



6 November 2014

“Solving problems around flags and emblems needs courageous leadership and a clear legal framework” says Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow.

It is a sad reflection that many of us who have been brought up in a society where national identity is contested ground, view flags and emblems, not as symbols of inclusion, but as a statement of exclusion of the other, representations of the dominance of one particular community. How ironic this is, given the fact that those same flags were originally designed to provide a common, unifying symbol for a group of people sharing these islands.

It is not enough to posit that it is “their fault”, rather it is time for all of us to challenge this default by doing something about it. We need to defuse situations which become little more than exercises in mutual goading and instead, work to realise the widespread public desire to live peaceful, shared lives, free from intimidation. This will require an outbreak of generosity.

The Executive’s Together: Building a United Community Strategy prioritises the need to create a community where everyone feels safe and where all areas are accessible to everyone. This is a laudable aim and one which has been pursued by the Equality Commission and its predecessor bodies for four decades through their work in creating safe spaces in the workplace and the public square.

In the 70s and 80’s the open displays of flags and emblems branded some places of work as the preserve of one community or the other. We should not forget how much was achieved in removing those displays - most workplaces are now free from intimidating symbolism and provide spaces where people work together comfortably without fear of discrimination.

Despite the best efforts of employers, trade unions and the Commissions, however, the fact we lived in a deeply divided society meant that many businesses were located in streets heavily festooned with murals, flags and graffiti, visible symbols which created a strong “chill factor” deterring employees from the “other” community.

Lest we think that such situations are now long gone, a recent study by Oxford Economics highlighted that there is still a reluctance, particularly among unemployed working-class men in Belfast, to travel through an area dominated by the “other” community; and that street displays of flags and murals are a key factor in stoking that fear. Interestingly though, the same study found that, where employers had succeeded

in changing their own working environment to make employees feel more safe, many workers were prepared to overcome their fears to take up jobs in such areas.

So, there is a question to ask. Is it possible there is anything we can draw from these workplace successes that would assist us in addressing the public realm, a place where in too many instances, deep seated sectarian attitudes still stalk the streets?

I think there are two key factors which have created the environment in which good and harmonious workplaces have flourished - courageous, focused leadership supported by a robust legislative framework.

Courageous leadership – from key employers, from the trade unions and from Government and civil society –highlighted the importance of fair employment as a principle for all the people of Northern Ireland. The law, the Code of Practice and the rulings of the Employment Tribunals provided a clear framework which employers and their workforces could understand and, albeit in some instances reluctantly accept.

So, the Fair Employment journey illustrates that people can be persuaded – and if necessary compelled – to accept that they cannot flaunt the badges of their identity in the workplace where that might cause dissension or make colleagues uncomfortable.

Courageous employers, with the backing of the law, gave focused leadership through the mechanism of clear equal opportunities and disciplinary policies, assuring employees that these house rules would be enforced.

Of course there is a difference of scale in addressing these problems in the relatively controlled environment of individual workplaces than having to deal with them outside in the wider community. It is self evident, that these mechanisms, and the level of acceptance for them within our society, cannot easily be read across from workplace to local community. People who might find it tolerable to set aside visible manifestations of their culture in the workplace, may not be similarly amenable to limiting those same expressions in their own streets and social activities.

There is no easy solution to this dilemma, but that does not mean that we can simply hold up our hands and do nothing. The Equality Commission made some practical suggestions last year to the Panel of Parties.

Regarding the official displays of flags, particularly the Union Flag, we proposed that the principles contained in the Flags (NI) Order, which applies to Government buildings and lists designated days for flying the Union Flag, should form the basis of a regulatory framework for official displays of flags by local councils. We also called for consideration to be given to developing new, shared symbols and emblems which would promote mutual respect rather than division.

Regarding the more contentious, unofficial displays of flags, emblems and murals on private and public property – we are clear that where these are associated with illegal

organisations they should be removed and enforcement action taken. In addition, a regulatory framework should be considered clarifying the types of flags and emblems which could be displayed and for how long they could be displayed. We suggested that a forum be created for local authorities to engage with local communities, and with each other, to provide such clarity and give authority for removal of flags and emblems where appropriate.

Let us not be mistaken, this is not simply about “fixing” the problem of flags and emblems. It is clear that much of the discontent and division played out through the medium of flags and emblems is not only symptomatic of latent deep-seated sectarianism, but is also should be read as an indicator that whole sections of our community, feel left out of any “peace dividend”.

Of course, if any of these proposals are to succeed, it will require a greater number of people willing to accept that living in a shared society means they will see and hear expressions of a culture and identity which they do not share, perhaps do not understand and, maybe most significantly, may have been brought up to have an historic antipathy towards. Such a quantum change will not be easily achieved but, as in the workplace, if we can provide greater clarity in law, and focused courageous leadership, progress can be made. This will only take place if we learn how to be generous to “the other”, to try and see things from their perspective.