

Statement from Michelle O'Neill at recall of Assembly

Jan. 17, 2024

Mr Acting Speaker,

We meet in a last-ditch attempt to elect a Speaker, and to form an Executive.

We do so as the DUP continue their boycott, refusing to do their jobs.

For two years now we have been told that the basis of their boycott is in opposition to the Brexit Protocol.

The British Prime Minister revisited those arrangements and after more negotiations with the European Union, the Windsor Framework was agreed.

Yet, the DUP turned their nose up at it.

This has caused damaging economic uncertainty alongside political instability here.

To placate the DUP further the British Government entered direct two-way negotiations with Jeffrey Donaldson.

In taking what we knew was a misguided and flawed approach; to the exclusion of the other parties and the Irish Government as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement they have got nowhere.

Before Christmas the British Secretary of State announced their Talks with the DUP have now ended.

And yet, Jeffrey Donaldson remains in suspended animation, undecided.



All the while, children with special educational needs and their parents suffer, patients on waiting lists crippled with pain suffer and our wider society suffers.

This indecision is hampering the £3.3bn that was put on the table. And now that much needed money hangs in the balance.

Workers are entitled and deserve their pay rise today.

Public sector workers cannot be punished for the DUP failures.

The Tories have chronically underfunded the Executive for over a decade.

And now they scandalously use this money as ransom, ransom on their own terms.

A ransom that is causing financial pain to public services and our public sector workers.

This is nothing more than scandalous.

Tomorrow 170,000 workers will take unavoidable general strike action - our nurses, doctors, civil servants, train drivers, bus drivers, teachers and education workers, police support staff, and essentially our entire public administration.

It represents the single biggest day of industrial action in a generation.

These workers should not have had to take to the streets.

Because of the DUPs inaction, Politics is stalled indefinitely, and our public services are at a standstill.

Today is the seventh attempt since the Assembly election to restore this Assembly, and Executive.

To date the DUP refuse to respect the democratic outcome of that election.

However, my message to the DUP is still to join with us, work with us, let us get round the Executive table and make a difference to people's lives.

I stand for mature, pragmatic politics where irrespective of your social, religious, or political background I see it as my duty to fairly stand -up for everyone in our society, across all communities, and to represent the Northern Ireland Executive as a "First Minister for All".

Regrettably, the approach of the DUP Leader is jeopardising vital public services, including health and education, with no clear explanation for stalling Executive formation.

The argument that this continues to relate to the Windsor Framework has lost all credibility.

Few people out there know what the DUP are talking about, and fewer care because it's not for the common good.

The hardship and suffering, the bread-and-butter issues for workers, families, households and businesses is what counts and it's what the DUP refuse to prioritise.

The only remaining explanation for the DUP boycott is the refusal to accept a nationalist First Minister.

There is a dangerous attempt underway to discard the democratic outcome of the Assembly election, and this threatens our democratic governance, public administration, reconciliation, and the fabric of this society.

If Jeffrey Donaldson does not change his approach, then this sitting may well be the final one of this Assembly.

I fear that the democratic institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are in free-fall.

And while this is reprehensible, those are the hard facts before us.

At midnight tomorrow, the statutory legislation underpinning Executive Formation falls if not restored by then.

The statutory duty is placed upon the Secretary of State thereafter to call another Assembly election.

Those are the rules.

However, Mr Heaton-Harris signalled to the parties on Monday that he intends to introduce new legislation at Westminster to change those rules and extend the deadline.

If it is the case that the DUP will not respect the outcome of the election and restore democracy, then there is an obligation on both the British and Irish Governments to look at Plan B – a British-Irish partnership that provides joint stewardship and an intensified role for the Irish Government in the affairs of this State and our administration.

The public looking on here today are not seeing the change they voted for.

If the DUP position of obstruction remains unchanged, then it is imperative that a change of direction within the constitutional framework of the Good Friday Agreement is now advanced.

If there are some within the DUP who think that by crashing the institutions that they will also crash the Good Friday Agreement itself, they are wrong – the Good Friday Agreement will prevail.

Go raibh maith agat.