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The Speaker

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To: All Assembly Members

2 February 2024

Dear Member,

Tomorrow, I will step down as the Speaker and finally bring to an end my long goodbye. As Senator George Mitchell said at the end of the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, “I have that bittersweet feeling in life. I am dying to leave, but I hate to go.”

The office of Speaker, with the requirement to impartially represent all Members of the Assembly, is a very specific and unique role in our political system. However, it has been a tremendous honour to hold it.

In January 2020, the Assembly got back to business quickly, only for us to face the Covid pandemic, a sobering time of loss across our community. Against that difficult backdrop, and in a shortened mandate, the Assembly still managed to process a significant amount of legislation. The public focus on many of those bills underlined to me that, despite understandable public frustration, there is a great public desire to see the Assembly deal with local priorities.

I have also been delighted as Speaker to preside over the Youth Assembly as well as parliaments for women, pensioners and people with disabilities. It is vital that the Assembly connects with every part of our community.

I did not anticipate in May 2022 that I would still be exercising the duties of the Speaker for almost another two years. While that had its frustrations, I consider myself privileged to have been able to represent the Assembly for key occasions including the passing of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022, the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in April 2023 and the visit of the US senior business delegation in October 2023.

When I first became Speaker, I recognised that the Assembly was on probation and had to prove itself to an expectant public. The Assembly which begins its business tomorrow faces the same circumstances, arguably even more so. Undoubtedly, a huge in-tray awaits the Assembly and new Executive.

There will be no shortage of advice and opinion offered to Members and Ministers. Forgive my indulgence for wanting to add two brief reflections of my own.

Firstly, parties will clearly continue discussion of high-level reforms of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. However, the potential for improving how the Assembly does its day to day business should not be overlooked. The pauses in the life of the Assembly over the last twenty-five years have impacted on the evolution of our parliamentary culture.

There are a range of areas, from introducing electronic voting to developing how the Assembly scrutinises legislation, which are worthy of the Assembly's consideration.

Secondly, through the representational functions of the Speaker, I have been pleased to welcome scores of Ministers, parliamentary delegations, diplomats and other international visitors to Parliament Buildings. In all of those discussions, it is abundantly clear to me that there is tremendous goodwill on offer to us. The Assembly, and not just the Executive, has a role in seeking to take strategic advantage of those contacts to deliver benefits for our economy and society.

Political life can be challenging and we all rely on the support of others. I want to acknowledge the work of Assembly staff. Most people outside of Parliament Buildings do not appreciate the range of work undertaken by some of the most professional and committed people I have had the pleasure to work alongside.

I want to thank all of the MLAs I have served alongside as a Member, Chief Whip, member of the Policing Board, Committee Chair, member of the Assembly Commission and Speaker. While we have had our differences at times, I only wish those outside could see more of the constructive working relationships, indeed friendships, that exist across the floor of the Assembly.

I am grateful to all of my party colleagues. They have given me great comradeship through the highs and lows of what have undoubtedly been historic decades and I cannot overestimate what that has meant to me.

Of course, most of all, I want to thank those closest to me, my wife Liz, our sons and their families. Getting involved in politics, has an impact on your whole family but the love and support given to me has been unlimited and unwavering.

The Assembly I entered in 1998 is worlds away from the Assembly of today. The Assembly that will meet tomorrow is much more reflective of the diversity of our society. The corridors of Parliament Buildings depict figures and events which are representative of our whole community. While debates in the Chamber may still see the strong expression of views, they are night and day compared to some of the conduct of Assembly business in the early days.

After over 40 years in public office, when the Acting Speaker rings the division bell, tomorrow, I will leave the ring. I am very pleased that one of my last official acts is to make the arrangements for the election of my successor as Speaker and the appointment of a new Executive tomorrow. There are many challenges but there is also great potential for the future.

I wish you all the very best for the important work you have ahead of you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex Maskey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

ALEX MASKEY
SPEAKER