

POST: Human rights law expert Professor Colin Harvey is believed to be candidate for a position on a panel of experts to provide advice on a bill of rights, but is being opposed by the DUP

Unionism needs to embrace partnership

Chris DONNELLY



THE single greatest factor contributing towards the culture of instability at Stormont remains political unionism's unwillingness to commit to a vision for the future, embracing genuine equality and parity of esteem for the main traditions and people that share Northern Ireland.

Unionism's opposition to equality continues to manifest itself in a variety of ways.

The Irish Language Act, first pledged 15 years and four DUP leadership changes ago, still has not been delivered by the British government. Doubts continue to linger as to whether or not the British secretary of state, Brandon Lewis, will honour his pledge publicly made a few months ago – in the face of fierce unionist opposition – that the British government are committed to introducing legislation to make that happen, albeit as part of a wider cultural package. Whilst Sinn Féin's deputy leader, Michelle O'Neill, attempted recently to reassure language speakers as to the British government's intentions, the fact the timescale outlined by Lewis has already slipped is disconcerting, not least given successive British governments' failure to deliver on a pledge first made in the St Andrews Agreement.

As of yet, no unionist political leader has publicly committed to continue in a power-sharing executive in the event of the electorate determining that the post of first minister will go to Sinn Féin.

In the House of Commons last month, Ian Paisley decried that there had not been a unionist justice minister since the 1970s. That is simply not true, as Claire Sugden served as justice minister prior to Stormont's collapse in 2017.

The North Antrim MP also neglected to mention it was at the DUP's insistence that the arrangements for the appointment of the justice ministry were kept apart from d'Hondt a decade ago because they did not want a nationalist to hold that position.

Calling our problem for what it is remains beyond many.

Those seeking to woo pro-Union voters to non-constitutionally aligned political parties won't call it out because they worry plain language may offend and prove costly when the votes are counted. That is why the Alliance Party and Greens refused to support proposals to license bonfires at Belfast City Council in October. Like politicians everywhere, self-preservation triumphed and the high ground oft-claimed by those positioned in the constitutional no man's land of our politics quickly abandoned.

In the assembly last week, Sinn Féin's Emma Sheerin accused the DUP of opposing the appointment of an individual, believed to be the renowned professor of human rights law, Colin Harvey, to the panel of experts to provide advice on a bill of rights.

Following the revelation, Amnesty International's Patrick Corrigan tweeted that Harvey "is a leading authority on constitutional and human rights law and the NI Bill of Rights."

Colin Harvey's CV would suggest there are few people in these islands as qualified to serve on a panel exploring a bill of rights for this region. He is a professor of Human Rights Law in the School of Law at Queen's, has served as head of the Law School, director of the Human Rights Centre and also served for two terms on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, in addition to many more roles rendering him more than qualified to claim expert status.

Of course, Harvey is also a prominent advocate of Irish unity as well as being a distinguished authority on constitutional and human rights law.

He has spoken before of the campaign of political pressure he has faced since publicly outlining his constitutional preferences. Two years ago, he revealed that leading unionist politicians – including the UUP's Steve Aiken – had contacted his employers, Queen's University, to demand to know if they supported his work on planning for constitutional change.

The dots virtually connect themselves.

By contrast, consider this.

Pete Shirlow is a prominent professor at the University of Liverpool, director of the Institute of Irish Studies and a commentator on Northern Ireland affairs. Like Colin, he is well-respected, affable and correctly viewed as an authoritative figure in his field of expertise. I have had the pleasure of working with both in different capacities over recent years and can attest to the sincerity of their endeavours and professional integrity.

Shirlow also happens to be avowedly pro-Union and was recently confirmed to be a member of the British government-established Castlereagh Foundation Advisory Committee, alongside Arlene Foster.

Far from seeking to exclude or marginalise him, Shirlow's pro-Union background and expertise is the reason he has rightly been invited to speak on platforms organised by Féile an Phobail over the years in addition to many other unionist commentators, politicians and former loyalist paramilitaries. In 2019, this included a panel exclusively of pro-Union commentators, including Shirlow, to discuss their vision for the future in an event held at St Mary's University College on the Falls Road.

That's how it should be.

The legislation the Tory government is currently guiding through Westminster will make it harder to collapse the Stormont institutions, as was set out in the New Decade New Approach document, but it can't and won't deliver stability. For that we must await a new unionism open to partnership, embracing accommodation, mutual respect and parity of esteem.

Whether that is possible this side of constitutional change, we will have to wait and see.

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ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 8 1921

Unionists block housing

OUR Enniskillen correspondent wires: The Unionists, having obtained control of Enniskillen Urban Council by grabbing a Labour seat, James Cooper, MP, the leader of the Unionist Party, has given notice to move that the resolution passed in December 1920, directing an application to be made to the Local Government Board for a loan of £66,000 for the purpose of erecting houses under the Housing of the Working Classes Act be rescinded.

There is a great scarcity of houses in Enniskillen and many of the existing dwellings have been medically condemned as being unfit for habitation. It is believed that Mr Cooper would not have taken this step if he thought it would not meet with the approval of the Northern Parliament and his action is, therefore, regarded as an indication of the policy of that Parliament on the housing question.

Belfast house wrecked by sectarian mob

AT the County Courthouse in Belfast yesterday before Mr Leech, KC, Deputy Recorder, a claim was made for £70 on behalf of the friends of the late John Cassidy in respect of the destruction of furniture at Harvey Street on 27th August 1920. The widow of the deceased stated that on the day previous to the attack on the house a mob assembled and the leaders ordered them to clear out inside a specified time.

On the following day, while she was out looking for another house, the mob broke into the house and burned everything, the only article left being an old sofa. Her husband, who had been an employee of the Corporation for 25 years, was then at work. He had since died and the doctor attributed his death to shock caused by the conduct of the mobs.

John Burns, brother of the witness and an ex-soldier, said the entire house was wrecked with the exception of a room occupied by himself.

Asked by Mr Beattie [for the Corporation] if he could account for the mob not breaking into his room, witness said it might have been because he had fought for King and country. Mr Beattie – Never mind about your King and country.

His Honour, in awarding twenty pounds, said there was no doubt that the crowd rushed into this house and wrecked everything they could lay their hands on.

(Scarcely had partition occurred when many of the issues which would fuel the later Civil Rights movement were set in train. In Enniskillen, where the Unionists gained control, a previous Nationalist application to build houses for the poor was reversed. The denial of council houses and jobs to Catholics in Fermanagh would become a burning grievance in the 1960s.)

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