**Wednesday 3 April 2013**

**News Letter**

**Outdated policy must come to end**

I WAS surprised to read Alex Kane in his column on April 1 – Shared schools only way forward – failing to mention the Ulster Unionist Party’s significant efforts – alone – to resist John O’Dowd’s Education Bill in so many of its aspects.

The UUP has been holding well-attended meetings around the Province to outline its policy of opposition and explain what is so wrong with the Bill, not least that the board of the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will lack representation from both the integrated and grammar schools sectors.

This mammoth centralised body will replace the five Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, losing most localised input in the process.

Nothing and no one is allowed to stand in the way of Sinn Fein creating a schooling profile in their own image or willing to oppose them, except the UUP. So it is not true to say that no party is trying to encourage sharing – in education at least.

Mr Kane seems to have a blind side as regards his former colleagues as he repeats his unevidenced pessimism that “neither the parties nor most of the electorate want to encourage, let alone live in a shared society”.

Oddly Alex also omitted any mention of the necessary precursor to shared schooling, let alone integrated education, and that is allowing teachers equal opportunity under fair employment law.

Currently and since 1976 there is an exception in Northern Ireland law, unique throughout Europe, on school teacher recruitment.

The UUP at its conference last year adopted a policy of seeking the exception’s removal, as indeed has the Equality Commission.

No other party has such a policy, Alliance oddly leaving it out of its January policy document about a shared society, ‘For Everyone’.

In the coming months all MLAs and Assembly parties will be asked to make up their mind when the UUP proposes an amendment to the Education Bill to bring the outdated exception to an end.

I hope a success there will lighten Alex’s gloom, as with an increasingly mixed teaching force, school pupils would at least meet members of the other tradition and those of a minority ethnic background who have little or no chance of a career in teaching presently.

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