

## An Ceann Comhairle

Seomra 39  
Foirgnimh na Parlaiminte  
Baile Lios na Scáth  
Cnoc an Anfa  
Béal Feirste, BT4 3XX

Guthán: +44 (0) 28 9052 1130  
r-phost: [speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk)



## The Speaker

Room 39  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: +44 (0) 28 9052 1130  
email: [speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk)

**To: All Assembly Members**

**9 January 2023**

Dear Member

### **Restoring the Assembly in 2023**

We return from the Christmas recess today after another turbulent year for the Assembly. As we approach another deadline for the formation of an Executive, it remains the case that I will make arrangements for the Assembly to meet to elect my successor, and appoint Ministers, as soon as it is clear that this can be achieved.

It is not for me to comment on the issues behind the current impasse. Members come to the Assembly with their own views and the right to express those has to be respected. However, no-one should be surprised that the Speaker will always want to see the Assembly fully functioning at the earliest opportunity. It is important that the Assembly should be able to exercise all the powers devolved to it, particularly at a time when the pressures on our community are increasing by the day.

Given the responsibilities of my office to uphold the scrutiny role of the Assembly, it is also plainly unsatisfactory that at a time when we have an Assembly and MLAs, we have major decisions being taken, whether by senior officials in Belfast or the Westminster government, without the Assembly's normal accountability mechanisms being able to operate. Those are matters which I will continue to highlight.

Much has rightly been made of the fact that this year is the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. However you wish to refer to it, it has been noticeable in recent Assembly debates that Members from all sides of the Chamber have been calling to have the Agreement upheld.

It will also be 25 years since this Assembly first sat in July 1998. While I hope I will no longer be in office at that point, it is important that these anniversaries should be marked at Parliament Buildings and I will be liaising with officials and the Assembly Commission to have planning in place to ensure that happens.

The Agreement and the creation of the Assembly were historic in securing peace and a new political settlement, but it was only the start of the work. Senator George Mitchell underlined at the time that it was important to maintain the momentum for all that had to be delivered.

Despite the numerous subsequent negotiations there have been to focus on outstanding issues, undoubtedly the momentum has been disrupted throughout the past 25 years. It

also cannot be denied that the reputation of the Assembly has not matched the high hopes that existed for it in 1998. Since the return of the Assembly in January 2020, I made clear on a number of occasions that the Assembly remained on probation and had much to do to build public confidence. Some three years on, that will now be an even bigger task.

However, regardless of past disappointments, it remains imperative that we return to having a functioning Assembly. The Assembly needs to be the heartbeat of our politics. It is the place where people should be able to see the issues affecting them being raised and dealt with. It is the place where decision makers, particularly the Executive, should be held to account. It is the place which should embody key principles of the Agreement, including being inclusive of all shades of political opinion.

As the heartbeat, and one of the centrepieces of the Agreement, we also have to acknowledge that when the Assembly is not operating it has a negative impact on the other key institutions and our whole body politic.

I firmly retain the belief that the Assembly can make a significant difference to the challenges facing the community. Even though they may often have lost patience with us, I also believe that a large section of the public want to see that too.

Towards the end of the last Assembly, in a shortened mandate which was further pressurised by the pandemic, all parties made great efforts to accommodate as much legislation as possible. The news was often dominated by the bills on bread and butter issues being debated that day. I was taken aback by how often people would comment to me on what they had seen in relation to particular legislation and how engaged they were with it.

We have also recognised that the legislative and scrutiny process can improve. The ups and downs of the Assembly throughout the last 25 years have had an impact on its evolution as a legislature. In particular, instability has slowed the development of a parliamentary culture amongst parties, MLAs, committees, Ministers and departments in the same way as would be seen in other elected chambers.

From the international diplomats, dignitaries and delegations that I continue to welcome to the Assembly every week, it is also clear to me that there is still much international goodwill waiting for the opportunity to support us. That is another area in which the Assembly could be doing more as a strategic priority.

Clearly, this Assembly, has its own specific issues arising from the divisions in our society and that is why unique governance arrangements were required. Elements underpinning the Agreement, particularly reconciliation, still urgently require our attention if we do not wish to see those divisions increase.

Many of the issues in the Assembly's in-tray are ones which political institutions across these islands and wider are struggling to deal with. Indeed, places without our history have had their own share of political dysfunction over the last year.

So, we should not underestimate the difficulties there are in restoring the Assembly, or the extreme challenges that await parties when Ministers are appointed. There are no easy answers or solutions but we must be mindful that those political realities do not temper the frustration there is amongst the public.

However, as we focus on seeking to see the Assembly restored in 2023, I would ask that we set our sights higher than just having parties taking up posts because they are entitled, or expected, to do so.

Given the scale of the challenges ahead, we need every party to uphold the spirit, as well as the letter of the Agreement, being determined to make the institutions work collectively, to build agreement, beyond just individual party views, to protect the interests of every part of our community.

I believe that we all want to see issues resolved to have the Assembly restored and I would again encourage that to happen as soon as possible in this new year.

Yours sincerely,

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

**ALEX MASKEY**  
**SPEAKER**