

Naomi Long MLA

Alliance Conference speech

March 2023

Distinguished Guests, fellow delegates, friends.

Before I start my formal remarks today, I want to take a moment to echo the comments of Stephen Farry, and extend our best wishes to Det Chief Inspector John Caldwell for a full recovery from the life-altering injuries he suffered during the horrific attempt on his life. On behalf of all of us, I extend our solidarity and support to John's family, friends and his police service colleagues at this time. On behalf of conference, I condemn those responsible for what was a merciless and chilling attack on a off-duty officer in front of his young son and the dozens of other children and parents at the sports centre in Omagh.

Whether those responsible are linked to an organised crime gang or are operating under some political flag of convenience, their activities show their complete disregard and contempt for the people of Omagh and that they have nothing to offer but misery and destruction. Their actions have no place in our community and I would encourage anyone with information to assist the police in ensuring that they face the full force of the law.

Conference, last year I addressed you just a few weeks after the DUP had brought down the Executive by resigning as First Minister. I was still Justice Minister and the Assembly was still sitting, so our team was continuing to push as hard as we could to achieve change.

In the weeks between last year's conference and the Assembly's dissolution for the election in May, the Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims Bill finished its passage through the chamber – the last five major pieces of legislation I delivered in the Department of Justice in just under two and a half years, designed to strengthen the criminal law and protections for victims of domestic and sexual abuse, and enhance the protections for women and girls, in particular.

Kellie Armstrong's epic battle to secure the Integrated Education Bill's safe passage through the Assembly concluded successfully, the only piece of Integrated Education legislation progressed under devolution; and Chris Lyttle's Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act limbo-ed under the finish line, ensuring that, for the first time in NI, discrimination on the basis of religion in the employment of teachers is illegal.

These achievements not only added to our record of delivery for people in Northern Ireland, but set out clearly the kind of society that we want to create, for the future – one that is safe, shared and fair.

They also demonstrate just what can be achieved when we have a functioning Assembly focused on the issues that really matter to all of our constituents, rather than the dysfunction in which we are currently languishing.

However, the biggest achievement since I last spoke to you is the result of the Assembly election. At conference last year, I encouraged you all to redouble your efforts on the ground in the weeks ahead and ensure that we knocked as many doors and engaged as many voters as we could, to maximise the opportunity for Alliance and for Northern Ireland in those elections.

And conference – you did. And we did.

We grew our team from seven to 17, leapfrogging from the fifth largest to the third largest party. It was, without doubt, an incredible election for Alliance, building on the momentum of previous success and keeping the Alliance Surge moving forward.

I want to thank each and every one of you for contributing to that success and for working to ensure that we returned a team not only strong in number but with a depth and breadth of talent that has been increasingly apparent over the last nine months. To the candidates, the campaigners, the fundraisers, our volunteers and our staff team – this success belongs to each of you.

It also belongs to every voter who went to the polling station and cast their vote in hope rather than fear; to each of them – thank you for the support and trust you placed in us.

Unfortunately, but not unsurprisingly, the institutions were not restored following May's election and the DUP have refused to nominate a deputy First Minister, or even to allow the election of a speaker, instead holding the institutions – and people's futures – hostage until someone fixes the mess that they and their ERG friends created.

Our team of MLAs – six with previous experience of a functioning Assembly and a collapse under their belt, plus 11 new MLAs, who arrived on day one full of energy, drive and ambition to deliver for their constituents only to be met by a road block, are nevertheless hard at work in their constituencies and with the preparatory work required so, when the time for restoration comes, our team can hit the ground running.

All of our MLAs and particularly those new MLAs have been elected to do a role that they are being denied the opportunity to perform in full. They've been robbed of that opportunity, not through their own actions or inactions, but because of the actions of another party. That isn't fair on them, and it isn't fair on the people who elected them.

I'd like to speak directly to our MLAs now, to say thank you, for not just hanging in there for the past 10 months but for giving 100%, in very difficult circumstances, to deliver better outcomes for your constituents.

I have rarely felt as proud of the party as when I had the honour to lead you into that Chamber, knowing with confidence, that whoever will speak for us on the day, will articulate with real passion the concerns of those we represent. I hope that, sooner rather than later, we will be doing that week by week, in a restored Assembly.

And while there may be next to no public sympathy out there for MLAs who have had their pay cut, though it is through no fault of their own, I want to say this: we accept that we cannot continue to be paid our full salary for doing only part of the job. However, it would be fairer still if those blocking restoration were not paid at all, until they are willing to return to work and let the rest of us do so, too. For whilst it might not be popular to say that we should pay politicians fairly (or indeed at all!), do we really want to create a system where the only people who can afford to be in politics are those who are independently wealthy? That is a prospect that should worry us all.

As you will be aware, Patricia O'Lynn has made the difficult decision to move on and take up an opportunity in Queens University. She has been an invaluable member of our team and, both as a local Councillor and in her short tenure as part of the Assembly Team, she has not only been a fierce and fearless advocate for her constituency, but has helped to grow the local Association and strengthen the team across North Antrim. QUB's gain will be the Assembly, North Antrim and Alliance's loss: Trish, on behalf of us all, I wish you every success and happiness in your new role.

Sadly, this is part of the price we all pay for the failure of the institutions: people with real talent, ability and ambition across all parties are either reluctant to get involved in the Assembly at all or reach a point where continuing becomes untenable.

If we want the Assembly to attract the kind of MLAs and staff we need and retain them, the best of what Northern Ireland has to offer, then it needs to function. It needs to work.

This is precisely why we published our proposals for reform, Sharing Power to Build a Shared Future, in June 2022. We have shared our proposals with two Taoisigh, two Tánaistí, three prime ministers and two secretaries of state for Northern Ireland.

Now need to see action to implement them. Irrespective of whether the DUP decide that it's in their own party-political interests to return to Stormont – for we know that's all that matters to them – the current system of stop-go, up-down, ransom politics needs to end. That is in Northern Ireland's interests and that should take priority.

I am weary of successive governments telling us that we have won the intellectual argument on reform – this isn't debate club, or an academic exercise. It isn't about being right, it's about delivering solutions.

We do not want to be patronised and patted on the head: we want our mandate – our votes and our voters' votes – to be treated as equal to everyone else's. And we want the people to have a stable, functioning government. No more excuses. No more delays.

Failure to act is ruining people's lives and jeopardising the Good Friday Agreement itself.

By responding to those who up-end the institutions by pandering to their demands time after time, rather than ending their ability to do so, they are condemning devolution to death by a thousand collapses.

Our proposals for reform are consistent with the principles of the Good Friday Agreement – principles of power-sharing, inclusion, interdependence and respect – but they also acknowledge the inherent instability of the structures created to implement it.

In this the 25th anniversary year of the Agreement, the fact that the institutions are suspended for at least the 3rd time, and the second time since 2017, is irrefutable evidence that real change is needed.

The Good Friday Agreement has brought relative peace to Northern Ireland, but it has not delivered the stability to which we all aspired in 1998. I say "we all", but of course, many in this room, including our Upper Bann MLA, Eoin Tennyson, were not even born when the Good Friday Agreement was signed.

Apart from making those of us who were around feel very, very old...(thanks Eoin)...it should bring home to us all that we should now evolve our structures, not for my generation, but for Eoin's and for generations to come, not condemning them to be forever bound by the unionist versus nationalist straightjacket of 1998.

Of course, in its wisdom, The Good Friday Agreement itself allowed for a review of the institutions 5 years after signing and yet 25 years on no major review involving all of the parties to the Agreement has ever taken place.

Instead, each time our institutions have broken down, they have been subjected to patch repairs, quick fixes, designed to get them back on the road as quickly as possible, with no thought as to how long they will last or the damage those patch ups are doing. That the wheels keep coming off again with increasing regularity, is proof that a more significant roadworthiness check is in order.

To argue for reform is not to undermine or reject the Good Friday Agreement – it is simply to acknowledge that, with the passage of time, the changes in our society (evidenced not least in the growth of Alliance) and with the benefit of having tested the structures in practice (and in some cases almost to destruction) there is room – actually more than room – there is a necessity for reform.

The Good Friday Agreement was always designed to be a foundation on which we could build a better, more shared and prosperous future for all our people: it was never and should never become the ceiling of our ambitions for Northern Ireland.

Our proposals for reform enshrine the right of parties to be in government based on the strength of their electoral mandate; however, they remove the right of any one party to deny the people of Northern Ireland a government.

They allow those who wish to get on with the work of government to do so and those who refuse to sit it out if they choose – no-one is being excluded, unlike the current absurdity where everyone is. And, Conference, I doubt that either of the two main parties would actually walk away from Government if they thought for one second that it would continue in their absence.

Our proposals also ensure that we end reliance on parallel consent to measure cross-community support– ironically, the least cross-community votes of any in the Assembly, as the votes of genuine cross-community parties count for less than others. Instead, parallel consent would be replaced with weighted majority voting, which would incentivise cooperation in a way that mutually reinforced vetoes have not and cannot.

It is fair to say that I had my disagreements with Brandon Lewis when he was Secretary of State, but his recent Belfast Telegraph article on reform had me nodding in agreement. So much so, I will actually quote him.

Writing about the Good Friday Agreement, he said:

“We must be honest about the fact that it was a brilliant framework for peace but is proving a poor foundation for effective government.

The question we must dare to ask ourselves is: what next? How can the Agreement be evolved to better support effective and resilient government for all the people of Northern Ireland? How must the structure of Stormont be reinforced so that it is not so fragile?”

Now, whilst I would have appreciated Brandon asking himself these questions when he was in a position to actually do something about them, I nevertheless welcome his intervention, as these are the very questions we have been raising now for many years.

Stephen mentioned earlier that he was part of the Alliance GFA talks team 25 years ago – as a child prodigy, obviously.

He is of course far too modest to quote himself, but we recently unearthed an article he and Sean Neeson authored back in 1998, in a special edition of the Fordham Law Review, marking the signing of the GFA.

In it, he wrote of a need to move 'beyond the band-aid' solution to the problems of Northern Ireland; he wrote that the designation system 'risked institutionalising division'; that the use of cross-community votes based on those designations 'could become a hostage to fortune'; and that mandatory coalition 'can create unwilling partners in government' and government in Northern Ireland could, therefore, become fragmented.

Very prescient insights from our very own Nostradamus. If any of you are interested in future World Cup or Grand National Winners, Stephen is available to advise you, for a fee, of course!

More recently, during the negotiations that led to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, I was told that the best way to make the case for reform was to for Alliance to grow and demonstrate the strength of that section of our community that does not designate as unionist or nationalist.

Well, Conference, we've done just that.

We have shown that far from being a niche position, non-aligned voters now represent a fifth of the Assembly; Alliance is the third largest party, the same size as the UUP and SDLP combined. But rather than unlocking the Assembly's rigid designation system, we remain frozen by the system's inherent vetoes and an unwillingness to embrace change.

In previous Assembly mandates, we were asked to accept that non-aligned MLAs votes counted for less than everyone else.

That wasn't acceptable when it was 6 out of 108 MLAs and it most definitely not acceptable now when it's 18 out of 90. However, the growth of Alliance isn't what makes it unacceptable: it simply makes the inherent inequality and discrimination more glaring.

To sit in the Chamber and listen to others wax lyrical about being treated like second class citizens, when their votes count for more than ours is frankly an affront to democracy. Not only is it not acceptable, it might well be unlawful, and conference, we are willing to put that to the test if we have to.

Because this isn't just about us as a political party and the way in which our votes and our voters are made count for less. It is about how ransom politics disadvantages everyone in Northern Ireland.

We only have to think back a few weeks to the debacle surrounding the Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Act, or Dáithí's Law – named for 6 year old Dáithí Mac Gabhann. The Act could not be commenced as planned due to the lack of Assembly. The DUP, utterly immune to shame, insisted that this life and death issue affecting over 140 people on the waiting list, should be resolved at Westminster.

Daithi's family have been tireless campaigners on this issue and they are careful to remain politically neutral, but I will say this: I am profoundly uncomfortable that they were put through several weeks of unnecessary stress and uncertainty while we all worked through the intricacies of parliamentary procedures and even an Assembly recall in order to bottom out how the Act could be commenced.

That is beyond unnecessary when the Assembly that passed the Act could have commenced it and approve the regulations, the fastest route to delivery.

I would like to pay tribute to Dáithí and his parents Máirtín and Seph, whose bravery, determination and drive to raise awareness and to change the law around organ donation has been an inspiration to all of us.

Thankfully, Dáithí's Law was able to be commenced via Westminster, using some fairly archaic processes and will take effect in June of this year – and I want to thank Stephen and Niamh for working with others to make that happen. However, there is a long list of issues being held up by the lack of Assembly where that is not necessarily an option and certainly not the best option: from budget certainty for next year, to health reform; from Gillen Review recommendations to a Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls; from animal welfare legislation to a hate crime bill.

This list is not exhaustive and the longer we go on without an Executive, the longer it will become. It would be dishonest to pretend that with an Executive and Assembly we can do everything, but without one, we can do nothing.

The case for reform may be undisputable, but it will be resisted because it privileges the two main designations and because it provides the two main parties with vetoes and blocks that they can abuse.

However, with the announcement of the Windsor Framework this week and the "Stormont Brake" it is even more crucial to ensure that, whatever mechanism is used to give MLAs a say over the EU laws that will apply in Northern Ireland, will not create more instability and further opportunities for stand-offs and walk outs.

The Windsor Framework is generally a much better deal than the Johnson/Frost Protocol, which we have always acknowledged was clunky and bureaucratic and which needed to be refined. The oven-ready deal that Boris and even members of the DUP initially hailed as a success, turned out to be a turkey, one that this party voted against in both the European Parliament and Westminster.

However, we also recognised that the way to resolve those issues was through information sharing, market surveillance, cooperation and negotiation between the UK and EU, not a series of unilateral actions and legal threats.

The deal we have now is the one we might have had in 2019, had we had a sensible and diligent Prime Minister at the helm rather than someone who knowingly and wilfully over-promised to unionists, leaving them high and dry, but also signed up to the Protocol knowing full-well that he had no intention of implementing it. No serious renegotiation was ever going to be possible with a bad faith actor such as that in Number 10.

Of course, the DUP, will try to claim that any progress made is as a result of their collapsing Stormont, whilst of course simultaneously trying to distance themselves from the deal.

However, in that respect (and I stress in that respect alone) Boris Johnson has helpfully demonstrated in his comments this week, that had he still been in charge this deal would never have been reached.

So, it was the change in Prime Minister and not the collapse of Stormont that made Windsor Framework possible.

The Alliance Party tests for any renegotiation were simple. As protocol pragmatists, like the vast majority of people and businesses, we wanted to protect our dual market access to GB and the EU; ensure the scale and nature of checks at the Irish Sea ports were minimised; and that any changes to the Protocol were mutually agreed and therefore sustainable and stable. That would allow businesses to have the certainty they need and, hopefully, create a basis for better future relationships between London and Brussels, should further issues emerge in future.

In as far as the trading arrangements go, those basic tests appear to have been largely achieved and credit is due to Rishi Sunak and his team and to Maroš Šefčovič and his team for what they have been able to deliver.

However, as we set out in our meeting with the Prime Minister and Secretary of State earlier this week, and in follow-up correspondence, our remaining concern is that, having managed to get to this point, the implementation of the Stormont Brake does not act to further destabilise Stormont, relying as it does on the Petition of Concern mechanism.

Whilst the Prime Minister said that the intention is for the triggering of the brake to be an act of last resort, and that the threshold for doing so should be exceptionally high - the same was said of the original Petition of Concern mechanism in the Good Friday Agreement yet, due to lack of legislative clarity,



they were tossed around like confetti at times in the Assembly. Such flagrant abuse frustrated Assembly business, eroded interparty relationships over many, and was the reason we refused to go into Government in 2016.

It is, therefore, imperative that the threshold for use of the Brake is clearly defined in legislation, and is enforceable and justiciable, rather than merely aspirational.

Further, the Petition of Concern appears at first reading not to trigger an Assembly vote, but instead to automatically refer the issue to the UK government for action.

Far from addressing the democratic deficit created by no longer having MEPs to help shape EU laws that apply here, this could gift a minority the ability to wage a war of attrition on Northern Ireland's continued membership of the Single Market, against the wishes of most people here.

That has the potential to create both political and trading uncertainty, which would far outweigh the economic benefits of this deal.

It is particularly of concern as the Petition of Concern appears to compel the UK Government to act; however, what is less clear is whether that action would be Government implementing that veto or simply considering the issue. If the latter, it is important that we get clarity on how that consideration will take place and within what parameters.

And of course, if a vote is to happen in the Assembly, it needs to be a proper test of cross-community consent – via a weighted majority – and not allow any party to exercise a veto on progress, something that was already provided for in the original Protocol legislation.

The Prime Minister sought to reassure us on these issues, and we will continue to work constructively with Government to ensure that we maximise the benefits and reap the full rewards of the opportunity that the Windsor Framework presents.

As a side note, it was rather surreal to hear the Prime Minister, talking up the enormous benefit to the NI economy from dual market access to two of the biggest markets in the GB and EU, given that he campaigned to remove that same benefit from the rest of the UK...

There have also been some significant developments for the party since we last met. We finally bade farewell to our old Headquarters at 88 University Street which has served us well over many years, but was no longer fit for purpose. We're about to move into new, more modern and accessible accommodation in Newtownabbey. It has been a mammoth task to complete the move and I want to thank Sharon Lowry, Billy Webb, Stewart Dickson and the Admin and Finance

Committee, and particularly Jim Hendron for ensuring that it all completed successfully.

Jim in particular dedicated a huge amount of time and energy to ensuring that all the legal and contractual paperwork was completed and so, in recognition of that and both his and Máire's lifetime of service to Alliance, Party Executive agreed last month that our new Headquarters will be named HENDRON HOUSE in their honour.

We are also about to open a Party Office in Derry-Londonderry for the first time since the 1970s and I am looking forward to further building Alliance's profile in the North West. Thanks to those who donated and to Foyle Association for making this possible. It will hopefully provide us with a useful base not only in the city itself but also across the wider area. Our MLA team are already on a rota to hold surgeries with the local Councillors in the months ahead.

And, thanks to the growth of the party, we also now have a much larger staff team, at the Assembly and in Headquarters. In these uncertain times politically, it is heartening to see so many capable and talented people join Sharon's team and help us deliver better for the Party and for the people we serve. Thank you to each of you.

As with last year, of course, I am speaking to you only a few short weeks ahead of our next electoral test, the local government elections.

However, before I turn my attention to that electoral contest, I want to pay a particular tribute to former Belfast City Councillor, Steve McBride, who passed away after a long illness just last month. Those of you who knew Steve will know that he was a barrister and local Councillor in South Belfast who served as High Sherriff between in the mid 1990s.

He served as Party Chair in the 1990s, and in 1996 was elected to the Northern Ireland Forum, representing Belfast South. Sadly, and despite coming third in terms of 1st preference votes, he narrowly missed out on an Assembly seat in 1998's Northern Ireland Assembly election. I am sure he would have been enormously proud of the two seats which we now hold in South Belfast. Steve lost his Council seat in 2001, in the midst of a truly vitriolic campaign against Alliance - and my first foray into politics - because we had supported the election of the first SF Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast.

Steve's political service spanned a period when politics was rough and when the City Hall was a particularly pugnacious environment, acting as a lightning rod for many of the divisive issues of the day in the absence of devolution. Standing up for Alliance values took courage, determination and resilience, which Steve had in spades. Our thoughts and prayers are very much with Steve's family and we are hugely grateful to him for his service to the Party and to the people of South Belfast.

I also want to offer our thanks to some of our councillors who have decided to stand down from local Government. Council is often a thankless task and Councillors rarely get the recognition they deserve for the work that they do, both in their constituencies and the council, delivering essential services and developing the cleaner, safer, greener and more shared communities of the future.

Unlike the Assembly and thanks largely to the successful legal challenge mounted by the late Addie Morrow against Councillors failing to discharge their statutory duties after the Anglo Irish Agreement, Council is the one part of government here that actually works. Consistently. Day-in, day-out. Delivering on what really matters to people. And our team of local councillors play a pivotal role in ensuring that it works well.

So as they step down, I want to say thank you to Gavin Walker, Gillian Greer, Scott Wilson and Deborah Girvan from Ards and North Down; to Brian Pope from Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon; to Michelle Kelly from Belfast; Chris McCaw from Causeway Coast and Glens; Fiona Cole from Lisburn and Castlereagh and last but not least, David Reid from Mid and East Antrim. I want to wish you good health and happiness and every success in whatever your future holds.

I also want to thank this years "Chain Gang": to Michael Long, who despite the name, served the shortest term as Lord Mayor of Belfast in history last May but who still managed to pack in more selfies than his predecessor Kate Nicholl had managed in the previous 11 months!

To the Mayor of Mid and East Antrim, Noel Williams, and Mayor of Ards and North Down, Karen Douglas, and to our fabulous Michelles - Kelly and Guy, Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast and Deputy Mayor of Lisburn and Castlereagh, respectively, it has honestly been a joy to see you all representing Alliance and our values of inclusion, respect and diversity in your leadership roles over the last year. I wish you continued success in what remains of your term.

Because of course, with the impending local Government election our thoughts are now turning to the next term and what the Alliance Party can achieve for the people of Northern Ireland over the course of the next 4 years, building on the successes and delivery of the last four.

Conference, every election is important but I believe that the local elections on 18th May are particularly so, both for this party and for the people we serve.

We have a real opportunity to further expand our representation right across every council in Northern Ireland. We currently have councillors in 10 of the 11 councils, so I'm looking to you Mid Ulster to make the breakthrough and make it a clean sweep. As a keen Pokémon Go player, you know my mantra - you gotta catch 'em all!!

However, we also have a real opportunity to increase our representation in those councils where we have elected representatives already and build towards the

next Westminster and Assembly elections. That's why it's been so encouraging to see the amount of campaigning, surveying, leafletting and door-knocking going on in every constituency. It is that activism sustained from the Assembly campaign last year and not just at elections but between elections which can deliver real gains.

That focus on delivery, on what really matters - improving health and education; protecting our environment; delivering accessible transport, safer streets, affordable care for children and adults, sustainable public services; building vibrant communities, fair housing, successful businesses - a society that works for us and empowers us, is the hope that people need right now.

The hope that together, we can elect politicians who will listen. Who will work with the community. For the community. On what really matters. Delivering real solutions to the real issues you face.

The hope that together, we can end the politics of fear, distraction and division; the endless cycle of ransom politics that stops us moving forward together.

We have just weeks until the 18th May: weeks to offer that hope to people who are despairing at the state of politics, who are sick and tired of the wreckers. The blockers. The wasters. The people who take the votes but deliver nothing for them in return. Those who hold Stormont and our future to ransom.

We need to share our vision of a future where better is possible.

Door by door, street by street.

Confident in our record of delivery.

And ambitious and optimistic for the future.

Because Alliance Works.

Conference, let's grasp that opportunity.