

## An Ceann Comhairle

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## The Speaker

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**To: All Assembly Members**

**9 December 2022**

Dear Member

### **Assembly Sitting Wednesday 7 December 2022**

A number of issues arose at the Assembly sitting on Wednesday 7 December 2022. In the absence of having the opportunity in the Assembly Chamber, I am writing to all Members to deal with these matters.

Before I do so, I want to thank Alan Chambers MLA and Stewart Dickson MLA for overseeing the attempts there have been to elect a new Speaker thus far as Acting Speaker. It has only been necessary for them to perform, what is supposed to be a very limited and infrequently used role, as a result of the Assembly's ongoing failure to elect a Speaker. The Acting Speaker only has responsibility for that item of business. While a Speaker elected by the Assembly has the opportunity to deal with the full breadth of issues over time, including the detail of the Assembly's standards of debate, the same cannot be expected of the Acting Speaker.

### **Remarks Made by Doug Beattie MLA**

In the Chamber, and subsequently, a number of Members have requested a ruling on comments made by Doug Beattie MLA. The entitlement of Members to freedom of expression, including to make points forcefully in a way which others might disagree with, is important to enable full and frank debate on important issues. However, Members have to use that privilege within the standards of debate expected in the Assembly, and they still have a responsibility to exercise care in the language they use.

While Standing Order 65 provides for the Speaker to deal with contributions in the Assembly Chamber, including unparliamentary language, the detail of the expected standards of debate have been defined and developed by various Speakers' Rulings over the years. These rulings set out that the concept of unparliamentary language is not used in the Assembly in the sense of purely considering words in themselves. It is the tone and context of which the Speaker must take account.

The rulings also set out that the general standards of debate expected in the Assembly Chamber are courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect. Mr Beattie's remarks clearly fell well short of those standards. Having had to address similar issues in the Assembly on a previous occasion, it is disappointing that a Party Leader, who should be expected to know better, made remarks of this nature in the Chamber.

In the heat of politics, any of us can sometimes say things which we later regret. On those occasions, it is important to reflect. I therefore acknowledge that Mr Beattie made an apology after the first Point of Order drew attention to his remarks. If the Assembly was currently conducting normal business, I would have considered imposing a sanction on Mr Beattie. Given the circumstances in which we currently find ourselves, as well as his apology, I do not propose to take any further action in relation to Mr Beattie.

However, the Assembly should demonstrate leadership and its debates should seek to set an example, and a higher standard, to the wider community. Much has been done to seek to increase the representation of women in the Assembly in recent years. While progress has been made, we still have much further to go.

Therefore, I think it is important that I set out clearly that remarks which rely on demeaning language or outdated phrases and stereotypes, in relation to gender or any other characteristic, are not appropriate and are contrary to the standards which should be set in the Assembly Chamber.

### **Interventions**

After Robbie Butler MLA sought to make an intervention, Aisling Reilly MLA asked whether he would be making it in Irish before declining the intervention. Members have the right to decide whether they accept an intervention or not, but Standing Orders also give Members the right to speak in the language of their choice.

Members cannot be discriminated against on the basis of the language they choose to speak. It is not in order for Members to ask which language will be used when considering whether or not to accept an intervention.

### **Challenges to the Chair**

The nature and tone of some of the interactions with the Acting Speaker at Wednesday's sitting, in particular by Sorcha Eastwood MLA, were such that if they did not constitute a challenge to the Chair, they were perilously close to doing so. This matter has been taken seriously by every Speaker, including me, as the authority of the Chair is important to maintaining order and the smooth operation of Assembly business. Therefore, Members should note that our procedures and conventions are clear that it is not in order to challenge the authority of the Chair.

### **The General Tenor of Debate**

The political environment we are in has, understandably but very regrettably, had an influence on the tone of recent debates. However, the nature of Wednesday's debate was at times verging on dis-orderly. In addition to those I have already outlined, issues included:

- Members continually speaking from a sedentary position and heckling other contributions
- Members refusing to speak through the Chair
- Spurious Points of Order
- A number of bad tempered exchanges
- Members going well beyond the scope of the debate - the election of a Speaker

I am conscious that this is a new Assembly with a number of Members elected for the first time. I am attaching correspondence which I issued to all Members of the then Assembly in April 2021. That letter attempts to translate the Assembly's standards into 10 practical principles of debate to guide Members. I would encourage Members to take account of that guidance before any future sitting.

I appreciate that there are deep frustrations and tensions at the current time. However, I would ask all Members to reflect on whether they think Wednesday's proceedings would have served to only further diminish public confidence in the Assembly.

I would ask all Members to take account of the points in this letter for future sittings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alex Maskey". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**ALEX MASKEY**  
**SPEAKER**