

**Naomi Long MLA
Leader's Speech
Alliance Conference
March 2, 2019**

Distinguished guests, fellow delegates, friends – I am delighted to be here with you in the Stormont Hotel for our 49th Alliance Annual Spring conference.

Each year, as I start to write my conference speech, I read last year's notes and reflect on any political progress over the intervening twelve months.

It will come as no surprise to anyone in this room, that process didn't take much time this year. However, for any of you harbouring the hope that my speech is also shorter - I can assure you that you aren't getting off that lightly.

It is hard to believe that we meet again this year, for the **third** year in a row in the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly; without any clarity or certainty regarding the likely outcome of Brexit; and without any clear pathway from the chaos in which we are languishing to where we need **urgently** to be.

Just this week, also for the third year in a row, quietly and without any debate or scrutiny, absent of any real challenge or meaningful local input, a budget for Northern Ireland was laid, in the form of a written statement at Westminster. A written statement – not even afforded the limited opportunity for an hour of questions provided by an oral statement.

This is not how we should be governed. It is not good enough. And it needs to change. Yet it passed by with barely a whimper, so accustomed are people becoming to **not only** the appalling dereliction of duty exhibited by the main political parties, who have failed to find the accommodation required to allow us to do the jobs we were elected to do, **but also** to the equally appalling dereliction of duty by the Secretary of State, who has made no concerted effort to end this interminable drift **despite** it allegedly being her top priority.

I haven't seen Karen Bradley's to do list, but if restoration of the devolved institutions is **indeed** her number one issue, heaven help those whose concerns are further down the list. Her claim in the House of Commons that she has approached resolving the impasse with "**laser-like focus**" is evidence only that we can now add **lasers** to the list of things the Secretary of State knew nothing about when appointed to her current role.

Of course, the Secretary of State is not ultimately to blame for the current stand-off between the parties: however, she **is** responsible for her lack of urgency to either get the Assembly restored or put in place alternative arrangements to deliver government if parties continue to refuse to step up to their responsibilities.

When we met last year, we did so in the wake of the collapse of talks between SF and the DUP. We had just published our **Next Steps Forward** paper, setting out a range of options to try to address the outstanding issues: options which included the potential to legislate on some key issues at Westminster, to re-establish Assembly Committees in parallel with talks.

But perhaps the simplest yet most fundamental proposal was that an independent chair should be appointed and all-party talks convened as a matter of urgency.

Instead, we got...nothing. No attempt or effort to re-engage parties. A vacuum was allowed to open up and was filled with recriminations, with claim and counter claim as to whether there was a deal, a draft deal, an accommodation, which has poisoned the atmosphere ever since and continued to cause rancour even in the most recent discussions between parties.

To be blunt, the time has long since passed for that argument to be put to rest. Irrespective of what anyone thought or hoped at the time, whatever there was in the lead up to February 14th last year, it clearly didn't work.

Had it done so we would have been here today talking about progress to deliver legislative change, such as Kellie Armstrong's Private Member's Bill on integrated education or the decisions on key infrastructure projects from the A5 to the North-South Interconnector, for which she has lobbied.

Paula Bradshaw would be telling us how the necessary legislative and policy reforms to deliver the Benigoa recommendations for health, which she has championed, have been implemented.

Trevor Lunn could update us on delivery of licencing law reform to support hospitality and tourism and on the actions being taken to renew and refine the mitigations needed to protect people from the worst effects of Welfare Reform.

Chris Lyttle would be reporting back on the progress made by the independent review of Education which he called for to address financial sustainability in schools, and on implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act.

We would be hearing from Stephen Farry about the work being done to mitigate the impact Brexit is **already** having on research collaboration in our universities and on job creation and economic growth.

Stewart Dickson would be outlining progress on prison reforms started by David Ford and on work to insure the "Farmer" Report recommendations, to keep families connected with prisoners, is fully implemented.

John Blair would be telling you how the Minister for Agriculture is responding to the Brexit challenge faced by the agri-foods sector and what progress there has been on the plans he is demanding to tackle the even bigger threat to all our futures that is climate change.

I could update you on progress to deliver a pension to those severely injured during the Troubles – people who carry the physical and mental scars with them each day and those who care for them, often at significant detriment to their financial security. I would have good news to share about the implementation of the Hart Inquiry recommendations to give the recognition and financial support so desperately needed by those who were victims of institutional abuse.

Perhaps the cross-party group on which I sat before the collapse of devolution, would have started to progress legislation to deliver equal marriage and finally bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of these islands.

But last February didn't deliver. And so we aren't in that position.

Instead, we're standing here over one year on and while our Assembly Team and our staff teams have been championing **all** these and dozens of **other** issues consistently and persistently, we hit the same brick wall of lack of a Minister, time and time again.

Though we represent the concerns with which we are confronted, day in and day out - as we meet with our constituents, with local businesses, as we talk to local GPs and hospital staff, as we visit schools and listen to parents, as we fill in Universal Credit claims and attend Personal Independence Payments appeals - we are denied the opportunity to effect the kind of **change** which is so clearly, desperately needed.

The kind of change people have a right to expect. **To demand.**

We can finger-point and assign blame between parties until we are blue in the face, but it will not move us forward and it will not deliver the progress which our community deserves. And I for one think that the public are sick and tired of bickering – of politicians fiddling while our public services and our economy burns.

Because we are not **simply standing still**: with every day that passes we not only lose opportunities to make progress but we fail stop the relentless deterioration in our public services, business and community sector confidence, community relations. And we continue to erode the public belief in politics as a means to deliver the change they **demand**.

All parties now need to focus our energy, our resources and our collective will to getting our differences **resolved**, government **reformed** and devolution **restored**.

That's why, in September, when there was no prospect of any government intervention, I initiated the first process to get all parties back into the same room.

Not only was that the first time the main parties had been in the same room for almost 8 months, but it was the first time **possibly since the Good Friday Agreement** that all of the parties and independents were actually included in any process.

Whilst that initial meeting did not result in much agreement – nor did I expect that it would - it did achieve **two** things: it demonstrated that, despite Government reluctance, it **was possible** to get all the parties to the table and it also made it abundantly clear that a **huge** amount of heavy lifting is required to re-establish trust and relationships between parties before any Executive can be restored.

It was and it remains clear that we need a **proper, structured and sustained process** if there is to be any prospect of devolution being restored.

In December, I travelled to a conference in Yale and Senator George Mitchell spoke of meeting with a group of paramilitaries who were engaged in talks to bring about a ceasefire to their war torn country. The talks had faltered and stalled. Communications had broken down. Things looked bleak.

He asked one of the lead negotiators “Do you see any light at the end of the tunnel?” Their reply sums up our situation perfectly: “Senator, there is always light. But right now, there is no tunnel.”

With that in mind, and in the continued absence of any process initiated by government, I again convened a round of all party discussions in January. Again, every party participated and, this time, we managed to get **agreement** on **two** things: that we should continue to meet more regularly as

party leaders and that, if the Assembly is to return, the institutions and **governance arrangements require significant reform.**

Because while the **Assembly** chamber has lain dormant, save for tourists and visitors over the last two years, the same cannot be said of the Senate Chamber at the opposite end of the building. There, under the scrutiny of the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry, any remaining doubts that the Executive was dysfunctional have been swept away by the tide of evidence **of the** depth and scale of that dysfunction.

Our experience in previous Executives and our complaints about the lack of collective decision making and responsibility within the Executive; about other parties' Special Advisors and Party apparatchiks wielding greater power and influence than Ministers; about lack of accountability of Ministers to the Assembly and about the utter disregard for due process, and openness and transparency were once simply dismissed by **both** the DUP and SF.

Well, no longer.

That our concerns were based in fact has been exposed by the forensic questioning of Sir Patrick Coghlan and his Inquiry Panel, whose incredulity at the lax approach to record keeping and the contempt of those in power for proper procedure was visible throughout the public hearings.

When we opted not to re-enter the Executive in 2016 unless there was significant reform and an equally significant change of attitude, we were right to **demand better** than what had gone before. And yet **even we** were unaware of just how far from the expected standards of good government the largest parties in the Executive **and the DUP in particular** had departed.

The Inquiry Report, due later this spring, will not make edifying reading, I suspect, and few if any of those who were involved in RHI will emerge covered in glory: however, it is important that we use it to learn lessons for the future not simply to rake over the past.

Not least among those lessons is the danger to good governance posed by a presumption that the **only** thing which matters is appeasing the demands of the two main parties, and in which even civil servants felt pressured to protect them from criticism and scrutiny rather than upholding due process.

That's why last month we published our **Better Government** proposals and have now sought meetings with the leaders to discuss our proposals for reform.

Because if and when there is a return to devolution, it has to be based on openness and transparency; proper accountability for Ministers and Advisors; collective responsibility and raising standards throughout government.

Only with genuine reform of the Petition of Concern, the replacing of parallel consent with weighted majority voting, and restructuring of the Executive to enhance and incentivise cooperation, will we have an Assembly and Executive which is not just restored, but which is fit for purpose, fit to deliver and sustainable in the longer term.

Talks to do so must start now. We need an independent chair to convene them: someone with the **impartiality** to command respect, with the **focus** to drive the process and with the **authority** to call it if parties fail to agree or engage seriously. And, if parties refuse to come, then they should not be paid. And if it becomes clear that there is no will to restore the Assembly, then it needs to be shelved

and alternative arrangements put in place to make decisions as we cannot continue in a state of suspended animation forever.

That process cannot wait, as some would wish, until Brexit is over because whatever happens over the next 27 days, it is clear that the slow motion car crash that is Brexit will not be over but only beginning.

Negotiating our future relationships with the world and planning for all of the contingencies will continue to consume the time, energy and resources of Government for years to come.

Just imagine that investment redirected towards building a sustainable economy, tackling health inequalities and poverty and investing in educating our young people for the modern digital revolution: it would create the kind of vibrant economic powerhouse which would benefit not only the UK, but also Ireland and the rest of Europe.

Instead, government spends millions of pounds of taxpayers money preparing to deploy the army in the event of no deal; stockpiling essential supplies; staging practice customs traffic jams - consisting of 57 trucks and a stray bin lorry; making contingency arrangements for shipping involving a ferry company with no boats, whose terms and conditions were cut and pasted from a fast food delivery company; while people are being issued with International Driving Licences written in biro to which their photograph is glued with Pritt Stick in something more reminiscent of 1950 Blue Peter than the 6th largest economy heading into the 2020s. If Armando Iannucci had written this as an episode of "The Thick of It" it would have been rejected for being too far-fetched.

As a result of this folly, we are embarked on a regressive path, one which is insular and backward looking, which ignores the peace and progress of the last 70 odd years in favour of jingoistic nationalism and which denies us the continued benefit of working closely with our European partners, neighbours, and friends.

There has been a lot of talk about hell of late – about who has reserved their special place there and how. I'm not going to add to that debate today. However, there's an old adage which says that "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". I disagree: It is paved with empty jingoism and misplaced nostalgia for a glorious past which never existed in a globalised world which has utterly changed.

The Brexit people voted for can never be delivered. For every Leave vote, there was a different version of Brexit. While that is a fine strategy to win a referendum, it's a much less effective means of creating cohesion about the kind of future people want outside the EU.

They were promised a deal that doesn't exist – if there were such a thing as Canada Plus or Norway plus plus, why would the Canadians and Norwegians settle for less?

They were promised a Brexit that would deliver £350m to the NHS each week when instead EU nationals working in our already overstretched health service are leaving in increasing numbers since the referendum – all predictable, but no-one put it on the side of a bus.

In short, our membership of the EU is a racehorse, which is being traded for the promise of a unicorn and so whatever donkey Theresa May brings home from Brussels will never and can never satisfy the expectations **either** of those who voted for a unicorn **or** those who were happy with the racehorse.

The tragedy of all of this is that many of those who voted for Brexit did so out of genuine anger and frustration that their area had not benefited when the economy was booming but suffered hugely when it failed. They have borne the brunt of government austerity, whilst those who caused the banking crash and financial crisis walked away scot free.

Their concerns are legitimate but their problems are not the fault of the EU, and Brexit is not the solution.

Now even the most ardent fans of Brexit admit that we will all probably be worse off for anything up to 50 years. Every credible economist predicts those areas which are currently poorest will also be hardest hit by Brexit. Just how angry, how frustrated will those people be to yet again be ones who shoulder the greatest burden while those who champion Brexit off-shore their hedge-funds, are insulated by inherited wealth or stand to make a fortune playing the currency markets or when their vulture capitalist companies feed on the carcasses of businesses destroyed.

Here in Northern Ireland, whilst Brexit did not cause the collapse of our Assembly, it undoubtedly added to the strain and has without question made restoration far more difficult than would otherwise have been the case.

The Courts may rule that leaving the EU does not breach the legal terms of the Good Friday Agreement, but common sense tells us that the entire premise on which the Good Friday Agreement relied was that of increasing collaboration and interdependence, of frictionless movement of people, goods, services and capital and of the diminishing focus on borders and nationalism within the EU. Nowhere in the EU was that model more important and nowhere in these islands will any departure from it be more keenly felt than here.

Yet in act of gratuitous self harm, the very people who claim to value the union above all else, the DUP, backed Brexit and in doing so put the question of the Irish border back at the centre of political debate after years of diminishing focus under devolution – a situation which Sinn Fein have predictably exploited. Still, the DUP, giddy on their new found notoriety among the ERG in Westminster have allowed themselves to lose sight of the irreparable damage an ERG-style hard Brexit will inflict on Northern Ireland – a region which opposed Brexit of **any** kind.

And if you doubt that they are “giddy”, you need look no further than the MP for this constituency who admitted he voted the wrong way this week on a key amendment because he was – and I quote – “caught up in the carnival atmosphere” of the votes - votes will determine our economic and political future. It'd be nice to think those voting were taking them slightly more seriously than ordering candyfloss or having a ride on the helter-skelter.

We have been clear from the outset: there can be no **good** Brexit, but if it is going to happen, a **no deal Brexit** would be the worst possible outcome.

Parliament has failed over the last two and a half years to articulate clearly what it wants. Another 21-month extension to this process would merely prolong the damaging, paralysing uncertainty. If, as the votes suggest, a majority of MPs **actually** oppose no deal – then they need to back the Withdrawal Agreement which is the only basis **for** a deal.

And if Parliament are not up to the task then **put it to the people**. Let's have a People's Vote – but this time, one based on the real choice between the donkey on offer and the racehorse we have, not the unicorn Brexit which never existed.

So while at Stormont and on Brexit little has actually progressed, there have been some significant changes in Alliance this year. David Ford retired in June after 20 years as a member of the Assembly.

David, thank you again for your service to the Assembly Team and for your continued willingness to contribute and advise – while avoiding Monday morning team meetings!

Your retirement has freed you up to become our local government Election Organiser in Antrim and Newtownabbey.

There has never been anyone in the history of the Alliance Party – or perhaps even in the history of politics - who gets more excited at the prospect of an election – especially an STV election – than David. So I look forward not only to hearing about how many extra seats we gain in Antrim and Newtownabbey, but also the precise number of votes and transfers at each stage to at least two decimal places.

At the Assembly, we were joined by John Blair, who has not only tackled his new role in the constituency with real energy and focus but has also made himself an indispensable part of the Assembly Team over the last 8 months. Given John's background in fisheries and inland waterways, his interest in rural development and years of environmental and community activism, he has brought fresh drive to the Agriculture, Environment and Rural development portfolio, building on the work which David had been doing.

Of course, for us John's selection as an MLA seemed unremarkable – for years he had served as a local Alliance councillor, building up his reputation as a capable advocate for his constituents.

However, his selection was also a moment of history as he became the first openly gay Member of NI Assembly, another barrier demolished by this party and another step towards the more representative and inclusive Assembly and society to which we all aspire.

I also want to congratulate Cllr Julian McGrath who replaced John on Antrim and Newtownabbey Council, where he has hit the ground running and has established himself as worthy successor to John and a valuable member of the team.

Of course, not all change comes about in such a positive way and since last year we also mourned the passing of Cllr Barney Fitzpatrick, after a long period of declining health. Despite illness, he continued to attend and participate actively in Council business and to serve his constituents until the end. His funeral service attended by political reps from right across the community was a fitting tribute to a man whose entire life was dedicated to public service and who lived a shared present while he worked for a shared future.

Born in West Belfast, he was an Irish speaking member of the RUC and PSNI for 38 years, shot by the IRA while on patrol during the Troubles in an incident where two colleagues died. After his retirement, he went on to serve the community as a local councillor and as an active member and lay server at his local church, St Mary's Star of the Sea in Portstewart.

Like so many people in Alliance, he was a man who challenged sectarianism by his very being: someone who didn't fit neatly into any box, who wasn't easily labelled or pigeonholed, but who saw the community as one community and saw his role as serving it.

He is hugely missed by us all.

Having been selected to fill the council vacancy, Cllr Chris McCaw has continued that tradition of standing up for and defending a shared and safe community, not least in relation to the recent spate of racist posters which appeared in Portrush.

And of course the year saw a change too in positions of responsibility within councils. Nuala McAllister ended an outstanding year as Lord Mayor of Belfast, Carole Howard completed her term as High Sheriff and Emmet McDonough Brown commenced his year as Deputy Lord Mayor. In Lisburn City and Castlereagh Council, Tim Morrow handed over his Mayoral chain at the same meeting where Amanda Grehan was installed as Deputy Mayor – I was so proud to be there to celebrate with both of them. And last but by no means least, Cllr Gavin Walker, concluded a hugely successful term of office as Deputy Mayor of Ards and North Down. To all of you who completed or commenced your term of office this year, thank you for the time you invested and the impact you had in office for your community and for Alliance.

Each of you – each of us - are from very different backgrounds, with vastly different experiences, working in different day jobs, juggling different family commitments, facing different challenges but what unites you all – what unites us all - is the commitment to the values and vision of Alliance and a passion for shaping our community for the **better**.

Alliance's record in local government is strong: driving openness and transparency, challenging sectarian carve-ups, promoting diversity, good relations and equality, supporting economic development, protecting the environment, creating safer communities.

With council elections exactly two months away today it is crucial that we focus all of our energy and resources in the next 8 weeks to ensure that **the one tier** of government which **is** working, continues to deliver and that we increase the influence of Alliance across local govt to make it **deliver better**. We don't do that simply because we want Alliance to win – we do it because when Alliance wins, the people of Northern Ireland win too.

Today, we have seen just a small selection of the people who are standing for election – in our Party Political Broadcast, our candidate videos or in our panel debates this morning. They represent the broadest cross-section of society you will find in any local party.

They are regular people, who live and work in their community, who share the same hopes and fears for the future as their neighbours, and who not only understand but share the frustration and anger that people feel with the state of politics right now. They are people who believe **rightly** that our community **deserves better**.

What sets them apart – what makes them special - isn't a privileged background or powerful connections but their determination to **not just** to believe that **better is possible**, but to step up, roll their sleeves up, and do the work to **deliver it**.

Because better **is possible**. But it isn't **inevitable**.

We have to **make** it happen. We have to **choose** it. **Demand it**.

In just two months time, every voter will have a chance to do just that.

We can cast our votes as we always have and get more of what have now.

Or we can cast our vote for Alliance, and **demand better**.

We have just eight weeks left to get that message out there. Grasp this opportunity. Knock doors, address envelopes, support our candidates.

People demand better. Let's deliver it.