

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 17 Jan 2017
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Changing laws is easier than changing people’s attitudes

As we start a year full of uncertainty - about politics, the economy and security, to name just a few areas on our shared horizon – it is tempting to look to the past for reassurance. January 17th has not been a particularly auspicious day in history, though one item did stand out for me. On January 17th 1909, the esteemed aviators, Wilbur and Orville Wright, opened the world’s first flying school at Pau, in France. Not terribly significant in world history you might say, but there is a rider to that event. When they opened, they refused to accept women as students.

Of course, we could say that was part of the context of the time – women still didn’t have the right to vote, there were no equality laws. But women’s suffrage movements were active, vocal and thriving, and I find it striking that these two creative inventors and entrepreneurs - who were able to set aside the received laws of physics and accept that a heavier than air machine could maintain flight - were at the same time unable to accept that women could fly such a machine.

My point is simple. Prejudice is deep seated and very often we remain blind to our own bias in our attitudes towards “the other”. That doesn’t just relate to the sexes. Legislation and passionate lobbying and advocacy have shifted society from those days when women were kept at the margins - “outside looking in”. We now have a series of legislative protections which offer redress in the event of discriminatory treatment. It has taken over 40 years of hard work and endurance to develop this framework. But to change discriminatory attitudes is a much more challenging task - and that remains a work in progress.

Prejudice still exists in attitudes to status, colour, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, age and, of course, to religious and political viewpoints. But we do not have to be defined by the prejudices of the day – that is true in 2017 just as it was in 1909. We can each take a decision not to be part of a dynamic which accepts old fault-lines at face value, a decision not to seek comfort in the long held, “safe”, narrative of a mono-cultural community.

The legal framework offers a foundation on which we can build a society that moves beyond compliance with the law. Many employers struggled to come to terms with the new legislation when it was introduced 40 years ago, but by ensuring those legal requirements were met we have raised the possibility of creating a new way of doing business, one where all people are considered equally. Wouldn’t it be great if we always

treated everyone in our society with reasonableness and decency, not just because the law requires it, but because it is the right thing to do?