



The Chief Executive  
NIHRC  
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RECEIVED

30 JUL 2004

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Dear Paddy

Thank you for sending us a copy of your update on *Progressing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland*. We were pleased to receive it and to have an opportunity to consider the revisions that are now suggested to the 2001 proposals, although it can be difficult in a lengthy document to get a real feel for any change in tone. It might be helpful for information sessions to be organised later in the year to enable changes to be presented more manageably and the motivation to be explained.

While this does not seem an appropriate time to put forward a complete response to every proposal, we have some general comments to make on the way forward for the Commission:

1. Throughout the document, there are acknowledgements of the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly for upholding many of the rights proposed. Assuming the continued absence or at least instability of the Assembly, will this mean rights here will be similarly unstable?
2. We were pleased to see the inclusion amongst the Commission's objectives (p.16) of the need to ensure a balance between communal rights and individual rights. This, alongside inclusion in the Preamble of a section on duty and responsibility, should go some way towards helping foster trust and reconciliation if it can be assessed and managed in practical ways.
3. How will the NIHRC continue to operate once the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is set up in London? The detail in the CEHR White Paper is still unclear, and it would be useful to know who will be the regional human rights body for Northern Ireland or at least how each body's role will fit with the other.
4. Section 10 on the Rights of Victims has been changed a little, but we feel it still overlooks the majority of victims in Northern Ireland who have and seek no public profile, and who simply want to cope with their losses privately. Is there some way a Bill of Rights can help them tell their stories if they choose, but also protect them from being swept up in a political-based process?
5. It would be persuasive if there could be case studies included at some point detailing how, were this Bill of Rights to be made law, the horrendous recent





spate of homophobic, racist and elderly attacks could either have been prevented or at least more satisfactorily dealt with.

We look forward to having these issues and many others considered over the next few months, and we hope that the political parties will be persuaded to take part in those discussions at long last. That being so, it would be vital for the Commission to have some structures in place for dealing with valid, but dissenting, viewpoints. That will also be important as new Commissioners are brought on-board and as new opinions are taken from them.

The Evangelical Alliance wishes Brice and his colleagues who will be moving on later in the year all the very best as they take up new challenges or simply spend some time recovering! We appreciate the hard work they have done and the efforts they made to reach out as broadly as possible.

Yours sincerely

Heather McKinley  
Public Affairs Officer