



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 1 April 2021

*The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Buckley:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 69(5)(b) relates to Members' interests. It states that, in relation to declarations:

*"A member who has ...*

*(b) a relevant interest in any matter,*

*must declare that interest before taking part in any proceedings of the Assembly relating to that matter."*

Mr Speaker, given your involvement, through sharing the details of the Bobby Storey funeral on your social media sites, have you sought advice on the matter? Given the huge public interest in today's proceedings and the crisis in confidence and accountability at the heart of the Assembly, it is in the public interest and in the interests of the credibility of the Assembly and transparency that today's debate is seen to be chaired by someone who does not have a perceived conflict of interest. Mr Speaker, have you taken such advice, and can you share it with the House?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for raising the point of order. The Member will know that the matter has been raised before, and I made it clear, in the first instance, that in no circumstances would I wish to breach any guidelines. I make that very clear yet again. I have sought advice, and I am perfectly entitled and able to participate in and preside over this plenary sitting, which was called to discuss an important matter. I am satisfied that I am well able and professional enough to conduct my role as Speaker. I think that I have proven that since the day when I took up the role. No one can say that I have acted in a prejudicial way towards anyone or any party on any item of business over the past year. I will stand over that record until the day on which I leave the position. I invite Members to recognise that fact.

As far as I am concerned, it is in order for me to preside over the proceedings. I draw it to Members' attention that two of the Deputy Speakers signed the notice for today's recall and the Principal Deputy Speaker is on record as saying that he will speak on the matter, as they are quite entitled to do.

It is incumbent on us as the Chairs of these proceedings to act in a professional manner and to conduct ourselves impartially and independently, as we are obliged to do by law. I stand over my role and my competence and professionalism in that.

As far as I am concerned, the post that was shared on my constituency Facebook page, which I do not manage and never see, advertised the online streaming of the event. I have no further comment to make on that matter.

**Mr Buckley:** On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Given that you shared the social media post promoting a mass gathering during COVID regulations that prohibited such gatherings and that some of your family members attended said funeral, is it in order for the House to adjourn to see the advice that you have received to ensure that today's proceedings have credibility and that the public can, rightly, ask for transparency in this place, given what has gone on over the past few days?

**Mr Speaker:** I will make a final comment on that. You are starting to stray into very difficult territory when you refer to members of my family. I think that you should desist from that line of approach. As far as I am concerned, Members of this House can all testify to my impartiality and independence in presiding over all the proceedings in the past year. By the end of the proceedings this afternoon, Members of this House and the general public will be able to determine that I have continued to act professionally and that I have conducted myself on the basis of the legal status that I have here and that I am professional, competent and well within my entitlements to preside over these

proceedings in a professional manner. I will not respond to any further points of order on this matter.

**Mr Buckley:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The credibility of these institutions is at stake. The public are, rightly, calling for transparency. I am, in no way, commenting on your previous conduct in the Chair. What I am saying is that I, and many in the House and in our community, perceive there to be a direct conflict of interest in your proceeding as the Chair of this debate. I ask further, whether the House can adjourn to receive such advice that you have been given. If it is the case that the Deputy Speakers are not available, can we not move to appoint a temporary Speaker to ensure that the public can have confidence in this sitting today?

**Mr Frew:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given everything that you have said to my colleague and given that you have stated your position, based on guidance, is it wise for you to have the Chair in this debate?

**Mr Speaker:** All I will say is that matters arise in the Chamber throughout the tenure of all mandates. Very difficult and very challenging debates often ensue, which have to be presided over by somebody. Since the start of the Assembly in 1998 and 1999, there have been many very difficult and very challenging and controversial matters and the Speaker of the day always presided over them. By the end of each mandate, whether people liked them or not as individuals, regardless of anything else, we have always made sure that we have lived by the rulings of the Speakers. The Speakers have always managed to preside over the proceedings of the Assembly in a professional, independent and impartial manner.

You have acknowledged that you have no grounds on which to accuse me of doing anything else since I took on this role. I invite you, then, to make your judgement at the end of the proceedings when I will, again, demonstrate my professional ability and my impartiality and independence in the way in which I conduct the business of this Assembly.

**Mr Buckley:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is a credibility issue in relation to today's debate. There is public confidence at stake here. I urge the Speaker to adjourn the House to brief party leaders as to the advice that he has received and to seek a temporary Speaker. Thousands of families have had to endure restrictions whereby they have laid their loved ones to rest in isolation. Meanwhile, we

have a party in this House, namely Sinn Féin, that went to that funeral and had no regard for the regulations that were put in place. Mr Speaker, that calls into question your credibility as an independent Chair of this debate, given your role in that funeral by promoting it online.

I ask you, Mr Speaker, to think of the credibility of this institution, to allow Members time to hear the advice and to reconsider your position and put a temporary Speaker in place.

**Mr Speaker:** You will be aware that it is not at all the common practice, the convention or the appropriate action to share with Members the legal advice that one has received. I propose, therefore, that we move on to the debate and let Members judge the credibility of the proceedings at the end of them. It is an unusual step to adjourn in such a fashion. As I have said, there are many issues that are challenging for all sides of the House. No matter who takes the Chair in any particular session, questions may well be asked as to whether it is appropriate. We have to judge the Speakers and respect the role of the Speakers, even though we may sometimes feel uncomfortable about the matters under debate. That is my view.

**Mr Buckley:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I clearly outlined the Standing Order under which I think that the sitting has to be adjourned:

*"A member who has ...*

*(b) a relevant interest in any matter,*

*must declare that interest before taking part in any proceedings of the Assembly relating to that matter."*

There is no doubt that on the matter before us today — the very serious issue of public confidence — your impartiality is in question. I ask you, Mr Speaker, for the credibility of this institution and for the sake of the debate, to adjourn the House, appoint a temporary Speaker and allow a fair hearing of the debate so that it can be perceived by all in our community as fair and balanced.

**Mr Speaker:** I have heard the Member and, again, I thank him for bringing that to the attention of the Assembly. It has been discussed before. In fact, as I understand it, it was discussed last July while I was shielding. As far as I am concerned, I have ruled that I have received advice. I am satisfied that I have proven, since the moment that I took up office

as Speaker of the House, that I have demonstrated my utmost professionalism, impartiality and independence in the conduct of my role. I will continue to do that, and people will judge me on that basis. I am satisfied that the judgement will be positive.

The Speaker's ruling is final. I do not intend to adjourn the House. I intend to proceed with the matter in the Order Paper. Let us conduct the business on a professional basis and give confidence to the public that the very important matter that is the subject of today's motion will be dealt with professionally and in a mature way. People will have their robust arguments and so on; that is the entitlement of every Member of this House. I have made a ruling. The Speaker's ruling is final, and I ask Members to respect that. I want to move on to the business in the Order Paper.

**Mr Buckley:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry but I cannot let the matter drop. Public confidence is at stake. You asked that we proceed in a professional and mature manner. Surely, that means proceeding with an impartial Chair who has no perceived conflict of interest on the matter. We have the ability to appoint temporary Speakers. It was done when the matter was debated in July. I ask that it is done again and that we can ensure full public confidence.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Buckley, I have made a ruling. The Speaker's ruling is final, as you are well aware. You and I have discussed the matter privately, in my office, in the last number of months. I think that you fully understand my position. You personally acknowledged in the House this morning that you have no issue with any of the conduct of my role as Speaker. I have made a ruling and I am not going to change that. I want us to move on to the Order Paper and conduct the business that we are here to discuss.

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget Bill: Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** I inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (NI) 2021 became law on 23 March 2021. It is chapter 4.

## Private Members' Business

### Ministerial Breaches of the Executive's COVID-19 Messaging

**Mr Speaker:** Before we begin the debate today, I clarify for Members that I am not aware of any active proceedings in relation to the matter addressed by the motion. Therefore, the sub judice rule does not apply. However, I am aware that a statement from the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) yesterday referred to an entirely separate decision to prosecute two individuals. Members are therefore encouraged not to refer to the substance of what may be active criminal proceedings. If they do so, they must ensure that their remarks will not prejudice the outcome. As I said, the sub judice rule does not apply to the motion.

Having been given notice by not less than 30 Members, under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on breaches of Executive COVID-19 messaging by Ministers.

12.15 pm

**Ms Mallon:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly acknowledges the pain endured by families across Northern Ireland who have experienced loss during the COVID-19 crisis; expresses its sincere condolences to those who, in periods of trauma and loss, were unable to say goodbye to loved ones; further expresses its gratitude to those who have followed the public health guidelines and played their part in keeping their neighbours, communities and the health service safe; regrets the actions of those in positions of elected office who breached the Executive's public health messaging and undermined efforts to prevent transmission of the virus; and condemns the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance for their actions, which have caused immense hurt and undermined the Executive's public health message.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. You will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to wind. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. As the motion refers specifically to two individuals, they will be given an opportunity to reply as private Members at the end of the debate, should they wish to do so. Before we begin the debate, I want to make clear that I am not aware of any active proceedings in relation to

the matters addressed by the motion and, therefore, the sub judice rule does not apply.

**Ms Mallon:** I will speak as the deputy leader of the SDLP and with deep regret that, in the midst of a public health crisis, we have had to come here today to give voice to so many of our citizens who feel so hurt and so betrayed. I rise not to score any political points, not to add to the grief of any family in the North that has lost a loved one in the past year and certainly not to undermine the important messages and instructions that we must all continue to follow in order to suppress COVID-19 and to move our people into a more hopeful and new era. I speak as a political leader who genuinely believes that we are, in fact, all in this together and that all those in power must be held to account for their actions.

The belief that we must all adhere to the regulations and the guidelines and look out for and support each other has been my approach and the approach of the Social Democratic and Labour Party to dealing with the pandemic in the Executive, here in the Assembly, in our communities, in our sports clubs, at our school gates and on the ground, and we will not deviate from that. In the Executive and in the Assembly, we have asked our citizens to make huge sacrifices. The biggest sacrifice asked of our people since last March has been that asked of the family and friends of the deceased. To bury a loved one with no wake and only a small number of people in attendance robs us of a final act of love, an act of grace in parting and a final comfort for the bereaved. It goes against our very nature. We have a uniquely Irish way of managing death, and it gives enormous comfort to our people to open up their doors when faced with death to embrace the comfort offered by our family and community. On this island, our wakes and burials are a crucial act of closure.

The restrictions require people to set that aside, and what a sacrifice that is. Our people said almost unanimously, "If that is what must be done, we will do it". Most of us will know someone directly or indirectly who has buried a loved one during the pandemic, perhaps stood on the roadside as a cortege has driven past or watched a funeral service on Zoom. It does not even amount to a substitute for the true way that these things should be done. So, when the leadership of Sinn Féin and 22 of that party's elected representatives decided to attend a funeral and a graveside rally last June, it was a knowing act. It was not surrounded in ambiguity, and there was not a slight question mark over whether public health advice, guidelines and legislation were broken. Please

do not let us hear that today. It is an insult to the bereaved across Northern Ireland and across our island, and it is an insult to all those who have followed and adhered to the rules over the past 12 months.

It was a proactive decision that they chose to make. They made the choice. They knew that the consequences for public health would be severe and even fatal, but, still, they made that choice.

They knew that hundreds of other families had acted within the law, the guidelines and the public health advice. They knew that, by their actions, they were putting themselves above the law, but they still made that choice. They also knew that there would be political fallout but they still made that choice. They knew what the restrictions that they had designed and implemented in the Executive meant. They knew because, along with the guidance and public health advice, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister made them. I sat in the meeting and saw them do it. Then I watched on television as they broke them. If they were confused, as they subsequently claimed in police interviews, why did they not raise this around the Executive table at the time? Why did they pretend to the public during the daily press conferences that they understood? If virtually every family knew, then why did Sinn Féin public representatives not know? The truth is that they did. We all knew, but they chose to break them anyway. It was a deliberate and proactive calculation that they set aside the law that they had made because it suited their agenda. They made that choice. Sinn Féin chose not to stand with the people, but to put themselves above them.

Over the past few days, there has been commentary in certain quarters that the SDLP is acting for political capital. That is untrue. Today, it is not just the SDLP calling out the purposeful rule-breaking, but every single party in the Executive, alongside our colleagues in the Green Party. This is not a political fight. It is a question of doing what is right. It is to show people, families across our island who have made huge sacrifices, that those who imposed the rules and then broke them must be held to account.

This is no longer about a funeral. It is now an issue of why Sinn Féin believes that they are above the restrictions, above the law and above the public health advice. We are here today to hear Sinn Féin account for their actions and answer the question that countless citizens across the North are asking: why is it one rule

for the political elite in Sinn Féin and one rule for the rest of us?

Had the deputy First Minister acknowledged last July that mistakes had been made and had she made a sincere apology then, we would not be here today. However, it is the arrogance of Sinn Féin and their refusal to acknowledge, explain and give a full apology that brings us here today. Enough of the wordplay. No more diluted craftily-worded apologies. I ask the leadership of Sinn Féin to let this be the day that, without qualification or equivocation, they offer the people of the North a full explanation.

At all times, but especially in a crisis, people look to those in positions of political leadership to be honest with them, protect them, put their interests first and to lead by example. They look to leaders to stand with them, not above them; to hold themselves to a higher standard, not a different standard; and, at the very least, to follow the rules that they and their party set. There can be no excuses; all of us are fully aware of the seven rules of public life that all Ministers have committed to upholding: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Leadership underpins it all. The truth is, be it the actions of Sammy Wilson and Arlene Foster's refusal to sanction and condemn his actions, or the actions of Michelle O'Neill and Conor Murphy in this instance, people rightly feel failed.

Just as people look to their political leaders for leadership, at all times people look to the police for independence, impartiality and consistency in upholding the rule of law. Where is the consistency in the policing response to the Black Lives Matter protesters, to the family of those remembering their loved ones brutally murdered at Sean Graham bookmakers on the Ormeau Road, to the crowd of loyalist paramilitaries in Pitt Park, to the funeral of Francie McNally or to the funeral of Bobby Storey? Those are serious questions and we will rigorously pursue answers to all of them through the accountability structures of the Policing Board.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I call on this Assembly to stand up for people across our island who have made so many sacrifices, for truth and justice, and for fairness and accountability.

It is what all the families grieving across our island and all our citizens who are struggling through this painful pandemic deserve.

The SDLP brought this motion today to give a voice to our citizens. As I end, I make a plea to the people across Northern Ireland, who have faithfully followed the asks made of them time and time again at the joint press conferences by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I appeal to all those who have adhered to the regulations and the guidance, who have made countless personal sacrifices for the common good and who rightly feel angry and betrayed. I plead with the people of Northern Ireland, and, in the words of James Mayne, a grieving son who could not lift his father's coffin, who watched his father's cremation through a screen and who sacrificed that crucial act of closure that we all need: regardless of those who break the rules, please know that you are a better person for following them.

**Mrs Foster:** Often in Northern Ireland, too much is made of what divides us, but what we do hold in common is a reverence for life, for family and for community. That is demonstrated by how we remember people in death and is displayed in the support for those who grieve, whether it is at the wake, at the funeral or in the time afterwards. These are unspoken obligations, inherited right down throughout the generations.

All of us who made the decisions and set the rules knew that the regulations on wakes and funerals would be the limits on life that would cut the deepest, ask the most of those at their lowest moment and frustrate the most basic human response: to console the grieving. It is to the immense credit of the bereaved and their families, and of communities right across Northern Ireland, that the most difficult limit on our lives was abided by throughout the pandemic by the vast majority. They bore a heavier burden than us, they protected us and they acted in the common good. The credit that they deserve is matched only by the shame that members of Sinn Féin should feel for their actions last June.

I take nothing away from the grieving family on that occasion. Sinn Féin, however, chose to act in a way that breached the regulations on funerals at that time, and, in so doing, happily sent a signal to everyone else in Northern Ireland that it was one rule for Sinn Féin and another rule for the rest of us. The actions of senior Sinn Féin representatives, the Sinn Féin deputy First Minister, Sinn Féin's Executive Ministers and Sinn Féin members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board sparked the political crisis, and, once again, the message from Sinn Féin was clear: Ourselves Alone — ourselves first — regardless of the cost of undermining the public health messaging.

The wake, the funeral procession of thousands and the political rally were clear and premeditated breaches of the COVID regulations. The prioritisation at Roselawn over other grieving families was hurtful, ignorant and callous in the extreme. Acts of arrogance, acts of self-entitlement, acts of privilege: Sinn Féin calls for equality, respect and integrity, but actually demonstrates the opposite.

When someone believes that they are above the law and where clear and premeditated breaches of COVID regulations are made, everyone has a rightful expectation that the police and the justice system show that such people are not above the law. To add insult to injury, that rightful expectation has been failed. Sadly, the police abdicated their responsibilities before the funeral, at the funeral and since the funeral. Decisions not to gather evidence; collaboration and knowledge of the plan to break regulations, facilitating the breaches of thousands; foot-dragging on the investigation: individually those are unacceptable but, collectively, they show that something is very wrong. Much work will be required to rebuild community confidence in the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

That really concerns me, because it is the failure of the PSNI command that has become the primary justification for the PPS's refusal to prosecute, allied with the absurdity from the PPS that ignorance of the law is a defence in general. The Northern Ireland public were not confused about the law, and yet we are asked to believe that those who enacted the laws were confused.

**12.30 pm**

**Mr Lyons:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Foster:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr Lyons:** Was the First Minister confused by the regulations at any point? Is it credible for people to say that they were confused by the regulations, when they were involved in the drafting and passing of that legislation?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mrs Foster:** I was not confused about the regulations. We had many discussions about policy. We took advice from our Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and our Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), and there are many funerals that I should have been at that I was not.

Many will say that Sinn Féin has no sense of shame. That may well be true, but it cannot be the way forward. It is important that we start the journey forward today with a common rejection of the idea that there are different rules and laws for different groups of people. For our part, we hold strong to the cherished ideal that all citizens are equal under the law and equally subject to the law. If we are to build a better society for all, it must be fair for all. If we are to do what is right, we must unite around that principle with no exceptions and no special favours for Sinn Féin or anyone else. While the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and their colleagues have tried to justify their behaviour and excuse their elitist attitudes to everything that has happened, we cannot tread that path.

I and my party stand with the families who sacrificed so very much for the common good of Northern Ireland. The battle to defend and protect the principle of equality before the law is more intense than ever, but it is a cause that we must win for everyone.

**Mrs O'Neill:** First, I confirm that I speak in the Chamber today in my role as an MLA. I take the opportunity to contribute, as I have done on every available opportunity over the past nine months since the death of my friend Bobby Storey. I have done so in the Chamber on many occasions, at the Committee for the Executive Office, at the Executive, at the party leaders' forum and via the media press conferences.

I wish to say again today and to put it on the public record that I am truly sorry for the hurt that has been caused to so many families who have lost a loved one during this time. My attendance at the funeral of Bobby Storey was to support a family during their grief as he was laid to rest. Over the past nine months, I have worked tirelessly to rebuild trust and confidence with the public as a result of undermining the public health message. I will continue to work every day with ministerial colleagues and will continue to work across the five parties to take us through what is a global health pandemic to save lives and to protect livelihoods.

I am truly sorry that my actions have contributed to the grief or the heartache that has been felt and experienced by many people who have lost a loved one during the pandemic. That was never, ever my intention, and, for that, I offer my heartfelt and unreserved apology to the families who have lost a loved one.

I take very seriously my responsibility as a public office holder and as deputy First Minister and joint head of government. The events of

that day were investigated by the police, to whom I gave, as you would expect, my full cooperation. The report published on 30 March by the PPS set out its judgement, which was made independently and impartially by the team of senior prosecutors, assisted by senior counsel. I now understand that a review of that judgement has been requested, and I will await the outcome of that. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that the matter has divided the Executive and the Assembly that many of us worked so hard to bring about and to restore, in order to get on with delivering public services to the public whom we serve.

We have made good progress in suppressing the virus and establishing a route map out of restrictions and in vaccinating the population, despite all of the difficulties. The progress that has been achieved is entirely due to the support and the concerted effort of everyone. As a result, we have now reached a key turning point in the management of the crisis, when the Executive's attention is now able to move from purely controlling the public health response towards planning for economic, health and societal recovery instead. My sincere commitment is to continue with that work, and that remains my number-one priority.

**Dr Aiken:** The events surrounding the funeral of Bobby Storey, with the mass breaching of the COVID rules and regulations by members of Sinn Féin, including the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister, MLAs, TDs and other elected representatives, have undermined the rather limited faith that the people of Northern Ireland have in the integrity of our Government, the rule of law and, indeed, the very process of democracy itself. At the core of all our concerns is the fact, rather than the perception, that there is now a two-tier justice and policing system in Northern Ireland. There is one rule for Sinn Féin and another for the rest of us.

Those of us who could not attend the funerals of our loved ones and believed that, by our actions, we could reduce the enormous burden on our health service and believed in adhering to the rules thought that our sacrifice would be matched by those in government; indeed, we all had a reasonable expectation that the very government members who set and agreed the regulations would show leadership and actually follow the rules that they had agreed. Many of us, despite our political differences, recognise a sorrowing and grieving family. I can understand grief, and I say to all of us that we cannot forget the very real sadness of the Storey family and the fact that the loss that they suffered is being revisited by these events. However, there were many thousands of others, including the Hume

and Dallat families, who also wanted to grieve but accepted that sacrifices had to be made for the good of us all. Those families did not have organisers, stewards and liaisons or coordination organised between the police and elected representatives. They did not allow their funerals to be used for propaganda. Above all, they did not flout the rules, not because they did not want to grieve but because they understood that, in the midst of a pandemic, it was the right thing to do.

Let us remember why the rules and regulations were introduced and by whom. We are in the midst of an unprecedented public health emergency that has, so far, cost 2,115 lives and infected 120,000 people, many of whom continue to suffer long-term effects. There is no doubt that there will have been and are direct links between crowds, proximity, public gatherings and the spread of the disease. While Sinn Féin opposite believe that the rule of law does not apply to them, the sharp scientific reality of viral infection does. Sinn Féin and its followers are not somehow immune. Infection, as they have been keen to point out, recognises no borders; indeed, Sinn Féin's president, its finance spokesperson and the many others who travelled to Belfast breached the Irish Republic's rules on distance and travel. They were, in all probability, vectors for the very disease that the Northern Ireland Executive, of which Sinn Féin is supposedly a part, said they were trying to control. In the midst of a pandemic, why would you risk it? Unless, of course, unfortunately, you did not care.

We have heard today that this is not an orange and green issue, and it is not. It is an issue of public health, integrity and morality of government. The first duty of any Government, regardless of circumstances, is the protection and safety of their people, not a small section, an interest group or even a political party but all its people: the old, the sick, the vulnerable, and, above all, the vital healthcare and public service workers who, on several occasions, have been nearly overwhelmed by the tsunami of hospital admissions. It was to prevent the collapse of our national healthcare system, to stop hospitals being overwhelmed, to avoid running out of ventilators and ICU beds and to stop the burnout of critical staff that restrictions on our daily lives were introduced.

They were restrictions that none of us wanted, but they were based on the best scientific, medical and UK-wide advice that was available. We must all continue to follow that.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I thought that the deputy First Minister had the opportunity

today to apologise for breaching the rules and regulations and for attending that funeral rather than to apologise to the Assembly for the hurt that was caused, but I have not heard that. That is what the people of Northern Ireland wanted to hear today to draw a line under this matter. Is there an opportunity for her to change her remarks and address the real issue at hand?

**Ms Armstrong:** If anyone had said a year ago that we would be here on April Fool's Day discussing how, after announcing to the public that they should stay at home in lockdown, a party of the recently formed Executive would then ignore that message and, instead, choose to congregate in a group of up to 2,000 people, with the result that our pandemic public health message was undermined, people would have said, "No way. That is not possible". So much for New Decade, New Approach.

Here we are discussing the actions of Sinn Féin, which knew that its actions were not in the spirit of the regulations, but chose to flout the guidance because the republican family needed it. No matter the technicalities of law that led the PPS to its decision, Sinn Féin played fast and loose with the rules that it asked the rest of us to follow. I am from one of the families who lost a loved one and was not allowed to attend a funeral. My aunt was one of the many people who saw her husband go into hospital only for him never to come out, to never have a wake, to have a closed casket and to have only a few people by her side as he was laid to rest. I come from a large family, and we are extremely close. We wanted to be there for her, to pay our respects to him and to grieve as we would normally have done, but we could not. We stuck to the rules. We did not find a loophole.

My intention today is not to upset a grieving family. Sinn Féin brought that family into the spotlight through its own actions. By holding its own version of a state funeral, it decided that nothing, even a health pandemic, would stand in the way of a public show of republican strength for a former senior member of the IRA.

That event has been accepted by Minister O'Neill as having undermined our COVID health message.

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Armstrong:** Not just at the moment.

I put it to the House that the impact of that event possibly led to the spread of the virus and more COVID deaths as people disregarded the advice to stay at home.

It is not enough to apologise for the hurt that others feel. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I want a public apology from Sinn Féin for its actions and for the event. As Mary Lou McDonald has confirmed, the event was meticulously planned. It was wrong. It went against the spirit of the regulations, and they, and we, all know it.

To reiterate, I do not want the Sinn Féin leadership to say that it is sorry that I and others have been hurt by its actions. I want an apology for its actions. I want it to say sorry for holding an event that went against the spirit and intention of the COVID regulations that you demanded that we follow. I do not know at this point whether you regret the event, and, if it were to happen again, would you do it again? PPS decision or not, this country needs to be able to trust political leaders.

Following RHI, there was a huge hill to climb to undo the damage done by the DUP on that matter. Instead of leading by example, Sinn Féin compounded the public's lack of trust in all of us. I have heard attempts to shift the blame on to the police, the Public Prosecution Service, the Justice Minister and even the Health Minister for how the regulations were written. Those are all a distraction. Let us get back to the core issue. As outlined in the motion, Ministers O'Neill and Murphy and others attended an event that was not in the spirit or intention of the regulations. Will they resign? No. Will this pull down the Assembly again in the middle of a pandemic and during an economic crisis? It better not. I think that I speak for the majority of people outside the House when I say that we need to get back to work and stop undermining the very hard work that our community is completing and what we are all trying to achieve.

I say to both named Ministers that instead of talking about being sorry, be sorry and understand the pain caused to my aunt, my family and the many families who are angry at all of us and at themselves as they ask, "Why did we stick to the rules? Why did we not just have a wake and go to the funeral?".

That horrible guilt-ridden feeling of not being able to honour our loved ones lingers on. I know. That feeling has been reawakened with the PPS announcement. It has not gone away.

#### 12.45 pm

We are very close to Easter, another time when families want to be together. An apology would go a long way to help encourage those who are

struggling to stick to the rules over Easter to know that they are doing the right thing by staying at home and not getting together. The message that this Government need to share is that we are still in lockdown and that regulations matter because they save lives. If leadership fails, the consequence will be another spike in numbers after Easter. We all know what that means: more lockdown.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Members draw her remarks to a close, please?

**Ms Armstrong:** Let me be honest: I, my family and our whole community are sick of lockdowns, but we stay in lockdown to protect our loved ones, the community and the health service.

**Mr Givan:** Respect, equality and integrity. That has been Sinn Féin's mantra for many years. Michelle O'Neill stated:

*"What we are seeking is respect and equality for all of the people. And what we are seeking is integrity in the political institutions. That is what Martin McGuinness stands for. That is what Sinn Féin stands for. That is what I stand for."*

The Minister in my church in my constituency responded to that adequately. He emailed me last night. He wrote:

*"As a result of the decision to not prosecute those who attended the Storey funeral, I am at a loss as a clergyman. Hypocrisy, one rule for them and one for everyone else, injustice and equality are some words that I can pen."*

He went on to write that he has buried 53 parishioners in his parish in Lisburn. All 53 of the families concerned knew the rules. They worked with the church and the undertakers, and he wrote, "There is much hurt".

What I say will have no impact on Sinn Féin, but listen to the hurt from people like that clergyman and people across Northern Ireland. Thousands of people have buried their loved ones during the past year, but special status was given to one individual. It was not just one individual — it was a terrorist. Special status for one individual. Where was the respect for the rule of law, which was broken by the very lawmakers? Where was the equality? Thousands were buried, but was Mr Storey treated equally? No. Special status was given to that one funeral. Other people were locked out at Roselawn. Special status was given to

that one family. Organised by Sinn Féin. "Meticulously planned", in the words of the Sinn Féin president, with the PSNI. Meticulously planned.

**Mr Stalford:** I thank the Member for giving way. Would he agree with me that, seemingly, in the republican world view, collusion with the PSNI is perfectly acceptable in certain circumstances?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Givan:** I will get to that point. I agree with the Member.

Integrity. Where was the integrity for the Nolan principles of public life or the ministerial code that the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister are pledged to? Where was the setting of an example and leading the community? That was abandoned when it comes to the special status of a terrorist who needed to be buried.

We have heard more shallow, hollow and meaningless words from the deputy First Minister. She was unrepentant about organising and attending a funeral but sorry that other people in Northern Ireland felt hurt by that attendance. When will we hear, "We were wrong as a political party", or, "As the deputy First Minister, I was wrong to have attended that funeral"? No, the record remains that the deputy First Minister will never say sorry for attending the funeral of a friend.

What about my friend who died during the past year? I did not go to that funeral. Should I have gone to that funeral? Is my friend not more important than your friend? Many of us did not go to funerals because of the regulations that this Executive brought in.

This speaks to the behavioural attitude that goes to the core of Sinn Féin: supremacy, not just over unionism but within its own community as well. It is supreme. One rule for us, one rule for others. We see its behaviour in its disrespect of centenary celebrations, comments about the Prince of Wales, referred to as POW, and so it goes on. New Decade, New Approach, new spirit of cooperation: there is no evidence of it, none whatsoever.

There are consequences that flow from the behaviour of Sinn Féin. This is just one example. The Finance Minister fired out a statement last night; again, this is the behaviour of those who believe that they are supreme and that people do as they are told, rather than

seeking consensus when it comes to a Budget. The supremacist attitude that exists within Sinn Féin is infecting our political institutions. It infects our society, and it has infected the police, who were collaborators, facilitating this and signing off on plans. They did not engage, did not inform and certainly did not enforce. I feel sorry for the rank and file, because they are lions led by lambs to the slaughter. There are consequences for confidence in policing as a result of the way in which the very highest levels of the police are now infected by seeking to appease the pervading republican campaign. That has to change, and that is why we are right to seek change.

There has not been a change in Sinn Féin's approach. There has not been an apology that stacks up. Sinn Féin will need to learn very quickly; if it wants to share power and build a society, it has to change its attitude, because it is causing huge damage to not just Northern Ireland but these political institutions.

**Mr Stalford:** It is important that we place this debate in the context of the period that we have just lived through. Our people are living under crippling restrictions, with access to their friends, family and place of work actively restricted by the Government. Our people have lost huge swathes of their liberty and freedom. Our economy has been driven over a cliff in the name of controlling the COVID-19 virus. People have sacrificed and sacrificed and sacrificed, over and over again, in almost every aspect of their lives. For many people, the epitome of the restrictions that they are living under relates to the circumstances in which they can bury their loved ones.

I recall last June, when this issue first presented, presenting to the deputy First Minister at the Executive Office Committee the example of a constituent of mine from the Belvoir estate who had had to bury her mother. She was devastated at the behaviour of the deputy First Minister. Until that point, she had said that she admired the approach and the collaboration taking place between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in trying to get COVID under control.

We now know that the credibility of government messaging was shot by the actions of the deputy First Minister, and we also know what we saw with our own eyes. There were thousands of people in attendance at this funeral. It was widely advertised on social media. A PA system was set up in a cemetery in order to hold a political rally. There were hundreds of people at the wake house, and now we know that that was facilitated by the

PSNI. Collusion with the state is clearly acceptable in certain circumstances.

I find it outrageous that the Police Service of Northern Ireland acted in such a way. I agree with my colleague in expressing sympathy and support for the lower-ranking officers, who are being extremely badly led. I repeat the call of the First Minister that the Chief Constable of the PSNI should do the honourable thing and resign from his post.

The conduct of Sinn Féin on the matter is a slap in the face to everyone else who has sacrificed so much during this period. Again, we heard from the Floor of the Chamber a classic politician's apology: "I am sorry if you were hurt". That is not the same thing as "I am sorry". "I am sorry if my actions offended you", is not the same thing as, "I am sorry". In fact, it puts the onus on the person who was hurt: "Well, it is your fault that you are offended, but I am sorry for that". People can see through such weasel words.

The people who have been fined, cautioned or threatened with fines or had their access to beauty spots or other places restricted are now well within their rights to demand their money back because it is now an accepted principle in Northern Ireland that ignorance of the law is a defence. If that is the case, the PPS has fundamentally undermined its own credibility. The thing that sticks in people's craw most is that it reeks of a policy of entitlement and privilege: "Do as I say, but not as I do". People have had enough of being governed like that.

I recall the deputy First Minister's comments when she defended the fines issued to Black Lives Matter protesters. She said that it was the right thing to do because we were trying to control the spread of the virus and the virus was killing people. She said that in the context of Black Lives Matter protesters, but, seemingly, when republican royalty die, that principle no longer applies. I accept that the deputy First Minister has referred to Mr Storey as her friend, and that is her right and her privilege. However, because of policies and restrictions that she authored, other people were not able to give their friends or loved ones the send-off they would have wanted. The hypocrisy is astonishing. Michelle O'Neill should resign.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Having to stand here today does not fill any of us — certainly not me — with any great sense of joy. Today, we have to remember that people are burying their loved ones under the COVID restrictions and will not get the send-off that they deserve or the comfort that the family needs. We, as a party,

had to bury colleagues of ours and adhere to the determinations and restrictions. We had no confusion about it: it was "Stay at home and limit the numbers attending". We buried someone who won the Nobel peace prize. We buried John Dallat, a man who gave his whole life to public service without any political elitism and without the trappings that others also did not receive. Members across the way recently buried their party colleague Jimmy Spratt, another man who dedicated his life to public service. The political elite in here are the Members to my right. They have set themselves above all others in society, who have followed the rules and regulations.

I regret the fact that the police are the boys and girls caught in the middle because, today, there are police officers out on the beat protecting our community and putting their lives at risk. It is not right that they have been put in that position. The PPS made it clear that there was a lack of clarity in the interpretation of the regulations. Who signed and put into law those regulations and restrictions? I will give way to Ms O'Neill if she wants to make a full apology for offending not only the people in the House, because this is not a green and orange issue, and it reflects the anger and hurt that is felt across the community. People could not call at a house and give comfort to people who had lost loved ones. Families had to draw lots to see who could attend their family member's funeral.

#### 1.00 pm

Yes, there are questions for the police to answer. I have just finished a private meeting of the Policing Board. Later, there will be a public opportunity to hear the Chief Constable and the senior officer team being held to account for their decision making, and it is right and proper that that be done. However, the Members to my right have questions to answer. I do not know what part of the public message on the motorway they did not understand. Many of them saw it as they drove down the M1 to go to that wake house or funeral. Did they not know what "Stay at home" meant? The rest of us knew, stayed at home and made the sacrifice, alongside our friends, neighbours and people across this community. The political elitism and arrogance of Sinn Féin is beyond belief. I still have time, if Ms O'Neill or, indeed, Mr Murphy want to stand and give their apologies, but I do not hear them. The silence is deafening.

We have seen the reports in the papers and heard people who are not normally on the air waves say how deeply hurt and angry they are at what has happened. It is right that that anger

and hurt is acknowledged in the Chamber, the Chamber where people are elected to be the voice of the people. That is right and proper, for this is the only democratic Chamber.

If these people had anything about them, they would reflect on their actions and what they have said. Last July, there was a scandal in Clifden in the South of Ireland, now known as "Golfgate". Mary Lou McDonald said that it was "chaotic and unstable" government and that people must and should be held to account for it. Do the same principles not apply in the North? Is that a partitionist attitude from Sinn Féin? Do those principles apply only to every other party on the island of Ireland but not to them? That is the question that, I hope, some of them will address. Mary Lou McDonald said that one of the representatives, Phil Hogan, should resign and that it was clear that he had lost the confidence of government. I say to Sinn Féin today, "You have lost the confidence of Members of this House because of your failure to take responsibility and your failure to set the same standards for yourselves as you do for others. I hope that you reflect on what damage you have done, not only the hurt that you have caused to people across Northern Ireland but the way in which you have dragged policing into the debate by your actions".

**Mr Nesbitt:** I speak as a Member of the Assembly, obviously, but I also declare membership of the Policing Board of Northern Ireland. I also acknowledge that, early in the pandemic, I transgressed the regulations. That is a matter of continuing regret. I have no difficulty in repeating my apology to the House and the broader population. It was a wrong action, and I resigned as Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, because I felt that it was untenable to continue in that role. All I can say is that, sometimes, people do things that they can explain but cannot excuse. We are debating one such occasion. We are debating it because of a widespread public perception that there are people and organisations who are, in some sense, above the law. That has implications for public confidence not just in those organisations and individuals but in organisations like the Public Prosecution Service and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Some Members have already made the point that the statement on Tuesday from the PPS was extraordinary in that it seemed to suggest that ignorance was a defence, going against the centuries-old legal maxim that ignorance is no defence in the face of the law. There are other extraordinary statements in the nine pages published by the public prosecutor. On page 9,

paragraph 24, he refers to a "lack of clarity" in the regulations. I have two issues with that. If the Police Service agrees that there was a lack of clarity in the regulations, how could they deploy the policy of the four Es: engage, explain, encourage and enforce? You cannot, if you are unclear, explain. Explain what? Regulations that you do not understand? Also, if I may, every time the regulations are changed, there is a debate in the Chamber, one that is recorded and transcribed into Hansard — the Official Report — verbatim, word for word.

Find me one occasion when a Member opposite has stood up during the debate and said to the Minister who is explaining the changes, "I'm so sorry, I don't understand that. Would you please explain?"

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, over the course of this event, the police have created the dangerous impression that they will police those whom they can police while other people can get away without being policed?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention: he reflects a commonly held public perception. I make a distinction between the leadership of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and those who are on the ground.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will he acknowledge that the police sent 24 files for prosecution?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I understand that. The Member will know that there were two reasons given by the PPS for the decision to not prosecute, and one of them was the engagement by the PSNI with the event organisers ahead of the funeral. I understand that, in principle, for a major public event, it is right for the police to liaise, but the question is: what was the nature of that engagement? Again, I go to the Public Prosecution Service's nine-page report. On page 4, paragraph 16(iv) quotes from the gold strategy for the day. It says that the purpose was to:

*"facilitate the funeral arrangements ... In a dignified manner which takes into account the wishes of the family, is sensitive to his community and which does not significantly compromise public health".*

I find that extraordinary. What I wanted to read was that the PSNI wanted to facilitate funeral arrangements in a manner that upheld the regulations regarding public health while, at the same time, doing everything possible to respect the wishes of the family and be sensitive to the community. It seems to be the wrong way around.

So, the police have questions to answers, and, as Mrs Kelly said, there will be a public session with the Chief Constable at 4.00 pm. I am very much of the opinion, and have been for a very long time, that the police had advance written notice of the funeral plans; everything from the wake to Milltown to Roselawn Cemetery.

A few weeks before Mr Storey was cremated, my mother was cremated at Roselawn Cemetery, aged 93. We were allowed nine people at the crematorium, which was fortunate because she had three children, five grandchildren and a minister there, adding up to nine. A few weeks before she died, her best friend passed away, and her beloved St Columba's Church was full to the brim with mourners. When my mother passed, we were into COVID, and the church was not even half empty; it was practically empty. She deserved better, but our glass is half full because we got a church service and we got a cremation. Those are the times that we live in and those are the conditions that we have to accept.

**Mr Frew:** In Northern Ireland, indeed the whole island of Ireland, bereavement and the process that is encountered around that is extremely important. The wake brings such comfort to so many loved ones who will be in shock and going through trauma. Looking back on my own life, wakes were critical in helping to comfort me as a child with the acknowledgement of, the coming to terms with and comforting each other on the mutual loss. Then there would be the family friend in the corner telling the room a funny story about the past. At that point, the laughter in amongst the tears has the most healing qualities imaginable. There is comfort from seeing so folk turn up at the funeral of a dearly missed family member. They do not have to say anything; they just have to be there. You are physically carrying your loved one on your shoulder.

**Mr Stalford:** I appreciate the Member giving way. Does he agree that one of the absolutely galling things about this situation is that, for week after week after week, the deputy First Minister, alongside the First Minister and sometimes the Minister of Health and the Chief Medical Officer, has fronted up press

conferences to tell our people how essential the restrictions are?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my colleague for his intervention.

When you physically carry your loved one on your shoulder, arm in arm with your brothers and your cousins, out of your home place and along your local street, on their last journey, it has a profound significance. Witnessing the burial of a loved one, no matter the weather, has a lasting anchoring in the mind to the place and time: a connection that will never be broken as long as you live. It is in that context that we find ourselves in this horrendous situation where a political party, Ministers in the Executive and MLAs in this place corrupted and copper-fastened that sense of loss in people who have been deprived of that relief.

Some 12,000, multiplied many times, is the immeasurable number of people who have been impacted by the actions of Sinn Féin. It is not only anger and frustration that have gripped the people of Northern Ireland but a deep sense of sadness and depression. More hurtful and impactful than that is that Sinn Féin has spread a cloak of regret and, dare I say, a sense of guilt over all those people who buried loved ones without giving them the funeral service that they deserved. All those families who sought guidance from undertakers and from the local minister or priest about what could and could not take place. All those families who had to choose which brother or sister, cousin, nephew or niece could attend the funeral. How cruel is that? How cruel are these restrictions? How cruel is Sinn Féin? All those families and individuals who sought advice were all too aware of the restrictions. Yet, the very people who formed the restrictions and scrutinised and created the law make excuses that they did not understand it. That is why those people who had to make difficult decisions and choices now live with regret and guilt.

This has always been about supremacy. When mourners were locked out of Roselawn, Sinn Féin members were parading in their thousands down the street and organising sham funeral orations in Milltown — a place where the remains were not even interred. When Sinn Féin was promoting and organising travel arrangements, speaker systems and crowd control, and negotiating with the PSNI and inserting its Sinn Féin plan, law-abiding citizens could only give their loved ones a small, humble send-off for fear of fine and penalty.

Sinn Féin cannot be seen to be above the law. It has corrupted the democratic process of the restrictions and it has corrupted the police actions. It has corrupted the actions and determinations of the PPS. It is a corruption that cannot be tolerated. This is not 1930's Nazi Germany and nor should our people have to live in that world.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate.

I regret that we have to have the discussion eight months after Bobby Storey was laid to rest, but it is necessary because we have yet to have an unequivocal, unambiguous apology for the actions of the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and, indeed, of Sinn Féin collectively for the blatant breach of the regulations.

### 1.15 pm

People — members of Sinn Féin — have significantly underestimated the amount of hurt, grief and anger that they have caused right across the community, particularly to those families who have had to lay their family members to rest in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. We have seen people who went to hospital, who never got to hold hands with their loved one again after that point, who never got to accompany them on their final journey to the crematorium or the graveside, and who have been profoundly hurt. They have also, I believe, been profoundly damaged by an incredibly painful experience. Whilst they were gracious and generous in making those tremendous sacrifices, it has been a burden for them to bear. It has been made worse by the fact that those who made the rules did not make the same sacrifice when their turn came. For many, that has been too great a burden. That explains why people are angry. It explains why people are upset, and it explains why people require us, as Assembly Members, to come together today to have the discussion and communicate that hurt and anger to Sinn Féin Members of the House.

We all recognise that there is a grieving family at the centre of this. None of us wishes to compound the family's pain or hurt, because we recognise the pain and hurt in our community over all of that. We have to communicate, accurately and honestly and candidly, that what happened breached not only the regulations but the bonds of trust between elected representatives and those whom they represent that require us to hold ourselves to the same and to higher standards than those to which the

rest of the community is held. That is what is expected of us, whether or not it is fair. We have a duty and a bond of trust that we have to uphold with our constituents.

With respect to the decisions made this week, Members will appreciate that, although I speak as a leader of the Alliance Party, I will not engage in commentary about the PSNI and the PPS because, in my role as Justice Minister, I respect their independence and the integrity of their offices. It is important that I do not stray into that territory. It is also important that people fully understand the rulings of the PPS. When the PPS refers to confusion about the regulations, it is not to be critical of those who drafted the regulations. It is not to be critical of the police and the way in which they interpreted the regulations. It is not to exonerate those in Sinn Féin who claim that they did not understand the regulations. It is simply to state that the prospect of prosecution, on the basis of some of the conflicts in the regulations and of the rapid changes in them, was diminished.

Having read the PPS decision and having sat at the Executive table along with all the other Ministers when the regulations were discussed, I am absolutely clear that none of us could have been in any doubt about what we were asking of our community, what we were asking of grieving families and what we were asking people to forgo in the interests of public safety, protecting lives and protecting people's health. Irrespective of whether the regulations were sustainable in terms of prosecution, no one sitting at that table could have been in any doubt about what the rules were when it came to gatherings and funerals. We need to be absolutely clear about that.

There are many wrongs in this world that cannot be prosecuted in court, but we can still apologise for those wrongs. We do not need to be found guilty in a court of law to know that we have broken the spirit —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

**Mrs Long:** — of the law that we created. I appeal again in my final comments to those in Sinn Féin to step up, to make that fulsome apology and to give some comfort at this late stage to the families who have been affected.

**Mr Buckley:** This morning when I woke up, I brought into sharp focus what today's debate is about. Today at 3.00 pm, my neighbour of 25 years will be buried, a lady whose table I ate at throughout my childhood and whose garden I

played in. That family will follow the restrictions and make that tough decision on who can and who cannot attend that funeral. For many of them, it will be making a decision between families.

Over 12,000 people have died in Northern Ireland since the Bobby Storey funeral. Families right across the length and breadth of Northern Ireland, regardless of community and regardless of religious background or political preference, have had to make the difficult decision to bury loved ones in isolation. I cannot but be moved by their accounts of what they have had to deal with. I listened to Mr Nesbitt's account. How could you not be moved? I listened to the accounts of Kellie Armstrong and Edwin Poots. How many other stories do we have where people feel a sense of regret that, because they followed the regulations and the law, they were not able to bury their loved ones in a manner that they felt was befitting for their memory?

What the public rightly want to see today is remorse from Sinn Féin, an apology, recognition of the hurt caused and, going a step further, its members saying, "We are sorry for what we did", and action taken. At the heart of Sinn Féin's mantra is respect, honesty, integrity and, indeed, equality. I, as an elected representative in this House, and many of the people whom I talk to can only conclude that by their actions, you will know them. For Sinn Féin, it is very much a case of Ourselves Alone. That is regrettable. Northern Ireland has come a long way over many dark years of our past, where politicians and political parties have had to work together for the common interest. I am sad to say it, but that message has been undermined, and undermined by the party opposite. We have all had to play a part, a shared effort, and obeyed life-altering circumstances even at the behest of social and economic well-being. Few in society have been confused by the term "lockdown", but we are expected to believe that 24 Sinn Féin representatives were blissfully unaware that the rules applied to them. Really? Is that how low politics in Northern Ireland has got?

Any prosperous and free society relies on a fair police and a just law, so we are right to examine the police actions throughout all of this. By 24 June 2020, police were aware that Sinn Féin was preparing a management plan for the funeral, and police intended to comply with the plan for public safety and traffic management. Listening to 'The Nolan Show' yesterday, I heard ACC Todd give an account of how he policed that operation, and I, like many other Members, was confused. Who was

ACC on that day? Was it ACC Todd or was it ACC Gerry Kelly? The public are rightly asking the question today. Who was in control? It certainly was not law enforcement. In fact, policing responsibilities were handed over to Sinn Féin, which was an absolute dereliction of duty.

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Member for giving way. The police, having surrendered the streets of west Belfast to Sinn Féin, justified not intervening because there would have been "a real threat of violence". Is it not outrageous for the police to use that as an excuse for handing over the policing for Sinn Féin to manage?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Buckley:** The Member nails the point very well because, let us face it, where were the efforts to engage, explain, encourage and, ultimately, enforce the regulations during Bobby Storey's funeral? Their conduct served only to draw the conclusion, that many have sadly come to, that Sinn Féin is above the law that it sets. The Chief Constable has to consider his position. He has to go because there is a crisis of confidence, and Members need to take note of that. I mentioned ACC Todd: the man charged with the task of upholding the rule of law was party to the breaking of the law. He let down and undermined the very police officers who have had such a difficult job throughout COVID. We have asked them to do some incredibly difficult things.

In closing, although we were told of the much-heralded New Decade, New Approach, there has been a new decade but no new approach. Sinn Féin needs to reflect on the damage that it has done to Northern Ireland society by its actions and failure to own up, recognise its mistakes and deal with the situation.

**Mr O'Toole:** It is important that we are clear on what today's debate is and is not about. It is not about Bobby Storey or his family, who are entitled to respect and privacy as they grieve. It is incumbent on us to remain measured and respectful in our language and tone. Despite what have some have said, the debate is not about broader perceptions of policing or criminal justice decisions. There are other channels for those questions to be asked and debated. This debate is about the actions of senior politicians, indeed serving Ministers, in the Assembly. We hold Ministers to account for their performance in office every day that the Assembly sits. That is core to the functioning of the Assembly and any legislature. This

institution is imperfect and frequently dysfunctional, but it is essential. Despite all the difficulties and complexities in society, people want political power exercised locally. That means that those who hold power must be held accountable for their actions. That is why we are here today.

When we first debated the coronavirus regulations in the Chamber, many of us remarked on the extraordinarily invasive restrictions that we were placing on the everyday lives of citizens. Notwithstanding the various amendments, these regulations are still in place more than a year after they were first enacted. For more than a year of our lives, we have lived with enormous restrictions that, previously, would have been simply unthinkable. I remember saying in the Chamber last year, as did others, that restrictions on funerals and wakes would be especially difficult. The restrictions were necessary to deal with a previously unthinkable threat — a virus that has killed nearly 3 million people around the world, including more than 2,000 in Northern Ireland, 7,000 across the island of Ireland and 127,000 across the UK. The public accepted and complied with these restrictions based on a social contract between the state and citizen. An implicit part of that contract is the understanding that those who make the laws are bound to follow them like everyone else. We make the laws so we have to be willing to make, and be seen to make, the same sacrifices that others have made.

There is an Irish way of death that spans major denominational differences and even includes those of us who are not religious. It is a shared, cultural instinct to come together to envelope families in support, solidarity and love. I have no doubt that some of those sincere instincts lay behind the gathering on 30 June last year. Given the cultural importance of marking death here, ordinary people are entitled to ask, "Why not me? Why not my family? Why was my loss less important than someone else?" Hundreds, if not thousands, of families have lost loved ones in circumstances where not only were they unable to mark the passing in a proper funeral, but many did not even see their loved one before they died in a hospital or care home.

Many were not able to view the remains of their loved one because of the restrictions that we in the Chamber enacted last year, which were signed off by Ministers in the Executive. As has been said in the debate probably all of us have experienced real regret at not having been present in churches, funeral homes or graveyards to mark the passing of someone we knew. It may not have been a family member or

even a close friend, but it may have been someone in our community or neighbourhood whom we knew and admired and whose life meant something to us, even in a small way, and to whom, we felt, we owed the small debt of bearing witness to their life. But we did not do that. Many hundreds and thousands of others did not do that, because the rules were made to protect us all.

### 1.30 pm

The idea of a social contract, which I mentioned earlier, first emerged in the 18th century, at the same time as another idea: the republic. At the core of the idea of a republic and, therefore, surely at the core of the values of anyone who is republican is the principle of equal citizenship, the idea that, in a republic, unlike in other systems, all citizens are equal before the law and all rules apply to everyone equally. Whatever the findings of the PPS were, whatever conversations were had with police officers and however complicated the changes to the regulations were, it is clear that, on 30 June last year, multiple breaches of the rules took place involving senior members of the Executive. People of all backgrounds are offended, especially those who have lost loved ones and have not had the same opportunity to mark their passing.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member please draw his remarks to a close?

**Mr O'Toole:** They are offended because the principle of equal citizenship, which is core to the principles of a republic, has clearly been undermined. The very least that they can expect is a clear and sincere apology.

**Mr Easton:** On 30 June last year, over 2,000 people, including Members of the Assembly, attended the funeral of Bobby Storey. Every day before that and every day since, for the duration of this pandemic, families across the country have lost loved ones. Many have not been able to visit their dying loved ones in hospital, and some have had to say goodbye on the phone. Some of the stories that we have heard are, frankly, inhumane.

There is one rule for Sinn Féin and another for everybody else. If that had been me, a unionist politician, you can guarantee that I would have been arrested by the PSNI, recommended for prosecution by the PPS, taken to court and fined. My party probably would have asked me to resign. I would basically have been hung, drawn and quartered. It pains me to say it, but it is absolutely clear that there is a two-tier

political policing system because of the fear that Sinn Féin will be upset and because of the underlying threat that there is a potential for violence.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a valid point regarding policing and the political party, Sinn Féin. Days before the funeral, there were warning signs at the wake. I think that 400 people attended the wake of the deceased. Surely, that should have raised sirens for the political party of Sinn Féin and the PSNI.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Member for his comments. He is right: that should have sent a warning signal to the PSNI and Sinn Féin.

I hate to say it, but the fact is that Sinn Féin is treating my community and the Assembly like dirt. That needs to stop, and it needs to stop now. That is how Sinn Féin make me and my community feel.

The PPS's decision not to prosecute was, sadly, predictable, but that does not make it less abhorrent. The most unbelievable part of the entire episode is that the decision was justified on the basis that Members of the Assembly were confused by the rules. I do not recall that ever being mentioned last year.

Where do I begin with this? Do I begin with the thousands of families across the country who have carefully abided by the restrictions when holding funerals; with the fact that the Sinn Féin Ministers in attendance at the funeral had helped to draft and approve the regulations in the Executive; or with the fact that those Members have repeatedly criticised those who have taken part in other large gatherings? Perhaps a good starting point is to actually believe the PPS. Let us all pretend for a moment that the Sinn Féin members who went to the funeral were genuinely confused about the rules. If that was the case, why did they not share their confusion with the PSNI when they met them to discuss the funeral arrangements? Perhaps there is a considerable difference between 30 and 2,000, but that cannot be used as an excuse. I have never heard a more ridiculous justification for a decision with such huge ramifications.

The position of my party is that the Chief Constable should resign. I have been led to that conclusion by a considerable list of failings. This is not an orange or green issue: people on

all sides of the constitutional debate are rightly angry about what happened, and many have lost faith in the Chief Constable. However, it must be said that the unionist community in particular has lost confidence, especially in the Chief Constable, and policing here relies on cross-community consent. The Chief Constable appears to be oblivious to the damage that has been done to unionist confidence in policing, and this is the latest in a catalogue of mishaps. There has long been talk of two-tier policing in Northern Ireland, and those at the top in the police insist that that is not the case.

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to my colleague for giving way. Does the Member agree that what we have here is a case not of confusion but of collusion. They plotted and conspired jointly — the police and Sinn Féin — to put in place the arrangements for that funeral.

**Mr Easton:** Yes, there is no confusion whatever.

If it is mere perception, how does one explain the Storey funeral and the subsequent investigation compared with how the unionist community has been treated? The Chief Constable still seems not to grasp the political repercussions of how this has been handled.

On another matter, the deputy First Minister was only interviewed five months after the event took place. Meanwhile, the PSNI continued to issue on-the-spot fines to members of the public and could arrest loyalists within three days for alleged breaches of COVID regulations, normally with less evidence than we have for Sinn Féin Members attending that funeral.

There is a picture of the deputy First Minister at the funeral with a man's arm around her. Some people in this country have not hugged their mother for a year. The policing of the event has made a total mockery of the regulations. The actions of the deputy First Minister and other Sinn Féin politicians last year undermined the public message, and I have no doubt that it reduced public compliance. Yet, throughout the most recent lockdown, the vast majority of people have continued to follow the restrictions. The decision by the PPS not to prosecute will, I fear, shatter compliance with restrictions. As a result of what happened, I have already heard about cases in which people are going to challenge in the courts the fines that they received. How can we tell members of the public with any authority that their businesses must close, they must not see their families and they must not leave their homes? The public will laugh at us.

The apology of the deputy First Minister was not enough and is not good enough. She has failed to acknowledge any wrongdoing on her part. It remains my view that her position is untenable and that she should resign, but you just do not care. The deputy First Minister has no authority to lecture people on what they should and should not do, because the message on COVID regulations has been shattered. The Chief Constable must also consider his refusal to resign. He should reflect on the magnitude of the events and their effect on the confidence of policing in Northern Ireland. What happened last June and the decisions in recent days cannot and should not be ignored. There must be serious consequences as a result of the actions of Sinn Féin.

**Mr Carroll:** People Before Profit have consistently opposed police powers to fine and prosecute people for gathering throughout the pandemic because the virus should be approached with a proper public health response, not a tougher police state. The Executive utterly failed to deliver the health response that we needed. Endowing the police with more powers has created the conditions for minorities to be targeted. When the debates around the funeral kicked off last year, we had no truck, therefore, with calls for prosecutions against Michelle O'Neill or, indeed, others for attending funerals, particularly when such a spectacularly disparate approach had been taken to other gatherings by those often leading the charge.

That is not where the disparities end, of course. For some time now I have strongly rebuked the PSNI for its disproportionate approach to gatherings across the North throughout the pandemic. There seems to be a thread that links the events that have been strongly targeted by the police that we cannot ignore today or during the rest of the pandemic. It appears that those standing up against systemic oppression have been treated differently from those who are in or are well-connected to Stormont. A gathering predominantly of women protesting against sexism and violence after the murder of Sarah Everard a few weeks ago was targeted and fines up to £500 doled out. A few months ago, an event with a handful of people commemorating the Sean Graham bookmakers' massacre ended seriously and faced unnecessary hostility from the PSNI. As, I know, some in the Chamber and some who have called in via video today are tired of hearing, a gathering of people taking a stand against racial injustice was targeted, first, by politicians in this room, who passed last-minute

regulations; secondly, by the police, who kettled people in a way that was unsafe and broke social distancing measures; and, thirdly, by the justice system, which continues to go after them for prosecutions. None of those gatherings of people had the benefit of claiming that the regulations were too complicated. None of those groups had the benefit of being offered police assistance to work through and manage their events; in fact, with the Black Lives Matter protest, the police went after organisers the night before the event attempting to hand out cautions before any gathering had taken place. Those people faced police repression, fines, threats of prosecutions and arrests for some. When you compare that with the likes of how Michelle O'Neill or Sammy Wilson have been treated, the disparity could not be clearer.

What astounds me further is the brazen hypocrisy. Sammy Wilson has made a habit of actively flouting the regulations, including going into an ice cream shop without wearing a mask. He did not care how dangerous it was. He did not like the regulations, and he knew that he could flout them with impunity. What a brass neck then for Sammy or his party to lead the charge against others who have broken or may have broken regulations during the pandemic.

Similarly, the fact that Michelle O'Neill has refused to retract her comments about the police response to the Black Lives Matter protests being proportionate, when she was involved in a gathering that appeared to be less socially distant, is hypocritical. I have asked her before and will put it to her again: when will she apologise for the defence of the PSNI's actions and stand on the side of those who were disproportionately targeted on that day?

In the wake of Minister O'Neill not being fined or prosecuted, the Executive should move swiftly to ensure that prosecutions for others gathering are quashed. Ordinary people, including the most marginalised, have been targeted while those in power and the bosses who force people into unsafe workplaces have been left untouched. What a terrible look for the Executive. It is fitting though, as a report shows how Stormont's racial equality strategy has utterly failed and the First Minister refuses to meet the leadership of the trade union movement in the North. It is disgraceful stuff.

I want to issue a warning. If the case against the Black Lives Matter protesters is allowed to proceed through the courts and results in prosecutions, the impact on the lives and careers of those protesters will have been caused by the Executive and their Ministers. It will be on their hands, so do something about it.

Otherwise, I imagine that it will be very difficult to answer this question: how can it be that those who took the most stringent measures to socially distance and who met in the smallest groups were targeted with a heavy-handed police response, yet those who did not so much as wear a mask were not? It would be the reverse, if the police responses were about COVID at all, but they are not. They are about who you are and why you are gathering, and the state has sent out a clear message: organise around police brutality, violence against women by a police officer or collusion by the state —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr Carroll:** — and you are fair game. Establishment politicians, on the other hand, are untouchable. I will continue to call out that rank hypocrisy going forward.

**Ms Sugden:** I begin by thanking all those who have kept to the rules over the past year. It has been a difficult year, and it has been a significant sacrifice. Every day, I hear stories from people crying to me on the telephone about missed appointments for critical surgery or about not being able to see their loved ones and pleading with me to give them permission to travel to see someone whom they have not seen in years, because that is all that they have. I also pay tribute to all those whose lives have been lost over the past year. I am sorry that, as an Assembly, we had to take measures that saved more lives. I am sorry that we stopped people mourning in the way that they would have expected.

I will begin this where it should end, and that is with political leadership. I am so disappointed in the deputy First Minister and others, not least because they have yet to give a full apology for their actions, not apologising for someone's hurt. You do not own their hurt to apologise for it: you own the actions that led to their hurt. If anything meaningful can come out of today's session, deputy First Minister, it is that you apologise for what you did. It leads me to believe that, if this circumstance were to happen again and you had a choice to make about attending another funeral in similar circumstances, you would do it again. Sadly, the people of Northern Ireland believe the same. People are so angry. They have been angry since last July. The messaging around the COVID regulations was diminished at the point at which you appeared at that funeral.

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am very interested in what she just said. Does she agree with me that that illustrates that the movement rather than the people, the health service or the economy always comes first with Sinn Féin and that it is not a conventional political party in the sense of every other party in the Chamber?

1.45 pm

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Ms Sugden:** Thank you. I thank the Member for his contribution. I will summarise by saying that I do not believe that there was any political leadership. Members on this side of the House have as much responsibility to everyone in Northern Ireland, not least the people who they would have vote for them. It is disappointing that that was put above the people of Northern Ireland last year.

Whether or not you believe that you knew the regulations, you acted against the spirit of the regulations. Further, it is your job to know the regulations, so if you are claiming ignorance, you are also admitting to incompetence. As political leaders, as the deputy First Minister, as the Finance Minister, as members of the Policing Board and as Members of the House, we are held to a higher standard because people look to us as an example. It is not an excuse for you to say that you did not know. If there was any doubt, you should not have been there. You intentionally flirted with the rules hoping that it would not be noticed — but it was. It was noticed by every person in Northern Ireland, particularly those grieving families.

I could say a lot about what happened this week. Ultimately, it was the result of poor political leadership. To an extent, it was also the result of poor legislation and an inconsistent application of said legislation. I agree with the Justice Minister, insofar as the justice system is there to seek to prove alleged crimes, and that can be difficult to an extent. However, I have significant concerns that the police did not even seek to gather evidence, which is a critical part of that system.

I also share in other Members' comments about policing and confidence in policing. I feel very sorry for police officers on the ground. I feel particularly sorry for them in my constituency, where we are expecting people to descend on the north coast. Not just that, but we are expecting people to come and break the rules because they feel that there will be no consequences. That gives rise to fears of a very

uncertain summer in Northern Ireland, and that worries me. I make this appeal to everyone in Northern Ireland: you are better for following the rules, and you are saving lives by doing so. Do not let the bad example of others discourage you in that.

On 10 April, it will be 23 years since the Good Friday Agreement. That agreement was a significant leap for all people from all sides in Northern Ireland. They accepted things that no person should have to accept, but they did that for the sake of peace and a better future. Last July, we saw thousands of people in uniform on the streets of Belfast. I do not think that that goes to the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement nor is it conducive to an inclusive society or a peace that those people made sacrifices for.

It is the sacrifices of the last year that we have to be acutely aware of today. I appeal to all leaders of the House, even those who broke the rules. I appreciate Mr Nesbitt's contribution. He broke the rules, but he said sorry for breaking the rules and took action that was symbolic of that apology. I want to see that from the deputy First Minister.

**Mr Murphy:** I welcome the opportunity that the debate gives me to set out my position on the funeral of Bobby Storey. Hurt has been caused to many families who had to bury their loved ones during this unprecedented health crisis. That was never my intention, nor do I believe that it was the intention of anyone involved in the funeral. However, hurt was caused, and I apologise for that unreservedly.

Let me be absolutely clear: the law does not distinguish between one set of people and another or one funeral and another.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Murphy:** I am not even sure who is speaking to me, a Cheann Comhairle.

**Mr Wells:** I am Jim Wells, and you certainly know who I am.

**Mr Murphy:** OK. You will have a chance to speak later on, and I will not interrupt you.

The law does not distinguish between one set of people and another nor one funeral and another; nor should it. I accepted and cooperated with the police investigation into the events. The PPS has now said that it will review the decision it made, and I await the outcome of that review. I fully accept the outcome of those processes.

However, let me reiterate today that I regret the political division that the matter has caused in the Assembly and to the public health messaging that we, as a collective, worked so hard to develop and get an agreed response to this terrible pandemic. More importantly, however, I want to say sorry to the wider community, but, more particularly, to apologise fully and unreservedly to those families who were hurt in any way by my actions.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Doug Beattie to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Mr Beattie:** In making a winding-up speech on the motion, I will reflect on nearly two hours of robust debate that was heated, certainly passionate, moving and angry at times. The debate ebbed and flowed, as it has done inside and outside the Chamber, about bereavement and how we remember lost loved ones, which, as Paul Frew said, goes to the heart of our society.

I thank everybody for their contribution to the debate. I timed Sinn Féin's contribution: it was four minutes. Four minutes of a two-hour debate to set out their stall on the matter. It is just not good enough. Absolutely not good enough. We needed to hear more; we heard nothing. The party doubled down on the position it held before we came to the House today.

Policing and justice has been damaged. Of course it has been damaged. However, like many people in this place, I have to reiterate that we cannot lay the blame on the rank-and-file police officer who has to interpret a set of regulations, written by us, that has to be delivered at the sharp end of justice; mistakes will be made.

People have pointed out the mistakes made by the gold commander at the funeral. Yes, he has made mistakes. Absolutely he has made mistakes. If he had worked on the enforcement aspect of the engagement, we may not be where we are today. If he had simply said, "You know what, you see that Milltown eulogy? It's not acceptable, it ain't happening. Go away and rethink that", we may not be where we are today.

The Chief Constable has come under serious scrutiny and criticism. I have to say, regrettably, that is justified because he is the head of a police force like no other. This is not Kent or the Midlands: this is Northern Ireland. We have a very distinct policing issue and, unfortunately, he has, in many ways, failed to understand that.

Please let us not lose sight of what happened. The very fact that the issue came about is because a political party — Sinn Féin — sat down in ministerial positions and made rules and regulations that they told everybody to adhere to and they did not. They just did what they wanted to do, and they cannot get away in the smoke as we start focusing on other people. It was not a decision made by mistake; it was a decision taken deliberately knowing the consequences. They organised the funeral in detail with the police. They even organised the wake, as Mr Stalford clearly pointed out. They proudly said, "We organised the wake", even though the rules stated you were not allowed to have a wake. There were signs pointing out to people how to go to the wake. That was compounded when the party refused to apologise and show contrition. They simply promoted the idea that they were above everybody else and that they had some kind of privilege that we do not. The IRA army council directed how the funeral should be done because it wanted to remember one of its own.

That is the reality. If they had shown political understanding, they would not have done it.

**Mr Givan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beattie:** I will not, Paul, if you do not mind. I just want to shoot through it.

Nicola Mallon, Mike Nesbitt and Claire Sugden raised the issue that the guidelines were said to be confusing. That is an absolutely embarrassing defence. If I were going to organise something, no matter what it was, a garden event or anything, the first thing that I would do is get out the rules and regulations and read them, because I may well have forgotten them over time. That is not a defence, and it should never be one. It cannot be a defence.

Many Members will have received emails from constituents, outlining the hurt that they have felt over this past number of months. I have received moving emails; even last night I received them. On reading them, you can recount the hurt that has been delivered on those people, because they saw one group getting something that they were not allowed, and that was to be able to say goodbye to their loved ones in the manner that they wanted.

Kellie Armstrong's contribution on the issue was very moving. Dolores outlined that although members of her party and her friends had loved ones who had died, they could not attend their funerals. These contributions highlight the issue

well. Integrity shown by parties that adhered to the rules and regulations. Of course, my friend Mike Nesbitt lost his mother. There could be no fanfare, no funeral, no lining the route, no ushers, no black and whites, no 2,000 people coming out onto the street. I could not even attend my friend's mother's funeral to show him support. Why not? It was because he adhered to the rules.

The PPS findings are absolutely staggering. Although we watched it all unfold on TV — people deliberately breaking the rules — the PPS said that it could not see them breaking the rules. It was there for all to see on television. There were 24 recommendations for prosecution, but none have been taken forward. Mary Lou McDonald and Gerry Adams were not even questioned or investigated, and no file was put forward. Why not? It is staggering. I wrote to the DPP on Tuesday night and said that the decision is having a material effect on my constituents and he must review it. I do not know whether he took my letter and said, "Let us review this matter", or somebody else did that, or lots of people did it. However, it is being reviewed. Let us see the outcome and get some meat on the bones of a decision that was taken that was fundamentally wrong. We know that it was wrong.

This is what it feels like for ordinary people out on the street. It feels like a criminal, maybe a thief, has gone before the courts, got away on a technicality and has come out sneering, only to do the same thing all over again. The difference is that this matter did not even get brought to court, even though so many other people have been brought to court.

This debate will not have any binding outcomes. It is an opportunity for us to express our views, and people will know that we are just doing that. The Sinn Féin Ministers will hope that it is all forgotten about in the days and weeks to come. However, it cannot be. You are the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and you are the Finance Minister, and you have shown no integrity, moral courage, compassion or understanding for the very people that you tell us that you represent. I am not talking about anybody in the context of green or orange, but about the everyday people who go to work every day to make a living and who adhere to the rules that we set and that you broke.

## 2.00 pm

Your apology was poor. It was not an apology. In the four minutes that you gave us, nothing changed. The apology needs to be about what you did. You organised and delivered a funeral

and a wake outside the rules and regulations. You have to apologise for that; that is what you have to do. My friend Mike Nesbitt apologised fulsomely — I felt it — and he apologised to me and my party in private. That was a measure of integrity. Claw back your compassion. Claw back your integrity. Claw back your moral authority. Apologise and then resign. That is where we are.

In the last 30 seconds that I have, in the context of the debate, I say to people: do not let Sinn Féin set your moral agenda on this particular issue. Please, everybody, adhere to the health regulations. Do not break them. Doing so will cost lives. The breach nine months ago cost lives.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly acknowledges the pain endured by families across Northern Ireland who have experienced loss during the COVID-19 crisis; expresses its sincere condolences to those who, in periods of trauma and loss, were unable to say goodbye to loved ones; further expresses its gratitude to those who have followed the public health guidelines and played their part in keeping their neighbours, communities and the health service safe; regrets the actions of those in positions of elected office who breached the Executive's public health messaging and undermined efforts to prevent transmission of the virus; and condemns the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance for their actions, which have caused immense hurt and undermined the Executive's public health message.*

*Adjourned at 2.01 pm.*

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