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Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

Building a united community needs leadership and good practice

This December, instead of focusing on all the traditional preparations for Christmas and New Year, Northern Ireland's political leaders are committed to serious and difficult discussions in an attempt to resolve the disagreements on key issues which have been making effective government so challenging. If not resolved, this impasse may yet threaten the survival of our political structures in their present form.

At the heart of the main issues dividing the parties – and the communities which they represent – is a failure to accept that, for a truly shared future, each needs to be open to, and accepting of, the values and goals of the “other”.

The lack of political agreement on how we create a shared future is too often evidenced on our streets where people are paying the cost for the failure to make progress. In creating a united community, we need to be able to rely on strong political leadership which demonstrates respect and tolerance for difference through their own words and their own behaviour.

Changing behaviour is a core challenge which will take leadership – and that means good example - from all the influencers in our society – the Executive, government departments, churches, the media, and all the institutions of civil society. We need to create a public consensus which promotes an acceptance and appreciation of the diversity of our society and challenges all expressions of prejudice and hostility towards people in our community based on negative stereotypes.

It is imperative that we push forward urgently with strategies to change attitudes and remove prejudices; but the changes they make will take time to be effective and must be modelled through civic leadership at the highest levels. Peace-building is a journey



not a destination and it is important to acknowledge that it is both a political and a personal one.

The Equality Commission and its predecessor bodies has worked for four decades with employers and trade unions in Northern Ireland in helping to create safe spaces in the workplace. We should not forget how much was achieved in removing contentious and divisive displays and ensuring that most workplaces now provide spaces where people work together comfortably. We can draw on that experience to assist us in addressing the public realm where, in too many instances, deep seated sectarian attitudes still cause real difficulties.

Two key factors which helped create the environment in which good and harmonious workplaces have flourished were courageous, focused leadership and a robust legislative framework. Of course there is a difference of scale and of context in addressing these problems in the relatively controlled environment of individual workplaces than having to deal with them outside in the wider community; but that does not mean that we can simply hold up our hands and do nothing.

A start could be made by working to persuade people to show a greater acceptance of the legitimacy of difference within our society. We cannot value the right to free expression only in terms of our own identity and beliefs. Many are too eager to take offence at every expression of an identity which is different from, or at odds with, their own.

It is good to see people value and enjoy cultures and expressions of identity other than their own but, where they cannot, they should at least be prepared to accept their free expression. That is a principle which should be at the core of every free society, but one which is frequently found wanting, not least in our own community. This is a big ask, to embrace the other with generosity of spirit. The question is not should we do it, but rather what if we don't?

The Equality Commission made some [practical suggestions last year to the Panel of Parties](#) > *(pdf)*



Read the Chief Commissioner's blog "*Here's the thing...*"

www.equalityni.org/blog