



BUILDING BETTER POLITICS

Ag Tógáil Polaitíochta Feabhsaithe

Sinn Féin

June 2025 Meitheamh



Foreword

In May, 2026, we witnessed seismic elections results across Scotland and Wales.

We now have three pro-independence First Ministers - here in the north of Ireland, in Scotland and in Wales.

Constitutional change is very much on the political agenda. Partition has failed all of the people of this island.

While our Assembly and Ministerial team continue to do all they can to deliver for ordinary people in the here and now, Sinn Féin believes that the best option for all the people of this island is a new, united Ireland within the European Union.

The constitutional referendum set out in the Good Friday Agreement needs to happen. In cooperation and partnership with the pro-independence movements in Wales and Scotland, Sinn Féin will continue to make the realisation of that referendum a political priority in the time ahead - while also working day-in and day-out to deliver for communities, families and workers.

Delivering for people in the here and now is of course a challenge, given the unusual political structure that exists in the north of Ireland. Delivery is frustratingly slow. I understand and share that frustration.

We have to do things better.

Reform of the political institutions is clearly necessary but it will, unfortunately, not resolve the fundamental problem that some parties remain opposed to power-sharing, to equality and to the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

Reform cannot address the fundamental difficulty of underfunding and an austerity

agenda imposed on us from Westminster.

But we can improve the operation of our political institutions to deliver better.

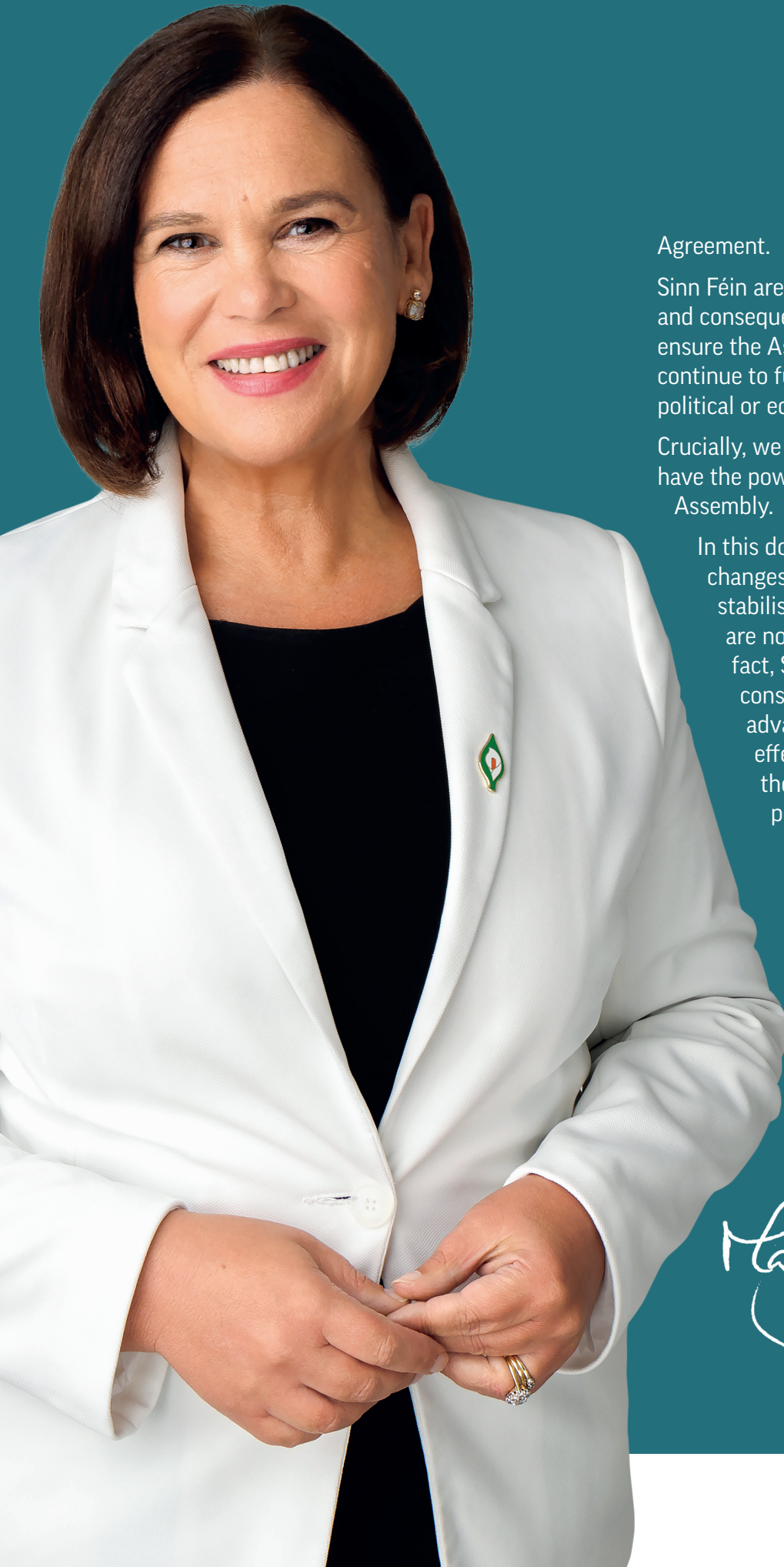
As a result of the inbuilt veto over Ministerial appointments by the two biggest parties, the Executive has faced repeated collapse with progress and day-to-day government frustrated.

It is our view that this is a fundamental flaw that should be addressed.

Given our difficult past and our divided politics, power-sharing must, of course, be maintained and resolutely defended.

Power-sharing is a core principle of the Good Friday Agreement, but the veto over the operation of the political institutions is a corruption of that principle.

The work of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) is the established and appropriate vehicle for addressing these important issues. The Sinn Féin members of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee are fully engaged in this essential work and will engage positively on proposals, views and suggestion for properly considered and researched reform that are meaningful and effective. And, crucially, proposed reform must protect the fundamental principles of power sharing and the Good Friday



Agreement.

Sinn Féin are now bringing forward important and consequential reforms, reforms that will ensure the Assembly and the Executive can continue to function even in the context of political or economic crises.

Crucially, we propose no single party should have the power to block or collapse the Assembly.

In this document, Sinn Féin has identified changes that would have an immediate stabilising and normalising impact. We are not ruling out other proposals. In fact, Sinn Féin is very open to working constructively with other parties to advance these and other credible and effective proposals that can improve the operation and effectiveness of our political institutions.



Mary Lou McDonald TD
UACHTARÁN SHINN FÉIN

Mary Lou McDonald



The Need for Reform

The Good Friday Agreement created a necessarily unusual, some would say abnormal, political architecture that helped to end decades of conflict.

Its structures were carefully designed to ensure that government would be based on the sharing of Executive power and the protection of minorities.

The Agreement remains the cornerstone of the political landscape in the North. The protections it provides must remain intact.

However, experience over the past twenty-eight years has demonstrated that certain aspects of the institutional architecture can make the institutions vulnerable in the context of political crises.

On several occasions the institutions have collapsed or have been prevented from operating.

Institutional reform should therefore focus, in the first instance, on strengthening the operation of the institutions so they are more resilient and can continue to function, while fully protecting the key safeguards contained within the Good Friday Agreement.

Reform can deliver institutions that work better

but reform will not overcome the reality that some parties are unwilling, uncooperative and, at times, deliberately obstructive participants in our power-sharing institutions.

Reform can help us deliver better but will not effectively reverse the legacy and ongoing reality of British government underfunding of our public services.



So, while we can improve the efficiency of the political institutions in the north, the reality is that the most effective reform will come through constitutional change and a united Ireland, where all decisions are made by the democratic representatives of the Irish people in the interests of the Irish people.

Sinn Féin's reform proposals are a genuine effort to achieve greater stability, accountability and democracy within our current, very challenging and difficult political architecture.

These proposals are not exclusive or comprehensive. They do not negate proposals that others will bring forward. Sinn Féin will examine and fully consider the merits of all other proposals that are meaningful, effective and protect the fundamentals of power sharing and the Good Friday Agreement.

FIRST MINISTER | AN CHÉAD AIRE

Michelle O'Neill MLA



Proposals for Reform

Ending the Veto on Executive Formation

Under current arrangements, the largest nationalist and unionist parties can exercise a veto over the appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

If the largest party within either designation refuses to nominate, no Executive can be formed.

This creates a situation where a single party has the power to prevent the formation of government.

This has occurred in practice and has resulted in prolonged periods without functioning political institutions.

PROPOSAL

Sinn Féin proposes that the veto of the largest nationalist party and the largest unionist party over the formation of the Executive should be removed.

The largest nationalist party and the largest unionist party should retain the right to nominate the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

However, if either of those parties chooses not to nominate, the opportunity to nominate should pass to other parties.

This would ensure that the democratic institutions can continue to function while maintaining the principle of power sharing.

Reform of the Election of the Assembly Speaker

A functioning Assembly cannot begin its work until a Speaker is elected.

The rules currently require that the Speaker be elected through a cross-community vote.

This creates a situation where the two largest nationalist and unionist parties can prevent the Assembly from functioning simply by refusing to support the election of a Speaker.

This effectively gives those parties the ability to veto the operation of the Assembly.

PROPOSAL

Sinn Féin proposes the removal of the veto over the election of the Speaker at the first meeting of the Assembly.

This would ensure that the Assembly can begin its work and carry out its legislative and scrutiny functions.



Accountability and Transparency in the Office of the Speaker

Under current Standing Orders, decisions made by the Speaker are final and cannot be challenged. There is no requirement for explanation, transparency or oversight in relation to those decisions. While the independence of the Speaker must be respected, democratic institutions also require accountability and transparency.

PROPOSAL

Sinn Féin proposes that options be explored to introduce greater transparency and accountability in relation to decisions made by the Speaker.

This could include measures requiring explanations for key rulings and exploring mechanisms for review in clearly defined circumstances.

International best practice should inform this process.

Equality for MLAs Designated as ‘Other’

The designation system remains a central safeguard of the Good Friday Agreement. It ensures that key decisions within the Assembly have support across the community and protects minority rights. However, it is also recognised that the current arrangements can disadvantage MLAs who designate as “Other”. Legitimate concerns have been raised that their votes do not carry equal weight in certain circumstances.

PROPOSAL

Sinn Féin believes that reform options to address the disadvantage experienced by those who designate as “other” should be considered positively.

While fully protecting the core designation safeguards of the Good Friday Agreement, proposals should be explored to address concerns regarding the weight of votes cast by MLAs designated as “Other”, particularly in key decisions such as the election of the Speaker.

Normalising the Appointment of the Justice Minister

The Justice Minister currently sits outside the standard ministerial allocation process. Unlike other ministers, the position is not allocated through the D’Hondt process. This creates an inconsistency within the operation of the Executive.

PROPOSAL

The British government should legislate to regularise the appointment of the Justice Minister through the D’Hondt process in line with all other ministerial positions.

Devolution of Fiscal Powers

The absence of fiscal powers significantly limits the ability of the Executive to raise revenue to invest properly in public services and to respond to other local economic challenges.

PROPOSAL

Sinn Féin proposes that the British government urgently engage with the Executive and the Finance Minister on the devolution of additional fiscal powers.

This would enable locally accountable decision making and support greater investment in public services.



