

'We deserve better': 589 days without government in Northern Ireland

By [Niamh Carroll](#)

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A sign at one demonstration expressing anger at the failure to reach a deal through talks (Image: Mark Weir)

"We deserve better," was a simple phrase spoken by Dylan Quinn, a County Fermanagh man, which seems to have encapsulated the people of Northern Ireland's emotions. It has been over 589 days since the Northern Ireland executive collapsed, meaning that the region has now broken the record for the longest absence of government in a democracy in peacetime. While Belgium retains the Guinness World Record (Northern Ireland was deemed inadmissible due to the fact that Westminster can legislate for it), the 589 day mark was a depressing milestone for the North of Ireland.

In the run-up to the record being broken, Mr Quinn posted a video impassionately speaking about NI's lack of government on social media. A video of an ordinary man discussing politics would normally get lost among a sea of political discourse online, yet Dylan Quinn's video caught the people of Northern Ireland's attention. Perhaps because like Dylan, they are angry. The video sparked the organisation of a series of demonstrations across Northern Ireland, under the mantra 'We Deserve Better'. Many in NI don't understand why the stalemate between their politicians has gone on so long, and why they can't resolve their issues for the good of the people who elect them.

The Stormont Government broke down in March 2017, following the resignation of deputy First Minister, Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness. McGuinness' resignation was provoked by a scandal over a Renewable Heat Incentive; the scheme ended up costing 500 million to the taxpayer and was run by a Department held by Sinn Féin's partners in government the DUP. This caused the already highly strained relationship between nationalist Sinn Féin and unionist DUP to completely breakdown. Since March 2017; Northern Ireland has seen a new leader of Sinn Féin in the North of Ireland, Assembly Elections, a General Election, a new Secretary of State, and numerous rounds of talks between its politicians but nothing has been able to convince the DUP and Sinn Féin that they ought to go back into government with each other. Typically of Northern Irish politics, both sides have blamed each other with the DUP issuing a statement at the 589 day point attributing the lack of an Executive to "Sinn Féin's Boycott". The crux of the issue between the two parties is that they both have adopted inflexible positions and have chosen to embody identity politics rather than move beyond them.

Several We Deserve Better rallies took place across Northern Ireland last Tuesday evening. Unfortunately the Belfast demonstration had to be cancelled due to a major fire in the *Primark* store in the City Centre; on social media there were wry suggestions that the shop should takeover the Stormont Assembly buildings, as it was a building without a purpose. However, the cancellation of the Belfast event did not deter hundreds from turning out to other rallies across the North of Ireland. One demonstration, in the coastal town of Portrush, even attracted a bit of Hollywood glamour with *The Hobbit* star and Northern Irish man Jimmy Nesbitt turning out. Those gathered at the various rallies heard speakers from many walks of life. In the County Down town of Bangor, attendees heard Wendy Crawley describe how her terminally ill daughter Angela, who died in June, was forced to sit on a chair in A&E for 24 hours; Wendy asked if the 9 million pound spent on MLAs wage since the collapse of the Assembly might not have been better spent on the NHS.

One woman, who works in the voluntary sector and who attended a protest in Ballyclare, County Antrim, expressed her anger at the failure of politicians to do the job they are paid and elected to do. "They can sit back and watch health and social care coming under increasing pressure and are failing to provide leadership," she said, "Funding for community and voluntary groups providing vital support has stalled and will affect the ability of many of these organisations to continue." A Court of Appeal ruling in July means that civil servants in Northern Ireland cannot make decisions usually reserved for Ministers, even when there has not been a Minister in place for over a year. This means that many vital projects will effectively be halted until the return of an Executive in Northern Ireland.

While Guinness World Records may not recognise Northern Ireland officially, Stormont politicians need to recognise how unacceptable it is that the 589 day mark has been reached or risk a major public backlash. The Northern Ireland Executive was born out of a peace process that risks being destabilised by its continued absence. It is not just politics that grinds to a halt when parties walk away from Stormont, it is also public services which ordinary citizens rely on. Members of the Stormont Assembly are elected by and should work for the people; they were given their jobs by voters with the expectation they would carry them out. For many Northern Irish people, everyday politicians are away from Stormont, regardless of the issues they might claim are keeping them away, is a day where MLAs have failed to do their job.



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