

An Ceann Comhairle

Seomra 39
Foirgnimh na Parlaiminte
Baile Lios na Scáth
Cnoc an Anfa
Béal Feirste, BT4 3XX

Guthán: +44 (0) 28 9052 1130
r-phost: speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk



The Speaker

Room 39
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: +44 (0) 28 9052 1130
email: speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk

The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
Stormont House
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3SH

14 September 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

Amendments to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000

You wrote to me on 1 September 2020 seeking the Assembly's views in relation to the draft Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No2) Regulations 2020 in accordance with Article 4 (1-3) of the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000.

I am writing to notify you that, the Northern Ireland Assembly debated the regulations today and I attach for your consideration an extract from our Official Report for the relevant sitting.

Full details can be found at:

<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2020/09/14&docID=307004>

I trust that this allows you to consider the range of opinion within the Assembly on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

ALEX MASKEY MLA

The Speaker

Room 39
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: +44 (0) 28 9052 1130
email: speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk

Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed changes to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 as set out in the draft Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have up to five minutes in which to propose and up to five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have three minutes.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am interested to know under what Standing Order Members are being restricted to three minutes? Standing Order 17 relates to speeches in the Assembly. Standing Order 17(4) says:

"The Business Committee shall consult with the Speaker in order to establish the total time to be allocated to each debate".

It does not bestow on the Business Committee the power to limit the Members who wish to speak to three minutes. It bestows only on the Business Committee, in consultation with yourself, the power to set the totality of the time. Where has the three-minute limit come from?

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee considered the proposal. The Member will be aware that the Secretary of State has written to me. The Business Committee, then, decided to table the motion for a take-note debate. The unusual and interesting situation is that, whilst legislation in this House is dealt with by way of no-time limit on speaking rights, this legislation is not being dealt with or processed by the Assembly. I am satisfied that the Business Committee took a proper and appropriate decision to leave the debate un-timed, but to limit the speaking time for Members to three minutes. I am satisfied that that decision is in line with our right to do that. We will review the approach if it appears that there is something wrong with it and in the light of any Member's contributions, including your own. We can do that in due course. Thank you.

Mr K Buchanan: The Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 made provision for the flying of flags at government buildings on specific days. Under the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000, it is the Secretary of State who has the power to make and amend such regulations. However, in doing so, the Secretary of State is required to refer a draft of the proposed regulations to the Assembly. The Assembly must then report to the Secretary of State the views expressed in the Assembly on the proposed regulations by the date specified by the Secretary of State. Following this, the Secretary of State has a duty to consider this report. The Secretary of State may amend the proposed regulations as a result of the report before laying the regulations for approval by resolution of each House of Parliament.

The Business Committee was made aware that the Secretary of State had written to the Speaker on 1 September 2020. The Secretary of State advised that he intended to amend the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 to implement the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement commitment to bring the list of designated flag-flying days for Northern Ireland government buildings and courthouses into line with the designated days. This means an increase of three days. The Secretary of State also advised that he intended to amend the list of specified government buildings from which the flag will fly. A copy of the proposed regulations and an accompanying explanatory memorandum was circulated to all Members last week.

The Secretary of State has asked the Assembly to consider these draft regulations and provide a report of the Assembly's views by 14 September 2020. The Business Committee did not take a view on these proposals in line with previous practice. Instead, the Business Committee agreed to bring forward today's motion to create an opportunity for Members to consider the draft regulations. The Official Report of the debate will record the views expressed in the Assembly on the proposal.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make some remarks as an Assembly Member for Mid Ulster and Democratic Unionist Party Chief Whip. The DUP regards the display of our national symbols, including the national flag, as a basic but central expression of pride in Northern Ireland's Britishness and membership of the United Kingdom. We have consistently supported its display from public buildings on a 365-day basis. This, we feel, is entirely appropriate for major civic buildings such as Parliament Buildings and Belfast City Hall and reflects practice that is increasingly being seen elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Therefore, although we welcome the addition of three designated days and two government buildings under these draft regulations as committed to in New Decade, New Approach, it does not address our overarching concerns about the general direction of travel.

Nowhere else in the United Kingdom has designated flags legislation. The fact remains that it is unwieldy and not fit for purpose. For several years, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has recognised the three royal birthdays that we are adding to the designated-day list. Northern Ireland has been left behind due to the absence of a political agreement or proactive steps by the Secretary of State. It is wrong that Northern Ireland faces such upheaval to, simply, keep pace with the expression of our Britishness as it is expressed elsewhere in our nation. It is unjust that our national pride is subject to the veto of certain political parties. We, on these Benches, seek a fundamental reform of those structures. As we approach the centenary of the foundation of Northern Ireland, we will be strongly making a case to Her Majesty's Government for greater assurances that the celebrations do not fall victim to the inflexibility of the current legislation. The Northern Ireland Secretary may be required to give due regard to the Belfast Agreement before making any changes, but we are clear that a failure to act, in itself, violates the constitutional provisions that are already set out in that agreement.

The flying of the national flag is not divisive or disproportionate. Its display from public or civic buildings does not invoke fear or division; it simply recognises Northern Ireland's constitutional status and gives due regard to the principle of consent. I encourage all Members who share our position on these matters to passionately make their views known in this debate.

Ms Sheerin: Like most people on a Monday in the middle of a global pandemic, the Union flag is not my top priority. It is fair to say that the Union flag is never my top priority. As Irish republicans, additional flying days for the flag are never going to be something that we, in Sinn Féin, will celebrate. Indeed, the presence of the Union flag above Parliament Buildings and other civic spaces — at one time intimidating to people who identified as Irish and to republicans — is now somewhat tired.

I do not feel welcomed when I drive up that hill and I see the red, white and blue flying, but it does not threaten my Irishness. I am confident in my identity. I can be Irish in a place that does not recognise me as such and seeing a Union flag does not take away from that. That said, respect is an important commodity, and the North of Ireland is contested territory. The dominance of one community over another should be left in the past. It is our belief that there should be parity of esteem for British and Irish identities here. We should have neutrality or equality when it comes to flags and emblems; either both or neither.

Obviously, that is not something that political unionism is ready to accept. We have seen and heard talk in recent days and weeks hyping up the need for artefacts and memorials to the creation of the state in the lead-up to the centenary of partition. If we are honest with ourselves, anyone can see from a quick walk around this Building or the estate — indeed, around this city — that there is no shortage of British imperialism reflected in architecture, statues and memorials and even in street names.

In the current context, the motion is at best bizarre and inappropriate and at worst insulting. We are in the middle of a global pandemic in which thousands are worrying about their business going bust, being made redundant or balancing and managing the threat of COVID with the need to maintain employment and put food on the table.

Mr Stalford: I thank the Member for giving way. She says that the motion is bizarre. She knows that the issue is a direct consequence of New Decade, New Approach — an agreement that her party signed up to support.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for his input. I am coming on to the fact that the British Government have got other commitments as per NDNA that they have not yet signed up to or implemented. That is why I am saying that the motion is bizarre.

With everything that is going on around us right now, ensuring the increased flying of a flag seems like a strange item to put at the top of the agenda. Of course, the virus that is Brexit is still trundling along in the background of our new normal, and given the British Government's failures to honour their commitments as set out in NDNA, as in previous agreements, it is a damning indictment that this is something that they are choosing to prioritise.

We have been waiting for 22 years for a bill of rights for the North, and, in our Ad Hoc Committee, we still have members questioning the merits of creating one. Two pages before the paragraph on flag regulations in NDNA, the British Government commit to:

"close engagement with a restored Executive"

in relation to our priorities in the next phase of Brexit negotiations. Disregarding the fact that the North voted to Remain, the fact that, three months ago, the Assembly voted to support a motion calling on the British to extend the transition period has been ignored. Just last week, they actually admitted publicly to their intention to break international law.

Considering all the important commitments that the British Government are not honouring, it is nothing short of absurd to me that we are standing here today discussing flags.

Mr McGrath: The flag regulations that are in front of us today are, as has been highlighted, presented as a consultation because they are being progressed in another place. We are asked simply to give our opinion on the matter, and that will be considered by the Secretary of State when he takes his decision.

Flags are controversial in Northern Ireland and are often not used for their purpose. They can be a sign of division and can be used to create feelings of unease.

I am always struck by how it is often the intention of the people who are putting them up not to celebrate or to create pride but to show negative or unhelpful things like the marking of division of territory and creating a sense of saying, "This is our place, not yours".

12.15

pm

'New Decade, New Approach' was a difficult document to develop. It was a bit of a pick-and-mix, with something for everyone in the audience. It was not so much of a deal as a collection of aspirations that were laced with items that were imperative on one side and not necessarily, but just, bearable to the other. However, it got this place back up and running, and with major issues like nurses' pay, health and education reform and then COVID-19, we are better served having this place functioning than not.

One item on the NDNA list was flag flying on additional designated days and from certain designated buildings. That is important to many in our community. It is not to me or to many of the people whom I represent, but it is to others, and in recognition of this being a shared space and a shared place, I am happy to support what is going through today.

I want to be clear that it is being delivered in the context of NDNA, which contains many more elements that are to be delivered and ones that I want to see introduced and introduced quickly. We need health service reform; we need to see the medical school at Magee delivered, and I welcome the progress on that to date; and we need to see the continued reform of these institutions in order to make them fairer, more democratic and more accountable to the people whom we serve. We want to see extra childcare hours for hard-working families and parents in order to ease the burden on their monthly pay packet. We want to see more social and affordable housing in order to tackle the unacceptable housing stress that there is here in the North. We want additional accountability for that housing matter, too, with a separate element in our Programme for Government (PFG) on housing so that we can measure its success. Those, we believe, are the issues that affect people. They impact their life and the matters that they want to see progress on. I want to see this place working, the people in it working and the people whom we are here to work for seeing improvements in their life. I want to see much more delivered than the flags.

Ms Armstrong: In response to the legislation, I acknowledge the sovereignty of our flags. Alliance has supported the designated days for many years. It shows respect for people who want the Union flag, and it shows respect for those who do not want the Union flag. What it says, which many others here have said, is that we are a community that appears to be divided. However, we are actually just one community; we are all from this place, and we want something better. New Decade, New Approach was that, and we all signed up to it.

The designated days have been equality proofed so many times. If I am to be in this Chamber, stuck in the middle here with you, all I ask is that we show each other respect. The flag is the flag; people want it and people do not want it, and it is time for us to move forward. As others said, we are in the middle of a pandemic. A virus is killing our people. We have an education system that is not being reformed and the Bengoa report has not been brought through from Health. There are a lot of priorities here. I respect this legislation, which is adding only three more days — the birthdays of the Duchess of Cambridge, the Duke of Cambridge and the Duchess of Cornwall. That will change when, unfortunately, people pass away and days are removed, and, when other people are born, days will be added. Those

are designated days. All I will ask is this: we have a lot of work to do in this place so can we move on with that?

Mr Stalford: As other Members mentioned, this development arises out of New Decade, New Approach, and, as such, I welcome it. It has also been said that New Decade, New Approach represented a compromise, and I accept that there are things that people on the other side of the House might not like but are going to have to tolerate going through as part of that compromise and that there will be things that people on this side of the House might not be that fussed on either will but have to tolerate going through. Politics is the art of the possible, and New Decade, New Approach reflected a compromise between the two major political traditions that exist in this community. I think that this is a welcome development, and I speak as someone who puts a flag on his house during July and August. I do so because I am loyal to the United Kingdom and I am a loyal subject to Her Majesty the Queen. It is part of who I am and my identity. It is important to me, and it is something that I value. I value the flag of my country, and I want to see it treated with respect. That is why, for example, I do not like to see flags left on lamp posts to become tattered rags. The flag of our country should be treated with respect.

I welcome the provision of these additional flag days, and the expansion to two other government buildings. It is right and appropriate. Mention was made of the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and its list. My understanding of the list that we are now being brought into line with is that that is the minimum recommendation from the Government at Whitehall for the total number of days when the flag is flown. It may be that other days can be added to the list, either on a one-off basis, such as a significant national event, or permanently, if it is so decided.

I have heard some of the comments that have been made. I sat in the Chair where you are, Mr Speaker, the last time that Assembly Commission business was considered. It would be the worst possible thing for us as a community to descend into the trenches over the issue of the foundation of the state. People will have very different interpretations of it — I accept that — but we should show a bit of give and take towards each other. On the actual day itself, why should the flag not be on the roof of the Building? What would it cost? How would it hurt anyone, on that one-off day, to accede to that request and show a bit of generosity to people who believe different things to you, but want to work with you to run the country?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ennis: As my colleague Emma Sheerin said, for some who are looking in on the debate there will be a certain and not unjustified sense of frustration that, in the middle of a global pandemic, with Brexit looming and all the other crises that are coming our way, here we are again talking about flags and emblems.

The debate is about more than flags. It is about us deciding what type of society and place we want to live in, how we are going to treat each other and, more importantly, how we acknowledge and respect each other's identities. In the context of Brexit, we are reminded of the British Government's total and unequivocal lack of respect for Ireland and the legally binding international agreement they signed up to. Talk is now emerging that the British Government are manoeuvring themselves to, perhaps, abandon and renege on major parts of European human rights law. Of course, in the North, we know only too well that the British Government have form in that regard. It is unsurprising then that the British Government refuse to implement key human rights components of the Good Friday Agreement, specifically a bill of rights.

The Good Friday Agreement provided for an equality of treatment duty on public authorities, and that statutory duty was explicitly singled out in the agreement to be enshrined within a bill of rights. It said:

"the formulation of a general obligation on government and public bodies fully to respect, on the basis of equality of treatment, the identity and ethos of both communities".

The Human Rights Commission, which was tasked with the formation of the bill, recommended in its 2008 advice to the Government:

"Public authorities must fully respect, on the basis of equality of treatment, the identity and ethos of both main communities in"

the North.

"No one relying on this provision may do so in a manner inconsistent with the rights and freedoms of others."

As my colleague said, look around the Building that we have to come to and work in everyday. I do not see my identity or ethos reflected anywhere in the Building. It is absolutely nowhere.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: No, I will finish if you do not mind.

Instead of asking us to roll out the flags to celebrate the birth of yet another unelected British royal, perhaps the British Government and this House might consider Sinn Féin's reasonable proposals on equality and neutrality: both flags or none at all.

The Secretary of State has said that he will read the Hansard report of this debate, so I take the opportunity to call on him and the Government to reflect on why they have yet to implement a bill of rights, and their apparent inability to honour international agreements and the commitments that they made in them. The British Government and this House need to demonstrate that we are serious about a peaceful and progressive shared future for the people on this island, a future that has to be based on equality, parity of esteem, tolerance and respect for all.

Mr O'Dowd: I was just again reading through the 'New Decade, New Approach' document that was published by the two Governments and led to the restoration of this institution. Ironically, one of the titles in the British Government's paper is, "Delivering on our Commitments". Delivering on our commitments: we have seen from the British Government in recent days what exactly that means. They will cherry-pick what they want to deliver, and they will deliver what suits them when it suits them, and sometimes it will never suit them. That is where the difficulty lies with the proposal. This is a take-note debate, and, at the end of this, we will vote that we have taken note of it. That should be in no way interpreted by the Secretary of State or by anyone in or beyond the Chamber that we support the notion that we need to fly more flags, because we do not. What we need to do is ensure that the parts of the paper that was published by the two Governments and that are the responsibility of the Assembly are implemented in full. That will cause challenges on either side of the House, but we have to do that. What the Governments do with their commitments, we will see, but they cannot cherry-pick. We have seen this from the British Government time and time again.

When you read through what is entitled:

"Annex A: UK Government Commitments to Northern Ireland"

it is as though those with an Irish identity do not exist. The UK Government — one of the co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement — seem to have forgotten that they signed up to the Good Friday Agreement, that the institutions are built on the Good Friday Agreement and that a significant and growing proportion of the population in this part of the island is Irish, wants to be seen as Irish and wants their identity recognised and acknowledged, but the Government do not do that in any part of this document.

The clear message that I am sending out, through Hansard, is this: the vote will go through today, but it is not an endorsement of the proposal. What we as a society have to do is acknowledge that there are different identities on this island, and they have to be acknowledged not only in word but in deed and in symbolism. Flags are about marking territory. Flags are a symbol of power; that you have power in a certain area or that you have control of a certain territory. You can put one above this Building or one on a flagpole somewhere, and they will send out the same message: it is about power. What we have here is power-sharing, so in terms of symbols and in our acknowledgement of this society, there has to be equality or neutrality in that regard.

Mr O'Toole: To say that flags are a vexed subject in this place would be to understate matters. No one in this part of the world is ever given to understatement, certainly not those in the Assembly. These regulations, as Members have said, implement one particular commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which was signed at the beginning of this year, on increasing designated flag days.

I want to say two connected things about today's regulations: the first is about respect; and the second is about consistency. First, on respect, it cannot be said often enough that Northern Ireland is a shared space, and it will continue to be, whatever our constitutional future. Mutual respect cannot simply be a phrase; it must be ingrained in how we think and talk about one another, our identities, our symbols and the space that we share. It is often said that we talk far too much about flags and identity. Many of the young people who leave here and cringe at the idea of coming back do so because they feel weighed down by the monotony of debates over symbolism and identity.

It is true that we talk too much about the questions of flags and identity, but it is also true that we do not talk about them in the right way. Too often, we do not speak respectfully about what is valued and precious to others. We are quick to take offence but are slow to see why others might be offended, so it is worth my saying clearly that I respect the Union flag, and I respect the importance of the flag to many people in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Chamber. In response to what my constituency colleague Mr Stalford said, I do not just tolerate symbols of Britishness or, indeed, symbols of other things; I hope that I actively respect them. The flag may not command my loyalty, but it should command my respect. If it matters to my neighbours, some of my friends, many of my constituents and, indeed, many of my Assembly colleagues, it should matter to me. Indeed, it is incumbent on those of us who seek constitutional change on this island to be clear that, if we are serious about having respect for Britishness in Ireland, it needs to be done not in a grudging way but in a clear and positive way.

12.30 pm

However, to be clear, mutual respect also means that, in addition to the additional designated flag days, we need to have a better approach to unauthorised flag flying in streets and neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland. In many communities, flag flying clearly has the consent, either active or passive, of the people who live there. However, in other places, there is limited, or no, consent. Many of my constituents in places like Carryduff, Rosetta or Finaghy live in communities that are proud of their integrated nature. They have a multiplicity of identities and constitutional viewpoints, but they also dislike public spaces being used to assert one viewpoint or identity for large parts of the year. Very often, the people who put up the flags are not known to the people of those communities, let alone accountable to them.

I welcome what Mr Stalford said about tattered rags. He is completely right: anybody who cares about a flag, whatever national flag it may be, should not want to see it become a tattered rag that intimidates people. However, in the absence of an agreed and consistent approach to regulation, many communities feel powerless on the issue. They do not want to remove all symbols of identity — I certainly do not — rather they want more transparency and accountability over these matters, as well as the ability to have their voice heard.

The two points are interrelated: respect for tolerance and symbols of identity but a consistency of approach. That is why we need to see the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, which is another part of New Decade, New Approach, report to the First Ministers to create a more consistent approach on the interrelated issue of flags.

Mr McNulty: Accommodation can be reached. In the darkest of times, accommodation was reached on flags. In this time of turmoil, I recall a different time of turmoil. Tuesday 3 March, I, along with my teammates, was training in a cut-and-thrust, dogged training session in Davitt Park in Lurgan when one of our joint managers, Brian Canavan, was called away urgently because there had just been a double murder in his family bar in Poyntzpass.

In the following days, two great leaders walked the main street in Poyntzpass together. They quelled anger and fear by their actions and their words. The spirit of accommodation exhibited by Seamus Mallon and David Trimble in those days has been shared by everybody in the community of Poyntzpass. Fortunately, the following month the Good Friday Agreement was signed. Further subsequent agreements were brokered in Poyntzpass by Tom Canavan, God rest his soul, and by Robert Turner.

The following year, that same team was in the Ulster final. The local GAA club approached the Orange Order, seeking guidance on where to source orange and white bunting. I believe that the GAA and the Orange Order worked together to take down the red, white and blue bunting, which had been up since the Twelfth, in order to erect the orange and white bunting for the Ulster final. Fortunately, my team was victorious on that day.

That spirit of accommodation still exists in Poyntzpass. The community there knows that we live in a shared home place. That is the type of shared home place that I want to work towards on this island: a new Ireland of tolerance and respect and ambition; a new Ireland of energy, endeavour, enterprise and equality; a new Ireland where we spill our sweat and nobody's blood. Let us all work towards that new Ireland, a new shared home place.

Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireas na daoine. We rely on one another for shelter.

Mr Robinson: I welcome the proposals, which correct mistakes in the original regulations from 2000 and ensure that Northern Ireland is brought into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. In other words, equality for Northern Ireland. When the original regulations were drafted, the Queen Mother was still alive, as was Princess Margaret. With their deaths, there was a net loss of days on which the flag could fly. New members were added to the royal family, for example, the Duchess of Cambridge. Her birthday is a day on which the flag is flown in celebration. The proposed new arrangements ensure that Northern Ireland can mark that occasion, along with the rest of the United Kingdom. Indeed, under the proposals, Northern Ireland will have three additional days.

The proposals recognise that change occurs and that a proactive response to change is essential to ensure that Northern Ireland maintains the same statutory days as the rest of the United Kingdom.

For many in Northern Ireland, the ability to mark significant birthdays by the flying of our national flag is welcome, both culturally and historically. I sincerely believe that these proposals are a positive move and urge the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I was to call Dolores Kelly but she is not in the Chamber.

Mr Allister: John O'Dowd said that some people seem to have forgotten that they had signed up to what he called the Good Friday Agreement. That is a message that he and his party should take themselves. Whatever else the Belfast Agreement can be faulted for, it involved — we were told — an acceptance that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. If that is correct, how can there be resistance to the flying of the flag of the United Kingdom on government buildings in Northern Ireland? If there is a recognition that we are part of the United Kingdom, one inevitably follows the other. Instead, we have had today, particularly from the first Sinn Féin Member to speak, Ms Sheerin, was bile against all things British and the flag. Yet these are the people who tell us that a great new dawn awaits us in a new Ireland. Here they are today, happy to take all the privileges of being part of the United Kingdom, bursting to get us out of the United Kingdom, promising a new Ireland and, yet, within Northern Ireland, they cannot even accept the flying of the flag.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I do not get extra time so I will not.

Ms Ennis said that she sees nothing in this Building that accommodates her culture. My goodness, if I walk into this Building and walk up the steps from the main hall, I am faced with the portrait of an IRA commander who was responsible for multiple murders of my constituents and others.

To get back to the regulations. I welcome the fact that they are bringing things up to date. I welcome the fact that the two Sinn Féin Ministers — Communities and Finance — will now have the Union flag flying from their headquarters. I welcome the additional days. However, I say to the Assembly Commission that there is a test coming for respect within this community: 7 June 2021 is the centenary of the formation — the first sitting — of the Northern Ireland Parliament. If the flag flies on this Building, it will show whether or not there is any respect, from the Assembly Commission and those who govern this place, for the people who want to be part of the United Kingdom. If the flag does not fly, it will be a calculated and deliberate insult to everyone who values their place in the United Kingdom and another confirmation of just what would await us if we were so foolish to leave the United Kingdom.

Mr Carroll: Clearly, we have more pressing matters to discuss today than the flying of flags, so I will not speak for long on the issue. I put on record my opposition to the extra days, contained in the motion. I believe that we, as a society, need to get away from the flying of communal flags. As a socialist, I do not support the expansion of flying flags to honour, and to glorify, any monarchy, never mind the British monarchy, in the role of British imperialism in Ireland, which, for the record, was not good for any working-class communities in the North.

This motion on flags, of course, stems from agreements that were signed up to by Sinn Féin and the DUP in the New Decade, New Approach agreement and, in a small way, sums up a major problem with the agreement; namely, how it doubles down on the two traditions — a schema — where communal forces are elevated in politics and certain sectarian practices are given cover by the law. For example, this agreement on flag flying came alongside a proposal to create a commissioner, whose tasks will include

"protecting the Ulster British tradition"

as if such a thing was an endangered species and not the historic ideology of elites here.

All these things are connected to the way that the state is the ultimate guarantor and cements sectarianism at the heart of it. People Before Profit, for our part, will continue to be a voice for social politics, inside and outside the Chamber, and will have no truck with this approach.

Mr Butler: I may not use the five minutes. I will speak first on behalf of the Business Committee. Thanks to all the Members who made a contribution. I intend to be very brief in concluding the debate. The Business Committee's intention in bringing forward this motion was to give Members an opportunity to express their views on proposed amendments to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. The Business Committee has not considered the proposals or taken a view on them as a corporate body. However, the Secretary of State, when he wrote to the Speaker on 1 September, asked that the Assembly considers these draft regulations, which is what we are about today.

The Secretary of State asked for the Assembly to provide a report of its views by 14 September 2020. Consequently and in order to meet that very tight deadline, the Business Committee was required to ensure that the Assembly had an opportunity to debate those proposals today. Members have now set out their views on them. I will not go through those views on behalf of the Business Committee, although I may pick them up myself. The Official Report records those views. The Business Committee has been advised, Mr Speaker, that you will send a copy of today's Official Report to the Secretary of State, who may then choose to amend the proposed regulations before laying them for approval by resolution of each House of Parliament. On behalf of the Business Committee, I ask all Members to support the motion.

I will now speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and myself. First, I commend all the Members who spoke for the manner and tone of the speeches on this issue. Flags have, for many years, been an issue of pride from a unionist perspective or a nationalist perspective, depending on the flag that you like. However, they have also been a cause of much angst and many sad debates in this country. These are regulations that the Secretary of State is bringing before us as part of New Decade, New Approach, which, as was pointed out by a number of Members, is a mixed bag of regulations and priorities for many of us. We will have to show each other a lot of respect to bring it into line.

A number of points were picked out by Members today. The motion was moved by Keith Buchanan, who talked about the value of British identity to unionists. That is something that I and the Ulster Unionist Party share. Emma Sheerin has her background and her pain, and she does not feel that her Irish identity has been celebrated. However, I am British and have lived for over 48 years somewhere which is supposed to be British and part of the United Kingdom. You want to try it in my shoes, with people picking at you all your life from 1972; it is not an easy ride. I am proud of the flag. I understand the need to be respectful and fly it appropriately. I do not see that as thumbing the nose to anybody's identity at all.

Colin McGrath is not here now but he was actually very good. He talked about how, sometimes, it is controversial and has negative connotations. However, he at least showed the respect that has probably been missing at times over the past few years with regard to the institutions not running. He indicated the need, which is probably borne out of the Good Friday Agreement, for us all to move a little bit and show respect; that was welcome. Kellie Armstrong talked about the sovereignty of the flag. She also talked about the priorities that need to be addressed. Whilst this debate might be important to some of us and less important to others, there are other priorities that need to be talked about. Christopher Stalford actually spoke really well. I do not think that he is here, but I will give him a compliment. He spoke about the need to fly flags appropriately. He spoke about his distaste for tattered flags on lamp posts. I do not think that too many in the House, including me, would disagree with that statement. He talked about the need to embrace the centenary and show generosity, which obviously works both ways.

Sinéad Ennis spoke about her frustration about this type of society and how we treat each other, but I believe that that is a mirror that we need to hold up to ourselves. Matthew O'Toole talked about respect and consistency, which I echo. Justin McNulty spoke, in Irish, about relying on each other for shelter. I cannot do it in Irish, Justin, but thank you for those words. Jim Allister reminded us of the need to show generosity in next year's centenary celebrations. The final comments were made by Gerry Carroll. That is why I will not be a socialist. If socialism cannot show anything but opposition and fails to show tolerance or accommodation, it will not be for me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed changes to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 as set out in the draft Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020.