

Mr Edwin Poots MLA  
Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly  
The Speaker's Office  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw, Stormont  
Belfast, BT4 3XX

**By email: [speaker@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:speaker@niassembly.gov.uk)**

24 September 2026

Dear Mr Poots,

We write as three distinct organisations with an interest in the Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill and its implications for freedom of expression, therapeutic practice and freedom of religion. We are concerned that Members have received unclear guidance on their ability to scrutinise the meaning and implications of “*gender identity*” within the Bill. We seek your clarification on the parameters of the debate going forward.

“*Gender identity*” is an operative term throughout the Bill. Clause 6 provides that a reference to a victim’s gender identity includes:

*“(a) what the victim considers it to be, and  
(b) what the person considers it to be.”* [1]

What the term means and encompasses therefore has direct implications for the scope and operation of the proposed criminal offences. This raises questions of legal certainty: citizens must be able to understand the conduct that could expose them to criminal liability.

On 15 September, when Mr Buckley sought to question what “*gender identity*” encompasses, the Principal Deputy Speaker, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, intervened, ruling:

*“It is self-determined, so it is not for Eóin Tennyson or anyone else to talk about how many genders there are.”* [2]

Later the same day, Deputy Speaker Mr John Blair clarified:

*“The Bill does include reference to gender identity, and discussion of gender identity is, therefore, permissible within the context of the Bill. This is not a general debate on gender identity, and Members should keep that in mind.”* [3]

You reiterated on 21 September:

*“The Bill includes references to gender identity. Discussion of gender identity is therefore permissible in the context of the Bill.”* [4]

However, uncertainty remained when the debate resumed on 22 September. Mr Buckley referred expressly to clause 6 and asked a Member how many gender identities she believed would fall within the Bill. Mr Blair stopped the question, ruling that asking another Member for her opinion on the number of genders amounted to a wider debate on “*gender identity*”. Later in the sitting, he permitted Mr Buckley to ask whether the term should be clearly defined for the purposes of clause 6. [5]

That distinction leaves an important question unresolved. Members must be able to test which asserted identities clause 6 would encompass, particularly by putting that question to the Bill’s sponsor. Otherwise, they cannot properly assess the reach of the proposed offences.

Given the significant public interest in this Bill, we would welcome clear guidance from the Chair confirming that Members may probe both the meaning and the scope of “*gender identity*” as used in the Bill.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Stella O’Malley, Executive Director, Genspect

Lord Young of Acton, General Secretary, Free Speech Union

James Kennedy, Northern Ireland Policy Officer, The Christian Institute

[1] Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill [As Introduced], NIA Bill 45/22–27, clause 6(1).

[2] Northern Ireland Assembly Official Report (Hansard), 15 September 2026, Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill: Second Stage, p. 17.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[4] Northern Ireland Assembly Official Report (Hansard), 21 September 2026, Conduct of Members, p. 1.

[5] Northern Ireland Assembly Official Report (Hansard), 22 September 2026, Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill: Second Stage (resumed).