



## **Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**

**25 June 2015**

**Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission**

**Presentation by Ms Emily Logan**

**Chief Commissioner**

Good morning. We are very pleased to be here with our colleagues from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and to speak to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to speak.

### **Human Rights and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**

Today is an important opportunity to recall the commitments made back in 1998 to respect and protect human rights and equality of opportunity. In signing the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the parties affirmed their 'commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community.'

Since 1998, there has been substantial progress in implementing the human rights elements of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The founding of two national human rights institutions on this island saw the establishment of the former Irish Human Rights Commission under the Human Rights Commission Act of 2000, with a statutory obligation to ensure the realisation and protection of the human rights of all persons in the State. In 2014, the Irish Human Rights Commission was merged with the Equality Authority to create a new body, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, with an expanded mandate and enhanced powers. The 2014 Act explicitly provides for a stronger level of institutional independence and direct accountability to the Oireachtas.

## **Two Commissions**

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement laid down not only a mandate for both national human rights institutions, but also the mechanism to ensure strong cooperation between them. The Agreement specifically envisaged the establishment of a Joint Committee with representatives of the two bodies, North and South, as a forum for considering human rights issues on the island of Ireland.

The first official meeting of the Joint Committee took place in November 2001 and, since then, members have engaged on several key issues and collaborated on all-island events. Recent examples include the jointly hosted conference held in Newry which brought human rights and anti-poverty practitioners together to discuss poverty on the island of Ireland and ways of responding at a legal, policy and community level. In addition, this year's conference on gender equality included expert speakers from across the island of Ireland.

As well as through the formal structure of the Joint Committee, the two Commissions have had the opportunity to meet and participate regularly at a regional and global level in international networks of national human rights institutions.

## **A Charter of Rights for the Island of Ireland**

Under the Agreement, the Joint Committee of both Commissions was invited to consider the possibility of creating a Charter of Rights for everyone living on the island of Ireland. The former Irish Human Rights Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission together published their *Advice on a Charter of Rights for the Island of Ireland* in June 2011 and this was presented to the Irish and UK governments and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Joint Committee recommended that, as a minimum, a Charter of Rights for the Island of Ireland should reaffirm the political parties' commitment to the rights in the European Convention on Human Rights.



## **Implications of Human Rights Change in the UK**

Members of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission are concerned that the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement may be affected if the British Government carries through on its pre-election manifesto promises to repeal the UK Human Rights Act and withdraw from the European Court of Human Rights. As members of the Committee will be aware, human rights protections were a core feature, not an 'add on', of the Peace Process and the negotiations around the Agreement.

Two referenda were held, North and South, on 22 May 1998, in which voters in both jurisdictions gave their support to their respective governments to approve the Agreement. As part of the Agreement, the Irish Government committed to bringing forward measures to ensure at least an equivalent level of protection of human rights in the South as in the North. Repeal of the Act and withdrawal from the European Convention would have negative consequences for the uniformity of human rights standards across these islands.

The importance of promoting and protecting human rights is fundamental to safeguarding peace, respect and inclusion in communities across the island of Ireland.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan, stated in his address to the Senate recently that 'the formal human rights architecture, including the European Convention of Human Rights, is woven into the structures of the Agreements, to give shape and effect to their principles and aspirations.' The Irish Government has demonstrated that it takes very seriously its responsibility to safeguard the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. It is the hope of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission that this commitment will continue into the future.

**/ends**



## **Conclusion**

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission are committed to working together on human rights issues which affect people throughout the island of Ireland. Full implementation of this aspect of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement can only be ensured if both Commissions are properly resourced and their work supported. I would therefore encourage the members of the Joint Committee to ensure that there is continued commitment to the work of the two Commissions into the future.

Thank You