

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 10 May 2016
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Discrimination laws protect us all and help create a fairer society

Laws place restrictions on us all – and give us all freedom. Traffic regulations, licensing laws, criminal laws against theft, assault and murder, give us the freedom to live our lives, protected from other people’s recklessness, malice or violence.

Anti-discrimination laws are no different. They both restrain and protect us. The grounds they cover have been established, by democratic decision, because they are areas in which levels of prejudice and a history of discriminatory behaviour make provision of legal protection necessary.

The development of these laws, and the journey towards a more fair and equal society, has been a long and complicated one. Unsung pioneers who spoke out courageously on behalf of “the other” helped make this place we call home more equal for all its people. They include members of Trades Unions and business people, voluntary and community sector bodies, faith groups, civil activists, politicians, public servants and the early equality bodies, such as the EOC and FEC. Together they challenged and cajoled us towards a more mature society, one which is more at ease with difference.

Their legacy can be seen in the sound, transparent and fair recruitment practices in Northern Ireland which mean that job opportunities are now more open and transparent – a fact that most under 30s take for granted. We expect honest feedback if we are not selected for promotion and trust that our jobs are no less secure because we take time off work to have a baby or care for a family member. We also expect that we can access goods facilities and services on an equal basis, without discrimination on any of the protected grounds.

Perhaps most importantly we can get legal redress if we become the subject of unlawful discrimination. Laws alone rarely change attitudes, but they can create a framework to challenge discrimination and inequality when it presents itself. The Equality Commission helps raise awareness of the laws by supporting cases arising across all grounds of unlawful discrimination and also by providing guidance to employers and businesses providing services to the public.

Differences on religious and political grounds, of race and ethnicity, have all raised, and still raise, tensions and problems in the workplace and in the commercial sphere. But most businesses have grappled with these issues. They have policies in place and implement them where necessary.

Some of our anti-discrimination laws, covering gender and religion and politics, have been in place for 40 years. In the case of age discrimination, we still await legislation covering access to goods, facilities and services. Sexual Orientation is the ground most recently afforded protection by law - the Sexual Orientation Regulations covering goods facilities and services came into operation less than a decade ago in 2007. These regulations embody the same underlying principles as all the other equality laws. Businesses must treat everyone seeking to access their services equally, regardless of their sex, disability, race, religious belief, political opinion - or their sexual orientation.

Next week is LGBT Awareness week and the Commission is running an event on 17 May in Belfast at which private sector employers and business people can find out about the law, lessons from legal cases and best practice in employing and providing services to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people.