

To: All Assembly Members

28 January 2025

Dear Member

Parliamentary Culture at the Assembly

At the start of business today, I returned to my comments last week in relation to the courtesies and conventions which apply in the Assembly Chamber. I am writing to all Members to ensure that all Members are able to note my remarks today.

The issue of the dress code for the Assembly Chamber received more attention than I might have expected last week. It is worth reminding Members that the current dress code was determined by Speaker McLaughlin in May 2016 who ruled as follows:

“While there is no exact dress code, it is entirely appropriate that Members should dress in a way which demonstrates respect for the House and the job we are here to do on behalf of the people the Assembly represents. That should be smart and professional business attire. However, I am content that a tie is not an essential requirement.”

Speaker Newton and Speaker Maskey upheld this ruling and I am therefore doing likewise as the points behind it remain important.

While I understand that individually these matters may appear trivial to some, together they underline some significant principles. Sittings of the Assembly are not just another engagement in Members’ diaries and this is not just another meeting room. At any one time there are only 90 people who have the immense privilege of participating in this Chamber and they are given that privilege by the people.

As an institution, this Assembly is the prime source of authority for devolved matters. With the privilege given to us to be here, comes the responsibility to exercise that authority by representing our constituents, holding Ministers to account and taking decisions to change policy, and the law, to address the issues impacting our whole community.

These are not casual matters. They require a level of formality to ensure that these responsibilities are discharged properly and with fairness to all Members. Therefore, issues like how we present ourselves and avoiding clutter in the Chamber are purely small symbols of protecting the dignity of the Chamber. Respecting our courtesies and procedures is about respecting the serious business we have to do and respecting the people who put us here to do it.

I also remind Members that next week will mark the first anniversary of the return of this Assembly which the vast majority of Members of this Assembly wanted to see. The development and maintenance of the parliamentary culture around how we do our business

has undoubtedly been affected by the fact that the Assembly has not been operating consistently over the past 27 years.

However, upholding a parliamentary culture around the serious business we have to do, has a major part to play in restoring and increasing confidence in the Assembly.

As Speaker, I cannot control the business that Ministers and Members bring forward, or the level of scrutiny which Members want to apply. However, it is my role, and that of officials, to seek to create the conditions for our business to be done properly and for effective scrutiny to be conducted.

I have frequently raised issues with Ministers about ensuring that they bring business to the Assembly and that they comply with our procedures. The same must apply to Members. In the coming weeks, I intend to say more about our standards of debate. However, for today let me raise three related points.

Firstly, since I have been in this role, I have had to raise with a number of Members the fact that they were not in the Chamber when their name was listed to ask a question of Ministers. I am conscious that a significant amount of time and resource from Ministers and officials goes into preparing for Question Time. Therefore, it is extremely discourteous and disrespectful for Members not to make the effort to be in place to ask their question.

Secondly, the Principal Deputy Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and I have all noted that on too many occasions Members are coming in during a Minister's statement, or after it has ended, expecting to ask a question.

Similarly, Members are too often coming into the Chamber shortly before they are due to speak and then leaving again after they have made their own remarks. Not only is this discourteous to other Members but, in focusing only on their own remarks, Members are undermining the concept of debate.

Ministers and Members are expected to give priority to the business of Assembly sittings on a Monday and Tuesday. It is acknowledged that all Members will not be involved in every debate on every issue in this Chamber. However, where they are due to participate, it is the responsibility of Members to monitor how business is moving and ensure they are here when they are required to be. That is one of the reasons Members are provided with televisions in their offices to follow proceedings as they happen.

Should, exceptionally, a Member not be in their place in the Chamber when they are supposed to be, it is courteous that they should apologise to the House at an early opportunity. If such an apology is not forthcoming, I will contact Members directly.

Again, all of these points are about respecting the business we are here to do and the people who have put us here to do it. As Speaker, I will do my best to ensure our business runs in a way which does that but I can only do that with the cooperation of Members.

I ask all Members to reflect on the principles behind the points I have raised last week and today.

Yours Sincerely

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

EDWIN POOTS MLA
SPEAKER