



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Contents

## Assembly Business

New Assembly Members: Ms Mulholland, Ms Brownlee ..... 1

Election of Speaker and Deputy Speakers..... 1

# Assembly Members

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

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 17 January 2024

*The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Acting Speaker [Mr Chambers] in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** Good afternoon, Members. It has been a while. Please be seated.

Having been given notice by not fewer than 30 Members under Standing Order 11, the Speaker has summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of conducting the items of business that appear in the Order Paper. Before we commence, I will make a brief announcement, and I ask for your indulgence that I remain seated for that and other items of business.

### New Assembly Members: Ms Mulholland, Ms Brownlee

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** I advise Members that Dr Patricia O'Lynn resigned as a Member of the Assembly for the North Antrim constituency on 31 March 2023. The Speaker notified the Chief Electoral Officer of a vacancy in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker was subsequently informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Sian Mulholland has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the North Antrim constituency. On 4 April 2023, Ms Mulholland signed the undertaking and the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Speaker and that of the Clerk to the Assembly. She has now taken her seat.

I also advise Members that Mr David Hilditch resigned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Antrim constituency with effect from 8 September 2023. The Speaker notified the Chief Electoral Officer of a vacancy in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

You will be aware that, shortly following his resignation, Mr Hilditch, very sadly, passed away. The Speaker wrote to David's family and to the Democratic Unionist Party to pass on condolences on behalf of the Assembly.

The Speaker was informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Cheryl Brownlee had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Antrim constituency. On 18 September 2023, Ms Brownlee signed the undertaking and the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Speaker and that of the Clerk to the Assembly. She has now taken her seat.

I formally welcome Ms Mulholland and Ms Brownlee to the Assembly, and I wish them every success.

### Election of Speaker and Deputy Speakers

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

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

Therefore, the Assembly cannot conduct any further business until a Speaker and at least two Deputy Speakers have been elected. Members should be clear: without the election of a Speaker and two Deputy Speakers, no further business can proceed. I advise Members that the election of the Speaker will be conducted under the procedure set out in Standing Order 4. Further to Standing Order 4(2), I am the Acting Speaker today for the purpose of electing a Speaker.

I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose that another Member be elected as Speaker.

I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded by another Member, as required by Standing Order 14. I will then verify that the Member who is seconded is willing to accept the nomination. I will then ask for further proposals and follow the same procedure for each. When it appears

that there are no further proposals, I will make it clear that the time for proposals has passed. If Members indicate that they wish to speak, a debate relevant to the election may then take place, during which Members will have up to five minutes to speak.

At the conclusion of the debate or the conclusion of the nominations, if there are no requests to speak, I shall put the Question that the Member first proposed shall be Speaker of the Assembly. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I shall put the Question in relation to the next nominee and so on, until all nominations are exhausted. Once a Speaker is elected, all other nominations will fall automatically.

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

**Mr Stewart:** On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I am very proud to nominate my friend and colleague Mike Nesbitt MLA.

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

**Mr Butler:** I second that.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** Is Mr Nesbitt happy to accept the nomination?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Oh very, very happy.

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

**Mr O'Toole:** For the sixth or seventh time now, I nominate Patsy McGlone MLA.

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

**Ms Hunter:** I second that.

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

**Mr McGlone:** Glacaim leis, a Cheann Comhairle.

*[Translation: I accept, Mr Speaker.]*

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** Are there any further proposals? *[Pause.]* The time for proposals has expired.

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** We meet today in a last-ditch attempt to elect a Speaker and form an Executive. We do so as the DUP continues its boycott and refuses to do its job. For two years now, we have been told that the basis of its boycott is its opposition to the Brexit protocol. The British Prime Minister revisited those arrangements, and, after more negotiations with the European Union, the Windsor framework was agreed, yet the DUP turned up its nose at it. That has caused damaging economic uncertainty alongside political instability here.

To placate the DUP further, the British Government entered direct two-way negotiations with Jeffrey Donaldson. In taking what we knew was a misguided and flawed approach, to the exclusion of the other parties and the Irish Government, as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, they have got nowhere. Before Christmas, the British Secretary of State announced that his talks with the DUP had ended, yet Jeffrey Donaldson remains in suspended animation, undecided. All the while, children with special educational needs and their parents suffer. Patients who are on waiting lists and are crippled with pain suffer. That indecision is hampering the £3.3 billion that was put on the table. That money now hangs in the balance.

Workers are entitled to, and deserve, their pay rise today. Public-sector workers cannot be punished for DUP failures. The Tories have chronically underfunded the Executive for over a decade, and they now scandalously use that money as ransom to cause financial pain to our public services and public-sector workers. Tomorrow, 170,000 workers, including our nurses, doctors, civil servants, train drivers, bus drivers, teachers and education workers, police support staff, and, essentially, our entire public administration, will take unavoidable general strike action. It represents the single biggest day of industrial action in a generation. Those workers should not have to take to the streets. Due to the DUP's inaction, politics here is stalled indefinitely and our public services are at a standstill.

Today is the seventh attempt since the Assembly election to restore the Assembly and Executive. To date, the DUP has refused to respect the democratic outcome of that election.

My message, however, to the DUP today is still to join us and work with us. Let us get around the Executive table and make a real difference to people's lives. I stand for mature, pragmatic politics, whereby, irrespective of social, religious or political background, I see it as my duty to stand up fairly for everyone in our society, across all our communities, and to represent the Northern Ireland Executive as a First Minister for all. Regrettably, the DUP leader's approach is jeopardising vital public services, including health and education, with there being no clear explanation from him for stalling the formation of an Executive.

The argument that it continues to relate to the Windsor framework has now lost all credibility. Few people out there know what the DUP is talking about, and fewer care, because it is not in the interest of the common good. The hardship, the suffering and bread-and-butter issues for workers, families, households and businesses are what count and are what the DUP still refuses to prioritise. The only remaining explanation therefore for the DUP boycott is the refusal to accept a nationalist First Minister. There is a dangerous attempt under way to disregard the democratic outcome of the Assembly election, and that threatens democratic governance, public administration, reconciliation and the very fabric of this society.

If Jeffrey Donaldson does not change his approach, this sitting may well be the final one of this Assembly. I fear that the democratic institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are in free fall. Although that is reprehensible, those are the hard facts before us all. At midnight tomorrow, the statutory legislation underpinning Executive formation falls if the Executive are not restored by then. A statutory duty is placed on the Secretary of State thereafter to call another Assembly election. Those are the rules. Mr Heaton-Harris signalled to the parties on Monday, however, that he intends to introduce new legislation at Westminster to change the rules and extend the deadline.

If it is the case that the DUP will not respect the outcome of the election and restore democracy, there is an obligation on both Governments — the British Government and the Irish Government — to look at plan B. There must be a British-Irish partnership that provides joint stewardship and an intensified role for the Irish Government in the affairs of this state. Members of the public who are looking on here today are not seeing the change that they voted for in that Assembly election. If the DUP position of obstruction remains unchanged, it is imperative that a change of direction within the constitutional framework of the Good Friday

Agreement now be advanced. If there are some in the ranks of the DUP who think that, by crashing the institutions, they will crash the Good Friday Agreement itself, I say to them that they are wrong. The Good Friday Agreement will prevail.

**Mr Lyons:** Before I begin my remarks, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the sad passing of our friend and colleague David Hilditch last year. David served his constituents in East Antrim with distinction for 25 years, and he is very much missed by them, by his friends, by all who knew him and, in particular, by his family. Our thoughts continue to be with them today. I am glad, however, that Ms Brownlee is in her place today. Cheryl will be a fantastic representative for the people of East Antrim, and I look forward to working with her.

This recall is much like the five others that came before it. It is a stunt. It is being cynically orchestrated to coincide with the industrial action that is scheduled across our public sector. It has been done in an attempt to make the public believe that the restoration of the Assembly today will lead to the cancellation of the strikes tomorrow. Sinn Féin knows full well that there is no prospect of a Speaker being elected today. It knows that there will be no Ministers nominated today and that, even if those things were to happen, the pay issue will not be settled today but will be subject to further processes that will, of course, take time. It is disingenuous to suggest otherwise.

Sinn Féin has form in that regard. Its disinformation is nothing new. Do Members remember when it told us that there were hundreds of millions of pounds sitting in a Stormont bank account just waiting to be spent if an Executive were to be restored? Sinn Féin was wrong, and, in truth, there was a huge overspend. It told the public that the Government's household energy payments could be quickly delivered by local Ministers. It was wrong. In truth, the fastest and simplest way for that to happen was for the Government to do it. As we found out last week in the High Court, Sinn Féin does not like the truth.

### 12.15 pm

The barrier to public-sector pay increases has not been the lack of an Executive; it has been the lack of finance to properly fund it. We should not forget that the Department of Finance was able to progress a range of decisions on public-sector pay over the last year. Those powers still exist. However, each decision had to be affordable under the Budget

imposed by the Secretary of State, and that is where the crux of the problem was and is. The cake simply is not big enough.

Much has been made by some of the other parties of the additional resource offered by the Government. That resource would not be on offer if it were not for the DUP highlighting the issue in the first place. The extra money on the table — *[Interruption.]* They do not like to hear it, but it was the DUP that raised and highlighted the issue, and it is the DUP that has been fighting for that money. While the extra money on the table is a good start, it is just that. What is presently on offer is a one-off package for public-sector pay in the current financial year. Without that being provided on a recurring basis, it is difficult to see how Departments could ensure that commitments to staff can be honoured in future years without significantly hampering the delivery of core public services. However, if the Secretary of State has the money ready, he should deliver it immediately. It is unfair on our public-sector workers to tie it to a demand for increased household taxes, more revenue raising or the restoration of the Assembly.

We all know how important the issue is. Our public-sector workers have not had the pay increases that they deserve for years. There has been an ever-growing squeeze on their incomes due to inflation and cost-of-living pressures. In our discussions with the Government, they have recognised that. They claim to have secured the money, albeit for one year, so they need to release it and get on with that today.

In addition to that stable financial foundation, we need a stable political foundation. The arrangements from the Northern Ireland protocol damage the basis on which power-sharing works and have prevented the formation of an Executive. Our goal throughout the process has been to restore Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market, as set out in our manifesto. Our negotiations with the Government have made real and significant progress but will continue until arrangements are agreed that unionists, as well as nationalists, can support. That is our goal, but it should in no way prevent the Secretary of State from providing the money necessary to ensure that public-sector pay awards can be made. We urge him to do that today.

**Mrs Long:** At the outset, I formally extend my condolences to DUP colleagues and to David Hilditch's family on his tragic passing last year.

It is with a heavy heart that my colleagues and I signed the recall motion and have come to the Chamber for the sitting of the Assembly today. We had hoped that, even overnight, wise counsel might prevail and we would come here with a genuine prospect of electing a Speaker and conducting the other business on today's Order Paper to restore an Executive. Sadly, despite the increasingly acute pressures facing our public services and finances and the impact that those pressures are having on those whom we were elected to serve, that will not be the case.

After almost two years without an Executive, over 18 months without an Assembly and 13 months since we last had locally elected and democratically accountable Ministers in office, my party's frustration with the continued denial of basic democracy is profound. However, our frustration is nothing when compared with the frustration or, perhaps more accurately, anger and despair that so many of our constituents feel at this point. Despite the urgency of the crisis facing Northern Ireland, we stand here today in institutions that not only are frozen and suspended in animation but have, for five of the past seven years, been similarly unable to deliver anything whatsoever for the people who elected us.

While the focus today is rightly on the DUP's boycott, I say this to other party leaders: there is no point coming to the Chamber bemoaning the bind in which we find ourselves time and time again while defending and refusing to address the structural weaknesses that enable it. The only conceivable reason that any party would want to retain the power to collapse the institutions is if it intends to use it or the threat of it to subvert normal democratic process. I want the institutions restored as soon as possible, but, more than that, I want them reformed so that no single party can ever again hold them to ransom and hold the best interests of the public and the future of our people to ransom with them, because it is those who live in our community who suffer as a result of the repeated collapses.

Our inability to sustain government has impeded public-sector reform. The now First Minister designate made a statement to the Assembly as Health Minister that she intended to implement Bengoa reforms back in October 2016. However, by January 2017, the institutions were collapsed. The problems in our health service have been allowed to fester and the crisis deepen to the position that we find ourselves in today, with a demoralised and underpaid health service workforce and some of the longest waiting lists in Europe. That is

merely one example; in fact, there is barely a part of our public sector that is not currently straining under a combination of high demand, inadequate resources and the need for modernisation and reform.

The fact that Northern Ireland is underfunded in relation to need when compared with England, Wales and Scotland is now a matter of public record. While I hold Treasury and the Northern Ireland Office fully accountable for their willingness not only to allow that situation to continue but to misrepresent the position actively in suggesting that Northern Ireland is overfunded and merely makes bad choices, the fact remains that, while the Welsh Government were negotiating a fiscal floor and framework with Treasury from a position of strength, our focus was deflected on to restoration efforts and political matters. For once, as an Executive, we could be arguing collectively on the same side of the table for the people who elected us, but, instead, we are locked out of those opportunities.

Tomorrow, public-sector workers, many of whom provided front-line services throughout the pandemic and have worked hard to support recovery and who are exhausted and demoralised, are yet again having to strike on the largest day of industrial action in a generation for their basic right to proper pay and conditions. I am not claiming that the restoration of an Executive would resolve all the public pay pressures or the wider financial and structural challenges facing our public services. However, we would be £3.3 billion closer to a resolution of some of those issues than we are now and than the Civil Service would be if restoration does not happen. We would have some additional resource to resolve pay. We would have some additional resource to tackle waiting lists. We would also, crucially, have a collective position from which to negotiate with Treasury a more sustainable framework for our finances when that £3.3 billion runs out in two years' time as an Executive, rather than as disparate political voices. That is why I have written to other party leaders to seek engagement now on plans for how we would prioritise those issues in any future Executive so that we can hit the ground running if and when restoration happens.

Alliance has raised with the Secretary of State and Prime Minister the need to resolve public-sector pay irrespective of whether the Assembly and Executive are formed. It is as wrong for the Conservative Government to use our public-sector workers as leverage in this political dispute as it is for any party to abuse the

institutions in that manner. Realistically, however, the only certain and the quick —.

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

**Mrs Long:** I will.

**Mr Muir:** Will the Member agree that today is the last chance to get the Assembly and Executive back and people should not be used as leverage by the UK Government or by the DUP?

**Mrs Long:** I completely agree, and, in fact —.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mrs Long:** Thank you. In fact, the only certain and by far the quickest way to have that money released is to get the institutions back up and running today, because, whether we agree or disagree, Treasury sees that £3.3 billion as part of a restoration package. Only the DUP can do that, so I call on it again not just to listen to the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland but to act in those people's best interests.

Sir Jeffrey has said that the time for decisions is approaching: I say, with the greatest respect, that it arrived some time ago. For our part, we will do all that we can to facilitate that restoration, and, today, as we have done on every other occasion, we will vote for every candidate for Speaker until one is successfully elected, if not today, then, I hope for the sake of my constituents, in the very near future.

**Mr Butler:** I also put on record my deep regret at the loss of David Hilditch. He was an MLA from the DUP whom I enjoyed working with. We shared a passion for speaking about firefighters, and David brought a motion on cancer among firefighters. To the DUP Members to my right and to his family we extend our deepest condolences.

That rather neatly also brings me to my first point. In 2002, as a firefighter, I was balloted for strike action. I had just started in the service, and the union was negotiating for us. As firefighters at the sharp end of public service and protection, we had to take the difficult decision to say that, yes, we would take strike action. That was in 2002 for fair pay and conditions.

One of the abiding memories of that is looking at the loss in pay at the end of the month for the days that were missed, which was five or six



days in my case, but, more importantly, on my annual pension statement, which I still get to this day, I see those same five or six days that I lost. I lost my own contribution, and I lost my employer's contribution.

I have a break in my pension service. When people take strike action, they do not take it lightly. It costs them more than people think it costs them. We would do well to listen to that. When I get my annual pension statement, I think "Why did it happen?" and "Who caused it?".

Tomorrow, around 150,000 to 160,000 public servants will take action on an epic scale. The impact of that will be felt not only by those individuals but by their families and by every one of us. In fact, the 1.9 million people who live in Northern Ireland will feel that same pain tomorrow through loss of service, extension of waiting lists and children not being in school. The people who take action tomorrow will lose pay, as I did in 2002, and will similarly get an annual pension statement that will reflect a breakage in service for every day that they have to take strike action.

In February 2022, the DUP pulled down the institutions by removing the then First Minister, Mr Paul Givan. By doing so, it also removed the normal and reasonable ability of the representative bodies to seek fair pay and negotiate fairly for public-sector workers, whether that is with a Minister, a Department or whomever it is that they would lobby. Whilst we have consistently, from the start, asked the Secretary of State to decouple the issues of public pay and further finances, my party and I do not blame the Secretary of State for the position that we are in today; rather, it is due to two years of political veto. The blame for the impact of the strike — I will not mince my words, because I may not get a chance to speak in the Chamber again, and I should have declared an interest, because my daughter and wife will take action tomorrow — lies squarely with the party to my right, the DUP.

I always strive to be fair and balanced, and I do not think that anybody in the DUP would deny me that. It is only fair, therefore, that I also state that I do not think that the blame lies squarely with every member of that party; in fact, it lies less so with the MLAs. If I were a betting man, I would wager that most of the people to my right have not even seen the deal that is on offer and has been negotiated. Those negotiations have finished. In my opinion, the blockage lies with a small number of DUP MPs and Lords who are far removed from the impact on public services and lives here, the impact that their veto is

having on people across Northern Ireland and, I would say, on the respect that unionism should seek to hold. Why do I say that those people are far removed from the impact of their veto? Well, I am not sure whether you saw the pre-Christmas news that was lauded around. Eight members of the party beside me may have celebrated that news, which was that there may be a 7.1% pay rise for MPs in April, which would see their pay rise from around £86,000 to £92,000 a year.

It would be wrong and churlish of me and a lie to suggest that some MPs do not deserve their pay. Some absolutely do, it would be fair to say and to put people on notice that the people who will take strike action tomorrow, who will see their pay cut and who are struggling to make ends meet — some of them have to visit food banks and come to our offices for assistance — will ask two questions and will ask them in perpetuity: "Why am I doing it?" and "Who is responsible?". Those annual pension statements that they will get year on year will reinforce those thoughts that they have. I ask the party to my right to consider what I have said and the abiding impact of the strike action on those people not just tomorrow but in the future, when they get their annual pension statements, think back and ask "Why did I strike?" and "Who was responsible?".

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker, for once again stepping into the Chair. I add my and my party's condolences on the passing of David Hilditch, both to his family and his DUP party colleagues. I served on the Public Accounts Committee with David. He was a gentleman and a dedicated elected representative.

Today, for the sixth or seventh time, I stand to nominate Patsy McGlone for the role of Speaker. Let me say that, although we believe that Patsy is an eminently qualified candidate, so too is Mr Nesbitt, and, indeed, our priority is getting a Speaker elected. We will not be a barrier to the election of a Speaker, notwithstanding the nomination of the excellent Patsy McGlone.

As I said, I think that this is now the seventh time in nearly two years that the Assembly has been recalled to attempt to elect a Speaker, nominate Ministers and allow us all to do our jobs. We all know why we have been prevented from doing so: the actions of one party.

What is our job, ultimately? It is supposed to be serving the public. As elected representatives, we ask the public, who elect us, to place their trust in us that we will argue for their interests

and prioritise their needs. However, those concepts of public trust and service have been abused and damaged beyond recognition in this place and are possibly beyond repair.

### 12.30 pm

Let us talk for a moment about public service and public trust. Tomorrow, true public servants — up to 170,000 of them — will forgo a day's pay that they can ill afford in order to stand in freezing temperatures not for an exorbitant pay rise but for the modest deal that was already promised to them but not delivered. The SDLP stands with them today, and we will be out standing with them tomorrow. They are real public servants. Unlike some in the Chamber and elsewhere who stand for election, they take seriously the trust that is placed in them and the service that they perform. They are the nurses and other health professionals who save lives and provide the care that we all need at some point in our life and that all of us will need in the future. They are the train and bus drivers who keep our economy and society moving and the teachers who educate our kids. Few of them do it for the money, but they have a basic right to expect to be paid a fair wage that allows them a decent quality of life, keeping pace with the cost of living.

Workers here have not just been let down; they have been used as pawns in a game to apply pressure to the DUP to end its boycott. Not only is that wrong but it demeans those workers and public servants. It demeans yet again their public service. Paperwork for some goods moving across the Irish Sea is, apparently, enough to create chaos in public services and governance here for years on end, but a widening sea border in basic pay for essential workers is, apparently, fine. By the way, I know what the demands of the workers who will be striking tomorrow are. I do not know what the demands of the DUP are, and I am happy to give way to anyone in the DUP who wants to give me a clear account of why its boycott continues and what it is waiting for.

On Monday, I spoke to a teaching union rep outside Hillsborough Castle. They told me about international schools, including some in the Middle East, where teachers' pay is much higher and taxes are much lower, specifically targeting new teaching graduates from Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College with the blunt line that teachers in Northern Ireland are paid badly and treated terribly. It is not simply a question of fair pay: it is ultimately a question of the survival and sustainability of public services here. Chris Heaton-Harris and the British Government

could settle the pay dispute today — now — if they wanted. The fact that they will not and are using workers for crude political purpose is yet another damning indictment of the Tory Government. Who gave them that power? Who continues to give them that power? It is, I am afraid, the DUP. The Chamber and the institutions matter only to the extent that they serve the public. They serve no one at the minute, other than the narrow self-interest and self-obsession of a few hard-line, usually online, voices. Tomorrow, true public servants will stand in the cold. They deserve so much better.

I say this to the DUP: do not utter one word or one syllable of complaint when people start to talk about fundamental change in this place, whether it is ending tribal vetoes, a role for the Irish Government, if we cannot have devolution, or fundamental constitutional change. More immediately, let me say this to DUP colleagues, and I say it honestly and sincerely: you have a choice — Sir Jeffrey Donaldson has a choice — to start to do our job again, honour the people who elected us and treat decently the public servants who will stand in the cold tomorrow so that we can start finally — please, honestly —

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr O'Toole:** — to rebuild trust in our public services and in our politics.

**Mr Allister:** I begin by joining in the tributes to the late David Hilditch and saluting his 25 years of unstinting service to the people of East Antrim. I convey my continuing sympathy to his family and friends.

This recall reeks of insincerity. The pretence is that the motivation is to get this place and the institutions up and running again. Yet, there is a studious avoidance of this question: why have the institutions failed? There is no facing the cause of the collapse of the Belfast Agreement institutions, namely the protocol; no facing of that at all. It is a bit like the tantrum child whose favourite toy stops working. His father says, "Well, we'll try and fix it"; "No, just make it move. Just make it work"; "But I have to find out what's wrong with it"; "No, no, just make it work"; "But I have to open it up to see what needs fixed"; "No, no, just make it move". That is like this place: just get the institutions going without ever asking or addressing the question, "Why have the institutions failed?". Of course, they have failed fundamentally and unavoidably because of the protocol upsetting and dismantling the constitutional equilibrium of the

very Belfast Agreement that some claim to support.

Some are now so sold on their blind allegiance to the protocol that they are prepared to damn the institutions in order to save it. In fact, some have so worshipped at the shrine of the sacred cow of the protocol that they are now prepared to slaughter the sacred cow of power-sharing. Some of them have told us that the way forward is to get unionists out of government — to abandon unionist/nationalist power-sharing — to get the institutions up and going. Why? Because we must have the institutions to implement the protocol. That has become the abiding and real determination.

The fundamental motivation of those who brought us here today is to break unionism. That is their motivation. It saddens me that the compliant Ulster Unionist Party is so soft on the dire constitutional consequences of the protocol that it is like putty in the hands of the protocol implementers. That is a great sadness. The motive is this: break unionism. How? By forcing the DUP back into the Executive with its tail between its legs, to accept that never again will Northern Ireland be a full part of the United Kingdom; never again will we be ruled solely by British laws; never again will there not be a partitioning border in the Irish Sea; never again will we go forward as a proper part of the UK. Instead, we will be ruled by colonial laws on many of our goods that we do not make and cannot change, and we must accept that, under the EU customs code to which we are subject, GB is a foreign country; accept that the suspension of article 6 is permanent, undermining the basis of the Union; and accept the stepping stone building towards an all-Ireland economy. If that is the price, it cannot be paid today, and I say to any thinking unionist, "It can't be paid tomorrow or any other day". Make no mistake about it: the demand to get this place going is to break unionism, to see the DUP back in government, as I said, tail between its legs. That is a price that cannot be paid.

The hypocrisy does not end there. It extends into —

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr O'Toole:** The Member talks about power-sharing and the protocol and why the protocol is the barrier to power-sharing. Will he confirm that he opposed power-sharing and the Good Friday Agreement long before the protocol

existed, before Brexit was a twinkle in his and other people's eyes?

**Mr Allister:** The ultimate irony is that the greatest threat to the Belfast Agreement today are its supposed supporters, who are demanding that we end power-sharing, get unionists out of government and move on without them. That is the position that is articulated to the House.

The hypocrisy also extends to tomorrow. I heard media interviews with the Alliance Party and others in which they said that we must decouple the public-sector pay issue — so we must — but then they sign a motion that gets them onto the Secretary of State's bandwagon of blackmail.

There is not a word about decoupling in the motion that has brought us here. It, too, is but an attempt to add to the Secretary of State's blackmail of public servants, who are deserving of parity of pay with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is an equal citizenship right, just as the right to be governed as a full part of the United Kingdom is an equal citizenship right.

**Mr Carroll:** On behalf of People Before Profit, I express our solidarity with all those public-sector workers who are taking strike action tomorrow for pay and investment in our public services, in defiance of the rotten Tory Government and their functionaries here.

Just this morning, I stood with striking education workers on the picket lines at St Joseph's Primary School, Slate Street. Their message was simple: they would rather be in school today, providing for our young people, but it is long past the time that they were given a real pay uplift and a grading review for the vital work that they do.

It is not lost on anyone that those who keep our society functioning have been forced to go on picket lines while the DUP refuses to do a day's work. We are far beyond the point of making appeals to the DUP or its fellows in the Tory party. I am not here to make an appeal to the DUP, because we have been down that road before. We know its real and divisive motives, and we know that its self-serving boycott has mainly been about staving off electoral losses. Instead, I speak directly to those striking workers who have set a shining example of people-power politics, refused to accept the limitations set by the crisis of Stormont and taken action to demand better for themselves and all who have been failed by Westminster and Stormont. Every person who has

languished on a health or housing waiting list is behind you. Every parent and pupil who has seen schools decimated by cuts is behind you. Everyone who has had their pay frozen and their living standards attacked and who has struggled to make ends meet is behind you.

In recent weeks and months, there have been deliberate attempts by the Tories and sections of the media to demonise those workers for taking strike action. It is important to say that we do not buy the propaganda and the spin of a Tory Government who have decimated public services, handed billions to the wealthy and condemned countless people to a life of state-enforced poverty. We do not accept the lies of a Government who say there is no money for public services but plenty of money to bomb Yemen and commit arms to fund Israel's genocide in Palestine.

It is also important to say that we will not play the cynical political game that tries to apportion blame to either the DUP or the Tories while letting the other off the hook. Just as the Secretary of State could stop using workers' pay as a bargaining chip to restore Stormont, so too could the DUP end its boycott and start addressing workers' demands. Both are to blame.

Workers will, no doubt, be familiar with the famous adage that power cedes nothing without a demand. If there is no progress on their demands, there should be an escalation of their strike action, including a general strike and, as some have suggested, civil disobedience if necessary. Shut the place down and show that it is workers, not politicians, who truly keep our society functioning and that they should be paid a proper wage for doing so. Workers should also reject the false narratives of parties that suggest that restoring Stormont will solve issues faced by working-class people. The DUP, Sinn Féin, Alliance, the UUP and the SDLP are the same parties that, time and time again, voted against giving workers a pay rise when they had the chance to do so.

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

**Mr Carroll:** I will in a second.

If you show me an Executive Minister who claims to have fought for the interests of those workers, I will show you their abysmal record. It is easier to condemn Tory cuts when you are not implementing them at Stormont. While there appears to be money on the table for workers' pay if Stormont is restored, there is no guarantee of investment in services. There is further talk of austerity measures, such as

water charges and an unacceptable 15% rates hike. Given their record, questions will loom about whether any incoming Executive and the parties here will, once again, roll over for the Tories.

Our message is that workers need to be ready to challenge them. The institutions, built on sectarianism, have failed workers for well over 25 years. In fact, workers on picket lines have done more to unite our communities and advance their causes than all the crisis-ridden years of the Assembly. That unity is the very thing that will deliver on their demands.

As the crisis at Stormont rolls on, more and more people will insist that the Northern state itself is fundamentally broken beyond repair. Unfortunately for the DUP, it will find that, if its boycott continues and this state is ungovernable, people will continue to demand and shape an alternative. If workers take up that struggle together, an all-Ireland alternative will, and needs to, go beyond —

**12.45 pm**

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** Will the Member conclude his remarks, please?

**Mr Carroll:** — the focus of an all-class alliance and challenge the profits of the wealthy and the rich.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Carroll:** Solidarity to those taking strike action tomorrow. I will be on the picket lines.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak.

*Question put, That Mr Mike Nesbitt be Speaker of this Assembly.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 26; Noes 26.*

**AYES**

**UNIONIST:**

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Beattie, Mr Butler, Mr Elliott, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.*

**OTHER:**

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

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr Stewart.*

## **NOES**

### **UNIONIST:**

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

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brooks and Mrs Erskine.*

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>[50.0%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>[23.5%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

*The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole.*

*Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).*

## **1.00 pm**

*Question put, That Mr Patsy McGlone be Speaker of this Assembly.*

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** I have been advised by the party Whips, in accordance with Standing Order 27(1A)(b), that there is agreement that we can dispense with the three minutes and move straight to the Division.

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 50; Noes 26.*

## **AYES**

### **NATIONALIST:**

*Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Mr Delargy, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan,*

*Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.*

### **OTHER:**

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

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCrossan and Ms McLaughlin.*

## **NOES**

### **UNIONIST:**

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

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brooks and Mrs Erskine.*

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>[65.8%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

*Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).*

**The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers):** The Assembly has been unable to elect a Speaker today and has been unable to conduct its first item of business. Therefore, we can proceed no further. Any further sittings of the Assembly can be held only to first elect a Speaker and Deputy Speakers. Under section 39(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the current Speaker remains in office until a successor is elected.

At this point, I place on record my appreciation to Members for how the sitting has been conducted.

I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to adjourn the sitting until a future date, the details of

which will be communicated to Members in due course.

*Adjourned at 1.11 pm.*