



## Article for Belfast Telegraph

May 2013

**New regulations on the flying of Union Flag would create a space for dialogue amongst our communities, argues Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission.**

Northern Ireland's profile in the world is now markedly different than it was a decade ago. We have built a positive reputation as a tourist destination and are a first choice for many inward investors particularly in the areas of traditional engineering and new technologies.

Something else is also changing, albeit perhaps more slowly.

In the most recent census over half (52%) of usual residents who were or had been brought up as Catholics were aged under 35, compared with two-fifths (40%) of those who belonged to or had been brought up as Protestants. Those who indicated an ethnicity other than "white" now make up almost 2% of the population, or 3% of school going population. This is more than twice the previous figures of a decade ago.

The Belfast/Good Friday agreement is now 15 years old, and there are many young people who have no first hand experience of our conflict/troubles, many of whom now talk openly of holding multiple identities, none of which define them.

Despite these changes, the recent turbulence which occurred over the flying of the Union Flag has demonstrated that we are still on a journey towards a shared and better future. As we travel this road, there is need for mature reflection on how we have failed to live peacefully together in the past and the necessity to recognise that although laws cannot change our attitudes they can help modify behaviours. To build a shared society together requires a change of heart together with a conscious intent to work together to make this place one where we are at ease with difference. This doesn't mean denying robust public debate.

To this end we in the Equality Commission hope that there can be a positive engagement with the "*Building Together a United Community*" proposals from

OFMdFM', focusing on how best to deliver outcomes which will address the remaining key inequalities of this place we call home.

Our historic responses were too often based on a certainty, real or perceived, of a need to defend. Our education systems, our deployment of housing, how we designate spaces have all evolved from a need to gather together, to preserve an 'equal but separate' way of managing difference.

This must change. Future responses must be based on a certainty of vision that can enable a fully participative society.

Part of our work in the Commission is to advise the legislature, local government and policy-makers on the shaping of their work to ensure equality of opportunity for everyone and to promote good relations. We have long argued that our workplaces can shine light to guide us in this area as business leaders have found ways to create inclusive and harmonious environments.

An under-pinning principle is that any structure or process that perpetuates segregation must be removed. This has led to a focus on the impact that environmental elements have. Clear and consistent policies on symbols and emblems, based on the legislative framework, have been key.

We believe that the way forward on those issues which continue to destabilise civic life should be dealt with at the level of the legislature.

One example of demonstrating strong leadership would be to consider the regulation of the flying of flags by District Councils in the context of the Review of Public Administration. This could lead to a clarity and consistency of action across all councils, no matter the particular political make-up. It could enable a shift of debate in council chambers from displays of flags and emblems, which has the potential to be divisive, to an increased focus on the effective delivery of local services.

A move towards regulation could allow the space for real dialogue at a community level.

We must find ways to articulate our different cultures and also to experience this without offence from others.

We know too well the cost of getting this wrong. It is time to address this purposefully and with the clarity of a legal framework.