

My day usually commences between seven and eight o'clock. The drive from Portstewart to Belfast, thankfully now in a chauffeur driven car, is taken up with paper work. Advice on meetings to be held later that day, documents to be signed off for action, policy papers to be considered and speeches to be reviewed, all form part of that paper chase.

The journey is a very different one from the five minute drive to the university where I had taught for twenty-five years before being elected first to the SDLP's negotiating team in 1996 and then to the new assembly in 1998 as a member for North Antrim.

But that journey and the meetings, visits, and assembly sessions that follow are all part of the profound changes, hopefully for the better, taking place in Northern Ireland. The institutions of the Good Friday agreement are slowly but surely taking root and becoming permanent features of our political life. As a result people are closer to government and government is closer to the people.

There is no hiding the fact that because it is all new, it is also very exciting as well as challenging. Personally, because of my background in university life, being Minister for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment I am familiar with many aspects of my department's responsibilities. This certainly helped in the beginning as I tried to come to terms with what was expected of a minister.

There are many things I want to see improved and changed in whole area of higher education and training. We need to open up after school education to everyone who wants to avail of it and who the ambition and ability to benefit. We need to give special support to those who come from low income backgrounds, those who are disabled and those who have family responsibilities. We need to assist our universities, colleges and community educators to expand and welcome many more students so that fewer will have to study outside of Northern Ireland.

Achieving these goals will not be possible without co-operation within the Executive with my ministerial colleagues. They too have plans to change and improve the services for which they are responsible.

Within the Executive the reconciliation promised by the Good Friday agreement has to be most in evidence. With politicians from our different traditions and parties, Ulster Unionist, SDLP and Sinn Fein, Executive members share a special responsibility to promote better relationships between our communities.

It is that context that I feel a special obligation to try practising the gospel message of 'loving one's neighbour'. Not always an easy obligation to fulfil! But that message along with the Sermon on Mount have always seemed to me to hold special significance for Northern Ireland. Together these messages are the Christian politician's guidelines. I often think we need to reflect more on what they should mean in practice, not just for the politicians but for all who are concerned to ensure that we continue to progress towards a peaceful and truly just society.

By the way, my working days sometimes end early enough to allow me join Patricia for an evening meal. Unfortunately, only sometimes. Spouses are the unsung heroes of politics.

Sean Farren