

The Speaker



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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TO ALL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

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Dear Member,

LETTER OF THANKS AND APPRECIATION

When the late Lord Bannside first approached me about standing for the position of Speaker, he could not understand my reluctance and in his characteristic style told me "sure it's only a matter of chairing a few meetings, what's the problem?" As both he and I knew, the role was a lot more challenging than that. In that context, my desire was always to use my final opportunity in the Chamber to express my thanks to those who helped me to perform the role over the last seven years. I again regret and apologise that I am prevented from paying proper courtesy to the House but by writing to all Members and having this letter placed in the Assembly Library and made public I hope my sentiments are placed on the record.

Firstly, I want to thank all the people of Foyle for having elected me since 1998 without whom I would not have been in a position to be Speaker. I will always regard it as the best constituency in Northern Ireland. The people of Londonderry have a unique character and my experience there has served me well. I am immensely proud to call that city home and look forward to representing it in the future in a different capacity.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all of the staff in Parliament Buildings. Working with them and the banter as I passed through the corridors was one of the pleasures of the job. Members of the Assembly, all of us, sign up for the criticism which comes with standing for office. However, media coverage often overlooks the huge amount of work behind the scenes which makes the Assembly operate every week and I know that this, and the political climate, do not always make Stormont an easy place to work. I could not have served as Speaker without the efforts and support of so many staff and I could not retire without expressing my gratitude to them.

The Assembly Commission is tasked with major strategic, corporate and practical decisions which are not made any easier when they become intertwined with party politics. Alongside many Members serving on the Commission over the last seven years, we have faced many difficult issues and, even through occasional differences of opinion, I want to thank them for their cooperation, support and commitment. We have made significant changes in many areas but in others we have not achieved as much progress as I would like. The

Commission is at its best when Members work together to seek consensus on the best way forward and I encourage my colleagues in the Commission to use that approach for the challenges in the future.

As Speaker, and Chair of the Business Committee, the relationship with the party whips is vital and I thank them for their constructive engagement. When I first took office, meetings of the Business Committee were regularly divisive but through much effort we reached the understanding that we should concentrate on agreeing the logistics for the Order Paper and leave the party political debate for the Chamber. In my view, the role of the Whips is much underappreciated and is key to the conduct of business in the Chamber.

I must make special mention of the support I have been given by the Principal Deputy Speakers and Deputy Speakers throughout my time in office, both Mitchel McLaughlin, John Dallat and Roy Beggs now and Francie Molloy and the late David McClarty before them. Every Monday and Tuesday morning when we would meet to prepare for the day's plenary business, we discussed it constructively in good humour and, whatever the political acrimony outside, it would never enter our discussions. We were supportive of each other whether it was our own parties or others testing us in the Chamber and that is the way it should be. When you are occupying the Chair, there is always someone who knows better but frequently without understanding the full picture and what the Chair can do. I would urge the House to remember that in supporting the Principal Deputy Speaker and Deputy Speakers in future.

Finally, I want to thank all Members, including Party Leaders for their support since 2007 and I am specifically very grateful for my many friendships across the House. I fully appreciate that Members will not have agreed with every ruling I have made. My natural inclination is always to try and resolve things amicably where possible but I quickly learnt that as Speaker that would not always be possible. You often have to make judgements to uphold the procedures and interests of the whole House when they conflict with the party political agendas of Members. That can make the position of Speaker a lonely one but all I could do was to take my decisions for the right reasons with the best of intentions. Once the House has elected my successor, I hope the whole House will understand that and support them to uphold the impartiality and authority of the Office of Speaker.

One of my priorities as Speaker was to give more access to Parliament Buildings and Assembly business to the people we represent to give them the information to inform their own opinions and engage with their elected representatives. Personally, it has been the range of initiatives we have undertaken to open Parliament Buildings up and the thousands of people I have met here which have meant the most to me. We are in an age when most parliamentary institutions are struggling to connect with wider society and I therefore urge the Assembly, even in tough economic times, to continue to strive for creative ways to engage with those who the Assembly is here to serve.

When I was first elected Speaker in 2007, my focus was to be careful to ensure that the Chair managed the political temperature in the Chamber without making it worse. While I have not convinced all Members of my belief that it is possible to express our political differences in a good tempered, courteous and respectful way, I was very proud to be part of the Assembly completing its first term of a generation and to have presided over many debates on the floor which would have been unimaginable years before. During my time in office there have been many highs and lows but I do regret that I now leave office at a time when the Assembly is not performing as it could. Particularly, despite being involved in a

number of events and initiatives to put it on the agenda, I am disappointed that the political climate has not allowed a parliamentary culture to develop which is key to the Assembly evolving as a legislature. However, within the specific construct of the institutions at Stormont, that is not something any Speaker can drive without the support of Members.

I know that Members seldom get the credit they deserve for the work they do on the ground, but I have seen first hand how much meeting the needs and interests of constituents matters to all of you. There is no doubt in my mind that seeing the Assembly work effectively is a key part of delivering for the people who sent us here. However, it is the responsibility of every Member, both individually and collectively, to find a way to do that. It has been a great honour to serve the Northern Ireland Assembly as Speaker. I wish it, my successor, and all of you nothing but the warmest wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely,



William Hay MLA