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**Taoiseach will get a taste of Northern Ireland’s new Pride**

**Varadkar’s visit comes as attitudes to same-sex marriage appear to be shifting**

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[Gerry Moriarty](https://www.irishtimes.com/profile/gerry-moriarty-7.1837417)



Bunny from Belfast performing at the Dublin Pride parade. Leo Varadkar will attend a Pride breakfast in Belfast, but not the parade itself. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill

Taoiseach [Leo Varadkar](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Leo%20Varadkar&article=true) deliberated carefully before deciding to attend the Pride event in [Belfast](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Belfast&article=true) on Saturday. It was established last weekend that he was about to make his first visit North as Taoiseach. This raised the inevitable question: would an openly gay Taoiseach join the LGBT event, as he had done in Dublin?

But it took until Tuesday for confirmation that he would indeed attend, but not the actual parade, rather a breakfast event in Belfast city centre ahead of the big march. His reason for missing the parade was that he had to be in Croke Park in the afternoon to cheer on the Dubs.

Asked about DUP sensitivities, Varadkar said he would not be making any compromises for anyone. But still, he had to be a little cautious. After all, he was about to visit the neighbouring jurisdiction to make a political statement about same-sex marriage which Northern Ireland’s main party, the DUP, opposes. A belligerent approach, which is hardly his way, wasn’t going to work. (That said, in the past week he appeared happy to rattle a few DUP and Tory cages on Brexit.) Breakfast rather than parade seemed to be the way to do things.

But if opponents of changes to legislation were annoyed with Varadkar, they kept it to themselves. He was “perfectly entitled” to attend Pride, said DUP leader [Arlene Foster](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Arlene%20Foster&article=true). What he did was his “own business”, said DUP MP [Jeffrey Donaldson](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Jeffrey%20Donaldson&article=true), as long as he “didn’t interfere in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland”.

**Meddling**

Now that would seem a moot point, because joining in an event supporting same-sex marriage could be construed, if certain politicians wanted to adopt such a stance, as indeed meddling in a [Northern Ireland](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Northern%20Ireland&article=true) political matter. But nobody seemed sufficiently upset or enlivened enough to protest about “Dublin interference”.

That could change, of course, but so far it’s a been the case of the dog that didn’t bark. What was really interesting was the lack of reaction or anything approximating outrage in a place where politicians are good at doing outrage.

It all seems indicative of a society quietly in transformation. There is no doubting there is a significant number of people in Northern Ireland who would oppose gay marriage in good conscience. But equally, polls and general political trends suggest that if the matter were decided by referendum, the result could be similar to the South where the vote was 62 per cent in favour of changing the law to 38 per cent against.

Six months after the May 2015 referendum, a joint BBC-RTÉ poll found that 64 per cent of respondents in Northern Ireland were either very or fairly comfortable with a close member of their family marrying someone of the same sex. This compared with 67 per cent in the Republic.

[Jeffrey Dudgeon](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Jeffrey%20Dudgeon&article=true), an Ulster Unionist member of [Belfast City Council](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Belfast%20City%20Council&article=true), for more than 40 years has been a trailblazer in effecting gradual liberalisation of legislation for gay people in Northern Ireland.

**Appalled reaction**

He noted the appalled reaction of the liberal establishment in the UK earlier this year when British prime minister [Theresa May](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Theresa%20May&article=true) and Ms Foster signed off on a £1 billion (€1.1 billion) deal to prop up the Conservative government. He observed how the likes of Conservative Scottish leader [Ruth Davidson](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Ruth%20Davidson&article=true), a lesbian, “took fright” because of the DUP’s record on gay rights and social issues generally.

But Dudgeon said they were wrong. “The majority of people in Northern Ireland now favour equal marriage, Protestants as well as Catholics. I think people here are ready for that particular change,” he said.

He believes that while the DUP opposes gay marriage, some of its members would at least tolerate, however grudgingly, changes in legislation.

Dudgeon was co-founder of the gay rights movement in Northern Ireland, and in 1981 he won a case at the European Court of Human Rights challenging the criminalisation of gay men in Northern Ireland.

He was also involved in successful campaigns to lower the age of consent and to introduce same-sex civil partnerships in Northern Ireland.

The DUP has 13 councillors on Belfast City Council but, he says, he has never encountered any “anti-gay sentiment” from any of them. “They do draw the line by opposing equal marriage, as do all the churches here; yet I have listened to young DUP members who cannot comprehend how anyone would be opposed to gays marrying.”

**Gay pardon**

Dudgeon adverts to another indicator of change. That was in November last year when the [Northern Assembly](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Northern%20Assembly&article=true), without any fanfare, passed a motion retrospectively pardoning gay men convicted for previously illegal homosexual acts.

Ms Foster and her leadership team imposed a tight whip, with the result that there was no real debate about the matter from DUP Assembly members. [Traditional Unionist Voice](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Traditional%20Unionist%20Voice&article=true) leader [Jim Allister](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Jim%20Allister&article=true), hoping to discomfit any DUP MLAs unhappy with the motion, sought to have a recorded vote but he could get no seconder for his endeavour.

He taunted, “The party of ‘Save Ulster from Sodomy’ does not want to have it on the record that it said anything about the matter, which is why it is so anxious that there should be no vote in the House on it. It is because of its embarrassment.”

But the DUP [Stormont](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Stormont&article=true) squad held its discipline and did not rise to the bait.

Getting this far required patience, says Dudgeon. He is confident that same-sex marriage will be introduced relatively soon: “I have always believed that you take the long view, you take your victories when you can and don’t expect too much too quickly. But we are at the end of the road.”

SDLP Assembly member [Claire Hanna](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Claire%20Hanna&article=true) believes he is correct, that there has been under-the-radar transformational societal change in attitudes to same-sex marriage over recent years.

**Young nationalists**

At 37 she is at an age where she is between the more venerable and younger sections of her party. She believes that regardless of [Catholic Church](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Catholic%20Church&article=true) opposition to gay marriage, young nationalists overwhelmingly – and quite a number of the older generation as well – support or would acquiesce to change.

Certainly that is the message she got when canvassing in the various elections over the past two years. “From knocking on doors I think the vast, vast majority of people are in favour and if not in favour reconciled to it. I think the referendum in the South changed the conversation and the thinking,” she says.

“People I know – young practising Catholics and very adherent Catholics who would be pro-life – would be very much in favour of equal marriage,” she adds.

There are evangelical Protestants of all ages who would oppose any alterations to legislation but Hanna generally thinks Northern Ireland isn’t much different to the Republic on the issue: there are divisions but probably the majority now accepts gay marriage

What happens next, and when it happens, depends on whether the Northern Executive and Assembly are restored. In the last and fifth Assembly vote on the issue in November 2015 a majority – 53 to 52 – for the first time voted in favour of same-sex marriage. The DUP, however, used the vetoing petition of concern mechanism to ensure that the legislation was not altered. This is a system where 30 MLAs can join together to block motions even if they are supported by a majority of Assembly members.

**Obstruct**

In the new, probably more liberal, 90-member Assembly, if it ever fully returns, the DUP has 28 seats so would need the support of two other members such as Jim Allister or some MLA from the [Ulster Unionist Party](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Ulster%20Unionist%20Party&article=true) if it wanted to obstruct a prospective sixth attempt to introduce same-sex marriage.

Part of the negotiations to bring back Stormont are about taking the petition of concern away from issues such as gay marriage. But if Stormont does not come back then it is likely that British direct rule ministers would introduce same-sex marriage through Westminster.

Claire Hanna reckons most of the DUP leadership would love this monkey off its shoulders. “My instinct is, and I could be wrong, but I don’t think people like Arlene Foster and [former DUP minister] [Simon Hamilton](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Simon%20Hamilton&article=true) want to be in the way of this. It wouldn’t be a policy they are dying about but I don’t think they want to be known as blockers,” she says.

That, she feels, is the changed and changing society Leo Varadkar will be visiting.