

**MINUTES OF THE 26th MEETING OF THE JOINT
COMMITTEE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TWO HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSIONS ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND
(THE JOINT COMMITTEE)**

**Held on Wednesday, 21st January 2009 in the premises
of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission**

Present:

NIHRC

Commissioners

Monica McWilliams, Chief Commissioner (Chair)

Professor Colin Harvey

Alan Henry

Ann Hope

Colm Larkin

Eamonn O'Neill

Geraldine Rice

Lady Daphne Trimble

Staff

Peter O'Neill, Chief Executive

Ciarán Ó Maoláin, Head of Legal Services, Policy and Research

IHRC

Commissioners

Maurice Manning, President

Conleth Bradley

Robert Daly

Alice Leahy

Tom O'Higgins

Helen O'Neill

Roger Sweetman

Staff

Eamonn MacAodha, Chief Executive

Kirsten Roberts, Director of Research, Policy and Promotion

In attendance

Brian Gormally, Joint Contractor

1. Apologies

Tom Duncan, Rosemary Byrne, Suzanne Egan, Michael Farrell

2. Welcome

The Chief Commissioner welcomed all present and especially Conleth Bradley to his first meeting of the Joint Committee. In relation to the Agenda for the meeting and sub-committees, the Chief Commissioner noted that the work of the Charter Sub-Committee had been subsumed into that of the Joint Committee itself. In addition, as the Chair of the Racism Sub-Committee was unable to be present discussions relating to the work of that sub-committee would be incorporated into the agenda for this meeting.

3. Minutes of the 25th Joint Committee meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chief Commissioner and the President. It was proposed that issues relating to the Common Travel Area should be considered at the next meeting.

4. Matters arising

There were no matters arising not covered by the agenda.

5. Update on the Bill of Rights process

The Chief Commissioner gave an update on the process of NIHRC preparing its Advice to the UK Government on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland which had been delivered on Human Rights Day, 10th December 2008. She noted that that the UK Government would issue a consultation paper in late spring. She outlined a series of meetings and activities organised for the near future in Belfast, Westminster and Dublin, including formal evidence to be given to the UK Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Oireachtas Committee on the Good Friday Agreement.

The President congratulated the NIHRC on its excellent work in producing the Advice and stated that IHRC would give all possible assistance in the process of promoting it. He suggested that a special event could be held in Dublin to promote the document. The Chief Commissioner proposed that the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Assembly should be approached with a view to receiving a joint presentation from both commissions on the need for a Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland and for their views on a proposed Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland.

6. Update on activities of the two commissions

The chief executives of both commissions tabled and spoke to papers updating those present on the recent activities of their respective commissions.

In respect of the IHRC, the President added that the previous six months had been a difficult time for the Commission with financial cuts and uncertainty about its future. He thanked the Chief Commissioner for representations made to the Irish Government on these issues.

Interventions by Commissioners expressed concern that an institution established under the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement was under threat. It was agreed that the consensus of the Joint Committee in supporting the important work of the IHRC be communicated to the Irish Departments of Justice and Foreign Affairs.

7. Racism Sub-Committee report

Tom O'Higgins tabled and spoke to a report of the work of the IHRC on matters related to the Racism Sub-Committee which he noted had been prepared by Michael Farrell.

In respect of work done in Northern Ireland, Ann Hope noted that a scoping study on the nature and extent of trafficking had been carried out with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and a draft of the report would be available in the spring.

Brian Gormally tabled a paper on possible work on the Migrants Workers Convention (MWC) which detailed background information on the Convention and a range of issues associated with ratification. The President noted that it was the policy of both commissions to press their governments for ratification and also to raise the issue amongst the members of the European Group of national human rights institutions. He felt that using the MWC as a possible template against which to measure law, policy and practice in both jurisdictions should be discussed further.

It was agreed that the Racism Sub-Committee should look into taking forward consultation on issues around the MWC with interested agencies across the island.

8. Charter of Rights Discussion Paper

Brian Gormally tabled and spoke to a paper on the subject of a possible Charter of Rights as described in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. This included a range of possible purposes and forms of a Charter. There was considerable discussion on this matter, particularly in regard to considerations of the equivalence of human rights standards and it was

noted that the Joint Committee was committed to holding a consultative event on the subject. It was agreed that this exploratory work was a priority for the Joint Committee and that a seminar should be held in November to scope out possible consultative options – staff would take forward practical planning. Progress would be further discussed at the next meeting.

9. Update on international developments

Kirsten Roberts reported on the recent ICC conference in Nairobi and the work being led by the IHRC in preparing a strategic plan for the European Group for the period 2009-2010. She also noted that the commissions of the four jurisdictions (IHRC, SHRC, NIHRC, EHRC) had met in September and it had been agreed that the Scottish Human Rights Commission will initially chair the group. Its next meeting will be in Edinburgh in June. It was also noted that the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU had held its first event and was seeking a formal relationship with European national human rights institutions.

10. Any other business

There was no other business.

11. Date and location of next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would be held on Tuesday 21 April 2009 in Dublin.