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VINNY HURRELL

The Finance Minister, Mairtin O’Muilleoir, from Sinn Fein joins me now.

MAIRTIN O’MUILLEOIR

I wonder just if I may answer the last gentleman as well, if I could just say something in response to some of the comments earlier this morning on Good Morning Ulster. The Finance Minister remains in post and will be in post until the day of the election and that goes for all the other Ministers, so monies will continue to flow into public services and yesterday I did a fairly intense meeting with senior officials, it’s clear to me that they understand that this is a time to assure people, give people confidence, that there is no threat to public services in the time ahead. Now after the election we move into a period of uncertainty and that’s true, but the direction of travel set down by Ministers will continue, that is groups will continue to be funded and money will be available and in fact I know some groups are saying well maybe my contract is up for renewal; a reasonable and proportionate response to contracts will continue so, for example, groups that I would deal with who help the homeless or help those who are dealing with self-harm or suicide, they should be able to have their contracts reviewed and that will be a very strong message I’ll be delivering to the Permanent Secretary in my department who will be the person in charge in the time ahead. But when they say strong leadership I think it’s a defining moment for all of us because do we believe a society which says no to the bigotry, no to discrimination, no to corruption and I don’t like uncertainty and the last gentleman was talking about politicians and the time ahead and what they face and politicians don’t like uncertainty either,

neither does business, neither does the (unclear) sector, but uncertainty is always preferable to corruption and to discrimination and so we have to ask ourselves and every organisation, I'll be writing to the CBI, the Chamber of Commerce, to NICVA today, telling them what my plans to ensure that funding continues to flow but also saying to them will they make a stand against corruption, will they make a stand against discrimination and would they, if it was their organisation, if you look at the Executive as an organisation, would they tolerate someone being, facing very serious accusations not standing aside? Would the chief executive of those organisations, if we look at Martin McGuinness' decision, would they continue in post or would they bring things to a head, I think Martin McGuinness took a very principled stand this week and I think the public understands that.

VINNY HURRELL

The Communities Minister, Paul Givan, he says that bedroom tax is on its way, it's coming. It's just around the corner and he is pretty largely blaming Sinn Fein?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

It's been wonderful to see the new Paul Givan over the last 48 hours, the Paul Givan the public was introduced to was the Paul Givan who on the 11<sup>th</sup> July introduced £200,000 for marching bands, it was not an interesting date to make that introduction and then later the same year found another £90,000 for the same cause and then on the eve of Christmas decided that children who want to speak Irish should be the victims of his venom and withdrew £50,000. He had no efficiency savings to make, he had adequate funds in his budget to pay those children or pay those grants and in fact if he did have a problem of course he could have spoken to the Finance Minister, so we are at this juncture, amazingly enough when you listen to the news...

VINNY HURRELL

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Well Sinn Fein did (unclear) to keep bedroom tax out, Minister, and now as a result of Martin McGuinness standing aside or his resignation it looks like it's going to arrive whether we like it or not?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

And I'm going to come to that, Vinny, but let no one allow Paul Givan to escape his responsibility for the crisis we now face because the DUP was being texted by the public, they were being tested in terms of corruption, the Public Suffered Red Sky, suffered NAMA where the DUP brought the fox into the hen coop in NAMA and now we see the RHI and I have no doubt, and I say this as Finance Minister, I have no doubt the corruption lies at the heart of RHI. Paul Givan, if you wanted a straw which broke the camel's back in terms of refusal to afford parity of esteem, refusal to afford respect to a nationalist identity, a nationalist community, Paul Givan was the person who got the curtain down on that. So for him to appear now and it's an interesting, now he's actually Tory cuts as well, so Paul Givan has no credibility..

VINNY HURRELL

So what do you say to the Minister, to Paul, when he says that he has given many thousands of pounds towards the Irish language and he draws a comparison between it and Ulster Scots?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

What I will say to Paul is, that I have rarely met, and I've met a lot of people in political and public life, I have rarely met anyone within (unclear) or hatred towards the Irish language which I see in Paul Givan and in payments he...

VINNY HURRELL

Well he says that he does not, he would say he does not have hatred and he also points out that the Irish language is not just for the nationalist community, the republican, the Catholic community, it's for all?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

A great shared treasure and of course actions speak louder than words and Paul spoke at the mouth of Christmas with his venomous letter, withdrawing money and then saying, happy Christmas and happy New Year. His actions spoke louder than words and really Paul can try and reinvent himself all he wants and I do regret this because I thought there was promise and hope for him in terms of his political career and I don't know if he will or won't lose his seat in the next elections. But I do regret that for the rest of his political career he will be identified, and it's across the island because this slap in the face to those of us who wanted parity of esteem, this slap in the face to the nationalist community and to Irish speakers and to children, it will be forever on his political CV and that's always regrettable but, you know, the line in the sand was drawn and people had...

VINNY HURRELL

Speaking of that line, Mairtin, many listening voters, listeners to this programme, they'll say, well what about the Fresh Start Agreement? What happened there, things seem to have broken down very badly between Sinn Fein and the DUP and is this something going ahead, whatever happens in the elections, that can be repaired. Can you work together again given what's gone under the bridge?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

Well you should always travel within hope, Vinny, always travel in hope but if you look at the RHI debacle and it's interesting again to hear Paul, Minister Givan this morning, saying that he has a plan to tackle RHI, Finance Minister and the Finance Ministers' officials who are the people best placed to, the

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only people who can test the viability of such a plan, having seen a plan. Paul says (unclear) every day £85,000 is lost to the public purse, that's real money being lost because of the debacle and the mess which Arlene Foster, by her own admission, is the architect of and to give her her dues she said I'm the person who created this mess but when I came to fix it she had obligation to do two things, one to stand aside to allow a credible investigation to take place, she blocked that, prevented that but also, as I say this, I could say this, and I've said this repeatedly and they won't take this piece of advice. If I was the DUP I would not let the author of this mess be involved in coming forward with a solution, I would keep it politics free...

VINNY HURRELL

Speaking of potential solutions, can you tell us more about the plan from DETI that was sent to the Department of Finance on Monday regarding a potential solution which was withdrawn ten minutes after you got it?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

What I can tell you is this, Vinny, it's absolutely urgent that we stop the loss to the public purse from RHI and we can make progress on this because the suggestion was that any solution would come in on the first April, so we could make progress on this today and it's a week today since I met Minister Hamilton and he promised to have a plan to me and he hoped to have it by Monday and of course that didn't happen, but we could make progress on saving the public purse so...

VINNY HURRELL

Just to stay on that point for a moment, Minister, that plan that was submitted, I think it was 5.55pm on Monday and withdrawn about ten minutes later, 6.05.

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

Well you tell me what's going on, Vinny, because when I was shown a so-called plan when I visited Mr Hamilton I was told then it's an interim plan, Arlene Foster seemed to know more about this interim plan because she said it would be no cost, as someone memorably said, you'd be in cloud cuckoo land if you believed there would be a no cost solution to RHI. I then was told on Monday for ten minutes the plan appeared in an email box of the Department of Finance and then was withdrawn, so I have no idea what these people are playing at. I'm told they are going to go to other parties with this so-called sticking plaster, interim solution plan and yet they won't be able to say hand on heart that any accountant from the Department of Finance or economist has looked at the plan and said it stacks up either, certainly in terms of money but also in terms of the legal. So there is a job of work to be done, maybe today I'll get a scrap of paper in my hand because officially at this stage we have been given no plan whatsoever and that is not good enough and you know, and this is, it's regretful to say this, but since my appointment I have been bringing up RHI to the DUP and the Minister of the Economy and pointing up the existential threat to our finances posed by RHI and it wasn't until Spotlight till they started to take this serious, but since Spotlight they have still been behaving in a dysfunctional manner and have not gone to grips with this, sadly more interested in Mrs Foster being able to say to the Belfast Telegraph that she had a solution, that there would be no cost, more interested in the politics than in sorting out the problem. So I stand ready today, if they will send me a plan, send it over and put it forward for assessment it will be done so swiftly, fairly with an eye to the public purse and saving money.

VINNY HURRELL

Before you go, Minister, a couple of final questions, in terms of people that might be affected by the so-called bedroom tax, if that does come in as Paul Givan is saying it will next month. What do you say to those people, the Department of Communities has said that whether the Executive and Assembly approval the department does not allowed to (unclear) mitigation payments as planned, so those people that are sitting there thinking, I am on

a very low income, I have very little excess cash to do anything with, if I'm going to be hit for £100 a month this is really going to have a detrimental effect on me and my life?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

Absolutely, it will crucify ordinary working class people and that's why of course we have stood four square we're against Tory austerity, we stood against the Tory...

VINNY HURRELL

The DUP are now blaming Sinn Fein that this has been brought in?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

I understand the DUP blaming Sinn Fein for a lot of things, in particular Paul Givan who sparked a lot of the problems we are in. What I would say is, two things, one, everybody in this society is to stand up against Tory austerity, just as we have to stand up against this Brexit madness they are imposing on us and we will not accept a bedroom tax. Number two, Mr Givan, I say this to all the Ministers because we are facing into a period of uncertainty and he's not the only Minister to come to me with a conundrum or a problem and these are real problems because we are facing into a crisis and a period of uncertainty. What I would say to Mr Givan is do your homework, you should have had this work done before Christmas, you haven't, we are where we are, get back and explore, don't come to me telling me there's only a 1% solution. I have sat down with officials and they believe creativity, they believe determination to get it sorted rather than use it as a political ploy ahead of election would service him better.

VINNY HURRELL

Minister, once again, what do you say to the people that might be affected given that the DUP are blaming Sinn Fein for the fact that this is being brought in. So is there any accuracy in what he's saying?

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

No, well I'm saying two things, one, we need to oppose the bedroom tax and oppose it with every fibre of my being but...

VINNY HURRELL

I understand that Mairtin but if you are sitting there in a house and you're think this is going to really affect my ability to feed myself, to heat my house...

MAIRTIN O'MUILLEOIR

Yes and we understand that, and the second thing I'm saying to people is that Mr Givan is the last person, the last person to blaming anything on Sinn Fein. This crisis we're in was caused by the corruption of the DUP, caused by the bigotry of the DUP, caused by the arrogance of the DUP. So if Paul wants to find people to blame he needs to look in the mirror.

VINNY HURRELL

We heard from the likes of John there and Laura, people are saying there's real issues that I have in my life that I want the politicians to be prioritising, to be fighting for and they're sick, sore and tired of this?

STEPHEN FARRY

And they're absolutely right to say that, devolution is supposed to be about local people taking local control and formulating solutions that are very particular to the circumstances of Northern Ireland. What we're now facing is chaos in terms of the wind up of the current Assembly, if you look at what

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happens in Westminster, if you look what happens normally in the Assembly, we have a fixed date for elections and often you see a lot of legislation that's actually rushed through towards the end because people are trying to tidy up all of the loose ends. Now we don't have that situation now, we're actually essentially falling off a cliff edge. I suspect as time goes on over the coming days we're going to hear of more and more problem such as the bedroom tax, I don't think that's going to be an isolated example at all of things that are very much going to be left up in the air. I agree with Mairtin O'Muilleoir in terms of the points he making around the Liofa funding and the fact that we don't yet have a proper plan around the renewable heat and that's one loose end for sure, but I do think he has been a little bit complacent in terms of our ability to make do in terms of the Perm Sec of the Department of Finance putting in place a budget. All that can be done at this stage is a 75% budget, now people may say, well in due course there may be a full budget agreed down the line but no accounting officer can work on that assumption, they will have to move ahead with extreme caution.

VINNY HURRELL

Stephen, stay there for a sec, I want to bring in a few more politicians. Nichola Mallon from the SDLP, Philp Smith from the UUP and the TUV leader Jim Allister.

Nichola Mallon, we're back to bedroom tax, we've discussed it on this programme many, many times and now Paul Givan, the Communities Minister, says it's on its way, there's nothing we can do?

NICHOLA MALLON

Well I don't accept that and I think if you listen very carefully to what John said I think the gross injustice in all of this is that its people like John who are paying the price for a financial mess and a political mess that has been created unquestionably by the DUP and their arrogance, aided and abetted by the weakness of Sinn Fein and I have to say, Vinny, I am very, very, frustrated

from listening to the Minister for Communities and the Minister for Finance this morning because they are playing political brinkmanship with an issue like bedroom tax and because of this and the way it's being played out the anxiety, the stress that that will cause the very vulnerable people in their constituencies, in my constituencies and right across Northern Ireland, I think its scandalous.

VINNY HURRELL

Jim Allister, some would say that it sounds like the wheels are falling off or they've just come completely off at Stormont now and what's possibly around the corner?

JIM ALLISTER

Well I'm tempted to say I told you so because I did for a long time, that this system of government was unworkable and one day it would implode, now it has and instead of trying to glue back together the fragments of failure we need to move on and moving on means recognising (unclear) won't work and in the interim we need to bring in an accountable system of direct rule, Stormont is incapable of government, it is capable of law making, it is capable of scrutiny, both those aspects of the Assembly work quite well, but in terms of the Executive it has been an omni-shambles, I think is what some DUP member called it, and it's just going from bad to worse. Let us have some government, let's bring in direct rule Ministers, let's put their laws...

VINNY HURRELL

Speaking of rule, Jim Allister, the SDLP leader, Nichola we'll get you in on this as well, Colum Eastwood has said that maybe British and Irish governments should jointly run things in Northern Ireland if the Executive cannot be formed, Jim, your thoughts on that?

JIM ALLISTER

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Well happily that's not possible, constitutionally impossible, we're part of the United Kingdom and when devolution falls it reverts to Westminster...

VINNY HURRELL

Nichola Mallon, it's not possible?

JIM ALLISTER

...this time it needs to be by retaining the law making body of the Assembly so to hold Westminster politicians to account in Northern Ireland and make their laws subject to Stormont and that way we keep accountable direct rule but certainly it would be government and we don't have government at this moment.

VINNY HURRELL

Nichola Mallon, if this is not possible as Jim Allister says, then why is your leader saying this, is it another example of electioneering?

NICHOLA MALLON

No its not electioneering and it's not the first time that this idea has been considered. It's very clear that if post-election when Executive can't be formed that direct rule, and we're finding this very clearly, is not acceptable to nationalism, it's certainly not acceptable when we have a hard Brexit Tory British government and in order to balance the voices between the two traditions here we believe that that can only be served through joint authority and (unclear) apology for that.

VINNY HURRELL

At this point I want to bring in Philip Smith from the UUP, so the Department of Communities, to take it back briefly to bedroom tax, it's on its way, they do not have the legal basis to introduce the mitigation payments that would have counteracted this potential £20 per week for people that are affected?

PHILIP SMITH

Yes it's one of many issues and problems that are going to come home to roost here and listening to John and Laura earlier their cases highlight the human cost of this scandal and this shambles that we're now witnessing and listening to Paul Givan at the start of your show, I was gobsmacked because he seemed to try and get us to believe this is nothing to do with them and at the end of the day this is their scandal and now everyone is going to have to feel the pain and John Campbell was outlining earlier, we have no Executive which means no budget, potential budget cuts, no economic strategy, including the flagship corporation tax. We've also got no action on health, let's remember the Bengoa report, the number one recommendation from that was now in January they were meant to put together proposals on how we were going to address waiting lists, we've 250,000 people waiting for an appointment and that, I hope, was going to be accompanied by some money. Now where has that gone, so you've all these issues coming home to roost and of course let's not forget that we continue to pay the £85,000 a day daily cost of RHI and that will continue now to roll out until whatever the outcome of this current crisis is.

VINNY HURRELL

If the election does come about, as it looks very likely, is your party nervous, 108 MLAs out and 90 will return, so do you feel like your party is more vulnerable than the two larger parties, Sinn Fein and the DUP?

PHILIP SMITH

I don't believe so, if an election comes we're not frightened of an election, we are keen to get out there and put our case to the people of Northern Ireland. We've already heard the impact that this self-inflicted crisis is going to have on people's day to day lives, people need the opportunity to give their response to that and I think, listening to people across the country, people are livid at this here, I have never heard people so angry at the incompetence around this whole process. So I'm more than confident to go out on the doorsteps and put our party's view in perspective to the electorate.

VINNY HURRELL

Jim Allister, do you share that confidence in terms of your own position?

JIM ALLISTER

I'm quite happy with an election but I do remind people they get what they vote for and if they vote again for the parties of failure then they will get more of the dysfunctional failure, there's no point in people letting off steam and complaining about the mismanagement of Stormont and then voting for the parties that give you that mismanagement. So this is an opportunity for the electorate, if an election comes, to make a difference and to say we've had enough. We can't go on like this and TUV is the one party of course which has been shouting that from the rooftops for a very long time.

VINNY HURRELL

What about the potential, UUP/SDLP coalition, do you think is that something that you would find more acceptable, Jim?

JIM ALLISTER

I think that any system in order to be able to deliver government has to be on the basis of a voluntary coalition (unclear) even if Mike Nesbitt and Mr Eastwood did exceptionally well in the Assembly election and were the

respective biggest parties they would still have Sinn Fein and DUP in their government (unclear) mandatory coalition. (unclear) and we have to move to voluntary coalition because fundamentally the people need to be able to change the government...

VINNY HURRELL

Stephen Farry, Arlene Foster has said that she would like to see voluntary coalition, is it something you would support?

STEPHEN FARRY

We would, we've been advocating this for many years but it's important to stress that this is not about the exclusion of any particular party, this will have to be about functional government which we clearly don't have at present and on that point, Vinny, can I make the point that we are going to have chaos now for the next two or three months and there is a role for the UK government in all of this, ie we're meeting them later on today and we will make the point to them, they need to consider some sort of legislative patch because the only way we're going to address issues around the budget uncertainty, around issues around the bedroom tax, is if Westminster intervenes. Now we're not talking here about direct rule but something much more limited where they can actually put in place some sort of legislative tweak that actually allows these loose ends to be tidied up otherwise we're going to be swinging in the wind for the next number of months and that's not satisfactory, it's going to cause immense pain to a lot of individuals who are the innocent victims in terms of this absolute disaster we're having at Stormont.

VINNY HURRELL

Nichola Mallon, just before we finish on this, your party meeting the Secretary of State, James Brokenshire, later today as well?

NICHOLA MALLON

We are yes...

VINNY HURRELL

And what will you be calling for?

NICHOLA MALLON

...we'll be calling for a strong intervention because we have no budget, we have no Programme for Government, we've no corporation tax, no plan for Brexit and while people have got away scot free through incompetence and potentially squandering half a million pound, our most vulnerable are facing the reality of being slapped with a bedroom tax. So we'll be sending a very strong message that the DUP have been indulged in their arrogance by the weakness of Sinn Fein and both, I have to say both governments have failed to step up in the intervening active checks and balances...

VINNY HURRELL

On a serious note though, will they heed your strong message?

NICHOLA MALLON

Well we're saying what people across Northern Ireland are saying...

VINNY HURRELL

Yes but the question is, will it make any difference, Nichola, is what I mean?

NICHOLA MALLON

Well we'll see, we'll see. It's up the Secretary of State but by listening exclusively to the DUP and Sinn Fein we have ended up in this situation so there's an onus on him to listen to the rest of us.