

On 30<sup>th</sup> November, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) issued its long-awaited consultation on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. In the foreword, the Secretary of State gave a sense of great hope for a changed human rights landscape in Northern Ireland. He said, “For too long issues of human rights and equality in Northern Ireland were seen through the prism of conflict as a kind of ‘zero sum game’ of winners and losers.” He went on to stress that the government, by contrast, had taken the aspirations of all the people in Northern Ireland to see how they can be given legislative form through a Bill of Rights. Sean Woodward assures us that human rights and equality are part of a necessary framework which is there to protect and benefit the whole community.

In reading these fine words, CAJ had great hopes for what lay ahead; but at the end of the report we were left wondering whether the foreword was written for a different document. Only 2 actual rights are recommended for inclusion – the right to vote/ be elected and the right to identify oneself and be accepted as British or Irish or both. Other rights are either ruled out completely (including social and economic rights) or left open for debate. The narrow scope of the NIO’s approach will serve only to reinforce divisions and sustain a “zero sum” approach to rights; it certainly does not constitute mutual respect for the rights and freedoms of all the people of Northern Ireland to which everyone could subscribe.

There are rights suggested by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission’s comprehensive advice which would actually change the terms of the debate, and take rights away from sectional “zero sum” interests into a framework for protecting and benefitting the whole community. However, these are not even offered for discussion. In discarding these rights, the government has effectively ignored the results of all consultation carried out to date on a Bill of Rights, and regular polling which shows that rights to health, education and housing, for example, are supported by the vast majority of people from all sides of the community here.

CAJ remains committed to a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. This unfulfilled element of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement needs to be addressed without delay and in a manner that genuinely takes on board the views of all people here. What the government is proposing does not come close.

The NIO says that “A Bill of Rights which has the support of the people of Northern Ireland could play an important role in underpinning the peace, prosperity and political progress of Northern Ireland by...protecting those made vulnerable by the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland.”

We challenge the many people who have been left vulnerable by the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland – whether political, civil, social, economic or cultural – to read the two rights suggested by the NIO and find something that offers them protection. If – as we suspect – you can’t, we urge you to contact the Secretary of State and tell him so.

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