**Jeffrey Dudgeon: ‘A reformer, not a revolutionary’**

**Will the Ulster Unionists choose the veteran gay-rights campaigner as a candidate for the Westminster elections in May?**

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In his tweed hat, grey overcoat and horn-rimmed glasses, [Jeffrey Dudgeon](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CDudgeon%5CDesktop%5CJeffrey%20Dudgeon%20%20%E2%80%98A%20reformer%2C%20not%20a%20revolutionary%E2%80%99.htm) looks the picture of respectability. That’s because he is respectable: at 65, the veteran gay-rights trailblazer was recently elected an Ulster Unionist councillor in Belfast City Hall, and he’s a potential party candidate for South Belfast in the Westminster elections in May.

Only Dudgeon’s tie – a rather thrilling shade of violet – gives any clue to the wearer’s past as an outcast and renegade who took on [Ian Paisley](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CDudgeon%5CDesktop%5CJeffrey%20Dudgeon%20%20%E2%80%98A%20reformer%2C%20not%20a%20revolutionary%E2%80%99.htm) and his campaign to “save Ulster from sodomy” – and won.

“I’ve always been a reformer. A rebel and a radical, yes, but I wasn’t a revolutionary,” Dudgeon says, looking back on his 1981 victory in the European Court of Human Rights, which decriminalised homosexuality in Northern Ireland.

What was life like, as a young gay man, before the Strasbourg win? Dudgeon sums it up in one word: isolation.

“I knew all about homosexuality, and by my midteens I had ascertained that fact about myself. But I just didn’t know how to meet other people, and I was petrified at the thought of it. You just couldn’t say the words to anyone.”

He lived in London for a year, after finishing his degree at Trinity College Dublin, but was surprised to find himself longing for home.

“In an odd way, without knowing it, I was Belfast-hinged. It was around that time that all the gay groupings were starting. I had more knowledge of politics than the others, and the upshot was that I became the driver for the Strasbourg case.”

Dudgeon remembers that opposition to the campaign for law reform was “incredible, colossal, total”.

There was no point in looking for protection from the security forces: he was one of many gay activists who had their homes raided by the RUC in 1976. Love letters, papers and diaries were seized and removed, and the suspects were pulled in for questioning, facing possible charges of gross indecency.

Prosecutions were launched and later scrapped, and a year later Dudgeon got his papers back, scrawled and underlined with red pen.

It would be another four years before the law changed. “Recently, through a Freedom of Information request,” he says, “I found a note from a Conservative minister from that time, saying, ‘Put this to one side; Strasbourg will do the needful.’ ”

Dudgeon is no longer on the front line of gay-rights activism. Indeed, he was criticised by the LGBT campaigner [Peter Tatchell](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CDudgeon%5CDesktop%5CJeffrey%20Dudgeon%20%20%E2%80%98A%20reformer%2C%20not%20a%20revolutionary%E2%80%99.htm) for staying with the Ulster Unionists after the party stood alongside the DUP to defeat the marriage-equality bill at Stormont.

But, for Dudgeon, equal marriage is not a burning issue. Decriminalisation, equality, civil-partnership law: these were the things he fought for, and won.

“Marriage equality has become a test issue of modernism, really, and youth, and I’m not young any more. I think I’m fairly modern, but I don’t like to be tested.”

He has also spoken out against “overzealous attacks” by LGBT people on Christians who express disapproval of gay marriage, seeing it as “a sort of triumphalism of people who were previously marginalised”. Perhaps it’s an inevitable reaction, he says, when a minority finds its feet.

**Unusual Unionist**

Dudgeon says he finds the Ulster Unionist Party “tolerant, pleasant, an easy home”, but he still does things that unionists tend not to, such as running for the Seanad in 2011 (he was unsuccessful) and writing a book about Roger Casement.

For many years he was involved with the integrationist movement, which was against devolution, instead seeking full participation in UK politics. “Since Gladstone’s time,” he says, “particularly since partition, we’ve been stuck in a side room, told to get on with our quarrels, but denied access to the UK properly because England wanted to get us out of her hair.”

He doesn’t appear to think much of the Stormont assembly, seeing it as mainly concerned with “spending the money and stopping things happening.” Westminster is a different prospect. “It’s hugely important to be in the dominant assembly in the UK, where things do get decided.”

Whether Dudgeon gets the chance may depend on whether the DUP, the party Paisley founded, can tolerate the idea of a gay man as the agreed single unionist candidate in South Belfast. Talks on an electoral pact between the Ulster Unionists and the DUP are believed to be at a crucial stage.

“I’ve always said it’s about the ‘selectorate’: if you’re out and then selected, that’s the hurdle,” says Dudgeon. “The electorate aren’t fussed.”

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