McAleese son delayed 'coming out' as gay

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THE son of former President Mary McAleese has told how, as a teenager, outspoken criticism of gay marriage by Ian Paisley jnr "belittled my existence, my dreams and my ambitions".

Justin McAleese publicly revealed he is gay for the first time, saying "I knew I was different when I was 11" but as an adult, delayed 'coming out' to family and friends after the DUP MP's condemnation.

The 30-year-old accountant penned an article in support of a Yes vote in the Republic's upcoming same-sex marriage referendum.

His mother, who raised her three children in Rostrevor, Co Down, before being elected president in 1997, has already expressed support for a change in the law, saying it is "a debate about children".

"I didn't have the words or knowledge to know then that I was gay but I knew that society's expectation for me was to get married to a girl," Mr McAleese wrote in the *Irish Independent*.

"I couldn't tell anyone that I suspected I might be gay because society didn't let me."

He said aged 16, asked directly if he was gay, he felt "panic, shame and fear".

Three years later, during university studies in Dublin, furore broke out when UUP advisor Stephen King married his long-term partner.

"[I] was on the verge of coming out when a well-known unionist official married his boyfriend in Canada," he wrote.

"The story was widely reported in the media at the time. I was in the company of friends who laughed and joked at the notion of two men getting married.

"Unknown to them, they were belittling my existence and my dreams because they thought they were in safe company.

"Ian Paisley jnr said at the time - in reference to the gay former secretary of state to the north - 'at least Peter Mandelson did not promote his relationship to this degree that he would go away and get married or create a civil partnership in it... The catch-all is that I find this sort of relation-ship both immoral, offensive and obnoxious'.

"He went on to say 'I am not speaking from a position of hatred. I don't hate gay people'.

"Perhaps he wasn't speaking from a position of hatred but he was able to use the institution of marriage to belittle my existence, my dreams and my ambitions.

"And the sad thing was that other people went along with it and didn't challenge that view. So I stayed in the closet for another 18 months. Language matters, words matter, marriage matters."

Mr McAleese called on voters to grasp the opportunity "to change this for young children being born in Ireland today".

"How do you know that your niece, nephew, son, daughter, grandson or granddaughter isn't going to be one of those 7,200 children born now who will have to come to terms with their sexuality in 12 years' time?"

Meanwhile, an influential Irish imam has added his voice to the Catholic Church's opposition to a change in the law.

Shaykh Umar Al-Qadri, senior cleric at Al-Mustafa Islamic Centre in Dublin, said it would " redefine marriage and parenthood".

"It will open the door to new definitions of marriage, which could extend further. These are consequences on children and future generations," he said.

Responding to Muslims' queries about the referendum, he said: "Supporters of the same-sex marriage amendment say the referendum is about 'equality' for gay people and acceptance in mainstream society. It is, however, not as simple as that.

"[Gay people] will be able to adopt children. These children will be brought up without either a father or a mother.