



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland
and the Republic of Ireland:
Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal
of the United Kingdom from the European Union

20 October 2021

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Sinead McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Pádraig Delargy
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin

Witnesses:

Mr Malcolm Byrne	Seanad Éireann
Ms Lisa Chambers	Seanad Éireann
Ms Róisín Garvey	Seanad Éireann
Mr Niall Ó Donnghaile	Seanad Éireann

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Good afternoon. You are very welcome to our magnificent Parliament Buildings at Stormont. It is absolutely a delight to have people attending in person. I know that the Seanad Special Select Committee has been working with the Committee, and I think that the last session with you was on 10 March. It is great to have our first face-to-face meeting.

Without further ado, I welcome Lisa Chambers, the Chairperson of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the UK from the EU. I also welcome Senators Malcolm Byrne, Niall Ó Donnghaile and Róisín Garvey. Those are all the members of the Special Select Committee who are joining us, unless others join us virtually later. Chair, I hand over to you to start your oral briefing.

Ms Lisa Chambers (Seanad Éireann): Sinead, thank you very much and congratulations on becoming the Chair of the Committee. It is fantastic to be here in person in Stormont with members of the Seanad Special Select Committee on Brexit. It is great to have face-to-face engagement.

As is always the case with Brexit, a lot has happened since we last met. It is a fluid situation. We are keen to hear the views of you, Chair, and the Committee members on the current situation. In particular, we are keen to hear your views on the Northern Ireland protocol, the four position papers that were published by EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, what is contained in those by way of solutions and how we might be of assistance. I think that we are probably all in agreement that we need to find a solution that works for the island. That has always been our view and, as the Chair of the Special Select Committee, along with all the Committee members, I have endeavoured to make

sure that all voices on the island are heard and reflected in our work as a Committee. I am keen that that should happen.

We published our interim report before the summer recess in July. We are now coming towards the end of our work as a Special Select Committee. We are due to publish our final report in December. We will certainly include the engagement that we are having today in that report. As you mentioned, here with us today are Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile on my right, Senator Malcolm Byrne just to the right as well and Senator Róisín Garvey. Those are the members of our team. Our clerk, Christy Haughton, is to my right as well. We are eager to hear the views of your Committee and, perhaps, even have a back-and-forth Q&A. We are keen to have as fluid an engagement as we can, rather than just making grand speeches. It would be good to hear what people think, focusing predominantly on the protocol, and to hear what you think about the work of our Committee and what we can do to reflect your views in our work as we come towards publishing our final report.

I will give my members an opportunity to make a couple of opening remarks, and then I will leave it to you, Chair, to direct the proceedings for the meeting. I will hand over to Niall Ó Donnghaile first.

Mr Niall Ó Donnghaile (Seanad Éireann): Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. Thank you, Chairs, and thanks to colleagues in the Assembly for the invitation and the opportunity to engage. Our Chair has outlined our perspective on that. I have to say that, in the midst of a lot of uncertainty and difficulty around the issue, our Committee has always tried to work collaboratively and as positively as we can. I think that we have been reasonably successful in doing that.

One of the key engagements that we were anxious to have was with the institutions in the North and the Assembly and Executive in particular. This really strengthens that work. Even though we have a relatively short time left to carry out our work, I hope that it will not be the last engagement, because, as we all know, we are dealing with a live, dynamic situation. I have the unique position of being from the North and elected to the Seanad. That gives me a bit of a different perspective when coming to this Committee and, indeed, a meeting like this. When our Chair asks whether there is anything from MLA colleagues, I can probably guess what some of them will ask, because, I imagine, they are quite a lot of the things that I would ask at our Committee meetings.

This is a welcome opportunity. Certainly, like other colleagues, I look forward to today's meeting and further engagement beyond it.

Mr Malcolm Byrne (Seanad Éireann): Thanks to both Chairs for the opportunity to be here. I certainly agree about the opportunity to meet physically. I think that we can all agree that we have got a little tired of all the virtual meetings. Hopefully, this will be an opportunity to share ideas.

One benefit of our Committee is that, in many ways, we try to avoid a lot of what we call the "high politics" stuff that may be above our pay grade and focus on issues that are of direct concern to citizens and businesses, whether that be cross-border trade, data transfers North/South or, indeed, east-west and so forth. We have tried to look at how the implications of the Brexit decision, which we respect, are being felt on the ground, what measures we need to put in place to minimise the impact on individual citizens and businesses and then, in that new relationship on these islands, how we can ensure further cooperation among citizens and businesses and, we believe, among parliamentarians and legislators. The approach that we have taken is very much to look at practical issues. I have certainly found that we have learned a lot as well from listening to people talking about everything from milk to whiskey to bread, things that we may not necessarily think about but for which there are implications. We come here in the hope of learning and maybe sharing experiences.

Ms Róisín Garvey (Seanad Éireann): Dia daoibh. Tá sé iontach bheith anseo inniu. It is lovely to be here today. It is a huge honour. I was reared coming up to the North but never thought that I would make it to Stormont. My father was a Fianna Fáil councillor for many years. He started the twinning of Newry and Mourne District Council and Clare County Council, so I grew up with members of the DUP, UUP and SDLP coming to our house. That was a huge honour for us, because it gives you different perspectives on things and stops you being narrow-minded or judgmental. That has stood to me a lot. It also taught me to be able, as one of the few Green Party Senators, to work with everybody from all parties and not to limit myself in that way either.

It is great to be here today. The Committee that Lisa has led is an important one. Well done on taking up your new role as Chair. It is good to have two female Chairs; it is always nice to see. I look forward to listening to you more than speaking today. I come from west Clare, down in the very south, and I

am not as tuned into the realities of what you are dealing with in relation to borders and businesses and the challenges that you face as the people in this room. Thanks very much for having us.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Thank you very much for being here and for the intensive work that your Committee has been engaged in. One of the issues that most concern all of us here is that we want to protect our businesses and our citizens. We want to ensure that the exit from the EU does not put any barriers in front of anybody on this island and between these islands. The primary purpose of all elected Members is to ensure that we do good work and remove any obstacles in anybody's way. We have been working hard at that through the various Committees that we have access to. In the context of the UK withdrawal, the biggest issue that we all have is that we feel that it is being done to us instead of us being in charge and having a voice at the table. That is one of the key areas that really focus the minds of people in the Assembly.

I have a couple of questions that I would like to explore in relation to your paper. In your interim report, you have recommended

"that the Irish Government must make every effort to ensure the voice of citizens in Northern Ireland is properly represented at EU level."

How do you envisage that that can happen? One of the key issues here is that Northern Ireland people feel that they do not have that voice at the centre.

Ms Chambers: I will take that one, and other members can come in. We are still exploring that. One of the areas that we discussed at great length was what we consider to be the democratic deficit that now exists in Northern Ireland. As it stands, we fully accept and appreciate that you are subject to EU single market and customs rules, but you do not have MEPs sitting at the European table. I accept that there is a democratic deficit, but how do we address that? As it stands, I take the view that the Irish Government are doing their best to advocate for the island and all of its citizens and are trying to give that voice. Obviously, all your members here are doing the same thing. I believe that the route that is being looked at is through the Joint Committee. At the moment, David Frost and Maroš Šefčovič are the two representatives on that, and there are subcommittees that feed into it. As I understand it, that is supposed to provide that voice so, when things come up for discussion, be it current tensions, future challenges or areas where we may have different opinions, they will be worked through in those subcommittees, which then feed into the Joint Committee, and that is supposed to give a voice.

I am of the view that we need to give that arrangement space to work and see how it works, but I am not sure that it will ever fully meet what is being requested. I will be honest and say that I do not see a solution on the table as of yet for providing that democratic input. That is one of the areas where we would very much welcome the views of your members on what, you think, are the solutions in that regard, how you feel about the Joint Committee and the subcommittees that feed into that and whether you feel that that process can be improved in any way.

We had an engagement with Department of Foreign Affairs officials just last week around the dispute resolution mechanisms in the withdrawal agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and how those work. They were quite honest in saying that the subcommittees were up and running but were very new and still feeling their way through how things will bed in. It is still a novel situation that we are dealing with. That is just a little bit of information on where, I think, we are now, but we have a long way to go. I do not know whether any other members want to come in.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: I do not want to be too retrospective on this. We made the case, and there was legal advice at the time, that it was within the gift of the Irish Government to allocate the two European Parliament seats that they gained as a result of Brexit to the North. Unfortunately, that was not to be, but there is a clear argument and rationale, as you and your colleagues will appreciate, for a formal representative structure, whatever form that takes or whatever view this Committee takes on that going forward. We need the Irish Government to be in concert with us in relation to that because, apart from their obligations in the post-Brexit context, they have their constitutional obligations under article 2 of Bunreacht na hÉireann, which states:

"It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland ... to be part of the Irish Nation."

We need to see an element of that being put into effect. To be part of the Irish nation must mean having a voice articulated on our behalf. We need the Irish Government to come to that position in

whatever shape it takes. We also need the European institutions to understand that there is that democratic deficit and there may need to be a look at bespoke arrangements. My preferred option and my party's preferred option at the time would have been the retention of those parliamentary seats, but unfortunately that has been and gone. I agree with our Chair that we do not have a firm position on that, but we would be keen to hear your views and the views of others about how we get to the position where we can articulate the voice of those who (a) want their voice to be articulated at that European level and (b) have the right to have their voice articulated at European level.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): In the context of your work with the report, how do you see the developments that have taken place in the last week with regard to the UK Command Paper and the proposals last week from the European Commission? The movement that has taken place is significant on both sides.

Ms Chambers: As a Committee, we have not discussed that yet. I can give you my view as a member of the Seanad, but it is not the position of our Committee, because we have not taken a position yet on that. I agree that there has been considerable movement. If you look at the four position papers in particular, it is evident that there was a lot of listening and a lot of engagement with businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland, which was a good thing. I feel that Commissioner Šefčovič stepped up to the mark in that regard and did his work well. That may not be the view of everybody, but I think that he tried his best to get the views on the ground as to the blockages, difficulties and practicalities of implementing the protocol day to day, be it on sanitary/phytosanitary (SPS), be it on customs import/export or how it was affecting businesses on the ground, hauliers and those at the ports. The solutions offered seem reasonable, practical and logical. They have flowed from evidence received from engagement with lots of stakeholders. It is a bespoke offering that has been put on the table.

With regard to the UK Command Paper, I respect the position of the United Kingdom Government to give their view. I might not agree with all of it, but they are a sovereign Government and are most entitled to articulate their position. I appreciate that there is still a gap for the two sides to meet, but, as with everything that has been through the Brexit process, I think that, with further engagement and dialogue, we will get there. The people in Northern Ireland have been solutions-focused and practical in looking at ways to make life easier for businesses and citizens. That gap can be closed.

It is a positive that everybody is still around the table and people are still talking. That is always a good thing. I do not think that I can offer anything further that would be helpful or useful at this time. I do not know if any other members want to speak.

Mr Byrne: A lot of these elements come down to trust and pragmatism. It would be useful for us to hear from your constituents and businesses who are impacted. As I outlined, there will always be high politics going on, and there are bigger issues. Our focus has to be how we can make life easier for the businesses that we all represent. We are dealing with some of the challenges for importers and exporters. I come from Wexford in the south-east, and we have benefited from Brexit because Rosslare Europort is based there. It has suddenly experienced a boom because the land bridge is not being used in the UK. However, hauliers and others have identified serious problems, particularly due to the capacity in Rosslare, so we have looked at how we could improve facilities there to make it easier.

It would be useful to hear the experiences of businesses that you are dealing with. Working within the framework that has been agreed between the UK and the EU, what pragmatic or practical solutions can we come up with that will make life easier for those businesses? That would certainly help us in the work that we do.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Thank you for that. I suppose that it is no surprise. Politically, this is a difficult topic. Finding one voice around solution-finding has been extremely difficult, and it has not been made any easier. The business community and the way in which it has stepped up to the mark have been really significant. It has engaged and participated in solution-finding for some of the areas that it was having difficulties with, and it has been very practical. We appreciate that the European Commission, in particular, has been in listening mode. We welcome some of the solutions that have been found for major issues that our business community was experiencing on a day-to-day basis. Those practical movements from the European Commission have been welcome for our business community. I have spoken to many business organisations in the past couple of weeks; in fact, we have been closely engaged with them since 2016. Those movements are very solid and very welcome. As a Committee and an Executive, we need to make sure that we are in solution mode to see if we can play the game that we are playing.

On my way here this morning, I was listening to Radio Foyle. One of the local business leaders was talking about his business and about how he had seen a 16% increase in business in the past couple of months. He is involved in a printing company, and the increased orders were a result of the protocol. He spoke of its value and of how it was bringing him more customers. In your engagement, have you found other businesses experiencing the same uplift as a result of the protocol? Are you in any way trying to engage or measure the impact of the protocol on businesses, either negatively or positively, North and South?

Mr Ó Donnghaile: The drinks industry in particular has been adamant that it has seen a lot of benefit around the protocol, as have others. That has developed as the committee has progressed and as the protocol and its outworkings have come to be, because, obviously, everything goes through its immediate teething problems initially. We have not done a particular engagement on the issue, but we have seen the Central Statistics Office (CSO) statistics around the stark increase in trade North to South and South to North. We do not yet have accurate figures on east-west. Certainly what we see published by arm's-length bodies and government agencies correlates with what we were beginning to hear, I think it is fair to say, from businesses and their representative organisations: that the protocol is there for a reason and they are utilising the benefits, protections and insulations that it provides for businesses.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): We hear a lot about supply chains and the change in supply chains. In your interim report, have you looked at and interrogated the data on what products are looking for other solutions on the island? I have just come from the Economy Committee. We know from our conversations that there is a lot of movement in supply chains. Have you drilled into any of that in your report?

Ms Chambers: Yes. It was not massively in-depth, but we have had some engagement, particularly, for example, on whiskey and dairy. We know that there were issues with the rule of origin, because, obviously, that industry did not really see any border. It was all the same milk; the cows do not recognise what county they are in, never mind whether there are any barriers. There were issues around the rule of origin for the whiskey and dairy industries. We had an engagement yesterday with representatives of Medicines for Ireland, who have spoken about their supply chains and challenges in trade between GB and NI but not so much between North and South. We know that certain importers were looking to other locations to make it easier to get goods. There has been some impact, but it is probably too early to know the full impact.

Next week, we meet the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), which we engaged with for our first interim report. We hope to have a final engagement with it to see if it has further data for us around that issue. ESRI spoke about the protocol, and the evidence to our Committee from the ESRI was that it presented an opportunity for Northern Ireland if it were to be locked down, for want of a better phrase. If there was uncertainty about whether it will remain, people may not invest on foot of it, but it presents an opportunity if there is full support to maintain the protocol. That was the view of the ESRI a number of months ago. We will have the chance to ask further questions of it next week.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): That will be interesting.

Mr Stewart: Thanks very much for coming along today; I really appreciate it. It is so important that we engage North/South and east-west and continue to keep that dialogue going.

In Northern Ireland, as the Chair said, it felt as though Brexit happened without any input or any say from Northern Ireland. It was a UK vote, and the United Kingdom — regrettably, in my opinion as a unionist who campaigned to remain — left the European Union, but that was the democratic vote. The Northern Ireland protocol had no democratic input from anybody in Northern Ireland. We talk about the "democratic deficit". The Chair made the point well, and I am glad that you picked up on it and accepted it. I put it to anybody in any other part of Europe, including the Irish Republic, that, as a true democrat, they could never accept being a rule taker under the jurisdiction of a foreign court without any democratic say. I find that completely unacceptable. I have not found anybody who offers anything more than lip service to that issue. It is important to get that on the record.

People say, "We would like you to feed in and say what the alternative is". My alternative is that I do not want to see the protocol in place. Apparently, I am seen and described by some, maybe as a slur, as too progressive and liberal a unionist. I do not believe that there is any such thing as a liberal unionist; either you are a unionist, or you are not. I believe passionately in the Union and am progressive on some issues, but people across the spectrum of unionism are opposed to the protocol.

According to the most recent poll, nearly 50% of the country have concerns about the protocol. Is that reflected in the Committee's evidence and the report that you are putting forward? You mentioned, in the context of the democratic deficit, that you felt that the Irish Government were speaking for all of Ireland. I have never heard the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste speak for unionism or about the massive concerns among unionist people here about how the protocol is being imposed without any democratic input or say from the people of Northern Ireland. I am interested to hear how, you think, that is reflected.

Ms Chambers: Thank you very much, John. We engaged with your colleague Doug Beattie on the last occasion.

Mr Stewart: He sends his regards.

Ms Chambers: Tell him that I send mine in return.

We very much appreciated his input at the time, because we were eager to engage with unionism and with the community to make sure that it was reflected. I hope that he felt that his views were reflected in our report. We made every effort to put those views in black and white in the report.

To work backwards from the points that you made, I know, having spoken directly to the Taoiseach, that he is keen to make sure that all citizens feel represented. The Irish Government are not elected by the people of Northern Ireland, but they do their best, in my view, to be a voice for the island at the Brexit table, acknowledging that there is no political representation for Northern Ireland at that negotiating table. There is, in an indirect way, through David Frost, but there is no directly elected person. They are conscious of that, and I know that from speaking directly to the Taoiseach about it. The information that we have received is that the concerns about the protocol focus mainly on medicines, sanitary and phytosanitary and customs checks on imports and exports, so a lot of it is to do with trade. We have not received any notable correspondence or had people raising issues about the European Court of Justice (ECJ) having jurisdiction over issues pertaining to the customs union or the single market. I can honestly say that that has never come back, at least not until recently. My understanding is that the issues pertain to the practicalities of the protocol working for businesses and citizens.

It was unfortunate that the institutions here were not up and running when all of that was being negotiated. There is no doubt that that left a deficit. We were conscious of that at the time. At the time, I was Brexit spokesperson for the Opposition in the last term. We were very conscious of that and tried our best to articulate all views. However, try as you might, you are never fully in the shoes of another person.

The Northern Ireland protocol was the result of four years of negotiations. We had exhausted everything by the end. There was no other option to prevent, ultimately, a border on the island of Ireland, which was a priority for the Irish Government, because we were concerned about what that would mean culturally, socially and economically for the island. We were clear that our priority was to avoid a hard border, and the protocol was how we squared the circle. It is a unique and bespoke solution that was put together specifically for Northern Ireland.

The European Court of Justice has jurisdiction only on matters pertaining to the customs union and the single market, because those are matters of European law. It is the court of final arbitration. I am not convinced that we will see many cases being taken to the ECJ on foot of issues. The rules on the single market and the customs union have been in place for nearly 40 years. Everyone knows what they do. The customs union, the single market and the ECJ go hand in glove. They are part of the same package. You cannot really have access to the single market and the customs union without allowing the ECJ to be the court of final arbitration. The ECJ has an arbitration role in dealing only with those issues; it does not have a role in any aspect of life in Northern Ireland other than the customs union and the single market. That is an important point.

We have always said that we will always have an open mind about any other solutions. Likewise, I hope that everybody has an open mind about what Maroš Šefčovič has put on the table in the positions paper, because, from the EU Commission's point of view, it is a considerable move. It will remove a lot of the blockages that came up in the consultation with businesses and communities on what in the protocol bothered them. It should solve a lot of those.

As I said to your colleague Doug, I fully accept that, no matter how much tweaking we do with it, the very fact that it exists will always be an issue for some people. I fully accept and respect that, but I cannot fully offer a solution to that problem, if I can put it that way. I do not know whether any other colleagues want to come in.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: John, I take your point, and I know that that was offered with sincerity. It is important to say that this is not an effort to shut down any conversation, because it is important that we have the conversation, for obvious reasons. Our brief and our remit is to engage, to research and, subsequently, to present. What we have tried to do through those engagements is get those voices around the table. There will be no hesitation or reluctance on our part to ensure that they are ultimately reflected in our report. We will present that to the Irish Government, the European institutions and wherever else it needs to go. There will be no hesitation in doing that.

As Lisa said, we engaged with Doug at the last meeting. It is good to hear other voices at this meeting, and those members will, hopefully, contribute from their perspective. None of us is green in that sense, except Róisín, who is a Green. None of us is green enough to think that we are here representing the Government: we are not. We are here representing our Committee to listen and, ultimately, to reflect. Speaking as a Shinner from the Short Strand, I will have no hesitation in including in the report the voices of unionists, loyalists or anyone else who wants to contribute to the Committee and, ultimately, to our report, because that is what it is about and what it is for.

Mr Stewart: I appreciate that feedback. That is really helpful. My party has put together alternative proposals and, perhaps, Doug passed those on at the last meeting. I do not want to get into that session now, but I am happy to forward those to you, if that has not already been done.

Ms Chambers: Brilliant.

Mr Stewart: Those proposals have been explored and pushed back. We are willing to engage continually because that is vital. I appreciate what you said about the role of the ECJ and how test cases do not end there often. I suppose my counterargument is that we have never seen a situation where a country like Northern Ireland has one foot in the United Kingdom and the other foot in the single market, and those two things can be at loggerheads. Every conflict could end up as a guinea pig or a test case for the ECJ. Then, all of a sudden, the ECJ would be a big issue.

There are a lot of aspects of the protocol that have not been raised, including the fact that those who called for a rigorous implementation at the start have now realised that what Lord Frost and Maroš Šefčovič have offered in the past week is quite appealing, compared with what the protocol looked like at the beginning. The picture is probably evolving as we realise what is coming out of that. If we are going to be under the control of foreign law, that will necessitate, at the very least, democratic input. That is not me accepting the protocol for a second, but that would need to be there.

Finally, you mentioned the impact on business. I am a former small business owner, and my family has a small business. I also chair the all-party group on micro and small business at Stormont. Undoubtedly, there are people in Northern Ireland who can see the benefit of the protocol. Given what they have been through for many years, Northern Ireland's businesses are extremely robust. They have built up a thick skin and a strong backbone to deliver regardless of the circumstances they are presented with. They will always make do and get on with the situation. The fact is that the true impact of the protocol has not been fully felt yet, because we are still in the grace periods. How will they be affected then? Granted, we hope to see massive changes to the protocol based on the ongoing negotiations. However, although some businesses are doing well out of the protocol — fair play to them: hopefully, many more can do well out of it — many still feel the pinch.

I will send you the 'NI Enterprise Barometer', which is produced two or three times a year. Enterprise NI surveys the tens of thousands of businesses that it represents in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a micro and small business economy: 90% of our economy is made up of those businesses. Enterprise NI surveys those businesses every year. I will send you the report that touches on the protocol and the issues that they face. Over half the businesses have experienced, at the very least, administrative and bureaucratic problems. The report will be handy for you. I do not want to go into it in detail today. I will send the report to you because it will be advantageous to the panel. That is all I have today, but I am happy to feed in as the debate goes on.

Ms Chambers: Thank you, John. We are happy to take on board any information that you have and disseminate it to the Committee. I take it on board that we have not fully seen the long-term impact of

the protocol. It is tricky because the Joint Committee deals with the withdrawal agreement and the protocol, and the Partnership Council deals with the trade agreements. The two have slightly different dispute resolution mechanisms. The ECJ is not the final arbiter of the trade agreement, which is the overarching agreement. If we have difficulties with regulation and divergence in 10 or 20 years' time, there will potentially be challenges; there is no doubt about that. From the evidence brought to our Committee, there is huge potential from being the only jurisdiction with access to two huge markets. It will never happen again. It could be brilliant; that is what we have heard. We hope that most things will never get to the point of going to the ECJ. It does not happen often, but I appreciate that it could happen.

Mr Stewart: In certain situations.

Ms Chambers: I get that. I suppose you have to weigh up the pros and cons of access to the single market and the customs union. The trade-off is this: are you willing to compromise in some way and have that oversight to get that access? We take on board the democratic deficit issue. We will be talking about that for some time. We may all be long gone when it is still being talked about.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Thank you. Thank you for your observations, Deputy Chair. A lot more data and evidence are required because we need to drill down into the opportunities that may exist from having access to two major markets. There is a deficit of evidence at the moment, and the UK has a role to play in gathering evidence for our benefit in Northern Ireland.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, Sinead. Míle buíochas libh as teacht inniu. Tá fáilte romhaibh uilig. I do not want to get into a knockabout with John, but you said that you wanted to hear different perspectives.

Mr Stewart: But you are going to anyway *[Laughter.]*

Mr Sheehan: John talks about a democratic deficit with the protocol and nobody here having a say over it. The protocol is part of the withdrawal agreement that was voted on and passed at Westminster. I have no time for the Westminster Parliament — I have even less time for this British Government, who are completely lacking in honesty and integrity — but, from a unionist perspective, that is democracy in action. A Bill went before Parliament and was passed. Unionism wants to be part of that set-up; I do not. The North clearly voted against Brexit. Our voice was heard and then ignored in that context. I just make that point.

Malcolm said that trust needs to be built and so on, and of course we agree with that. You said, Lisa, that this can be resolved and everyone is trying to have the mindset to resolve any problems that exist with the protocol. Most of us accept that there are operational difficulties with the protocol that need to be tweaked, resolved or whatever. However, we hear David Frost talking about the increase in North/South trade as a problem that needs to be resolved. I would like to hear your perspective on that and the recent utterances from other members of the British Government. Leo Varadkar was out the other day, talking about how other countries needed to be sure that, when the British make an agreement, they hold to it. Maybe this is all part of a negotiating process and people are playing hardball and so on, but it certainly does not augur well for any resolution. I am interested to hear the perspective of the members of your Committee on that.

Mr Byrne: All of us want to see an increase in trade North/South, east-west and between GB and NI. The more that can be done in that regard, the more benefit there is for all of us. We had an interesting engagement with Enterprise Ireland and some of the other trade agencies. A new consulate has opened in Manchester, along with new Enterprise Ireland offices, which is testament to the fact that the Government in the Republic want to do far more business directly with the UK in spite of the difficult circumstances. There will be operational difficulties, but, if we look at the big picture, we all want to see every business on this island growing. If, as a result of that, we increase trade North/South and east-west, so much the better.

There will be those practical measures. As Lisa said, there will be operational difficulties that we need to work out. As colleagues know, I have an issue with the data regime, which they suspected I would raise *[Laughter.]* I will not talk about that at length, but it will be useful to hear the Committee's perspective. One of the concerns that I have about the inhibition to trade is the UK Government's decision to look at carrying out a review of the data protection regime that will operate in the UK, because that will have serious implications for business.

John, on your point about issues going to the ECJ, if we see a situation in which the European Commission determines that the data adequacy regime that continues to operate in the UK is not adequate, we will run into problems. We talked about it in relation to healthcare yesterday. Apart from goods being traded, given the amount of trade that now happens in services and the amount of data being shared North/South, east-west and, indeed, between the UK and the wider EU, my view is that data adequacy is one of the most immediate major potential challenges that is not being discussed.

Specifically to answer your question, our Committee's view is that the more trade and business we can encourage on and between these islands, the better.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist. Thanks, Pat.

From our perspective, we need to get better at articulating the benefits of the protocol. We need to be better nuanced and, perhaps, even more assertive in doing that, appreciating that, as we all agree, if tweaks need to be done, they need to be done for everyone's benefit. If people are opposed and have objections to the protocol, they are entitled to make the case. As a member of the Seanad, separately from this Select Committee, I have asked relevant Irish Government Ministers to come in to articulate the benefits that they see of the protocol, whether they have a business, agriculture or European affairs brief. I have asked them to convey that argument so that it is not lost, particularly when quite a large section of society North and South sees and feels the benefits of the protocol. We need to get better at that in Ireland and internationally and get on the same level as others in making the case for defending the protocol and what it does, while appreciating that nothing is perfect and the fact that, as you rightly said, the protocol is in place because of Brexit and we did not want Brexit in the first place here.

Chair, I wish to say briefly to the Deputy Chair — I did not get the chance — that I agree with him in one sense, which is that we are still seeing the outworking of the protocol. We still have some way to go with that, and we should be alert to it. I am keen to see what people base their statistics on for east-west trade. As a member of this Committee and, indeed, of the Seanad, I would love to see that, because it would help to better inform the debate. If we base it on anecdotal evidence — we can only go by anecdotal evidence — I say respectfully, John, that we are not seeing the empty shelves here that they see across the water. We are not seeing the chaos on garage forecourts. That, in itself, is one of the arguments that need to be made for the insulation that the protocol offers us all.

To go back to Pat's point, the Irish Government and the EU need to get a bit more match fit in dealing with the practicalities of what the protocol does. I will also say, by the way, that some of our colleagues from the business community, the trade unions and elsewhere will come to a Committee like ours and to meetings with our parties and will, perhaps, articulate the benefits of the protocol that they feel, but they need to say that outside those rooms as well. We all need to cut through some of the noise out there.

I was particularly aghast at David Frost's remarks about North/South trade being a problem that needed to be solved. That just tells you — I was certainly telling the Irish Government and the Seanad before, during and after Brexit — that the people leading the charge on Brexit were most definitely worth watching.

Ms Chambers: Pat, thank you very much for your remarks. Malcolm and Niall have covered a lot of it. Regarding your comments on North/South trade, I can see why, for some people, it will be a frightening development. I can understand it. I do not agree with it, but I probably understand why the comment was made. If there is increased trade on the island, it should be considered a good thing, I would think, because it benefits everybody on the island. Malcolm has referred to the high-level politics. There have, at times, been throwaway remarks on all sides. I do not doubt that there are frustrations behind the scenes about the actions and conduct of certain members at that negotiating table. However, at the end of the day, if you throw the toys out of the pram, the people who will be hurt are the citizens whom you represent. Sometimes, you have to rise above it, continue and stay at the table, and I am glad that that is happening. Thank you, Pat.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. I want to deal with one other area. It does not relate directly to the protocol, but it is part of the outworking of Brexit. It is the things that, the Irish Government said, they would make available to Irish citizens in the North, including, for example, access to ERASMUS and, more recently, COVID certificates. I have been inundated with complaints and queries from constituents who are trying to access COVID certificates. I tried to access one a couple of weeks ago and could not. I got to the last section, and it would not accept the QR code. On the certificate in the

North, there are two QR codes: one for each vaccination. Funnily enough, I was in the barber's last week and was talking to the barber about it. He told me that you need to take a screenshot of the second QR code and upload that to your application. I did that, and I was successful. The point is that I should not have had to get that information from my barber. That information should be available, and the Dublin Government need to be much more proactive. If they say that Irish citizens in the North can access things like COVID certificates and ERASMUS, they need to be proactive.

For a long time, Niall has been banging on about having a passport office in the North. Those are issues that the Dublin Government really need to take the lead on and inform Irish citizens in the North about them. If there are teething problems or issues with applications, they need to tell us how to resolve them.

Ms Chambers: I might defer to Malcolm to speak about ERASMUS, because he is on that Committee. I do not have any information on COVID certificates.

Ms Garvey: If I may, I will talk about the certificates.

Ms Chambers: Yes.

Mr Byrne: Pat, other than your barber being available for consultancy [*Laughter*] I can engage on that.

It was a very unfortunate decision on the part of the UK Government during Brexit to withdraw from ERASMUS. Even quite a number of those who campaigned on the Leave side viewed that as unfortunate; indeed, Universities UK made it clear that it thought that it was a poor decision. It means that students in the UK will now, in general, not be able to avail themselves of, perhaps, one of the most successful European programmes.

In partnership with the universities in the North, the Government decided that students from the North who wish to take part in ERASMUS will be covered by the Irish Government. We view that as particularly important, and those opportunities for exchange will be available. Students who attend Ulster University (UU), Queen's or, indeed, any of the training colleges who want ERASMUS opportunities will be able to avail themselves of those. Interestingly, there were challenges for the ERASMUS programme, in that —.

Mr Sheehan: Excuse me, Malcolm. If I could stop you there. That is great, and I am happy with that. However, I do not want students coming to me to ask how they can access ERASMUS. Why are the Government not putting advertisements in 'The Irish News' or the 'Belfast Telegraph' or uploading stuff to social media so that students, student unions or whoever else can access it? That is why I said that we should be more proactive.

Mr Byrne: OK. I accept that. A lot of discussions have gone on with universities. There has, obviously, been a difficulty with the numbers in ERASMUS and exchange because of COVID, but, from what we have been told, I anticipate that things should be back to some level of normality for the 2022 academic year.

If there are individual queries from students, we can certainly pass those on. The ERASMUS programme is managed by the Higher Education Authority in the South. There have been some queries, but, although it is still at an early stage, my understanding is that it is operating reasonably well. The intention is that students from the North who want to take part in ERASMUS will be encouraged and facilitated in so doing.

Ms Garvey: I wonder whether that is an issue that we could flag up with Simon Harris. As John said — or is it Pat?

Mr Sheehan: Pat.

Ms Garvey: As Pat said, it should be sorted.

You are so similar in your views on everything. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Ó Donnghaile: They go to the same barber. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Stewart: Pat has more hair than me.

Ms Garvey: It should not be that complicated. Malcolm is right, but either it is available to them or it is not. Maybe you should email one of us on that. We could take it up with Simon Harris directly. He is the Further and Higher Education Minister, so the buck stops with him. On that note, the buck stops with my colleague Ossian Smyth on the COVID cert, so, if you follow up with me directly on that, I can get straight on to him about that issue. In your words, actions are what we need when we want to resolve problems.

You made a point about Westminster. I know that you are Sinn Féin and do not accept it and that the UUP does, but, in some ways, that is not really relevant to the Northern Irish protocol and what we are dealing with here. No matter what your belief is in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland was not really listened to when it came to deciding on Brexit, whether you were Sinn Féin, the UUP or anybody else. We are dealing with this situation irrespective of the older issues. We have to separate them in some ways; otherwise, we will not be able to move forward and find resolution. Every party in Northern Ireland wants what is best for Northern Ireland. Most of the businesses and the ordinary people are not too caught up in the politics of it all; they just want it to be done in such a way that they can all survive and thrive in this lovely part of the country.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Pat makes a really compelling case. Similarly, I know that you, Chair, have raised stuff in the media about the digital cert. Aside from the practicalities of needing a digital cert and that probably becoming even more the case with restrictions in the South, there are people who want the EU cert just because they are entitled to it and they want to avail themselves of that entitlement and service. There should not be any hindrance to them, but there are practical problems with accessing it.

Whether it is that issue or the issue of ERASMUS, our Committee can articulate that. It is all right for the Government to say, "Look, we've ensured this entitlement for you. You'll be able to access ERASMUS. You'll be able to access the EU digital cert", but, if they do not communicate how you go about that and say, "Listen, there are problems here. We're working on it. We're going to get it resolved", a lot of people will be left in the dark. Maybe some of the Committees of the Assembly, whether it is Education, Economy or Health, could engage with their counterparts in the South or the relevant Department to say, "Look, can you even furnish us with some of this information? We're getting it in our constituency offices all of the time". As Pat said, it is really welcome that those entitlements have been preserved and that we can avail ourselves of them, but they are not much use if you cannot get the bloody thing downloaded.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): I have been working on the issue quite a lot, obviously, as I am from a border constituency. It is more than practical; we need our COVID certs if we want to go to a restaurant, pub or whatever in Donegal at the weekend. It is really important. It is a practical thing. I have a step-by-step guide on how to do it on my Facebook page. It is about cropping it and all the rest, but I will not get in to the technical details.

Mr Byrne: From this weekend, Sinead, to get into a nightclub in Donegal, you will need to produce your —

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): I know. I will be there at the weekend *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Sinead, I will need a cert to get my dinner in the Leinster House canteen, so I really need it sorted.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): It is a real practical issue for residents in border regions.

There is another thing about ERASMUS. Yes, students in Northern Ireland can participate in ERASMUS programmes, but the richness of ERASMUS is also in the return visit. It is about students from other countries visiting here. That is a major source of income, and it has an economic impact. That is not provided for in the context of the ERASMUS programme. Although our students may be able to participate in it, the full ERASMUS programme is out of reach for Northern Ireland. That richness, which is of value, is absolutely gone. I regret that so much on behalf of our young people.

I will bring Trevor in, because I realise that he is leaving early.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for that, Chair. It is good to see you folks here again. I will ask you a few things about trade. However, first of all, there is a list of recommendations arising from your report. I think that it is an interim report, dating from July: is that right?

Ms Chambers: That is correct.

Mr Lunn: It is now October. When do you expect to issue your final report?

Ms Chambers: In the first or second week of December.

Mr Lunn: The recommendations are excellent and, in a lot of ways, mirror some of the things that we would recommend up here. As an example, however, recommendation 40, which is about the Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme, appears to be a bit more urgent than is suggested by waiting for a decision in the middle of December.

Ms Chambers: We had a briefing on that very issue yesterday. The Bill is being drafted. The administrative scheme that is in place will be put on a statutory footing and will be permanent. They expect that to happen in Q1 of next year. The current system will remain in place until that is in place, so there will always be coverage to access healthcare. I believe that the scheme here has pretty much the same set-up. There is full cover to maintain cross-border healthcare, and legislation is on the way to make that permanent.

Mr Lunn: Good. I picked that one almost at random. Can you give us more good news about any of the other recommendations that have been brought forward in advance of your final report?

Ms Chambers: There is nothing else yet. We wanted to allow a bit of time for those recommendations to bed in. When they do, most of them will be carried over to the final report. There will be some additions on foot of our engagements over the last number of months. As for how it will work, the Minister will talk about the report in the Chamber in December. Six months after that, the Minister will come back for a follow-up session to give an update to the House on how they are progressing with implementing our recommendations. We expect to have that follow-up in June of next year, when we will see how they are going with implementing all of that. That is the plan.

Mr Lunn: I will return to trade for a moment. I think that we had this discussion one time before. When everything kicked in, following a messy agreement just before Christmas, there is no doubt that businesses had a hard time for a while. That was partly because of misapprehension from across the water about the difficulty of moving stuff across the Irish Sea. As someone said, however, business does what business does. I can only tell you from my contact with people around Lagan Valley, but the impression that I get is that business is optimistic. There are different degrees of optimism, but the terrible fear that they would just not be able to get supplies and all the rest has gone.

I have seen various reports and surveys. They are a bit of a mixed bag, but there are two things that come out of them for me. The first is that they are making do and doing quite well. They are, obviously, doing increased trade with the Republic. I do not think that that is at the expense of trade across the Irish Sea, but we will wait and see. There is also a healthy welcome for Dr Šefčovič's latest proposals. I do not mind what other people think: those proposals are far-reaching, ambitious and constructive. They could be useful for our economy and could put us back towards the situation that was envisaged. As Lisa said, there is enormous potential in the protocol if we can just get it ironed out and put to bed and start to work it properly instead of working against it.

The last thing that I will say is that there is considerable disenchantment, as others referred to, with Lord Frost's comments the other day about North/South trade being a problem. I cannot use the words that I want to use because we are being recorded by Hansard, but those comments are outrageous, absolutely disgraceful. Where is the man coming from? That is leading to disenchantment not just with Lord Frost but with the British Government in general and the way that they are handling this and what, I believe, is the offhand way in which they are treating Northern Ireland. Boris Johnson made his conference speech the other day: he, as the Conservative and Unionist Prime Minister, did not mention Northern Ireland or the protocol. Where are they coming from?

At the moment, our situation is optimistic. Businesses realise that. They are a bit concerned about price increases, but I think that they also realise that those price increases are not necessarily coming because of the protocol; they are coming because of world trade problems with supply chains, the cost

of energy and steel — I could go on. Those things are transient, and they will come round again. I do not see the protocol having a massive effect on our situation.

I am curious to know this. Niall, you said that you were waiting for figures on trade between the UK and Ireland and between Ireland and the UK: do you have an impression of how that trade is going? Is it holding up?

Mr Ó Donnghaile: No, I do not. I am not even implying that there is anything sinister at play there, Trevor. It is just that those figures are cyclical; it is a case of when they are due to come out. They are not necessarily published as regularly as the CSO or ESRI statistics. I would welcome their publication tomorrow, because, as I said, I do not see how they would be reduced as a result of the protocol and of businesses adapting and doing what they do, as you rightly say. Again, I would rather light a candle than curse the dark. Once we see those statistics, that will help to inform the discussions much more reliably. Can you get them for us? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: There was not much of a question in what I said; it was more of a statement. Thank you very much. It is good to see you here.

Ms Chambers: Thanks, Trevor. It is great to hear that view and that there is some positivity and optimism out there. That is welcome.

Mr Lunn: There is plenty of it out there.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): There is a theme here that we need more data, more evidence and more stats. It is incumbent on the UK Government, the Irish Government and the EU to start working collectively. Certainly, we in Northern Ireland need to do an awful lot more of that.

Mrs Dodds: Good afternoon, everyone. You are all welcome. In case anyone thinks that I am wearing some weird rosette and does not understand, it is to support Lucy's law. We are trying to introduce a private Member's Bill that would outlaw third-party selling on of puppies, particularly in light of the 'Spotlight' programme last night. It is really important that we act to ensure that that trade, which takes place North and South and is then carried into the GB market through ports here, is curtailed. It is barbaric. I do not know if anyone else saw the programme last night. I just wanted to explain my rosette.

Mr Lunn: I thought that there was an election coming, Diane. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dodds: Did you think that there was an election coming?

Ms Garvey: I thought that your dog was *[Inaudible]* for jumping or something.

Mrs Dodds: Just in case you thought I had done anything really weird.

Mr Lunn: I thought that you had changed parties as well. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dodds: Anyway, I will get down to today's more serious business.

I have listened carefully to what has been said in the meeting. I want to say a number of things from a unionist perspective. I say them respectfully. I take this as an opportunity for dialogue, and I talk respectfully. We are sitting in the Senate Chamber of the Northern Ireland Assembly. As John said, not one unionist Member of the Assembly supports the protocol. We have not arrived out of the blue from another planet; we are reflective of the society that we represent. If you take nothing else back today, I want you to take back the reality that not one unionist in this House supports the protocol and that we reflect the society that we represent. That is a difficult and, I would say, dangerous place to be in Northern Ireland.

Chair, in your opening remarks — I think in answer to a question; I jotted it down quickly but, I think, accurately — you indicated that the Irish Government are doing their best to advocate for the island. I am a unionist. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom until, as the Belfast Agreement says, its people vote otherwise. Therefore, it is the United Kingdom Government and, whether you like him or not, their negotiator in Brussels, Lord Frost, who will negotiate on behalf of Northern Ireland. I say respectfully that we should be careful in our use of language. If the protocol has done anything in

Northern Ireland, it has isolated and marginalised unionism and many people from the unionist community. I want people to understand that today, and that, specifically, is why I am making myself so clear. I want to engage on some of your recommendations and to talk particularly about data flows, but I want to make that absolutely clear. I get the feeling that many politicians from Dublin and the Republic of Ireland more widely ignore, do not understand or simply want to whitewash those facts.

The protocol is damaging to Northern Ireland. It is damaging to Northern Ireland's democracy. You talked about the democratic deficit. We are in a single market with laws, yet we do not have any say on those laws, and those laws will be arbitrated on by the European Court of Justice. I want Northern Ireland to belong fully and absolutely to the United Kingdom's internal market, but the protocol has created a barrier to trade between GB and NI. I will look at some of the stats around that in a moment. The protocol is damaging to Northern Ireland democratically. It is damaging to Northern Ireland constitutionally. I accept that there are different allegiances in Northern Ireland, but it is wrong that one part of the United Kingdom — Northern Ireland — is not treated the same in respect of goods etc.

Look at the UK Government proposals, the Command Paper of July and the EU proposals. I often wonder whether I read different documents to everybody else in this room; I genuinely do. I speak as someone who has spent many years in the European Parliament. We are going through a deeper analysis of the EU proposals, but, when I look at them, I find that many of them lack substance. The proposals talk about 80% fewer checks, but it is 80% fewer checks in the rigorous implementation of the protocol, not the "protocol lite" that we have at the moment, which still leaves us in a pretty awful position. The proposals talk about some kind of system for goods not at risk of going into the EU single market, but the EU does not tell us what it will do in that regard. I have just jotted this down quickly. The proposals say that medicines destined for the Northern Ireland market can be regulated by the UK, but the UK would need to adhere to the ongoing application of EU legislation and the enhanced surveillance that that would entail. That will not solve the medicine issue for Northern Ireland. On SPS, the proposals promise us fewer checks, but the EU does not really tell us how it will do that. All that is imposed, without the consent of unionism, on the internal market of the United Kingdom. I do not know any other part of the world where that would happen. We are damaging Northern Ireland. It is damaging to our democracy. The EU proposals lack substance and specific detail.

I also want to talk a bit about trade. There has been much talk about Lord Frost's statement on North/South trade. I genuinely do not have it with me here, Trevor, so I cannot interpret it, and I do not know exactly what it says. However, whether there is an increase in North/South trade or not — any increase in trade, the building of businesses, greater prosperity for families and more jobs in Northern Ireland is always to be welcomed — the vast and overwhelming majority of our trade is with the GB market. It is where we buy most of our goods, and it is where we sell most of our goods; in fact, we still sell more in GB than we do in every other part of the world put together. If we add all the other trade stats and compare those with GB, we see that that is still where we do most of our trade. We are putting barriers between us and our biggest market.

There are huge problems with the protocol. There are huge problems for trade and for the free flow of that trade from one part of the United Kingdom to the other. To give you a practical example, I was at a haulage firm in my constituency a couple of Fridays ago. It is a substantial operation that does a lot of trade across the world, across Europe, between GB and NI and North/South. It has almost given up coming through Dublin port because of the long tailbacks and delays that it experiences there and the checks that are imposed on it there. That firm told me that, since January, it has added four people just to deal with customs checks. Those are not customs checks with the rest of the world or the rest of Europe; those are customs checks within the UK's internal market between GB and NI that were imposed by the protocol.

The firm further told me that the problem does not always lie in Northern Ireland; it sometimes lies in GB. We are a relatively small market. Firms have said that they simply will not supply to Northern Ireland because they cannot be bothered with the additional paperwork, cost and hassle that it gives them or that they will do it only at a specific time of the day because they need additional staff to do it. Therefore, their lorry drivers end up waiting around much longer. To cut a long story short, the additional cost to that business is between 18% and 20%. A business cannot absorb that. That will be passed on to the end destination: the consumer. That is the result of the protocol. This is not about worldwide trade for them. This is not about trade with other parts of this island or other parts of Europe. This is about trade between GB and NI. If I leave you with nothing else, I leave you with that story. That is not me; that is a haulage firm in my constituency.

Yes, there are huge problems in relation to GB/NI trade. We cannot keep going on like this. Lots of things have been thrown around here today. We have had talk about fuel shortages in the south of England and the fact that there is none here in Northern Ireland. There is no fuel shortage in the south of England. There was a distribution shortage and issue in the south of England but no fuel shortage. There was no fuel shortage here because the distribution pattern is different. We are supplied from Scotland. I am not sure that the protocol or Brexit or anything else had anything to do with it.

I enjoyed the tic-tac between the two Sinn Féin members. I am surprised at their absolute attachment to ERASMUS. When I was in the European Parliament, ERASMUS reached only 9% of European youth, and it rarely reached any of the youth that many of us deal with on a day-to-day basis. I am therefore surprised. I am a supporter of ERASMUS, but we should recognise its shortcomings and not be too dewy-eyed about what it does or does not do. The UK has launched its replacement programme, and it is worldwide. It will enable students in the United Kingdom to engage in America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. All parts of the world can take part in that programme. Therefore, we are not losing that wider vision of the world.

Data adequacy is a huge issue, but it is largely a services issue that is outside the scope of the protocol. Have you considered that within the bounds of your report? One of your recommendations is the mutual recognition of qualifications. I could be wrong, but my understanding is that the problem is an EU problem, because the EU will not agree to a much wider form of mutual recognition of qualifications and has insisted on this being done on a piecemeal basis. I would like comments on that, because I think that the common travel area and the protections that it provides for us will protect and allow us to continue on a reasonable basis. I am interested in the data flows. I have done some work with Chartered Accountants Ireland, for example, which operates North and South. They are the types of service business that will have a problem, should there be differences.

Ms Chambers: Diane, thank you very much. We very much appreciate the engagement. You have covered a lot of ground.

Mrs Dodds: I apologise. It was a bit more of a speech than I had intended it to be.

Ms Chambers: It was very structured. I have taken notes, so, hopefully, I will respond adequately to the points that you have raised. I will defer to Malcolm on data adequacy, because that is one of his topics. I will perhaps defer on ERASMUS as well, albeit I know that there have been developments. Interestingly, a new programme — Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve (ALMA) — is being developed at EU level. Not only will ALMA allow people to go to college, but it will enable young people to work abroad in trades and other types of work. It will try to open it up to more young people, because, as you said, ERASMUS did not cater for everybody.

Mrs Dodds: I will interrupt on this, because ERASMUS was something that I did a lot about in the European Parliament. It always amuses me that those who go on about equality etc are so attached to ERASMUS, which reaches only 9% of the European youth that it is supposed to reach. There are huge problems with ERASMUS; there always have been. For those who are on it, it is brilliant. It is very good, but it did not reach or open up the world to most young people.

Ms Chambers: It is an excellent programme, but, to try to expand the opportunities for young people, the fact that there will be a new programme to deal with that, I suppose, is evidence that there was a gap there. The Turing programme that has been launched by the United Kingdom is very good as well. They are all good opportunities for young people. I will go back to Malcolm on the data issue.

I will go through some of the points that you raised, Diane. We will certainly reflect in our report the point that you made strongly that there is no unionist support in this House for the Northern Ireland protocol. You made that point clearly. We also take on board the point that you made that, from your perspective, Lord Frost is the representative designated to speak for the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland; he is that, obviously. We will certainly reflect those views; there is no difficulty about that.

You said that you believe that the Northern Ireland protocol damages Northern Ireland, and again we will take that on board. I will say that there is probably an alternative view that Brexit damages Northern Ireland and that the protocol flows from Brexit. We take on board the fact that there are different views on all that.

Mrs Dodds: Lisa, may I come in there? I always prefer to have a conversation with people. There was nothing inevitable about the protocol. The protocol was a choice promoted by the Irish Government and signed up to by Boris Johnson's Government, but it does not have support here. The really big issue here is the Belfast Agreement. Some people in this room made a great play of protecting the Belfast Agreement in all its parts. Now, it seems, we protect only the bits that we want to protect. The Belfast Agreement set up a delicate balance of relationships North/South and east-west. I suggest to you that the protocol damages the Belfast Agreement. It is not the inevitable consequence of Brexit. There was a choice. It was promoted by the Irish Government and demanded by them. I was in Brussels on the day that Leo Varadkar waved pictures of customs posts at his colleagues on the European Council. I felt that that was absolutely reprehensible, because nobody was threatening violence, or at least nobody whom I know was doing that. The protocol was demanded by the Irish Government. That is why unionism sees it as damaging those relationships North and South.

Ms Chambers: I take on board the points that you have made. I offer an alternative view that — I said this earlier — the Irish Government had a clear position: their top priority was to ensure that there would be no hard border on the island of Ireland. It was to avoid a border on the island, because of Brexit, the United Kingdom coming out of the single market and customs union and the unique geography of the situation. The fact is that you have two jurisdictions on one island side by side, and now you have the situation where one is in the single market and the customs union and the other is not. Checks have to go somewhere. There are alternatives. You are right: there was a choice. However, the choice on the table was unpalatable. We were never going to have a choice or solution that would please everybody. We all accepted that.

You rightly pointed out that the United Kingdom Government negotiated and signed off on it, but a Government rarely have full support for a policy. I do not say that they never have, but it is unusual. I suggest that there is some support — many would say, "significant support" — for the protocol in Northern Ireland. I fully accept that it is not full support. However, without the protocol, the choice is that you put checks on the island or around Ireland, between Ireland and mainland Europe. Those are the options. There was no perfect solution, but the reason why the protocol came out on top was that it was the option that ensured the top priority of the Irish Government, which was no hard border on the island of Ireland. There was talk of having, alternatively, checks between mainland Europe and Ireland, but that would have damaged our position in the single market and the customs union. I am sure that you can appreciate why, in Ireland, the position of the Irish Government and the united position of the Oireachtas was that that was not an option.

Those three options were on the table, and the one that was selected or negotiated and signed by all sides was the protocol. In my view, there was no option on the table that everybody agreed with, and nobody has offered a solution as to how you dispense with all checks, because you would then be ignoring the loud voice of the European Commission, which has said that some checks are required somewhere. That was the circle that we had to square, and that is why there has been such a strong focus from the Irish Government and our Committee on finding a way of making this as streamlined, straightforward and minimally impactful as it can be.

As I said to John, I fully accept, as do most members of the Committee, that the fact that the protocol exists in any form will be a problem for a significant community here. We get that.

Mrs Dodds: You accept, as I think we have to, that something in Northern Ireland not having the support of the unionist community — as I said, there is no unionist representative in the House who supports the protocol — must mean that this is an untenable situation. You have acknowledged that. I sometimes think that it is given to us as, "Take it or leave it; that is what it is", but that is not democracy. That is not, in a situation such as Northern Ireland, helpful.

Ms Chambers: In my view, the protocol was not just given to Northern Ireland to take it or leave it. That was certainly not the position of the Irish Government. As you said, the UK Government negotiated on behalf of the UK. They negotiated the protocol. They signed the protocol. Those are the facts of the situation that we have had to deal with. I suggest that, if we had the unimaginable situation of a border on this island, a significant community in Northern Ireland would not be happy with that situation.

You can see the difficulty, but, as I said, our focus in the Committee, having been on a listening exercise to hear the views of businesses and citizens North and South on the practical implications of the protocol, is to find solutions as to how we could ease those. We have tried to make that our focus.

We are probably beyond the point of looking back on Brexit and the negotiations that have already happened. All we can do now is to look at the present and ahead. The views that you have expressed would not be the views of a lot of stakeholders that we have engaged with through our Committee, but, as I have always said, we certainly respect that there are strong opposing views to the position that the protocol presents, and we will reflect that in our report.

Mr Byrne: Diane, I might start by mentioning that haulier in your constituency. If they find Dublin port to be too much of a difficulty —

Mr Ó Donnghaile: I knew you were going to say that.

Mr Byrne: — they are most welcome to come to Rosslare. *[Laughter.]* There is lots of capacity in my constituency, so I would be happy to introduce them.

I agree with you about ERASMUS. It is far from perfect. The Turing programme, particularly if we look at cooperation between Ireland and the UK as it starts, could be advantageous. I hope that the UK Government would look at taking part in the DiscoverEU programme about Interrail. There are still real opportunities for young people here in a lot of those programmes, and they should have those possibilities. We did not touch on it, but the area of Horizon and access for universities in the North to research funding is a broader issue.

I agree on the data flow issue, which is outside the protocol, as an area of cooperation. Colleagues will worry that I have now found somebody with a similar concern to me on that. *[Laughter.]* It has serious practical implications for businesses on these islands. For example, a small business that operates in Monaghan but has its payroll done in Armagh will have significant problems if there is a change to the data adequacy regime. When our Data Protection Commissioner came before the Committee, their office reckoned that divergence could cost businesses in the South up to €1 billion in extra administration and paperwork. We may not get into a huge debate on that, but it may be a specific area that we could look at cooperating on.

Diane, may I ask one question? I got your point about the protocol.

Mrs Dodds: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Byrne: Yes. I am sorry. You said that politicians in the South do not understand unionism's perspective on the protocol. We hold a different view. How do you suggest that we engage or learn more to understand some of those concerns? Obviously, you will appreciate that we will come from a different position, but how will we engage more broadly with unionism on the issues?

Mrs Dodds: The position of unionism has been well articulated over the last number of months. Anybody who is watching unionism with a view to listening to unionism — "listening" is the important word — will be in no doubt that the protocol is not supported by vast swathes of the unionist community. That is stark in the House. On Monday, the House divided on predictable lines on a debate about the protocol.

In Northern Ireland, there is a delicate balance. The Belfast Agreement asked for consent from unionism as well as nationalism on controversial issues. However, with the protocol, suddenly, Europe, our Government in London and Dublin said, "No. A majority vote will decide all that". There is a lack of listening, and, if you will forgive the colloquialism, it is almost like we have to suck it and see. That is just the way it is, and that cannot be right. It should be about listening with open ears, hearts and minds. I will hold a different view. I hope that I have expressed my view respectfully and forcefully. No one who knows me will expect anything else. However, I want people to acknowledge, listen, understand and act. We have not had a lot of that. There has been a bit of an issue.

I know that I am keeping the rest of you back, and I will not do that any longer. There is a crunch decision coming for the European Union, the Commission and the Irish Government. Are they using Northern Ireland to punish the UK for leaving, or are they going to step up and preserve the peace and allow Northern Ireland to move forward? If they are, we are coming to a crunch for those decisions because Northern Ireland cannot continue where it is.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Thanks, Diane. First, my colleague Senator Lynn Boylan is working on similar legislation on dogs. Maybe the Assembly and the Seanad could collaborate on that issue, given the cross-border and cross-island nature of that abuse. I agree with you that it is horrific.

You know where I am coming from on the issue. You have heard what I have said thus far. You know my party's position well. With regard to the views that you have articulated here, as I said to John, we will reflect that in our report — absolutely. We will reflect it verbatim if that is what you want. However, equally, we will reflect that a majority in the House supports the protocol too. It was really interesting to hear that understanding of democracy. You posed us the question of whether it is democratic if a majority of unionists do not agree with the protocol, yet a majority of the House agrees with it.

Mrs Dodds: Are you saying that we should go back to majority rule?

Mr Ó Donnghaile: No, I am saying that —.

Mrs Dodds: That is not in the Belfast Agreement.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: I am saying that the institutions here are operating the institutions in the Belfast Agreement —

Mrs Dodds: Well, they are supposed to be operating the Belfast Agreement.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: — and, if there are ways in which the unionist parties think that they can utilise the mechanisms of the institutions, that is open and available to them.

I am glad that Trevor said that the meeting was being reported by Hansard, because I am fairly sure that I did not mention fuel shortages. I think that I spoke about chaos on garage forecourts. We know that there was a shortage of haulage drivers. I also referred to bare supermarket shelves, which you did not mention in your contribution. That is fair enough. I agree with you on the mutual recognition of qualifications. I have raised that issue in the Seanad through questions and in debates. If the issue there is with the EU side, we will make the argument to that side as forcefully and comprehensively as we would to the British side that it needs to be resolved. However, again, the very fact that we are faced with that problem flows as a direct result of Brexit. That is why we are faced with it.

You also mentioned that the Irish Government are not listening to or hearing the concerns of unionists and loyalists. You are far better equipped than me to articulate that view. However, again, I respectfully suggest that the forum and platform at which to articulate those views, make your case and ensure that it is heard is in structures like the North/South Ministerial Council. Get into the room with them, look them in the eye and do the politics there. I offer that as a suggestion. We will certainly convey what we can in our report, but, as we are adhering to the Good Friday Agreement and its institutions, I would have thought that that was the ideal place to articulate those fears and concerns.

Ms Garvey: Thanks, Baroness, for your lengthy contribution. I just want to clarify something. It may be because I am green or naive, but it felt as though you were almost criticising the Southern Government for our dealings on the Northern protocol. Maybe I picked that up wrongly. What is confusing for me is that, as a DUP baroness, you are part of the British Establishment and the Westminster Government. Therefore, if there is an issue with the protocol, would it not fit you best to bring it back to the people whom you are loyal to in London, as opposed to putting it to us, an Oireachtas Brexit Committee in just one House of the Irish Government? It has to be said that we are in this situation because the Government to whom you are loyal voted to leave Europe. I just wanted to clarify that for the record.

Mrs Dodds: I am really delighted that you have elevated me to the House of Lords *[Laughter.]*

A Member: There is time yet, Diane.

Mrs Dodds: I certainly have not been elevated and am not a baroness. That is probably worth putting on the record as well.

The other element of that is that we are in constant dialogue with our national Government. I thought that the purpose of today's meeting was to understand, discuss and hear the voices of others. I hope that I have done that.

Ms Garvey: I knew coming here that the DUP was against the protocol, but you have not really expanded on that. You have an opportunity to submit further information so that we can put it in our report. That would be useful. When we came here today, we already knew that you were against the

protocol. It might be more useful if you could expand on that in some way and contribute to our report or, as Niall said, bring it to the Northern Irish general —.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: The NSMC — the North/South Ministerial Council.

Ms Garvey: Thank you.

Mrs Dodds: Of course, you know our position on that. Since the institutions of the Belfast Agreement are being trashed on an east-west basis, we are not prepared to engage in those institutions on a North/South basis. That is where it is. Those are difficult —

Ms Garvey: OK. Will you engage with our Brexit Committee report?

Mrs Dodds: I am here to do exactly that, and Emma is about to —

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Yes, she is about to explode [*Laughter.*] I ask Emma Sheerin to make her points.

Ms Sheerin: Sinead, thanks a million for letting me in. I have another meeting at 4.00 pm, so I will have to drop off the line then. I want to ask about the rights implications of Brexit.

We have just listened to a rewriting of history, and I cannot go past without commenting on the bizarre position of the DUP and Diane's lengthy commentary. We have to deal with reality. Yes, the position for a majority of government officials from the Twenty-six Counties and the EU member states and our party position was that we needed to be protected from Brexit, but the majority of the people in the North did not want Brexit to be imposed on us by a UK-wide vote.

There are problems and hiccups with the implementation of the protocol, and we have called for those to be ironed out. However, the reality is that the alternative to the protocol would be the reimposition of a hard border on the island of Ireland. While there may be problems with trade between us and the UK, if we had a hard border on the island of Ireland, we would not just impact on trade or journeys that involve a trip by air or over the sea — there is a sea between us and the UK — but impact on journeys that take place every day, with people going to school or work two minutes up and down the road. As Carál Ní Chuilín would say, you are comparing apples and spuds. I had to make that comment first.

I want to ask about the frontier worker scheme. Again, that relates to the border. We heard that that scheme would be implemented for people who live in the Twenty-six Counties but work in the North. Have any of the representatives from the Seanad Committee had any feedback from constituents about that? Obviously, we have not seen the full implications of a lot of those things. We have been in a pandemic, and people have been working from home and not travelling as much as they would have in an ordinary year.

A couple of weeks ago, Dominic Raab and the Tory Government told us that they are rethinking the Human Rights Act. We had the comments about misogyny and the obvious lack of understanding about what that word even means. There are fears and worries for people who identify as Irish — Irish passport holders in the North — about their rights and what we will see following Brexit and the loss of European protections.

Ms Chambers: Thanks very much, Emma, and thanks for bearing with us and coming in to say some words. To be fair, on the last occasion when we engaged with the Committee, you also bought up citizens' rights. I know that that has been a common theme in your contributions. We were keen to reflect that on the previous occasion, and there will be a considerable section on that in our final report. I do not know the views of other members, but I think that that is one of the areas that probably did not get enough attention at the outset because a lot of the focus was on trade. As things settle somewhat, we start to see some of the deficiencies there. We need to do a lot of work in that space, if I can make that point, and not all the solutions have yet been articulated or found. I do not know if other members have a view on that, but, unfortunately, it was not at the top of the priority list initially. However, it is a key area of concern for all of us.

You made the interesting point that we probably have not seen the full impact because of the pandemic. That is true, and we have discussed that. It is hard to get a true picture when you are in the middle of a pandemic. We are living through extraordinary times between Brexit and the pandemic,

and it will probably take us a little time to get the full information. We may have that when we publish our final report in December and get the opportunity to follow up on our recommendations and see where things are six months after that.

When we started the Brexit Committee over a year ago, we did not envisage that so much would still be happening with Brexit or that it would still be in such a state of flux. I do not doubt that we will still be dealing with a lot of the issues even in six or eight months' time. However, I hope that we will have made some progress by then.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Emma, you know the issues too, and I am sure that you pick those up from constituents. Again, the Committee can look at that. You will appreciate that there is a huge range of concerns from citizens' rights through to trade, data, agriculture and medicines. We all know about and understand those. The Chair is right: we could have done better in the earlier stages on citizens' rights, and we acknowledge that. Across the board, in the institutions and everything else, we need to keep a watching brief on that, because — you are right — it will become more apparent as we emerge from the pandemic. Entitlements that were afforded to us have been lost as a result of Brexit. I made the point that our Committee and other Committees of the Oireachtas need to understand the domestic responsibilities — for want of a better term — that the Government have, particularly in giving effect to article 2 of the constitution. What does it mean to give someone the birthright and entitlement to be part of the Irish nation? I would like to see the sentiment of that article lived a wee bit more in practical reality.

The other big democratic option available to us all, of which we as democrats need to be respectful, is a democratic pathway back to the European Union, and that is provided for in the Good Friday Agreement as well. The Chair will probably say that the Committee has not come to a position on that, and we have not. It is important to say that. We all have our individual views on it. Certainly, we need to get to the point at which we are alert not just to the issue of what rights have been lost but to how we will rectify and address the issue of lost rights to ensure that people are not disenfranchised when they do not need to be.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Do you have any other questions, Emma?

Ms Sheerin: No. Go raibh maith agat, Chair. That is brilliant. Obviously, I echo a lot of those comments. Constituents talk to me about that.

Pat remarked on COVID passports. That was brought into focus during the summer when travel was massively impacted by the COVID situation and there were different requirements on people. You see how strongly people feel about having an Irish passport and about the fact that they want to have the same arrangement as their neighbours in the Twenty-six Counties when travelling abroad, and that has been the case even more so post Brexit. They do not want to be treated as part of a different system. You get that anecdotally in conversation all the time. When people go abroad, they are asked where they are from, and they will say, "Ireland". Our wee country is known across the globe as the land of saints and scholars, good craic and Guinness. You will always get that perception, and people want to feel part of it. The protections that we need to see from the Government of the Twenty-six Counties, which Niall commented on, are key to that, because those are about people's identity and that feeling of inclusion on which they so rely.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: I promise that we did not tic-tac on that. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Senator Garvey, did you want to come in?

Ms Garvey: As a point of information on the COVID certificates, over 10,000 have already been distributed to Irish citizens in the North. The Minister sent me an email that I can share with members here who have been contacted by their constituents in which he says to get on to him directly about any issues that people experience. Over 10,000 have been successfully distributed to date.

Ms Chambers: Brilliant. Thanks, Róisín.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Our final member is Pádraig Delargy.

Mr Delargy: Not to labour the point, but it would be remiss of me not to mention the fact that I engaged in two ERASMUS schemes: one at university and one during my time at school. It has given

my generation, in particular, the opportunity to really develop a pro-European identity. It has been vital to my generation. The outworkings of that have been seen in your constituency as well, Diane. Young people across the North are overwhelmingly against Brexit, given that they voted overwhelmingly to remain in Europe. Schemes such as ERASMUS very much contribute to that inclusive, progressive and forward-looking agenda.

My second question is probably for you, Lisa. What communication has there been between Ministers north and south of the border on post-Brexit working? I think of Minister Swann and Minister Donnelly and what level of communication there has been on cross-border health directive replacement schemes.

Ms Chambers: Thanks very much, Pádraig, for your comments. I agree with you about the positive impact of ERASMUS. You are right about getting that positive relationship between young people and the European Union; we have had the same experience.

On ministerial engagement, I am not in a position to give you the exact number of engagements. We are consistently told that there is constant engagement and dialogue. Minister Donnelly has engaged with Minister Swann on health issues, including cross-border healthcare. The Committee received an update yesterday from departmental officials that the administrative scheme, which was the sticking plaster for this calendar year, will remain in place until Q1 of next year. The heads of Bill are being drafted, and it will be put on a statutory footing at the earliest opportunity next year, so there will not be a gap in cover and cross-border healthcare will be maintained. There is a similar scheme in Northern Ireland, so that issue is being worked on. All that I can say to you is that we are told that there is consistent engagement between Ministers, but I cannot speak for individual Ministers. That is as much information as I can give the Committee. Thank you for your comments, Pádraig.

Mr Delargy: No problem. Just on that, I did not mention that ERASMUS is run through schools as well. I appreciate that, at the moment, your focus is on making sure that university students have access to the programme, but I would like your Committee also to look at whether it could be extended to ensure that schools have access to it.

Mr Byrne: That is the case. We have to look at broadening ERASMUS. Lisa mentioned that there used to be the Leonardo da Vinci programme, which focused very much on training, and the more opportunities there are for education and training exchange, the better. There used to be a youth exchange programme that operated on these islands called Causeway, which would be particularly useful.

I welcome the fact that you say, regarding ERASMUS, that it is important to be part of a progressive pro-European agenda. My party consistently held that view over a long period and never felt that any part of the island should take its place outside the European Union. Speaking personally, I hope that at some stage in the future the UK will consider rejoining. Our Committee is clear that we respect the democratic decision of the UK people in the referendum. Obviously, when the UK Government enter into an international agreement, we respect their negotiating stance. However, equally, we expect that, when that agreement is entered into freely, they will honour all its parts.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: It is worth pointing out that members of our Committee take wee digs at each other too, just in case anybody did not pick up on that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Byrne: Yes.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: In terms of Pádraig's point —

Ms Garvey: Sorry, were you going to let me in there?

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): I will let you in afterwards.

Ms Garvey: I did not see him indicating before me, sorry.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Sorry, do you want in, Róisín?

Ms Garvey: No, go for it. You have started now, so knock yourself out.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: I have started so I might as well finish.

It was announced last week by the Commission that it would release 60,000 free travel passes for 18-to-21-year-olds throughout the EU. The South will have got an allocation based, I think, on population size, and people will be able to apply for those. I have been trying to get clarity on whether young people here will be able to apply for those travel passes, because, as I said —

Mr Byrne: At the moment, it is for EU citizens who are aged from 18 to 20.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: If you are an EU citizen who is resident in the North, will you be able to apply? That is another example of something on which we need clarity. Our Committee will look at that, but I know that Pádraig has a particular interest in that kind of issue. The more voices that articulate that issue, the better.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Absolutely.

Mr Ó Donnghaile: Gabh mo leithscéal, Róisín.

Ms Garvey: On a point of information, ERASMUS is not the only programme. Diane mentioned another programme. In case you were not aware, schools in Northern Ireland are part of the Eco-Schools programme. We have a programme called Green-Schools in the South. There is the movement of Eco-Schools around many parts of Europe and all around the world. There are plenty of opportunities for second-level students to do exchanges through the Eco-Schools programme. I think that you are with Sinn Féin; I come from a Green perspective, but everybody is wearing the green cloak these days, so that is great. Maybe you could look into that matter in schools if you are looking for exchanges.

It does not have to be all about ERASMUS. I find that, sometimes, ERASMUS can be for certain cohorts in society and that not everybody who is not as well off as other people gets to go on ERASMUS. Eco-Schools is done in a low-budget way, and you stay with families and do not have to come from a privileged background to take advantage of it. My experience of ERASMUS has been that it is usually the more privileged families who use it. That is a point of information on Eco-Schools, which, in the South, we call Green-Schools. It is for primary, secondary and third level, and there are huge opportunities to delve into lots of interesting countries all around Europe, not just in the EU. I went to Moldova and lots of other places with the programme, so look into that.

Mr Delargy: Thanks very much for that. I do not know whether you are aware, but I was a primary-school teacher until mid-September, so I know Eco-Schools well. There is such a breadth of schemes, and one point that we have to take from this is what Niall mentioned: those need to be put together, making sure that that information is clear. Even from this meeting between the two Committees, each of us has come up with several schemes. If those could be put together into a clear format that was easily accessible, particularly to schools in the North, we could work collectively on that, and that could be easily done following this meeting.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): That is a point well made, and we should progress that.

I have this image from 'Derry Girls', where there was a blackboard listing what Protestants like and what Catholics like. It is a bit like that around the protocol, where the Minister has said that no unionists like or are for the protocol. I do not think that anybody likes the protocol, but what we really believe is that Brexit damages Northern Ireland. We want to ensure that we protect the island. If we get the protocol as lean and as mean as we can and get the barriers raised, the better it will be for all of us. Obviously, with the constitutional issues in and around it, it will be hard to get agreement, but today's meeting has been open, honest and productive.

We have covered an awful lot. We talked about the democratic deficit; that is there and is a reality. We talked about trade flows and customs and the lack of trading evidence, which really concerns me. We have economic development agencies on this island and between our islands, including Enterprise Ireland, InterTradelreland, IDA Ireland, Invest NI and the UK Department for International Trade. It is incumbent on them to work collectively to gather that evidence and present it. While they might be competitors in some way, there is synergy among them that could help to support businesses on this island and between our islands. I would like to see more work at that end so that we can analyse and have data that stacks up.

You can say that you do not like something, but, if it ultimately benefits our citizens, once we overcome some of the obstacles, we as public representatives must ensure that we do the right thing for the people whom we represent. It is fair to say, Diane, that the majority of the Assembly supports the protocol in the absence of other solutions. The hard Brexit, which was the choice, has left us with an inadequate solution — the protocol — and we are trying collectively to work through it.

I thank members —

Mrs Dodds: Chair, may I come in, since I was addressed directly?

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Yes.

Mrs Dodds: I am not disputing that, and every vote in the House says that, but the Belfast Agreement is the child of the SDLP and it is very strange to hear the SDLP say, on this occasion — this occasion only, maybe — "I support majority rule, and I'm not supporting the balances and checks that were set up by the Belfast Agreement". That is strange. I want that on the record.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): We will agree to disagree. I do not think that today is the time to have those conversations. We are trying to be in solution mode. For goodness' sake, we have those conversations at least once a week in the Chamber, and we are not making progress. However, we are making progress on some of the barriers that our citizens face regarding the like of green cards, pet passports, medicines etc. We are making progress. The more progress we make, the better.

On behalf of our Committee, I thank you for taking the time to attend. I also thank you for the due diligence and work that you have put into the report. We look forward to the completed report in December. We would welcome you back or, perhaps, even visit you on your home ground the next time to get another update and, hopefully, further evidence that we can move forward and represent Northern Ireland on and between the islands.

Ms Chambers: On behalf of our Committee and the Clerk, I thank you for the invitation to be here today to engage with you. It has been useful. We have covered a lot of topics. I reiterate that we appreciate getting different views. That is important. There is no point in being in an echo chamber. That will not provide any way forward. I extend an invitation to your Committee to visit us in Leinster House at a time that suits you. We would love to have you visit our Chamber and engage with us in our House. Perhaps the Clerks of both Committees can engage on that front to see whether it is possible to arrange something that suits. We look forward to continued engagement, and, of course, we will forward you a copy of the report when it is published in early December.

The Chairperson (Ms McLaughlin): Following the meeting, we will have an opportunity to have a chat and some refreshments.