



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Summary of opinion poll findings

In October and November 2001 a representative sample of 1,000 voters were asked about some of the main proposals in the Commission's consultation document on a Bill of Rights, published in September 2001.

Consistently the responses received indicated a very high degree of support not just for the concept of a Bill of Rights but for the need for it to be meaningful to ordinary people. A clear majority in both main communities, of men and women and all age groups, said they thought that the Commission was right to propose not only guarantees for members of both main communities but also a wide range of social and economic rights for all individuals.

As might be expected, there were some significant differences based on political views on what exactly the proposed Bill should cover, but to the Commission it is clear that there is a "sufficient consensus" on the issue. This consensus will have to be taken into account by the UK Government, the political parties and everyone else involved in the discussions on the proposed Bill of Rights in the coming months.

The need for a Bill of Rights

Over 70% of those questioned said that a Bill of Rights reflecting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland was either essential or desirable. There was strong support in both main communities (64% of Protestants and 83% of Catholics) and in all age groups, although those over 75 were less enthusiastic. Only a tiny percentage thought the idea was unacceptable.

Table 1 The need for a Bill of Rights

Do you think a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland which reflects the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, including the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem is:

	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable/ Tolerable	Unacceptable	Don't know
Protestant	39%	25%	14%	3%	19%
Catholic	68%	15%	7%	1%	10%
All	52%	21%	11%	1%	15%

What the Bill should cover

There was also strong support for the view that the Bill should protect the full range of internationally accepted human rights, including both civil and political and social, economic and environmental rights. But on this issue there was stronger support among Catholics (80%) than Protestants (65%).

Table 2 What the Bill should cover

How important is it that the Bill should protect the full range of internationally accepted human rights including civil and political rights, and social, economic and environmental rights?

	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable/ Tolerable	Unacceptable	Don't know
Protestant	37%	28%	14%	3%	19%
Catholic	65%	15%	9%	1%	11%
All	50%	22%	11%	2%	16%

Views on specific rights

The survey included more detailed questions on a number of specific rights. The responses to these questions from respondents in the two main sections of the community are summarised in Table 3 below.

It is clear from this that on most issues, although there is a higher level of support in the Catholic than the Protestant community, a substantial majority in each is in favour of including the rights in the proposed Bill and that very few thought that their inclusion was unacceptable.

The most striking evidence of consensus was in respect of a governmental duty to guarantee the rights to health, an adequate standard of living, access to work and a healthy, safe and sustainable environment. Roughly nine out of ten people in both main communities (85-88% of Protestants and 91-93% of Catholics) wanted these duties to be included.

There was also a high level of cross-communal support for the inclusion of a right of effective participation by elected representatives in the governance of Northern Ireland (62% of Protestants and 80% of Catholics) and by women in decision-making (74% of Protestants and 86% of Catholics).

Also popular were specific protections for the rights of the two main communities (65% of Protestants and 84% of Catholics), a right of choice of religious, integrated and Irish-medium schools (62% of Protestants and 81% of Catholics), special rights for children (67% of Protestants and 78% of Catholics) and special rights for victims of the conflict (62% of Protestants and 81% of Catholics).

There was somewhat less support among Protestants for pro-active measures to deal with inequality (56%), for the right to use any language in obtaining essential services from public bodies (54%) and for the continuation of the rights in the Bill in the event of Irish unification. (53%) Finally, any suggestion that those questioned were simply ticking all the boxes is clearly refuted by the response to the Commission's proposal that the Bill should include a right to vote at 17. This was supported by only 12% of Protestants and 20% of Catholics and was stated to be unacceptable by 51% of Protestants and 37% of Catholics. Even among younger respondents aged from 18-24 years the proposal was supported by only 21% and was stated to be unacceptable by 35%.

Table 3 Views on specific rights

<i>How important do you think it would be for the Bill to include:</i>	<u>Essential or Desirable</u>		<u>Unacceptable</u>	
	Protestant	Catholic	Protestant	Catholic
<i>Specific protections for the rights of the two main communities</i>	65%	84%	3%	-

<i>A right not to be treated as a member of a particular community</i>	59%	72%	6%	6%
<i>Proactive measures to address inequality</i>	56%	79%	5%	1%
<i>A right for parents to have their children educated in religious, integrated or Irish medium schools</i>	62%	81%	9%	1%
<i>A right to communicate with public bodies in any language if necessary to access essential services</i>	54%	77%	13%	2%
<i>A duty on government and public bodies to guarantee social, economic and environmental rights</i>	64%	82%	2%	1%
<i>(a) the right to health care</i>	87%	91%	1%	1%
<i>(b) the right to an adequate standard of living</i>	87%	91%	1%	-
<i>(c) the right of access to work</i>	85%	91%	1%	-
<i>(d) the right to a healthy, safe and sustainable environment</i>	88%	93%	1%	-
<i>A right of elected representatives to full, fair and effective participation in governance of Northern Ireland</i>	62%	80%	6%	1%
<i>A right for women to participation in decision-making and power</i>	74%	86%	1%	-
<i>Special rights for children</i>	67%	78%	4%	3%
<i>Special rights for all victims of the conflict</i>	62%	81%	7%	2%
<i>A right to vote at 17</i>	12%	20%	51%	37%
<i>Continued application of the Bill if there were a united Ireland</i>	53%	71%	15%	6%