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## Challenge to Tories over UUP councillor accused of homophobia

Antrim mayor Adrian Watson selected as election candidate despite refusal to allow gay couples to stay at his B&B

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Henry McDonald, Ireland correspondent  
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Gay rights activist Peter Tatchell has urged the Tories to reject Adrian Watson as its joint Conservative-UUP candidate for South Antrim. Photograph: Linda Nylind

The Tories face further embarrassment after their new allies, the Ulster Unionists, selected a councillor accused of homophobia to stand in the general election.

Adrian Watson, the mayor of Antrim, has been chosen by his constituency association as its candidate for the UUP in South Antrim this May. He caused outrage within the gay community in Northern Ireland after saying he would not allow gay and lesbian couples to stay in his family-run bed and breakfast.

In 2006 the UUP councillor told a local radio station: "This is a bed and breakfast in a family home with three young children. Common sense has to prevail. There is no difficulty with members of the gay community phoning up and booking a room. The difficulty would arise because of the logistics of the bed and breakfast – if it was a same-sex couple – and because my wife has strong Christian views she felt it was difficult to facilitate that.

"It is difficult because my 14-year-old daughter helps out immensely. And the obvious question: 'Why are two men, or why are two women, in a double room?'"

Watson has also been accused of racism towards Ireland's Traveller community. A year before his remarks about gay couples, he described Travellers at a local halting point in the Antrim area as "scumbags" and "scum of the earth".

The decision by the South Antrim Ulster Unionist Association to select Watson comes in the week the Tories launched a national programme promoting gay equality.

Before a [speech to US Republicans at the Cato Institute in Washington this week](#), the shadow environment secretary, Nick Herbert, wrote on the Tories' website: "For the

modern Conservative party, embracing gay equality is neither a temporary phenomenon nor an agenda which can be reversed."

A spokesperson for the UUP said the final selection of a candidate for South Antrim had yet to be taken. A joint committee of senior officials from the UUP and the Conservatives has to meet and ratify the candidates standing on the parties' joint ticket.

The Guardian has learned that local Tories are concerned about the choice of Watson as the UUP's nominee. A senior source said they would expect all candidates to support the party's manifesto which, he pointed out, advocates gay equality. The Tory source stressed that Watson was not yet the Conservatives' candidate.

Gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has challenged the Tories to reject Watson as the joint Conservative-UUP candidate. "I don't see how the Conservatives can claim to be a gay-friendly party when they are allied to an Ulster Unionist candidate who calls gay people 'homos' and who demands the right to discriminate against same-sex couples," he said. "David Cameron should disown Watson and call on the Ulster Unionists to replace him."

The South Antrim constituency is a key UUP-Conservative target in the general election. The seat is held by the Democratic Unionist the Reverend William McCrea. However, the DUP will face a challenge from the hard-line Traditional Unionist Voice, which hopes to pick up votes from grassroots unionists angry over continued powersharing with Sinn Fein.

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