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Eastwood: The New Year is an Opportunity to Break Free from Failure

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In his New Year message the SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood MLA urges the public to reflect on where a year of failure has left us. The SDLP Leader says that while people may “not have fallen in love with devolution, all of us will inevitably come to loathe Tory/DUP Direct Rule.” In his message the Foyle MLA sets out that solutions can be found and that direct rule does not need to be inevitable, “British Direct Rule can’t, like Brexit, be enforced upon us.”

The SDLP Leader said:

“I would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone the happiest of New Years. I hope the Christmas holidays have been a time of comfort, rest and family.

2017 delivered a calendar of unprecedented event after unprecedented event. The only continuity in modern politics appears to be a corrosive uncertainty.

Brexit has thrust the islands of Britain and Ireland into the depths of the biggest economic and political shift since partition. The ‘sufficient progress’ achieved at the December EU summit was welcome but all of us must remain cautious in the knowledge that Brexit still has a long road to run.

It is timely that the coming year will mark the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, the 50th anniversary of Civil Rights and the centenary of the 1918 election. There can be little doubt that we are all living amid a similar period of defining change.

However, amongst those momentous anniversaries for Irish democracy, this January will mark a major step back in the linear march towards gaining and retaining power on this island. January 26th will officially mark 1 year without a government in Northern Ireland. In the absence of a dramatic change in their failed strategies, Sinn Féin and the DUP are set to fully and freely hand power back to the British Government for the long-term.

Their incompetence and inability to govern has left us with the worst level of economic growth on these islands, a business community left to fend for itself with the challenges of Brexit, static wages for working families and our hospitals and school system either breaking or broken.

Under their failed leadership, the North's voice is not only an afterthought in terms of Brexit but our economy and public services have been an afterthought during 1 year of talking between the DUP and Sinn Féin. People deserve to know; their focus is elsewhere and not on the people who actually elected them.

The SDLP spent the year tirelessly working to bring resolutions to the table. Time and time again we put forward solutions, not least through the reform of the petition of concern. We made it clear that economic equality, language equality and marriage equality is needed and can be delivered through an agreement to move forward together. Let us hope that those who were not interested in finding solutions last year embrace them this year.

In mapping out these realities, I am conscious of the deep frustration at the failure of Stormont over 10 wasted years. Some wish for any kind of change away from that decade of failure. However, I would urge people to reflect that though they may not have fallen in love with devolution, all of us will inevitably come to loathe the Tory/DUP Direct Rule.

This New Year is an opportunity to break free from that failure.

British Direct Rule can't, like Brexit, be enforced upon us. Instead of being led into the easy comfort of our own silos, let all of us in political life finally reach for solutions.

Whether from a nationalist or unionist tradition, each and every one of us belongs to this small corner of Ireland. Our only choice is to live with each other and work together.

This year has moved us no closer to the only future worth knowing – a future where we truly share power and finally deliver good government for all our people. If much of 2017 was spent forgetting that solution then let us all work to remember it and deliver it in 2018.”

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