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**UUP’s ongoing engagement with LGBT+ community is about building meaningful relationships – Beattie**

Ulster Unionist MLA, Doug Beattie MC, has said that the Ulster Unionist Party’s ongoing engagement with the LGBT+ community is about building meaningful relationships.

Doug Beattie MC MLA said:

“Political Unionism has been slow in engaging with the LGBT+ community; in turn it has created a ‘cold house’ around relationships between the LGBT+ community and Unionism. This has not been helped by the harsh language from the DUP in the past that has added nothing but hurt over the last number of decades.

“In cities, towns and villages throughout the country the feeling that being gay means you cannot belong to a Unionist or indeed Loyalist community doesn’t stack up, therefore it is the lack of engagement by political Unionism that contributes to this tension. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) are attempting to change that under the leadership of Robin Swann.

“So far an LGBT+ working group has been set up within the Party to engage across the community and has had a number of meetings with LGBT+ groups including the Rainbow Project, Cara-Friend, Outburst and HERe NI. Other meetings are in the pipeline each designed to gather evidence and create a working relationship between the LGBT+ community, the UUP and hopefully wider Unionism.

“Of course, same sex marriage remains a major issue and the UUP continues to have a free vote for its elected representatives. This is not going to change but there are many other issues that can be advanced through engagement such as Sexual Orientation Strategy, tackling the staggeringly high levels of poor mental health within the LGBT+ community and eradicating homophobic bullying in our schools.

“By meeting with groups the UUP are laying the foundations that will make engagement meaningful.

“The Pink News event on Thursday will be addressed by Robin Swann who accepted an invitation some months ago without fanfare or publicity. This will be a chance to advance the UUP message that we are listening and that the LGBT+ community is an integral part of our society and should be shown respect, understanding and enjoy quality of life within an inclusive Northern Ireland.

“Many people will not see the work that goes on behind the scenes in order to create a strong relationship between a political party and the LGBT+ community but that is not to say it is not there. Gesture politics is needed at times but without meaningful engagement set on solid foundations it is little more than a one-day news story.”

My Facebook comment:

Important statement from the Ulster Unionist Party on matters LGBT. Doug Beattie is doing sterling work, unseen by most. I have been a member of the party for a long time (and an elected councillor in Belfast) and, perhaps once, have heard an unpleasant remark. We are a broad church, essentially a movement to protect the Union.

It must also always be remembered that when nobody risked even being tolerant to gays, H. Montgomery Hyde, a Belfast Unionist MP in the 1950s majored on homosexual law reform in the House of Commons. He risked his career. (Read my book on the subject.) Other parties have an unpleasant track record in voting terms, rarely raked over.

I do feel that in the absence of an Assembly, the Prime Minister has a duty to give government time to Conor McGinn's equal marriage bill for Northern Ireland and will be saying this to Arlene Foster if I speak to her tomorrow night. Being nice is not enough, especially given the 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' campaign of her two predecessors as party leader, to maintain criminalisation. She alone has the ability to clear that with Theresa May and not jeopardise the government's existence.

It is actually a matter of human rights to have a marriage in one part of the Kingdom not downgraded when you arrive in Belfast. There is a huge majority in our parliament for change, as indeed with abortion law.

No more delay.