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APNI2021 virtual spring conference speech, 27 March 2021

Hello everyone! I am absolutely delighted to have the opportunity to speak with you all this morning at this our 49th Annual Conference of the Alliance Party.

As with everything at the moment, it is very different than in previous years – but hopefully none the less enjoyable as a result! At the very outset I want to thank our small but fantastic staff team for bringing this online conference together today.

They have worked incredibly hard in at times quite surreal circumstances over the last year, and have shown resilience, agility and commitment, in responding to the pandemic and ensuring that the party has continued to function and that Associations have been able to move to new technology to continue the important work of building the party in each constituency. To each of you, we are enormously grateful.

As some of you may recall, last year I missed conference with what was originally thought to be a partially collapsed lung due to a bacterial infection and which was in fact later diagnosed as Covid. I'm sure all of you who normally opt to sit in the front row are glad now that I wasn't well enough to power through and attend or we may have been the not just the last public event but the first super-spreader!

Last year – though it seems like a world away - we were meeting in the early days of the restored Executive and shortly after our formal departure from the European Union. Whilst we could have predicted many of the challenges we would face over the last 12 months – from the often fragile and frequently dysfunctional nature of newly restored devolved institutions to the inevitable disappointment and anger when Boris' "oven-ready Brexit" proved to be the turkey many of us predicted - none of us could have conceived of the enormity of the challenge which Covid would pose, impacting on almost every aspect of life.

Health and healthcare have been dramatically impacted, but there have been also been major consequences for the economy, our environment and how we live our everyday lives. The crisis has also exposed many of the structural weaknesses in our society and, in some cases, exacerbated them.

From the social isolation felt by many who are older or who live alone to the digital divide between urban and rural communities and between those who can afford the technology to access the internet and benefit from online access and those who cannot; from the fragility of employment in the gig economy, where those on zero hours contracts and the newly self-employed found themselves without a safety net to the educational inequalities or the lack of affordable, accessible childcare, the impact of the pandemic has not been felt equally by all.

It has also created a whole new set of challenges, from long-term disruption of education and training for our young people to the challenges of moving rapidly to widespread remote working. Most of all, we have had to resist our natural instincts to draw close together in times of crisis and loss to support each other through trauma and grief and to join together in the good times to celebrate achievements.

When I think of loss in the context of the Party, my mind of course turns to the passing of David Cook, a founder member and former Deputy Leader of this party, last September. His loss in this our fiftieth year was all the more poignant as we never got to celebrate that anniversary together as a result of COVID-19, to which he ultimately and tragically succumbed.

David broke the mould in City Hall when he became the first non-unionist to be elected Lord Mayor in 1978, and he served south Belfast faithfully on Belfast City Council from 1973 until 1985 and then at the ill-fated Northern Ireland Assembly from 1982 to 1986. He was also a committed European and stood as a European parliamentary candidate in 1984.

A familiar face to us all at recent conferences and dinners, he continued his interest in Alliance over the years and also his work in community projects, because that was what led him into politics and that was what he continued to do in his retirement from politics. He was also a gentleman, well-liked by those who met him and dearly loved by those who knew him, not least for his warm wit and his sense of humour.

David was a beacon of liberalism during the dark times of our past - he was a trailblazer for equality, respect and fairness when all three were in short supply. He offered the hope of change when hope was scarce.

Conference, it is because of the vision and courage of people like David Cook and all those who came together to form the Alliance Party – many of whom are still with us here today, some of whom have passed - that people now have the option of voting for a different kind of political representation, committed to the creation of one community, united but diverse and inclusive.

We are proud of their hard work, their desire to see a better way forward for Northern Ireland even the darkest times, and it is from that we can draw inspiration to offer hope and optimism for a new generation, faced both with new challenges and many old ones as yet unresolved.

And just as David broke the mould in local Government, so too our increased group of Councillors have been delivering practical change for their constituents whilst challenging prejudice and promoting openness and transparency. Whether it is Stephen Donnelly as a sole voice in Fermanagh and Omagh Council or large teams in places like Lisburn, North Down and Ards, and Belfast – I am enormously proud of what our councillors have achieved over the last year.

I have been especially proud of their focus on supporting the community efforts to assist those most vulnerable during the pandemic whether through funding or hands-on support. They have done so in often difficult circumstances and have faced not only opposition from other parties but also attempts to silence their voices even on issues that should be non-controversial. I think it evidences just how effective our councillors are that others see them as such a threat!

Whilst I cannot begin to list all of their achievements – I do want to echo the tribute David Ford paid to our Councillors in Mid and East Antrim. Their unwavering commitment to ensure accountability, transparency and to uphold the basic principles of democracy have not gone unnoticed. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude for continuing to ask the important questions and demand the honest answers which the public have every right to expect, and to do so irrespective of the obstacles placed in their way.

Standing up for Alliance values can at times be uncomfortable but it is never more important than at those moments, and I want to thank all of our councillors for being courageous, committed and consistent whether in Council, in the community or on social media in championing change and challenging bigotry, intolerance and division.

Throughout the pandemic and despite the seriousness of the challenge it has posed to all of us, we have too often been hampered in our collective response by a lack of cohesion and coherence from the Executive. At a time of uncertainty and anxiety, it is understandable that people will look to the Executive for leadership and clarity.

Sadly, they have been frequently let down by mixed messaging, division and delay. It is hard to believe, given the enormity of the crisis that we have faced, that sectarianism managed to infect the political response and yet given the nature of our politics, at another level it is depressingly predictable.

The last year in the Executive and the Assembly has, therefore been a challenging one. Yet despite that, I believe that Alliance has shown real leadership, not only responding to the pandemic, but seeking to deliver the promise of delivery and progress from restored institutions after three years of suspension.

I'm sure we all appreciate just how busy our Health spokesperson, Paula Bradshaw, has been in the middle of a public health emergency. However, in addition to working on a huge range of Covid issues at Health Committee she has also: helped secure a public inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital; supported birth mothers and their children seeking justice before, during and since the publication of the research report on mother and baby homes; chaired the All Party Group on Cancer, holding the Department of Health to account on development of a comprehensive cancer strategy and ensuring that vital work did not become another casualty of the pandemic.

Outside of her Health brief, Paula is also representing the Party on the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights and just this week she managed to compel some long overdue action on the FICT Commission report. It transpires that in the almost 9 months that passed since the report was submitted only 3 meetings were held about it, of which one was to thank the chairs and the other was in response to an Assembly motion she tabled for debate. Despite having written to the First and Deputy First Minister both myself and with Minister Nichola Mallon, it took the debate to get a discussion at Executive.

Our Economy spokesperson, Stewart Dickson, has been leading the charge on behalf of 'The Excluded' – those who have been left out of financial support schemes during the pandemic. He worked closely with campaigners to achieve the creation of a scheme for the newly self-employed but still continues to campaign for those who remain excluded as well as the medium term assistance businesses and the self-employed require to reopen and recover.

He's also been standing up for those needing financial support who are self-isolating due to Covid or who are shielding, as well as students; he has been campaigning for comprehensive, green recovery plan; for decarbonisation of home heating; for more coherent and transparent energy governance in Northern Ireland and for a move away from fossil fuels – including vehemently opposing the natural gas storage project in Islandmagee.

Stewart has also mentioned to do all of this whilst recovering from cancer – it's quite the return to work! We are all delighted to have you back, Stewart, and based on your exchanges in the chamber - quite literally fighting fit!

As Chairperson of the Education Committee, Chris Lyttle has been an informed and passionate advocate for children and young people and our education sector - leading scrutiny of the Education Minister's response or more often lack of response to the pandemic on a range of issues including the chaotic and distressing post-primary transfer situation, and championing calls for proper support for children with special educational needs and their families, who were utterly failed by the Education Minister and the Education Authority during lockdown.

Committee Chairs can often be confrontational and seek only to criticise; however, Chris has instead used his position to offer leadership and find solutions, proposing the establishment of the childcare reference group, which improved delivery of funding for our vital early years and childcare sector, as well as working to find coherent contingency plans for those pupils facing uncertainty around exams over the last year.

He has also stood up for Alliance values: equal educational opportunity for all children and young people on issues like free school meals, flexible school starting age, period product provision, robust and consistent Relationship and Sex Education, youth mental health, safe active travel routes to school and of course, integration.

Our Agriculture and Environment spokesperson, John Blair, has been making waves in his first year in the Assembly – John's private member's bill on banning the hunting of wild mammals with dogs sparked a record-breaking number of consultation responses – over 18,000! It's not often that a PMB from the Northern Ireland Assembly makes the national ten o'clock news but it speaks to the strength of feeling on this cruel so-called sport, that John is so rightly working to end.

John is also advancing Alliance's green values at DAERA Committee, highlighting sustainability issues and ensuring environmental sector voices are heard at such a critical time for our climate. He is also the co-sponsor of a Climate Change Bill, pushing for ambitious, transformational change in Northern Ireland to avoid a climate crisis.

As our representative on the Policing Board, John is making the case for representative, community policing as well as a strong response to hate crime and violence against women and girls.

Kellie Armstrong has been hard at work as Deputy Chairperson of the Communities Committee: standing up for unpaid carers, pushing for reform for in housing; and campaigning for fair and compassionate treatment of those with terminal illnesses within the welfare system.

She is also a passionate advocate for people with disabilities and of course of integrated education. Kellie's private member's bill will be a game-changer in ensuring integrated education receives the provision, the protection and the profile it needs to drive integration and help create a shared future.

As our Finance and Infrastructure spokesperson, Andrew Muir has been influencing Ministers on issues such as the establishment of a Fiscal Council – which would consider the cost of division – a fit for purpose planning system, as well as an Infrastructure Commission. These are examples of the long-term, strategic vision Alliance has to transform our society and our economy.

As our resident train fanatic, Andrew has focused on advocating for improved and expanded public transport as well as active travel, linking the need to consider the health of our people alongside that of our planet.

Andrew is also driving change on social issues, working alongside colleagues from across the party to progress a ban on the cruel practice of so-called “Conversion Therapy”. And I want to congratulate Micky Murry of LGBT Alliance for his petition on this issue, which Paula presented as part of our campaign to end this offensive and harmful practice.

For me, my first year in the Department of Justice, was always going to be a steep learning curve and, of course, I had big shoes to fill. However, Covid brought its own challenges. First and foremost, due to the dedication of staff and planning from the Department, we have largely protected our prison population from Covid, in stark contrast to the dire situation seen elsewhere in these islands.

Whilst we’ve had to remove some in-person services for prisoners, such as education and working-out schemes, we have made every effort to continue to do as much virtually as we can. Ceasing in-person visits has been incredibly difficult for the prison population and their families, but though we hope to return to some visits as soon as possible, the use of virtual visits (via zoom and skype) has also been a huge success – allowing some prisoners to see inside their family homes for the first time in years, to see pets and family members who might not have been ever able to make it to visit them. For foreign nationals especially, this has been a positive development and one which we’ll continue even when in-person visits resume.

Although courts activity stopped for non-urgent business during the first lockdown, we were quick to resume normal business in a safe way in order to allow access to justice. We’ve adjusted to the “new normal” in courts by conducting much business virtually – something that was previously heavily resisted – and by seeking innovative solutions, such as using conference and arts spaces which would otherwise be sitting vacant, for jury trials.

One of the most poignant moments I’ve had since taking up the role of Justice Minister was standing at the former MOD base in Kinnegar, Holywood, viewing the Temporary Resting Place facility that we created for the eventuality of mass fatalities/excess deaths during the pandemic. I am immensely grateful that these facilities have not been needed but I am also hugely proud of the sensitive and difficult work we undertook to have such a facility prepared for that worst case scenario.

However, while Covid has been a huge strain on us all, it has not diverted our time and energy from delivering on Alliance priorities in Justice.

One of my proudest achievements has been seeing the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act pass into law. It has criminalised coercive control and enhanced protections for victims of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland, and I hope by this time next year I will be updating you about a Protection from Stalking Bill which is about to receive Royal Assent.

We’re also working hard to speed up the justice system. Covid has undoubtedly raised challenges around delays and backlogs, but we are determined to use what we have learned about the use of

technology and agile working to speed things up going forward, rather than returning to the status quo.

The Committal Reform Bill seeks to enact changes to the way we process criminal cases which are long overdue – first attempted by David Ford - and will represent an important intervention to prevent victims having to give evidence more than once in court, something that was highlighted as necessary by Sir John Gillen in his review of serious sexual offences.

We're also pushing ahead on implementation of a wide range of those recommendations from Sir John's review after lengthy delays due to the lack of Executive, particularly in the Miscellaneous Provisions Bill which I will introduce to the Assembly in May.

By the end of this mandate of just over two years, I will have brought five pieces of legislation through the Assembly. I'm not aware that any Minister – even our own – have previously taken as much legislation through the usual five year mandate. If that isn't a demonstration of the cost of three years of political stalemate, I don't know what is.

Even with the limited time available, I am determined to deliver change in Justice. Legislation is a huge part of this but it isn't the full picture. I'm also pushing ahead to rid society of the scourge of paramilitarism through our Tackling Paramilitarism Programme; modernising our civil and family justice systems; ensuring our policing oversight structures are robust; developing proposals to address hate crime; raising cross-cutting issues around addressing and preventing violence against women and girls; working with the Department of Health to create a ground-breaking regional care and justice campus; embedding problem-solving justice; and putting a focus on trauma awareness and mental health at the centre of our work in prisons, both with those in our care and those charged with caring for them.

My aim is to take forward progressive reform to create a safer and more shared society where we respect the law and each other.

And of course, alongside all of that work preparation for Brexit the protocol continued to be a large part of the work of the Executive and of this party over the last year. I will not rehearse all of the challenges that Brexit has caused both practically to businesses and in terms of the political tensions which it (and reaction to it) has fuelled as I think Stephen has done so comprehensively in his earlier contribution.

I do want to pay tribute to Stephen Farry, our MP for North Down for the vast scale of Stephen's achievements on Brexit: ensuring Northern Ireland stays on the agenda when some in Westminster would rather ignore the particular inconvenience we present to their hard Brexit project; calling for cool heads and a focus on problem solving and de-escalation at the all too frequent moments of diplomatic failure; and, most importantly, suggesting solutions which would actually solve the problems created by others in order to protect Northern Ireland's best interests.

His efforts have been recognised in the national and local media, but also by those in business and politics across these island and across the EU. It has also drawn praise from some unlikely sources – including Michael Gove, who thank Stephen and Alliance for approaching the protocol in such a constructive way. Whilst praise by any current government minister is a bit of a double edged sword, I think it is absolutely justified in this case.

Stephen was the first to call for initial grace periods and to suggest a bespoke UK-EU veterinary agreement to help address challenges of the Protocol. When others seek to ramp up the rhetoric and engage in a blame game, Stephen has been a vital Alliance voice providing leadership for the people of Northern Ireland.

That's not to forget the critical work Stephen is also doing to champion human rights, democracy and the rule of law, at a time when they appear to be under attack within the UK government: whether it's their intention to break the law "in a very specific limited way", implementing punitive immigration policies or increasing authoritarianism, Stephen is pushing back and standing up for Alliance values. Thank you to him and to the people of North Down for giving us this voice in Westminster at this critical time.

Whilst Covid has stressed the system hugely, the pandemic has also had some positive impacts. More than ever before, our society has proven itself to be resilient and innovative, able to find new ways of connecting and working through digital technology.

Whilst home working has challenges, at its best it has allowed people to achieve a better work-life balance and avoid a costly, time consuming and environmentally damaging commute. It also has the potential to bring the workplace to the employee, removing many of the geographical barriers to employment that people face.

There has also been a welcome reassessment of the value of front-line and essential workers, as well as increased focus on and support for communities working together to support those more vulnerable members.

And many of us have a new appreciation of the natural environment - our parks and outdoor spaces - and their important role in sustaining wildlife, biodiversity and our mental health and well-being. We need to capture that as we build and develop new housing and workplaces, and ensure that access to open space is part of that design.

With the rapid roll-out of vaccines continuing, there is now light at the end of the tunnel and while we are not there yet, it is right that we turn our minds to recovery and what that might mean – not only in terms of the various relaxations which we are working through but the wider picture of how we start to build back our public services and our society.

Given all of the challenges and the opportunities Covid has presented, we must not settle simply for a return to how things were before. Instead, we must grasp this opportunity both to address the structural weaknesses in society and to build on the positive changes we have made to our lives and our priorities.

Alliance has some really ambitious and progressive ideas for how we can start to capture that: how we can advance health reform and tackle waiting lists; develop an integrated, properly resourced mental health service to support people at every stage of life; review and reform our education system, including expansion of integrated education and better support for those with special educational needs.

The need to deliver a UK-EU veterinary agreement to mitigate some of the worst effects of Brexit; to sell the benefits of the protocol to global companies that by basing themselves here, can uniquely access freely the GB and the EU markets; working towards free broadband to help

facilitate increased access to digital technology; and establishing a youth employment scheme to assist young people find secure, sustainable employment where their rights and entitlements are protected.

We are championing a green new deal, to create quality jobs and drive innovation, and an independent environmental protection agency to safeguard our environment, while promoting active travel and green transport opportunities to make the most of the eased pressure on our roads.

We want to ensure that we build stronger, safer, shared communities by delivering a single equality act; bringing forward comprehensive hate crime legislation; delivering a cross-cutting strategy to end violence against women and girls; progressing NDNA commitments on language and culture; building further on our work to tackle paramilitarism and organised crime.

Crucially, we need to reform the Assembly and Executive, to end community designations and vetoes, so our Assembly better reflects the increasingly diverse nature of our community and works more effectively.

They are just some of our ideas to deliver a genuine transformation of society, one which benefits everyone while addressing fundamental inequalities and ending segregation.

We have just over a year to get that message out to the public. And that that too may be challenging as our normal activities may be more constrained than usual. That's why strong communications and messaging really matter more than ever before.

We've all been encouraged, both by the increase in membership and by recent polling that the Alliance Surge continues. When I became leader only four years ago, there was still furious debate as to whether Alliance would ever be able to break through the 10% ceiling: hard to believe that now questions are being asked as to what would happen to the Assembly structures and designation system if we were the largest or second largest party!

Of course the only polls that really matter are the elections themselves, and so we will not be complacent or take anything for granted. We can also expect the pressure to increase, as other parties seek to undermine the progress we have made.

However, it is within reach for to significantly increase our MLA team, and in doing so. We can challenge with justification and by our mandate, the segregationist approach in the designation and so-called cross-community voting system and the mandatory coalition because as David Ford said earlier, those with a vested interest in division continuing won't make it happen – we will.

In doing so, we can also challenge the narrative that our people must forever be seen as just two communities, forever in opposition to each other, forever divided.

We are the growing evidence – the lived reality - that people can come together, united around a vision of a community in which everyone is treated with respect and where diversity is embraced and celebrated rather than merely tolerated. For over 50 years we have been at coalface of driving prosperity, protecting our planet, uniting our people, and delivering progress.



In the year ahead we have the opportunity to deliver real change for our people, because they deserve better. So as we move towards recovery and rebuilding, let's not settle for doing things the way we always have before.

This is a chance for change. Let's grasp it.

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