

Current Research Projects

Political Capacity Building: Advancing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland **Dr Anne Smith, Professor Monica McWilliams and Priyamvada Yarnell**

The report, 'Political Capacity Building: Advancing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland' was researched and written between March 2013 - September 2014. The report assessed the current position of the Northern Ireland political parties, and the position of the British and Irish governments, on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Given the political vacuum that currently exists on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, the report proposed possible ways forward.

The report draws upon a range of literature including but not limited to: political parties' submissions to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's 2008 advice, the Bill of Rights Forum's 2008 report, the Northern Ireland Office's consultation paper 2009 and the final report of the UK Bill of Rights Commission 2012. Material was also drawn from media reports; party manifestos and policy papers; past and current parliamentary and committee debates; on-going political statements and publications from human rights organisations. The academic literature on Bills of Rights, presented in an early chapter, illustrates how Bills of Rights have been used in affording protections and safeguarding against abuses in the majority of democratic societies. It shows how Bills of Rights act as a bridge for countries to move forward from a contentious past as well as being a point of reference for future generations.

The report also shows how political parties positions have developed in Northern Ireland since the proposal for a Bill of Rights was first put forward over forty years ago. The authors interviewed eight of the nine political parties in Northern Ireland (the Traditional Unionist Voice, TUV, making no response to the invitation). Interviews with political parties focused on their past and current position on a Bill of Rights and discussed ways in which they believed it could be brought forward. Interviews with other stakeholders, such as NGOs and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission were also conducted to gain their insights on this issue.

All of the local political parties acknowledged that there is a political vacuum that currently exists in relation to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement's proposal for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland but disagreed on where the responsibility lay for the lack of progress. As the co-guarantors of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement the report urges the British and Irish governments to dispel the differences that currently exist in their approach to this particular proposal and to develop more coherence on how best to resolve the current situation. The report recommends that the governments develop a framework that would help clarify how they see their joint role in implementing the proposals from the Belfast/Good Friday and St. Andrews Agreements.

The report recommends that if a process were to be established on a future Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, then guidance involving specific human rights expertise should be provided to assist the parties in their deliberations. Some consideration should be given to not just identifying the assistance needed by the political parties but also to other factors conducive to building political consensus such as setting aside time for roundtable discussions on what a Bill of Rights would mean for Northern Ireland. The opinions documented throughout the report



point to a lack of clarity amongst the political parties on the purpose and role of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which in turn creates a lack of political consensus on its contents. Both need to be urgently addressed and it is hoped

that the report will go some way in doing so.