find that he had lost his business and his home. He still suffers from severe physical complications. In 1994, when I was 21, loyalists took over my home to lie in wait for a neighbour. The neighbour did not turn up, so they emptied a machine gun into me instead. I am also paralysed and, like the others, I live in constant pain. Only last year, I had a kidney removed as a result of ongoing internal injuries and complications.

Most severely injured people were left to struggle with long periods of rehabilitation in hospital and a bleak future and left to get on with their shattered lives. Many of us could not get back to work and, therefore, were unable to earn occupational pensions; others lost their businesses and homes; most spent a lifetime on benefits. The lives of entire families were fundamentally changed. In addition to the trauma of having a loved one horrendously injured, mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, brothers and sisters had to become carers, almost overnight, with no training or preparation and little to no support. The Government insulted us with derisory compensation packages that were based on invalid assumptions about our life expectancy. Nobody expected us to survive for so long. Yet, survive we have, only to be faced with lifelong mental, emotional and physical pain on a daily basis.

Six years ago, we decided that it was time to do something about this ourselves, as no one was thinking about our case. That was made clear to us after the publication of the Eames/Bradley report which, while recognising the need to make reparations payments to bereaved families, failed to offer similar recognition to the injured. WAVE commissioned a research study led by Professor Marie Breen Smyth, which examined the needs of the severely injured. Our group collected a petition of 10,000 signatures, which we brought to the doors of this House in 2012.

The research recommendations were clear that a special pension should be provided to those who were seriously injured as a result of the Troubles. In no way would that compensate us for our years of suffering, but it could go some way to allowing us to cover the costs of old age and the additional expenses incurred as a result of our specific injuries. We all recognise the reality that, as we get older, all of us, including able-bodied people, expect to deteriorate physically, not to be able to do what we used to, to develop aches and pains that we did not have before and to be more prone to illnesses that take longer to recover from. Try to imagine what that is like when you start from where the severely injured have been for so many years. Sadly, four members of the Injured Group have died since we embarked on the campaign. Time is not on our side.

We came to the Assembly and presented our proposal for a pension, which is supported by the main international document on reparations, the 2005 UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparations for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law. It states that the purpose of reparations is to promote justice by redressing the harm caused. That right was reinforced by the UN Special Rapporteur, Pablo De Greiff, who recommended that the issue be urgently resolved. After a multitude of meetings, all parties agreed that our proposal was a reasonable request that could and should be done.

We were tasked with providing additional supporting information, and, with the invaluable help of our colleague, Stuart Magee, who is sitting here, and others, we produced another research paper that provided a realistic model on which the pension could be based. That was followed up by research commissioned by the Victims' Commission and by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. All of the research and groundwork has been completed, the pension has been costed and it is ready to be implemented. Yet, we wait while political parties sit entrenched in the same old grievances and cannot come together in peace and reconciliation to make reparations to the victims who are suffering and provide measures to help alleviate the harm caused. To say that we feel let down is truly an understatement. While we understand the political arguments that issues such as this bring forth, we are not a political football, and we refuse to be treated as such any longer.

This is the Executive Office Committee, which is here to hold the Executive to account, albeit it one that no longer exists. The point should be made that, because of the efforts of the Injured Group, the provision of a pension for the severely injured was part of the Stormont House Agreement, yet we have heard nothing from the Executive about how that has been taken forward. The last reference that we can find to it is in the Stormont House Agreement progress report of June 2015, which stated:

"Initial proposals have been prepared for consideration by the Stormont House Implementation Group on 6 July."

That was 18 months ago.

We came to the Assembly because this is where we hoped the pension could be put in place. Victims and survivors are constantly told that their interests must be at the core of all the efforts to see Northern Ireland deal with the legacy of the past. The severely injured are a physical manifestation of that legacy. It is within the power of the Executive to address the issue if they have the will to do it. That they have not is shameful.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Thank you, Paul.

Mr Alan McBride (WAVE Trauma Centre): That is the only statement we are making. We are prepared to take questions. Stuart has come along to answer any technical stuff on the workings of the pension, because he was the drafter of that paper. We are happy to throw it open.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): I pause because that was a very thoughtful paper that you have spent a lot of time on, and I do not want to ask questions or do anything that takes you somewhere where you are uncomfortable.

Mr Gallagher: As Alan said, we are open to talking about it.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): OK. Do not answer anything you do not want to answer. I will tell you what I have been thinking, Paul. I have been in the Long Gallery at events with you and, more broadly, events about dealing with the past. As politicians, we all stand up and say, "You are very welcome. It is great to see you here". I cannot help thinking that maybe it is not so great. Maybe it would be great if we were welcoming you to an event to celebrate a resolution of something. You guys come here time and time again: are you not fed up with us?

Mr Gallagher: Yes, pretty much so. The only good thing about coming up here is getting to the canteen down below. The food is not bad. Even down there, you can see the way that the Assembly is split. People sit round in their own corner in that canteen. There is no interaction. Every party sits at its own tables. Every time you go in, they are sitting in the same corner. There seems to be no coming together on issues such as this. To me, that is just one example of how the Assembly is failing at the moment. I hope that, in the future, there will be a bit more coming together around these tables instead of conflict across them and a bit of agreement on how we can actually move this forward instead of just coming in the hope that we can do something. For me and the group, that is a problem.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): OK. I suppose that the issue is that, even if, at the time of the incident, somebody got compensation, it did not take into account that people would live longer than expected, were not able to work or contribute to their National Insurance, were not able to save and were not able to have a private pension. That argument has been made. You have done all the research. You have done everything by the book.

Mr Gallagher: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): You have been going round the parties. What is now the sticking point or stumbling block?

Mr Gallagher: Basically, as we all know, it comes down to who is eligible and who is not. It is the old argument about the definition of who is a real victim here: who is deserving and who is undeserving. Those arguments are really the blockage for many things here.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Had you as a group moved — potentially reluctantly, but moved — to a point where you said that there would be a pension for those who were injured through no fault of their own or not by their own hands?

Mr Gallagher: Over the years, the group has talked about these things. The group is pragmatic. We are trying to find workarounds to get the issue dealt with. We have spoken about this over the years. As a group, in the main, we are for a totally inclusive pension. It would be a lot easier to get through if

the only criterion was that you were a victim and were injured. That comes from a sense of the group ourselves. We come from all backgrounds and were injured by different people, but we can empathise with people who were injured and live with the same pain and injuries as us. It comes from a sense of empathy, compassion and mercy. We understand how people feel.

It has got so far that there needs to be some other way. At the moment, the arguments seem to be that if one terrorist — to use the label that is used — gets this pension, then nobody gets it, and, on the other side, they say, "If one of our guys does not get it, nobody gets it". We are stuck between those two arguments. That cannot go on. It just cannot go on any longer. That is the problem. We have been up here since 2012. This is 2017. We have been going round the same circular arguments. What we said was that, as a group, we were all injured through no fault of our own. We are not saying that anybody should be excluded, but we are trying to find a compromise. We have done all the work. We have had all the arguments. If this is the only way to get it through — we do not know. It is not up to us anyway to make the decisions: it is up to the Government up here.

Mr McBride: Whilst those positions are polar opposites of each other, for those constituencies there is actually something noble about them. Take the DUP position that no terrorists will benefit from the pension — certainly nobody who actually planted bombs or was injured by their own hand. I would suggest that it has absolutely got traction out there in the community. It certainly has traction amongst my family; I can see that. From a republican perspective, there is the notion that you do not leave a wounded soldier behind on the battlefield. I can also see how, in that community, there is traction. With both those positions, when you think about it and if you argue the other argument, if you like, you can see that there is something noble about it.

The greatest wrong in all of this is that there is another quite noble position, which is that the overwhelming majority of people who were injured through no fault of their own are stuck in the middle whilst the argument goes on over those other positions. I do not know if they are solvable, given the backgrounds of the two main Executive parties. I do not know if there will ever be a meeting of minds on that. The overwhelming majority of people who are stuck in the middle are not getting anything, and that is wrong. It is over to the politicians in the House to solve that issue. We have presented all sorts. We had Luke Moffett look at maybe removing the 10 individuals for the time being to see what can happen with the overwhelming majority of people, and then we can consider how we could look at issues for those 10 people. We have done everything bar award the pension, and we are stuck.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Alan, we are recording this for posterity. Just read the numbers into the record. You are saying that 10 of —

Mr McBride: There are 10 that we know of at the minute.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Who were injured by their own hand.

Mr McBride: Who were injured by their own hand. Six loyalist and four republican.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Out of a total of?

Mr McBride: Almost 500.

Mr Gallagher: Ballpark.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): So there are 500 people who, you think, would be eligible for the pension because of their severe injuries and, of that number, 10 were injured by their own hand.

Mr McBride: If this was to go through, people might well come out of the woodwork. We think that is unlikely because, to do so, they would have to declare how they got their injuries and, if they do that, they obviously risk being brought before the courts and sent to jail for a maximum of two years. That is roughly what it is. That is what is holding us up.

Paul mentioned this. To be honest, this is not a decision that the group took lightly. We are from a wide range of backgrounds. We understand the hurt and pain of people, including people who were injured by their own hand. One guy we know was 17 years old when he went to throw a petrol bomb or something at the army, and the army opened fire and shot him. He was 17 years old — a kid — and probably a bit green behind the ears. He has been left paralysed. Some of these cases are hard

cases. They are not people who are well-known terrorists or whatever and are running about. They are hard cases but, in the interests of pragmatism, we should just move those cases to the one side for now and move on with the rest. That is not to forget about those people, because they need to be looked at. Luke Moffett's paper certainly brought up the idea of some sort of appeals panel where people could look at the merits and all that and test these things, but it cannot be right that the pension for the greater majority of people is being held up because of 10 hard cases that the two main parties will probably never reach agreement on.

Mr Gallagher: Can I come in while we are talking about the hard cases? Nobody has ever come to those people and asked them, "Would you even go for the pension?". Nobody knows who those people are, so it may become a moot point. They might never come forward, so we are arguing over something that may never happen. It is hard to do. We know about the 490 or 500 people and the 10 because of research done a few years ago by the Victims and Survivors Service, and it said that these people were already getting help from the Government and from the Executive Office, which makes the decisions for the Victims and Survivors Service to look after people who were injured, people who were bereaved and people who are carers for the injured. That is the definition of a victim as it stands. These people are already getting help, and that is how we know about them. It may not even be 10 — who knows? — but we do not know what figures we are working with. These are the nominal 10 that we have been working on for the past few years, and they are already getting services through the Government here. If the pension was all-inclusive and went by that definition, this would have been done years ago. This is the only thing blocking it. We are only talking about £3 million a year, which is a figure that will go down every year as these people die off. I am one of the youngest people to be sitting about with such injuries; most of the people in our group are in their 60s, 70s and 80s. As I said, four members of our group have died, and we do not know about the other 500 who have died in the meantime or are sitting in their home and do not anything about the pension but could be entitled to it.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): It comes down to whether you are going to do it on a principled basis — Alan was talking about the two logical sides — or whether you do it on a pragmatic basis and look for a workaround. We have discussed that, Paul, but Christopher wants to come in, so I will return to that in a second.

Mr Stalford: Thank you very much. I apologise for being outside for your presentation. I can never put myself in the position that you were in, Mr McBride, or in the position that you have found yourself in. It is not for me to try to put myself in your place. I have never experienced anything like what either of you have experienced, so I am trying to be very careful in the words that I use.

The issue about the definition of a victim is not simply a dispute between the two main parties in the Executive. While I was listening to what you were saying, I looked up an article in the 'News Letter' from May 2015, around the time that some of these issues were being raised. The Ulster Unionists' submission to the 'News Letter' said that the 2006 definition was "totally unsatisfactory" and "morally unjustifiable". The TUV called it "perverse". The Northern Ireland Conservatives said that they would "never accept equivalence". Therefore, it is not simply a case of the two parties from what was the Executive staking out their ground on the issue. It is important that that is put on the record, because it is important that this should not be seen as an issue of a logjam in the Executive — two parties at loggerheads and all of that — which, I know, people like to talk about. There is, in the broad unionist community that I represent, the Chairman represents and Jim Allister, who is not here, represents, a deep hostility to the idea that people who were engaging in illegal activity could avail themselves of a pension.

You have given us the numbers, and that is useful for me to know. I did not know the numbers. At its root, getting around this means that we will need to look again at the definition of a victim, and that has been rumbling on long before I was elected to this place. I was elected in May, and that argument has been rumbling on. As I said, there is a hostility to that definition in the broad unionist tradition, which is represented here. I am interested to hear your thoughts. As you know, politics affects everything. If in, say, May 2015 we had indicated a preparedness to allow pensions to be paid to people like that, with the greatest of respect, I think that others in the unionist community — political unionism — who compete with us for votes would have crucified us for it. There is an entire community, not just one political party, that needs to be moved on the issue, if that is what you want to see happen. I hope that I have not offended you. I am trying to be frank and blunt but not offensive. I am just stating where the reality is.

Mr Gallagher: You asked us for our thoughts on it. You are saying that the DUP has tried to get the definition changed over the years. It has brought Bills to Parliament in Westminster, and it has done the same here. Is it the same Bill that it is bringing every year, or is it changing every year? If it is the same Bill that goes forward every year and gets rejected every year, is that not just Einstein's definition of insanity — expecting different results from the same action? To me, a change is not going to go through. I do not think that it will be ever be changed, so do we have to wait for the definition to get changed, or can the Government who sit here think about the broader picture and about the people who have to sit and wait for this in the hope that it happens? I do not think that that is good enough. There needs to be some lateral thinking about how you get round it and bite the bullet and have leadership in the community.

You say that the broader unionist community would be against this, but the fact is that these people already get reparations and services through the VSS and get cash in their hand. The sky has not caved in, and the unionist community is not on the streets protesting against that happening. It happens. Some people might not like it, and it might leave a bad taste in the mouth, but it happens and the sky has not caved in. The pension could just be taken over by the VSS and the same thing could be done.

Mr McBride: I take your point, Chris, and I understand that it is not just the view of one party. I was not trying to get at one political party.

Mr Stalford: I know you were not.

Mr McBride: I know that that idea probably has traction in the entire unionist community. However, there is still a need for people who have been left in the way that these guys have been left. As a bereaved person, I will not benefit from the pension at all; it is just for these guys. There is an onus on the Assembly to make this work in whatever way it can.

The DUP, of all the parties, is probably the only one that has brought something forward in the shape of a private Member's Bill. Unfortunately, the private Member's Bill that it brought forward was not fit for purpose, and we know that, so maybe we are going back to the drawing board on that point. We met Jeffrey Donaldson back in 2013 and 2014, when he was supporting us. He talked about a private Member's Bill and told us that to get it over the line and avoid a petition of concern, it would have to be made, in his words, "SDLP-friendly". What I understood by that was that the 10 people out there who had been maimed as a result of planting bombs and stuff like that would probably be excluded or removed from it at that point in time but everyone else could be looked at, including people who maybe had convictions for paramilitary activity or whatever. Given that there was a conflict that went on, not all paramilitaries were bad people. My father was in the UDA when I was growing up; it was just a sign of the times that we were in. Maybe that would be something that the SDLP could live with, and in that way we could get it through.

I know that meetings between the DUP and the SDLP were scant and, certainly, not a lot of work was put into it. When the Bill came forward, it was not fit for purpose and it was never logged. Now, I have heard from the DUP — Arlene Foster has gone on record saying this — that the definition is an issue. Jeffrey Donaldson assured us that the pension was a stand-alone pension and would not be part of the definition debate. He is still in favour of changing the definition, but he assured us that the pension, as he understood it, was not part of the debate. They were not going to use the pension, because it would be immoral to use the plight of the people in this room for a DUP — or UUP or TUV or whatever — tactic of trying to change the definition. He assured us that it could stand outside that.

Given that we have been up and have met most of the people in this room at various times and are still coming up here — we are on first-name terms with the people in the café, and they know us well — it represents a failure to take this forward, perhaps not just by the Executive Office but by the entire political edifice here. It is not going to break the bank; it is £3 million. I know that there is a principle at stake here, but is there not that old cliché about politics being the art of the possible? Why can we not look at this and do something that gets it over the line so that it will benefit the people who are here in the room?

Mr Stalford: Given the fact that there has been a failure to achieve a change, do you have any ideas about how to get it over the line?

Mr McBride: I would advise members to have a look at Luke Moffett's paper. He has suggested, for instance, having some kind of panel to explore the issue of the 10 people who were maimed by their

own hand and look at them on merit. That would be a side issue, however, and the overwhelming majority — the 470-odd people — could press on and, hopefully, get their pension. That is out there in the public domain; Luke has met Mike and others, and I am sure he has met the DUP on those issues.

From our perspective, we came up with the idea of a pension. Stuart did fantastic work in saying, "Look, this is how this could work". Up to that point, people had been saying to us, "We do not know how this would work". Stuart did some work on it and came forward with recommendations on how it could work; he can speak to that. We did that, and then, when people said that there was a logjam, we consulted again and came back with ideas and suggestions on how to break the logjam. Do you know what I mean? We have done absolutely everything. There is nothing more we can do on the issue. It is really disappointing that we come here month after month, year after year, and hear the same arguments and debates. They tell us to go away and think about this, and we come back with answers and suggestions. We lay it down, and nothing moves. That is disappointing.

Mr Stalford: What about that Moffett paper? Do you think it could be codified into regulations?

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Alan, it might be a good opportunity to hear from Stuart, if he is willing to talk us through his thoughts.

Mr Stuart Magee (WAVE Trauma Centre): As Alan says, from the start of lobbying for this type of proposal, the group has been asked at various stages by all the political parties to come back with feedback about certain issues and their ideas as victims. The group has done that time and again. We were first asked how this would work, what it would look like and what a payment would look like. That was all done. It was overwhelmingly accepted by all the political parties at that stage. Essentially, it was taken on by the Victims' Commission, ratified and costed by RSM McClure Watters back in 2014. That proposal was submitted to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as it was then.

From the outset of the campaign, WAVE has tried to avoid being dragged into what is, essentially, a political question. Unfortunately, the realpolitik of this is that the group had to go there because the political parties were not getting the job done between them. They went back into academia and got Luke Moffett to write papers with various proposals and presented that. There is nothing more that this group can add to the discussion. This is something that the political parties are just going to have to resolve. It is, quite frankly, shameful that 490 people are being held up over potential political ramifications around 10. There are ways to address that issue, and it needs to be looked at in isolation and a solution come up with that is palatable to everyone.

Paul and Alan mentioned panels and things like that. From the very outset of the campaign, going back to 2012, it was envisaged that there would be situations, as there are with all these issues, where for one reason or another eligibility was not clear-cut. Just like any other system whereby a benefit or pension is paid to someone, an applicant who has been refused has to have the opportunity to be heard by some sort of panel. That still holds true whether or not there is a dispute about whether someone was injured in a Troubles-related incident; about the nature of their injury; about the degree to which it causes disablement; and about the vexed political question of whether they are deserving, because of the circumstances in which the injury came about. That is definitely something that you could put in regulations. I am reluctant to draw too many parallels between the two situations, but it was done in relation to the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013. There was some opportunity for hard cases, effectively, to go before a panel that has a quasi-judicial function. It can look at all the evidence around it and hear from the person involved and take representations from them. The state is represented as well at such hearings. There is a legal framework, so that due process is followed in making the decisions and it is not trial by media. Those are things that can be explored and can be done. The problem is that, unless there is the political will to reach a conclusion, it is a pointless discussion, really.

Mr Stalford: Given that there is not going to be political agreement on the definition of a victim, we are probably in a situation where we are looking at how we effectively bypass that issue and make sure that the money is not withheld from people who are not affected by the issue. At this point, I would normally say that we should have a paper tabled on that for the Committee to look at. Going forward, it is something that I would be interested to learn more about. I am not across that appeal mechanism or how it would work. It is something that I would like to hear.

Mr McBride: I would like to say something. Stuart mentioned the notion of trial by media. We know that there has been a lot of that, of late on all sorts of issues. In relation to the pension, this has been

brought up, always by unionists of one ilk or another, to try to show how abhorrent this might be to the public. You have Jim Allister calling it a "Provos' pension" etc. The case of Sean Kelly is mentioned frequently, and I am personally involved in that case. Sean Kelly, as it stands, would not be eligible for the pension, yet I hear unionist after unionist bring it up. Sean Kelly is well known and what he did is well known, so the reason why they bring it up is to try to turn public appetite against this. Trial by media is one thing, and Stephen Nolan and people like that have their own case to answer, but so do people who communicate through and take part in radio discussions, particularly those from a political background.

At the end of the day, it is a hard case. He is not eligible simply because he is not injured enough. That might sound hard, but the pension is for the most serious disabilities. We are talking about people who are in this room. We are not talking about people who lost a finger, were mildly inconvenienced in some other way or have other issues. We are talking about the absolute severe end of disability. I ask that, if you are on the radio talking about this, you look at the people whom it will really affect and do not bring up people who might get a public reaction but are not actually part of the debate.

Mr Stalford: Alan, do you see that, when names like that are invoked, that is politics being played with the issue?

Mr McBride: Absolutely. Totally.

Mr Stalford: Whether it was Peter Robinson or Arlene Foster considering a "Provos' pension", people were beaten around the head with that.

Mr McBride: I understand that. Christopher, maybe I am being naive in all this, but I still believe in devolution, power-sharing and the things that Paul talked about. I would love to go down to that cafe and see our political parties together. I am starting to sound like John Lennon and all that — I do not mean to — but my vision for the future is not of those narrow political camps still in their silos and hell-bent on whatever. I understand the question about how far you walk in front of the people, whether you bring the people with you or walk behind the people. I do not know where people are on this, but I think that it is up to politics to change that dynamic. One of the things that we could do is to have a look at this and not allow Jim Allister to dictate it. This is not a "Provos' pension". Most of the people who will benefit from the pension are not involved in paramilitarism in any shape or form, so even to describe this as a "Provos' pension" is an absolute nonsense.

Mr Stalford: It is insulting to the people who would benefit.

Mr McBride: It is, but it is up to other unionists to tackle him on that rather than to be frightened of him. What is he? He is one man.

Mr Gallagher: I echo what Alan says about the political situation. For me, politics is about forgiveness. The reason why the Assembly sits here is the Good Friday Agreement and the forgiveness that came from that. People did forgive. People were let out onto the streets. That was hard for a lot of people, including a lot of people in this room, but we agreed to that. The likes of me voted for that knowing that people who were involved in my shooting and in bombings would be let out. It ended up being a good thing, I think. The pension would be another step along the road of reconciliation and real forgiveness in this society, only for a few hard cases. An election is coming, and there is talk about grace, forgiveness and things like that after it. I live in hope, anyway; I am an optimist. I have been let down over the years, but I will keep at it.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you for your attendance and your presentations. You have been very honest with us. This is a very challenging conversation on the eve of what is likely to be a challenging, if not brutal, election, and politics plays its part in here. I have not had the experience that you have had, and I want to be absolutely respectful of that. Realistically, little will change as a consequence of today's meeting other than that we have had this useful conversation and you have more than taken the opportunity to confront us on the issue. Politics is the reconciliation of pretty obnoxious opposites: those of us who have been in it for a while have found that to be consistently true, unfortunately.

Jim Allister's name has been mentioned, and Jim Allister is not present to defend his position. It is fair to say that it is not Jim Allister solely who holds that position. That position is supported and maintained not only by Jim Allister or members of the TUV but, by my estimate, by a pretty sizeable

faction of what is called unionist opinion. It is about reconciling that moral position with the pragmatic approach and the help that government needs to give to those who were injured so grievously through no fault of their own. That is where the issue is at its starkest. Do we include those who went out of their own accord and free will and caused hurt and serious damage to other human lives, for whatever reason? Dealing with that moral issue and finding a pragmatic solution is and will remain so challenging. It is better that we are challenged on it; it is better that it is discussed in a proper forum like this. I have no doubt that it will feature as elections fade away and negotiations or discussions begin. I do not see an easy solution. I say that in all charity, not through any wish of wanting it to be unresolved. I genuinely think that it will be a real and significant challenge to find a proper and fair solution that everybody can live with. That is one of the many challenges that we will face as politicians after the election. All that I can say at this point is that it needs to be a continuing conversation. It is not resolved, and it will not be resolved at this stage, but — I have to be honest with you — I have no solution that I can offer you on this day. It will remain a significant challenge, but that is not to say that politicians should not be challenged about it and challenged to do something.

Mr McBride: Obviously, the Committee looks at victims and survivors and not just in relation to the past. What happened to some of the folk involved in the earlier session is absolutely horrendous. I cannot imagine going through what they have gone through. They are to be commended for the way in which they have held themselves in public and all that. When it comes to victims and survivors, you can see where the added problem is. There is probably not a political party in the House that would begrudge those people what they rightly deserve. The very fact that you will, potentially, recall the Executive for a one-off special meeting to give them what they rightfully are entitled to is fantastic, and I am really happy for them. However, you can see the added disadvantage and headache that there is for people who are victims and survivors. We have to negotiate a political minefield.

Our group is frequently asked, "What's the difference between you and a rape victim?" or "What's the difference between you and a road traffic accident victim?". All those cases are horrendous. Most people, no matter who they are or what political side they are on, will say that rape is wrong and that it is wrong that people are killed by drink-drivers and agree that we need to do something about it, but, when it comes to victims and survivors of the Troubles, there is division. That division holds up progress. Unfortunately, not only have those folks been victimised by the fact that they have been left with horrendous injuries but they are victims of the political process that you are all involved in making these decisions work at Stormont. I do not know how we get through it, but, if we do not, it is quite telling, in terms of moving on as a society, that those people will be left behind in that way. That is, in my view, morally reprehensible.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Alan, where we are — everybody knows it — is that we will never have an agreed narrative for what happened. Each individual narrative is underpinned by matters of principle, and you summed it up effectively by saying that one group is saying, "Unless all my people get in that room, we will have no deal" and, on the other side, they say, "If a single one of that group gets in, there is no deal". The challenge is whether you can come up with a workaround that is practical and pragmatic. I believe that there is a workaround, but we are so close to the election that I would not wish to discuss it in this forum because I do not want anybody to think that I am taking party political advantage.

Even if there is a pragmatic workaround, does it chip harder into one set of principles than the other? Do you know what I mean? I guess that it is the difference between appeasement and compromise. Appeasement is where I give you everything, and compromise is where we agree to meet in the middle. To an extent, it is almost a double challenge. Will you do it on the basis that we want to be pragmatic? I think that what you are asking for is pragmatic. People have suffered and been denied life opportunities, and it is about trying to compensate them for that. It is an entirely pragmatic thing, but it comes up against those two great pillars of principles, and, if you are to work around them, you need to have give and take in some balanced way.

Mr McBride: While you are on that, Mike, I want to add one thing. I suppose that what has been part of the mix of late and has been really difficult for the group to hear is, again, probably trial by media. There is a lot going on around, for example, the social investment fund and the money that was supposed to be going to Charter NI and Dee Stitt and all that stuff that was overshadowed by the renewable energy crisis over Christmas. I am not casting aspersions on Charter NI; I do not know them. I know Dee Stitt, but I do not know Charter NI. I know that it does some work with the ex-prisoner community. The fact that money is going to them would suggest that there is money that has been agreed by the Executive that is going to people with questionable pasts to help them to rehabilitate, get involved in community work and move away from what they were involved in in order

to become better citizens. I think that everybody would say that that is good. I know that there has been a hue and cry about it, but I absolutely think that people like that need to be rehabilitated.

I will go back to those 10 people. If anybody needs rehabilitation to be able to get on with their life, surely it is the 10 individuals who were left maimed. I am not trying to be their spokesperson. My sympathies are with these guys here and not with those guys, but the fact is that there are precedents out there for how the Executive have tried to help people, albeit they got it in the neck for what was going on. I realise and understand that people who took part in the conflict need to come away from that and live a better life. If they continue to be involved in criminality, of course, it is a policing matter; there is absolutely no doubt about that. There is a contradiction there. It is almost as though you cannot rehabilitate the most vulnerable and the most hurt, but you can do that with other able-bodied people whom you might be able to create jobs for or get whatever for. There are contradictions in the debate, Mike, and they are worth highlighting.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Thank you. Thanks for doing that.

Mrs Cameron: Thank you very much for your presentation and for being here. It has been very useful, and, as Chris mentioned, the clarity about the numbers has certainly been helpful. I was also not aware that we were talking about such differing figures.

I am also an optimist, despite the mental kickings that you take when you are in this business, which is nothing compared with the suffering of others. I feel completely frustrated with this place and with recent events. I completely understand and sympathise with you. Trial by media has been mentioned a lot of times. I know that we are not going into politics, even though we are politicians, but our party has suffered greatly from trial by media, so I understand the impact that that has. There is no doubt that the perception out there, certainly among the unionist community, is that the figure of 10 people is a lot higher than that. I do not think that people realise how low the controversial numbers are. I do not think that any reasonable person would argue anything but that the majority of those 500 people really deserve the help that you propose.

As I say, I am left completely frustrated with this place. For the last couple of weeks, I have felt like crying or screaming. I imagine that you have probably felt like that for even longer. I see the despair on your faces even when we talk to you. It is like, "Here we go again. I've heard it all before. We're getting nowhere", and you still have to fight on. We all have to fight on, and I believe that we should fight on. We need to see that help that you need, deserve and should be entitled to. I hope that we see that.

I am also acutely aware sitting here today that, representation-wise, we are missing half an Assembly. That also makes me despair because you are talking to one section of the community — we will not mention Alliance. That frustrates me because, quite frankly, there are people who should be here. We are all going into elections, and people should be here doing the job, so I am angry about that as well.

I do not have a solution, but I do not see that we cannot find a solution. I hope that we are not sitting in limbo for too long so that we can get on with the work that we need to do.

Mr McBride: We have the solutions — we have several solutions — and we just need people to take one and run with it.

Mrs Cameron: That is much appreciated, and your presentation and time here today certainly clarified a lot of issues for me and demonstrated the work that you have put in. You have done everything that you have been asked to do, and you have been faced with another problem that is not of your making.

I do not have a question for you, but I thank you for the work that you have done, for being here today and for throwing the challenges up to us. I hope that those of us here who heard you today will be back at some stage and will be able to progress this issue.

Mr Gallagher: Pam, thank you. We thought that this year would be the year that it would be done. With a three-year gap between elections, we thought that there was a good chance of getting it through. We came up every year for the past few years, but there has been election after election after election, and these issues cannot be touched. If they are touched on, it is a photograph in the paper of an IRA man or somebody with a balaclava and a rifle, and people saying, "This guy is going to get a pension". That has been picked on and used by parties across the board. People are afraid

to touch that sort of thing. We were hoping that this time, especially after Fresh Start and a better working relationship, it would be done. Now, there is another election. We hope that, after this election, there can be a bit more leadership to take the community along on these issues. Bring the community with you. Listen to your community, but see the bigger picture too. If you come back after the election, we hope that you can do that.

Mr Dickson: If we cannot listen to you and the way in which you have worked this out, there is nobody else we can listen to in the Province. We politicians and all the political parties have to bear the responsibility of resolving this. Perhaps my party is perceived as being more willing to help to resolve this. There are others who have barriers and difficulties in resolving it. I understand that from the communities and the people whom they represent. However, they should not be scared of standing up. If you as a group of some of the most vulnerable people who have been attacked and injured as a result of what we have come through can rationalise that and accept what has to be done in order for all of us to heal this society and community, it is incumbent on every elected politician to come alongside you.

We have to come alongside you and resolve this. There are ways, perhaps, in which it can be resolved. There are technical issues around the pension and how that is done. Appeals and all those mechanisms could and should be there to provide the appropriate checks and balances. I have a personal belief that some people may not even wish to have that pension because they believe that they are not worthy of it or do not deserve it. However, that is their personal human choice at the end of the day. I do not believe that we can or should stand in the way of people. If you have resolved this for yourselves and can stretch out your hand to those who perhaps are the very people who injured you, I am not going to stand in your way. It is as simple as that.

You made reference to people who are raped. It sickens and saddens me that there are people in this society and around the world who believe that people — women in particular — who are raped have brought it on themselves. That is not true.

We are in the last few hours of this place today. I can do no more, but, as I go round the doors, I will tell people that we need to move Northern Ireland forward and include everyone, and no one should be left behind. Thank you for what you do.

Mr Irwin: I also welcome you along. We as a party would dearly love to get this one sorted. Politically, it would be to our advantage to do that. In no way do we want the 480 or 490 people who are entitled to pensions not to get them. It is important that we get there on this one.

You fully understand the difficulties. I want to move forward. I try to be pragmatic. My party has tried in many ways to be pragmatic in a lot of situations. I am not sure that there is anywhere in western Europe where, if a terrorist walked in with a bomb in his hand to blow someone up and got critically injured, he would get a pension. That is very hard to sell to a lot of people out there, not only those in our community; there are difficulties with that even for some people in the nationalist community. As I said, no one should think that it is not to our advantage to get this sorted — it absolutely is. Parties are being unreasonable in expecting someone injured by their own hand to get a pension. I do not think that anyone could state anywhere in the Western World — we have tourists from all over Europe, France and everywhere — where this would happen. It would leave us with a difficulty. From talking to SDLP voters, I know that some of them would not want that to happen. However, I hope that it can be resolved. It is unfortunate that we are where we are. As you know, because of the form of government that we have, we have to get agreement. That is the difficulty, as we are all aware. It is not the perfect form of government or the one that we would ideally choose, but I assure you that my party will make every effort to resolve this.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Alan and Paul, it was important to me to offer you the opportunity, on this last day of the mandate, to come up and speak if you wished to. I think that we are all glad that you did. Your opening remarks, Paul, were very impactful, as has been what you have said since. Is there anything that you would like to say in conclusion?

Mr Gallagher: I think that we have said it all. There is no more to be said on this for the moment.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): I hope that all of us around this table regret that we have not got it over the line and that those who come back keep it high on the agenda.

Mr McBride: There is a lot of gloom out there at the minute — I get that. I am also canvassing for a political party, which I will not mention. I get that when I am going round the doors, but I still fundamentally believe in this House. I still fundamentally believe in the Assembly. I still fundamentally believe that what happened in 1998 was the right decision and that, if we are to see peace and prosperity for our children and our grandchildren, the only way forward is inclusive and ordinary politics. It is about you guys sitting down and having coffee with people of different persuasions and being able to have a talk and an argument. The further we remove ourselves from the conflict, the more likely that is to be the case. For that to happen, you guys maybe need to think about who you are meeting and the conversations that you are having.

I will tell you a quick story before I go. It is anecdotal, and I will not mention the two political parties. A number of years ago, I was in England at a Christian festival talking about victims issues, believe it or not. I will tell you the names of the parties but not the people. Two parties — the DUP and Sinn Féin — were invited to come and join me. This was way before devolution, and decommissioning and all that stuff was still an issue. All that debate was going on, and I spent most of the day with these two guys at the festival. The two of them, just by talking to each other, resolved all these issues. It was a DUP politician and a Sinn Féin politician. At the time, I wrote a wee column for the 'Sunday Life', and, on the way home at the airport, the DUP guy said to me, "Whatever you do when you get back home, do not write about this because my career will be over. I will be toast". I never wrote about it, but I said to him, "That's great, but do me one favour". I said to him that the conversation that they had had in England needed to become a public conversation. I said that it could not just be a private conversation. My father voted no to the Good Friday Agreement — he has lost his memory now and has dementia — so I know that background. Our politicians need to lead from the front. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard what Ian Paisley Junior said last Thursday. That is the kind of politics we need to get into, Mike.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): You know that I presented endless political shows on television, and there were so many times when they tried to rip each other's throats out verbally in the studio and then went upstairs to the green room, cracked open a beer and said, "How is your big son doing at uni?" or whatever.

We will leave it there. Stuart, thank you very much, and, Alan and Paul, in particular, thank you very much for coming in today.