



A Hindu devotee performs a ritual bath during the Thaipusam festival at Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, yesterday

AP PHOTO/LAI SENG

Rise of minority politicians a refreshing sign of the times

I broke the mould when I became Northern Ireland's first openly gay councillor. The fact that my co-option to North Down Borough Council passed without any adverse comment hopefully signifies that Northern Ireland has changed. We have evolved from a place where it was illegal to be gay to a new Northern Ireland where gay people are protected against discrimination and now feature in many professions, whether it be medicine, law, finance or politics.

I have received a warm welcome from nearly every person I encounter. Whether at the town hall or across Hollywood, I am judged by most people on my ability to do the job — not by my sexual orientation.

So why did we have to wait until now before Northern Ireland got its first openly gay councillor?

The answer to this question lies in North Down. In 1953, Patricia Ford was elected in that constituency as Northern Ireland's first-ever female MP. When Patricia was elected, it had been 35 years since older women had been given the right to vote in Westminster elections and 25 years after universal suffrage was achieved in 1928.

Gay councillor **Andrew Muir** believes old prejudices can no longer thwart moves towards a more liberal-thinking society



It took far too long, but thankfully having great female MPs, such as Naomi Long in East Belfast and Lady Hermon for North Down, has helped partly to right this wrong.

In Britain, they already have many openly gay MPs and Lords. The Irish Senate has several openly gay members, including presidential hopeful David Norris. The Scottish Parliament has four openly gay members.

Northern Ireland still hasn't any openly gay MLAs or MPs. I do, however, believe that this will change within the next four years.

The challenge ahead is for mainstream political parties to select men and women who are openly gay to stand in winnable seats so that the people can elect a new generation of politicians fully reflective of today's society.

The Alliance party has already

proven its ability to meet this challenge with myself as Northern Ireland's first openly gay councillor. I hope others will also step forward.

Peter Robinson recently remarked, "We are the party of progress. We are the party of the future. We are the party of Northern Ireland." The DUP's ability to attract openly gay candidates and voters should be used to test whether this is rhetoric or reality.

With legal protections now in place and attitudes changing, an increasing number of lesbian and gay people have the confidence to be out and proud.

This is now feeding into the political system, with being gay less of an issue for party members. Barriers to selection are slowly breaking down and I hope more openly gay people will soon emerge as election candidates.

Anna Lo was the first politician born in east Asia elected to any legislative body in the UK. She was also the first person from an ethnic minority elected to any office in Northern Ireland.

Anna bucked the trend and lifted the glass ceiling. It was a great step forward — but we need to go much further.

In order for politics to work, we need people to get involved. Anna stepped forward and has proven a fantastic MLA for South Belfast. The time for others to step forward is now.

Shortly after winning a supervisor's seat in San Francisco, Harvey Milk — the first openly gay man to be elected in the US and later assassinated — stated: "It's not my victory, it's yours and yours and yours. If a gay can win, it means there is hope that the system can work for all minorities if we fight. We've given them hope."

I hope to continue the beacon of hope lit by Harvey back in 1977 and that others will join me. Together we can change Northern Ireland.

Andrew Muir is an Alliance member of North Down Borough Council