

# PLACE INITIATIVES

## Headed Paper

14<sup>TH</sup> December 2007

Bill of Rights Forum  
Interpoint Centre  
1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
20 – 24 York St  
BELFAST  
BT15 1AQ

**Our Ref:      Submission to Bill of Rights Forum**

Dear Sir/Madam

Please find attached, the submission to the Bill of Rights Forum from P.L.A.C.E. Initiatives, Portadown.

This submission was agreed following a substantial educational, awareness raising and dialogic process consisting of four two hour workshops and participation in a two day residential with diverse community groups from across Northern Ireland.

Visiting Speakers included representatives from the Human Rights Commission, Bill of Rights Forum and the Centre for Conflict Resolution, Stanford University, USA.

Participants were community group representatives from PUL (Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist) areas of Portadown, Co. Armagh and facilitated by the umbrella group for the area – P.L.A.C.E. Initiatives.

Yours faithfully

**Gordon Blevins**  
**Chairman**

**P.L.A.C.E. INITIATIVES  
Headed Paper**

**P.L.A.C.E. INITIATIVES SUBMISSION TO THE BILL OF RIGHTS  
FORUM**

**Process:**

Our group of Community Representatives participated in three Education and Awareness Raising Workshops, the themes of which were as follows:

**A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland...What's It All About?**

During this workshop information was provided around the current Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland debate – where its at, where the idea came from, what are human rights etc. and group exercises focused on developing understanding of human rights both locally and internationally.

**Does Northern Ireland Need A Bill of Rights?**

This workshop aimed to bring the idea around a Bill of Rights into the lives of participants. It focused on social, cultural and economic rights and provided examples of what advantages a Bill of Rights might bring to Northern Ireland society. Group exercises again helped to develop understanding of what rights are already protected in the ECHR and the Human Rights Act etc. and what protections, over and above this, could reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland.

**Hearing From Those More Involved**

An extra workshop was requested by participants to hear from representatives of the Human Rights Commission and Bill of Rights Forum. Rev. Samuel Hutchinson, Convenor of the Forum's Victims and Criminal Justice Group and Miriam Titterton, Bill of Rights Worker with the Human rights Commission explained their roles within the debate and emphasised the complexities they were dealing with.

## **Residential to Share, Reflect and Learn from Differing Experiences**

The residential brought our participants into a learning environment with community groupings from diverse backgrounds and again extended the understanding and developed thinking around – what is already protected in the ECHR and the Human Rights Act and also, through the intervention of Professor Byron Bland of Stanford University, U.S.A., the difference between moral and ethical Rights – and extended the thinking around grounding any potential Bill of Rights in law or creating an Aspirational Statement where citizens of Northern Ireland could make ethical promises to one another around how we share this place and treat one another as equal citizens. He made a statement which extended our thinking: “Ceasefires often mask underlying and unresolved political, social, economic and cultural issues” We discussed whether a Bill of Rights could do the same and asked: What, unique to Northern Ireland, needs to be enshrined in law in a Bill of Rights? What needs to be aspirational that we as people collectively must address?

## **The Formulation of our Submission**

A fourth workshop gave time and space to reflect on all the learning and to share feelings again around –

“Do we need A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?”

“ If so, should it be enshrined in law, aspirational or a combination of both?”

“ What rights, reflecting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, and supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human rights should be included?”

“What structural and implementation issues should be taken into consideration in the formulation of any Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?”

## **Conclusions**

We feel that there are many tensions around the formulation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

### **Our main question is:**

In the parliamentary democracy that we live in –  
WHERE DOES A BILL OF RIGHTS FIT?

We live in a country where we celebrate an unwritten constitution.

We take our role and responsibility as citizens of the United Kingdom seriously.

There is potential for a Bill of Rights to give that a structure.

## **Referendum**

We discussed the idea of more Direct Democracy i.e. the right of citizens to hold government to account through the right to call a referendum on important issues if you gather a certain number of signatures i.e. Switzerland.

Most felt this would be a good idea but reflected on whether this had the potential to undermine parliamentary democracy.

We also reflected on whether a Bill of Rights had the potential to undermine the parliamentary democracy and unwritten constitution we hold dear.

The group felt that these tensions should be important considerations when contemplating the idea of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Our thinking also reflected that a British Bill of Rights is being considered and as citizens of the United Kingdom we would obviously be included in that process.

## Agreed Statement

We conclude therefore, re status and implementation, that a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland should be an aspirational, ethical statement that reflects the particular circumstances we face in recovering from a very difficult and damaging period of conflict.

It could be the added injection needed, within a lifetime of say a ten year period, to encourage normalisation in Northern Ireland, as enjoyed by the rest of the United Kingdom.

During the lifetime of the temporary Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, we would continue to assimilate to recognised International Standards of Human Rights and participate in the debate around a British Bill of Rights.

## **P.L.A.C.E. INITIATIVES**

### **HEADED PAPER**

**Reflecting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland and recognising the fundamental rights already protected in the ECHR and the Human Rights Act we feel that the following issues should be included and addressed in the temporary aspirational Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland**

#### **Health Issues: The Right**

Access to good quality health care services without discrimination – not based on ability to pay

To clean, hygienic hospital care

To dignity, respect and privacy

To preventative health care programmes

To adequate mental health services

To local maternity services and pre and post natal care

To suicide prevention support services

To a society free from drug abuse

Protection from physical, sexual or mental abuse

To adequate social security and health benefits

To be free from harassment by benefit departments

To a complaints system that does not impact on care given

#### **Housing Issues: The Right**

To affordable Housing suitable to the changing needs of people at different stages in their lives

### **Education Issues: The Right**

Be nurtured and valued as unique individuals within an education systems that celebrates and protects the self esteem and potential of every child

Be educated whenever possible within the community school with extra support i.e. classroom assistants provided to those with special needs

### **Cultural Issues: The Right**

To celebrate our culture including peaceful assembly, freedom of movement and acceptance of diverse cultural expression

To cultural awareness, expression and community contact as a means of developing good relations through increased understanding and good practice

To be accepted for who I am, including my nationality and religion

### **Security/Criminal Justice Issues: The Right**

To adequate, appropriate sentences for crime

To a society free from sectarian or racial harassment and intimidation

To visible, fair, accountable and impartial policing

To a fair, accountable and impartial justice system including trials by jury and careful use of digital, photographic and internet technology. A Justice system that treats everybody the same under the law.

Not to be discriminated against if you are a family member of someone involved in the conflict here who perhaps has a criminal record. Family members, children and grandchildren should not be subject to discrimination in any area of life i.e. employment, joining the armed forces

**Vulnerable People: Very Young, Elderly, Disabled: The Right**

To be free from fear and to be safe in the home, streets and community

To dignity, respect and privacy

To be able to choose to live at home with adequate and available support

To be consulted about decisions affecting lives

To be supported to live active, quality lives and live, work and socialise freely

**General: The Right**

To be informed about changes to government policy that has major affects on our lives

To access to clear, concise, easily understood information with language that everyone understands

To have our point of view respected