

09/09/2020

Stewart,

Thank you for email and letter from Committee Chair, Linda Dillon MLA. I appreciate you sought views to be returned in June 2020, however, I am only taking sight of this letter. I understand if the chairperson cannot be accept my views at this stage.

I would only support a form of proxy voting in future Standing Orders if an equal opportunity can be sought to vote in absentia for independent members without having to proxy my vote to another Member. I stand and I am elected as an independent Member so that I am not politically associated with another party or elected representative. I choose independence despite its disadvantages, including access to resources and less speaking opportunities. My independence is very important to me and I should not be expected to affiliate with another Member to enable a proxy vote. If a proxy vote is not available to me, therefore, I am disadvantaged.

Further, I take exception that I must negotiate my seat and therefore my speaking opportunities with other parties and independent members during sittings of the NI Assembly to ensure social distancing as a response related to COVID-19. Of course, allocation of seats can be facilitated within parties, but it should not be expected of independent members who have no party political affiliation. In the past, smaller parties and independent members requested an opportunity to form an Assembly Group to coordinate improved speaking rights – this was denied - Yet it is now expected we must coordinate for other reasons including seating arrangements without the benefits of a formal Assembly Group. I would appreciate if the committee would review this current policy too. I suggest meeting with the Chairperson to discuss further.

Kind regards,

Claire Sugden

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