

Naomi Long MLA
Leader's Address
Saturday, 25 March 2017

Distinguished guests, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

As always, it is an honour and a privilege to stand before you today to address this 47th Alliance Party Annual Conference. It is a particular privilege to be able to welcome you here to my own constituency in East Belfast.

It also feels a little strange, after 10 years of doing so to introduce the Party Leader, to now be doing so as Party Leader for the first time.

After almost six months in post, I am finally adjusting to my new title and role, though it did take a while. In the early weeks of leadership, I pre-recorded a radio interview. I promptly forgot about it, and the following morning when I was listening to the news, they said that they would be speaking with the Alliance leader next. For a second, I wondered what David was being interviewed about before hearing my own voice being broadcast.

David's 15 years of leadership left us as a party in good health and good spirits, ready to grasp the opportunities ahead for Alliance and most of all, for Northern Ireland. And so I want to begin my remarks today by thanking David for his dedication to that role and to this party over many, many years.

Whilst we have had other opportunities to say thank you as a party, David, I want to reiterate my thanks here at our annual conference, not only for what you have done for the Alliance Party and for Northern Ireland during that time, but also for the way in which you have done it - often at great personal cost, but always with good grace and real dedication.

When I spoke of David's leadership at our special dinner in November to mark his time as Party Leader, I said that leadership is not just a position you hold, but an attitude you have, and that has proven yet again to be the case with David.

Over the last number of months I have taken to jokingly referring to David as Leader Emeritus, but though said in jest it is a title well-earned for to call him "former leader" would not reflect his current role within the party.

It speaks volumes of David's commitment to Alliance that unlike many politicians when their time as leader ends, he has neither disappeared nor become a critic or even a passenger, but has continued to play an active and valuable role, not just as an MLA but within the leadership of Alliance and for his continued support and guidance, I am hugely grateful.

Thank you also to Anne and the family - we owe you all a huge debt for continuing to put up with the demands we make on his and your time when you thought you were finally getting him back. When I took on the leadership about five months ago, I undertook to do a number of things, key among which was to work to build the party and its membership outside our traditional areas of strength.

I did so with a view to the next elections which I rather optimistically thought would be the local Government elections in 2019. As we all now know, that optimism was misplaced; however, the strategy was not.

I have always believed that the vision which we have as a party for an inclusive, open and fair society is one which is as relevant to people in Lisnaskea as in Lisburn, in Newry as in Newtownards, in Derry as in Dundonald and the response to our membership drive confirms that to be true.

That work of reaching out beyond our traditional base, and renewing and reinvigorating our local associations across Northern Ireland, starting with my meetings with Associations, was reflected membership growth in every constituency.

One of the best jobs I get to do as leader is to sign the new members welcome letters and to see not just the number of letters each day but the geographic spread of those addresses has been a real encouragement, as was meeting many of you in a packed Long Gallery in Parliament buildings in January.

For those of you who are with us as today as new members, I want to welcome you and thank you for your support.

However, that strategy was also put to its first electoral test with the collapse of the Assembly in January and the snap election which that triggered at the start of this month.

At a time when there was little good news for liberal politics either nationally or internationally and in an election which was incredibly polarised, we managed to buck that trend, polling our highest number of votes since 1979 and our highest vote share since 1987.

Over 70,000 people voted Alliance across Northern Ireland – a 50% increase in our vote and in many constituencies our vote doubled or tripled from the last election only eight months ago. Not only did we hold our eight seats with increased votes despite the drop from six to five MLAs per constituency, but we were the runner up in both North Belfast with Nuala McAllister and in South Down with Patrick Brown.

I think that success was down to two main factors – the quality of the campaign which we ran as a party and the quality of the candidates.

Thanks to the recruitment and growth in the party, we were able to field candidates in every area who were genuinely grounded in that constituency and capable not only of representing Alliance to the people but also of representing the concerns of local people in our campaign.

I want to thank each of you who had the courage to step up and run as a candidate. Whilst many of you did so knowing that you were unlikely to win an Assembly seat this time, you still worked your constituency and took the Alliance message out into neighbourhoods that hadn't been canvassed by Alliance for a generation. Without your efforts those results could not have been achieved.

You have recruited new voters and new members and are well placed now for potential gains in the local council elections. My advice to you is simple: work like you won and next time you will.

So to Colm, Noreen, Stephen Donnelly, Jackie, Tara, Fay, Danny, Patricia, Chris McCaw, Emmet, Nuala, Patrick, Sorcha, Chris Lyttle, Stewart, Paula, Kellie, David, Stephen Farry and Trevor – thank you. I could not have been prouder of you all.

And could you all keep your diaries free for the next few months – you never know when there might be another election....And this time we'll get Nuala and Paddy elected too.

As I did my tours of constituencies each Saturday of the campaign, I was struck by two things: Firstly, the enthusiasm and dedication of our volunteers who, regardless of the weather, were determined to get the Alliance message out in every area, and secondly the welcome that message received as we chatted to people on doorsteps and in town centres across Northern Ireland.

I want to thank all of you who participated in the campaign and gave of your time, talent and money to make it a success.

Actually, I was also struck by a third thing: my dog Daisy now officially qualifies as a celebrity, thanks to social media, TV and newspaper appearances – I have a sneaking suspicion that quite a few people who came up to us to chat were at least as interested in meeting the dog as discussing our manifesto pledges. And that was only the candidates.

I also want to say a brief but very sincere thank you to our staff team. For any party to run two major elections in eight months, and to do so not only at such short notice and to such tight deadlines but to deliver the successful campaign and results which they did is remarkable. What is more remarkable is how they delivered those elections on a shoestring budget.

That they also managed to simultaneously provide us with support for the talks, organise our Annual Conference for this weekend, and keep the party ticking over is nothing short of miraculous. To Sharon, Debbie, Sam, Nuala, Connie, Ben, Scott, Michael and Lauren – thank you for all that you do, most of which goes unseen but all of which is hugely appreciated.

To our constituency and research staff who absorbed the upheaval, disruption and stress of setting up offices after May's election only to have the future thrown into chaos 8 months later, but who have continued to provide the vital constituency service on which much of our success rests – thank you for all of your patience and dedication.

Whilst we were delighted at the election result we of course never lost sight of the fact that the election in itself was the result of political failure and, unless the difficulties which brought about that collapse can be resolved, then the future of devolution looks bleak.

Whilst it was a successful election for Alliance, the mark of a truly successful election for us and for Northern Ireland will be if the devolved institutions can be reformed and power sharing restored on a more sustainable footing and start the job of delivering real change for the people of Northern Ireland.

Regardless of the size of the mandate of any party, it is not worth the ballot papers is cast on, unless you are able to exercise it by working together with others. That is the challenge which we face now and that will be the challenge which remains if the current talks fail to produce an Executive on Monday and if another election is called.

Bertie Ahern this week described the prospect of another election as “pointless time wasting” which it undoubtedly is. We will return to Stormont as we have after this month's election with mostly the same parties, the same people and the same problems. However, it is more serious than just a waste of time.

We are days away from the end of the financial year yet we have no budget. We are days away from the triggering of Brexit yet we have no Brexit plan. We are already overdue the Assembly vote needed to set next year's regional rate yet we have no Assembly. We have no Programme for Government – in fact we have no government at all.

This is no time for any parties to indulge themselves in the vanity project that is another election. Our community and voluntary sector, our essential public services, like the health service and education, are already feeling the dire effects of budget uncertainty in reduced services and job losses. We owe it to those who rely on those services and to those who deliver them, to get a functioning executive established now and get back to doing the job that we were elected to do.

Whilst the collapse of the Executive was disappointing, but it was also predictable. We realised towards the end of the previous mandate that significant reform was required to make it fit for purpose and so when we entered negotiations in May about the justice ministry, we were clear about the failings of the previous mandate and offered five clear steps to address them.

Firstly, addressing deficiencies in governance – and in particular the abuse of the petition of concern – in order not only that we could end the veto on socially progressive legislation for which there is overwhelming public support, but also that we could ensure that no one party could exercise a veto over others was long overdue.

Secondly, the failure of political parties to confront legacy issues including ongoing paramilitarism in our community with integrity, was a growing point of tension between parties which needed resolved for the sake of devolution but more importantly to improve the lives of those living with its consequences.

Thirdly, we recognised that there was a need for parties to face up to and address the costs of segregation and division in society to allow us to build a more shared and integrated society but also as part of the means of addressing the very real budget pressures facing departments and put our public finances on a more sustainable footing.

Fourthly, we sought a plan to develop and promote integrated education in Northern Ireland as a means of delivering not only high quality and sustainable education but also to meeting the demand of parents for their children to be educated together.

Fifthly and finally, we wanted to secure additional funding for skills to ensure that not only could tuition fees be maintained at their current level without negative impact on the universities, but also to we could attract the kind of high skilled jobs and opportunities which we believe are necessary if we are to create a more dynamic and balanced economy.

The outright rejection of our five points confirmed for us that any Executive formed would not only fail to address the key emerging challenges for our community and for devolution, but in the manner of that rejection, would potentially struggle to deliver anything at all. As such, it was not an executive in which we could take up a role.

Walking away from Government is not a choice that any party makes lightly but our priority was how and where we could make most progress on the manifesto pledges we had made during the Elections. Our manifestos are not empty documents, printed for a launch during the campaign but then left to gather dust between elections. They are the documents which drive our work and focus our efforts between elections, whether that be in government or opposition.

The decision to go into opposition was not without risk, but reality within months our position was vindicated and within eight months the very issues which we had raised contributed to the Executive's collapse.

Throughout our message has been consistent and clear. We are offering people a positive alternative to the politics of the past and we are determined to change our broken politics to better serve our rapidly changing society.

Whether in government or in opposition we intend to drive change, for good.

That means firstly good government.

As I prepare my conference speech each year, I usually read through my speech from the year before.

When I addressed conference last year and in almost every preceding year I did so in the wake of scandal – some accusation of corruption, cronyism or greed – at the heart of our political system – whether it was an expenses scandal, dodgy land deals, or some other allegation which cast a shadow of mistrust over our political system. Last year we met in the wake of an expenses scandal at Stormont, and fresh allegations emerging from the probe into NAMA and the Project Eagle sale.

This year the whiff of corruption and cronyism rapidly became intolerable, as further allegations emerged about the Social Investment Fund – public money – our money - being used to line the pockets of those who the Chief Constable described as “community workers by day and paramilitaries by night”.

That a self-proclaimed UDA commander, who brazenly claims to be “homeland security” – a direct challenge to the rule of law – can continue as Chief Executive of an organisation which is in receipt of Government funds would be completely unthinkable elsewhere.

It is long past time that it was unthinkable here.

And we stand here today without an Assembly in place and with the future of devolution still uncertain, in large part due to another scandal – that of the botched renewable heat incentive - and of the inability of the Executive to deal maturely, competently and transparently with the crisis which it precipitated.

Conference, I want to pay tribute to the work which Trevor Lunn did as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, diligently and patiently drawing out key information and exposing the flaws in the scheme and in how it was developed, implemented and monitored.

The murky influence of Special Advisors who in some parties appear to be directing ministers rather than the other way around; the attempts to conceal from public scrutiny the beneficiaries of the scheme; the fact that even when the impact of the lack of cost controls had implications for the budgets of other departments, the extent and cause of the projected overspend were hidden from Executive colleagues; the lack of full disclosure to the Assembly about the real reasons for the overspend exposed a systemic failure of government.

Compounded by the fact that those who had presided over the mess seemed to be happy to take power, but not so happy to accept any responsibility, this episode highlighted for all to see the need for real change in how the Executive conducts its business, in terms of openness and accountability.

It seems that history keeps repeating itself but yet nothing is learned from the repetition. Nothing changes, except that what was the whiff of corruption is now rapidly become a stench which hangs

heavily over the guilty and innocent alike. And with every fresh revelation, every new allegation, the public's trust and confidence in politics and politicians is further eroded.

Nowhere is that more clear than in the area of political donations. Year after year Alliance has pressed for change, for swifter progress towards a fully open and transparent politics, and year after year other parties have sought to prevent that openness being delivered despite the fact that, in doing so, they further fuel the public's mistrust and suspicion.

Public scrutiny is key to delivering open, transparent and accountable governance. No politician should seek to pause progress towards delivering it, and the public will rightly question the motives of those who do.

In every other part of the UK, publication of any donation or donations from a single source of £7.5k or more is mandatory; however, NI is exempt, a decision by the Secretary of State which they justify on the basis of security.

However, the time has long since passed where the security situation can be used to justify such a lack of transparency.

You cannot argue on one hand that NI is a safe and stable region for inward investment and tourism, whilst simultaneously arguing on the other that it is so abnormal and dangerous that the same degree of transparency around donors cannot apply here as elsewhere.

Despite prolonged and sustained assault by both dissident republican and loyalist paramilitaries, which saw our party offices damaged and destroyed and the homes and lives of party staff and elected representatives threatened, we have continued to publish in line with the standards in the rest of the UK.

Alliance again called on the Secretary of State to end donor secrecy when we wrote to him during the RHI scandal in December and continue to make the case in the talks process for an immediate lifting of the NI donor publication exemption.

Thanks to an amendment which I made to the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions Bill), all donations made since Jan 2014 which meet the publication threshold in GB, can be made public when the security exemption is lifted. Yet even now in the current talks there are attempts to limit any change to future donations only.

We have been and will continue to press hard on openness, transparency and accountability both between Ministers in the Executive, between the Executive and the Assembly, and crucially between political parties and the public we are elected to serve.

We have an opportunity to deliver good government during the current talks process which we must not squander.

We also remain focused on delivering good services. For those of you who were at the dinner last night, I'm sure you will recall Tom Ekin's speech – I suspect it is one you will never forget! – and specifically when he said that if the relationships between parties are to improve and normalise, and if the Executive and Assembly are to regain the confidence of the public, they need to start doing things. They need to focus on delivery.

That is all the more the case given the pressures which our key public services face. Our health service is facing a funding gap of £200 million pounds this year alone and the combination of increasing pressures from an ageing population and advances in medical care make the future grave.

Last night, David Gordon said that if you could read the Bengoa Report and not wake up in a sweat during the night, then you were a braver person than he was. That report makes for stark reading. Our national health service is simply not sustainable without major reform.

I want to thank Paula Bradshaw for her work on Bengoa on the Health Committee and for her measured and sensible approach to the need for reform. I believe as she does that such are the challenges facing our national health service and such is its fundamental importance to each and every one of us, that we need a cross-party compact agreed as part of the negotiations that party political campaigning on health reforms, regardless of who becomes health minister, is out of bounds.

We need all parties to sign up to the road map presented by Bengoa and work with patients and clinical staff to shape a service fit for purpose for the future, which delivers high quality care and is financially sustainable. That cross party approach has allowed real progress in places like Glasgow and Manchester and our constituents deserve no less.

Yes the decisions will be difficult and some will be unpopular, but our choice is not between the current service we have and a reformed service but between a reformed service and a service in collapse. The choice is between a national health service and a notional health service.

Whilst health is stark it is not the only service facing mounting pressures. We also face huge challenges in our education system – the challenge of empty desks, limited resources, a lack of coherent planning and the continuing challenge of educational underachievement which limits the opportunities and life chances of too many of our young people.

I want to thank Chris Lyttle for the work which he has done both as vice chair of the education committee in holding the Minister to account but also in East Belfast where he has been one of the political drivers behind Eastside Learning, aimed at driving up aspiration and attainment in education particularly in disadvantaged areas.

We also need to focus on fostering good relationships, not just between parties in the Assembly but also in the community. I think most people would recognise that whilst the peace process has delivered relative stability, the reconciliation process has been the Cinderella element of that work.

Good Prospects for young people so that they build a future here rather than leave.

And last but not least, it also requires good leadership.

There has been much talk for obvious reasons in recent days of what leadership looks like. The passing of Martin McGuinness once again put the nature of his leadership in the spotlight but it also, in how people responded to news of his death, put the wider quality of leadership under scrutiny.

As someone who grew up in the 1970s and 80s, I am under no illusions as to the role of Martin McGuinness and the impact of the IRA campaign on our community. I did not and I will never seek

either to diminish the wrong that was done or the grief that was caused nor in any way to justify the use of violence in Northern Ireland.

It is not acceptable now and it was not acceptable then.

Neither do I whitewash out the broken and profoundly unjust nature of the society into which people like Martin McGuinness were born. I understand the anger which led many young people right across our community to turn to violence; nevertheless, I still believe that choice was wrong, destructive and ultimately did more harm than good.

In all that I have said and done since I have acknowledged the genuine and justifiable anger, hurt and pain of those most directly affected by that violence: those who bear the physical, emotional and mental scars of the terrorism which gripped our society for over 30 years.

But I recognise that in these last twenty plus years, he not only moved away from violence but sought to bring others with him. I recognise the value of that work which he did not only in challenging his opponents but also stretching his own constituency, throughout his time in office.

People like Martin McGuinness, Ian Paisley and David Ervine contributed in word and deed to the Troubles and to the painful legacy which we have inherited but I acknowledge and appreciate that they also contributed to the peace when they moved from very entrenched positions towards the relative peace that we now enjoy. That move allowed progress to be made towards a brighter future and for that I am grateful.

However, that darker legacy is still with us and even this week we continue to wrestle with it, not just in finding the right words of condolence for a family which have lost a husband, a father, and grand dad, and of thanks for the good which he did, without increasing the pain of others, but also in how to complete the work of addressing the needs of victims and survivors and their varying desire for truth, justice, practical and emotional support and recognition in a way which demonstrates integrity, compassion and honesty.

If we are to do so, if we are to transition beyond bitterness and hatred, beyond division and conflict, beyond revenge and recrimination, then that demands that we reconcile ourselves not only with each other but also with our painful and broken past. Ultimately, in life we make peace with our enemies not with our friends and we have to find within us some generosity, some grace, some bigger vision of a better future that helps us find the strength to do so.

The past cannot be undone but it does not have to be repeated. It cannot and should not be erased but it must not forever overshadow and limit the future.

We must find a way to make hope flourish in the darkest places.

And so I turn my thoughts to other leaders – some with us in this room, others who have now passed on – who lived through those times but who chose peace when violence was the more obvious choice. Who chose building a shared future when others were tearing the present apart.

I think of the leadership of those who came together in 1970 and formed the Alliance Party as a radical alternative to increasingly divisive politics, at a time when others took Northern Ireland over the brink of destructive action and reaction. Who made hope flourish in the darkest moment.

I think of the leadership of those who joined and led the party, throughout the 1970s and 1980s and who worked ceaselessly for peace. Who spoke out courageously and without fear or favour against injustice and violence and continued to be a voice of reason and calm in unreasonable and turbulent times. Who made hope flourish in the darkest days.

I think of the leadership of those who led the party through successive rounds of talks and negotiations which led to the Good Friday Agreement and which have been necessary many times since as we have made our faltering steps in the peace and political process. Who were consistent in their commitment to devolution and in their support for the rule of law. Who recognised that reconciliation was not a soft option but a hard necessity if we were to secure real peace, not merely the absence of violence.

They offered a real alternative to the darkness and ensured that the hope of real change could continue to flourish.

We are the people who carry forward that legacy: who are charged with being the change-makers now and tomorrow. Who have a vision of a society which is not about us and them, but about what we can achieve together.

We have a rich and diverse membership, one which is growing rapidly in every part of Northern Ireland; a membership made up of people of all ages, all backgrounds, of different ethnicities, sexual orientations, faiths and abilities: what brings us together, what unites us and makes us strong are our shared beliefs and common values.

Those values bridge across our membership, from the founder members of this party to the newest members in the room. We are joined and connected by a fundamental belief that our people, however diverse, have more in common than divides them.

When it comes to difference, we have a choice: we can use it to divide people and make it a weakness or we can embrace and celebrate that diversity, and make it our strength. In Alliance we choose to celebrate it.

We have a strong and a proud legacy, but more importantly we have an important job to do in this society, continuing to offer an alternative vision for the future: an aspirational vision of a society which is progressive, liberal, fair and open, in which rights are respected, talent is celebrated, creativity is nurtured and each person is valued.

That is a vision which only a party which itself is progressive, liberal, fair and open - a party that has a diverse and vibrant membership - a party committed to offering hope for the future, not fear of it - can truly represent.

That's why our message to people is a confident one. If you share our ambition, if you want that vision too, then join us and be part of making that change.

Today in Parliament Buildings just across the road, the future of devolution hangs in the balance. The clock is ticking down to Monday's deadline.

Whilst others may secretly hanker for a period of direct rule or feel that another election may offer the chance of a better result for their party, we are clear that neither will solve the problems which face us today.

Voter turnout in the Assembly election was the highest we have seen since that first Assembly election after the Good Friday Agreement was signed. They saw the institutions in real jeopardy and the clear message they gave to all of us elected was that they want to see devolution restored and delivering for them.

Our peace process and our institutions are imperfect and unfinished. They are a work in progress. The clear message from voters was the one echoed by Bill Clinton in Long Tower Church on Thursday: "Finish the work".

Conference, we are up for that task and whatever is ahead, be it talks or elections, whether in government or opposition, we will play a positive and constructive role in raising the standards of Government; of moving beyond the divisions of our past; of building peace and reconciliation; of driving forward a progressive, liberal, just and vibrant society.

Of being a radical alternative to the established binary politics.

Of ensuring that hope continues to flourish.

Of delivering change. For good.

Thank you.