

REPORT TO COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE

LEAD ORGANISATION ASHTON COMMUNITY TRUST.

FUNDED BY N.I.V.T.

FORMAT

This conference was organised by the Ashton Community Trust and was held at the N.I.C.V.A. building on the 12th of December 2001. Over 40 people from all over North Belfast attended it. (List included). These came from a targeted invitation to 100 people. Participants were all given the full draft document and a summary. In addition the representatives of groups were allocated a video. This was also made available to the local residents who attended. The speakers were:

- Paddy Sloan-Human Rights Commission
- Inez Mc McCormack-Human Rights Commissioner
- Maggie Beirne-Committee Administration of Justice
- Terry Enrigh-Equality Coalition

The speakers were asked to give their view on the draft bill and to generate thoughts for the workshops, which were facilitated in such a way to give the participants the opportunity in smaller, less, confined groups to give their comments and ideas. Lunch was provided at the venue.

SPEAKERS INPUT

Some of the main points and issues put forward by the speakers were:

- Ultimately Westminster decides what is in the bill.
- Part of the Good Friday Agreement.
- Sometimes seen as a republican agenda.
- The make-up of the Commission.
- Lowering voting age to 17?
- Criminal Justice- was it right that a 10 year old should be held responsible for their actions (youngest age in the world).
- Hefty and mixed up document.
- Think about options, what would work for the community?
- Equality schemes in Public Sector
- No woman judges
- Separate section for Children and Young People?
- It is about getting a balance and equilibrium right.
- Issues particular to Northern Ireland
- Difficult to get local people as opposed to intellectuals involved
- More ground level conferences such as this one.
- Very legal document, difficult to understand.
- C.A.J. had some concerns and there submissions were available at the conference.
- Still lots of work to be done to involve local people
- The Bill should be a rulebook for government.
- Will the government take it seriously?
- Should there be a chapter on language?

- **Social and Economic section.**
- **Make use of the South African Model**
- **Civil rights are ok but what about housing rights etc.**
- **Discussion has to be brought back to the people.**
- **Perhaps some breathing space is needed for people to understand how significant the bill is.**
- **Need to decipher what is in the bill.**
- **Poverty is a violation of human rights.**
- **Need a campaign to get MLAS involved.**
- **Perhaps commitment to human rights should be proof tested before funding is given out.**
- **People do not want to give up power, see this bill as a threat and so spread negativity about it.**
- **The bill is weapon and is not the end of the struggle for equality**
- **It should benefit everyone.**

After the speakers there was time before lunch and subsequent workshops there was time for a short question and answer session. Some of the more pertinent points arising from this interchange between the speakers and the audience were:

- ⚡ **That the commission was flawed at the onset because of the lack of community representation.**
- ⚡ **There had been 530 applications for the commission and selection had not been easy.**
- ⚡ **It was still a selection process rather than an election one.**
- ⚡ **With all the equality agendas did we really need a bill of rights?**
- ⚡ **Could the resources be better used?**
- ⚡ **Was there a social class issue in the set up of the commission?**

FEEDBACK FROM WORKSHOPS

After lunch the participants were split into 4 workshops and were asked to focus on set questions. One of the most encouraging elements of these sessions that the end of the time allotted for the workshops, each one requested more time to finish their debates. Some the main themes and opinions that came from these workshops were reported back to the main audience and these were:

- **That most people had not seen the bill of rights draft or heard of it.**
- **The document particularly in North Belfast context does not mean much to local people on the streets.**
- **Will the bill itself have any legal powers and will it protect an individual's power.**
- **The authors are very far removed from those the bill is intended to safeguard the most.**
- **Use of legal terminology e.g. "could" would not guarantee specific rights-dependant on interpretation.**
- **Mechanisms for implementation need to be stated, clear, accessible and resourced appropriately by government.**
- **Must incorporate local relevance (but this may cause irresolvable conflict) in reference to issues such as political ex prisoners, a woman's right to choose, and parades or rights of assembly versus children's safety and education as in the Holy Cross situation.**

- Right to remain silent must enshrined in bill.
- Community has a role to ensure that past breaches of human rights are never allowed to occur again.
- Our bill of rights could be a role model for the rest of the world. If we can get it right.
- How is it accountable to local people i.e. a person living on the New Lodge Road?
- Raised more questions than answers.
- Women should not need separate section if the bill is implemented.
- The civil conflict makes Northern Ireland unique.
- The bill should be a part of the reconciliation process and not see as belonging to one section of the community.
- Government policy should reflect human rights.
- Punishment should be severe for people who breach or ignore the bill.
- Should be separate Human Rights Court as in the USA.
- Catch 22 situation how do really hear the views of children while accepting that they are not responsible for their actions at a particular age.

The main rights the participants wanted emphasised in the bill were

- Decent standard of living.
- Right to work no matter what your personal circumstances.
- Safe and sustainable environment.
- To live free from sectarianism.
- Standardisation of adulthood. In regards to voting, partaking of alcohol, sex, and minimum wage.
- ⚡ Living wages not an adequate one both for part time and full time workers.
- ⚡ Right to be healthy without it depending on financial circumstances.
- ⚡ Employment protection.
- ⚡ Right to join a union.
- ⚡ Decent affordable housing
- ⚡ Right to death.
- ⚡ Right not to be married.
- ⚡ Right not to be classified as coming from the catholic or protestant community.
- ⚡ Rights for unmarried parents especially in regards to children.

In addition at the plenary session it was stated unequivocally that the conference had raised people's awareness and that some groups would now be making their own submissions to the commission emphasising their own thematic concerns. The speakers were thanked for their input and above all for their candour and being able to take and answer criticism. It was pointed out that in reference to women not having their own section that this was an individual's idea and was not sanctioned by the main body. It was agreed that the Ashton Community Trust would after consultation prepare a report to the funders of the conference and to the commission and the participants offered their thanks to the Trust for giving them the opportunity at a local level to respond to the draft bill.