

Just News

Human Rights in Northern Ireland

Inquiries to begin

Rosemary Nelson

Six years after the death of Rosemary Nelson the Inquiry recommended by Judge Peter Cory is set to commence. Rosemary Nelson was killed in a car bomb on the 15th March 1999.

The Inquiry team, which is based in London, is considering how it will conduct the Inquiry at the moment and is beginning to gather evidence. Further details can be found on the Inquiry web site at www.rosemarynelsoninquiry.org

The Inquiry has said it welcomes submissions or observations in writing or other documentary material from any interested non-governmental organisations or public bodies and, indeed, from any other person or body who wishes to write to the Inquiry or to provide it with documents. The Inquiry can be contacted at:

The Rosemary Nelson Inquiry
PO Box 50157
London
SW1E 6WW

The formal opening of the Inquiry will take place on Tuesday 19th April 2005 at 11:00 am at the Craigavon Civic Centre.



In December's Just News we questioned whether the Inquiry will use its authority so that all aspects of the case will be included in its examination. We welcome the recent announcement by the government that the terms of reference have been amended and extended to ensure that this is the case. The website states that the Inquiry intends to accord to a very limited number of persons or organisations the status of *Full Participant*. It is the Inquiry's current view that Full Participant status is likely be accorded to the family (that is Rosemary's husband and her mother), the NIO and the PSNI. This means that they will receive copies of all statements supplied to the Inquiry and a copy of the Inquiry bundle to help them prepare for the full hearing. Copies of any additional evidence will be made available to the Full Participants during the Inquiry (subject to a confidentiality undertaking).

Being granted Full Participant status also ensures legal representation, and the Inquiry has said that "in appropriate cases" it will recommend assistance for legal representation from public funds. However these matters are not agreed and the Inquiry has indicated that it will not issue a finalised procedures document until after the opening of the hearing on the 19th April 2005.

The Inquiry website states that:

"It is the Inquiry's expectation that all questioning of witnesses at the Full Hearing will usually be undertaken by Counsel to the Inquiry, on the Inquiry's behalf. In exceptional cases the Inquiry may be prepared to allow further questioning by representatives of Full Participants or others"

This is a worry. The Inquiry is an inquisitorial and not an adversarial process, however, if the families cannot instruct their representatives to directly ask questions of witnesses and follow up lines of inquiry or points revealed by the questioning from the inquiry's legal representatives how can the investigation be as thorough as it needs to be? The families' representatives have been involved with the case for many years and have a store of knowledge and information which should be tapped into to assist the Inquiry in its stated aim of establishing the facts and making recommendations. The Inquiry website also states:

"The Inquiry intends to carry out its task with rigorous thoroughness and fairness, adopting flexible, even-handed and open procedures which will enable it expeditiously and economically to establish the facts and to make recommendations".

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To do this there must be scope for parties involved to put questions. Will the Inquiry ensure that Full Participants are represented and that their representatives are given appropriate rather than an exceptional opportunity for further questioning? Will the venue chosen allow for the attendance of family members? Where persons other than those proposed as Full Participants are giving evidence, and their evidence may give rise to criticism, will they be entitled to legal representation? These are issues which must be satisfactorily resolved if the Inquiry is to command the necessary confidence and respect.

Billy Wright

The Wright Inquiry has established its headquarters in Edinburgh and is in the process of developing a website and a timetable. In December's issue of Just News, we noted that CAJ shared David Wright's concerns about whether the terms of reference can and will be interpreted so that the inquiry will conduct a thorough and effective examination of all the circumstances surrounding Billy Wright's murder. This is still unresolved and thus progress in establishing the Inquiry is slow.

Robert Hamill

The Robert Hamill Inquiry formal opening will take place on 24th May in Craigavon Courthouse (anyone who wishes to raise points at this hearing should give at least 14 days notice of what they wish to raise). Hearings are likely to commence in the autumn and are likely to take place in Portadown. The Hamill family have met with members of the inquiry team, at which they raised their concerns about the terms of reference and the need for the Inquiry to be aware of and deal with the issues of institutional sectarianism underpinning the collusion that resulted in Robert's death. The same concerns about representation as arise in the Rosemary Nelson Inquiry are applicable here too. The Inquiry website states that:

"Once the main hearings have begun, the usual practice will be that—apart from questions from the Panel members themselves—witnesses will be questioned only by the Counsel to the Inquiry. However, the Chairman may make an exception, if he is satisfied that there are good grounds for doing so. Applications by a representative of an interested party to put questions will be considered, case by case, and will have to be justified. If necessary the Chairman will intervene to ensure that only questions that are relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference are asked and to prevent repetition and prolixity."

For further information and inquiries contact:

<p>Robert Hamill Inquiry PO Box 50156, London, SW1E 6AU</p>

Patrick Finucane

The case of Pat Finucane is taking a much more circuitous route to an Inquiry. Instead of announcing an immediate inquiry under the Tribunal of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921 as recommended by Judge Cory, the government announced it was bringing forward a new piece of legislation under which the Inquiry would be held. CAJ and other NGOs shared the family's concern that this was just another delaying tactic. The Inquiries Bill was brought forward and has been subject to robust criticism both in parliament and outside (see Just News December 2004).

Both Lord Saville, who chaired the Bloody Sunday inquiry and Judge Cory have come out against the Bill. Indeed the Select Committee on Public Administration and the Joint Committee on Human Rights (both parliamentary committees) have also criticised the Bill.

Geraldine Finucane, Judge Cory and human rights NGOs were among those who presented evidence to a US Congressional Hearing on the issue this month, expressing ongoing concern about the developments and the fear that this will act as a further block on the truth about the circumstances of Patrick Finucane's murder coming out.

Judge Peter Cory said in a letter to Congress that:

"If the new Act were to become law, I would advise all Canadian judges to decline an appointment in light of the impossible situation they would be facing. In fact, I cannot contemplate myself respecting Canadian judge accepting an appointment to an Inquiry constituted under the new proposed act."

While CAJ has lobbied members of the House of Lords and the Commons and some amendments have been made to the Bill, these do not go far enough to address the fundamental problems with this legislation, namely its shift in emphasis towards inquiries established and largely controlled by government ministers. This shift is achieved by the repeal of the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921 and the terms of several of the Bill's clauses.

We do not see how any inquiry held under this legislation can be effective and how it can fulfil the promises made in the Weston Park Agreement. On the 22nd March a joint statement from Amnesty International, British Irish Rights Watch, CAJ, Human Rights First, The Human Rights Institute of the International Bar Association, INQUEST, JUSTICE, Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada, the Law Society of England and Wales, Pat Finucane Centre and the Scottish Human Rights Centre was sent to parliamentarians expressing our continued disquiet.

Has the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission been effective?

Republished from Scope, March 2005 issue

While we wait for the government to announce the new members and Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission it is a good opportunity to examine how effective the Commission has been so far. Research carried out by Dr Rachel Murray of the University of Bristol and the late Professor Stephen Livingstone of Queens University Belfast has just been completed. This research is an in-depth evaluation of what the Commission has done to date and offers some recommendations for how things may be improved in the future. By looking at other similar bodies elsewhere in the world, the research tried to come up with a list of criteria which make national human rights commissions effective, and then applied these to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

The research concludes that whether the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is effective or not depends not only on how the Commission itself performs, but also the conditions under which it is established, as well as how it is seen in the eyes of others. Therefore, responsibility for the Commission's effectiveness must also fall on government. The research found that how many powers and resources are given to the institution, how much political support is provided to it when it is created as well as afterwards, and how the members of the Commission are appointed are all key to its success. Unfortunately, because the British government did not use a transparent appointments process to select members of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and then failed to defend those who it selected, this caused serious difficulties for the Commission. Although the government gave the Commission wide powers, it did not give it adequate powers to undertake investigations and failed initially to provide it with sufficient money to carry out its work. Given, also, that human rights is a politicised issue in Northern Ireland, the Commission was therefore bound to face difficulties before it had even begun operating.

Collective approach

However, the research also finds that the Commission must bear some responsibility itself for its successes and failures. Looking at other commissions, we found that those which were able to develop a strategic vision for the organisation, as well as a collective approach to their work were more likely to succeed. In Northern Ireland, while the Human Rights Commission did achieve some change with

some of its investigations and research, it has struggled to develop this strategic approach. Internal divisions, while normal for any organisation like this, were unfortunately displayed to the outside through a lack of a clear media and communication strategy. For example, it was felt by many we interviewed that Holy Cross had been very damaging for the reputation of the Commission. One of the reasons why this was the case was because it had not agreed a consensus on how to approach this very difficult situation, or how to respond to crises in general, and internal disagreements were then played out in full media glare. In addition, the Commission chose to make the Bill of Rights a central feature of its work, yet it has still failed to deliver its advice, and disagreements over it were cited by some of those who resigned from the Commission.

However, the vast majority of those we spoke to, and we interviewed over 100 individuals and organisations for our research, were convinced of the need for a Human Rights Commission in Northern Ireland. We therefore made a number of recommendations as to how it could be improved in the future.

Firstly, we recommend to the British government that it make sure the Commission is now given adequate funding to carry out its work, that it defend those who it appoints to the Commission, and ensure that it works closely with it in the future. In addition, the government should follow up on its statement to give the Commission appropriate investigatory powers and to respond in full to the review of powers.

Secondly, we recommend that the Commissioners themselves develop a clear collective vision for the organisation, that they should not be afraid to work closely with civil society organisations, political parties or the government, keeping in mind their independence, and that they should build upon what exists in the human rights field, in particular the Human Rights Act. The Commission also now needs to consider carefully what its role is going to be in the Bill of Rights.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is at a turning point in its history. Although the imminent appointments to the Commission do not create a new Commission as such, the inclusion of new members and a new Chief Commissioner is an opportunity for the Commission to take stock, learn from the past, and look to the future.

Dr. Rachel Murray
University of Bristol

This article is reproduced from NICVA's Scope magazine. For further information on this research, please contact Rachel Murray, School of Law, University of Bristol, Rachel.Murray@bristol.ac.uk

A BILL OF RIGHTS - V

An exchange between civil society and politicians

"A Bill of Rights – what it means to us", conference report, published in August 2004, does exactly what it says on the tin: it contains an exchange between civil society and politicians. Jane Morrice MLA in her welcome remarks said "...it is very good that we have got such a cross-party grouping of politicians present...we are coming close to setting a record for attendance..." Indeed, the event organised by the Human Rights Consortium turned out to be a positive and open discussion on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

The report is divided into accessible sections following the format of the event itself: "What are the particular circumstances of NI relevant to a Bill of Rights?"; Why should socio-economic rights be included in a Bill of Rights for NI?"; and "Making it real – How can a Bill of Rights best be enforced?" All sections contain a plenary discussion involving remarks from the audience and the NI Human Rights Commission.

Panel 1: Particular Circumstances

NICEM, Save the Children and WAVE Trauma Centre representatives spoke on this panel, highlighting the need for a broad interpretation of "particular circumstances". Karima Zahi (NICEM) spoke of the real need to go outside the 'two communities' as listed in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: *"ethnic minorities have been, if not ignored, excluded and certainly marginalized...the Bill of Rights is for all of us."* Sheri Chamberlain clearly set out why children in NI warrant special protection because of the 'particular circumstances in NI', listing some shocking statistics of the differences in children's lives here in comparison to Scotland, England and Wales. Alan Mc Bride looked at "particular circumstances" from a victim's point of view, strongly recommending that the Bill of Rights should apply to all victims – *"regardless of whether they are victims of the conflict, victims of domestic violence or whatever."*

Panel 2: Socio-economic rights

Ann Hope (NIC-ICTU) stressed that the inclusion of socio-economic rights in the Bill of Rights was vital to underpinning the peace process in NI and to the creation of a strong and just society. *"We believe that poverty and social exclusion*

are fundamental rights issues and must be addressed strongly in the Bill of Rights if the most marginalized and disadvantaged people are to benefit from its creation."

Brighde Vallely from the Conference of Religious of Ireland connected the need for a Bill of Rights with teaching in the bible that carries *"an implicit concept of human rights because we find there that each person, no matter how despised or maltreated by society ... possesses an inherent and inalienable dignity and worth"*. She went on to say that socio-economic rights allow for the participation and active involvement of even the most voiceless and marginalized in society. Terry Enright (Upper Springfield Development Trust) and Fiona Mc Causland (Old Warren Partnership) spoke directly from the experiences of disadvantaged communities and emphasised the importance of socio-economic rights in improving lives affected by violence and deprivation.

According to Fiona *"The troubles particularly affected those worst off in our country...the real long-term damage was inflicted on those communities – both nationalist and loyalist – that were unable to bridge the equality gap and faced increasing social and economic disadvantage."*

Panel 3: Enforcement

The NI Anti-Poverty Network, Amnesty International and the Law Centre NI all spoke on this topic. Frances Dowds from (NIAPN) urged the political parties to show the necessary will to introduce a Bill of Rights and pointed out that in order for the Bill to be enforceable, the language needs to be accessible to all, information and education are needed to assist in understanding rights, and legal aid should be available. Patrick Corrigan from Amnesty International suggested that *"the enforcement of the Bill of Rights needs to be a function of the existing courts"* and that the judiciary must therefore update their skills and knowledge in line with international human rights standards. Les Allamby from the Law Centre NI believes that enforcement mechanisms must be both programmatic and judicial and goes on to discuss the advantages of these combined approaches.

The event and the subsequent report aimed to open dialogue between civil society and politicians on the issue of a Bill of Rights for NI and as such, were a great success. A lot of work, discussion and debate remains to be done but the report proves that this dialogue is both necessary and possible. The Consortium hopes this experience will be used to inform the Bill of Rights debate in the future.

Fiona Murphy
Amnesty International

WHAT IT MEANS TO US

“A Bill of Rights – what it means to me”

A special event to promote the ongoing campaign for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland took place in Belfast on 7th March 2005. The event was organised by the Human Rights Consortium to launch a report and leaflet on "A Bill of Right - what it means to us" (see previous page).

The launch of the report and leaflet was opened by the Rt Hon Lord Mayor Tom Ekin, who congratulated pupils from St Teresa's Primary School in West Belfast and Elmgrove Primary School in East Belfast on their creative artwork, which was displayed at the event. He spoke about the importance of a Bill of Rights and emphasised the need to put a timetable in place to move the debate ahead.

Local celebrated artist Rita Duffy, who helped the P7 pupils from both schools produce artwork for the event, then spoke about the experience. She particularly highlighted how important it was for children to be aware of human rights, respect and dignity for others. "I wanted to get the kids thinking about basic rights, like the right to adequate food and a good standard of education. With high levels of child poverty and pressure on

education budgets these fundamental rights must not be taken for granted in Northern Ireland. We need to ensure every child's basic rights are met".

A leaflet accompanying the report highlights individual case-studies of issues that a Bill of Rights could address. Some of those involved in the case-studies made very moving contributions about the difference a Bill of Rights could make to their lives. John James from Steer Mental Health highlighted the need for a Bill of Rights to address issues facing those with mental health difficulties. He noted that 1 in 4 people in Northern Ireland would experience mental health difficulties at some stage in their lives. In particular, he emphasised the pressing need to establish a base line of services for those who leave hospital after receiving treatment for mental health problems. This is a key danger time for many people, and it is crucial that they receive ongoing support. John James believes a Bill of Rights would help establish this baseline and in this way protect the rights of those who face these difficulties.

The issue of adequate income for pensioners was highlighted by June Mallon, who told those present that having worked since the age of 14, she believed she would be entitled to a pension that provided her with an adequate standard of living. Instead she struggles on a pension that is entirely insufficient, and she believes a Bill of Rights would offer protection to people in her situation and would ensure the right to a basic adequate income such as a pension.

A young homeless man then spoke very movingly about his experiences, which included living in temporary accommodation most of his life, being unable to get employment because he is homeless and how difficult life can be without a home to call your own. He

argued very strongly that everyone should have the right to a home and expressed his hope that a strong and inclusive Bill of Rights would protect vulnerable homeless people particularly and guarantee them the right to a home.

The event was wrapped up by Aideen Gilmore from the Human Rights Consortium who highlighted plans to launch this report and leaflet in a variety of locations across Northern Ireland, and in that way bring public and political attention to the very local and real issues that a Bill of Rights should address. She reiterated the Consortium's call on the governments to establish the proposed roundtable forum of political parties and civil society to move the Bill of Rights ahead, so that the most vulnerable and marginalised in society could have their rights protected.

Jeanette Murtagh
Volunteer

To learn more about the Consortium and its work, or request copies of the report and leaflet, contact 02890 961128, info@billofrightsnri.org

News

We are pleased to announce that Aideen Gilmore, who has worked on CAJ's Bill of Rights project since 2000, has recently been appointed as CAJ's Research and Policy Officer.

The post of Human Rights Programme Officer has recently been advertised. Please contact Liz at the CAJ office for further details. Closing date for completed applications is 15th April.

The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements

Professors John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary have been studying and researching Northern Ireland for nearly twenty years. Both are political scientists, born into Catholic families on either side of the Irish border and who shared the same grammar school, Garron Tower in County Antrim. They now hold chairs in North America, McGarry in Queen's University in Canada and O'Leary at the University of Pennsylvania which he combines with a chair at the LSE. They have been writing together 1989.

This book brings together a dozen of their previous published articles and chapters as well two pieces specially written for the volume. Some are sole authored and others are co-authored. All the pieces address some aspect of consociational theory – one of the most influential theories in political science in the regulation of conflicts. At the heart of the theory is the relatively simple idea that historically antagonistic and divided societies, whether along religious, ethnic or linguistic lines, can be governed according to certain principles.

The term 'consociational' although commonplace in political science literature is not particularly appealing. But it would be a shame if readers are put off by the concept because this book is essential reading for anyone interested in the Northern Ireland conflict.

It is elegantly written and free from jargon, and complex ideas are described with great succinctness. Throughout the text there are some wonderful bits of writing and the authors have a knack of putting the boot into their opponents in a most humorous manner. For example, anti-consociationalism is described 'as a staple political diet for many in Northern Ireland, a diet we believe to be as bad for local public health as the "Ulster fry". Or another example: 'Liberal democrats and democratic socialists should stop analysing Northern Ireland as a set of traffic lights where the choices are green, red, or orange' (p. 96).

The chapters cover a range of different issues from the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the path to the Good Friday Agreement and a comprehensive evaluation of it, the role comparative method, five fallacies in the misinterpretation of the conflict, Labour and Conservative stewardship in Northern Ireland, the impact of changes in the international order on the conflict, 'democracy' in Northern Ireland, the protection of human rights in the Agreement, and the politics of policing and policing reform in Northern Ireland.

In addition, there is an extensive and very valuable bibliography which brings together the authors collected and separate publications over the last eighteen years, including over one hundred newspaper articles, reviews and ephemera published by O'Leary. The chapters on the agreement, protection of human rights and politics of policing reform will be of particular interest to CAJ members.

It is an extremely scholarly and readable book and I agree with much of their analysis. However, I do take issue with their downplaying or outright dismissal of the role of socio-economic factors in the conflict.

While few would not dissent from their position that the underlying problem is ethno-national, nevertheless socio-economic factors have played and continue to play a significant role. In the fallacies chapter, the authors dismiss the conflict as having 'fundamental economic and material

foundations'. Expressed in this extreme way, few would disagree. But this does not mean that these factors are not important in maintaining and sustaining the conflict. What is needed, I feel, is some economic analysis to balance the political analysis.

Northern Ireland has been and continues to be one of the most unequal societies in Europe. The poverty rate is also one of the highest.

Social class, which is not listed in the book's index, continues to be a major division in terms of health, income, wealth and life-style. The middle classes here, compared for example, with their counterparts across the water, have done reasonably well over the last thirty years. They have benefited greatly from the regressive nature of the local taxation system, the continued existence of the grammar school system and huge support for local businesses and economic development. The Agreement has further consolidated their position through the creation of numerous professional jobs in criminal justice institutions and in the expansion of the human rights and equality duties.

In contrast, few permanent public sector employment opportunities have been created for the semi-skilled and unskilled sections of the community. At the same time we have created a political class of MLAs who earn at least twice the average annual salary of the working person. This is not an argument against the Agreement but an observation on the way existing social structures have been maintained and sustained rather than being radically altered by the Agreement. These divisions need to be given far more attention.

Paddy Hillyard
Professor in Sociology, QUB

"The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements"
John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary
Oxford University Press, 2004

Human Rights: *Who Needs Them? Using Human Rights in the Voluntary Sector*

This is a very timely book. It argues for connections to be made between the Human Rights Act (HRA) and social justice questions that lie at the heart of voluntary and community sector concerns. It aims to encourage voluntary and community organisations to use the Human Rights Act as a tool to improve public services on behalf of their beneficiaries, especially the most vulnerable members of society. Published by the Institute for Public Policy Research, it may refer to the voluntary sector in England and Wales, but it has useful lessons for Northern Ireland.

It represents an urgent call for action, citing challenges to the HRA such as the fragility of the government's commitment, the threat by the Conservatives to review it, the hostility from sections of the media, and perceptions that rights are either for celebrities protecting their privacy, or for campaigning organisations to protect civil liberties, rather than advancing social justice.

The author Frances Butler performs a good job explaining how the HRA came into force in 2000 to give fuller effect to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). She explains, *inter alia*, that the HRA requires all government policy to undergo an assessment against ECHR standards; that legal liability extends beyond central government to all public authorities and any non-statutory organisation exercising a public function; that a 'victim' can bring legal proceedings in a UK court against a public authority for breach of Convention rights; that government must state whether it thinks new legislation is compliant with the ECHR; courts must read existing legislation as far as possible in line with the Convention rights; and the Act applies to decisions made by staff and to the way public services are provided as well as policy.

The report provides examples to show how the ECHR, which is primarily concerned with civil and political rights, can be framed to apply to the social policy field – eg lack of accommodation for Travellers (Articles 8, right to respect for private and family life and Article 14, freedom from discrimination in enjoyment of Convention rights).

It also argues that the positive obligations' principle under the HRA should encourage a proactive approach on the part of public authorities to ensure that they act compatibly with the ECHR. It cites instances where this doctrine could apply, such as the problems of infant mortality in the

Travelling population, bullying in schools and protecting victims of crime.

The author outlines the reasons why many voluntary organisations find the HRA irrelevant or inaccessible, including lack of awareness and inadequate guidance from the government that has warned them about their potential liability as public service providers but not supported them in using the Act to protect their clients. Making the important point that human rights promotion can be a charitable objective, she suggests that the voluntary and community sector should develop a strategy to hold public authorities accountable for their human rights responsibilities on behalf of their service users. She provides advice about lobbying techniques ranging from submitting evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, various Select Committees, and the inspection process carried out by the Audit Commission, to preparing briefings on draft legislation and using test cases and campaigning. There is also reference to the various UN treaties and the possibility of intervention when government is reporting to the various committees.

The research is not another dry document - instead it is based on discussions with voluntary organisations in Britain which represent people who experience discrimination and disadvantage, including children, young people with disabilities and homeless people, black and minority ethnic people, older people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, people with mental health problems, people in poverty, refugees and asylum seekers, religious minorities, Travellers, victims and women.

Part of the rationale for the research is the need to prepare the ground for the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights. Perhaps this points to a useful model for the NIHR which has tended to overlook the advantages of helping the voluntary and community sector to use the HRA as a regulatory tool. However, it could be argued that successful use of the HRA by the voluntary and community sector, with the support of the NIHR, could encourage support for a strong and inclusive Bill of Rights.

Anne Moore
NICVA

In the Headlines

CAJ holds newspaper clippings on more than
50 civil liberties and justice issues
(from mid 1987- December 2000).
Copies of these can be purchased from CAJ office.

The clippings are also available for
consultation in the office.

Anyone interested in this service, should telephone
CAJ office on (028) 9096 1122.

Civil Liberties Diary

Feb 2nd An independent report written by Prof Stephen Livingstone and Dr. Rachel Murray criticised the NIHRC for its failure to develop a clear strategy and a unified Commission, which has undermined its ability to act effectively as regards the promotion and protection of human rights for all. The government was also criticised for its failure to resource and support the Commission adequately.

Joan Harbison of the Equality Commission warned that Northern Ireland is rapidly gaining a reputation for racism.

Feb 3rd Family of Pat Finucane joined relatives of murdered London teenager Stephen Lawrence, as well as groups demanding inquiries into the deaths at Deepcut Barracks and the Southall rail crash to lobby MPs over the controversial Inquiries Bill.

Establishment of public inquiries into the murders of Robert Hamill, Rosemary Nelson and Billy Wright moved a step closer as the NIO announced that counsel and administrative staff had now been appointed and moved into their offices.

Feb 4th The Northern Ireland Policing Board censured member Ian Paisley Jnr over his comments describing homosexual behaviour as "immoral, offensive, obnoxious".

Feb 10th Nigel Dodds called on Tony Blair to appoint a Victim's Commissioner in Northern Ireland.

Tony Blair apologised publicly to the Conlon and Maguire families of the Guildford 4, saying they "deserve to be completely and publicly exonerated."

Feb 14th A major resource which aims to support teachers wishing to explore human rights issues as part of the curriculum was launched. The materials were developed through a partnership of the NIHRC, the Department of Education and all 5 Library Boards.

Feb 15th US Congressmen petitioned Tony Blair for the immediate establishment of a public inquiry into Pat Finucane's murder. In a letter they expressed concern that the standards of independent scrutiny and full public review will not be met if the Finucane inquiry goes ahead under the new Inquires Bill.

Feb 16th The government is to review the libel laws after Helen Steel and David Morris, the so-called McLibel pair, won a ruling in the European Court of Human Rights that their rights to a fair trial and freedom of expression were violated when they were denied legal aid.

Feb 19th Residents of Castlerobin have called on the Children's Commissioner to help in their bid to prevent the granting of a controversial landfill site.

Feb 22nd Chief Constable Hugh Orde and Garda Commissioner Noel Conroy signed joint proposals at Hillsborough Castle which would allow personnel exchanges and secondments between the PSNI and the Garda Siochana.

The mother of Eoin Morley, shot by the IRA in 1990, said she has no confidence in a new police investigation into her son's murder. A Police Ombudsman report found that Special Branch withheld crucial information from detectives investigating the murder.

Feb 23 The British government has strengthened the power of the Parades Commission so that it will be able to apply restrictions to people supporting or protesting against contentious marches.

Feb 24th A report by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee recommends that Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan have her powers extended to deal with complaints from police officers and to investigate complaints about the army.

Prof. Brice Dickson ended his term as Chief Commissioner of the NIHRC this week, and used the opportunity to write to the Secretary of State highlighting many of the problems that the NIHRC had faced.

Feb 25th Policing Board Chairman Prof. Desmond Rea questioned Chief Constable Hugh Orde about the implications of MI5 taking charge in Northern Ireland of national security work from 2007 onwards as planned.

Feb 27th Founder of Amnesty International, Peter Benenson, died aged 83.

Compiled by Mark Bassett from various newspapers.

CAJ meet REM in Belfast

CAJ staff and members had the pleasure of attending the REM concert on the 25th February at the Odyssey and met Michael Stipe afterwards. CAJ's former director Martin O'Brien has been a good friend of the REM singer since he received the Reebok Human Rights' Award from him in 1992. CAJ's Director Maggie Beirne took this opportunity to thank Michael Stipe for his support for human rights work internationally and locally over the last years.



Just News
Human Rights in Northern Ireland

Just News welcomes readers' news, views and comments.

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