

Press release: Oral statement on the death of Lyra McKee

Mr Speaker, with permission it is with great sadness that I wish to make a statement to the House today on the appalling murder of Lyra McKee in Londonderry on Thursday evening.

That evening, PSNI carried out searches in two locations in the Creggan area of the city, believing that dissident republicans were storing firearms and explosives in preparation for attacks.

While the searches were being carried out a crowd gathered. Three vehicles were hijacked and set alight and the police came under attack, with up to 50 petrol bombs thrown at police lines. During the disorder a gunman fired a number of shots in the direction of police, wounding Lyra McKee.

Showing incredible bravery while still under attack, PSNI officers attended to Lyra as she was transported to hospital in a police vehicle.

Tragically neither those on the scene nor medical staff were able to save her... and she died from the injuries she sustained.

I want to thank once again the police, medical staff and other emergency services for their bravery and commitment.

On Saturday I had the privilege of thanking a number of them in person and to pay my respects to Lyra at the Guildhall with John Boyle, the Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council.

As we signed the book of condolences he told me the touching anecdote that he was one of Lyra's first journalism tutors.

Mr Speaker, this is first and foremost a personal tragedy for the family and friends of Lyra who fully expected her to come home. It is a truly shocking and heartbreaking situation for them and we can only imagine the devastating pain they must feel – something that they should never have had to endure.

I know the whole house will want to join me in extending our deepest sympathies to her partner, Sara, family, friends and colleagues.

Lyra was a brilliant, talented journalist, and a true loss to Northern Ireland.

She was a role model to many who always fought to make Northern Ireland a better place.

Nothing we can say today can take away the pain that Lyra's family must be experiencing now.

But what I can say to her family, the people of Derry and the whole of

Northern Ireland is that we will continue to strive for peace in Northern Ireland.

We are behind you and we are united in rejecting those who seek to undermine peace with terror. They have no place in our society. They must be dealt with under the law.

The people responsible for Thursday's sickening attack will never win.

This is also a tragedy for the community in Creggan and the city as a whole.

I am sure we have all been struck by the profound sense of anger at this sickening and callous attack.

This was a young woman with so much hope and so much to offer unlike those who have continually shown that they have nothing to offer. It remains the case across Northern Ireland that small numbers of dissident republican terrorists remain intent on killing.

But what we have seen in the days since Lyra McKee's death is that the communities that they claim to represent and seek to control don't want them.

They want peace, progress and prosperity ... and want no part of the sort of mindset that leads to the death of a young woman, simply doing her job.

To those responsible for this act of terrorism we say we have heard your excuses and your hollow apologies – no one buys it – this was no accident.

There is nothing that can justify this murderous act ... and you are being called out for what you really are.

Church and community leaders have united their voices in condemnation ... as have those across the political spectrum.

Those voices of peace are strong and united and louder than those who peddle hate and division in a city with so much to offer.

Strong and effective policing has reduced the number of national security attacks in Northern Ireland from 40 in 2010 to just 1 in the whole of 2018.

Yet despite this welcome reduction, vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential. The current threat level in Northern Ireland from dissidents remains SEVERE ... meaning an attack is highly likely.

As the PSNI investigation into Lyra's murder continues, I would urge anyone with information to pass it to the police or anonymously to Crimestoppers, so that her killers can be brought to justice. The brave men and women of the PSNI and other security partners will always have the fullest possible support from this Government.

Mr Speaker, I have heard those in Northern Ireland calling for political leaders now to come together.

And I am sure the whole House will have welcomed the united display from leaders of the political parties in the Creggan estate on Friday.

The Belfast Agreement has formed the bedrock of peace since it was reached just over 21 years ago.

It must be upheld and must be defended from those who would seek to undermine it.

And I intend to hold discussions with party leaders later this week to see what progress can be made.

Our clear and overriding objective must be the restoration of all the political institutions established by the Belfast Agreement.

Northern Ireland's politicians need to take charge ... including in the vitally important area of tackling all forms of paramilitary activity. But Mr Speaker – today is not a day for party politics.

Lyra was a young, vibrant woman who symbolised the new Northern Ireland.

A modern, dynamic, outward looking place that is open to everyone regardless of their community background, political aspirations, race, gender or sexuality.

Yet last Thursday Lyra McKee was killed in the most tragic of circumstances.

It should not have happened ... and it cannot be in vain.

All of us must take inspiration from what Lyra achieved in her life ... in wanting to make Northern Ireland a brighter place for everyone.

Lyra once wrote of being part of the Good Friday Agreement Generation and the need to reap the spoils of peace.

Our lasting tribute to Lyra will be to ensure that we continue to work for peace for the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker, I commend this statement to the House.