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The Speaker

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To: All Assembly Members

19 April 2021

Dear Member,

STANDARDS OF DEBATE

Since the Assembly returned in January 2020, the vast majority of debates in the Assembly have been constructive, even when robust, and there have been relatively few significant issues for the Chair to deal with. Our debates are certainly vastly different in nature from those in the early days of the Assembly in 1998.

In recent weeks, the tone of debate has been concerning at times and a number of matters have been raised with me. That is likely to be a symptom of wider political tensions. However, in the past week, there has also been very positive recognition that what happens in the Assembly Chamber can also set a positive tone for the wider community. As Speaker, I would much rather see the Assembly continue in that mode with a minimal need for the Chair to intervene.

The Assembly has a range of rulings and conventions in relation to the expected standards of debate. However, the three year gap between Assembly sittings and the changeover in Assembly membership may have diminished the awareness of those standards. As the Assembly resumes full business this week, it is timely to provide Members with a brief reminder.

On 24 November 2009, Speaker Hay ruled that rather than focusing his judgements on the basis of particular words or phrases, he intended to judge the nature and context of Members' remarks against the standards of courtesy, good temper and moderation. He said then that:

"I have acknowledged that, at times, Members will wish to express their views forcefully, and to engage in robust debate. That is acceptable. Let me make it absolutely clear that what is not acceptable, is where the tone or nature of remarks becomes so ill-tempered or bad mannered that they are closer to discourtesy and disorder, than to debate."

Speaker Hay developed these standards during his time. Speaker McLaughlin continued to build upon them by adding the additional element of respect. On 18 May 2015, Speaker McLaughlin said:

“My focus will be on Members showing one another respect in this Chamber, creating a space that allows Members to express themselves, probe others and hear answers without it degenerating into schoolyard name-calling and grubby attacks on personal integrity.”

These rulings still remain relevant and I intend to continue with them. However, a number of Members have sometimes queried what these standards mean in practice. I have therefore worked with officials to develop the attached ten practical principles of debate. While not an exhaustive list, these points are fully consistent with the procedures, conventions and guidance which already exist and are an attempt to provide some helpful guidance for Members when they are preparing their remarks.

This is an Assembly of diverse political views. All Members have to accept that there will often be things said that they may disagree with, sometimes in different terminology from that they would use themselves. That is a characteristic of debate. However, from my own years participating on the floor of the Chamber, I know that sometimes in the heat of politics any of us can say things which would have been better said in a different way or not said at all.

In the Assembly Chamber, Members are not just speaking to their own political base but to a wider audience of people from other parties and different political perspectives, as well as the wider community. Members may well want to make the same core points in the Chamber as they would elsewhere, but it is worth considering whether more can be achieved if those points are expressed in a way that is more appropriate to the public platform of this Assembly.

I would also suggest that if Members have any doubt as to whether the remarks they are planning to make are in keeping with courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect, that probably provides sufficient answer in itself. At a time when, fractures and tensions undoubtedly exist in the community, Members on every side of the Assembly need to be mindful that heated language, and a confrontational and adversarial tone in debate is only likely to exacerbate the situation rather than help the Assembly perform its role of finding resolutions to difficult issues.

I will continue to consider the specific tone and context of each issue raised with me against the standards of courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect. These standards do not prevent debate from being as robust, lively and challenging as effective and interesting debate should be and if Members are guided by the ten practical principles, the interventions required from the Chair should be few and far between. I therefore hope Members find them helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alex Maskey". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned below the text "Yours sincerely,".

ALEX MASKEY MLA



Ten Practical Principles for Debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly

1. You will have the opportunity to express in debate your views and those of your constituents, and have them heard, in a way that demonstrates courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect.
2. Debate is a two-way process and you should listen to, reflect upon and respond to the views of other Members.
3. In an Assembly of diverse political views, you should accept that points will be made by other Members that you will not agree with, sometimes in terms that you would not use yourself.
4. Take care to ensure your own contribution is well founded and accurate and give thought to your own language. Be mindful that you can express your political differences in robust debate without using words or phrases that are likely to be provocative or offensive to other Members.
5. Be aware that the tone and temper of remarks can be as impactful as the words used and can be as likely to lead to a downward spiral in the nature of a debate.
6. If someone draws your attention to the fact that they have found something you said offensive or distasteful, be prepared to consider reflecting upon, and responding to, that perspective, even if at a later point.
7. It is entirely appropriate to debate, challenge and probe the views and positions expressed by others but you should avoid personal remarks, attacks or insults on other Members. That is one of the reasons why remarks are made through the Chair.
8. Stay within the scope of the debate you are participating in. Issues often arise when Members are tempted into discussing issues which are for another day.
9. Contributions are not expected to be heard in complete silence but it is discourteous, disrespectful and disorderly, to heckle or shout down another Member or to have loud conversations while another Member is speaking.
10. Using interventions or your own contribution are the primary ways of responding to, or taking issue with, a point another Member has made. This is not the purpose of Points of Order and Points of Order should not be abused in this way.