



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 8 April 2021

*The Assembly met at 11.00 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Private Members' Business

### Support for the Rule of Law

**Mr Speaker:** Having been given notice by not less than 30 Members, under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on support for the rule of law.

**Mrs Long:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes with concern the violence on our streets over recent days and condemns without equivocation those involved; sends best wishes to those police officers attacked or injured whilst protecting the community and extends its sympathy to those members of the public who have suffered distress, loss or damage as a result; reaffirms its full commitment to support for policing and for the rule of law; recognises that leadership comes with responsibility; recommits to upholding a culture of lawfulness in both actions and in words; and calls for an immediate and complete end to this violence.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. You will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I call Naomi Long to open the debate.

**Mrs Long:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is with a heavy heart that I propose the motion for debate today. I thought long and hard before deciding to submit a recall petition. However, in the face of successive nights of violence and unrest on our streets, I felt that it would be a dereliction of our duty as an Assembly not to return to address the issue in a democratic forum and to seek to calm tensions and jointly call for the violence and unrest to end.

Over 55 police officers have been injured in over 36 incidents of disorder, deliberately

designed to draw the police into areas to be attacked as they try to protect the community. The scenes that we have witnessed of people forced from their cars, bus drivers and passengers ordered off public transport and vehicles set alight are nothing short of disgraceful.

Anyone who, in any way, tries to justify, excuse or deflect from those abhorrent scenes should also be thoroughly ashamed. I want to place on record my support for those officers and their families and for the Police Service in general for all the work that they are doing, day by day, night by night, to keep people safe. I wish those who were injured a swift and complete recovery from what could be life-changing injuries.

My thoughts, too, are with ordinary members of the public who are going about their day only to have their lives disrupted and their property destroyed by mindless thugs. It is a mercy that no one has lost their life as a result of this appalling violence. I appeal, again, for everyone with influence in our community to use it to end this. The scenes over the last week have been as depressing as they are disgraceful. Whilst not all those who are involved are young, it has been particularly disturbing to see another generation of children and young people, some as young as 12 or 13, being involved in violent confrontation with the police. However, my horror at that has been intensified as I watched adults old enough to be their parents and old enough to know better standing by and cheering, goading and encouraging young people as they wreaked havoc in their own community. That is nothing short of child abuse.

There are many theories as to why this violence has erupted. Whilst there may be an element of truth in each of them, there is and can be no excuse or justification for what has taken place. Our condemnation of such violence must be unequivocal. For some months, we have all been aware of the simmering tensions in parts of our community over the outworkings of Brexit. Most of us, including those who opposed Brexit, have some sympathy for those people who feel betrayed. They were promised sunlit

uplands, and that was a fantasy. It was never how Brexit would end. Those in government knew that, but were more interested in their own ascent to power than the hurt and instability that their deception would cause in Northern Ireland. Instead of calm and measured leadership in the face of challenge, we have heard inflammatory rhetoric, with threats of renewed violence being bandied around by people who claim to be trying to lead others away from their violent past. That dangerous language and foolish talk could only ever serve to further stoke the anger. While people will claim that they were speaking in metaphors, we know all too well that many others hear it literally.

Temperatures were raised still further last week. After a year of restrictions and lockdowns, people were, understandably, frustrated and even angry that those who made the rules and then broke them may not be held to account. Upholding a culture of lawfulness is not only about what we say: it is about what we do. Leadership is about action, not just words. However, few of those teenagers who were burning buses and throwing masonry will have been influenced by the finer points of the Northern Ireland protocol or the COVID regulations. I hate the phrase "recreational rioting" because it trivialises something that causes untold harm. Nevertheless, many of them are bored, angry, reckless and willing to engage in high-risk behaviour for thrills and excitement. Few of them are considering the impact that a bad decision today will have on the rest of their lives. Some of them are convinced that they have no real future worth worrying about. That is utterly tragic.

Some of those young people are also vulnerable to coercive control from the same gangsters who pollute their community with drugs and who are engaged in extortion, racketeering and thuggery. Those malignant influences have every reason to seek to undermine police engagement with the community, given the recent successes of the paramilitary and organised crime task force in disrupting their criminal activities and their incomes. The evidence of orchestration in some areas is confirmation of that. Last night, as the trouble moved towards interfaces and flashpoints in our city with a depressing inevitability, it became clear that deep-rooted sectarian hatred still propels people towards violence.

All those factors and more may have played a part in creating the toxic environment in which trouble has erupted. However, while many factors have contributed to the febrile

atmosphere, there can be no excuses or justifications. There is a common thread throughout: lack of leadership and a common target, which is the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Those who intentionally or unintentionally, through their actions or their words, have helped to position policing as a lightning conductor for anger and frustration in the community now need to step back and reflect. We need to dial down the rhetoric, walk back the ultimatums and allow the accountability and oversight structures for policing and justice to do their job. It is time to support the police — its leadership and its officers on the ground — as they do their jobs.

Therefore, I welcome the unanimous statement that was issued by the Northern Ireland Policing Board yesterday and I trust that, alongside support for the motion today, it marks the start of rebuilding trust, relationships and respect. There are political solutions to all the issues that I have raised. We are not powerless and, if we work together, we can shape things for the better. We can work with business, government and the European Union to resolve the challenges around the operation of the protocol and focus on achievable solutions, such as a full veterinary agreement to mitigate the worst impacts and deescalate the disruption and tensions. We can ensure that, in all that we say and do, we acknowledge the challenge and sacrifice that lockdown has been for all our people and provide leadership in respecting the regulations and guidance and collectively working to deliver an inclusive recovery. We can work together to tackle deprivation and exclusion, particularly among our young people, that leaves them vulnerable to paramilitary influence. We can invest to build more resilient communities that can resist coercive control from thugs and gangsters. That work is already under way through the tackling paramilitarism programme, and, with focused and sustained investment, it has the power to transform people's lives. We can confront the sectarianism in our society and take action to tackle it through support for integrated education, shared housing and diverse communities. We cannot rewrite the past but we can agree to start a new chapter. One that offers hope in this community. All that needs to be built on a firm foundation, respect for the rule of law and respect for policing and justice.

The system of checks and balances are designed to ensure that the operational elements of justice are independent and free of political interference. Although we may not agree with every operational decision of the police, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) or the judiciary, it is vital that, if and when we have

concerns, they are directed through the correct channels and due process is respected. Community confidence in policing is not ours to give or take away, neither is it the job of the police alone to build it. Each of us has a duty to build that confidence by our actions and words and our active and visible support for and engagement with the police at every level. The Policing Board has unanimously asked that we invite Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) to assess the policing of the Storey funeral against national standards, and it will report in a matter of weeks. In the meantime, it is not for me or anyone else to prejudge the outcome. None of us has the expertise in policing or full knowledge of the facts. It is profoundly unfair and incredibly damaging to trash the reputation of the Police Service and senior officers without evidence. We must allow those who are tasked with the complex challenge of policing this community to do that job without fear or favour. Our actions today will impact our ability to deliver fair and effective policing right across our community, both now and in the future.

I propose the motion in the genuine hope that, despite our different perspectives, we can unite in support for policing, the rule of law, delivering political solutions to the challenges that we face and, above all, our desire to seek an immediate end to this violence before the damage done is irreparable.

**Mrs Foster:** I apologise for my voice today. I hope that Members can at least make out some of what I am saying.

I welcome the motion before the House today. The scenes that we have seen last evening and on previous evenings in various parts of Northern Ireland are totally unacceptable. There can be no place in our society for violence or the threat of violence, and it must stop. Just as it was wrong in the past and was never justified, it is wrong now and cannot be justified. The injuries to front-line officers, victims being terrorised, damage to people's property and harm to Northern Ireland's image in this, our centenary year, have taken us backwards. No brick, bottle or petrol bomb thrown has achieved, or can ever achieve, anything but destruction, harm and fear.

**11.15 am**

We are indebted to the police officers who stand between order and those who prefer anarchy. We are also indebted to all the political representatives, community leaders, parents, pastors and others who have sought to calm

tension and urge restraint. Rioting, criminality and wanton destruction destroy lives and livelihoods and bring fear and misery to local communities. It is not in the name of the people who live in the areas impacted on. I have spoken to some of those people, and it is certainly not in their name.

Today is not the time to rehearse the arguments of the last number of weeks, save to say that we should all know well that, when politics fail or are perceived to be failing in Northern Ireland, those who fill the vacuum offer destruction and despair. We cannot allow a new generation of our young people to fall victim to that path or be preyed on by some who prefer the shadows to the light. Political problems require political solutions, never street violence.

Northern Ireland is faced with a number of deep and significant political challenges in the time ahead. We must work through those challenges collectively. Responsible leadership will not cherry-pick the problems that are easiest. Responsible leadership means actively listening to views that people may not agree with or want to hear. Responsible leadership will not deny the existence of the most politically difficult challenges or wish them away. Responsible leadership will not leave things to fester or worsen. In the Assembly, our democratic forum, we will always have our differences and our different legitimate expectations, but the only bedrock on which we can move forward successfully is to recommit ourselves to redoubling our efforts to solve each and every one of the challenges that we face through politics. A stable and prosperous Northern Ireland requires a solution to all our challenges built on the firm foundation that every citizen is equal under the law and is equally subject to the law, regardless of background or status.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I also welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate, albeit that I am saddened by the fact that we have to have it. It is incumbent on us all as Assembly Members and political leaders to meet and publicly express our deep concerns relating to the recent violence and the ongoing street disorder over Easter week across Belfast, Derry, Tyrone and other parts of the North. What we saw last night at Lanark Way interface was a dangerous escalation of the events of recent days. It is utterly deplorable.

This morning, I met the Chief Constable, Simon Byrne, who then briefed the special meeting of the Executive, where he gave an operational update on the police response. As we speak, 55 police officers have been injured. I send

solidarity to those officers and their families at this difficult time. It is a time when they are out on the front line, tackling difficult situations on the ground and trying to protect people in our communities from harm and protect property. I also reaffirm support for the rule of law and those who are charged with upholding it on our streets.

I am glad to say to the Assembly that the Executive met just this morning and, as I said, had the Chief Constable there. As a result of that engagement, we have issued a joint Executive statement. Our words are powerful, and it is really important at this time that the Executive have sent out that united front. There is an onus on every MLA and on other public representatives to assume our responsibilities, to address the tensions as we see them, to restore calm and to work with credible community leaders and the police to provide the leadership that is required to confront these problems. As political leaders, we must stand united in appealing to all concerned to refrain from further threats or use of violence and recognise that it is only through democratic politics that we can solve our problems and concerns and call together on those organising young people to engage in violence to stop and call on the young people themselves to exercise restraint. Nobody could fail to be alarmed by the fact that these are young people — children as young as 13, barely teenagers — who have been involved in rioting at Sandy Row and, last night, in similar scenes at Lanark Way.

It is not right; it is dangerous; it is unacceptable; and it is a miracle that, as we stand here today, no one has been killed.

I commend all those who are working really hard on the ground in our communities to try to provide diversionary activities for children and young people, because we know that that can help to prevent further antisocial behaviour by those who face the highest risk of influence. We all know where that influence is coming from: it is coming from illegal loyalist paramilitaries and criminal elements. They are orchestrating this violence and are sending youngsters out to do their bidding, while they stand back. Those people are no role models for our youth. They are outdated and antiquated and are caught in a time warp, which has no bearing on where the vast majority of people across this society now are or, indeed, where they want to be. They are holding back their people and their community.

It is only through dialogue and through the democratic institutions that political solutions to problems can be found. This Saturday marks

the twenty-third anniversary of the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which created the democratic institutions, based on power-sharing, and guaranteed equality and parity of esteem between both traditions and the right for citizens to be Irish, British or both. It also created an alternative to conflict. It gave today's generation the precious gift of peace and hope. It is vital that the benefits of the peace process are safeguarded and built upon for future generations, and that all of our people feel the benefit.

The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) has now, we are told, withdrawn its support for the agreement. What is its logic and, more importantly, what is its alternative? Unionist leaders have withdrawn their support for the Chief Constable, demanding that he resign. When we see that manifest itself, with young people from working-class loyalist areas attacking the police, it seems to me and all who are watching on that those things cannot be entirely divorced. Surely unequivocal support for the police and their leadership is the responsible thing to guarantee today from this democratic Assembly.

Political unionism cannot blame Brexit —.

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What we as an Executive, as an Assembly and as political leaders need to do is focus on working together and say very clearly that there is room for everybody at the table. I will, however, tell you whom there is not room for: there is not room for armed gangs and criminal gangs who care nothing about the future of this society. Those people are enemies of the peace, and it is our job to make sure that all generations and future generations feel the benefit of the peace. It is incumbent upon us as political leaders, to whom the public give their support, to work together.

**Ms Mallon:** I support the motion and speak on behalf of the SDLP. Like others, I want to begin by addressing the escalation in violence that took place in Belfast last night. When I became Infrastructure Minister last year, I never imagined that I would be receiving updates about the condition of one of our bus drivers — a public servant — after a bus was hijacked and petrol bombed, while the attackers were cheered on by a mob. Last night, a bus driver was attacked doing his job serving the community and a press photographer was attacked for doing his job in capturing the truth.

Police officers were, for the eighth consecutive night, attacked for doing their job, protecting communities and keeping us safe. If anyone needed a wake-up call about the dangerous escalation of the situation, they should reflect on those facts. It has to be said that the immediate response on social media from some political leaders fell far short of what was needed to provide assurances to people and communities who are afraid of where we will go next.

Today is not the day for a political blame game. The people of Northern Ireland are not stupid: they know how and why we got to this dreadful point. What the people of Northern Ireland want to know is what we, as their political leaders, are going to do to de-escalate the situation and prevent it from reoccurring and infecting another generation of disadvantaged young people.

I appeal to all Members to reflect seriously on where their words will take us over the next few hours and days. The truth is that the violence, disorder and sustained attacks on police officers are a damning indictment of the quality of political leadership that has been provided to our communities. The fact that children are engaged in violence on our streets is a damning indictment of the quality of political leadership that has been provided to our communities. Those young people should look with excitement to their futures and careers. They should have the world at their feet. Instead, they are looking at criminal convictions that will follow them throughout their lives and limit their ambitions and opportunities. Is that the kind of society for which we want to be responsible? After years of lost opportunities and lives, are we content to sacrifice another generation to our own divisions?

I welcome the voices here that have condemned the violence of recent days. However, the truth is that we have condemned working-class communities to the cycle of violence for generations. I look at those young people in Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey and see the burden of poverty, isolation and alienation that they share with young people in the New Lodge and Ardoyne. This place, these institutions, should have been an example to people everywhere of what we can achieve by living for ideals, rather than fighting for them. Instead of building partnerships, we have allowed division to occupy the heart of our institutions. It has affected and infected our politics and communities. Most unforgivably, it has placed a limit on the scale of young people's ambitions.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am grateful to my colleague for giving way. Does she agree that one of the most damaging and upsetting things about what is happening is that we are allowing young people to be infected with the narrative of "win versus lose" in a zero-sum situation where one community is being pitted against another, and that we need to overcome that? This cannot be a zero-sum society. It has to be shared.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have an additional minute.

**Ms Mallon:** I absolutely agree with the Member. We should all reflect on the sad reality of the commonality that many of our citizens have. As we stand here today, 120,000 children are living in poverty, 40,000 families are waiting for a home that meets their needs, and thousands of people are waiting for urgent medical care. The children who are wearing balaclavas on our streets this week were born into a society that was not of their own making; an unequal society, where they start off at a disadvantage. They are looking to us for help. What we offer here today and in the weeks ahead needs to be more than judgement or criminal sanction.

I regret that some in the House followed the raging crowd rather than providing direction over the past few months. As leaders, we have an obligation to exercise our influence to reduce tensions and bring the violence to an end. The message that we all need to send today is one of unequivocal condemnation of those who are orchestrating the violence and pushing children and young people into harm's way. Rather than continue to fail those young people and leave them ripe for manipulation and exploitation, we need to be unequivocal in our commitment to tackle the poverty, alienation and hopelessness that is faced by so many young people and citizens in working-class communities. When Lyra McKee was brutally murdered, we all stood together and said, "Never again". We must all unite to act on that pledge.

John Hume once said that if the underlying problem has not changed, the underlying solution has not changed. We have a duty and obligation to work together to address the problems that plague our communities. I assure the people of Northern Ireland that the SDLP remains committed to playing its part.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank Mrs Long for bringing the motion to the Assembly. Violence on the streets or anywhere is completely unacceptable. Organised criminal gangs bringing out children, young people and others to commit acts of

wanton destruction helps no one and no cause. The image that it portrays of Northern Ireland in the 21st century and into its second century is not one that anybody should want to see. The violence must stop before someone is killed. COVID has not gone away. Creating chaos and disruption not only damages Northern Ireland but creates opportunities for transmission of the disease. The violence is in breach of the law and the health regulations. That, indeed, is the very reason that we have complained so vehemently about all those who have undermined the health regulations so far. It is that breaching of those regulations that puts all people at risk as much as the violence.

The burning of cars and roundabouts in Cloughfern, very close to my constituency, just in sight of where we are setting up a Nightingale recovery facility at the Whiteabbey hospital, is beyond perverse.

### 11.30 am

I re-emphasise our full support for the PSNI. Given the attacks on any of our police, who are on the front line of defending us against terrorism and who are helping to deliver our public safety during the pandemic, it is beholden on all politicians to support the police as they continue to do the most difficult tasks. They deserve our unreserved thanks.

On behalf of my party, I re-emphasise our abhorrence of attacks on the police, and I wish all 55 who were injured a swift recovery. We also trust that those who have injured and attacked the police and committed criminal acts will swiftly be brought to justice. We will continue to pass on our support in the discussions with the Chief Constable that we will have this afternoon.

I will comment on remarks that I made last week about Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. I make clear that we fully support the HMIC in its work and that its professionalism and ability to investigate impartially is not in any doubt. We look forward to the publication of its findings on the policing of the Bobby Storey funeral as soon as they are available.

The violence and destruction across Northern Ireland is unacceptable and unjustifiable. If it does not halt now, the risk of someone being seriously injured or killed is there. Any anger must be directed through political, diplomatic and legal channels. To use violence is to lose the argument. It is to inflict great damage not only to your cause but to your community,

because those in it are the ones who are left to pick up the pieces.

I welcome, as indeed does our party, the joint statement from the Northern Ireland Executive today. That is a start. I say to the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the other members of the Executive that that is an important move towards where we need to get to. All of us politicians must stand shoulder to shoulder to make sure that we use our best endeavours across all of Northern Ireland to make politics work. Violence and the threat of violence have no place in any society. In particular, it has no place in Northern Ireland. We must work together to stop it happening. We support the motion.

**Mr Middleton:** I am proud to come from the Newbuildings area of Londonderry. My wife is from Nelson Drive. I was born and bred in that community and my roots are there. It is my greatest honour to have a mandate to represent those areas and all the people of the Foyle constituency. The images and the videos that I have seen on news outlets are not a true reflection of who we are. In my constituency, I believe that the sense of community and looking out for one another is second to none. Over the course of the pandemic, we have seen the best of our people step up to help their neighbours.

I unequivocally condemn the violence and disorder that we have witnessed across our communities in recent days. Whether the violence happens in Londonderry or Belfast, Ballymena or Craigavon, it should be equally condemned.

**Mr Stalford:** I am very grateful to my colleague for giving way. He will be aware that social media postings are being put up that are trying to entice people into further lawbreaking. Will my friend join me in urging young people especially to ignore those voices that will take them down a path that will destroy their lives?

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

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for that and I agree with it.

There can be no excuse for damaging or destroying the property of our neighbours in our communities or, indeed, for attacking the PSNI officers attending the scene. My thoughts are with each and every one of those officers injured and, indeed, all the rank-and-file officers of the PSNI who have, unacceptably, come under attack simply for doing their jobs.

There is no doubt that there are deep frustrations and anger in the unionist and loyalist community. However, the presence of that disorder and rioting on our streets is wholly unacceptable. There is no justification. The fundamental concerns expressed in the wider unionist community are genuine, and they must be addressed. It is of the utmost importance that those concerns are not drowned out by the destruction and mayhem that we have sadly witnessed on our streets. The outworking of that frustration and anger must be entirely peaceful and democratic.

The overwhelming majority of my constituents, and, no doubt, constituents across Northern Ireland are law-abiding and just want their concerns to be heard.

We must never stoop to the level of those who would use terror and violence for political means.

Frustrations have been building for months. In speech after speech in the Chamber, I and others have warned of the complete disregard being shown to the unionist community by those who champion the border in the Irish Sea and call for the rigorous implementation of the protocol. The complete disregard for the COVID-19 regulations shown by the deputy First Minister has caused immense anger and raised serious concerns about the criminal justice system.

In the week that the deputy First Minister and her colleagues received word that they would face no prosecutions for breaching COVID restrictions, at least 12 loyalists of whom I am aware in Londonderry were summoned to court for illegal assembly. The incident that I refer to did not happen last week or last year or the year before that; it happened four years ago, when a group of loyalists gathered peacefully to tackle ongoing issues of antisocial behaviour in the St Columb's Park and Bonds Street areas. Night after night, there was violence and alcohol and drug abuse in that park. There were no summonses for those engaging in that behaviour, yet, four years on, in the week that the deputy First Minister and others got off the hook, the loyalists received those summonses. There are questions to be asked of the PPS in that respect.

The perception of two-tier policing has led to the erosion of support in the unionist community and created a vacuum that, sadly, others seek to fill whether it is a perception or a reality of double standards in the police. That damages respect for the rule of law. When those in senior government positions break the law but are not

held accountable, that endangers devolution. It is because we believe in the police and the rule of law that we want to see the law applied equally and fairly. Everyone inside and outside the Chamber must work to rebuild confidence and promote stability. Given the scale of the problem facing trust in politics and policing, while we support the motion, it is self-evident that words of condemnation will never be enough to provide solutions.

We all have choices to make. We have a choice as to whether to engage in violence or not. We have a choice as to which path we take in life. It is the job of us in the Chamber to improve the choices that our young people have, to provide them with a hopeful present reality and a hopeful future, not re-enacting the acts that, sadly, have been too familiar in the past. The Assembly needs to focus on the full reopening of our youth services, allowing for interventions and targeted programmes for our young people, providing them with an alternative platform to highlight the fact that they have a voice, that they will be heard and that they have a say in democratic processes and will never again turn to the violent acts that, we all agree, are completely and totally wrong.

All of us in the Chamber need to redouble our efforts to bring about calm and hope for all in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I ask the Chamber this: do you care deeply enough about a shared future to take on board the genuine concerns raised by the unionist community? Collectively, we in the Chamber have the ability to send a strong message to every person in our society that we are serious about making Northern Ireland work, that we want to deliver a better future and that we are not going back.

**Ms Anderson:** The violence that erupted in Derry was mainly in the Waterside Protestant/unionist/loyalist (PUL) areas and was orchestrated by crime gangs. To demonstrate unity of purpose, political leaders — me, Gary Middleton, Karen Mullan and Sinead McLaughlin — met the PSNI district commander, the Chamber of Commerce, the City Centre Initiative and other statutory agencies to discuss reports of ambulances being stoned, petrol bombs being fired at cars, petrol bombs being put into the hands of 12-year-old children and police officers being injured.

**Mr Middleton:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Ms Anderson:** Afterwards, we issued a joint statement calling for an end to the ongoing cycle of violence.

I and Sinn Féin councillor Christopher Jackson were in small, mainly nationalist areas in the Waterside, such as Currynierin and Shepherds Glen, with residents who felt utterly terrified in their homes as attempts were made to restrict access into and out of their estates, putting lives, families and communities at risk. There is no doubt that council and departmental support is needed for the besieged community of Currynierin, for youth services and to build community capacity.

When violence occurs in nationalist areas of Derry, it is community activists, youth leaders and Sinn Féin who are on the ground, assisting to de-escalate the situation and challenge bad behaviour. Today, in the Chamber, we need to demonstrate a generosity of spirit; outreach to one another; dial down the rhetoric; build on the common ground on which we all stand; and, as political leaders, recommit to upholding a culture of lawfulness in actions and words. Twenty-three years after the Good Friday Agreement, we are, thankfully, in the privileged space where dialogue can be used to build relationships between orange and green and all other traditions who call our society "home". From political representatives, leadership is essential at all times, in good times and in challenging times. The key to that is dialogue and proactive engagement between all traditions and none. We all know that our young people and people collectively deserve a society in which tolerance, equal treatment and the rule of law are standards that govern all institutions and everyday life.

I have listened to people in the PUL community who feel that their identity has been undermined by changes brought about by the British Government and political unionism. Those changes have happened and challenge us, but they have to be managed. So, my appeal, on behalf of the many people in Derry whom I have the privilege to represent, is for us to work together and use dialogue to meet those challenges together and shape a future that addresses the needs of all of our people together. I do not want to see any young person from any tradition having their life ruined by a criminal record. Young people enraged by dangerous and provocative rhetoric are easy prey for the crime gangs involved in drug dealing, extortion and intimidation as well as attacks on journalists, bus drivers, photographers and representatives. It will be the young loyalists who will face the wrath of the criminal justice system, not those who shamefully stoked and orchestrated the violence.

Today, we must stand together to condemn without equivocation the violence on our streets, which serves as a sobering reminder that peace is a process that needs to be constantly safeguarded. If leadership is shown today and every day and if the rhetoric is toned down —

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

**Ms Anderson:** — inevitably the violence will be too. Tá mé ag tacú leis an rún. I support the motion.

**Mr Middleton:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member for Foyle Martina Anderson stated that ambulances were stoned. We need to be careful with our facts and our language in the Chamber.

**Ms Anderson:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Very briefly, please.

**Ms Anderson:** I said that we were discussing reports of ambulances being stoned: that is the difference.

**Mr Speaker:** OK. Let us not have a cross-Chamber argument about reports and so on.

**Mr Storey:** I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

No one can be but saddened and depressed at the scenes of violence and destruction on our streets over the last number of days. Let us be clear, with no ambiguity, no double-talk and no smoke and mirrors: this is wrong.

No one should use legitimate political concerns about the events that have unfolded in our country over the last number of months — whether that be the protocol or the circumstances surrounding the funeral of Bobby Storey and how it was mishandled — as cover or as a licence to attack police officers or to burn cars, buses and property, instilling fear in their own and someone else's community.

#### 11.45 am

Today's date is also a sad occasion for the families of two RUC officers who were murdered 44 years ago, on Good Friday, outside Moneymore. One of those officers, Constable John Thompson McCracken, was from my hometown of Ballymoney, and he was

murdered along with Constable Kenneth Sheehan. One was 22 and the other was 19. One of the gunmen became a hunger striker: one of the heroes of those who represent Sinn Féin in the Assembly. Was that gunman a role model for our young people? I have heard eulogies in the House that stand in stark condemnation to the bravery of those two constables. When we come to condemnation, let us not be partial or selective. Violence was wrong in 1977, and it is still wrong in 2021.

That brings me on to discuss the issue of rhetoric and how important our words are. Our words are important. We, as unionist leaders, have been challenged about what we have said in recent days. My colleague Gary Middleton referred to the fact that we have listened to a barrage of disrespect against the centenary of this country, which is our home. The Members opposite cannot even recognise the shape of Northern Ireland. They see it as offensive. A number of weeks ago, I listened to contributions in the House from Emma Sheerin, Martina Anderson and Pat Sheehan. If that was showing "respect", we need to rethink the definition of that word.

This is not only about Sinn Féin. Let us remember that, when concerns were raised about the protocol, members of the SDLP told us, "Suck it up. It's not changing". Let us be clear that, on social media, the leader of the SDLP and an Alliance MLA made comments in which they engaged in name-calling towards a particular MP colleague of mine. I would not repeat in this Chamber what he was called. If we want to dial down the rhetoric —

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

**Mr Storey:** Yes.

**Mr Clarke:** I see that the Member is probably running out of time for his speech but will he touch on some of the comments where Sinn Féin threatened violence if there had not been a border in the Irish Sea?

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask that that comment be withdrawn. There is no evidence whatsoever that Sinn Féin has threatened violence over anything.

**Mr Speaker:** I did not want to intervene in any shape or form today. The debate has gone quite well, notwithstanding the subject, but, before we continue, I remind Members that an awful lot of people out there are watching and

listening to what is going on here this morning. They want to see constructive, positive, measured and principled leadership from Members of the House, across all parties. I do not want to hear any other contributions that are straying into disrespect.

In the past, two Speakers — Willie Hay and Mitchel McLaughlin — brought a departure from the rulings of previous Speakers, insofar as they focused much more attentively on the conduct of the debate, the language that was used, the disrespect and the tone of the debate.

If Members cast their minds back, I think that they will find that they were quite successful during their tenures, notwithstanding difficult circumstances when they presided over the House. I want to remind Members that they should use respectful language to make their points. People here are grown up. They are very mature politicians. You can make an argument without insulting someone and without inflaming the mood out there.

Like every other elected representative in the Chamber, I listened to the fears and worries of people in the communities in my constituency last night. Other Members have testified that they also did that and all other Members can do so. I do not want those people to ring tonight or tomorrow night to tell me of the same fears that they had yesterday.

Our job here is to support the motion. That is what Members are entitled to do. I advise the House that more than 60 Members signed the recall petition. Virtually every element of the elected representatives in the House signed the recall petition, which indicates that they support the motion and that almost the entire Assembly supports its content.

I appeal to Members to watch their language from this point on. Measure your language and be respectful of all sides. Bear in mind that you are demonstrating your leadership, or lack of it, as the case might be, to the general public, who I believe will be looking at the debate, probably in large numbers. Please show what the House can do and achieve when it works together. Those have been the sentiments of the vast majority of the Members who have contributed this morning.

I end on that remark. I appeal to Members to measure their language, to be respectful and to make sure that they give a positive demonstration of leadership to the wider community who are looking in here with hope, and who are looking for hope and inspiration that we are moving forward into a better place,

rather than moving back 20 years as we have done during this past week in our community. On that basis, I recall Mr Storey.

**Mr Storey:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Whenever any call comes from my office, it is wrong.

I want to return to rhetoric. The Alliance leader was on the radio this morning and rightly said that we need to consider our language, but she then said that we had been lied to about Brexit. As we leave the Chamber, if our starting point is to take the advice of the Speaker and the comments of some Members who have already spoken to mind our language, let us be consistent in that.

I said this morning that I have suffered politically and personally because we went into government with Sinn Féin in 2007. People have stopped speaking to me and have stopped socialising with us, but we stretched out the hand to those —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Storey:** — who were justifying murder and mayhem. Now the time has come to show respect, not only by your words but by your deeds, do what you said others should do and dial down the rhetoric and give leadership to your community, as well as respect to mine.

**Ms Hargey:** I support the motion and hope that the House stands united in its unequivocal condemnation of the violence that has ensued over the last week. That violence has seen petrol bombs being thrown, a public transport worker being forced from his bus and the bus burned, a photographer being attacked and injured and residents and communities living in fear. We also saw young people being used by sinister elements to attack the police, sinister elements placing petrol bombs in the hands of young people — the same sinister elements who place drugs in the hands of young people — and criminal elements using our children.

I am deeply concerned that protests are being organised at interface areas. Those protests are being widely circulated on social media. I have worked on interface issues for over 20 years in Belfast, and my experience tells me that those who organise at or near interface areas are not intent on peaceful protest. Their intent is organised, and it is a deliberate attempt to stoke up violence and sectarianism. That is what we saw last night.

We must stand together collectively and condemn that violence. We must stand together

and condemn those criminal and sinister elements who are using young people to incite violence.

We can see on a daily basis, even this morning, that there are orchestrated attempts to organise more protests at or near interface flashpoints. Those criminal gangs have nothing to offer the community. They should disband and climb off the backs of their community. Street protests need to be called off, as it is clear that they are leading to tensions and violence. I hope that the House unites around these issues.

I want to take the opportunity to commend the many community and youth leaders and activists who have been tirelessly on the ground and engaging with young people to try to pull them away from the violence. I live in a community with young people who are just like those were caught up in the violence at Sandy Row, which is in my constituency, and on the Shankill Road. They are working-class communities. We have similar housing. We suffer from poverty. We have the same health inequalities that see people in our communities die almost 10 years younger than the average because of poverty. Our communities are facing the pressure of development without their interests being considered. There are high levels of unemployment. These communities have borne the brunt of conflict and sectarianism and continue to bear the brunt of health and economic shocks.

I have been a youth worker, a community activist and an elected rep in my community and I am also a resident. We need cross-party support in the Chamber, from the Executive and the Assembly, to tackle poverty and inequality and to target resources on the basis of objective need for communities like Sandy Row, the Shankill Road, the Springfield Road and the Waterside and the Bogside. I will work with all those around the Executive table and across the Chamber to achieve that. Now is the time for calm and to call for an end to violent protests. It is time for criminal gangs to go away, leave the communities alone and get off the young people's backs.

To the young people in our communities, I say this: I want to work with you and ensure that your voices are heard. I want to listen to you. I am here to engage with you to address the issues and the hopes for our communities. Let us stamp out the flames of hate and work to allow our young people and our communities to flourish.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Twenty three years after the Good Friday Agreement, this is the right

moment to reflect on its success and, yes, on where it has been less than successful. It gave us peace but it has not given us reconciliation. Perhaps, just as bad, it has failed to get rid of paramilitaries and the sinister forces in our communities. The people of Northern Ireland are deeply frustrated, depressed and disappointed in our politics and our politicians. Every single MLA in this House has been told at one time or another that their constituents feel let down. Our politicians are not living up to the vision, the spirit and the hope that is contained in the Good Friday Agreement.

When it comes to governing Northern Ireland, the political tension between the DUP and Sinn Féin is palpable. When it comes to big decisions and issues that need to be resolved such as Brexit, COVID, schools closing and reopening, victims' pensions and the provision of women's health services, there is rarely a meeting of minds and the dirty linen tends to be washed in public. A sectarian mindset still prevails. There is no disguising that we have had our fill of serious pressures in our political institutions. We can all accept that Brexit has, regrettably, reopened old wounds and has, indeed, sharpened all the lines and divisions that the Good Friday Agreement sought to soften around sovereignty, identity and borders.

The SDLP hears and deeply regrets the feelings and frustrations of abandonment that are acutely felt in our unionist community. As a nationalist, I truly understand that. However, John Hume once said that if you fall into reacting to reaction, you lose perspective and judgement. I am afraid that that is precisely what has happened. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister should reflect very carefully on the role that they each have played.

### 12.00 noon

The outworking of political ineptitude creates a space for violence in our streets.

Political dissension provided a target and an opportunity for the disorder. In the past nine days in Derry, Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland, we have seen 12-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 14-year-olds on the streets throwing petrol bombs, stones and rocks and setting cars alight. They were not there to demand that the protocol be scrapped or that Simon Byrne resigns from the PSNI. We can be confident that those teenagers were motivated and manipulated by paramilitary groups. In the Waterside area of Derry, that means the UDA. The PSNI has been ramping up its actions against the UDA in recent weeks. It is no

wonder that its leaders are causing a ruckus. Whatever the UDA claims to be, it is just a criminal operation that sells drugs, runs protection rackets and engages in loan-sharking. Its members become rich while its victims become poor. The UDA is not unique. In Derry there is a drugs war between the INLA and the New IRA that has led to recent shootings.

We have to do so much more to rid ourselves of the scourge of the paramilitaries. The last thing we need to do is give those sinister forces any type of political cover or credibility. The First Minister must surely understand that this would be a reckless action. These groups do not want to move on because their members do very well, thank you, from holding us back. We must give our young people hope for the future. The paramilitaries offer them a few minutes of buzz followed by years of deprivation and, for some, a criminal record or prison.

Leadership can take us out of this mess. We need to put an end to the zero-sum politics that prevail among us. We need to give our young people hope for a better future, create a more equal and just society, move beyond segregated communities, create good jobs and ensure that people in our poorest communities benefit from those opportunities. Unemployment and deprivation are recruitment agents for paramilitarism.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Let us take the oxygen away from them and invest in a good education system in which we support our young people in a better life.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I speak as a Member of the Assembly and the Policing Board. I was on a Zoom call last night with some very concerned citizens. One made the point that we, as politicians, are not consistent in what we say and how we say it, rather we shape our words to our audience and the forum in which we speak. Is there not truth in that? Another person asked whether, when we are in dialogue, it is civil, constructive, humble and charitable, and he was not joking. It reminded me of the Thursdays at Ulster Television when I chaired political debates. Politicians had no difficulty tearing verbal lumps out of each other on live television but in the green room afterwards, how different it was. Over a tea, wine or beer, they asked, "Did your mum get her hip operation yet?", or, "Did your son get his grades for university?". There were relationships. Where have those relationships gone?

If there is any opportunity in this crisis, is it not to renew our pledge of support for the Good Friday Agreement, which will be 23 years old this weekend, and build new relationships based on mutual respect and trust-building? I heard my friend Doug Beattie on the radio this morning with my friend Matthew O'Toole. I was very struck when Doug said that he wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with Matthew, not just to condemn the violence but to build a better society. I would like to stand shoulder to shoulder with every single Member of the Assembly to do just that, but I am held back by one party that is making it very difficult: it is the republican party opposite, because it will not apologise for something that it should not have done. That does not excuse the violence because nothing excuses that violence.

We come to what I have described previously as events that can be explained but cannot be excused. We should look for explanations for why this violence is occurring. I have heard many reasons: the funeral, the protocol, two-tier policing, the statement by the Public Prosecution Service, a reaction to the success of the police and the National Crime Agency against some of these organised criminal gangs. By the way, can we stop calling them paramilitary groups, please? That may describe how they are organised, but it does not reflect their intent. Their intent is to terrorise people, to exercise coercive control on communities up to and including child abuse, to intimidate and to extort. Let us think about better language to describe these groups.

However, I have heard another reason to explain the violence that cannot be excused: a sense of alienation in the communities where the violence is taking place. I have to ask this to the parties that brought us programmes such as the social investment fund and Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC): can you, in a civil, constructive, humble and charitable way, say that there has been a failure? Then, can we, as an Assembly and a coalition Government, come together and fix it? If you look at the league tables of areas of deprivation going back 10 and 20 years, the top 10 are still the top 10. Whatever we have done has failed to solve the problem.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. He has made a very powerful point. I remember, when I was Minister for Social Development, asking for a breakdown of all the money spent in certain areas. It was stark. Money was spent in the very areas that we are seeing engulfed in violence and trouble today. Is it because there has been a tendency to feed some others and give priority to some other

people in those communities? Maybe that is part of the problem as well.

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** Thank you Mr Speaker. I thank Mr Storey for his intervention. All that I would say to him is that, if he studies my remarks about the social investment fund over the years, he will understand that I was no fan of that programme.

However, let us look forward because there is still opportunity to address those issues. We are, after all, a coalition Government of five parties. That means that we should be a Government for all; not a Government for sections or factions, but a Government for all our people. I can think of no better way to close than to quote from the agreement, which is 23 years old this Saturday. In the "Declaration of Support", paragraph 3 states:

*"We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships".*

It is time — well past time — that we delivered.

**Ms Bunting:** I declare my membership of the Policing Board.

I deplore violence, all violence, regardless of the source. I am appalled at what we have witnessed. I am sorry for the public and police who have been injured. I am horrified that these children may be criminalised. However, it is so disappointing that civic society is quick to condemn but does not seem to want to understand, never mind address, what is at the root of this. We are always analysing those who commit crime. What was in their background? What gave them the propensity? Was it a broken family, drug abuse, the legacy of the Troubles or violence in the home? We should also want to understand why there is rioting and civil unrest now. We need to look at and consider how we got here, what brought them to this, and what needs to change.

There is massive political and cultural alienation. I am not condoning or justifying their behaviour, because it is never acceptable to burn a bus, throw a petrol bomb or attack a police officer.

However, part of this is that they have watched and learned that violence, or the threat of it, has often paid off, sometimes literally with funding. Historically, they have watched parades rerouted or stopped because of violent protest

and fear of disorder. More recently, they have watched the law be blatantly broken, without consequence, by those who wrote it.

The political elite in Sinn Féin, who adopt a "Do as we say not as we do" attitude, brought thousands on to the streets and hundreds into a cemetery when every other family got 25, 30 or 10 and were not allowed into the crematorium, never mind, what has been viewed as, given control of it. Sinn Féin: happy to write and endorse draconian laws for restrictions, safe in the knowledge that it can flout them without recourse. Those laws may be for everybody else, but there is another set of rules for Sinn Féin, which appears to be above the law. It also appears to be facilitated by the police to breach those laws in ways that are inexplicable and unacceptable. I want to place on record my full support for the rank-and-file police officers who are having to deal with this on the ground, but something needs to change at the top, and, at the very least, it is the mentality.

The Storey funeral is the benchmark to which the policing of all other restrictions is compared. There absolutely is two-tier policing in Northern Ireland, and the PPS provided the evidence last week. In any circumstance, where the PPS writes that the PSNI's behaviour had anything to do with it being unable to bring a prosecution, that is a massive problem and an epic failure on behalf of the PSNI. I have been harping — that is the only word for it — at the Policing Board about two-tier policing since I got there in 2016. I have raised my community's lack of confidence in the police at pretty much every meeting, private and public, but, until recently, I was dismissed like a child, because the police did not believe that I was right and they did not care if they were wrong. We are all supposed to be equal under the law and equally subject to it, but that is not the case, and everybody in my community sees that. That is why all four unionist parties have indicated that they no longer have confidence in the Chief Constable and some of his team, and nor do the people whom we represent. That should matter.

Another example is recruitment. There are five under-represented groups in the police, but only four have support groups set up in the organisation, and it is only those four with whom the police and the Policing Board proactively engage. When the police advertise, only four are mentioned in the ad. One is not, and the one exception is always working-class Protestants.

Our community has had enough and so have we. Are some of them expressing their anger and frustration in the right way? Absolutely not,

but that does not invalidate their fears and views. Those are shared by hundreds of thousands of people who do not take to the streets.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for giving way. You followed on from what Mr Nesbitt and others said about not getting into the detail and about the fact that we are here today to try to calm down the rhetoric, but, do you accept, given your contribution and what Mike Nesbitt said, that there may be an opportunity after this debate to get into those issues and find out what the core problems are in all those areas?

**Ms Bunting:** I thank the Member. I agree, and I think that we will.

Their behaviour is that of the outlier, but their views are not. Their frustrations are mainstream, and they are also ours. Two things can be true at once. It is entirely possible to condemn the violence and yet still be frustrated at the annexing of Northern Ireland through the protocol, believing that this is not the Brexit for which you voted. You can still condemn the violence and be aghast at a weak PPS, which tells you not to believe your own eyes, that there is nothing to see here and that it is the laws that are very confusing. It is entirely possible to condemn the violence and still be angry that there is two-tier policing. Protestant, unionist and loyalist — I am all of those — no longer feel as though as they are being heard, listened to or valued —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Ms Bunting:** — in what is supposed to be a shared society.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you.

**Mr G Kelly:** I support the motion, and I thank Naomi Long for bringing it forward at this time.

It is important that, after the past week of violence and destruction, the motion gets unanimous agreement. I am glad to hear that the Executive have put out a statement, although I have not seen it yet. The immediate message, of course, is that the violence needs to stop and needs to stop now. There needs to be one voice on this issue, whatever the disagreements are on other issues.

**12.15 pm**

When I started to write these notes, over 40 police officers had been injured. We now know

that up to 55 have been injured. I want to join with others in the Chamber to wish those officers a speedy recovery. Of course, as other Members have mentioned, there are civilians who have also suffered damage as a result of the violence. Last night, there was mayhem at what should have been a historic interface in Belfast. I say "historic" because it should have been a thing of the past that, perhaps, tourists or people with an interest would go to look at, or whatever. I then spent hours at Lanark Way, engaging with the police and others on the ground, trying, along with many others, as I said, to de-escalate the confrontations. That is what we, as politicians, need to do here; de-escalate the rhetoric and show leadership. A good place to start is not with whataboutery — although it might be too late for that — but with having a realistic view of the situation. Crime gangs are orchestrating the violence for their own ends. There can be no justification for the violence, so let us accept no pseudo rationale for it. We must collectively challenge and face down those who are putting stones, bottles, fireworks and petrol bombs into children's hands.

My experience, which is similar to that which was described by Deirdre Hargey, is that those whose intent is the escalation of unrest will always move that unrest near to interfaces and try to turn it into a tit-for-tat situation. In fact, I made that very point in a Policing Board meeting with the Chief Constable a couple of days ago. I should have declared earlier that I am a member of the Policing Board. Unfortunately, I then witnessed that in west and north Belfast because the unrest did spread throughout last night.

We must call out threats of sectarian attacks on elected representatives, journalists and ordinary people in their workplaces and homes. Paramilitary drug dealers cannot be allowed to work as community workers by day and thugs by night. They do not represent loyalism or any other section of society, so let us not join in the pretence that they speak for anyone but themselves. Whatever the criticism or disagreement with senior police officers is, demanding their removal does not solve the problem. Accountability mechanisms have been set up to deal with complaints, big and small. The place to deal with political disagreements is here in the Chamber; not by refusing to meet, but by dialogue and outreach, listening and finding answers collectively when that is possible. Sinn Féin will always work to resolve difficult problems when possible. That can be done only with other parties.

The motion speaks for itself. Let us condemn violence without equivocation wherever it occurs and uphold:

*"a culture of lawfulness in both actions and words."*

This morning, we got a report that a number of plastic bullets or attenuating energy projectiles (AEP) were fired last night for the first time in many years. That, to me, shows the tinderbox that we are in at the moment. No one wants to go back to those days. I urge the people who are organising these protests — by bringing people onto the streets, the situation will escalate — to stop before someone is killed. Tá mé ag tacú leis an rún.

**Ms Armstrong:** I will not take up too much time. Folks, I grew up during the Troubles. I just want to take Members back to the reality of what has happened over the past few days. Last night, I watched two women on video. One stood at the side of the road clapping while a group of people wearing masks and dark clothes ran down the road. The other was a health worker who was trying to get her car out before the burning bus blocked her in. Why have we come to this situation? Why do we have two people who live and work in the same area having such different attitudes? It comes back to our failure to deliver a shared society. That has been mentioned previously. We have had T:BUC, shared housing and such stuff. Why has it not worked? It has not worked because, I believe, this place has not committed to it.

Today, all parties need — not "have to" but need — to condemn the violence. We need to reaffirm our support for the police and the rule of law. We do not need to add to the pressures on the police at this time by undermining their leadership. This is an opportunity for parties to work together. When the recall petition came forward, a lot of people said to me, "Sure, this is a talking shop. It means nothing. There will be no action out of it." Can we leave today with action? It has been talked about by Mr Clarke. I welcome the opportunity to sit down and find out exactly what the issues are. There are lots of issues out there. We all know that. It is time that we in this place take on leadership and bring it forward.

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

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

I want to rebuild trust. I want to bring forward political solutions. We know that political

solutions can work. They worked in the past. I do not want my child to sit and watch news of petrol bombs being thrown at people. That is attempted murder. It is time that we stopped this carry-on. I am aware that, thankfully, the parties are meeting the Chief Constable and that the Policing Board has been meeting the police. These are the actions that the public need to hear about from us. The public also need to hear us use language not to heighten tensions and cause more problems and give people cover for criminal activities but to bring our community together.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. I make the plea to her and to colleagues around the House that when some of us come to the House with genuine concerns about problems — things that we will disagree on; I will not list them, because that is not for today — we are not dismissed and seen as dinosaurs. We genuinely represent people in our community who hold those views, and we should not be dismissed. If today is to achieve anything, surely to start by putting that respect into action would be a step forward.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank Mr Storey, and I thank you, Mr Speaker.

I do not consider Northern Ireland to have two communities. I am part of one community; issues for anybody are issues for all of us. I absolutely agree with Mr Storey, but can we knock on the head this craic about two-tier policing? I appreciate that he has concerns about the police force, but it is the same police force of which 55 members have been hurt. That number will probably increase. Those are people who are trying to protect us. Those are people who helped to get that health worker and her car out so that she could go about her business. At the time of a health pandemic, we need our health workers and our police.

There are young people out there. Mr Middleton said that we could improve choices; as politicians, we can improve choices by not using contentious language. That contentious language gives criminals the excuse that they need to harm our community. They are harming it. I am aware that, while we are here, there is a protest happening outside City Hall by bus drivers who are terrified to go to work because one of their colleagues was petrol bombed.

We need to support our community — our whole community — together, and I welcome the opportunity to sit down with every Member. As for what Mr Nesbitt said, outside this room, I can sit over a cup of tea with any of you and take forward something proactive. It is our time

to move all this away from the Troubles, not back into them.

**Mr Clarke:** When I read the motion, I had no difficulty supporting it to condemn violence. I have never supported violence.

What I want to say has probably already been said by many Members, but I want to pick up what the last Member to speak said about us changing our rhetoric about two-tier policing. More people than the Members on the unionist benches are saying that of policing. Members of the police, possibly including one of the 55 officers who have been injured, are themselves saying that. My thoughts go to each and every one of those officers. Those men and women have been sent out to do a job, and not every one of them agrees with what they are being asked to do. They also have the perception that their job is in a two-tier police force. It is difficult for us to support the leadership of the police until that perception changes.

**Ms Armstrong:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Clarke:** I will in a second. The funeral has already been touched on today. It is terrible that we must continue to rehearse the funeral.

However, the PPS's answer in relation to that says it all, and I think it was my colleague Joanne Bunting who read it out. There is no way to read it other than that the PSNI facilitated that funeral.

**Ms Armstrong:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Clarke:** I will give way in a second. There was no other way to read it, other than as a facilitated funeral.

Sorry, I should have declared at the outset that I am a member of the Policing Board.

I raised with the Chief Constable last week the fact that the police had the plan for the funeral: 30 people attending with provision made for another 94 to participate. That was in absolute contrast to the rules, so they broke the rules. They facilitated Sinn Féin to break the rules.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the Member for giving way, and for pointing out that there are issues. What I would say is that we have mechanisms in place and I would prefer that we used those mechanisms. We all agree here on supporting the police and following the rule of law, and part of that law is our mechanisms. If the mechanisms are not right, then the Policing Board and others have the opportunity to

amend them, but the mechanisms must be key, not the media.

**Mr Clarke:** I absolutely agree. We are waiting on two things. It is right that the board did unanimously agree to the HMIC investigation. I support that and am looking forward to the outcome of that. Also, some members wrote privately to the ombudsman for an investigation, and I am also looking forward to that. Those, I think, will bring answers.

I have listened to what the Speaker said, and I want to keep the tone right because I want to see an end to the violence.

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

**Mr Clarke:** I will in a second. I want to see an end to the violence because it serves no good for no one other than giving people criminal records. I think that Mr Storey touched on this: Members across the Chamber need to listen to the genuine concerns that we bring because we speak and listen to people. Those are genuine concerns, and you must listen to them.

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The Member knows that I come from a working-class background and live in a working-class housing estate. Does the Member agree that it is essential that we send a powerful message to our young people that the way to effect change in their community is to get politically involved and active, and to go down only the democratic routes that are available because the other routes will lead to ruin?

**Mr Clarke:** I concur with that absolutely. I put it on record that I grew up on a working-class estate as well. I may not live in that area now, but I say to many people that I would not think twice about having to go back. It would not cause me a problem to go back because I enjoyed my time there. What I really deplore is seeing our people, people I grew up with, getting themselves criminal records for no reason.

We do need to dial down the rhetoric, but we also need to get to the solutions and fix the problems, change the perceptions and give people hope. As Minister Long said at the outset, there is a list of things that we could pinpoint as reasons, but we cannot dismiss those reasons. I am not saying that the Minister said that we are dismissing them; I am saying that we cannot dismiss them.

We can dial down the rhetoric today and calm things down but we must go back and look at every one of those issues with an open mind and get a resolution to bring as many people as possible with us. We will never satisfy everyone, but there is real, palpable anger out there today. I agree that it could be any one of those issues; it may not be one issue but multiple issues. The sooner that we get to the position to dial down and find out what they are and address them, rather than dismissing people and their genuine concerns, the better.

**Mr Speaker:** There are five more Members to speak before the winding-up speech. I am prepared to give each of the five two minutes to make sure that they all get in, but it has to be two minutes. I will ask you to sit down if you go beyond two minutes.

**Mr O'Toole:** I will be brief. I simply want to add my voice to those of my party colleagues Nichola Mallon and Sinead McLaughlin in condemning utterly the scenes that we have seen and in supporting the motion that Naomi Long and other colleagues have brought.

It has been fairly traumatic for people across this society to look at images on their screens over the past few nights of things that people had genuinely thought were part of our past here. Unfortunately, there are people in this society who seem to be intent on inflicting the past on our children, and making children, some of whom were not even born when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, carry forward a legacy of hatred and division. Those children are being handed petrol bombs by criminal gangs. We cannot tolerate, condone or let that stand. I am glad to see widespread condemnation today. I hope that that will continue and that we can all find ways to moderate our language and come together.

It is important to say, and I will be brief, that these are working-class communities. There is a deep and profound alienation in those areas. Those are loyalist areas and people there care about their identity. I respect and understand that people have legitimate concerns about the outworkings of Brexit and are frustrated about new trading arrangements. I get that — I am not deaf to it, I am not blind to it and I do not seek to demean it — but this is not a tolerable or justifiable response. Nor can we, as elected officials, communicate to people that in a society like this one we can get everything that we want: we have to share this space. The outworkings of Brexit are difficult and —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr O'Toole:** — complicated, and the only way that we can get through them is if we accept that we are a shared space and a shared community.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Stalford:** Like the proposer of the motion and my colleague from South Belfast Deirdre Hargey, I am proud to come from a working-class background. It is devastating and heartbreaking to see violence on the streets of working-class communities, some of which I have the great privilege and honour of representing.

My message to the young people who are engaging in this reckless and criminal behaviour is to stop. It will achieve nothing, it will advance no cause, and, at the end of it, there is a genuine possibility that you will have destroyed your life forever by landing yourself with a criminal record. You are also destroying public services in your own communities. We have already heard reference to the fact that we have a situation in which transport workers are afraid to go to their place of work. That is hurting the wider community, and it is not acceptable.

There is an alternative to behaviour like that, which is, as I said earlier in the debate, to get politically active and get involved in your local community. If you want to effect change, you can be part of positive change by involving yourself in your local community group, joining a political party, running for the council and making a contribution in that way through democratic means.

I have four young children, and I want them to grow up in a better society than that which I grew up in or that which my mother's generation grew up in at the height of the Troubles. We have a responsibility to point a way to all of our young people, because they deserve better than that which we had growing up.

**Mr Beggs:** I support the motion and sense the shock and concern at the level of violence that we have seen once more on our streets. Every petrol bomb and piece of masonry that was thrown could have resulted in serious injury to, or death of, a member of the public or a member of our police service. In particular, we have to thank the PSNI for its actions in Lanark Way and keeping the gate there closed. If the two groups of rioters had been able to get into direct conflict with each other, there may well have been a loss of life. We must thank the

police for what they did in that particular instance.

Turning to my East Antrim constituency, dreadful rioting occurred in Cloughfern, and there were reports that the south-east Antrim UDA invited businesses to close because there was going to be a riot. Young people — teenagers — were largely at the front line. Some obviously had nothing to lose, which is an issue that we must address. We must ensure that there is a place for everyone in our community and that no one is left behind. Again, there was a wheelie bin set on fire on the North Road in Carrickfergus and police were also attacked. Violence must stop. Thankfully, at the Antiville roundabout in Larne, there were largely peaceful protests, but politics must be seen to work, and that is a challenge to us all.

We have genuine concerns about the Northern Ireland protocol. The community has: this is not just politicians. Anybody who orders items on the internet will find that out.

There are concerns about the criminal justice system, but, thankfully, there is a review of the PPS's decision and an independent review of policing. Hopefully, lessons will be learned. Politicians also need to learn the lesson that they should do what they say and lead by example.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Beggs:** Lessons must be learned from what happened at Bobby Storey's funeral so that others do not feel incensed.

**Miss Woods:** Violence on our streets is depressingly familiar. We have seen this all before. My message today is, "Stop it. It is not worth it". Conflict and disorder form part of a peace settlement for Northern Ireland that is supposedly a beacon of hope for conflicts around the world. Incredibly, I studied this at university as a model of conflict transformation. The reality differs considerably from the myth. We know that this has been a political process rather than a peace process. Everything has changed, and yet nothing has changed. Criminal gangs still coerce communities, and we live lives that are segregated and divided physically and psychologically. We continue the divide between "us" and "them". Words and narrative are used to divide when it suits. There is continued failure of elected politicians here.

Let us not forget that not all of those who have engaged in violence recently are young people.

Those who are being sucked or encouraged into violence and into a conflict that does not belong to them are certainly not expressing this kind of anger because of the protocol or the political fallout over regulations. What about the 13-year-olds who are now in the process of getting a criminal record and all those who have gone before? Should we arrest them, charge them and let the justice system deal with them, as bickering and fighting continue in the Chamber and across society and as the legitimate concerns and grievances of communities are ignored? Should we continue to cut corners, cut investment and cut opportunities, leaving people to fend for themselves and be exploited or be directed into public disorder and criminality? Where is the responsibility? We deserve and need strong, mature leadership from the Executive, but it has been lacking. It has been lacking since 1998. We have had a political agreement but not a peace agreement. People have been and continue to be left behind. That is not good enough. We need to replace hostility with hope.

**Mr Carroll:** Since the meeting started, we have heard that, in Belfast, bus workers have walked out against sectarianism, violence and intimidation. We have to send our solidarity to them today and going forward. The trade union movement will be incredibly crucial in the period ahead. I also send my solidarity to the driver and passengers of the bus that was hijacked yesterday. I extend my sympathies and best wishes to Kevin Scott, a journalist who was brutally attacked yesterday. No worker should be subjected to that kind of activity. They are providing a public service in the middle of a pandemic.

Last night I was at Lanark Way, an interface in west Belfast, where I witnessed crowds gathering on either side and petrol bombs flying over the so-called peace wall. Some of us were there last night to appeal for calm and for people to desist from the rioting. I say, "Fair play" to all the community workers and youth workers who gathered. They were out last night doing their best to appeal for calm. Today, like last night, I stand with the families at interface areas who are once again living in fear. Cars have been stolen, areas have been petrol-bombed, and there has been much trouble on top of that.

There is no doubt that everybody here condemns the violence, as I do, but I am afraid that that is where the cohesion ends for me. Unfortunately, I have limited time to explain that today in terms of supporting the motion, which I do not believe provides an alternative to the same old politics that have fostered division

across working-class communities across our society and have enabled sectarian tensions to grow. For that reason, I tried to submit an amendment.

Today, we have heard some talk with no sense of irony or hypocrisy about a law-and-order response. Some of those parties and Ministers cosied up to paramilitaries, who, by definition, are not upholders of the law and, in the last week, have engaged in organising people to wreak havoc out in the streets. Moreover, it is hypocritical that some in the Executive now condemn the same paramilitary groups —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Carroll:** — that they have funded, catered to and legitimised for so long. They are the groups that act as gatekeepers of funding and continue to exert control over working-class communities. I would like to say much more, but, unfortunately, I have no time left.

**Mr Speaker:** All Members always want to say more. That is their right, but it is not always appropriate at the time, so I thank you for that. I thank all Members for their contributions.

I call Stewart Dickson to wind on the motion. The Member has 10 minutes.

**Mr Dickson:** It falls to me to wind on the motion and the debate.

I trust that the words that I am about to give to the Assembly will not entirely fall on deaf ears — hopefully not. I thank Naomi Long, the leader of the Alliance Party, for tabling the motion and thank the House and you, Mr Speaker, for accepting the proposal to recall the Assembly.

Today is a day for leadership, to show our commitment to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to show our commitment to the rule of law and to unite against all violence and lawlessness in our society. Put simply, this must stop. Some 19 Members were able to speak today, and they have put on record their views on the motion. I do not need to amplify what they said, but I place on record my thanks to the Executive, who met this morning, and welcome the joint statement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on behalf of the Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly about the issues that have been ongoing for some time.

The violence on our streets over the past weeks is wrong. Some of it has been opportunistic, but it serves only to undermine the communities in

which the destruction has taken place. That includes communities in my constituency of East Antrim, where, regrettably, we have seen attacks on police and property. Police officers undertaking their duty to protect everyone have been attacked and injured; people have had cars stolen and destroyed; and public property has been damaged. Those perpetrating the violence have themselves been injured, and, rightfully, there have been arrests. Like everyone in the Chamber, I am deeply concerned that young children appear to have been brought into the protests; indeed, I observed that when some young children were blocking traffic in Larne on Tuesday night.

Members have referred to the need to tackle the structural inadequacies in Northern Ireland. That is evident when we see what has gone on on the streets over the last number of nights. We need to build trust and confidence in this society, in those communities and all communities across Northern Ireland. That can be done only when we listen to everyone in the Chamber. Yes, we must listen to the voices, every one of them, of the Members who have spoken in the Chamber today. Some have said that the violence has been orchestrated in many cases by sinister criminal elements, and, indeed, that may be true. However, those encouraged onto the streets are often vulnerable young people and children who are risking their futures, their safety and, indeed, sadly, in the past day, lives. I do not know whether any of those young people will ever listen to me, but I ask them to think twice before they get involved in that criminality. I appeal to mums and dads and, indeed, to anyone of good influence to speak up. It is extremely dangerous. You are destroying your community; you are hurting your friends and family; and your future prospects will be on the line, if you end up with a criminal record.

Nonetheless, I am strongly encouraged by the resounding rejection of the violence on social media by people in many communities. It is not wanted. What is wanted, however, is peaceful political solutions to problems, solutions that the House must commit to. Regardless of the breadth of voices that have been expressed in the Chamber today, the one message that I heard coming through was a desire to sit down and talk and start to work out what those peaceful solutions are.

It is our job, as elected representatives, to lead by example and to set an example, so I was disappointed at the examples that have been set in recent weeks. Violence is completely unacceptable and counterproductive, and we have to acknowledge that the words and

actions of political representatives have consequences. As expressed by many in the Chamber, there was no excuse for the actions of Sinn Féin, including our deputy First Minister, among others, in undermining the COVID restrictions at the funeral of Bobby Storey last year. No excuses. The deputy First Minister has much work to do to restore any public confidence following that. I do not believe that the immensity of that task has struck home entirely yet, but I hope that her words today were a step forward.

The people of Northern Ireland are understandably upset by the hypocrisy of delivering decisions on regulations that impact lives hugely and, yet, attending such a large event in the midst of severe restrictions. I share the feelings and frustrations of the community when they see that.

#### **12.45 pm**

The response of the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party to the PPS announcement that it would not pursue any prosecution was also not constructive. Those parties must also understand that we have to end this two-faced approach of supporting PSNI officers but not their leadership. That is deeply undermining, and it has, in fact, put rank-and-file officers at risk. Rank-and-file officers look to their leadership for direction, and the opportunistic politicisation of the PSNI leadership by the DUP and the UUP is unacceptable and profoundly counterproductive.

Our First Minister needs to show leadership and to meet the Chief Constable, and I am pleased that that is likely to happen. There should be discussion about concerns rather than the pursuit of politicising our police because, simply put, that is what is expected of a First Minister. Undermining confidence in the leadership of the PSNI at such a sensitive time is clearly unhelpful. Sadly, we have seen the outworking of that on our streets. I hope that the First Minister's words today will be seen as a step forward as well.

I want to express my and my party's unequivocal support for the PSNI for the work that it does in extremely challenging circumstances. In addition, we send our best wishes to those who are injured and our sympathy to the members of the public who have faced distress while their property and their communities have been damaged and, indeed, to the bus drivers. The violence is unacceptable and must stop now.

The protocol has been mentioned today. The DUP's attempt to deflect on the matter is simply not working. No one wanted the protocol, but it was the consequence of the hard Brexit that was championed by that party, against the political, economic and social interests of Northern Ireland. The reality is that we have the protocol because that party sank the backstop, which would have seen no customs border throughout the whole of the UK or Ireland. It is time to wake up to the Brexit reality. It is time to stop and let us move to a light touch on Brexit instead of lighting the blue touch paper on every occasion.

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

**Mr Dickson:** I want to finish, thank you.

I call on everyone in the Chamber to work to defuse frictions, stop boycotts, stop deflection, stop whipping up tension and do what we have been saying here today: get round the table and work out how we can approach the UK Government together collectively to resolve and mitigate many of the issues.

The message from today is simply that the violence must stop. No one should be above the COVID restrictions or the law in general. As political representatives, we have to set an example. I invite Members to join my party in demonstrating our united condemnation of the violence and our full and unreserved support for the communities that have been harmed by violence and for the PSNI, from the Chief Constable down through every rank. There is no two-tiered policing, and there is no room for it in Northern Ireland.

It is incumbent on all of us to show leadership, dial down the rhetoric and seek solutions. We must all accept when we are wrong and apologise for it — me included. Our words and actions have consequences, especially when we are in positions of leadership. Let us go from this place today determined to address every one of the issues raised by Members in the Chamber.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes with concern the violence on our streets over recent days and condemns without equivocation those involved; sends best wishes to those police officers attacked or injured whilst protecting the community and extends its sympathy to those members of the public who have suffered*

*distress, loss or damage as a result; reaffirms its full commitment to support for policing and for the rule of law; recognises that leadership comes with responsibility; recommits to upholding a culture of lawfulness in both actions and in words; and calls for an immediate and complete end to this violence.*

**Mr Speaker:** I thank all Members for their contributions today. I also thank the officials in the Speaker's office and the Business Office for working with the parties over the last number of days throughout their holiday leave period in order to make the debate happen today. Thank you all.

*Adjourned at 12.49 pm.*

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