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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 30 May 2022

Assembly Business

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Good afternoon, Members. I am Acting Speaker today by virtue of holding the position of Father of the House. I will not dwell on the criteria for qualifying for that title. *[Laughter.]* Having been given notice by not less 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.

Election of Speaker and Deputy Speakers

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Section 39(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides:

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

Therefore, the Assembly cannot conduct any further business until a Speaker and at least two Deputy Speakers have been elected. Members should be clear: without the election of a Speaker and two Deputy Speakers, no further business can proceed. I advise Members that the election of the Speaker will be conducted under the procedures set out in Standing Order 4.

I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose that another Member be elected as Speaker. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded by another Member, as required by Standing Order 14. I will then verify that the Member seconded is willing to accept the nomination. 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 Butler: I nominate Mr Mike Nesbitt for the role of Speaker of the Chamber.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Is there a Member to second the proposal?

Mr Stewart: I second that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Thank you. Does Mr Nesbitt accept the proposal to be Speaker?

Mr Nesbitt: I do. Can we use VAR this time, please? *[Laughter.]*

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

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker, and thank you for stepping in in these circumstances to keep us right. I nominate Mr Patsy McGlone MLA to be the next Speaker of the Assembly

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

Ms McLaughlin: I second that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Does Mr McGlone accept the nomination to be Speaker?

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat. Glacaim leis. *[Translation: Thank you. I accept.]* Thank you. I accept.

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

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

Mr McNulty: On a point of order, Mr Acting Speaker. I wish the Father of the House well in his role as Cheann Comhairle, [*Translation: Speaker*] and I wish the Cheann Comhairle to join me in offering hearty comhghairdeas [*Translation: congratulations*] to the Derry senior footballers on their Ulster Championship victory yesterday. My grandfather was a proud Magherafelt man and an O'Donovan Rossa man, and he is smiling down today. I wish them very well on their success, and I congratulate them.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I am sure that there will be much joy in the county of Derry today. Thank you for that.

Mrs O'Neill: I congratulate both Tyrone and Derry. I have the pleasure of representing east Tyrone and south Derry; it was a good day for the constituency. Well done to all involved.

Today marks 26 days since the people voted and gave the parties represented here in the Chamber a mandate to constitute the Assembly, form an Executive, agree a Budget and allocate £420 million from the Executive's bank account into the pockets of workers and families to help to alleviate the burden as a result of the cost-of-living rises. The people have spoken, and they now want action. They do not want protest. They want the parties and every single MLA elected to this democratic institution to get their sleeves rolled up and get down to business.

Since the election, Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Prime Minister Boris Johnson have both visited Belfast and met the parties. I told Boris Johnson that the Tories are cynically using the people of the North and their democratic institutions as bargaining chips in their attempt to renegotiate with the EU. They do so for narrow party interests. The majority of people voted democratically to stay in the EU; they rejected Brexit. There was certainly no consent to leave. The majority of new MLAs elected to this Chamber support the protocol, believe that it is workable, if given the chance to be implemented, and believe that, where any issues exist, they can all be resolved within the framework of the protocol and the Joint Committee.

Last week, we had welcome news that Wrightbus had secured a deal to supply 60 hydrogen buses to Germany over the next two years. That illustrates the benefits that our continued access to the EU single market is yielding for our local businesses, our economy and job creation.

All parties, and also the British Government, should respect the democratic outcome and now fully support the application of the Good Friday Agreement through power-sharing and equality. The DUP standoff is with the public, not with the European Union. The standoff is with those people who are crippled with pain, waiting for treatment and surgery on the NHS, who voted for us to tackle the waiting lists by investing an extra £1 billion in our health service. The stark figures that we saw last week from the Department of Health show that almost 360,000 people are now on a waiting list. We need an Executive in place to reduce waiting lists, to hire more doctors and nurses, and to fund vital mental health and cancer services today.

We in Sinn Féin are committed to making health the Executive's number-one priority for the next three years. We are committed to investing in health, tackling waiting lists and ensuring that you can get access to your GP when you need to do so. We need to protect the health service and resist Tory underfunding and attempts to dismantle the NHS. People, rightly, want their politicians to work together to prioritise those very important issues.

When the Assembly, Executive, North/South bodies and east-west relations were all restored in January 2020, there was a shared commitment to deliver public services, societal reforms and a future that our people need and deserve. Over that period, we demonstrated that, when there is a unity of purpose and when parties work together with determination, we can deliver for the public whom we serve. As I stand here today, I am ready to work with others and lead an Executive to make politics work for everyone and demonstrate that real change is possible. Working together, we can prioritise health, housing and education, and we can create more jobs in a stronger economy. We can build a more progressive and modern society that is based on fairness and equality. Those who disrupt the present and threaten our future need to realise that there is no going back; only forward.

Mr Givan: Today's recall is another attempt at majority rule and has no credibility as it comes from the party that kept these institutions down

for three years. The public will see that hypocrisy from Sinn Féin for what it is.

This is not a serious attempt to restore the principles of power-sharing and these institutions; it is a stunt. Serious efforts to do that would be working with us in order to try to get the barriers removed that are creating the instability that is thwarting these institutions. Instead, over the past three weeks since we last met to elect a Speaker, we have had republican entitlement and majority supremacy from the Alliance Party, no less. The party of cross-community working has abandoned that territory and has now unashamedly joined with the SDLP and Sinn Féin on majority rule, calling for the Belfast Agreement to be changed so that these proceedings can proceed without unionists having their say. We have had disrespect shown to the unionist community. Again, the Alliance Party and the SDLP stopped the Union flag flying from the Building on Saturday. We have had the denigration of the unionist community from one media outlet in particular.

Demands for majority rule were not allowed in the past, and they will not be allowed today. We have had two years of raising our concerns around the protocol and its implications, and not one single unionist Member of Parliament, Member of the Assembly or local government councillor has given it their consent. We had Members of the House ignoring that. There were three motions calling for the rigorous implementation of the protocol. Jeffrey Donaldson gave space and was gracious in doing that. He extended his grace periods for the Executive, but, instead, we had other parties taunting him, calling on him to take action to withdraw from the Executive.

However, progress is being made. Not one party in the House calls any more for the rigorous implementation of the protocol. The Republic of Ireland even says that there have to be changes. We were told that there would be no renegotiation of the protocol, and now the European Union recognises that change needs to come. So, I welcome the progress that this party has been able to gain and achieve over the past two weeks when it was denied to us for over two years. Who in the House wants the grace periods to end? Who in the House is ready for the end of the £500 million of support that the Government provide to traders in order to overcome the barriers that are down the Irish Sea? Not one Member of the House supports the imposition of that cost to our business. Not one Member of the House wants the grace periods to end.

I call for a recommitment from the parties that have recalled the Assembly today to join in the spirit of the Belfast Agreement, which you all supported and which called for true power-sharing between unionists and nationalists. Let us make progress. Let us commit to those principles. I hope that we can get to a stage where the House is recalled, we elect a Speaker and we are able to form a new Executive. But the time for words is over. It is action that we need to see, and the UK Government have it within their gift to deliver that action. The European Union has it within its gift to make the changes that need to be made in order to have these institutions up and running on a power-sharing basis.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I call Andrew Muir. *[Pause.]* I call Nuala McAllister.

Ms McAllister: Thank you, Acting Speaker. I was elected to the Assembly to deliver for my constituents right across North Belfast and, indeed, for people right across Northern Ireland. The very fact that I, along with many newly elected representatives across the Alliance Benches, am being denied the right to do so by the DUP is nothing short of shameful, and it stinks of egotism.

There is much talk today about the protocol for the unionist community and about issues for the unionist community, but the hardships right across Northern Ireland now are affecting not just one section of our community but everyone. That is why we are happy to nominate a Speaker today, and, indeed, we are content to support either Patsy McGlone or Mike Nesbitt. For us, the importance is not about who fills the Chair but that we get someone to fill it.

12.15 pm

We need a Speaker so that we can scrutinise the work of the Departments. There were no Executive caretaker Ministers during the previous collapse of the Assembly, so there is no grandstanding or showboating here today. The stunt itself, over the past few weeks, is on the heads of the members of the DUP. We need to have an Executive up and running so that we — all of us in positions of responsibility — can take those decisions to ease people's hardships. Any argument that the Conservative Government are delivering for people in Northern Ireland does not stack up. There are simply too many questions. The Chancellor could not answer simple questions last week about what will happen with the £400 payment. The thought had probably not even crossed his mind because, let us face it, Northern Ireland is

not the priority. People's hardships here are not the priority of the Conservative Government. If, through the Executive, we could access that support and more of the £435 million that is sitting here, then, just maybe, we could restore public confidence.

There is something that we have the ability to restore, and that is people's dignity. For years, people right across Northern Ireland have had to access food banks. For the past few months, people in working poverty and, for the past few years, those in receipt of social security benefits have had to access food banks more and more. They are not able to provide for themselves and their children. They are choosing between heating their homes and eating. They are borrowing from family or, quite simply, doing without. Much can be done by an Executive to tackle the cost-of-living crisis, whether through a childcare strategy, an anti-poverty strategy or the review of the welfare reform mitigations and the implementation of the recommendations by the expert panellists who were put in place by the Executive. The system that is designed to support those in acute financial distress — all those important strategies, into which so much work and expertise have gone, are just sitting on a shelf, gathering dust. Meanwhile, parents cannot afford to feed themselves and their children. At the heart of the cost-of-living crisis is our Government's failure to act. That is something that we all take responsibility for, but we are ready to make decisions to alleviate those stresses and give hope to people who have been voiceless for so long — hope that things can be better, that life can be more comfortable, and hope and resolve to continue, because, as it is, people cannot go on for much longer.

I do not doubt that members of the DUP are dealing daily with the pleas for help that I and members of my party, the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the UUP deal with every day. Most recently, for example, a mother in north Belfast contacted me. She did not send her kids to school because she could not afford to buy them food for break time. She could not afford to get her child new school shoes, and she did not want her child to be shamed or feel embarrassed. She cries herself to sleep every night because she feels that she is failing as a mother, but she is not. We are failing her, and it is not for our lack of trying. Believe me, those of us who want to get on with the job are more than desperate to do so. How long must we continue in this crisis after crisis?

We are committed to the Good Friday Agreement. We are committed to power-sharing, but we can no longer accept the

irresponsible decisions and consequences that affect our people. That is why we need reform. Over 70% of Members in this Chamber want to elect a Speaker and get on with governing. Holding our society to ransom is unacceptable. Those of us who want to get on with the job of governing should be able to do so. Let us not just hope for something for our people; let us actually act and deliver for them.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I apologise to the Member for the misunderstanding at the start.

Mr Butler: Mr Acting Speaker, I take this opportunity to welcome you to the Chair. I hope that you will not sit there too many times. As for your being Father of the House, I hope that there will not be too many in-jokes in the UUP room; maybe it all went on this morning.

I welcome the chance, albeit in a potentially artificial setting, to nominate my colleague and friend Mr Mike Nesbitt for the position of Speaker. I do so in full confidence that Mike is indeed the right person for that role. Mike's attributes are many, but his political leadership and confidence are perhaps eclipsed only by his unparalleled articulation. I struggle to say that word, but he is incredibly articulate. I enjoy listening to him, and many across the Chamber enjoy Mike's participation. Mike is responsible for me being here today. As a councillor in Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, I received a call from him one day. He asked me to come and visit Stormont. It was my first visit to Stormont; I had never been here before.

He spoke about a Northern Ireland for everyone and about his brand of unionism, which very much resonated with mine. It was his confidence and belief in my ability that contributed to me entering the fray, and it is a real privilege today to return that favour and formally nominate Mr Mike Nesbitt for the role of Speaker.

I referred to the sitting today as being potentially artificial because we will know in a short time whether we can convince the party to my right to make a move today. Whilst I said that it is artificial, it is absolutely within the rules, and I hope that the DUP shows a graduated response, as has been articulated by the DUP leader in its response to the moves by the British Government with regard to the protocol. I agree with him that it is absolutely unfair, particularly to the people who elected me in Lagan Valley.

Having covered the ground across Lagan Valley, I can attest that the DUP was clear on the doorsteps about not nominating for First Minister or, indeed, deputy First Minister without the protocol being addressed, but at no point was the matter of nominating for Speaker mentioned. That, along with the co-option in place of the DUP leader, has left many voters in Lagan Valley shaking their heads and feeling misled.

My leader spoke here a couple of weeks ago, and he majored on the silence of this place while the people of Northern Ireland battle with crippling waiting lists and the health service remains under so much pressure. I pay absolute respect to the Minister of Health whom we had during the pandemic, because there was not one person behind a door that I knocked who said that we did not have the right person in the right place at the right time.

The cost-of-living crisis gets worse every day. Whilst I call on the DUP to at least enable the Assembly to function and Ministers to be scrutinised by supporting our nomination today, we at least can agree that the issues that I have spoken of will not disappear and need to be addressed now because they are getting worse.

With that in mind, the UUP has written today to ask the head of the Civil Service to convene all-party talks to establish a Programme for Government and the Minister of Finance to reopen the public consultation on the Budget to allow our people to let us know how they want their money to be spent. Those are measures that, I believe, can and should be taken now to restore, in some way, the confidence of the people of Northern Ireland whom we all purport to serve.

It gives me great pleasure to once again nominate Mr Mike Nesbitt for the role of Speaker of the House.

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

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. As I said before, I hope that you do not have to spend too long in that Chair, but thank you for standing in today to oversee proceedings, such as they are.

A couple of weeks ago, when we met, I proudly nominated Patsy McGlone MLA to be Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Today, I nominate Patsy again. I hope, but I do not expect, that our party and the Assembly will be successful today in nominating Patsy for the role.

In our view, he is the outstanding candidate to be Speaker of the Assembly. For more than three decades in politics, he has shown his commitment to cross-community politics, to delivery for people and to serving the people of Mid Ulster and across this region. He has been in the Assembly since 2003. He is a former general secretary of the SDLP, and he has been Deputy Speaker of the Assembly since 2016. He is a committed parliamentarian, a sure hand and a fair mind and someone who would be ideal to lead this institution. We nominate him today, and we will keep nominating him until certain parties in the Chamber come to their senses and allow us to get back and to do our jobs.

We know in all probability that, today, the DUP will not let us elect a Speaker. Today is another opportunity to elect, first of all, a Speaker and then First and deputy First Ministers to enable the people who were returned here by the electorate, just a few weeks ago, to come in and do their jobs.

I want to pause for a minute and reflect on the democratic act that everyone in this room participated in a few weeks ago. We went out and knocked on hundreds and thousands of doors in our constituency and asked people for their vote: a precious, precious thing. Politics is not about politicians. It is not about those of us who stand up and make speeches in the Chamber and seek office; it is about the people whom we serve. That is what a democracy is supposed to be about.

To be honest, I do not know how the party opposite can face the people whom it asked for a vote. I do not know how it can face them. Blocking us from even electing a Speaker in order to have debates and to hold shadow Ministers to account is genuinely abhorrent. To breach the trust of people from whom you have sought a vote is unconscionable.

The thing that we should be doing here today is electing, first of all, a Speaker, and then First Ministers, to deal with an appalling cost-of-living crisis and deal with a health service crisis that sees nearly a third of our population — a third of our population — on a waiting list.

In relation to the cost-of-living crisis, the SDLP has a Bill ready. We tried to move emergency legislation before the Assembly dissolved for the election, and we will try to move it again should a Speaker be elected, but, in all probability, the party opposite will not let us do that. Why, why, why is the DUP holding the people of Northern Ireland hostage? Why? It says that it is all about the protocol. The

protocol is an international treaty signed by the UK and the European Union. It was not negotiated by the people of Northern Ireland and it was not negotiated by MLAs. Mr Givan mentioned the role of MLAs, but the number of MLAs who support the protocol went up at the last election. The DUP has decided that the people who will be made to pay for its arrogance and intransigence are the people of Northern Ireland. Those are people who cannot heat their homes and whose family members are stuck on waiting lists. It is, as we have discussed, truly appalling.

I do not know what else to say about the behaviour of the DUP, but I will say this: you talk about consent. You talk about the failure of the unionist community and the people who elected you to offer consent for the protocol. I acknowledge that your party does not like the protocol. Do you acknowledge that my party and other parties in the Chamber have an equal objection to Brexit itself? *[Pause.]* No. Consent, apparently, means simply the consent of the DUP. Shameful. Utterly shameful.

I hope that, when you leave the Chamber today, having again blocked us from appointing a Speaker, you will hold your heads in shame. People are struggling to heat their homes, struggling to feed their families and worried about their parents or other family members who are on a waiting list. I hope that you can hold your heads high when you face them, because I could not.

Mr Allister: This is patently a stunt sitting of the Assembly, initiated by Sinn Féin and its ever-willing little helpers in the Alliance Party. More than that, it is riven with the most base hypocrisy. The first person to speak in the debate, Michelle O'Neill, was the very Minister of Health who walked out of Government — not for three weeks, not for three months but for three years — caring nothing about waiting lists, caring nothing about the sick. Now, they come here to lecture us on those very subjects.

Mrs O'Neill and her party are not bringing forward a proposition to try to resolve the impasse. They are trying to bring forward a proposition to break the resolve of unionists who oppose the iniquitous protocol. That is what today is about: trying to coerce and cajole unionists into giving up the key essential leverage that they have against the iniquitous protocol. I trust that that will not work today and that it will not work until that protocol is gone. No unionist who is awake at all to the protocol — sadly, that may not include all unionists — can ever come to terms with the fact that, under that protocol, Great Britain, the other part of this

nation, is decreed to be a foreign country, which means that its goods must, therefore, be checked as if they were coming from Bolivia rather than Britain. That is such an affront to my citizenship and to the unionist position that it can never be accepted.

Then, you top that off by saying to Members of this elected Assembly, "You should have no power over many of the laws that govern your constituents. You should have no power to make or to change laws that govern trade, economy and all the things that the protocol controls".

That is such an affront that no democrat — unionist, nationalist or other — should be prepared to live under it. I am clear to the House, therefore, that I trust that the attempt to break the resolve of unionism will fail and continue to fail. Unionism needs to hold its nerve. It is doing the right thing and, in doing so, has no option but to continue to repudiate and make clear that you cannot have the protocol and Stormont at the same time. The protocol is about dismantling the Union: that is why Sinn Féin is its cheerleader. The protocol is about dismantling Brexit: that is why Alliance is a cheerleader. Now, however, Members need to come to realise that the protocol is also about dismantling the Assembly. On your head be it, because that is the course that you have chosen to take.

12.30 pm

The only advantage to the debate today is that, although there will be an echo chamber debate about all the issues, it gives one the opportunity, which I wish to take, to place on record the fact that Wednesday is the centenary of the formation of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which served this country with such gallantry and selflessness and which paid such a high price to the terrorists who are represented in the House. Furthermore, later this week, of course, we will have the momentous occasion of the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. What a remarkable achievement: 70 years to rule over us. Long may she rule over us, indeed.

Mr Carroll: Some three weeks after the election results, it is clear, more than ever, that the actions of the DUP are causing more and more people to be furious with its refusal to form an Executive. People have been left to the wolves of monopoly energy companies to charge whatever they like for the necessities of life and are rightly asking what Ministers here will do about it. What will they do to tackle the

fact that heads of companies such as BP are arrogantly bragging that their organisation and industry is a cash machine for shareholders and the wealthy? People are languishing in jobs for which employers are not paying a level that allows them to live with some enjoyment and dignity without being forced to count every penny. People are asking what Ministers here are doing about it. We have an unbelievable situation: the average rent in Belfast is extortionate, and people are struggling, but most landlords are raking it in. Furthermore, consider the fact that rent went up again last year and continues to soar while landlords in student areas such as the Holylands and the like are pulling in £1.8 billion from renters, making this city — Belfast — the most lucrative for landlords. They are putting profit before people and decent housing conditions. Teachers in one of the biggest unions — the NASUWT — are balloting for strike action over inadequate pay and poor terms and conditions. Assembly staff in this Building are still challenging changes to working conditions and inadequate pay offers. I stand with them in that fight. I urge every MLA to do so and to refuse to cross their picket line. There can be no scabbing in a cost-of-living crisis. In truth, if an Executive were formed today or tomorrow, it could — I emphasise "could" — act on all those issues. However, Ministers and Members had a chance to act on the issues before but refused to take the required action in the previous mandate or in the mandate before that.

Truth be told, the past record leaves a lot to be desired, to put it mildly. On every measuring stick, the big parties here have failed miserably to reduce poverty, increase wages and tackle wealth inequality. The previous Executive endorsed pay cuts across the board for workers, disgracefully sided with landlords when they had the chance to reduce private-sector rents and have left the wealthy unscathed during the pandemic. They failed to protect people. That is not just my assessment and that of my party. A recent Ulster University study found that many households here were struggling before the recent cost-of-living crisis. As part of a life and times survey, research conducted last year found that 62% of people did not think that the Executive were doing enough to address poverty. I therefore ask the parties in the House that would potentially form an Executive what guarantees they will give workers, especially everyone who was on the front line during the pandemic. I ask that they not plough ahead again with pay offers that are below the rising rate of inflation. Inflation is sitting at 10% — the highest in 40 years — and is set to rise. If that is the case, nobody in

society should be left to stomach pay offers below that rate.

As I have said before, a deal below the rate of inflation is a real-terms pay cut. Officially, inflation is at 10% and is set to go higher, but we know that even that percentage does not truly reflect the cost-of-living increase, as food items are up by 20% and 50% in some aisles.

At the same time, we see the profits of big supermarket chains such as Tesco literally double. What are Ministers doing now about capping the cost of food so that people can afford their weekly shop and eat food that is good for their health? If anything has been especially clear in the past two years, it is that leaving it up to the market does not work and only bolsters the profits and strength of shareholders and already super-rich individuals.

We need government action now. We need ministerial action now. Regardless of whether an Executive are formed today or whenever, urgent action needs to be taken on those questions. Waiting for a resolution or an agreement in this Building does not cut it in this period for me. Change is always slow in coming from this Building. Repeatedly and often, it has been a block to progress and advancement. We need to follow the likes of the Caterpillar workers in west Belfast and Larne, who are going on the offensive and challenging inadequate pay deals and changes to their job that will see them forced into completing compulsory overtime without having any say-so. Workers are right to take action now to fight back, and we should stand in solidarity and encourage every one of them to do so.

Mr Kearney: Tá sé de rún agam labhairt leis an Tionól i nGaeilge inniu. Ba mhaith liom seans gairid a thabhairt do Chomhaltaí na cluasáin ateangaireachta a chur ar a gcloigne.

A Cheann Comhairle, tá beagán níos mó ná trí seachtaine ó shin, labhair formhór na ndaoine amach go láidir. Bhí ré úr polaitiúil ag teastáil uathu. Tugadh teachtaireacht shoiléir dúinn go léir: comhroinnt cumhachta chuí a athbhunú; dul i ngleic leis an ghéarchéim sa chosta maireachtála atá ag gabháil in olcas; an córas sláinte a chur ina cheart; agus seirbhísí poiblí inmharthana a chur ar fáil.

Níl aon amhras ach gurb é toil ár ndaoine é go n-oibreoidh na hinstiúidí seo ar son leas an phobail. Níl aon cheart ag an DUP, ná ag an Ord Oráisteach, cosc a chur ar an chomhroinnt cumhachta ó Thuaidh ná ar fheidhmiú Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta. Tá seasamh an DUP meargánta, dochosanta agus

mífhreagrach. Ní chuireann an prótacal bagairt ar dhream ar bith ó Thuaidh. Finnscéal atá ansin.

Tá an prótacal riachtanach; tá sé anseo le fanacht. Chomh fada agus a leanann dúrach an DUP ar aghaidh, beidh teaghlaigh agus seandaoine ag fulaingt, beidh oibríthe ag streachailt, agus beidh scríos á dhéanamh ar sheirbhísí poiblí.

Níl aon fháth nár cheart Ceann Comhairle, Leas-Chinn Comhairle ná Airí a ainmniú inniu. A fhad agus a leanann an DUP leis an chur chuige mhífhreagrach seo, is amhlaidh is mó an damáiste a dhéanfar. Is mar gheall air sin gur gá ceisteanna tábhachtacha a chur: an bhfuil an DUP i ndáiríribh faoin chomhroinnt cumhachta leis na páirtithe eile nó nach bhfuil? An bhfuil an DUP fíor-thiomanta do Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta nó nach bhfuil?

A fhad agus a chuirtear cosc ar an phróiseas dhaonlathach, tá gach cuma ar an scéal nach bhfuil aon bhaint ag seasamh an DUP le fíor-imní faoin phrótacal. Ina ionad sin, is é a gcumhacht a chailleadh is mó atá ag cur imní orthu.

Tá tromlach na gComhaltai a toghadh don Tionól seo i bhfách le bealach forásach chuig sochaí cheart-bhunaithe, dhearfach dhóchasach. Tá ceist le freagairt ag an DUP: cé acu rogha a bhfuil siad i bhfách léi? Todhchaí fhorásach nó diúltachas agus deighilt? Tá dhá rogha os comhair an DUP, ach, a chairde, níl ach cinneadh ceart amháin.

[Translation: I intend speaking to the Assembly in Irish today. I would like to give Members a quick opportunity to put the interpretation headphones on.

Mr Speaker, a little over three weeks ago, the majority of people spoke out clearly. They wanted a new era in politics. All of us were given a clear message: re-establish just power-sharing; tackle the worsening cost-of-living crisis; fix the health system; and provide sustainable public services.

There is no doubt that it is our people's will that these institutions work for the benefit of the community. Neither the DUP nor the Orange Order has the right to prevent power-sharing in the North or the functioning of the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP's stance is reckless, indefensible and irresponsible. The protocol threatens no one in the North. That is a myth.

The protocol is necessary; it is here to stay. As long as the DUP's stubbornness continues, families and the elderly will suffer, workers will struggle and public services will be decimated.

There is no reason not to nominate a Speaker and a First Minister and a deputy First Minister today. The longer the DUP continues with this irresponsible approach, the greater the damage that will be done. For that reason, important questions have to be asked: is the DUP serious about sharing power with the other parties or not? Is the DUP truly committed to the Good Friday Agreement or not?

As long as the democratic process is being thwarted, there is every appearance that the DUP's stance has nothing to do with genuine concern about the protocol. Instead, their worry is about losing power.

Most of the Members elected to this Assembly are in favour of a progressive path to a rights-based, positive and optimistic society. The DUP has a question to answer: which choice are they in favour of? A progressive future or negativity and division? The DUP has two options, but, friends, only one right decision.]

Mr Kingston: The Northern Ireland protocol remains the single greatest obstacle to political stability in Northern Ireland and to the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The DUP will continue to act to focus the minds of Her Majesty's Government and the European Commission on the need to address the fundamental errors of the protocol.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kingston: No, I am not taking interruptions, thank you.

It is no coincidence that we have seen greater movement on the matter in the past two weeks, since the DUP took this stand, than we have seen in the previous two years.

The DUP is a pro-devolution party. We strongly support the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive as per political agreements, including the principle of parallel consent. Not a single unionist MLA — not one — supports the Northern Ireland protocol, which was imposed on us and foolishly agreed to by Boris Johnson's Government. It is for other parties in the Assembly to explain if they think that the need for parallel consent applies only when nationalists object. Does it not also apply to the unionist people of Northern Ireland?

Our objections must and will be addressed. Since last September, our party leader has made it clear that we could not continue with business as normal under the Northern Ireland protocol. The DUP made it abundantly clear as a manifesto pledge in the recent election that we would not support the formation of a new Executive unless our Government brought about the replacement of the protocol. We have set out our seven tests for how we will judge that.

For any who dispute it, I assure them that we have very strong backing for our position in the unionist community. I hear it every day. I heard it on Saturday, here in the grounds of Stormont and along the route into the city centre, when over 125,000 people gathered for the centenary of Northern Ireland parade. And a wonderful day it was too. We look forward to Her Majesty's platinum jubilee celebrations later this week, and we congratulate Her Majesty on that unique achievement.

The DUP will continue to stand firmly by our manifesto pledge. People would do well to remember that what we have currently is not the full implementation of the protocol. We are in a grace period. Our access to the UK internal market and the impact on our people and on household bills will be much worse if that ends without the protocol being rewritten.

For those who say, "Let's get the Assembly up and running and we can talk about it", this is not the level at which the necessary powers reside. The powers lie with Her Majesty's Government and the European Commission. It is not good enough for Maroš Šefčovič to repeatedly turn up to talks and say that he does not have a mandate to make the necessary changes. If the EU will not move, our Government must make the necessary changes and undo the harm that they previously and foolishly agreed to. We will judge them on actions, not just words. There is a great prize for us all in terms of political stability, if we can get the protocol issue sorted. We ask other parties to work with us and support us in achieving that stability.

I hope that all MLAs have a long list of constituency work to get on with, as I do. Despite some pretence otherwise, we have Ministers in place to make ministerial decisions; indeed, Sinn Féin appointed a new Infrastructure Minister just last week, and the Sinn Féin Finance Minister allocated an extra £400 million to the Department of Health the week before.

Last week's American delegation only reinforced the suspicions regarding the motives

and partiality of such delegations. However, I noted that it represented the Ways and Means Committee. Perhaps some of the other parties here could bear that in mind. Instead of trying to block the spending of public money during this period, for party political reasons, they should work with Her Majesty's Treasury and other Ministers to ensure that ways and means are found to deliver those public funds, as they surely can be delivered.

The DUP will do all within our powers to see that those funds are delivered —

12.45 pm

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

Mr Kingston: I am on my last sentence. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Regarding the Northern Ireland protocol, we will stand by our pledge; we will use our political leverage; we will focus minds; we will bring matters to a head; and we will hold our Government's feet to the fire until they bring about the necessary changes to the protocol.

Mr Tennyson: I rise as the first Member of the House to have been born after the Good Friday Agreement was signed. It beggars belief that we are here today, 24 years on, with the institutions once again being placed in jeopardy. My generation was promised more than that. We were promised not just peace but progress, progress that has never been fully realised because of the poor political leadership that is on display in the Chamber today. It is difficult to fathom and yet, at the same time, depressingly predictable that we are here today, four weeks on from an Assembly election, without a functioning Assembly or Executive. That is a sad indictment of our politics at any time, but it is particularly shameful when people in our community struggle to heat and eat and face some of the worst hospital waiting lists anywhere in western Europe.

Since the election, the Alliance Party has been here every Monday doing what we can to serve our constituents, willing to get on with the full jobs that we were elected to do. Today is no exception. Again, we stand ready to support the nomination of a Speaker and, over the course of today's proceedings, will likely support both Patsy McGlone and Mike Nesbitt for the role. Indeed, little over two weeks ago, over 70% of Members in the Chamber — nationalist, unionist and none of the above — supported

the appointment of a Speaker. My vote and the votes of my 16 colleagues were effectively disregarded. How can it be that the votes of a cross-community party are excluded from a cross-community vote? That one party is able to block an appointment is an affront to democracy and is disrespectful to the people whom I represent. The case for reform has never been clearer.

Shamefully, the DUP Members turned up, signed the register, took their salaries and then refused to do the jobs that they were elected to do and serve our community. The DUP claims to be exercising leverage, but it is treating the most vulnerable in our community as leverage. The DUP's actions over the past number of weeks will not hurt Boris Johnson or the EU, but they will hurt people languishing on waiting lists and people relying on food banks to feed their kids. The DUP claims to have a mandate for this course of action, having never mentioned blocking the formation of an Assembly at any point during the election campaign, but let us be clear: we all have mandates in the Chamber. The majority of MLAs want to be pragmatic on the protocol, and an even greater majority want to get on with the job of actually governing.

We have heard much today about the Good Friday Agreement and about equality: you will forgive me for taking no lectures from the party to my right on either. They have spent a lifetime railing against both. The lowest moment of the recent election campaign was when I knocked a door and a lady came to her front door in a winter coat. She said that the kids were at school and that she could not afford to pay for gas, so she had to save it for when they got home. It is beyond me, after two years of a pandemic, when our people and public services are on their knees, that some still seek to pursue even further chaos and instability.

Over the past two weeks since the last sitting, the cost-of-living crisis has deepened. Even further funds have gathered, waiting to be allocated. Today, we have an opportunity to end the seemingly interminable drift; to finally deliver real leadership built on hope, not fear, and delivery, not division; and to build a more fair, shared and equal society. For the sake of all the people whom we represent, I urge colleagues to my right to change course, do the right thing, support the election of a Speaker today and let us serve our entire community together.

Mr C Murphy: The party opposite has said that it has a mandate for the position that it takes today. Like the Member who spoke previously, I never heard that party, over the course of the

election, advocating that it would block a Speaker from being elected and the Assembly from being able to carry out its functions. I did not hear it say that it would continue to withdraw from the Executive for any lengthy period either.

I heard it talk about its five-point plan and how it was going to fix all the problems that we face. I do not believe that many of those Members, as far as I know, want to implement a mandate that, effectively, punishes people. The position that they have taken today is this: to punish the people whom we represent. It does not punish us — we can turn up here as long as we want and go off and do the work for our constituents — but it punishes the people whom we represent.

Last week, there were welcome interventions from London on cost-of-living issues, but we now have to find a way to work in order to make sure that those supports get to people. My colleague Deirdre Hargey has to work with DWP in London in order to ensure that those payments, which will come through the benefits system, actually reach the people for whom they are intended: the people who are, and will be, most in need as the cost-of-living crisis bites deeper.

I will work with the Treasury. It fully understood — I had dialogue with it last week — the position that we are in without an Executive. Its representatives know the legal advice that we have. They fully understood that we cannot take decisions on that £400 household support for people. I will, of course, work with my Department as best I can in order to try to ensure that that money goes to people. Let me be very clear, however. There is absolutely no certainty that we will be able to get the £400 per household out by the autumn. There is no certainty about that whatsoever, because the first hurdle that we have to overcome is the fact that we do not have an Executive in place to take the decision on it. Nonetheless, we will continue to work.

The big issue is the £435 million — it is heading towards half a billion pounds — that we have sitting, which could go out of the door today as support for people here and now, but we cannot allocate it. We have to sit on it. The pot actually grows and has grown. Today and tomorrow, that money could be going out to households to assist those who are struggling to meet the challenges that they face with the cost of living and in trying to provide support for their families and others.

The big issue is something that Mr Kingston got entirely wrong, and I will come to him in a minute. I am not sure who provides the script for the DUP, but its Members all try to spoof about this part of the issue in a kind of Trump-like fashion, which is that, if you tell a lie often enough, people believe it. The big issue is the Budget. People in the Chamber argued and clamoured for the past number of years for a multi-year Budget, and we finally got one. Part of the initiative with the draft Budget was to match the priority that we had all spoken about. All the parties declared, even before we came back into the Executive, that we were going to make Health a priority and that it would not really matter, in that sense, who took the position, because we would all support the Health Minister and would ensure that the funds were allocated. We then had a disagreement over the draft Budget, but, ironically, the DUP took the position of the draft Budget, which was to give an extra billion pounds to Health, and made it part of its election manifesto. There was no additional £400 million allocated to Health, however. The Health Minister is acting at risk, because that is the only way that he can try to get support to the people whom we, including your party, collectively promised to support in the time ahead. We are all acting outside and are trying to stretch the boundaries of our limited ministerial authority in this time in order to undo the damage that the DUP is causing on a daily basis.

I will just say something about what Mr Givan said. He and others trotted out the usual thing. Mr Allister has gone, but he was not in the Chamber at the time, so I will at least give him some credit for that. When the Assembly went down over RHI, every single party in the Chamber asked the then First Minister to resign in order to allow an inquiry to be set up — every party, with the exception of the DUP. She refused to do so. Martin McGuinness had to get off his sickbed to come in and hand her a letter of resignation because that was the only way that we could take action to try to deal with that scandal and get an inquiry set up. We then went into an election. Within a matter of months, in February 2018, there was a deal on the table, which the DUP signed up to. Its Members sat in rooms upstairs with us and signed up to that deal. We said, "Let's go out and announce it"; they said, "Give us the weekend to get it fixed"; and, by Monday, its MP team had scuppered the deal by rallying round the Orange Order, the UDA and all the others in order to spook the horses. That is an absolute fact. *[Interruption.]*

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Order, Members. Order.

Mr C Murphy: The reason —

Mr Lyons: On a point of order, Mr Acting Speaker.

Mr C Murphy: The reason, Mr Acting Speaker *[Interruption.]* The reason —

Mr Lyons: The Member must withdraw that comment. It is absolutely shameful that he would say that. He needs to withdraw that right now. *[Interruption.]*

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): *[Inaudible.]*

Mr C Murphy: I think that I should have an extra minute, Mr Acting Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): You will have.

Mr C Murphy: Thank you very much. That was not a point of order, for starters, but I will let it go.

The reason we know that is that the DUP told us that. You say that it is shameful to say that you talk to the UDA, but you talk to the UDA all the time *[Interruption.]* You talk to the UDA all the time, and you talk to the UVF. The reason we know that is that they scuppered the deal. Therefore, we sat from February 2018 *[Interruption.]* From February 2018 *[Interruption.]* He was not in the room *[Interruption.]*

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Order, please. Please. I have given *[Interruption.]* I have given *[Interruption.]* Be quiet. I have given Mr Murphy an extra minute. Now, let him finish.

Mr C Murphy: Thank you.

Mr Lyons: On a point of order, Mr Acting Speaker. I made a point of order asking for you to rule whether what Mr Murphy said about my party is appropriate.

Mr C Murphy: I have just repeated it, so there you go.

We sat for two full years, from February 2018, with the same deal on the table that the DUP came back to in January 2020. So, two years. You trot out the lie about the three years, but those two years were on you. The two years were on you. We sat waiting for you to come back to exactly the same deal when, eventually,

you got your MP team in line in order to get the deal done and over the line.

None of us wants to be in this position. I have better things to do than to argue with those people across the way. I would prefer that we were sitting around the table with those people, working on the issues and trying to deliver support for the people whom we represent, to get money into the health service and to fix the cost-of-living issues. That is what I would like to see. I do not want to hear chirruping from the would-be First Minister on the other side of the Chamber.

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

Mr C Murphy: That is what we need to do. That is what the people elected us to do.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I call Gary Middleton.

Ms Bunting: On a point of order, Mr Acting Speaker. At the end of that point of order, you afforded the Member an extra minute. That is not in procedures. I appreciate that your rulings are final. However, perhaps the officials could go and look at the established procedures, because that could well be a precedent that you have established and a danger.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I am sure that the Member will indulge the fact that I am the Acting Speaker today. I will call the next Member to speak, Gary Middleton.

Mr Middleton: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. The recall of the Assembly is nothing more than a distraction from the real issue and problem that is preventing these institutions from functioning, our communities moving forward and progress being made in Northern Ireland; that is the Northern Ireland protocol. Rather than trying to work towards solutions and to get a resolution, this is another attempt to ride roughshod over the concerns of the unionist community. We have seen attempt after attempt by Sinn Féin, joined by its useful helpers in Alliance and the SDLP, to sneer at, look down on and try to laugh off the genuine concerns of the unionist community.

Northern Ireland power-sharing works on the basis of parties working together. It works on the basis of consensus. It works on the basis of parties coming together and trying to move forward. Since the inception of the Northern Ireland protocol, not one unionist MLA or MP has supported it. Despite that fact —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: No, I will not.

Despite that fact, Sinn Féin has not done one single thing in the spirit of respect, and we see nothing but disrespect from the Members opposite. Not one time have they attempted, in the interests of respect, to deal with the concerns or the problem. In fact, when the DUP tried to bring the issue of the protocol to the Executive, when it was functioning, it was vetoed by Michelle O'Neill. It was vetoed from even getting on the agenda by Michelle O'Neill. That is the type of respect from the Members opposite that we are dealing with.

At the election, the DUP received a mandate to deal with the protocol and to ensure that we remove the Irish Sea border. I want to make the message very clear today — my colleagues have already done so — that we are resolute in holding to those commitments. The unionist community stands together. If you have not noticed it, please wake up and see that the unionist community is resolute about dealing with the Northern Ireland protocol, restoring fairness to these institutions and ensuring that we have fair access to the UK internal market.

Over the past two weeks, we have seen some progress being made by the UK Government, despite the shameful delegation from the United States, which came into Northern Ireland on a supposedly diplomatic visit and has left a damaging and disgraceful message to our community. Basically, it came here and sided with the republican agenda, and that is completely and utterly unacceptable. Of course, we have Declan Kearney coming out to say that the concerns are a myth; we have Mr O'Toole saying that he does not understand it; and we have Mr Tennyson saying that it is beyond him. I urge the parties opposite to please get to grips with the unionist electorate. They should understand that we will not be pushed to the side or ignored.

If Sinn Féin and other parties in the Chamber are serious about making devolution and these institutions work, they should look back to 2019 and the mistake that they made to move forward with a Northern Ireland protocol without the support of the unionist community. That was a mistake then, and it is a mistake now. I urge them to commit to making Northern Ireland work within the United Kingdom. This party is resolute on that, and it will not change its position.

1.00 pm

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: It is a bit of a Groundhog Day, but I welcome the opportunity for us to have the debate again and for the Northern Ireland public to hear the reasons — the very clear reasons — why we are not able to appoint a Speaker today or to progress with the appointment of Ministers. I very much wish that that was not the case. I very much desire for us to be back in government as quickly as possible. However, unfortunately, those decisions will be taken elsewhere.

In her speech, Mrs O'Neill talked much about the health service. That is the same Mrs O'Neill who was the Minister of Health and walked out of her job. Waiting lists rose in every quarter for the three years after the walk-away Health Minister left her job. They rose exponentially. When I left the post of Health Minister in September 2014, we had the lowest waiting lists of any time. I was criticised for the health waiting lists then, but they are now more than twice as long. Over twice the number of people are on those waiting lists now. Mrs O'Neill walked away from the Health Minister portfolio when the Bengoa report was to be implemented. The reason for the health service waiting lists is the action of the very person who criticises it now: Michelle O'Neill. Own it. Own the health waiting list crisis, Michelle O'Neill.

Mr O'Toole talked about us looking the electorate in the face. I looked the electorate in the face on Saturday, and they are very clear that they support the position that the DUP is taking. Over and over, we are getting the message, "Stay strong, do what you are doing and do not give in". I have been very clear about it: if you want the Belfast Agreement — I expect that most Members do — you cannot have the Northern Ireland protocol. The two things are incompatible.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: No, I will not give way. I have limited time. The two things are incompatible, and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement will not be brought together again while the Northern Ireland protocol is in its current form.

Mr O'Toole blandly dismissed it as an international agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom Government. Yes, it is, but what is its title? It is the Northern Ireland protocol. It is as if we, the people of Northern Ireland, should not have any say in it and should not be concerned about it. Of course, we are.

Mr Kearney heavily emphasised the cost of living. He also said that the protocol threatens no one. That is patently untrue. The protocol is damaging household after household and industry after industry, right across Northern Ireland. Let us be very clear: currently, the cost of the protocol is being soaked up by many businesses and by the Government, but those costs will not be soaked up by the Government or business for a long period. If we do not address the issues, every household will be impacted by the cost-of-living crisis from the Northern Ireland protocol.

Members should be standing with us in getting rid of the protocol, not backing it up. I note that we do not hear of the rigorous implementation of the protocol any more, but let us get a little bit further. It is good that Members have got off that space; that is of benefit. However, let us now get onto the space of what we can do to make things better for all the people of Northern Ireland.

The DUP is very much fighting this battle on its own.

The DUP is not getting the support of the other Executive parties to take on the issue. If it did, Northern Ireland could speak with one voice and say, "Do you know what? It is preposterous that we have all these companies saying that they will not supply Northern Ireland." It is impacting on people who can buy things cheaper online, for example, and it is impacting on their cost of living, but people want to ignore that.

I, as Minister of Agriculture, and my colleagues are doing our jobs. I remind Mr Tennyson of that. Indeed, his colleague Mr Blair —

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

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr Givan: On the cost of living, does he agree that the protocol prevents us from having the VAT reduction in Northern Ireland that the rest of United Kingdom will benefit from?
[Interruption.]

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

Mr Poots: I thank the Member. His point is quite correct.

Mr Tennyson's colleague Mr Blair seems to realise that we are working — he might want to have a chat with him — because he submitted a flood of questions last week. I welcome them, and they will be answered to Mr Blair as we get on with our job. I am at my work every day, and we are making many decisions. What are the other Ministers from the other parties doing? Perhaps we will see a bit more activity from them in the future. Mr Murphy said that Ms Hargey was negotiating with London about getting money distributed, so the 24-week period that we negotiated during previous talks is proving useful in that people still have government, with Ministers —

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

Mr Poots: — engaging. People need to realise and recognise that.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker, for stepping in today. Unfortunately, you have had to preside over what has been an entirely shameful episode. Many people at home will be watching this with even more frustration than they had four weeks ago.

The message does not seem to have hit anywhere near the doors of the DUP Members on the opposite Benches. I am in my constituency office every day, and I listen to constituents every single day *[Interruption.]* You can hit the table all you like, but there seems to be a lapse in reality on the Benches of the DUP. The people who are on the phone to me and, I am sure, other Members across the House are not saying, "My children can starve today, so long as you sort the protocol"; "I can't put clothes on my children's back, but it's OK — they'll do without. Sort the protocol"; or, "My mother is lying in a hospital bed dying, but it's OK. Sort the protocol". Wake up, and come back to earth. This is totally and utterly ridiculous messing about. This, today, is not about real life. It is a distraction move by the DUP. A distraction move so that it does not have to go into office. It is pointing the finger at everyone else on these Benches.

Today is about nominating a Speaker to enable the Assembly to function to some degree, even if it is in shadow form. That would not be perfect, but it would ensure that we can resolve the problems that people are facing in their homes, in their jobs and in schools and hospitals, including the cost-of-living crisis, addiction services and mental health services. Those are real-life problems. I do not know who is ringing you, but I can tell you one thing: they

are not ringing the majority of Members of the House, saying, "It doesn't matter about everything else. Prioritise the protocol". Using that as an excuse is utter nonsense.

This place was built on compromise and agreement. Holding these institutions down will not resolve anything for any of our constituents — not one. The reality is that the DUP is ashamed of its involvement in propping up Theresa May's Government. It is ashamed that it polished the big red bus that much that it reversed over the top of it. The reality is that you broke it, so you own it. You have taken no responsibility for the fact that the Brexit protocol is here because of a reckless Brexit that your party championed, day and night. Where has it got our people? Here is a dose of reality for you: people are starving, people cannot feed their children and people cannot heat their homes.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will, briefly, in a wee moment.

People cannot even afford to travel to their jobs because of the price of fuel.

People cannot visit their loved ones in hospital because of the ongoing rules preventing them from going there in great numbers. There is a reality here, folks.

People have elected us all to resolve those problems, and, regardless of whether the DUP accepts it, no one gave Members over there a mandate to fold their arms and stamp their feet. That is the reality. I would love to meet one constituent who says, "Fair play to youse, hey. My children will have no food tonight, but, as long as you sort the protocol, boys, even if that takes you a year". I am not being flippant, but that is what it looks like from this side of the House. People are totally and utterly sick of it, and they are watching you today from home standing up there and distracting, hardly even mentioning, might I add, the cost-of-living crisis but talking about the protocol, the protocol — the protocol that is here because you championed Brexit. That is the reality. Take some ownership *[Interruption.]*

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): The Member has the Floor.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. Take some ownership of the decisions that you have taken and the positions that you have adopted. You seem to think that everyone else has forgotten because you repeat the same lie

over and over again. What will you do tomorrow? How long will this go on? How many people will die? How many families —

Mr Allister: *[Interruption.]*

Mr McCrossan: I am listening to the DUP leader — the real DUP leader, Mr Allister — in the corner shouting at me. The real reason that you are in this position is that you are so fearful of that man and the TUV that you will not put people first. That is the reality.

Listen, folks, to a dose of reality. Families are struggling. People cannot travel to their work, and people are in hospitals, sick and dying.

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

Mr McCrossan: I will, Mr Acting Speaker.

You need to get real here. You are not elected to sit over there and do nothing. You are elected to resolve problems and deliver, so get back and do your work.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: First, I congratulate the Members who made their maiden speeches today. Well done to all those who contributed.

I am utterly dismayed by the tone and nature of the debate. Of course we do not all agree; we all know that. I have been involved in the process since 2007, and I have worked with many Members across the House. The one thing that we all know is that, in order to make the process work, we need to understand one another, to show some respect and to work on solutions together. I am dismayed to hear the jeering and sneering from others about the concerns of unionists. I am deeply dismayed to hear the genuine issues of unionism being described as nonsense, a tactic or some sort of a stunt. *[Interruption.]* I am dismayed, frankly, to hear from the Benches across not just the demeaning, disregarding and dismissing of the deep and genuine concerns of unionism that we have heard for the past two years but now insults.

I could easily say to any of the Members on the Benches across, "When was the last time that you spoke to people who were in the IRA?". I could easily call out the behaviour of the past number of years. In the five years of the previous mandate, Sinn Féin brought down and kept down the institutions for three years. You have said today that it is OK when you do it and that it is OK when it is an issue that is important to Sinn Féin but that, when it is an issue that is

of concern to unionism, "Forget all about it. Get in there. You are talking nonsense". We are utterly dismissed.

Mr Butler: On a point of order, Mr Acting Speaker. I cannot hear what is being said by any of the Members. There is too much chuntering going on from the left and the right at times. Can you ask all Members to show a bit of decorum in the Chamber? The people of Northern Ireland are being let down on many fronts, and some of the behaviour and chuntering is unacceptable.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): Members, I think that everybody who wanted to speak has had an opportunity to do so in proper order. Please respect that and give Members the courtesy of being heard. Please exercise a little courtesy to other Members.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Yes.

Mr Poots: Does the Member recognise that, when Mr Murphy was throwing his allegations about, the DUP is subject only to the decisions of the party officer team and the party executive team, unlike Sinn Féin, which seems to rely on the IRA army council?

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): The Member will have an extra minute.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for that contribution.

The reality is that we all have issues that matter deeply to us and to the communities out there, and we must do our best to get those issues resolved.

I appeal to everyone around the Chamber by saying that the only way that has ever worked in Northern Ireland is through us speaking to one another and trying to get solutions together. That has not happened for over two years.

1.15 pm

When the protocol was announced in late 2019, there was a full year before it came in on 1 January 2021. In that year, we highlighted the many problems and concerns that we had. We went to the British Government and to Brussels, but, rather than getting the compromises that

we needed, parties across the Chamber ran to Dublin and Brussels and asked them not to give an inch, not to compromise and to implement rigorously the protocol as it stood.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I do not have time, unfortunately.

When the protocol came into effect on 1 January 2021, the problems unfortunately emerged. We have seen some solutions and some tinkering with those issues, but what we need now is a genuine resolution.

The Member opposite asked, "What is it that the DUP stands for?". The DUP believes in Northern Ireland and wants Northern Ireland to work. It cannot work if there is a deep fracture, and that fracture is caused by the Northern Ireland protocol. We are all here today and can continue our process only if the Assembly and the institutions are based on the concept of consent. Unionism is no longer consenting to be part of a process that demeans, disregards, dismisses and insults its genuine concerns. This is not just a unionist issue. Unless we get the protocol resolved, it will create huge amounts of paperwork and cause costs to be passed on to the ordinary people of Northern Ireland at a time of a cost-of-living crisis. This is bad, and we need to get it resolved.

I appeal to all of you to stop the shouting across the Chamber, the jeering and the insults. Get around a table and find solutions. The sooner the issue is resolved, the sooner the Northern Ireland Executive can get back and this place can function properly. It is in all of our hands.

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.

Ayes 27; Noes 26.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Beattie, Mr Butler, Mr Elliott, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, 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 Nicholl, Dr O'Lynn, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr Stewart.

NOES

UNIONIST:

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr K Buchanan and Ms Forsythe.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>[50.9%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>[25.7%]</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).

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

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

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 53; 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 Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney,

Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Ms Sheerin.

UNIONIST:

Ms Sugden.

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 Nicholl, Dr O'Lynn, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McGrath and Ms McLaughlin.

NOES

UNIONIST:

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr K Buchanan and Ms Forsythe.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>79</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>[67.1%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>[3.7%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

Question accordingly negated (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 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 will remain in office until a successor is elected. I therefore 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.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Acting Speaker. Mr McNulty opened the sitting with a rather dodgy point of order on sport, and I want to do the same to close. Every Member in the House today has signed a round-robin open letter to the International Gymnastics Federation deploring the decision to bar three of our sportspeople from competing in the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham and asking it to reverse that decision. We have not agreed on everything in this sitting of the Assembly, but every Member has stood firm on that point. I wish to thank them for their solidarity.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Chambers): I thank Mr Nesbitt for that point of order. On a *[Interruption.] [Laughter.]* I can assure Members that I did not touch any buttons. *[Laughter.]* On a personal level, I apologise for any errors that I may have made during the proceedings today. I am available for any future bookings, however, as and when required.

Adjourned at 1.54 pm.