ATT Welcome September 2020

Welcomes

01 September 2020

This year will go down in history for many reasons, both good and bad. There is Brexit, the current coronavirus pandemic, the forthcoming Presidential election in America, the recent events in Lebanon and the UK becoming more diversity aware. Some of these were within our control and others outside; where we can influence change for the better, we have a responsibility for future generations to play our part.

I am a former Chair of ATT/CIOT Northern Ireland Branch and currently work in tax practice in Belfast. The turning point in our history in Northern Ireland may be considered the peace agreement negotiated in 1998 after nearly 30 years of disturbances and unrest. Before then, we usually featured in the national and international headlines for all the wrong reasons; after 1998 we featured for more good reasons than bad.

I acknowledge it is difficult to change overnight. Our problems may be traced back to the 12th century with the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland, or more recently with the Plantation of Ulster in 1605 when the North of the island of Ireland was settled to provide a degree a security for England. The island of Ireland was considered an easy backdoor for France and Spain, both predominantly Catholic countries, to mount an attack on England.

Since 1998, we have tried to a become a more inclusive and welcoming place:

- The Union Jack can only be flown from public buildings for a limited number of designated days (previously it was in place for the whole year).
- Displays of the Union Jack has been removed from courts – the Crown Prosecution Service has been renamed the Public Prosecution Service.
- The police service, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (formed in 1922 following the partition of Ireland), has been renamed the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

- To encourage more applicants from the Catholic population, 50% of recruits must come from that religious background; the remaining 50% will be from all other religious backgrounds.
- The 1998 peace agreement also established the Equality Commission, an independent public body which oversees equality and discrimination law.
- In my local hospital there is a ‘Welcome to the Hospital’ board. During my last visit several years ago, I counted some 20 or more different languages.

But we do not live in Utopia.

There is a desire to introduce an Irish Language Act to put the Irish language on the same footing as English, just in the way the Welsh language appears, for example, on HMRC correspondence; in the interests of equality, part of the population believe that Ulster-Scots should be given equal status, too. Also, there are regular reminders of atrocities and injustices that occurred after 1969 – not to learn from our mistakes, but to keep the wounds fresh. Often, we learn our history from close relatives. It is only in the past few years that there has been any acknowledgement of the sacrifices made by Irish soldiers in the British Army during the First World War, even though those soldiers of the 16th (Irish) Division and 36th (Ulster) Division fought side by side against a common foe.

We have started our journey to end discrimination in Northern Ireland but there is a long way to go. It is so important to ensure that our children and grandchildren do recall our history but only to learn from our mistakes.

But we are not all bad. My previous employer was Catholic and held a British passport, and I would still have the greatest respect for him.

If you see any injustice at work, do not fight it – change it by peaceful means.

May I wish you all the very best.

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