

## **SPEECH FOR WOMEN INTO POLITICS CONFERENCE MARCH 7<sup>TH</sup> 2006**

Good morning everyone and thank you for inviting me to speak to your conference today. I met some of you at the WiP seminar in Parliament Buildings last year and it is a great pleasure for me to be asked to join you once again.

For those of you who don't know me, I was appointed as Northern Ireland Commissioner for Public Appointments in August last year, which is a part-time appointment. For my day job, I'm a tax consultant with my own business in Belfast. I hold a number of other appointments, including that of member of the House of Lords Appointments Commission.

The theme of today's event, "New Perspectives" is, I think, especially relevant to the current public appointments arena.

The Review of Public Administration will result in a significant rationalisation of public bodies. Many will be abolished, others merged and new bodies created, but the total number of public appointments is likely to be reduced considerably.

I know that there is concern that because fewer appointments will be made, there will be little prospect for a more diverse range of people to apply and be successful.

This is particularly the case amongst groups which are already under-represented on public bodies – a number of speakers at the RPA conference last November made this point specifically.

But I don't believe that this is a given – I view it as an opportunity, not a threat. What I want to see is an appointments process which is innovative and creative and will attract a more diverse group of applicants.

This was one of the recommendations of the original Nolan Committee – the same Committee which advised that my post be created. They commented that “We do however believe that the boards of public bodies should contain a balance of relevant skills and background .....If the members of boards are too similar in background and outlook there is unlikely to be the sort of healthy debate that is conducive to good governance.”

I agree with this wholeheartedly – board members do not need to be clones of one another, but it is sometimes an unfortunate side effect of the current system that this is exactly what we get. There is a real need for a more diverse range of applicants – this will, in turn, make public boards more reflective of the communities they serve.

Statistics gathered by the Central Appointments Unit show that the make-up of those who are successful in gaining an appointment (by gender, community and ethnic background and so on) is broadly in line with those who apply. People clearly aren't being

held back once they begin the process – the problem seems to lie with how we attract them in the first place.

This is why my predecessor, Baroness Fritchie, set up a working group to look at the whole issue of diversity – or lack of it - in public appointments in Northern Ireland and their report was published last year.

The group gathered evidence from a whole range of people and concluded that there were 5 main reasons, why the wider public don't get involved in public service. They came up with 11 recommendations which might help to bring down some of these barriers.

I'd like now to talk about these obstacles in a little more detail.

The first is that people simply aren't aware of public appointments. If they ever think about them at all - which admittedly is pretty unlikely - they don't realise that many of the appointments are open to people like them.

I don't think this is helped by the way many appointments are publicised. An awful lot of advertisements are buried in the Public Notices section of the Belfast Telegraph, among the tenders and planning applications – not the part of the paper I turn to first.

Sometimes they appear in the Jobfinder section, but unless you are actually looking for a job, you're unlikely to read that either.

Of course, both these methods make the assumption that everyone reads one of the Belfast papers. I'm sure you know that this isn't the case, but I'm afraid that I was guilty of that assumption too at one time. It was my husband who 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.

Now I'm not suggesting that appointments are advertised in every single local paper in Northern Ireland – the cost alone would be prohibitive. What the working group suggested and I support, is that departments explore alternative ways of publicising appointments.

There have already been some very creative approaches taken. The Department of Health, for example, used posters showing a picture of an elderly patient, with the tag line "What sort of care services should he get? – You help us decide." These appeared in public spaces like doctors and dentists' surgeries, health clinics, hospitals and libraries. It was backed up by a mail shot in areas like the North West, where there was a real lack of applicants.

This was a simple and eye-catching approach and is just the sort of thing the working group was recommending.

The second barrier is that the public appointments process is unattractive to many people. It can be pretty intimidating, particularly if you aren't used to competitive selection.

During some research done by the Scottish Executive on appointments, someone commented that the process was "quite heavy, to be honest – I'm sure it puts people off." I believe that this is down to a combination of things, like:

- Unappealing advertisements
- Documentation which is too formal;
- Application forms, that are daunting for the "ordinary person"
- Criteria which is unclear, or set at too high a level

I'm particularly keen to see the last two issues addressed. I know that it's important that the application form gives the selection panel enough information about the candidate's abilities to help them decide whether they should be invited to interview, but some forms I've had to complete have been interminable and took a very long time – and I'm used to it. Some of the criteria which is used routinely is unhelpful. For instance, you'll often see "5 years recent senior management or board level experience". Now I don't think this tells you much about a candidate's abilities – they may have they experience, but were they any good? I think the focus should be on their skills – were they a good team player, or communicator, for example?

Such a criterion can also inadvertently bar some people, particularly women who may have taken a career break to bring up children.

Sponsor departments need to bring some new thinking to this – it's not sufficient simply to repeat what was done before.

The third barrier is linked to this lack of attractiveness – people lack the confidence to apply for an appointment. Even when they know something about the process, there is a feeling that appointments are only for “the great and the good”.

My predecessor commissioned MORI to do some research on this and only 10% of the people they asked said they would consider applying for a public appointment. Here are just some of the comments that were made about what people saw as the typical board member:

- “He is around 45-ish, a little bit round, a grey suit, greyish hair” (note the “he”!)
- “They would have a record of being in the public eye”
- “They would have gone to university and have a political interest”
- “It's not somebody I could relate to now”

It seems that for many people, appointments are simply not for “people like them”. They don't think they have the ability to be a

board member, or they under-value their own skills and experience.

There is work to be done on reaching out to a wider audience - to listen to their views on how the process can be made more accessible. Events like this are a great way for me to hear directly from you where you think improvements could be made. I can then feed this back to those who are running the appointments process.

The last two barriers are directly linked – these are the commitment associated with an appointment and remuneration – or, more accurately, the lack of it.

Public service is a major undertaking – it's not simply a matter of turning up to a meeting once a month. There are papers to review, sub-committees to attend, you might have to represent your board at events or functions. All these take time, which most people don't have enough of already.

It's essential that departments give a realistic idea of the time commitment required – it's a frequent complaint by board members that the information pack will say the post requires, say, 2 to 3 days a month, but that the actual time spent on it is a great deal more.

There are other time-related issues which can affect your ability to take up an appointment. If you're employed, you might find that your employer won't be keen to release you for meetings held during the day. If you're self-employed, you might lose out on

business, if you take time out to attend a meeting. If you have children, or other dependents, you might find it difficult to work round that.

It also doesn't help that most board meetings are perceived to take place in Belfast. Some research done by my office among rural women highlighted this – it's not just the time it takes to travel there from, say, the west of the Province. Public transport in rural areas is not that frequent, especially in the evenings, so if you are a non-driver, this is a major disadvantage.

There is no reason why meetings can't be held in different locations, if it suits some of the members.

I believe that remuneration is a big part of this. My Office has found that there is a general perception that only people who can afford to take up a public appointment do so – and I don't think it's a coincidence that a quarter of appointees are over 60. Many of these are retired and have no dependents, so they can give their time freely.

Currently, less than half of the 2,400 public appointments in Northern Ireland are remunerated – others generally get expenses only. If this was increased, it may attract a more diverse range of applicants. For instance, those with carer responsibilities could pay for support, which they couldn't otherwise afford. The self-employed could pay for cover, to enable them to take time out for meetings.

Even if an appointment isn't paid, I would encourage departments to consider paying additional expenses which might help a disadvantaged person take up an appointment. There's a department in England that pays for a carer to help a disabled board member travel to board meetings – not a great expense, but it makes a huge difference to the member in question, who wouldn't otherwise be able to do it.

So, as I'm sure you can see, there is a great deal of work which needs to be done to improve the diversity of applicants for public appointments.

I think, though, that it comes down to 2 simple questions. Departments need to look at a board and ask "Who isn't here?", then "Why not?".

The working group's recommendations will, I hope, help departments answer these questions, then encourage the best to apply and remove the barriers in their path.

Thank you