

To: All Members

17 June 2025

Dear Member,

Standards of Debate in the Assembly

On a number of occasions, I have indicated to Members that I intended to return to the Assembly's standards of debate.

Our standards of debate are often referred to in the context of the first element – the standard of remarks made about other Members. However, there has been a decreased focus on the second element - the concept of debate. If the Assembly is to be serious about its scrutiny role, having a strong culture of parliamentary debate is vital.

Our existing standards of debate of good temper, courtesy, moderation and respect towards other Members would be expected in any legislature. They simply require Members to demonstrate good manners and focus on the arguments being made, rather than on the person making them.

In April 2023, I reminded Members that these standards operate alongside the legal right to freedom of expression, which means that Members may sometimes choose to express their views forcefully, and in terms that others would not use themselves. Members know that my general approach is that regardless of my own opinion on the views expressed by a Member, it is my role to protect their right to say it.

Requiring Members to exercise care in their language and have civility in our exchanges is not intended to, and should not, prevent passionate and robust debate. While there has to be some level of procedure to ensure our business runs smoothly, effective Members will be able to find ways to make the points they want to make in the appropriate way, at the appropriate time.

In my time in the Assembly since 1998, I have been privileged to witness political giants, who passionately articulated their own case, engaging in debate. However, they also realised that they had to give as good as they could take.

The freedom to challenge and to express different views in debate are core to this Assembly's core functions of exercising scrutiny, holding Ministers to account and representing our constituents. Proper debate is about both having the opportunity to state your own views and listening, responding to and challenging the views of others. Some Members increasingly concentrate only on stating their own opinions.

Technology has created a temptation for Members to deliver a pre-scripted text in the Chamber, shortly after which they leave to issue a clip of their speech on social media. If

debate was only about a series of Members reading out pre-scripted thoughts on an issue, without interaction, there would be no need for an Assembly Chamber – we could do it by email.

I am also concerned about the tendency to raise Points of Order with the Chair about the normal cut and thrust of debate, rather than challenge those points themselves.

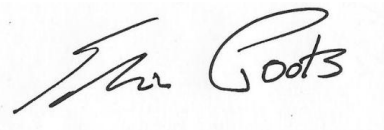
In April 2021, my predecessor circulated “Ten Practical Principles of Debate” to set out what our standards of debate mean in practice for Members. I am today expanding those principles to ensure they focus not only on interactions between Members, but also on having a strong culture of debate and challenge.

I have sought to capture a range of our wider procedures and conventions related to debate, including being present to hear the arguments of others, taking interventions, being able to respond to other points and challenging those who make assertions and points you may disagree with.

When the Assembly has responsibility for making legislation which impacts on people’s lives, it is vital that Members are able to probe all the arguments before the Assembly takes a decision. It is my role to encourage the conditions for Members to be able to exercise effective scrutiny and accountability in the Chamber.

I therefore ask all Members to take the time to reflect on the principles I have set out in the attachment and to adhere to them in debate.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mr Poots', written in a cursive style.

EDWIN POOTS MLA
SPEAKER