



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 17 June 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

### Appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

**Mr Speaker:** Members, this sitting has been convened to fill the vacancies in the offices of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I will conduct the process in accordance with the procedures set out in section 16B of the NI Act 1998 and Standing Order 44(1).

I will begin by asking the nominating officer of the DUP to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be First Minister. I will then ask the nominating officer of Sinn Féin to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be deputy First Minister.

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

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

*"To pledge:*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(cd) to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement;*

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

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

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

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

*(ci) to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;*

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

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

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

*(e) to operate within the framework of that programme when agreed within the*

*Executive Committee and endorsed by the Assembly;*

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

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

*Paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement states: We believe that the essential elements of support for law and order include endorsing fully the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system, actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas and actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions, including the Policing Board."*

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

I call Mr Edwin Poots to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the First Minister. I will allow him up to three minutes to say a few words in support of the nomination, if he so chooses.

**Mr Poots:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Just over 20 years ago, a schoolboy came into my office to find out more about politics. He was different from others who came in, with his eagerness and hunger to get involved in politics. Over the years, I mentored him. I brought him into Lisburn City Council at the age of 23 and, in 2010, into the Assembly at the age of 28. Over those years, I have watched that young man mature from a schoolboy into the politician that he is today.

I am proud to nominate today, not with a precondition from Sinn Féin but with a brand of confident unionism that is capable of recognising wins and even recognising those things that do not do us demonstrable harm. Paul was in the new generation when he entered the Assembly, and we need more young people like him to come through and win for unionism: young people who are confident in what they do and in what they say, ensuring that we achieve things and that we do not just carp from the sidelines.

With Paul in the leadership role in the First Minister's office, I believe that we will win, not just for unionism but for everyone. We will make this place that we call home, Northern Ireland, a better place, and a better place for everyone. I stand, today, privileged to nominate Paul Givan

MLA to the role of First Minister of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** Paul Givan, are you willing to take up the office of First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

**Mr Givan:** I am.

**Mr Speaker:** I have received a letter from the nominating officer of Sinn Féin advising me that Mr Conor Murphy will serve as its nominating officer. I call Mr Conor Murphy to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the deputy First Minister.

**Mr Murphy:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted to nominate leasuachtarán Shinn Féin, Michelle O'Neill MLA, to the position of deputy First Minister. Michelle has jointly led these institutions through the most difficult times as she charted our way through the biggest public health crisis that we have faced in living memory. She led at all times with good grace and determination to do what is right for all our people, no matter what their background.

As a former Health Minister, she is extremely aware of and passionate about addressing the waiting list crisis in our health and social care system.

Michelle set in motion much-needed reform, and I have no doubt that she will drive that work through the Executive.

The Executive will face many challenges in the time ahead. The legacy of Brexit is still being played out. COVID-19 has not yet been defeated, although we can take heart that we are on the road to recovery. As Finance Minister, I can also testify to the impact of austerity and cuts to the block grant on our ability to maintain first-class public services.

Michelle O'Neill, however, has shown herself time and time again to be a strong, dedicated and undaunted leader. I have no doubt that she will face each and every one of those challenges head-on and deliver progressive, positive change for all our people. I am very pleased to nominate Michelle O'Neill MLA to the position of deputy First Minister. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** Go raibh maith agat. Thank you. Mrs Michelle O'Neill, are you willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, the offices have been filled. I congratulate the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on their appointments. There will now be an opportunity for speeches. I will begin by calling the First Minister and then the deputy First Minister to address the Assembly.

**Mr Givan (The First Minister):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. To keep the record right, I believe that I should have read the Pledge of Office into the record. Maybe I have led the deputy First Minister astray already in that she followed me in that respect. For the record, I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I trust that that satisfies the record.

I thank Edwin, first and foremost, for his confidence in me. It was 25 years ago that our paths crossed; I was 16 at the time. It was at the point of the Belfast Agreement, and I got politically active at that stage. Edwin is not just a colleague. Edwin is a close personal friend of mine. Edwin is a leader who has a big heart for the people around him. He wants them to do well. He wants people to succeed, and he loves this country. I pay tribute to him and look forward to his leadership in the time ahead.

Little did I know at 23, when I became the then youngest councillor to be elected to Lisburn City Council, that today I would end up as the First Minister of Northern Ireland. It was at the same age that I got married, and my wife said to me, "Only a councillor. You will never be allowed to be anything else. You can only be a councillor, and I want you to get a real job". Here I am now, taking on this job. I thank Emma and my family for their support throughout my career. I know that the time ahead will be more than challenging.

I pay tribute to those whom I follow. First, Dr Paisley. He founded the DUP. Without him, there never would have been a Democratic Unionist Party. My grandfather, with his two brothers, founded the party with him. They were south Tyrone people. They were farmers, and they ploughed a difficult field for the DUP back then. It was not the establishment, and many looked down upon them, but it is because of that generation that my generation is able to serve the party in political office.

I pay my thanks to Dr Paisley and those who went before: to Peter Robinson for his unrivalled strategic ability and for how he led

the Democratic Unionist Party; and to Arlene Foster for her energy and commitment to make devolution work, recognising that difficult choices needed to be made but devoted to making this place work. They all had their own way of leading, and I will have mine. Mistakes, I am sure, I will make — I am not infallible — but I share the same drive and determination to serve the people of Northern Ireland.

There is much goodwill from the public for this place to work and for our politics to work for everybody. We must all recognise that we have much more in common than that which separates us. Northern Ireland is a special place. It is special because of its people. We have different identities. We need to respect those identities. That difference should not be seen as a threat; it should be seen as a strength.

We have a rich tapestry that makes us who we are, what we are and the society that we belong to.

As we emerge from COVID-19, there is much work to do in rebuilding our public services and supporting our economic recovery. I know that the challenge is great, and the responsibility will be heavy. I have never shied away from taking on responsibility when asked to do so. Let us get to work.

## 12.15 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Mr Givan. I now call on the deputy First Minister. Before Michelle O'Neill speaks, I remind Members that those who wish to speak must give their name to the top Table.

**Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister):** Tá mé an-sásta glacadh leis an ról seo. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister. I affirm the Pledge of Office as set out in the 1998 Act.

I thank Members of the Assembly for the special sitting today to allow the process of nomination for First Minister and deputy First Minister to proceed. I wish the Ministers who have vacated their post in the past week well for the future. I thank them for their efforts over the 17 months since the political institutions were restored, as they and the Executive responded to the COVID-19 pandemic to protect lives and livelihoods. I welcome the MLAs who have taken up ministerial office in the past week in the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education and

the junior Minister who has taken up post in the Executive Office.

As an Executive, our top priority is our response to COVID-19: ensuring the continued successful roll-out of our vaccination programme across the population; and rebuilding our economy to sustain jobs and livelihoods. The five Executive parties have shown over this very challenging period that, when there is a unity of purpose, we can tackle the biggest of challenges and get our society through.

We have monumental challenges ahead that will require that same unity of purpose and the same urgency. They include tackling the totally unacceptable hospital waiting lists that have left people crucified, in pain and without hope. We must immediately set about addressing those issues together. Together, we must mount a case to secure funding from the British Government to rebuild and transform our incredible public health service. Our people, and the heroic health service workers whom we are blessed with, deserve nothing less — nothing less. Our economic sector and its workers have faced a double whammy in recent times with the impact of the uncertainty created by Brexit and the unexpected onset of COVID. Therefore, recovery is now key.

Each of the five parties in the Executive has a distinct identity, a different outlook and different policies. Parties of the right, centre and left are in coalition government that is, undoubtedly, challenging to steer. We do not and will not always agree, but we are adults. We can get around the Executive table. We can give our perspectives. We can voice our views and take decisions collectively in the best interests of the people whom we are elected to serve. People want mature political leaders who will get things done.

In taking the Pledge of Office, I am fully committed, in the interests of the whole community, to working in the Executive Office with Mr Givan, as First Minister and deputy First Minister and joint heads of Government. Our mission is to deliver on public services: health, education, jobs and the economy.

We will not share common ground on a Brexit that a majority of MLAs rejected and the majority of citizens democratically voted to oppose. The protocol is a consequence of Brexit, which was championed by the Tories and the DUP. The protocol's purpose is to limit the impact of Brexit on the island of Ireland, to protect the Good Friday Agreement and the all-Ireland economy and to avoid a hard border

North to South. With access to both the British and EU single markets, our agriculture, retail and manufacturing sectors are ready to grasp the benefits of that market access and to fill the gaps in the supply chain, create jobs and strengthen our economy.

We have seen the DUP resist rights. I do not expect that to change. I will work with the other parties in the Assembly and the Executive to achieve a progressive social reform agenda for women, children, Irish language speakers and newcomer communities. There is a requirement under the Good Friday Agreement for equivalent standards of protection of rights on the island of Ireland, North and South. Both Governments, as co-guarantors of that agreement, have a responsibility to act when the Assembly cannot.

The entire cultural package agreed in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) symbolises respect for diversity, tolerance and mutual respect for each other's identity and culture. I respect those of a British tradition and a unionist tradition in the House and in our wider community. I have tried to demonstrate that in my role as deputy First Minister over the past 17 months. Language is fundamental to nationality, agus mar sin beidh Acht Gaeilge againn. The official recognition of the Irish language in this state, the repeal of draconian laws preventing the use of Irish in the courts and the appointment of a commissioner all represent parity of esteem. Taxpayers who use Irish in their everyday lives, including those who educate their children through Irish-medium education and who wish to access public services through Irish, should be able to do so. In public administration, that is a service not a special privilege. Only two days ago in the Chamber, however, the DUP voted against a translation service that was explicitly agreed to in the New Decade, New Approach political agreement. That represented bad faith and a lack of leadership, and it really is not acceptable. As a society, we are only going forward. We are certainly not going backwards. The process of change will not be stopped by anyone, including the DUP.

New Decade, New Approach provided the basis on which to restore all the political institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. It set out 80 commitments that need to be delivered by us all and without delay, including tackling health waiting lists, providing supports around the mental health of our young people, tackling educational underachievement, the expansion of Magee university, the delivery of Casement Park, the delivery of the A5 major road project, an increase in police numbers and much, much

more. The success of one depends on the success of others, including as well the Assembly, the Executive, the British-Irish Council (BIC), the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and the operation of cross-border bodies.

I had the opportunity to host the British-Irish Council meeting last Friday in Fermanagh, in which eight Administrations from across these islands participated, joining hands in solidarity in our fightback against the deadly virus, which has, sadly, taken the lives of so many of our people and brought tremendous hardship to every family during this time. The Executive will meet after the sitting to discuss COVID-19 and the current situation, and we will be briefed by the Health Minister on the delta variant and any implications that it has for the current restrictions that are in place to protect public health. Tomorrow, the First Minister and I will host the plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in Armagh.

We have prevented a political vacuum this week. We cannot stand still for one second, because the stakes are so high. The public depend on those of us elected to this democratic Assembly to get on with the job, and that is what I intend to do.

**Ms Mallon:** Comhghairdeas to the joint First Ministers on their nominations today. The SDLP welcomes the fact that this crisis appears to have been averted, but the people of Northern Ireland should never have been brought back to the point of crisis yet again. Five parties, the British Government and the Irish Government all signed up to New Decade, New Approach. All of us made promises to the people of Northern Ireland, and all those promises must be honoured. No party has the right to pick and choose which commitment will or will not be honoured. Neither is it good or responsible devolved government, however, to run to the British Government every time that the DUP and Sinn Féin fail to implement what had previously been agreed. The SDLP entered the Executive on the basis of New Decade, New Approach. We entered the Executive in good faith, and we remain committed to the delivery of all the commitments that were made.

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stafford] in the Chair)*

Although there may be a sense of relief today that we have not been pushed over the cliff and into the hands of Boris Johnson and Matt Hancock, the truth is that the British Government do not have a good track record

when it comes to delivering on the promises that they make. We have only to look at the protocol. The SDLP in Westminster will, however, hold the British Government's feet to the fire to ensure that they deliver on the Irish language and deliver for those who care about and respect all our cultures.

As this political drama comes to an end for the time being, the clear message from people in Northern Ireland is, "Cut the drama and start delivering. Get on with the job: the job of making people's lives better, not worse".

That means getting the 335,000 patients who are living in pain off our hospital waiting lists. It means giving the hundreds of children who are waiting for school places the education that they deserve. It means dealing with the housing crisis, the COVID crisis, the Brexit crisis and the climate crisis. We do not need any more DUP/Sinn Féin-manufactured crises to add to our list.

The SDLP, of course, has many questions about the exclusive negotiation between the DUP, Sinn Féin and the British Government. Were there any negotiations on funding to tackle the crisis in our waiting lists? Were there any negotiations on the housing crisis? Were there any negotiations on the anti-poverty strategy? Were there any negotiations on free and affordable childcare for working parents? Those are all commitments in NDNA, and we will be seeking answers.

To conclude, the SDLP remains committed to good governance, to putting people before party, and to improving the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Beattie:** I feel like I should have written something down for this extraordinary day, but I do not want to work for the extraordinary day; I want to work for the everyday. That means tackling the waiting lists, which we keep mentioning: 335,000 people who feel abandoned and let down by our actions. It also means working for the people who are coming off furlough, the people who are on waiting lists for housing, the people who cannot get housing, the people who cannot afford housing, the people for whom no housing is available, and the people who are concerned about the education of their children and the state of our education system. That is what all of us need to be working on. Ninety MLAs need to be united in working in that regard.

I no longer want to see identity politics being the thing that drives us in the Chamber. I do not want to see ransom politics being the thing that

holds us to account. I want to see collaborative politics, where we all see the problem in front of us and work to try to find a solution to it. We all want our people to wake up in the morning with a sense of purpose and to go to bed at night with a sense of fulfilment. To get there, we need to work together. We can have our disagreements if we want to have them, but, at the end of the day, let us set our sights on a target to make Northern Ireland a good place to live, where people want to work, get educated, bring up their children, and call their home rather than leave at the earliest opportunity.

I congratulate Paul on becoming the First Minister, and I congratulate Michelle for continuing as the deputy First Minister. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party and I will work with them, as we will with every Minister. I will work with every political party — large or small — and every independent Member to make sure that we do what is right for Northern Ireland. I will work with every MLA. However, we have to set our focus on the people of Northern Ireland and on making this a better place for them.

I will not get into sticking my boot into anybody across the Chamber regarding where we are now and how we got here. That would not help. What will help is getting this done today and getting on with the business that we are paid to do and that the people expect us to do. That is key. I hope that we can all unite in trying to do exactly that.

**Mrs Long:** I welcome the appointment of our new First Minister and the reappointment of our not-so-new deputy First Minister. Warm congratulations to them both. I wish them well over the coming crucial months as they take on the responsibility of jointly leading the Executive and our community through the ongoing pandemic, the first stages of recovery and the last stages of the mandate. There is much work for us all to do. I, for one, will be glad to get back to focusing on that rather than on all the drama of recent weeks. I also very much welcome their positive words and commitments today.

I am sure that neither Minister wants or needs my advice, but, in keeping with the habit of a lifetime, I will give it to them anyway. *[Laughter.]* We can all agree that the past few weeks have been an unedifying experience. Whilst the late-night agreement that has got us to this point is welcome, in that it allows devolution to continue, it ought never to have been necessary.

The matters that are in dispute were settled in the NDNA agreement. We took up our posts in government knowing that our role was to deliver the agreement that our parties signed up to, not to unpick it. Relying on the UK Government to deliver not only the cultural package that was agreed in NDNA but these very institutions, yet again, from the brink of collapse is a failure that diminishes what little public respect remains for devolution and local politics.

### 12.30 pm

Over the last few days, time has been squandered as departmental and Assembly officials, Ministers, MLAs and lots of other people outside this Building were preparing for failure. That is time that has been stolen from the people whom we represent and were elected to serve. People outside the Chamber were worried about when they might get a hospital appointment for a diagnosis; parents were in distress, watching as their children were made to feel worthless by our fundamentally flawed transfer system; and others lay awake at night, desperate for reassurance that they will have a job to return to when furlough ends. It must have seemed like the height of indulgence when they watched well-paid MLAs threatening to bring down the very institutions that could deliver them respite.

I had a stark realisation in the early hours of this morning. In the time when I have been an MLA — since my election in 2003 to date — I have endured more time in talks and negotiations to restore these institutions than I have spent enjoying being able to walk through those double doors to do the job that I was elected to do. That has to change. We have to wean our politics off this toxic cycle of drama.

My advice, for what it is worth, is simply this. The public are weary. They need and deserve leadership and hope. I will work, in good faith, with both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to deliver that. We have a chance to deliver real change; let us grasp it together.

**Ms Bailey:** The nomination of a First Minister and deputy First Minister is welcome, but we should not be here again. Continually taking people to the brink and back is ridiculous, manipulative and simply wrong. How many more five-party political agreements will be made, rolled back on, stalled, not followed through and then manufactured into a crisis before calling an election?

It was 23 years ago that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was put to the people for

ratification. It was given overwhelming endorsement, and yet it remains largely undelivered. Although it was not perfect, it was right. Since then, political crisis has brought us many political agreements. We have had St Andrews, Haass/O'Sullivan, Eames/Bradley, Stormont House, in-and-out Ministers, Fresh Start — false start — and New Decade, New Approach. All those were made without people's agreement, and they all remain undelivered.

This five-party Executive have a long track record of manufacturing political crises, rather than tackling the long-standing and ever-growing list of multiple crises that people are living through: the housing crisis, the climate crisis, the waiting list crisis and the mental health crisis, to name just a few. We need to see delivery, whether that is delivery of abortion rights, an independent environmental protection agency, a childcare strategy or enhanced provision for integrated education. You can take your pick; there is so much that needs to be done.

Let us not forget that it was Westminster MPs who approved our new abortion regulations, just a year ago. Look at how that has worked out. Women here are still denied access to services, and 371 women have been forced to travel to England, during a pandemic, to access healthcare that has been denied to them.

No one is fooled that this overnight political agreement on how to deliver an Irish language Act will bring any stability at all. I question whether it will even bring an agreeable Act, particularly when we look at where it will come from: a Tory Government whose track record is of lies, spin and non-delivery. That is yet another well-worn track.

I send my congratulations to the new Executive team, but be in no doubt at all: all eyes are on you. People are in crisis, and people will be watching your every move. I wish you luck.

**Mr Allister:** Today is a day of victory for ransom politics. It is a day of indisputable victory for Sinn Féin. It is a day of shame and humiliation for the DUP, added to by the fact that the nomination made today was in defiance of a vote of the DUP Assembly group, where as many as 24 of those gathered voted against rolling over and proceeding. Doing Sinn Féin's bidding mattered more to the DUP leader. In recent days, the DUP leader has been spoken to like a small boy by Sinn Féin. He has been told what he can do, what he cannot do and when he can do it. Today, he spinelessly rolled over, having paid the ransom and having paid

the Dane-geld. Mr Poots, I say to you: power bought by paying the Sinn Féin ransom is power not worth having.

Kipling said of the folly of paying the Dane-geld:

*"For the end of that game is oppression and shame,  
And the nation that plays it is lost!"*

How true.

To the new beholden First Minister, Mr Givan, I say that we have given more than we have left to give — far too much. Unionism has been stretched beyond giving point, and, by living up to your name, Mr Givan, you will ensure that this Poots/O'Neill Government will go down in history as the P O'Neill Government. What a pitiful, hopeless place unionism has been brought to by the poodle brothers of Poots and Givan.

**Mr Carroll:** Time after time, from equal marriage to abortion and now the Irish language, the DUP has played a disgraceful role in blocking, delaying and rolling back on people's rights. When Gaeilgeoiri or women, for that matter, have to rely on the rotten Tories to give them basic rights, it speaks volumes about the level of dysfunction and dead-end politics that leaves the Stormont institutions utterly incapable of delivering any kind of progressive or real change. Frankly, I do not trust the Tories; most people do not. I do not think that they give a damn about Irish language rights, Irish language speakers or anybody here. The only reason that they are willing to step in is the same reason that parties in the Executive are willing to accept their intervention: it is because activists continue to campaign and demand that those who support them stand their ground. Once again, this campaign has defined the fault lines of this Executive, and the buck has had to be passed to the Tories to keep these institutions afloat at all costs. It is also because the Tories are facing their own crises on multiple fronts.

Let us not forget that these are the same institutions that presided over a disastrous COVID policy, with lives tragically lost. They are the same institutions that saw Black Lives Matter activists targeted, that have utterly failed to deliver on commitments to workers in NDNA and that have witnessed a spike in poverty and deprivation levels right across our communities by unleashing welfare reforms, maintaining bottom wages and paying more heed to paramilitary demands than demands from trade unions. The only time this Executive have ever deviated from this miserable record is when

workers or people-power campaigns have put it up to them. That is how health workers got their pay rise. That is how women forced the issue of abortion onto the agenda, front and centre, when no big party stood by them. That is how Irish language campaigners have shaken up the cosy politics on the hill once again.

They have persisted despite being ignored and opposed. It is clear to us that the only way to bring about real, progressive change is through more and relentless people-power campaigns.

I want to stress that we should never trust the Tories with rights. Recent history shows that. The responsibility still lies with Stormont, and those who breathe a sigh of relief that the buck has been passed should not be allowed to get comfortable until those rights are finally over the line.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I appreciate the passion with which the Member expresses his views, but I am not certain that it is parliamentary to refer to people as not giving a damn. However, I am sure that it will not trouble his conscience too much. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Sugden:** I offer my congratulations to Mr Givan as the new First Minister and to Mrs O'Neill on her reappointment as deputy First Minister. That said, this is an exhausted mandate. The biggest mistake in January 2020 was not having an election. The biggest mistake was restoring government three years into a mandate with no opportunity to provide good governance on the ground for the people of Northern Ireland.

Did we really not expect the instability that we have seen over the past number of years restored at the end of three shameful years of nothing, which have contributed to our waiting lists? We have five competing parties in government, five parties that will be competing for votes in an election that is less than a year away; a two-year mandate; and a de facto Programme for Government in New Decade, New Approach, which was not about people but about politics. This mandate is exhausted.

The people of Northern Ireland are tired; they are tired of the charade. On my way to Stormont this morning, I deliberately looked around at the people of Northern Ireland. It was a bright, sunny day, and people were getting on with their lives, perhaps not even paying attention to what is happening in this place. That is an important point to make, because we need to build back confidence in these institutions.

What was last week's behaviour about? It feels like drama. It feels as though every political party was speaking to voters rather than doing the job that it has the responsibility to fulfil. I would call for an election at this point, if it were not for legislation that is in passage — the only opportunity to actually do our jobs — and if we were not coming to the end of a pandemic. There are priorities: health waiting lists; policing; reform of these institutions, which is key to avoiding that type of behaviour in the future; welfare mitigation; soft opt-in of organ donation; the Justice Bill that is coming through; Brexit; and education.

If it means that we can draw a line, parties need to figure out what they want to do next, because the people of Northern Ireland are tired. They want to see this place work. They do not want direct rule from Westminster, because, if its outcomes were to happen, the same people who advocate that would disagree with it as well. We all have a mandate to work for the people of Northern Ireland. Everybody in a position of responsibility needs to realise that and get down to doing it. Next year will be very difficult, not for any one of us but for everyone out there.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I wish Mr Givan well in his new and challenging role. The people in this country are counting on him to work well with Mrs O'Neill in her role as deputy First Minister. I place on record my good wishes to her as well. Both of them need to work collaboratively with their Executive colleagues as we continue to emerge from the pandemic and towards the end of the mandate.

There are a number of very important health Bills that require urgent sign-off from the Executive and progress made on them. They are the Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill and the draft organ and human tissue donation (deemed consent) Bill. I also mention the Justice (Miscellaneous) Provisions Bill and the proposed sign language Bill in the Department for Communities. I concur very much with Ms Mallon's reference to the long list of outstanding strategies and policy changes, not least those included in the New Decade, New Approach deal. Few of them will get newspaper headlines, but their contents are so important to the people whom we represent and who eagerly await policy and legislative change.

#### 12.45 pm

It was my great privilege to represent the Alliance Party on the language and culture

working groups that were set up on two occasions during the talks when the Assembly was not functioning. I fully appreciate the significance of the contents of the tripartite cultural package and how important they are to so many across society. It is my sincere hope that the recommendations of the report by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) dovetail neatly into the outworkings of that package. The issues that FICT considered are of equal importance to the people of the growing centre ground in Northern Ireland, who want to see workable and robust solutions put in place in their neighbourhoods before we have any more so-called hot summers here. Their aspirations for the future for themselves and their children are of equal importance and should be respected equally.

*Adjourned at 12.45 pm.*

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