

Naomi Long MLA
Leader's speech
Alliance Conference
March 5, 2022

Good afternoon, everyone.

It's two years from our last in-person conference and three years since I had the opportunity to address you in person. I have to say that it is great to be back together, and I hope that today will not just be an energising political event but a welcome opportunity to catch up with old friends and meet some new ones.

It's great to see so many of our new members at conference. Throughout the last two years, the party has continued to grow at an unprecedented rate with over 300 new members last year alone – and it is encouraging to see so many of you here today.

Of course things are not quite back to normal – not only are we continuing to exercise caution in terms of making sensible choices about social distancing, hand sanitising, and wearing masks, but it has also meant that some of our MLAs, speakers and guests who have contracted Covid are unable to be with us today.

In particular, I want to send our best wishes to John Blair and Stewart Dickson for a swift and full recovery from Covid, and also to a number of our candidates who were due to be panellists today but who are also now self-isolating due to positive tests this week. Of course I was an early adopter – for it was Covid that prevented me from addressing conference in 2020 – so they are in good company. Thankfully now, we have the ability to livestream to those who can't be here – and I hope you are enjoying being with us virtually.

Since I last had the opportunity to address conference in person, three years ago, much has changed, both for the party and for Northern Ireland.

On that occasion, we met ahead of the local government elections in 2019. No-one predicted the significant gains that Alliance would make, electing councillors in ten out of the 11 local councils. Of course we had to leave ourselves something to aim for next time around!

However, winning elections is only the starting point: delivering for the electorate is what matters, and I want to thank all of our local councillors for the work they do, day in day out, to represent Alliance values and the best interests of their constituents.

That renewed strength at local government level has also led to more Alliance office bearers over recent years and I want to say a particular thank you to our current "chain gang" - Mayor Billy Webb, Mayor Stephen Martin and Lord Mayor Kate Nicholl for the exemplary way that they have represented not only their Council but also this party during their term in office and also to Michael Long for his successful year as High Sheriff of Belfast.

We also met just a few months ahead of the European Election, where our electoral momentum as a party continued to build and when I had the privilege of becoming the first Alliance MEP. Whilst my time in Brussels and Strasbourg was short, it helped us build the connections and networks which have been sustained since Brexit and has strengthened our connections with other liberal parties across Europe through our membership of ALDE and Renew Europe.

As we meet today, of course, our European colleagues are very much on our minds. Last week, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe, granted affiliate membership to Sluha Narodu, Servant of the People, the party of Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. I think none of us can fail to have been impressed by his composure and leadership as Ukraine has seen war waged by Russian troops on the streets of their towns and cities, or to be moved by the horror of the scenes unfolding in a nation only a 3 hour flight from here.

As someone who lived through the Cold War and watched the break-up of the USSR, as a teenager - as independence movements and the hunger for democracy and freedom swept across the soviet block, causing the fall of the Iron Curtain, it is hard now to explain the sense of relief and optimism of the time. And it is harder still to explain the anguish I feel watching as Putin and the Kremlin seek to crush that spirit of freedom under the advance of their tanks and guns and roll back the clock to a darker time in our history.

This war of aggression waged against a sovereign, democratic state is not the first breach of international law by the Kremlin, who were responsible for the Salisbury poisonings, and the annexation of Crimea to name but two.

Neither is it the work of the Russian people – indeed, it has exposed the lengths to which the Kremlin is willing to go to subjugate freedom and democracy for their own people. I commend the bravery of those who have stood up against the authoritarian and autocratic regime in defence of their Ukrainian neighbours.

Today we offer our solidarity, but more – we can offer our help. You will see on the screens today details of the Ukraine Appeal from the Disasters Emergency Committee, who are working directly with their partner charities on the ground in Ukraine and the surrounding countries to alleviate the rapidly unfolding humanitarian crisis in the region. Please, if you can, make a donation and help those who are being displaced internally, who cannot find safe routes to escape the advancing troops and those who have managed to flee to neighbouring countries.

We offer our support not only for humanitarian aid, but also call on the UK government to open legal routes for refugees to reach safety here. We must play a role in assisting with the now over one million people who have fled Ukraine since the war began – ordinary people facing extraordinary hardship.

Two weeks ago, these were people just like you and me – people with jobs and homes, caring for relatives, getting their children to school, shopping in town, visiting friends. Now, they are sheltering in the underground and basements, unable to access basic essentials like food, water and electricity, pushing their women and children on to over-crowded trains and buses heading west, with no idea when or even if they will be reunited. The UK must not place barriers in their way as they flee a war zone. We need to waive the visas and welcome the refugees.

We also offer our support for stronger, swifter economic sanctions against Russia and in particular the oligarchs who support the Putin's regime. Whilst welcoming what the UK and other countries have done thus far, we need to act faster and more decisively to strip this kleptocracy of its source of power – its wealth. That also mean seeking alternatives to reliance on Russian oil and gas.

It should disquiet us all that so many of those in this Government are recipients of large donations from Russian sources and it demonstrates powerfully why we need to rid the UK of outside influences, which threaten our own democracy. Openness and transparency are critical tools in ensuring that we guard against the flow of dark money infecting our politics and elections.

And of course the influence of that dark money was not far away when it came to Brexit either, and it is essential that the finding of Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee report, released this week, is taken seriously and acted upon. The long delayed report exposes the potential interference of the Kremlin in British elections and referendums.

And Brexit continues to destabilise relations between the UK and the EU even at this critical time, as well as our politics much closer to home. It is a painful irony that those who most avidly pursued the hardest possible Brexit, refusing every possible alternative to the protocol, are the same people who are now bemoaning most loudly the impact of the Brexit they chose and the Protocol they made an inevitability.

Of course it was no surprise to any of us who had watched Boris bluster his way through politics leaving in his wake a tsunami of unkept promises and unfulfilled commitments, when his supposed "oven ready" Brexit turned out to be a turkey. What never fails to surprise is the eternal willingness of some to put their

faith in a man and a party which with such consistency throws them under the bus. Indeed, some parties have spent so much time under the bus over the last few years, you would be forgiven for mistaking them for Translink mechanics.

Despite our opposition to both Brexit and the Protocol – which we voted against in both Europe and Westminster – we have continued to focus on solutions to make Brexit as painless and as low impact as it can be for the people we represent and for local businesses. Whether that is new EU legislation to ensure continued access to medicines or a bespoke UK-EU veterinary agreement, we have focused on solutions. But we can only deliver pragmatic solutions, if people acknowledge the fact that the inevitable consequence of Brexit was increased friction and costs, rather than the fantasy that we could exit the EU and still maintain all of the benefits of membership.

And that is why it was so important that the Alliance surge continued in the 2019 Westminster elections, when North Down elected Stephen Farry to Westminster, to be a strong advocate on international affairs, human rights and equality and ensuring that an informed and pragmatic voice from Northern Ireland is heard in Parliament, on issues at home and abroad.

I am immensely proud of all that Stephen has done and has achieved on behalf of his constituents and of Northern Ireland in the House of Commons, but I am particularly proud of his work to assist refugees from Afghanistan. It is not an exaggeration when I say that there are people alive today who otherwise would not have been, as a result of the direct intervention of Stephen and Niamh McCourt, his parliamentary assistant. Thank you, Stephen, for all that you do for your constituency, for NI and for the Alliance Party.

Our electoral successes in 2019 not only provided us with more opportunities to deliver for people right across Northern Ireland at every level of Government: it also served as a wake-up call for other parties. It was a reminder that they couldn't simply take the public or their votes for granted. The prospect of another battering at the polls in an Assembly election created the conditions which led to the NDNA agreement and got them back to work.

And so devolution was restored, just over two years ago. Whilst getting institutions back up and running again, re-forming the Executive and getting MLAs back into the Assembly, was way overdue, it was also an opportunity for Alliance to powerfully demonstrate that when people demand better by voting Alliance, they get it.

After three years of suspension and wasted opportunities, our focus was firmly about what we could achieve in the remaining two year term: about what Alliance could deliver.

Our focus was on making a positive impact on people and the issues that really matter to them.

It was also about demonstrating to a public increasingly weary of stop-go devolution, who were understandably starting to question the very point of the Assembly, that it could really deliver progress.

And that has been my focus as Justice Minister.

In legislative terms, despite having a short mandate of just over two years instead of the usual four or even five, it has been about working hard to develop and deliver five Bills through the Assembly.

The fourth of those Bills finished its passage through the Assembly last week, when the Protection from Stalking Bill had its final reading. The fifth and final bill – The Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims Bill - is due to have its Further Consideration stage on Monday, the penultimate step in its journey into law.

I'm sure the only previous Justice Minister to have passed devolved legislation, and indeed our former DEL minister, won't mind if I claim the passage of five substantive pieces of legislation as a something of a record in any mandate, let alone in one which lasted only two short years!

The legislation I have prioritised will deliver wide-ranging positive changes and new protections for victims. For example, the new domestic abuse offence for Northern Ireland, which came into full operation last

week, captures not only physical abuse against a partner, former partner or family member, but also patterns of non-physical controlling and coercive behaviour.

The new Protection from Stalking Bill, will not only make stalking a criminal offence by the end of this summer, but will introduce Stalking Protection Orders by the end of the year, to allow early intervention by police and courts to protect victims at risk of serious harm ahead of a conviction.

The Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims Bill will bring in a raft of measures to offer better protections for witnesses, who are often also victims, in serious sexual offence cases. It will create new criminal offences of upskirting, downblousing, cyber-flashing as well as strengthening the laws around “revenge pornography”, banning the so called “rough sex” defence and creating a specific offence of non-fatal strangulation, often a precursor to domestic homicide.

Victims and witnesses will no longer have to provide oral evidence more than once; just one of the measures within the Committal Reform Bill. I also made the compensation and personal injury arrangements fairer for victims, scrapping the same household rule, which prevented those who were victims of someone they lived with from being compensated, and by ensuring that those who have suffered personal injury through no fault of their own are properly compensated for the impact of their injury.

These are hugely important and significant measures which will help people when they are at their most vulnerable. I have met with and listened to the experiences of many victims, and their loved ones. I have heard heart-breaking, personal stories and I want to commend the dignity and bravery of each and every person who has spoken with me. I want them to know that they have been heard but also that I have been seeking to find solutions to the problems they faced so others will have better experiences in future.

In the coming weeks, I will be giving victims a stronger voice and dedicated advocate by appointing a Victims of Crime Commissioner Designate for Northern Ireland.

Also, acutely aware that those permanently injured during the Troubles had waited too long to receive a pension, the Department of Justice at my request stepped up and did the heavy lifting in terms of creating a workable scheme and establishing the Victims’ Payments Board which has now made the first payments to victims. I am particularly glad that I was able to play a role in breaking the political stand-off on this issue, having supported the campaign from the outset and having travelled to Downing Street with the Seriously Injured Group from WAVE while I was an MP.

And I have also laid the foundations for future progress. Work has been completed for the introduction of a Sentencing Bill in the next mandate. I am currently consulting on proposals for a new Hate Crime bill and consultation on proposals for ‘Charlotte’s Law’, to encourage disclosure of information on the locations of victims’ remains by those convicted of their killing, has just finished paving the way for legislation in the next mandate.

I want to especially thank Claire Johnson, my special advisor, who has been indispensable throughout this entire process. Her intelligence and clarity has been a huge asset to me. And, amid all the other delivery in which she has played a major role, she also managed a special delivery of her own, baby Lily! I want to send Claire, Jason and Lily our congratulations and also our best wishes as they are currently at home recovering from Covid. Thanks also to Patricia O’Lynn for covering during Claire’s maternity leave.

I have been open and honest about the significant challenges of being part of an often dysfunctional Executive: it has not always been easy. But I have also demonstrated what we can achieve if we focus on doing the job we were elected to do rather than posturing and bluster. However, that progress is only possible if we have devolved government with an Executive and Assembly.

Because it isn’t only in the Department of Justice and in the Executive where Alliance has been making progress and delivering change.

Kellie Armstrong has brought the Integrated Education Bill through Committee, Consideration and Further Consideration Stages of the process, largely unscathed and undiluted – quite an achievement for a back-bench MLA and one staff member when facing the weight of opposition of a DUP minister, backed by her party and department, not to mention sectoral interests.

It has truly been a David and Goliath battle - a battle not to give integrated education an advantage over other schools, or to deprive other schools of resources, or restrict parental choice as some have falsely claimed – but to level the playing field and support the choice of parents who wish their children to be educated together in a fully integrated setting.

Of course we are not out of the woods yet. The DUP continue to seek the extra signature needed for their petition of concern to kill the Bill. Whilst that comes as no surprise to those familiar with the antics of Castlereagh Borough Council in the 1980s, where some councillors did everything but lie down in front of the diggers to prevent Lagan College coming into being, it is depressing that there is still such hostility to educating children together in 2022.

It's almost as though some people fear what will happen if the barriers in our community are broken down and people realise just how much they have in common; that together, we can achieve so much more than apart.

I also want to put on record my gratitude to Chris Lyttle, who as Chair of the Education Committee, played a not insignificant role in ensuring that Kellie's bill made it past committee stage and who has also managed to make progress with his own Bill to remove the exemption for teachers from Fair Employment legislation, again placing equality and inclusion at the heart of education. Let's hope it gets a fair wind and completes before the end of this mandate.

Chris's wider work in championing the concerns of teachers, staff and parents throughout Covid in particular, with both persistence and forensic attention to detail, led to more than one teacher and parent describe him as "the best Education Minister that Northern Ireland never had". I can't think of a better description or a more fitting tribute to Chris as he approaches not just the end of this mandate, but the end his service in full-time politics.

I have had the pleasure of working with Chris from the a youthful, fresh faced politics student until the broken husk of a 40-something man that we see with us today. Some might claim that's cause and effect! Seriously though, East Belfast and those in the education and childcare sectors, in particular, will be losing a fierce and dedicated advocate. For me it feels more like losing a limb than a colleague, after 20 years working together. I'm sure we'll find an opportunity to properly say thanks to Chris for all of his hard work but for now, I want to wish him, Lorraine, Caleb and Grace every best wish for the next chapter.

Sadly, not all Bills make it through the Assembly: despite our best efforts, John Blair's bill to ban hunting of mammals with dogs was voted down by Sinn Fein supported by some in the DUP. Despite Mary Lou McDonald telling animal welfare organisations in the south that when the next opportunity arose, SF would vote for a hunting ban, instead blocking it at Second reading.

John's Bill falling is a good illustration of two things – it shows us what happens when other parties who talk the talk, but fail to walk the walk have a majority; more importantly, it shows us the difference that more Alliance MLAs would make. Just four more Alliance MLAs would have delivered the Hunting Ban in Northern Ireland. Let's make sure we're back in the next mandate, with those extra MLAs, to finish the job.

In this and so much more, our Assembly team has been punching well above its weight. Paula, Stewart and Andrew are examples of the best kind of political representatives: hard-working on their committees and in their constituencies, forensic in their scrutiny and utterly dedicated to improving Northern Ireland.

Sadly the same cannot be said for all of our political leaders. We meet at a time when, yet again, our institutions are beset by instability. The absence of a First Minister, while no longer able to cause the collapse of the Assembly has deprived us of that working Executive, at a time when many key decisions still depend on it.

We're emerging from a pandemic, fighting a battle against climate change, facing a cost-of-living crisis and there's a war on our doorstep in Eastern Europe.

This is not the time to walk away from government, this is time to lead in government.

This week, I met with home office ministers about a bill which Westminster is bringing forward urgently to strengthen Unexplained Wealth Orders and account seizure and forfeiture powers, as well as increase transparency of shell companies and trusts, as part of the sanctions against Russia.

For Northern Ireland to be able to keep pace and ensure that we don't become a haven for dark money, we need a legislative consent motion, something that isn't possible without a functioning Executive in place. We are now seeking legal advice in the hope we can work around that barrier – all because others refuse to do the job they were elected to do.

Next week, on March 11th, we will be making the apology the late Sir Anthony Hart recommended to victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse; however, the state apology will now be made by five government ministers, one from each Executive party, rather than by the First and Deputy first ministers, a situation which has divided victims and survivors and caused genuine hurt and distress among those who believe that this is, in some way, a downgrading of its status.

Whilst we have done all we can to ensure and reassure that this is not the case, it pains me that some of those who have had to fight so hard and wait so long to have their voices heard and to receive the recognition, acknowledgement and apology they so deserve now feel in some sense cheated by the absence of a First Minister and deputy First Minister to deliver it.

And of course, we have now had to suspend plans for the delivery of a three-year budget. Whilst I made my concerns about the impact the draft departmental allocation would have on the justice system, I was absolutely committed to working with Executive colleagues to resolve those issues during the consultation period, so that together we can provide the certainty and increased health funding required to deliver transformation which is so desperately needed.

Instead, in the absence of an Executive, the budget consultation is paused and without certainty of funding, health reforms are on hold – yet again – while our beleaguered health workers continue to battle within a system with some of the worst hospital waiting lists in western Europe and under the morale-sapping pressure of unsustainable workloads.

Those who have worked on the front line in the fight against Covid for the last two years deserve better than just a clap for carers – they deserve politicians who will deliver a system that is fit for purpose and sustainable for the future. And we know from talking to our constituents on the doors steps that the health service is by far their main concern.

That's why this week, Paula launched our latest health paper, Fighting Fit, setting out how together, we can start to reform and rebuild our broken health service, addressing waiting lists, invest in mental health and preventative services.

And whilst the health service is the main concern, the mounting cost of living crisis runs it a close second. Rapidly rising gas and fuel costs – including an eye watering 39% gas price hike yesterday – is making it difficult for families to make ends meet.

That's why this week, we launched our plan to tackle the cost of living crisis – setting out clear actions both in Westminster and Stormont – which would help families currently struggling to choose between eating and heating.

With so much important work to work to do, it is hard to fathom how we are again without an Executive only two years after restoration. It seems that some politicians are addicted to crisis and conflict, and simply not up to the job of actually governing.

People have had enough of the constant dramas and the political soap operas. They want politicians who don't just identify more problems – or worse still, add to them – but who are focused on finding solutions, on making things better.

But it doesn't have to be like this. Yes, we know there are huge challenges ahead – from the climate emergency to the spiralling cost of living - but together, we can face them.

Conference, May's election won't just determine how our politics works for the next five years - it will determine if our politics works.

This May, together we can deliver a bigger Alliance Team. A team that will not just deliver more and better, one that ensures that together, we can secure reform of the Assembly, move away from binary politics that seeks to divide people and ensure no one party can hold progress to ransom.

Together, we can deliver Alliance's Green New deal to meet the climate emergency head on and create 50,000 Green high paid, high skilled sustainable new jobs, boosting sustainable growth and creating new opportunities for our young people.

Together we can build a positive, inclusive and shared society, a vibrant and safe community which embraces and celebrates diversity as a strength.

Together, we can build bridges, not barriers.

Inspire hope, not fear.

Fight poverty and inequality - not each other.

But Conference - we can only do it together.

Each of you has a key role to play in making this a reality. Your help is crucial if we are to reach as many people as we can with our message between now and the 5th May. We have exactly two months left. The opportunities are real. Change is possible.

Let's use every minute of the next two months.

Let's leave nothing in reserve.

Let's encourage our community to have big ambitions and work together to realise them.

Let's offer people the hope of better and work to deliver it.

Conference, I believe we have the people, the policies and the passion needed to build a truly progressive, inclusive and prosperous future for all of our people - to deliver the transformation our public services, our politics, our people so desperately need.

And on the 5th May, together, we can. And we will.