



Official Report (Hansard)

Saturday 3 February 2024
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Contents

Assembly Business

Election of the Speaker	1
Election of the Deputy Speakers	10

Committee Business

Business Committee Membership	12
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Assembly Business

Appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	12
Appointment of the Minister of Justice	20
Ministerial Appointments	22
Official Opposition	24
Appointment of Junior Ministers	24

Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)	Hargey, Miss Deirdre (South Belfast)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)	Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)	Honeyford, David (Lagan Valley)
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)	Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)	Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Baker, Danny (West Belfast)	Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)	Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Blair, John (South Antrim)	Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)	Kingston, Brian (North Belfast)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)	Little-Pengelly, Mrs Emma (Lagan Valley)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)	Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Brett, Phillip (North Belfast)	Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Brogan, Miss Nicola (West Tyrone)	McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
Brooks, David (East Belfast)	McAllister, Miss Nuala (North Belfast)
Brownlee, Ms Cheryl (East Antrim)	McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
Brown, Patrick (South Down)	McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)	McGrath, Colin (South Down)
Buchanan, Tom (West Tyrone)	McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)	McHugh, Maolíosa (West Tyrone)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)	McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)	McLaughlin, Ms Sinéad (Foyle)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)	McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)	McReynolds, Peter (East Belfast)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)	Mason, Mrs Cathy (South Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)	Mathison, Nick (Strangford)
Delargy, Pádraig (Foyle)	Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)	Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Dillon, Mrs Linda (Mid Ulster)	Mulholland, Ms Sian (North Antrim)
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)	Murphy, Miss Áine (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Dolan, Miss Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Donnelly, Danny (East Antrim)	Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Dunne, Stephen (North Down)	Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)	Nicholl, Ms Kate (South Belfast)
Easton, Alex (North Down)	O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
Eastwood, Ms SORCHA (Lagan Valley)	O'Neill, Ms Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Egan, Ms Connie (North Down)	O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Poots, Edwin (Speaker)
Ennis, Mrs Sinéad (South Down)	Reilly, Ms Aisling (West Belfast)
Erskine, Mrs Deborah (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Robinson, Alan (East Londonderry)
Ferguson, Mrs Ciara (Foyle)	Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Flynn, Miss Órlaithí (West Belfast)	Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Forsythe, Ms Diane (South Down)	Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)	Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)	Tennyson, Eóin (Upper Bann)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Saturday 3 February 2024

The Assembly met at 1.00 pm (Mr Acting Speaker [Mr Chambers] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):

Welcome to today's sitting. Before we commence, I intend to make some personal remarks, and I ask for your indulgence as I will remain seated for this and other items of business.

This is the sixth occasion on which I have sat in this Chair in the capacity of Acting Speaker at a session of the Assembly convened for the purpose of attempting to elect a permanent Speaker. It has been a personal privilege and an honour to have performed that duty on your behalf. I concede that it has taken me some time to help, in a small way, to deliver a successful outcome. However, I am confident that today will be the day that I can finally pick up my P45 [*Laughter*] and end my career as Acting Speaker. Given the budgetary constraints, I am not expecting a retirement gift of a gold watch.

I understand that I may have made a bit of Assembly history by setting an unwanted record for the number of attempts by an Acting Speaker to complete the task of actually electing a Speaker. My personal hope is that that unwanted record will remain unbroken in the future, as breaking it would mean that, once again, we had deprived the people whom we represent of the governance that they entrust us to deliver in this place. I place on record my thanks to you all for your cooperation and patience with me during this lengthy process and for the assistance and support that I have received from Assembly staff in performing this duty.

The Speaker has summoned the Assembly to meet today, and I welcome him in the Chamber this afternoon as we come together to elect his successor. Mr Speaker, you exercised your authority in the Chamber with integrity, impartiality and more patience than we often deserved. We wish you well for your retirement.

Election of the Speaker

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): The first item of business is the election of the Speaker. Section 39(1) of the Northern Ireland Act provides:

"Each Assembly shall as its first business elect from among its members a Presiding Officer and deputies."

Therefore, the Assembly cannot conduct any further business until a Speaker and at least two Deputy Speakers have been elected. Members should be clear: without the election of a Speaker and two Deputy Speakers, no further business can proceed.

I advise Members that the election of a Speaker will be conducted under the procedures set out in Standing Order 4. Further to Standing Order 4(2), I am the Acting Speaker today for the purpose of electing a Speaker. My sole responsibility is to preside over the election of a new Speaker. I will not take any points of order that do not relate to that specific matter.

I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose that another Member be elected as Speaker. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded by another Member, as required by Standing Order 14. I will then verify that the Member seconded is willing to accept the nomination. After that, I will ask for further proposals and follow the same procedure for each. When it appears that there are no further proposals, I will make it clear that the time for proposals has passed. If Members indicate that they wish to speak, a debate relevant to the election may then take place, during which Members will have up to five minutes to speak.

At the conclusion of the debate or the conclusion of the nominations, if there are no requests to speak, I shall put the Question that the Member first proposed shall be Speaker of the Assembly. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I

shall put the Question in relation to the next nominee and so on until all nominations are exhausted. Once a Speaker is elected, all other nominations will fall automatically.

Do I have any proposals for the office of Speaker of the Assembly?

Mr K Buchanan: On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I nominate Edwin Poots.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Do we have a seconder for that proposal?

Ms Bunting: Seconded, Mr Acting Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Mr Poots, are you happy to accept the nomination?

Mr Poots: I am.

Mr O'Toole: On behalf of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, I nominate Patsy McGlone for the office of Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Do we have a seconder for that?

Ms Hunter: I second that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Mr McGlone, are you happy to accept the nomination?

Mr McGlone: Glacaim leis an ainmniúchán. I accept.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Are there any other nominations?

Mr Stewart: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I nominate Dr Steve Aiken.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Does that nomination have a seconder?

Mr Beattie: Seconded.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Dr Aiken, are you happy to accept that nomination?

Dr Aiken: I am happy to accept that nomination.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Are there any other nominations?

The time for proposals has expired. A number of Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I remind Members that they may speak only once in the course of the debate. Members have up to five minutes in which to speak.

Ms Ennis: I will just say at the outset how good it is to be back in the Chamber doing the business that people elected us to do.

If you will indulge me, I will take the opportunity to say a few words of thanks to my friend and colleague Alex Maskey for the fantastic job that he has done as Speaker of the Assembly. When Michelle O'Neill nominated Alex four years ago, she said that she did so in the knowledge that he would carry out his role with determined professionalism, treating all with impartiality and respect. He has certainly lived up to that. His decision to retire from front-line politics is a huge loss to this institution. When I have spoken to Assembly staff over the past number of days, they have been glowing in their genuine appreciation for his steadying presence and guidance during the difficult and uncertain period that we have just come through.

Nowhere will Alex's loss be more keenly felt than by his colleagues in Sinn Féin and by the party as a whole. Alex was a trailblazer for our party. He was the first Sinn Féin member of Belfast City Council and the first republican mayor in the history of Belfast. He has been a constant presence over the decades, whether it was the Good Friday Agreement negotiations or the many subsequent rounds of negotiations. Alex was always there and always a key figure, bringing experience, maturity, a fierce commitment to equality and a tireless determination to make politics work for everyone. That has been the hallmark of an incredible and unique career in the service of people whom, I know, Alex was honoured to represent.

I grew up looking up to Alex and watching him and others guide our society towards peace and equality. My younger self could not have comprehended that, one day, I would have the privilege of standing here, wishing him well as he takes a step back from the front line of political life. My mind would have been just as blown to think that I would have the opportunity to work with Alex and the even greater honour of calling him a friend.

Your retirement is well earned, Alex. I am sure that I speak on behalf of everyone in the Chamber when I say go raibh míle, míle maith agat. I wish you, Liz and the rest of your family every happiness in the years ahead.

In that same spirit, I wish a big ádh mór — [*Translation: good luck*] — to whomever the new Speaker is to be. It is always a challenging role that they undertake. I say on behalf of the team that they have all of our good wishes for what will be a challenging time ahead as they steer us through the many debates and issues that we will have to go through.

Mr Dickson: Today marks a new chapter for the Assembly, but it is also the end of an era, as Alex Maskey finally gets to retire after 26 years in the Assembly and four years as Speaker. During that time, he has shown leadership in extending the hand of friendship to those from different backgrounds. As has been said, he was the first Sinn Féin councillor in Belfast since the 1920s. He went on to become the first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor, which indeed created headlines, but the act of choosing the opening of the Presbyterian general assembly as his first public duty marked him as someone different. Laying a wreath for remembrance is seen now as a normal act, but for a member of Sinn Féin to do so in 2002 was a big event, as were his dealings with the royal family following the passing of the late Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. From handling official condolences to meeting the new King and Queen at Hillsborough, it was clear that Alex Maskey was prepared to represent the office of Speaker with impartiality and integrity.

Many of our young citizens across Northern Ireland will remember him fondly for different reasons. Left with no MLAs to fill this Building, he seized the opportunity to use this space to develop the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly and the Disability Assembly, providing an opportunity for voices not often heard in the Chamber. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I wish him a very happy retirement, although, if he misses sparring in the Chamber too much, perhaps he could return to his boxing roots. In the 75 fights that he competed in, he lost, I believe, only four. Perhaps we won a few more political fights than he did, but we will leave that to the history books and the writers to decide. One thing that we can be sure about is that history will remember him as a fair and impartial Speaker who steered the Chamber through many difficult and momentous occasions.

The Alliance Party is happy to support all of the nominations that have been made today for the position of Speaker, as we have done through all of the recalls that the Assembly has had.

1.15 pm

Mr Beattie: I stand primarily to support the nomination of our candidate for Speaker, Dr Steve Aiken, an exceptional candidate who would be fair and robust. If he gets cross-community support, he will add value to what we have in the House and on the Floor.

It would be remiss of me, as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, not to look to the outgoing Speaker, Alex Maskey, and thank him for all that he has done. It has been a difficult stint, and his retirement has been long in coming; I suppose that it is one of the longest. I have engaged extensively with him, certainly around the death and funeral of Her Majesty The Queen and the coronation of King Charles. I thanked him then and thank him now for all that he did in that regard. I thank you as you move on, and I wish you all the best.

I also wish the best to whomever takes over as Speaker when the election happens. Of course, it will be Dr Steve Aiken, but I can thank him personally later. I thank you, Mr Acting Speaker, for all that you have done as well. It is not easy to be thrust in there periodically and have to go through this process.

As for where we stand now, we have had two years of having no Executive or Assembly, and we have all been frustrated in some shape or form. Everybody, from all corners of the Chamber, has been frustrated, but, despite all of that frustration, the people who have suffered most are the people of Northern Ireland. They have really suffered, and, in our frustrations, we must remember that as we look forward. We have a Herculean task before us, and we have to improve the lives of the people. We can do that by making Northern Ireland a working part of the United Kingdom.

We need to focus on people and everything that goes with that, regardless of their religion, sexual orientation or which community background they come from. We can do that by focusing on things like the economy, because the economy will drive our infrastructure to make people more connected. It will help us with our health service and education. It will help to build houses and create jobs so that our young people wake up in the morning with a sense of purpose and go to bed at night with a sense of fulfilment. The economy connects people to everything that goes on in Northern Ireland. That is what I am looking for going forward, but this is no panacea. Some of the challenges ahead are monumental, and we will meet them only if we support each other. There are opponents in here, and I get that we will have divisions and arguments, but we can all move in one direction, and that is to improve

the lives of the people who live here, work here and visit here. I set out now, as we go forward, regardless of who the Speaker or the Ministers will be, that the Ulster Unionist Party will work with you to make this place the best place that it can be for the people who live here.

Mr Givan: I am pleased that we have reached the stage where we have a stable and sustainable basis on which to elect a Speaker and have the institutions back up and running. Two years ago, to the very date, I resigned. Something had to bring matters to a head, which is why my leader acted decisively at that time. Having secured the necessary progress across a wide range of issues, we are here at this point today.

I am glad that we have got to this stage. It has been a long road to get here. I hope, as the Assembly starts out in a renewed effort to deliver for the people, that we never again end up in a position where unionists are discarded, others in the House do not listen to the concerns expressed by the unionist people and every unionist elected Member of this place feels that changes have taken place without our consent.

That has been the journey that we have had to go on, often, regrettably, without the support of many people in the House who often made issues more difficult for us to reach the point that we have got to today. However, through determination, Jeffrey Donaldson has led us to this stage, and I am proud of the work that he has put in to get us to that point, not for the DUP but for Northern Ireland and the people of Northern Ireland.

As we step forward, let us do it in a manner that we can work together in genuine cooperation. We have the right person now to be the Speaker of the Assembly in Edwin Poots, someone whom I have known for a very long time. At 16 years of age, when I joined the party, it was Edwin who was there. I worked for him for one day a week when I was 17 years of age, so I have known him for a long time. I have always known him to act with absolute integrity in everything that he does, and Members can rest assured that there will never be anything that will cause them concern in how Edwin Poots discharges his duties as the Speaker of the Assembly. Elected here in 1998, he is one of only two left and still standing. He was elected previously in the 1996 Forum and was a councillor in 1997, but he is not the first Poots to have been elected to this Assembly. His father, the late Charlie Poots, was elected to Stormont in 1973 for what was the old North Down constituency. I know that his family are

immensely proud of how Edwin Poots has continued to carry on the legacy that his father left him and of the character that was instilled in him in that family.

Today is an important day for Edwin, but I have to say that I will miss him on these Benches. I will miss him in the room upstairs where we meet and discuss how we will deal with business, but it is a new challenge for him and a new opportunity, and I know that he will embrace that. I am delighted to speak in favour of my good friend and colleague Edwin Poots, and I know that he will do incredibly well in the position of Speaker in the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I call Mr Matthew O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. Before I get on to moving the nomination of my friend Patsy McGlone, let me first pay tribute to you. You are a very experienced retailer, and you have had to do quite a lot of minding the shop in this place over the past while. You have done it with good grace and competence.

As others have done, I would like to pay real, sincere tribute to Alex Maskey, the outgoing Speaker. Alex was a fine Speaker who had a brilliant record of acting with impartiality, robustness and fairness in the Chair. As others have said, as a republican, he made real progress in his outreach around cross-community work. Just last year, he and I had a somewhat surreal moment chatting to one another in Hillsborough Castle while we were waiting for the new King to arrive. I think that he and I were both slightly nonplussed by being there, but Alex, as always, stood up to the moment and did himself and his party proud. He has now been on the longest farewell tour since Springsteen, and I hope that he enjoys a retirement now that the tour is coming to an end.

This is now the sixth or seventh time that I have moved a nomination for Patsy McGlone, and I am proud to do so today. Notwithstanding the quality of the other candidates, I am sure — many others will agree with me — that Patsy McGlone is the most qualified candidate to be Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. He is the most experienced Chair that we have. He has been an elected representative for more than 30 years, proudly serving the people of Mid Ulster in south Derry and east Tyrone. He has been a Member of the Assembly for more than 21 years. He has done that role with diligence, commitment to cross-community politics and commitment to the kind of progressive, pro-reconciliation values that have

always marked my party out. He would be the first fluent Gaeilgeoir to take a seat in the Speaker's Chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Given that we are now in a Chamber that, for the first time, can do simultaneous translation for Irish speakers and given that the Irish-speaking community is moving forward and expanding into new communities and new speakers in a way that we are all excited about, it would mark a really profound moment to elect Patsy, a fluent Gaeilgeoir, to the Chair.

I say that notwithstanding the quality of the other candidates. We will not be supporting them; we will be supporting Patsy. However, whoever is elected to the Chair, we look forward to working with them positively.

Mr Allister: This is a day of glee and gloating for republicanism as the DUP leadership returns, after its seismic climbdown, to implement the Union-dismantling protocol. Despite all the fake news and attempts to spin defeat as victory, this is a climbdown of monumental proportions. It is quite clear that not one word of the protocol has changed — not one word. Northern Ireland remains under the EU's customs code, which decrees GB to be a foreign country. That is of momentous constitutional significance in itself. We continue to be ruled, in significant part, by foreign laws. In annex 2 of the protocol, all 287 of those EU laws remain in place in perpetuity, beyond the reach of the Stormont brake, and therefore under the supervision of the European Court of Justice.

We still have an Irish Sea border. If the Irish Sea border was gone, we would be dismantling, not continuing to build, border posts, yet millions of pounds are being spent in that pursuit. Under EU legislation, Northern Ireland is still determined as EU territory. None of that has changed.

On article 6, despite the weasel attempts in the Donaldson deal to diminish its importance, it is still in suspension and, with it, so is one of the twin pillars of this Union. Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom is not restored. We are still constitutionally a condominium, ruled in part by UK laws and in part by foreign laws that we do not make, and all of that with a partitioning border down the Irish Sea.

It is little wonder that this morning, in 'The Belfast Telegraph', Sam McBride described the deal as "the Windsor Framework in drag". That is exactly what it is. The Windsor framework was not good enough to bring the DUP back to vote in a Speaker, nor is this deal, and to roll over now and become protocol implementers is

beyond comprehension. I accept that there are many in the DUP — some of them are on the Benches today — who are very unhappy with this course of action and agree with many of the things that I am saying, and I urge them to continue to stand strong. I suggest that the moment that we vote to elect a Speaker, that is a vote to proceed to implement the protocol. That is a step that should not be taken.

Of course, as it turns out, there were many for whom opposition to the protocol was just bluff and bluster, and none more than Mr Poots. This is the man who told us that there had to be seismic changes to the protocol. It turns out that, for Mr Poots, seismic means the promise — not even the delivery — of the reduction of green-lane physical checks from 5% to zero. That is not even in the legislation that was passed this week. For Mr Poots, that is seismic. Wow. To everyone else, it is closer to infinitesimal.

So, from Mr Seismic to Mr Speaker: oh, the irresistible lure of office for those whose principles are expendable. For Mr Poots, the speakership is the fruit of the poison tree, and no good can come of it.

1.30 pm

Mr Carroll: Mr Acting Speaker, I wish both you and the outgoing Speaker well on your retirement. The Speaker is my colleague in West Belfast; I wish you both well.

After two years of divisive posturing from the DUP, working-class people are in no mood for the cynical fanfare that surrounds Stormont's resurrection. If I was a member of the DUP sitting here today, I would be utterly embarrassed by the entire debacle. You should be embarrassed that striking public-sector workers have forced you back to work, that you have delivered next to nothing on the protocol and that you have blatantly lied to the base you claim to represent. You put your political interests before workers' pay, public services and the day-to-day struggles that face working-class communities, and you have been found out.

Over the past few days, I have been on picket lines with striking education and transport workers, who are out because the return of Stormont does not guarantee the pay rise that they need and deserve. They need to be paid now, and all workers need to be ready to challenge the new Executive to deliver their demands. People Before Profit has been consistent in calling for the DUP to end its

boycott, but it would be remiss of me not to outline our firm opposition to the latest Tory/DUP pact. It can be described as a Tory love letter to the DUP. It is couched in the language of the DUP. It is meant as a reward for its divisive antics, and the Tories are signalling that the DUP was justified in holding people to ransom for two years, that the concerns of unionism should be elevated above everything else and that the feelings of hard-line loyalists, including paramilitaries, are there to be pandered to.

More importantly, the deal contains absolutely nothing that will tackle the issues facing our communities, including poverty, pay, growing inequalities, hard-up schools or our collapsing NHS. In fact, the deal signifies the exact opposite. In addition, there is talk of water charges and raised rates. The deal also recommits to the devolution of corporation tax, which parties here have been itching to slash for years. Establishment parties that have heralded the changes of a new Executive must think that the public has collective amnesia. They think that their spin, which is lapped up and flung out by the media, will make us forget the failures of previous Administrations. They think that the talk of a new dawn will hide the old divisive and regressive politics at its very core. We remember that the DUP, Sinn Féin and Alliance implemented welfare reform in a previous bid to slash corporation tax, punishing the poor and the vulnerable to give handouts to the rich. Shameful.

Workers will remember that those parties cut their pay and gutted public services when Stormont last sat. The people who are languishing on health waiting lists will remember who inflicted those cuts and who opened the door to the slow privatisation of our NHS. Those waiting on a home will remember who refused to build homes and handed land to private, wealthy developers. The communities around Lough Neagh and in the Sperrins and elsewhere will remember who incentivised the destruction of our environment and poisoned our waterways. Therefore, our message is that there should be no honeymoon period for the new Executive, and trade unionists must get ready, as they were this morning, to breathe down the neck of this Administration.

While the unionist establishment continues to wrangle over the protocol, unionism remains in terminal decline. The Tories have copper-fastened the Stormont brake, enshrining the communal veto and reinforcing the system of sectarianism that has afflicted the Stormont institutions for years. The instability that that will cause will shake not only the foundations of

Stormont but the foundation of the northern state itself. Despite what the Tories have outlined in the deal, the democratic aspiration for a united Ireland will not be stymied by imperial diktat. It is for the people of Ireland to decide. People Before Profit will continue to fight for a socialist path to a united Ireland that sees all people from all backgrounds in its spoils and the politics of sectarianism left in the past.

The Tory/DUP love-letter deal is not just about strengthening the Union, it is about strengthening its militaristic aims. It will attempt to incorporate the North further into British military defence systems as the Tories beat the drum of war louder and louder.

Therefore, the new Executive will have a question to answer: will they roll over as the Tories drag us into war in Europe and the Middle East, or will they really stand for peace on the global stage? People have to know that the mass Palestine solidarity movement that has exploded across the world and on this island and will not tolerate the North having any part to play —

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Will the Member bring his remarks to a conclusion, please?

Mr Carroll: — in funding the apartheid state in Israel. More on that later.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I call Mr Mike Nesbitt. *[Pause.]* I call Mr Mike Nesbitt.

Mr Nesbitt: Sorry, Mr Acting Speaker, I did not hear you there.

I just want to say a few words in praise of the outgoing Speaker. When I came here in 2011 as a rookie Ulster Unionist, I encountered a well-seasoned republican in Mr Maskey, and I quickly came to realise, to my surprise, that we could work together harmoniously, much more so than in our previous encounters as interviewee and interviewer at Ulster Television. Mr Maskey used to come in, particularly on a Thursday night, for the politics, and I remember that, one night, the editor whispered in my earpiece, "If you push him any harder, he might deck you" *[Laughter.]* But he never did.

Here, we served together on the Committee for the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister, scrutinising the work of the Executive Office. It is a matter of record that, over the past nearly 26 years, that was the only Committee that ever single-handedly put legislation through

the House. That was the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman Bill, which became an Act. It took a long time. As Chair, I had the pleasure as of steering the last few passages. It was not without its challenges to republican ideology, but Mr Maskey took a practical and pragmatic view that the prize was worth paying a little price for and that the price did not compromise his principles. I very much appreciate what you did, Mr Maskey, in steering the Sinn Féin group through that Committee.

I think that we all can agree on what Mr Maskey did in that Chair: the neutrality, the friendliness and the professionalism. Of course, we do not see a lot of the work of the Speaker, which includes meeting and greeting and promoting this institution. A little while ago, I was asked by the Northern Ireland Centre of Competitiveness whether I would entertain a worldwide global president whom they were flying into Belfast in the hope of attracting an annual conference. They were to come up here one Friday morning, and I sent a message to Mr Maskey, "Could you join us at 11 o'clock for a cup of coffee in the Members' Bar?" The answer came back straight away: "No, I will not. You come here, and I will entertain you in the Speaker's Office". That is what he did, and it was a much more impressive greeting than I could have offered upstairs. Not only did we spend a lot of time chatting in the Speaker's Office but, when I said that I was now taking this worldwide president on a tour of the Building, Mr Maskey came with us. At one point, we left Mr Maskey and the president in the Senate Chamber where they spent over 15 minutes, as he charmed her into agreeing to bring that conference to Northern Ireland. That is the sort of thing that Mr Maskey has been doing for the past three years, which we have not seen, but it has been incredibly important for this institution, particularly at a time when, in the court of public opinion, we do not always necessarily score a straight 10.

Mr Maskey, I thank you, and I wish you every success and happiness as you open the next chapter.

I finish, Mr Acting Speaker, by expressing regret that Mr Allister would not take an intervention. For those wondering what I was going to say, it was simply this: if his analysis is correct, why has he ended his boycott of this Building?

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):

Members, since no other Members have indicated that they wish to speak, I intend now to put the Question.

Question put, That Mr Edwin Poots be Speaker of this Assembly.

The Assembly divided:

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):

Members, I noticed, during our previous proceedings, that, at this point, everybody feels the need to fall silent; in fact, you can still communicate. *[Laughter.]*

Ayes 67; Noes 9.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Mr Delargy, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

UNIONIST:

Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Ms Sugden.

OTHER:

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Brown, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Honeyford, Mrs Long, Ms McAllister, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brooks and Ms Forsythe.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole.

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCrossan and Mr McGrath.

Total Votes	76	Total Ayes	67	[88.2%]
Nationalist Votes	33	Nationalist Ayes	25	[75.8%]
Unionist Votes	26	Unionist Ayes	25	[96.2%]
Other Votes	17	Other Ayes	17	[100.0%]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Edwin Poots be Speaker of this Assembly.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):

I formally declare that Mr Edwin Poots has been elected as Speaker, and I invite him to take the Chair.

(Mr Speaker [Mr Poots] in the Chair)

Mr Speaker: First of all, I thank Mr Alan Chambers, who has presided over the election of a Speaker for the seventh time. Anybody who knows anything about their Bible will know that seven is the number of perfection, so we actually got it right this time. You will not have a perfect Speaker, I can assure you, but you will have one who will do their best to ensure the smooth running of the House with impartiality and integrity.

I want to acknowledge the contribution of our outgoing Speaker, Mr Maskey. Mr Maskey came to this place in 1998, and Mr Kelly and I are still here from 1998. We were the three last people standing.

When I came here, I was a relatively young person in my early thirties; those gentlemen were more middle-aged. *[Laughter.]* Nonetheless, Mr Maskey and I engaged in many a boxing match in the Chamber and in Committees over the years, but we came to an understanding of each other, and it ended up that we were able to work together progressively on many issues. In his contribution as Speaker, he conducted that role with complete fairness and impartiality. I commend him for the work that he did as Speaker over the past four years, sometimes in difficult and trying circumstances, but, nonetheless, conducted with professionalism. I wish him well as he retires, and I hope that he has a healthy and happy retirement.

I recognise that, as I move into the office of Speaker, it is a very different role from the one that I have held. In many ways, I am one of those people who has always been up for the battle and the fight and ready to get in there for the challenge. Now, I have to calm it all down,

so it is quite a challenge for me, I have to say, as *[Laughter]* a bit of a poacher turned gamekeeper, but, hopefully, that will all go well. I look forward to working with all of you in the Assembly. Considerable progress has been made over the past number of months, and I am absolutely delighted that we have been able to get the Assembly up and running again, because there is so much to do out there for the public. I trust that we will all put our shoulders to the wheel to do that to the best of our ability. I truly hope that the Assembly is never suspended again and that it will move forward together in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland. We are mindful of the huge range of issues that is out there. I will seek to be a facilitator to an Executive that, I sincerely hope, will really drive things forward. Therefore, our focus will be on getting down to business and getting down to it quickly. I commend the Executive to, next week, get on with making really important decisions, because that needs to happen.

In that context, to all who voted for me, and those who did not, thank you for your participation today. I look forward to working with all of you over the next number of years, God giving us health to do so.

A number of Members have indicated that they wish to respond. I remind Members that they may speak only once in the course of the debate. Members have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mr Blair: Mr Speaker, it strikes me immediately, of course, that I am the first to address you in the post. It is with pleasure that I extend to you congratulations and very good wishes on behalf of those of us on the Alliance Party Benches and that I do so on a day on which we make progress in this place — the progress that the people of Northern Ireland have wanted, waited for and needed for the past two years. Reflecting on your previous comments, Mr Speaker, I cannot help making a comparison with our previous exchanges in this place, when you were in your role as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and I was here in my role as party spokesperson. Of course, we disagreed once or twice — a week *[Laughter]* — either at plenary Question Time or in the Committee. I am making lighthearted comments, Mr Speaker, because I also want to say to the House and publicly that, in truth, in that role, you were always available and accessible to members of the Committee, whatever their politics or the disagreement at hand, and it was appreciated. I have no doubt that you will bring those characteristics of approachability, accessibility and good working

relations to the role of Speaker and add to that your knowledge of this place, first of all, and your publicly declared support for devolution and the success of the Assembly.

I will close on two points. First, if you do not mind, I will add to the comments made earlier about the previous Speaker, Alex Maskey. I put on record what a pleasure it was for me to work with him on the Assembly Commission.

I have no doubt that you will have the same good and positive working relationships with all Members. It is my and our sincere wish that you have the full support of Members across the Assembly to conduct business here properly and to make progress on the legislation and the delivery that the people whom we represent are waiting for and deserve.

2.00 pm

Mr O'Toole: Although we did not vote for you, Mr Speaker, we are delighted to see you in the Chair. Many congratulations. It is now, after six or seven times of asking, an immense relief to all of us to finally elect a new Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Like Mr Blair, I have had, over the last few years, many political differences with you, the new Speaker, but there has always been an acknowledgement of your seriousness, your commitment to Northern Ireland and, indeed, your pragmatism when it comes to the issues that face us. I hope that you bring those same qualities to the Chair.

Might I say something, with a little special pleading, if you will permit me? Given that it looks as though — we do not yet know — our party will be the only one in opposition, I gently point out to you, Mr Speaker, that there are eight of us-uns and 80 of them-uns, so give us a fair crack of the whip when you are in the Chair. I repeat my congratulations, Mr Speaker. Notwithstanding the fact that we supported another candidate today, we are very pleased to see you in the Chair. We wish you well.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much for giving way. As the other candidate, I add my congratulations to the Speaker or, as I know him, Edwin. He and I go back a number of years to our time in local government and local government organisations. I like to think that, over that time, we built a respect and, indeed, a friendship with each other, where we could sit down and talk politics readily and respectfully and achieve solutions. I know that that ability to achieve solutions and, hopefully, bring people together in a conducive atmosphere, as we face into a new future with a new Assembly, will be

the incentive to move this place forward, act in the best interests of all our people and work for all our people together. Congratulations to you, Mr Speaker — Edwin, as I know you.

Mr O'Toole: That was a very indulgent intervention that you allowed, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I will not say anything more. All the best in the role.

Mr Allister: Mr Speaker, as a Member, I respect the office of Speaker, and, accordingly, since you now fill it, I wish you well in that regard. To the disappointment of the protocol implementers, I will be here as a thorn in their side, as I have had to be in the past. When it comes to that, Mr Speaker, I will probably test your patience and certainly test your impartiality, but, when I test you, just remember that it was 1,000 TUV transfers that elected you to the House on the fifth count in South Belfast.

Mr Givan: I now formally congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on being successfully elected to the position that you hold. I trust that you will give all Members of the House the latitude that you always wished a Speaker would give you when you were a Member and that, when the boundaries are tested, you will be forgiving. I have no doubt that you will do that to all of us in equal measure, not showing any favouritism to this side of the House.

It is worth putting on the record my disappointment at the very personal and bitter contribution from Mr Allister. He is an angry man, and I can understand why: he has achieved absolutely nothing — nothing — in order to have the institutions restored. In his contribution, he was again incapable of responding to the challenge by my party leader to provide any evidence of what he has achieved, because it is nothing. *[Interruption.]* I understand why he is angry and shouting at me. His political career has been marked by failure. Even in the DUP, he was a poor substitute for the late Dr Paisley. He cost us votes when he was our candidate for Europe. When he stood to be a candidate for Westminster, he failed again, to Ian Paisley. By his own test — we measure him against his test — for the election to the Assembly, he said that it would be a failure if he returned on his own, and he is here on his own. His test, which he set, he failed because he is a political failure, a dead-end unionist, when we in the Democratic Unionist Party are on the front foot leading for unionism, and we will build the unionist community, not divide it like the Member for North Antrim.

Ms Ennis: I wish you well on your election as Speaker. At the umpteenth time of trying, we have eventually passed that hurdle. While today is a monumental day, a historic day and a day of change, we will have little time for patting ourselves on the back or bickering among ourselves, because the public have an expectation that we will get on with the job and deliver for them. We know there are big challenges ahead of us. We are up for that challenge. That will involve lively debates, but it will also involve us working together to achieve all the things that our electorate wants us to achieve.

I wish you well in adjudicating those debates. I am sure you will do so with impartiality and with a tone of respect. We will certainly be up for reflecting that, and I hope that it is reflected across the Chamber. Once again, congratulations and best of luck for the time ahead.

Mr Speaker: I thank all the Members who have spoken.

Election of the Deputy Speakers

Mr Speaker: In accordance with section 39 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we will now commence the election of the Deputy Speakers. The procedure for electing Deputy Speakers will be the same as for the election of the Speaker. I will ask for proposals, which must be seconded. I will then confirm that the Member accepts the nomination and will continue in that way until there are no further proposals. I remind Members that a debate may take place after I announce that the time for proposals has passed, during which Members will be allowed up to three minutes to speak.

Do I have any proposals for the office of Deputy Speaker?

Mrs O'Neill: I nominate Carál Ní Chuilín as Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder?

Ms Ennis: I second that.

Mr Speaker: Ms Ní Chuilín, do you accept the proposal?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Glacaim leis. I accept.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

Ms Bradshaw: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I nominate my colleague John Blair.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for that proposal?

Ms McAllister: I second that.

Mr Speaker: Mr Blair, are you prepared to accept the nomination?

Mr Blair: I am happy to accept.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

Mr Stewart: Mr Speaker, I congratulate you on your new role. As Chief Whip of the Ulster Unionist Party, I look forward to working with you through the Business Committee.

I nominate Dr Steve Aiken MLA.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for Dr Aiken?

Mr Beattie: I second that.

Mr Speaker: Dr Aiken, do you accept the proposal?

Dr Aiken: I accept the proposal.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals? OK.

The time for proposals has expired. Do any Members wish to speak?

Mr Kelly: I should put it on record that, although Alec and I are older than you, we still feel a little middle-aged.

Is mór an onóir dom tacú le Carál Ní Chuilín don phost seo. It is my great privilege to support Carál Ní Chuilín MLA for the position of Deputy Speaker. Carál is a friend whom I have known for many decades, and, throughout that time, she has been a steadfast and determined advocate for the people of North Belfast and a relentless voice for the least well-off in all our communities, determined to ensure that they key principles of respect, equality and tolerance are hardwired into the institutions and, indeed, into society.

Carál has been a Member of the Assembly since 2007, serving as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Minister for Communities as well as acting as Sinn Féin's Chief Whip, so she has enormous experience in the institutions. She knows what it takes to ensure that they

function as they should, and I have no doubt that she will bring the benefit of that experience to the position of Deputy Speaker. I also know that she will bring to the role her characteristic straight-talking and no-nonsense approach, which I have often witnessed at first hand. That will ensure that the Chamber provides a platform for respectful, positive and productive debate. Carál is a huge asset to the institutions, and we are privileged to have her. I am delighted to support her for the position of Deputy Chief Constable. *[Laughter.]* I have to retract what I said about feeling middle-aged: I feel a lot older after that. To set the record straight, since this will be all over the news, it is for Deputy Speaker.

Carál, you would have made a very good Chief Constable as well. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: I call Ms Bradshaw, if you can follow that.

Ms Bradshaw: I am not sure I can follow that. As a fellow South Belfast MLA, I congratulate you and wish you well in your new role as Speaker.

I am delighted to nominate my colleague and friend John Blair to the position of Deputy Speaker. I first met John over 20 years ago on a district policing partnership, and I saw then, as I have seen since, a hard-working individual who is committed to making Northern Ireland a better place for everyone to live. For those of you who have served on a committee with John, including the Policing Board, you will know that he is fair and considerate and likes to get on with business. I know that he will be perfect for the role of Deputy Speaker and that he will treat every Member of the Chamber without bias or favour.

I ask Members to support our nomination of John Blair and vote for him as deputy Whip. *[Laughter.]* Goodness, what is going on today? Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. There are no further speakers, so we will move to the Question.

Question, That Ms Carál Ní Chuilín be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Ms Carál Ní Chuilín be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and only one No, from Mr Allister, I

am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

I congratulate you, Ms Ní Chuilín, on becoming Deputy Speaker.

Question, That Mr John Blair be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr John Blair be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and only one No, from Mr Allister, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. I therefore confirm Mr Blair as Deputy Speaker and congratulate him.

2.15 pm

Question, That Dr Steve Aiken be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Dr Steve Aiken be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and only one No, from Mr Allister, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated and therefore congratulate Dr Aiken. You are now a Deputy Speaker, Dr Aiken.

All three Deputy Speakers have been elected. That concludes this item of business. I congratulate the successful candidates and look forward to working with all of the Deputy Speakers.

Committee Business

Business Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion to appoint the Business Committee will be treated as a business motion, so there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That the following shall be appointed to be Members of the Business Committee:

The Speaker (ex officio);

Ms Paula Bradshaw;

Mr David Brooks;

Mr Trevor Clarke;

Mr Mark Durkan;

Mr Tom Elliott;

Mrs Sinéad Ennis;

Miss Nuala McAllister;

Mr Colin McGrath;

Mr Philip McGuigan; and

Mr John Stewart. — [Mr Speaker]

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and only one No, from Mr Allister, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Assembly Business

Appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I will conduct the process of filling the offices in accordance with the procedures set out in section 16A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44(1).

I will begin by asking the nominating officer of the largest political party to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be First Minister. I will then ask the nominating officer of the largest political party of the largest political designation to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be deputy First Minister.

As the persons nominated to fill the vacancies shall not take up office until each has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, when I have received both nominations, I will ask each of the persons nominated to accept the nomination and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office.

Before we proceed, Members may find it helpful if the Pledge of Office is read into the record:

To pledge:

(a) to discharge in good faith all the duties of office;

(b) commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means;

(c) to serve all the people of Northern Ireland equally, and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination;

(ca) to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future;

(cb) to participate fully in the Executive Committee, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council;

(cc) to observe the joint nature of the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister;

(cd) to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness,

impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement;

(ce) to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it;

(cf) to work collectively with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve a society free of paramilitarism;

(cg) to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality;

(ch) to call for, and to work together with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve, the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures;

(ci) to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;

(cj) to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism;

(ck) to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment;

(d) to participate with colleagues in the preparation of a programme for government;

(e) to operate within the framework of that programme when agreed within the Executive Committee and endorsed by the Assembly;

(f) to support, and act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly;

(g) to comply with the Ministerial Code of Conduct.

Paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement states:

"We believe that the essential elements of support for law and order include endorsing fully the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system, actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas and actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions, including the Policing Board."

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There will be no points of order taken at this point.

Members, the Pledge of Office has been read into the record of proceedings, and I will proceed with the nomination process.

I have received notification from the nominating officer of Sinn Féin advising me that Miss Aisling Reilly will serve as nominating officer for the party for this item of business. I call Miss Reilly to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the First Minister, and I allow her up to three minutes to say a few words in support of the nomination.

Miss Reilly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Comhghairdeas leat, agus guímid gach rath duit sa phost seo. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Congratulations and we wish you all the best in your role.]* It is a privilege for me to speak today. I know that I speak for every single one of us who is here now, the generation before us and the generation of the future, and for those who are no longer with us who made a day like this possible and who will be as proud as I am. I am delighted that this is happening today and that we will now have a functioning Executive and Assembly so that we can deliver for the people whom we represent. As a child growing up in west Belfast, a day like today seemed unimaginable. It seemed unimaginable for our parents and our grandparents, but nothing is impossible. Here we are, and, for the first time, an Irish republican will take up the position of First Minister. She will lead with determination, have a true vision for change and be a First Minister for all. I am, therefore, honoured and proud to nominate Michelle O'Neill to the position of First Minister.

Mr Speaker: Mrs O'Neill, are you willing to take up the office of First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Tá mé toilteanach oifig an Chéad-Aire a ghlacadh. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of First Minister, and I affirm the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter from the nominating officer of the DUP advising me that Mr Keith Buchanan will serve as its nominating officer for this item of business. I call Mr Buchanan to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the deputy First Minister. I allow

him up to three minutes to say a few words in support of the nomination.

Mr K Buchanan: On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I nominate Emma Little-Pengelly MLA.

Mr Allister: When was she elected?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mrs Little-Pengelly, are you willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: There will be an opportunity for speeches. I will call the First Minister and then the deputy First Minister to address the Assembly. I call the First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill.

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): Is mór an onóir liom seasamh anseo i mo Chéad-Aire. *[Translation: I am honoured to stand here today as First Minister.]* Today opens the door to a future — a shared future. We mark a moment of equality and a moment of progress, a new opportunity to work and to grow together, confident in the idea that, wherever we come from and whatever our aspirations, we can and must build our future together. I am delighted to see every MLA back in the Chamber today. I welcome the fact that the DUP has decided to re-enter the democratic institutions and that the outcome of last year's Assembly election is now being respected. I also look forward to there being a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) shortly.

The power-sharing coalition that the parties are forming here today must now dedicate itself to delivering an ambitious agenda for change. I wish all incoming Ministers well, and I pledge to work with and to collaborate with you all. The public are now relying on each of us to act in their best interests and to serve our whole community with good faith. We must make power-sharing work, because, collectively, we are all charged with leading and delivering for our people. In common cause, we must work to make life better for workers, families and communities and to create hope and opportunity. We must be respectful of each other. The days of second-class citizenship are long gone, and today confirms that they will never come back. As an Irish republican, I

pledge cooperation and genuine honest effort with all those colleagues of the British and unionist tradition who cherish the Union. This is an Assembly for all: Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Despite our different outlooks and different views on the future constitutional position, the public rightly demand that we work and deliver together, and also that we build trust and confidence in our ability to collectively do that. That will require courage and ambition, not just from those of us who are elected but from the public. We should all invest in this. The more of us who do that, the better chance it has to succeed.

This power-sharing coalition will undoubtedly face great challenges, and there are many nettles for us to grasp. The rising cost of living has been a heavy burden on many households and businesses, and there are people out there who are living hand to mouth. They need our help. Too many patients are waiting for treatment and support. Teachers, nurses and all our public-sector workers are being forced onto the picket lines, and that demands urgent action from us. There is no escaping the impact of Tory austerity. It has badly damaged our public services. The Tories have presided over more than a decade of shame and caused real suffering to the people we represent. I wish to lead an Executive with the freedom to make our own policy and spending choices. We cannot continue to be hamstrung by the Tories in London, so, together, we must unite and we must fight, with one voice, the corner of everybody whom we represent, every citizen in this society. We must fight for properly funded public services.

I know that we have many shared priorities, and those will be reflected today, but we must deliver more. We must deliver more on affordable childcare to support workers and families, and more on social and affordable homes, because everybody has the right to call somewhere their home. We must transform our health and social care system and ensure that children with additional needs have first-class support. Key infrastructure developments, such as the A5 and A29 road schemes, Casement Park and other signature projects, will be delivered so that we can enhance connectivity and support communities. Regional balance and the continued investment in Derry and the north-west are essential. We must work together to mitigate the climate catastrophe, protect Lough Neagh and realise its massive potential. With new leadership in the Economy Department, we will work in partnership with businesses, the trade union movement, education providers and the community and voluntary sector to improve economic

performance. A reformed Invest NI will be required to promote regional balance, because everybody should share in the benefits of prosperity. We will now begin to seize the considerable opportunities that are created by the Windsor framework to use our dual market access, grow our exports and attract higher-quality FDI and realise the all-island economy's potential.

We must do more to shape the type of society that we live in. Violence against women and girls is an epidemic, an emergency, and it requires urgent action. That means every one of us working collectively to challenge the misogyny and sexist attitudes that have led and continue to lead to violence against women. As political leaders, we need women and girls in our society to know that we have their backs, we are looking after them and we are going to bring in laws to protect them. One of the first actions that this incoming Executive must take is to introduce the new strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. I know that we are all committed to doing that.

Our society is becoming increasingly diverse, as reflected in the census results. That is something to be respected and also celebrated. Everyone, from every section of this society, must know that they matter and we care.

Last year, we marked 25 years of peace and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. That was a political accommodation that provided a peaceful and democratic alternative to 30 years of conflict. We all know collectively, as a society, the value of peace. Today we are all heartbroken for the suffering of the Palestinian people. Today, in this Chamber, I call for an immediate ceasefire, dialogue and peace.

2.30 pm

I was a 20-year-old mother at the time of our agreement. I remember vividly the sense of hope and that real feeling of optimism. I got right in behind the politics, and I have worked since then to build the peace. There is no question that our society has been fundamentally transformed because of our peace process. I stand here, an elected First Minister, proud as someone who represents that Good Friday Agreement generation and someone who will lead us into the next 25 years. I am also an Ulster woman, a Tyrone woman and a deeply proud Irish and European citizen.

This is an historic day, and it represents a new dawn. For the very first time, a nationalist takes up the position of First Minister. That such a

day would come was unimaginable to my parents and grandparents' generation, but, because of the Good Friday Agreement, that old state that they were born into is gone and a more democratic and equal society exists. This is now a better place for all of us. This place that we call "home" and which we all love — the North of Ireland, Northern Ireland — where you can be British, Irish, both or none, is all a changing portrait. Yesterday is gone. Today is a new day, and my appointment today reflects the change that is happening.

I am a republican. I will serve everyone equally and be a First Minister for all. To all of you who are British and unionist, I say this: your national identity, your cultures, your traditions are important to me. I will be inclusive and respectful to you all. None of us is being asked to surrender who we are. Our allegiances are equally legitimate. Let us walk this two-way street together; let us meet one another halfway. I will be doing so with an open hand and with heart.

Much suffering and trauma persists in our society as a result of the injustices and tragedies of the past. We must never forget all those who have died or been injured or their families. I am sorry for all the lives lost during the conflict, without exception. As First Minister, I am wholeheartedly committed to continuing the work of reconciliation between all of our people. The past cannot be changed or undone, but what we can do — what we all can do — is build a better future. I will never ask anyone to move on, but I really hope that we can all move forward. I want us to walk in harmony and friendship. My eyes are fixed firmly on the future, looking towards that future where we unify people and society.

Every generation must write its own chapter and define its own legacy. Scotland's greatest Irishman, James Connolly, proclaimed what are my ambitions for our young people:

*"our demands most moderate are,
We only want the earth."*

It is my dream that our children and grandchildren will achieve beyond all of our wildest dreams and all of our wildest ambitions. I believe in our young people. They can change our society; indeed, they can change the world, if we only give them the chance. Let that be our legacy. Let our legacy be that chance — that freedom — for every young person and every child out there. Nineteen ninety-eight opened up a new horizon of hope and optimism. Now, in 2024, let us gift today's generation everything that they deserve.

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First

Minister): First, Mr Speaker, may I congratulate you on being elected by both sides of the House to serve as Speaker? I know that you will carry out your duties with diligence, for which you are known, and great dedication. As one of the class of 1998, you have unrivalled experience on these Benches. I look forward to working with you and the rest of your team in the Speaker's Office. I also wish the outgoing Speaker well in his retirement and thank him sincerely for his service to the House.

Michelle O'Neill and I come from very different backgrounds, but, regardless of that, for my part, I will work tirelessly to ensure that we can deliver for all in Northern Ireland. I recognise that, for many, today is an historic moment with the nomination of Michelle O'Neill and me as First Ministers. It is a day that confirms the democratic outcome of the election.

Serving people in this House in any role is an honour and a privilege. It is an opportunity to shape Northern Ireland for the better and to make a meaningful difference. I love Northern Ireland. I am deeply proud to be from this place that we call home. Despite our often troubled history and divisions of the past, I know that we have incredible potential.

As a young girl sitting in Markethill High School almost 30 years ago, I could never have imagined that, one day, I would have the opportunity to serve in such a way. This is a responsibility and an honour that I will never take for granted. Each and every day. I will strive to make this place the very best that it can be. I thank Sir Jeffrey and deputy leader, Gavin Robinson, for their support by being here today, their leadership in getting us to this point and for the great honour of being asked to step up and serve.

Like so many across the Chamber and throughout Northern Ireland, I grew up with conflict. As a child of just 11 years old, I stepped outside my Markethill home on a warm August afternoon to the absolute devastation from an IRA bomb. Seared in my experience is that haunting wail of alarms and the sounds of our emergency services, the carpet of glass and debris, the shock, the crying and the panic that shook and destroyed that place I called home. I am thankful that our young people today do not have to face that terror, which so many of us here faced. As a child, I did not understand the politics of it, but I will never forget the fear, the hurt and the anger. There are moments in each of our lives that shape us. The past, with all its horror, can never be

forgotten, nor will it be allowed to be rewritten. While we are shaped by the past, we are not defined by it. The experience of my childhood gave me the drive and desire to make a different future, not for just myself but to do all that I could and can to ensure a better future for all of us.

Across the Chamber, we have different political viewpoints and experiences. However, we know that the wee mummy waiting for her cancer diagnosis is not defined as republican or unionist; she is defined by sleepless nights and the worry that she may not see her children grow up. The daddy fighting to get the right educational support for his child is defined not by orange or green but by the stress and anxiety for the future of the child whom he loves. Let that be your inspiration, for those are the issues that we can agree on. The challenges that so many families face throughout Northern Ireland are the same no matter where or what we are or believe. It is those shared problems, which are blighting too many lives, that we can work constructively and urgently together to improve.

We must learn the lessons of the past seven years. Whatever path we take — on health service reform, schools reform or improving public services to make this place the thriving and flourishing Northern Ireland that it can be — we will succeed only by walking that path side by side; not by dismissing and demeaning each other's concerns. There can be no dominating of one over the other; rather, there must be a new approach of recognising the concerns of each other and finding solutions together. We are all born equal, and the people who look on this sitting today demand that we work together. Michelle is an Irish republican, and I am a very proud unionist. We will never agree on those issues, but we can agree that cancer does not discriminate and that our hospitals need to be fixed. We can agree that too many mummies, and some daddies, are having to give up work because childcare is too expensive. We agree that our teachers need to be supported and equipped to teach and that our public-sector workers need to be properly paid.

We all agree that drugs destroy communities and that the police need the resources to put the dealers out of business. We can all agree that economic prosperity is the game changer for every community.

Let us be a source of hope to those young people who are watching today, not one of despair. Let us prove that difference, through recognition and respect, can be a strength and

that difference need not be a barrier to progress and delivery. This is my pledge: I love this place that we call home, and I will work tirelessly for delivery for all the people of Northern Ireland, from every background. I will do so to the best of my abilities, honoured by the privilege and opportunity to do so. Let us do it, side by side, and let us keep Northern Ireland moving forward.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I now confirm that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have taken office, and I offer them my congratulations.

There will now be an opportunity for a representative from each party to speak. Members should limit their remarks to not more than three minutes. I have the names of some Members who have already indicated that they wish to speak, but I ask all Members who would like to contribute on behalf of their party to approach the Table and add their name to the speaking list.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It has taken two years, and, at times, it has seemed like a vain hope that we would reach this point, but it is a good day for Northern Ireland that we stand here today, with you in the Chair and with a First Minister and deputy First Minister confirmed in office.

First, I congratulate you on your election as Speaker. We supported you in the Lobby, and we will, no doubt on occasion, challenge you in the Chamber, but we look forward to working with you, and you have our respect and cooperation as we move forward. I also extend my congratulations to the First Minister and deputy First Minister — Michelle and Emma. It is a huge burden to lead the Executive, particularly in the challenging times in which we find ourselves, but I have no doubt whatsoever that they will be up to that task.

There are many pressing issues ahead for that Executive to tackle, none more fundamental than negotiating a proper funding formula with His Majesty's Treasury in order to place our public finances on a sustainable footing. Other pressing issues are addressing public-sector pay as a matter of urgency; delivering health transformation and stabilisation; tackling education funding and reform, with particular provision for those with additional needs; delivering justice and security and peace of mind to our constituents; and supporting a dynamic and thriving economy. Those are essential elements of building that more shared,

equitable, prosperous and peaceful society to which Alliance has always been committed.

As I drove up the path this morning, I saw young families make their way to the playgrounds. It reminded me of the childcare pressures that many of those young parents face. It would be remiss of me not to mention that that must also be a priority for an incoming Executive.

We desire to see a united community, one in which we can embrace our diversity, not deny it. We want to embrace and celebrate it with confidence and in security. Although our focus today is, rightly, on the future, we must also reflect on the damage that has been caused by the instability of our institutions over the last number of years. Stop-start government has played a major role in deepening the crises in our public services' finances and across society. Alliance will continue to pursue sensible reform of our institutions in order to ensure that no single party can ever hold our institutions to ransom again. The institutions are not the property or plaything of any of us in the House. They belong to the people who elected us. I am determined to work to ensure that the Executive and Assembly are not just stable but effective and that they deliver positive change for those people. I believe that we do that best when we do it together, and I look forward to making real progress in this mandate.

Mr O'Toole: As we walked down the stairs into the Great Hall, we passed the figure of James Craig, Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister — the man who built this Building and this state in his image. Whatever one's view of him, Craig was a far-sighted strategist, but even he was unlikely to have foreseen today's events. The state that he constructed was not meant to have people like Michelle O'Neill in charge, but here she is — a republican woman taking the First Minister's office. On behalf of the SDLP, I offer warm congratulations to you, First Minister. I offer congratulations to you, deputy First Minister. We sincerely wish you both well.

First Minister, you have waited with patience and good grace to take up a post to which you were freely elected two years ago but which you have been blocked from taking up ever since. It is, as you said, a profoundly symbolic moment that we should all acknowledge.

2.45 pm

It is also true to say that this place — Northern Ireland; the North of Ireland — has had many symbolic moments: firsts, lasts, handshakes,

ceremonies and milestones. What our people need now is delivery. Symbolism will not pay teachers or nurses; selfies will not cut waiting lists. We need an Executive to be focused on resuscitating collapsed public services and helping our demoralised workers. We need an Executive to address ecological catastrophe in our greatest natural resource, to help exhausted parents with the crippling cost of childcare and to take economic advantage of our unique trading position, but, to do any of that, we need to be here.

Today's restoration comes after two years of chaos. In 2020, the restoration came after three years. First Minister and deputy First Minister, I have congratulated you both, but your parties have both collapsed the institutions in the past seven years. I do not think that, if they are collapsed again, they will ever restart, but only two people have the power to stop that happening: both of you. My first act in leading the SDLP Opposition in this reformed Assembly is to ask both of you to add to the Pledge of Office that you have just taken. Will you both now, in the Chamber, pledge to all the people of the North that, for the duration of this mandate, you will not use your power under the Northern Ireland Act to collapse devolution by resigning your office? I am happy to give way to the First Minister or deputy First Minister. I will follow up in writing, Mr Speaker. I will give way to the First Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: With all due respect, I do not think that this is a day for stunts, but let us all collectively work together to ensure that this is sustainable and lasting and that we do right for the people whom we collectively serve. We choose to be in the Assembly and the Executive because we want to make a difference. I am here; I have turned up. Everybody has turned up today. We should be grateful for that, but, more than that, we should get down to the business of delivering.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the First Minister honestly for her answer. I asked that neither party choose to collapse the institutions. People out there want to know that that will not happen again.

This place has changed. We are a plural society, but we have struggled to combine inclusive governance with effective governance. This is the last chance that we have to get it right for the people whom we serve. The SDLP's job as a constructive Opposition is not, as some have said, to tear lumps out of anyone; it is to bring long-awaited accountability to lift up our democracy, to lift up our people and to deliver hope, change and ambition in

equal measure. Our collective job is to finally prove that this place can work, so, once we have finished with the ceremony today, let us get down to that work.

Mr Allister: Now comes the consummation of the Donaldson deal, with the DUP enthroning a Sinn Féin First Minister, with the unelected bridesmaid as deputy. David Trimble had his "Well done, David" moment of endorsement from IRA leader Gerry Adams. Now the leader of the DUP has his "Well done, Jeffrey" moment, as he gives us a First Minister who wallows in the glorification of terrorism and tells us that there was no alternative to the murder of our kith and kin: no alternative to La Mon; no alternative to Enniskillen; no alternative to Teebane; no alternative to Kingsmills or to Markethill; and no alternative to the incineration of a young woman in Ballymena in my constituency, Yvonne Dunlop, whose vile murderer, McElwee, Miss O'Neill celebrates every year. This year, she will do so as First Minister. Well done, Jeffrey. This is the woman who now has oversight of victims policy. Let it never be forgotten that we now have a First Minister under the direction and control of the IRA army council. That is not just my belief but the unaltered police assessment of the nexus between Sinn Féin and the IRA. Such a puppet will never be a First Minister for all.

Behind all the pious, honeyed words of today lies the real Sinn Féin view that this brings it within touching distance of an all Ireland. That is how it will abuse and misuse the office in this place and, no doubt, in Washington, when the opportunity arises. We have a Sinn Féin First Minister but not in my name, nor in the name of thousands of unionists who will never bow the knee to IRA/Sinn Féin.

Mr Carroll: It is important to briefly address the appointment of a nationalist First Minister. First, we reject the sectarian politics that seek to deny somebody office on the basis of their community background, where they grew up or where they live. Secondly, nobody can deny the symbolism of a nationalist First Minister in a state that was designed to ensure unionist domination. The Protestant state for a Protestant people was undemocratic and unjust. It was meant to ensure the fortunes of a unionist elite who were far removed from the ordinary struggles of working-class people — Catholic, Protestant and neither. This state still grapples with the legacy of that sectarianism, with an Assembly built on communal designation, communities built on segregation and a political establishment that strangles attempts at working-class unity and a decent future for all.

The election of a first nationalist First Minister is symbolic, but, in a society like ours, boy, do we need to move beyond symbolism. Symbolism is not enough to deliver the aspirations and needs of working-class communities. It was not too long ago that the First Minister and deputy First Minister — unionist and nationalist — worked hand in glove to essentially impoverish people of all backgrounds. Given the past record of Sinn Féin and others, we seriously ask whether we will have a First Minister for all or a First Minister for the well-off. Will we have a First Minister for workers or a First Minister for corporations?

I note and welcome the First Minister's comments on a ceasefire, but, genuinely and sincerely, will the First Minister for all stand with the people of Palestine and boycott the White House this St Patrick's Day, or will the lure of American capitalism, foreign direct investment and low-wage jobs for Irish workers prove too much? The mass Palestine solidarity movement will not tolerate Ministers of any kind or ideology from this Administration giving cover to a US Administration who are funding the genocide in Gaza. One of the first tasks of the Assembly should be to call for a ceasefire in Gaza and join the boycott of the apartheid Israeli regime.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: In a second.

There is also an onus on the First Minister to support and outline a vision of a united Ireland that breaks from one that simply stitches two states together and challenges the powerful interests at the heart of the states North and South. We cannot continue to assure Irish capital that its profits will remain untouched. We stand with many others in the tradition of James Connolly and insist that working-class rule, not unionist or nationalist rule, is the only rule that is worth fighting for in a united, socialist Ireland that brings together people of all backgrounds and creates better living standards for all. Only then can we leave communal symbolism, sectarianism and the deprivation that was wrought by Stormont and Westminster in the past.

Mr Lyons: I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, as you take up your new role. I know that you will do an excellent job on behalf of the House. Secondly, I thank Mr Allister for the reminder that we have had from him today. Every time he speaks, he reminds us why he is the sole TUV Member on that Bench. He has absolutely nothing to offer the people of Northern Ireland.

He has no plan, strategy or record of delivery for the people of Northern Ireland. I am pleased that we are able to be here today to get on with the job at hand.

I recognise the significant role that Michelle O'Neill and Emma Little-Pengelly have taken on today. We want them to succeed because we want what is best for the people of Northern Ireland.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I want to say a little about Emma Little-Pengelly. I have known Emma for almost 20 years. I have worked alongside her in many different capacities, and certain things have become apparent to me over that time. She has a very clear love for Northern Ireland. She loves its people, and she is passionate about the future of this place. She already has a record of delivery, especially through her previous role in the Executive Office. I think of the Together: Building a United Community programme, the numeracy and literacy initiatives that she took up, the Urban Villages programme and standing up for the innocent victims of terrorism. I know that she is determined, resilient, compassionate and is often late for meetings, but I also know that she wants to make a difference. Those are characteristics that will serve her well in this new role, and they will also serve all of us. This Executive need to be marked by delivery. There is much work to do for the people whom we represent, and now is the time to get on with it.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and congratulations on your appointment. I wish to pay tribute to your predecessor. I always felt that he was fair in giving smaller parties and independent Members their rightful voice, and I hope that you will continue in that vein.

I congratulate Michelle O'Neill on becoming First Minister and Emma Little-Pengelly on becoming deputy First Minister. I am pleased for Michelle and Emma: both are capable, strong women who have worked in politics for a long time, and they will, despite the misogyny, continue that work. I wish all new Ministers success in their roles, because we need you to step up. We have heard our First Minister describe herself as the First Minister for all, and I welcome that. Indeed, I encourage you all to work towards that goal, because today is not about one person or one political party; it is about the people of Northern Ireland, and we need to start serving them.

The constitutional question is important and will remain so. It is absolutely valid to be a unionist, nationalist or not to have made your mind up. Having an opinion on the context in which we

deliver our public services is absolutely relevant. It is fundamental. Let us stop conflating this issue with orange and green. That is cultural, which is also important to many, but it is certainly not sectarian. We are not neutral. We are wonderful and varied people. Let us embrace that instead of tearing lumps out of each other. Let us stop excluding people because of their constitutional preference. Sadly, we are formally doing that again today by not putting the Department of Justice into the d'Hondt process. My appointment, a number of years ago, was not a failure. It was progress, and I welcomed and appreciated Martin McGuinness doing that. If a unionist can be a Justice Minister, that paves the way for a nationalist to be a Justice Minister. However, today, it seems that it can be neither. Apparently, the courage that was displayed in 2016 is gone.

I respect that Michelle O'Neill, the leader of nationalism, is our First Minister. I am pleased for her and for the people whom she represents, because, as a confident unionist, they are my people too. I love Northern Ireland, and it breaks my heart to see us not reaching our potential, but we can change that, starting today. We need to reconcile, and we need to do that by not remaining apart and hiding who we collectively and individually are. We do it through integration, commonality, acceptance and respect — always respect. All of the above is an acknowledgement of who we are, but this institution needs to get on with the business of improving public services, hospital waiting lists, childcare, trust in our police force and preparing infrastructure, our skills and our economy for the opportunities that will now come our way. By focusing on these issues, we will give confidence back to the public, who desperately want this place to work. The numbers who marched for fair pay in Belfast city centre last month and those standing outside today calling for restoration far exceed the numbers who opposed it. It is their lives, the lives of their families and the life of my baby girl, Indy, that we are responsible for changing for the better. I look forward to working with you all.

3.00 pm

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It would be remiss of me not to begin by congratulating you and assuring you that I am not about to burst into a chorus of that great 1976 hit 'It Should Have Been Me'. *[Laughter.]* I also congratulate the new First Minister and deputy First Minister and welcome their initial remarks, which I think we can all buy into. I see that Mr Muir has a copy of the 1998 agreement, and that reminds me of the initial commitment that is

in that agreement. On a day when we are all making pledges, perhaps we should pledge to recommit ourselves to the declaration of support in that agreement, where we pledge to take a fresh opportunity and a fresh start so that we can have relationships that are built on tolerance of each other, on reconciliation of building mutual trust and, above all, on demonstrating mutual respect. It seems to me that those values are the only solid foundation on which to go forward.

Over the past couple of years, of course, we have missed opportunities to build those relationships, not just here in the Chamber but at the various Committees, where I think that those relationships are built and where we best get the opportunity to understand each other and what we are trying to achieve. Of course, through our Ministers, in our relationship with the Government of Ireland, we have missed out on the North/South Ministerial Council, where Ministers come together and understand each other. This is an opportunity to make those pledges, and I wish everybody well. I look forward to finding out who the Ministers will be in support of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

Mr Speaker, I do not know what other Members' plans are for private Members' Bills, but I assure colleagues that, as soon as you call a break, I will be heading for the Bill Office like Usain Bolt or, as it might be more accurate to say, like Usain Bolt's grandad. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak. The outgoing Speaker had agreed with the Whips that there would be a short suspension. I propose that we suspend for 30 minutes.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The sitting is suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 3.01 pm and resumed at 3.32 pm.

Appointment of the Minister of Justice

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the filling of the office of Minister of Justice. I will conduct the process for filling the office in accordance with the procedures set out in part 1A of schedule 4A to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44A. I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise and nominate another Member of the Assembly

to hold the office of Minister of Justice. If Members rise from more than one party, I will call first the Member from the largest of those parties to make a nomination, in accordance with convention.

I advise Members that the Act requires that one nomination must be processed before a further nomination can be made. I will therefore take only one nomination at a time and put the Question on that nomination. If the Assembly resolves by parallel consent that the Member nominated shall be Minister of Justice and that person takes up office as required by the Act and Standing Orders, no further nominations may be made. I will call for further nominations only if those conditions are not fulfilled.

Having consulted the party Whips, I will allow a Member making a nomination to speak for up to three minutes. Following that, there will be an opportunity for debate on the nomination, with Members also having an opportunity to speak for three minutes. Standing Orders place a time constraint on the nomination process, and I will curtail the debate if necessary, unless, under Standing Order 44A(2), the Assembly approves a request for the time limit to be extended. In any event, if it appears that, before I put the Question, the time limit will be exceeded, I will ask the nominator to repeat the nomination after the debate.

As the person nominated to fill the vacancy shall not take up office until he or she has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, after the Question has been determined I will ask the person nominated to affirm the Pledge of Office, which was read into the record during the previous item of business.

Do I have a nomination for a Member to hold the office of the Minister of Justice?

Ms Bradshaw: It gives me great pleasure to nominate my party leader and friend, Naomi Long MLA, as Justice Minister.

Members who sat in the last Assembly will have seen the impressive number of Bills she brought through in partnership with the Justice Committee. Each Bill fundamentally changed justice policy and is already impacting positively on people's lives, and we can see improvements in public-sector delivery. Naomi Long still has many more areas of work in the Justice Department and with its delivery partners that she would like to tackle, and I know that she will do that with the same passion and drive as before.

Naomi proved herself to be a hard-working member of the Executive during the last mandate, when her strong sense of collective action shone through, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed our society. She believes in devolution and that the people of Northern Ireland are best served by a locally elected Government who are responsible and responsive to its people. Naomi's long history of public service in the Chamber and in many other political institutions along the way has proven her commitment to delivering a shared society that works for everyone.

I ask the Assembly to support the nomination of Naomi Long and vote for her as the next Justice Minister.

Mr Speaker: Naomi Long has been nominated. Mrs Long, do you accept the nomination?

Mrs Long: I accept the nomination, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The nomination is now open for debate. I remind Members that they may speak for up to three minutes.

Ms Dillon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate you on your new role.

I support the appointment of Naomi Long to the position of Justice Minister in the Assembly. Sinn Féin is absolutely committed to working with you as Justice Minister, as we have in the past, and with all parties and every section of our community to deliver progressive change in our justice system.

The issues of justice, policing and community safety go right to the core of who we all are as human beings. We all want to feel safe in our homes and communities. We all should have the right to expect that that will be the case. We should have the right to expect that those tasked with administering justice will be there for us, without fear or favour, when that support is needed.

Of course, there are massive challenges ahead, not least the huge budget pressures facing all the Departments, but we are determined to work in partnership with you in addressing those challenges and in delivering the necessary legislative change in the Chamber.

I wish you well in the important role of Justice Minister that begins today.

Mr O'Toole: First, I congratulate Naomi Long on being reappointed as Justice Minister. I do

not think that there is anybody in Northern Ireland politics who would doubt the ability of Naomi; indeed, some of us have found to our cost electorally that Mrs Naomi Long is an extremely effective politician. However, I put on record today my party's profound regret that, once again, the post of Justice Minister has been excluded from the d'Hondt process. I said earlier that there was a profoundly historic moment when Michelle O'Neill was elected to be the first nationalist First Minister of this place, and it is something that we should all mark, but there is absolutely no reason why there should not be a nationalist Justice Minister elected. There are qualified Sinn Féin MLAs on the Benches behind me who could do that job. There is no reason why anyone's preference for a united Ireland in the future should prevent them from taking up the post of Justice Minister. I want to make that point.

I also gently say to some of my Alliance colleagues, who had a very good election and who are entitled under a normal d'Hondt process to have two Ministries — of course, in the previous mandate, they had the same number of MLAs as us, and they had the justice Ministry because it was taken out of the d'Hondt process — please, finally, can this be the last time that a nationalist is excluded from holding the post of Justice Minister, because it is utterly indefensible in 2024.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the debate. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind the Assembly that the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that the resolution must be passed by parallel consent.

Question, That Mrs Naomi Long be the Minister of Justice, put and agreed to.

Resolved (by parallel consent):

That Mrs Naomi Long be the Minister of Justice.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and only one No, I am satisfied that parallel consent has been demonstrated.

Members, I now ask Naomi Long to affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mrs Long: I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I now confirm that Naomi Long, having affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office, has taken up office as Minister of Justice

in accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I offer her my congratulations.

Let us move on.

Ministerial Appointments

Mr Speaker: I will conduct the process for filling these offices in accordance with the procedure set out in section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44. I will ask the nominating officer of each political party in the order required by the formula contained in section 18(5) to select an available ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly.

I have received notification that the nominating officers for this item of business for the Alliance Party will be Paula Bradshaw; for the SDLP, Ms Cara Hunter; and for the UUP, Mr John Stewart. If a nominating officer declines to nominate, I will invite the nominating officer of the next political party determined by the formula to nominate a Member to hold ministerial office.

I call Michelle O'Neill, as nominating officer of the political party to which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs O'Neill: I choose the Department for the Economy and nominate Conor Murphy.

Mr Speaker: Does Conor Murphy confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office.

Mr C Murphy: Tá mé sásta, a Cheann Comhairle, agus tá mé toilteanach glacadh leis an oifig. [*Translation: I confirm, Mr Speaker, that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for the Economy.*] I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: Conor Murphy is now Minister for the Economy.

I call on Keith Buchanan, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mr K Buchanan: I select the Department of Education, and I nominate Paul Givan MLA.

Mr Speaker: Does Mr Givan confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the Pledge of Office?

Mr Givan: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Education, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: Paul Givan is now the Minister of Education.

Ms Ennis: May we have a slight suspension? Proceedings have run contrary to how we expected.

Mr Speaker: OK. We will suspend for 15 minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 3.42 pm and resumed at 3.54 pm.

Mr Speaker: I call on Michelle O'Neill, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and of the Assembly.

Mrs O'Neill: I choose the Department of Finance and nominate Dr Caoimhe Archibald.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Dr Archibald: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Finance, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald appointed Minister of Finance.

Mr Speaker: I call on Keith Buchanan, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and of the Assembly.

Mr K Buchanan: I select the Department for Communities and nominate Gordon Lyons MLA.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Lyons: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Communities, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Gordon Lyons appointed Minister for Communities.

Mr Speaker: I call on John Stewart, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and of the Assembly.

Mr Stewart: I select the Department of Health and nominate Robin Swann MLA.

Mr Speaker: Mr Swann, are you willing to accept the nomination?

Mr Swann: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Health, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Robin Swann appointed Minister of Health.

Mr Speaker: I call on Michelle O'Neill, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and of the Assembly.

Mrs O'Neill: I choose the Department for Infrastructure and nominate John O'Dowd.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr O'Dowd: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Infrastructure, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr John O'Dowd appointed Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call on Paula Bradshaw, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the

highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and of the Assembly.

Ms Bradshaw: On behalf of the Alliance Party, we will be taking Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and we nominate Andrew Muir.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Muir: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Andrew Muir appointed Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Assembly for its patience. That concludes the appointment of Ministers under the d'Hondt process. I offer my congratulations to all those who have taken up office.

Official Opposition

Mr Speaker: As SDLP Members comprised 8% or more of the total number of Members of the Assembly at the end of the day on which the Assembly first met, the condition set out in Standing Order 45A(1)(c) is met that the SDLP may therefore choose to be recognised as an Opposition party. I received a letter from the nominating officer of the SDLP to advise me that Ms Cara Hunter will serve as its nominating officer for this item of business.

Ms Hunter, does your party choose to be recognised as the official Opposition?

Ms Hunter: Yes, the SDLP wishes to be recognised as the official Opposition, with Matthew O'Toole MLA as its leader.

Mr Speaker: In accordance with Standing Order 45A(2), I invite the nominating officer of the party in Opposition to nominate a member of that party to be the leader of the Opposition.

Ms Hunter: In our role as the official Opposition, we wish to nominate Matthew O'Toole as leader of the Opposition.

A Member: Twice.

Mr Speaker: Thank you: I apologise for that.

4.00 pm

Appointment of Junior Ministers

Mr Speaker: I have received correspondence from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in relation to the appointment of junior Ministers.

"Dear Speaker,

Pursuant to the procedure for the appointment of junior Ministers specified in paragraph 3(1) of the determination made by the then First Minister and deputy First Minister on 8 December 1999, as approved by the Assembly on 14 December 1999, we have appointed Aisling Reilly and Pam Cameron as junior Ministers in the Executive Office.

Signed,

First Minister and deputy First Minister"

Mr Speaker: Will Aisling Reilly affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Miss Reilly: Glacaim leis. [*Translation: I accept.*] I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of junior Minister in the office of First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Aisling Reilly appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: Will Pam Cameron affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs Cameron: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of junior Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mrs Pam Cameron appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the business of appointing the junior Ministers, and I offer my congratulations to them as they take up office.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer you to the Pledge of Office. Can you confirm whether the Pledge of Office includes a pledge to operate and work the recently announced east-west council, because I do not think that it was in the text. Secondly, when the Pledge of Office commits Ministers to implementing the law, in light of the judgement that was held in the case of Rooney against

you, can you confirm that that means that there is a statutory obligation on each and every Minister to implement the protocol?

Mr Speaker: The Member heard the Pledge of Office as it was read. It came from the St Andrews Agreement in 2006, and, therefore, the Pledge of Office is as it was written at that point.

As that concludes all the business in the Order Paper that may be conducted today, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to adjourn the sitting. Details of the next sitting will be communicated to Members in due course.

Adjourned at 4.02 pm.