**DUP Conscience Clause**

DUP MLA Paul Givan's private member's bill aims to create a legal exemption on grounds of strongly held religious beliefs. He is seeking to introduce a "conscience clause" into equality law in NI, following legal action taken against Ashers, a Christian-owned bakery.

The Equality Commission has brought a civil case against Ashers Baking Company after it refused to bake a cake with a pro-gay marriage slogan. The row first emerged in July, when Ashers revealed it was facing possible legal action over its decision to decline a customer's request.

Mr Givan said the Equality Commission's legal action had "created a hierarchy of rights where all minorities are not to be treated equally".

The clause is a flagrant attempt to enshrine the right to discriminate into law; it would allow religious business owners to refuse services to customers on the grounds of conscience.

Under the proposal it would make it perfectly acceptable under the law for a B&B owner to refuse to cater for a gay couple or an unmarried couple. It is clear that there is a great deal of opposition to Mr Givan’s Private Members Bill, with a petition against garnering over 20,000 signatures online.

When the Prime Minister says tolerance towards people of different sexualities is an "important part of being British", the introduction of this clause clearly shows irony when the proposal is coming from the supposedly pro-British DUP.

The Equality Commission’s Chief commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow said: “We believe that, if introduced, the proposed amendments would significantly weaken protection against discrimination in Northern Ireland for lesbian, gay and bisexual people when accessing goods, facilities and services or buying or renting premises.

“These exceptions are targeted solely on the rights protected by the sexual orientation regulations and no equivalent provisions are proposed for other areas of equality law.

“They are inconsistent with the approach adopted under other equality strands where there is also the potential for competing rights, and with the approach adopted by equality law in other parts of the United Kingdom.”

Dr Wardlow added: “The commission has consistently made it clear that any exception to equality law or other law must be narrowly defined and objectively justifiable. It believes that the proposed business exception meets neither of these conditions.

Mr Givan’s own consultation paper gives examples such it “Would NOT mean that a Muslim printer could refuse to print a brochure publicising coffee tables made by a lesbian cabinet maker”. Yet on BBC’s The View he couldn’t give concrete answers to a load of other possible scenarios.