**Gay rights campaigner defends Ulster Unionist membership**

Jeff Dudgeon faces criticism over decision to stay within party even though it helped veto gay marriage in Northern Ireland

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Campaigners may take a test case to the ECHR if unionists continue to block gay marriage in Northern Ireland. Photograph: David Lucas/Getty Images

One of the UK's most famous [gay rights](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/gay-rights) campaigners has defended his continued membership of the Ulster Unionists even though the party helped veto gay [marriage](http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/marriage) equality in Northern [Ireland](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/ireland).

Jeff Dudgeon became a gay political icon after winning a case in the European court of human rights that de-criminalised homosexuality in [Northern Ireland](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/northernireland) in 1981. Dudgeon's battle in Strasbourg brought the law in the province into line with the rest of the UK in the face of fierce opposition from local evangelical Christians. This was led by the Rev Ian Paisley, who had vowed to "save Ulster from sodomy".

But now fellow gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has questioned Dudgeon's decision to stay within the UUP after the party joined forces with Paisley's Democratic Unionists to defeat a [gay marriage](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/gay-marriage) equality bill in the Stormont Assembly earlier this year.

Peter Tatchell, director of the human rights lobbying group the Peter Tatchell Foundation, said he would "walk away" from any political party that voted against gay marriage equality.

Tatchell said Dudgeon would be better resigning from the UUP and embarrassing them over their stance in the assembly. "A high-profile external challenge that shames and embarrasses the party is likely to secure more change – and more quickly," he said.

Tatchell added: "Jeff has a long and distinguished record of gay rights activism. He's a true pioneer who deserves great respect. I can understand why he might want to stay in the UUP and work from the inside to overturn the party's homophobic stance and alliance. Every equality movement needs both suffragists and suffragettes.

"Personally, I don't have Jeff's patience and stoicism. In my view, the UUP vote against marriage equality, and its past history of homophobia, make it unworthy of support by LGBT people."

But the Belfast gay rights campaigner and author of a book on gay Irish patriot Roger Casement insisted he was staying inside the UUP.

Under the complex rules governing power sharing in Northern Ireland major bills cannot be passed through the devolved parliament unless they have the support of a majority from both the unionist and nationalist communities. In effect, this gives the DUP and the smaller UUP power to veto legislation as they did last month when Sinn Féin tried to introduce a gay marriage equality bill into the Assembly.

Amnesty International and local gay rights groups have warned that they may take a test case to the ECHR if unionists continue to block moves to allow for gay marriage in the province.

Dudgeon has denied his membership of the UUP was a betrayal of his record in promoting human rights for LGBT people in the most socially conservative, religiously devout part of the UK.

He said: "My efforts ('heritage') were decriminalisation and equality (in sexual offences, for example), as near as reasonably possible. They were achieved, including civil partnership law. Equal marriage is not something I particularly sought. Things don't have to be that tidy and I do concern myself with over-zealous attacks on Christians, as we have had.

"I rather follow the Matthew Parris line that marriage should be a matter for religious ceremony, and civil unions (with whatever combinations) for the state, although both would end up being called marriage," he added.

Later this year the Irish Republic will hold a referendum to ask the public to endorse gay marriage. The opinion polls south of the border indicate majority support for the legislation.

[I was in debate with Tatchell on BBC NI’s Talkback programme later that day on 4 June]