

STATEMENT BY CHRIS SIDOTI,  
CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND BILL OF RIGHTS FORUM

I welcome the debate on the Bill of Rights Forum in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 15 October 2007. The debate has drawn public attention to the work of the Forum and, more importantly, to the importance of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. I was pleased with the wide, cross party support expressed for the development of a Bill of Rights that meets the needs of all the people of Northern Ireland.

However, I am gravely concerned by the sharp remarks that some members of the Assembly directed at some members of the Forum and its working groups. These comments were very personal and entirely improper. They were directed towards people who have contributed with generosity, commitment and total integrity to the work of the Forum. Whatever the intentions of those who made them, they will make the work of the Forum, and therefore the work of developing a good Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, more difficult.

I regret that the procedures of the Assembly were apparently unable to prevent these kinds of personal attacks on those performing unpaid public service. I understand that the Assembly procedures do not enable those so criticised to make an official response. I am writing to the Speaker to request that he consider developing, for the Northern Ireland Assembly, procedures now operating in many countries with Westminster systems, to permit persons attacked under parliamentary privilege to make official responses to the criticism levelled at them. Indeed I see this as an issue of basic human rights.

I hope that the Assembly will continue to debate on the Bill of Rights. I ask, however, that Assembly Members act with the same integrity as I expect of members of the Forum and observe the same standards of professionalism. The right of parliamentary privilege carries with it that responsibility.

16 October 2007