

Interview with the Speaker - An interview with Mr Mitchel McLaughlin MLA (2015)

KEY:

LD: Lizzie Darragh

MML: Mitchel McLaughlin

(MUSIC)

LD: Hi, I'm Lizzie and I'm here at Parliament Buildings in Stormont to interview Speaker of the House, Mitchel McLaughlin.

Speaker McLaughlin was appointed to office in January 2015 after Speaker William Hay. I'm going to begin the interview by asking him how his role as Principal Deputy Speaker helped him prepare for his new post.

MML: It was a longer apprenticeship than I expected. It was almost two years but it gave me a very valuable insight into the role and the function and just, you know, how many difficult issues would confront the Speaker.

LD: Were you aware you were the first Nationalist Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly? Do you think this is important?

MML: Yes, of course it was important and historic. It was a difficult decision for some of the MLAs and some of the parties in the Assembly but they made the decision eventually. That, I think, is a very clear indication of the progress that we're making as a society.

LD: In your own opinion what do you think are the most difficult things about being Speaker?

MML: The challenge is to actually steer even difficult discussions through to an outcome, hopefully one that is agreed across the Assembly.

LD: Of course, while we may see you in the Assembly Chamber, there is much more to your role than that. What else do you get up to?

MML: Behind the scenes? What people would see are, maybe, the debates in the Assembly and sometimes, you know, the Speaker being heard to demand order and good behaviour. But, in fact, on a day to day basis there's quite a lot of management and organisation, and interaction with officials, the Business Committee which organises all those debates, organises the schedule of the presentation of motions, and does that in advance. Then there is the Commission. They provides the services to support the members in their work. Then, of course, there are visiting dignitaries and I'm the first port of call for the Assembly.

LD: Are there any changes that you would like to see happening to the procedures and the work in the Assembly?

MML: I would like, you know, for us to begin to examine how we can encourage more, kind of, young people about the place; how we can actually get a better balance, gender balance in

terms of the elected members; how we could modernise and improve our procedures, particularly through electronic voting.

LD: Is it difficult to balance your role of Speaker with your constituency work?

MML: I'm every party's Speaker in this: I'm not Sinn Féin's Speaker. I'm an elected representative, I work through my Party Officials. I manage to the best of my availability the question of meeting constituents and working on their behalf but the party political dimension of it is quite significantly limited.

LD: And finally Mr Speaker how are you finding the job?

MML: My philosophy in life has always been to look for challenges, to look for new opportunities and this certainly is that. I have a wider appreciation, really, of just how hard elected representatives work. I think they are making a contribution to the public good, and the development of politics in this Assembly will be to the benefit of wider society.

LD: I would like to thank the Speaker for giving me an insight into his important role. Keeping order in the Chamber, meeting with dignitaries, implementing changes, remaining impartial. The Speaker most definitely has his hands full.

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