Sinn Fein have made it perfectly clear that they will not return to the NI Assembly until Unionist's (of all persuasions) acquiesce in relation to their demands for a standalone Irish Language Act. This demand to most neutral spectators appears, on the face of it, to be a reasonable request enabling a community to express their culture through the Irish language. However the request has serious implications for the Protestant / Unionist, non-Irish speaking community who are finding themselves increasingly disenfranchised in the workplace.

For a long time now within NI, Protestant students in increasing numbers reject NI's two universities. No one has undertaken research as to why a larger percentage of the Protestant school leaving population should reject NI's universities, than their catholic counterparts. I have argued that there are not only 'push' factors that determine NI's university population, there are also 'pull' factors. It is my view that the two local universities socially responsibility obligations to ensure that they address the 'pull' factors that historically have been dissuading Protestant / Unionist students attending the UofU / QUB. Catholic / Nationalist students increasingly dominate the local universities at undergraduate, post-graduate (Masters) and PhD level. Because of their superior academic qualifications, the local Catholic / Nationalist students rightfully have a competitive advantage in the workplace. The provision of an Irish Language Act provides an added stimulus to Catholic / Nationalist employment within NI government departments, universities, schools and courts. This reason alone demands that Unionist politicians seek parity in other areas to avoid further Protestant / Unionist workplace displacement.

There is however another more important reason that the Unionist political community cannot give way on a standalone Irish Language Act and enter into a devolved government. Any such compromise could be political suicide. Many senior Unionist politicians from all Unionist political parties have been informed over the last six months that there is systemic, long-standing discrimination against Protestant / Unionist students within NI's university sector. The same Unionist politicians, after being provided with considerable statistical information and data from the universities and government departments have stayed silent. However this issue would inevitably shape the views of the Unionist electorate if a return to Stormont is proposed. If I am correct and there is systemic discrimination within NI's university sector against Protestants, it would be political suicide for Unionist politicians to agree to a standalone Irish Language Act. After any deal is struck, Unionist voters will be informed by the media and disgruntled politicians that prior to any agreement the mainstream Unionist politicians and parties were made aware that an additional £200 million pound over 10 years had been paid to subsidise Catholic students (at the UofU and QUB) over and above the DfE subsidies to Protestant students. Unionist politicians will not retrospectively be able to explain to
their voters, why having been made aware of S.75 failings in PhD awards; S.75 failings in the relocation of campuses and courses; anomalies in staff redundancy programmes and student housing provision failings, why Unionists agreed to additional payments to educate Catholic students in the Irish language education when Protestants have been historically disadvantaged by QUB / UofU's failure to address the under-representation of Protestants at university. Currently, there is only one senior Unionist politician who could go to the electorate and win the support of his constituency electorate for the actions he has taken to address discrimination against Protestant's in NI's university sector.

The older Protestant taxpayers have historically been helping to pay for substantial additional subsidies for younger Catholic students. These university subsidies (of approximate £2,500-£5,000 average per undergraduate student / per year) substantially benefits the Catholic community more so than the Protestant community. Those Protestant school-children who fear to go to the UofU campus at Magee, Londonderry or who fear to reside in the Holyland at QUB, instead relocate to England and Scotland. Protestant university students in GB receive no DfE subsidy and their parents (or the student loan system) has to pay substantially more for their university education. Importantly, this Protestant student population is less likely to return to NI and hence employment within NI's professional and managerial sector is skewed because of discrimination in the university sector.

If what I have reported to Unionist political community over the last six months is factually accurate, then this may be one reason why those Unionist MLAs and MPs who wish to see Stormont returned, prefer that the issue of Protestant discrimination within the NI university sector is kept out of the public domain. Any such disclosure would make it very difficult, indeed perhaps impossible, for Unionist politicians, particularly the DUP (who might favour a return to Stormont) agreeing to a standalone Irish Language Act. Any such Act would further disadvantage the Protestant population and any such action would be politically high risk.

Should any Unionist political parties return to Stormont, having agreed an Irish language Act and subsequently discrimination within NI's University Sector features high on the political agenda or the media, Unionist politicians could face a backlash from the Unionist voters similar to that faced by David Trimble and the UUP after the signing of the Belfast Agreement.

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