



Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland

**REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
PATHWAYS TO ACCESS & PARTICIPATION CONFERENCE**

TUESDAY, 6 SEPTEMBER 2005

**SPEECH BY FELICITY HUSTON, COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC
APPOINTMENTS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

Mr Chairman, colleagues

Firstly, may I say thank you to the RPA for inviting me along today and giving me my first opportunity to address a group since my appointment.

I'm not the only new kid on the block here today, of course, as Bob has only just taken up his appointment too.

My appointment as Commissioner for Public Appointments for NI means that we now have our own Regulator for public appointments.

My predecessors were all English and based in England as Commissioner for England and Wales, with Northern Ireland as a sort of colonial after thought. I am the local Commissioner, responsible for Northern Ireland alone, without the distractions or machinations that go on in GB.

As many of you don't know me, let me give you a brief autobiography – and firstly, can I make it quite clear I live here, I work here and I was born and bred here. In fact, one granny came from South Armagh and the other from Moneyreagh.

For my day job, so to speak, I'm a tax consultant, with my own business, Huston and Co. Some of you will know it, if you drive up and down the

Newtownards road to Stormont. I used to be a Tax Inspector here in Belfast, before I jumped ship to the private sector.

I have a wide experience in public appointments.

I was Chairman of the Electricity Consumers Watchdog until we were abolished in 2003. And I can neither confirm nor deny that we were done away with by the powers that be for being too bolshie. I think Greg was still responsible for energy in the department at the time that decision was taken but ...well I'm sure it was nothing personal!

For the past 5 years, I have been a Commissioner for the House of Lords Appointments Commission – appointed by the Prime Minister to recommend individuals directly to him for non-party political peerages. What you and I would know as cross bench peerages. To date we have recommended 35.

We are also responsible for vetting party political peerages, to ensure that no-one has bought his or her place on the Tory, Labour or Liberal benches in the Lords. What an outrageous suggestion!

My work on HOLAC has brought me into contact with a wide range of individuals and provided me with an opportunity to interview household names, international experts and what our chairman Lord Stevenson would call 'truly remarkable human beings'.

I'm glad to say that more often than not it's the truly remarkable beings who are recommended for peerages - not the great and the good - contrary to tabloid gossip.

The PM asked us to find individuals who would reflect the diversity of the UK, as well as command respect and bring a positive contribution to the Lords.

In this, our work is no different from that of anybody looking for new members of a public body.

We want to find the best, not just the most obvious, from our diverse population,

I do not think our inequalities or imbalances in applicants for posts are any worse here than in GB. And many of the obstacles are just the same.

As we're all too aware, being on the edge of everything here- in England nothing matters unless it happens in London. Here it's the same with Belfast. My in-laws in Coleraine remind me of this regularly.

But many of our public bodies do function outside Belfast and in fact it is their very local nature that gives them a reason to exist. I'm thinking of school governors, local health councils and even Commissioners of Income Tax. All these bodies function within geographical areas for a very specific reason.

I am currently involved in the project to reform and update the General Commissioners of Tax. Not because there's really anything wrong, but because the department has decided it's a good thing. I don't think there's a single user who wants them changed and so most of our work is focussed on trying to keep the best of what's there and not having it swept away by the Department of Constitutional Affairs in London. And one of our positive features is the local nature of the Commissioners, who know the commercial environment involved and often the individuals too.

We want to keep this local aspect of the system – and not move it all to Belfast, or worse still have it administered by London.

Local people should look after their own patch – especially when they're doing a good job. End of rant about protecting our regional identity – but having worked in several areas where centralisation to London has become a real issue, I feel very strongly about it

It's vital that interested individuals know that there are opportunities available to them and we need to use local media to inform them. Many years ago, my husband took me aside and explained that, hard and all as it was to believe, the Belfast Telegraph was not the be all and end all of people's lives up country, as he put it and he's a farmer's son. It's the weekly local paper that counts with the News Letter on a Saturday for Farming Life.

After location, another barrier is time commitment and the very timing of the meetings.

I really don't understand why board meetings have to take place at 10.30 am in central Belfast. It suits no one but the officials and they're paid to be there anyway.

As a member of several boards and self-employed, I have often faced the issue of losing fees in order to attend a meeting. Those salaried members would normally have come to some sort of arrangement with their employers over remuneration – but this doesn't apply to those in business on their own. I am able to arrange my work round fixed commitments, but those in retail aren't so lucky. If the shop door isn't open, customers just go to the next one that is.

It's hard enough to arrange work cover, but what is even more difficult is arranging the children round meetings that finish after school. I know many have other domestic responsibilities which are equally problematic, but it is the mother thing that I have most experience of.

Of all the hats I wear, my MUMMY hat is the most important and the one that gets put on first and taken off last. ~in fact, I suppose I never actually take it off at all.

It is still very important to me to be there as often as possible when school finishes and when the boys were wee, I was always there.

I make it quite clear where my priorities lie and tough if they don't like it. I would ask all women off to get the kids to stand up and say 'please excuse me, I'm off to do something important – I'm collecting my children from school.'

I make it quite clear where my priorities lie and tough if they don't like it. I would ask all women off to get the kids to stand up and say 'please excuse me I'm off to do something important – I'm collecting my children from school.'

Evening meetings make life so much easier for almost all of us. Childcare and domestic responsibilities can be shared with the other half and time out of work is not an issue. Time which otherwise has to be made up later.

I do think that employers should see public appointments as a positive part of staff development – in the same way as, say, membership of the TA is regarded. Staff involved in public life and their local communities are sure to grow and flourish. We really are only talking about 3-4 hours a month. Time which can be accounted for, if there is a genuine will on the part of the employer.

And then this of course brings us to the vexed issue of payment. Should quangos be paid, and if so, should it be at a commercial rate, or merely a token payment. Well personally speaking, having been on the receiving end of both, I know which I prefer.

There seems to be no rhyme nor reason to whether payments are made, or the quantum of such payments.

And the decision on payment is made by an official, probably paying higher rate income tax and definitely a member of a sick pay scheme with 6 weeks leave and an inflation proof pension. Things the majority of us don't have.

And of course, if these individuals sit on a board, its nearly always as a departmental representative, so its part and parcel of their salaried work.

I gather some government departments won't even pay expenses for candidates to travel to interview. I used to be a civil servant and I know all about travel expenses, paid travelling time etc. It seems profoundly unjust to me, not to say hypocritical, to refuse to pay others' travelling expenses

I don't think the refusal to pay a realistic rate for attendance at quangos is malicious. I think it just comes from a complete lack of understanding of other peoples' circumstances. And the challenges faced by those who don't have the same job security and accompanying benefits.

If we want our public bodies to reflect NI society, we must make the process open and I don't think that means stuffing public bodies with representatives of special interest groups. It is so demeaning personally to know that you're there as the woman, or the regional representative. It's as if you aren't actually a rounded human being, with a set of experiences that might be of some use to the body you sit on.

The problem encountered by the Education and Library boards have drawn public focus to the composition of such boards. I think it has been a revelation to us all to learn how many councillors sit on these boards and more to the point, how long some of them have been in post - many of them well over 20 years!

No-one doubts that the majority of them take their responsibilities seriously, but there are major issues that come out of a god-given right to a statutory nomination.

Despite my own feelings about being pigeonholed, statutory nominees often feel they are there only to represent their own special interest. I have sat on boards where an individual with a special interest only turned up when that particular interest was being discussed.

That's like me being an accountant and only turning up at the audit meetings.

It's such a waste of talent and experience.

Some statutory nominations don't even get filled, as the nominating body can't find anyone who can be bothered to attend.

Meanwhile the general public is willing to compete for appointment to a board.

My Office, in a previous incarnation, published a report on the issue of diversity in public appointments. The underlying message in that report was that to find the best we had to get out there and encourage the best to apply and to remove the barriers in their path.

I'm hoping that my own experience in public life, combined with the opportunities my new post gives me, will help me shift these barriers and welcome an increasingly diverse range of dynamic individuals into NI's public life