

Ulster man set to take

A plucky Ulster Unionist is running for election to the Irish Senate, representing Trinity College Dublin, which has links to unionists such as iconic leader Edward Carson. **REBECCA BLACK** reports from the southern capital



JEFFREY Dudgeon may be used to knocking doors in south Belfast to canvass on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, but Dublin doors are an unknown quantity to Orange feet.

The postboxes in Dublin may still bear King George's crest of arms, but there's more than just a layer of green paint in people's minds when it comes to Britishness.

Mr Dudgeon has travelled a long road, politically, from involvement with a communist party as a young man, taking a groundbreaking case to the European courts which saw homosexuality legalised in Northern Ireland, to working for UKUP leader Robert McCartney when he was MP.

But wooing the diverse electorate of 55,000 Trinity graduates is a new challenge.

The ballot is 100 per cent postal and voting slips are being returned to the election office from across the world. The count will take place on April 27 in the Public Theatre in Front Square.

Mr Dudgeon studied at Magee College in Londonderry when it was part of Trinity College and also studied at the Dublin campus.

Last Thursday I shadowed the gay rights campaigner and author as he travelled south on the campaign trail.

Starting out on the bleary-eyed 6.50am train from Belfast, we arrived at the political institution that is Buswell's Hotel opposite the Irish Parliament at 9.30am.

This was the only chance that the 18 candidates got to eyeball each other and debate together in public.

There were originally 20 candidates but two dropped out – one, Karin Dubsy, because she is not an Irish citizen, and Francis Donnelly, as he is hoping to get to the Seanad through the panel system.

Mr Dudgeon welcomed the news as “two less Shane Ross clones to deal with”.

The election of former journalist Shane Ross to the Dail in the recent general election is thought to have sparked big interest in the gap he leaves as a former senator for Trinity.

At the last election in 2007 there were just 11 candidates.

The debate is being recorded by RTE for its Today programme with Pat Kenny, but is

held in a small downstairs room in the grand hotel.

Wheelchair-bound candidate Roseleen McDonagh is unable to attend and instead speaks via a pre-recorded message.

Nervous candidates are pacing around the entrance when we arrive.

Fermanagh-born David Martin, who has been working as a teacher in Dublin for most of his lifetime, is standing for the fourth time.

He's somewhat cynical about the poll, telling me: “It'll be Norris in with 10,000 votes, then Ivana Bacik and the next person who gets 1,000 votes.”

Two of the youngest candidates – youth worker William Priestley and trainee barrister Maeve Cox are next to arrive.

Former Progressive Democrat Fiona O'Malley also arrived into the entrance hall. In 2007 she was appointed to the Seanad by then taoiseach Bertie Ahern but this time she must win votes.

Meanwhile, there are the more confident contenders such as media commentator Tony Williams, who is in the enviable position of having outgoing Shane Ross's backing, as well as the slick Marc Coleman.

The overall feel of the candidates is of a collection of some of the most eccentric people in Ireland, but having read the small mountain of leaflets about them that I have received as a Trinity graduate, I know that they are in fact some of the brightest minds on the island.

The candidates were organised into panels along with the 20 competing for the national universities of Ireland's three seats.

They are not given an easy ride, with not only RTE anchor Pat Kenny grilling them but also a newspaper journalist and a comedian chipping in.

Outgoing senator and Trinity law lecturer Ivana Bacik was among the first panel for interrogation along with former Belfast Sinn Féin councillor Eoin O'Broin, who is going for one of the national university's seats.

Both were immediately criticised as failed Dail candidates, as both had recently run for the southern lower house.

Mr Dudgeon told the audience that he feels it is time that a Northern Ireland unionist is represented for the first time since 1922.

Irish senators are paid a basic salary of €70,000 plus expenses, but this could be the last chance for a Northern Ireland unionist to enter the Republic's upper chamber, as taoiseach Enda Kenny has promised to hold a referendum on abolishing it.

Mr Dudgeon has been backed by a diverse range of figures from across the spectrum including former deputy editor of the Irish Times Dennis Kennedy, senator Eoghan Harris, Ulster Unionist health minister Michael McGimpsey, author and columnist Ruth Dudley Edwards, Professor Roy Foster, former Alliance Party chief executive Gerry Lynch, former Northern Ireland Human Rights Commissioner Daphne Trimble, the University of Ulster professor of politics Arthur Aughey and historian Gordon Lucy.



Jeffrey Dudgeon with News Letter reporter and fellow Trinity graduate Rebecca Black outside Trinity College in Dublin
PICTURE: Julien Behal/PA

Dudgeon in with chance – bookies

THE bookmakers have placed Jeffrey Dudgeon in the top six of the 20 candidates who put their name forward for Trinity's three seats in the Seanad.

Leading the odds are the two sitting senators – retired lecturer David Norris (1/12) and law lecturer Ivana Bacik (1/8).

The third favourite is Dublin-born medical doctor Dr Maurice Gueret who just missed out on a seat at the last election in 2007.

Trinity's junior dean and economics professor Dr Sean Barrett is next favourite with odds of 6/4.

Tony Williams, who has been backed by outgoing senator Shane Ross, is lying in fifth place. Despite the support of Mr Ross, who recently scored the second highest vote in Ireland in the Dail election, Mr Williams – a solicitor and media commentator – has been given



Jeffrey Dudgeon

odds of 4/1, just slightly ahead of Mr Dudgeon. The Belfast man is 5/1 to win a seat.

Journalist Marc Coleman, who wrote books on Ireland's economy including *Back From The Brink*, is 10/1. With the same odds, former Progressive Democrat TD Fiona O'Malley is an outgoing senator but not representing Trinity. In 2007 she was one of the then taoiseach Bertie

Ahern's nominees for a seat in the Seanad but now has to be elected to remain in the body.

Former rugby player Graham Quinn is on 16/1. Barrister Dermot Sheehan has been allocated 20/1. There are eight other candidates including the man deemed least likely to win, David Martin, who went to school at Portora Royal in Enniskillen, on 66/1.

Fellow gay rights advocate favourite for president

THERE is a striking similarity between current senator David Norris and Jeffrey Dudgeon: they were responsible for the decriminalisation of homosexuality on both sides of the border.

Senator Norris, who is expected to win re-election by a landslide, has also launched his bid to

become the next president of Ireland.

If successful, he would follow in the steps of Mary Robinson – who was his lawyer when he took the Republic of Ireland to the European Court of Human Rights in 1988, eventually overturning its ban on homosexual intercourse.

That case followed a

similar European court challenge taken by Jeffrey Dudgeon in 1981, which led to the decriminalisation of homosexual intercourse in Northern Ireland.

If Norris succeeds in his bid to be president, it will create another vacancy for the Seanad.

In this contest, there are more hopefuls than ever

before contesting Trinity's three seats and similarly there are more than ever in the running to become Irish president.

In 2004 Mary McAleese was the only candidate to be nominated and was deemed automatically returned. But this time there is rumoured to be a string of high profile

candidates including former taoiseach Bertie Ahern.

An opinion poll conducted in January placed Norris ahead of other potential candidates.

Last year Mr Norris, a prominent Church of Ireland member, called for the Republic to rejoin the Commonwealth.

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