

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

Date: 25 January 2022 Index number: EUR 45/5181/2022

UNITED KINGDOM: AUTHORITIES MUST ENSURE SAFETY OF PROFESSOR COLIN HARVEY AND PROTECT FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Amnesty International is concerned at the campaign of hostility directed at human rights and constitutional law academic, Professor Colin Harvey, as a result of his legitimate academic activity.

Professor Harvey has been subjected to a years-long campaign from elected politicians, media commentators and political activists on social media designed to undermine his professional academic standing, because of his participation in public discourse on matters such as the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, implications for Northern Ireland of the UK exit from the European Union and the proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

This campaign of vilification has escalated in recent weeks and raises concerns about Professor Harvey's safety and, more broadly, the ability of academics and other individuals to participate in such public policy debates in Northern Ireland without fear as to their personal safety and professional standing.

Professor Harvey is Professor of Human Rights Law in the School of Law, Queen's University Belfast, a Fellow of the Senator George J Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, an Associate Fellow of the Institute of Irish Studies, and a former Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.¹

In 2019, elected representatives from two political parties contacted his employer, Queen's University Belfast, demanding to know if the institution endorses his work on "planning and preparing for constitutional change in Ireland".²

In November 2021, the chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly ad hoc committee on the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland reported that the failure by the First and deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive to appoint a five-member Panel of Experts to advise the committee, as required by the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement,³ was due to opposition by the First Minister's party to the appointment of Professor Harvey.⁴

Against this background, public vilification of Professor Harvey has increased and he has become the subject of media and social media comment directly or indirectly alleging that he has abused his academic role or may otherwise have acted inappropriately.⁵ Further social media commentary has accused him of support for illegal armed violence and alignment with Nazism. One comment said he "should be stripped of his position... Colin Harvey is a snake. Get rid."

¹ Queen's University Belfast, Professor Colin Harvey personal profile, pure.qub.ac.uk/en/persons/colin-harvey

² Irish News, "QUB academic reveals year-long 'campaign' of political pressure", 5 November 2019, irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2019/11/05/news/headline-1756474/

³ *New Decade, New Approach*, 9 January 2020, assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

⁴ BBC News, "DUP accused of blocking NI Bill of Rights", 25 November 2021, bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-59415769

⁵ For example: Irish News, "Journalists Allison Morris and Aoife Moore to take legal action against Eoghan Harris and Twitter", 12 May 2021, irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2021/05/13/news/prominent-journalists-allison-morris-and-aoife-moore-to-take-legal-action-against-eoghan-harris-and-twitter-2320305/ and Newsletter, "I forgot to banish human rights professor to the desert island", by

In Northern Ireland, in the past, such slurs have led to personally-directed violence. The region has a deeply troubling history of violence, including against lawyers, academics and politicians, and including the 1983 murder of Queen's University Belfast law lecturer, lawyer and elected representative Edgar Graham, and the murder of lawyers Patrick Finucane (1989) and Rosemary Nelson (1999).

While recent decades have seen a significant reduction in such violence, illegal armed groups have continued to carry out wide-ranging acts of violence, including threats to journalists and others, beatings, bombings and killings.⁶

Academics and academic institutions play a special role in society and, as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression has noted, "without academic freedom, societies lose one of the essential elements of democratic self-governance: the capacity for self-reflection, for knowledge generation and for a constant search for improvements of people's lives and social conditions."⁷

The Special Rapporteur has reported that "academics and their institutions face social harassment and State repression for their research, the questions that they pursue, the points that they raise and the methodologies that they bring to bear on public policy – or simply for the stature that their academic work has given them in society"⁸ and has called for State authorities and academic institutions to take appropriate steps to protect and promote academic freedom.

Amnesty International calls on the United Kingdom authorities and academic institutions in Northern Ireland to take all steps necessary to ensure the protection of Professor Harvey and of all individuals exercising their right to freedom of expression, including academic freedom, in line with its international human rights obligations.

Ruth Dudley Edwards, 11 January 2022, newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/columnists/ruth-dudley-edwards-i-forgot-to-banish-human-rights-professor-to-the-desert-island-3522667

⁶ Police Recorded Security Situation Statistics, 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021 - Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), 7 January 2022, psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/security-situation-statistics/2021/december/security-situation-statistics-to-december-2021.pdf

⁷ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on academic freedom and the freedom of opinion and expression*, 28 July 2020, UN Doc. A/75/261, para. 54, undocs.org/A/75/261

⁸ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on academic freedom and the freedom of opinion and expression*, para. 2 (previously cited).