

**A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR EVERYONE THAT SETS A NEW
INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARK**

The newly appointed Chair of the Forum on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, Chris Sidoti, today described the Forum's objective as achieving a Bill of Rights with broad community support, that works for everyone and that sets a new international benchmark for the protection and promotion of human rights.

Commenting on his first meeting as Chair of the Bill of Rights Forum, Chris Sidoti said: **"I do not under-estimate the challenge in developing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland that everyone can support. It is going to be a big task for us all. I am confident that we can do it and get it right. Of course we must take into account the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland but we should also build on past experiences of Bills of Rights in comparable legal systems. Then we can go further, developing a new international standard that others will seek to emulate. The people of Northern Ireland deserve nothing less than a state of the art Bill of Rights.**

"I am delighted that Human Rights Minister, David Hanson, has asked me to Chair and contribute to the important work of the Forum. I have my own legal knowledge and expertise to bring to this vital work but this is not a job for me alone. Fortunately the Forum can rely on the extensive experience and detailed local knowledge of other Forum members who know this region and its communities far better than I can ever hope to do. I have been most impressed by the level of their enthusiasm, commitment and experience. I invite them to share with me this challenging and rewarding work.

"A Bill of Rights however must be for all the people of Northern Ireland. It must reflect the needs and views of all sectors of society, regardless of age, gender, religion, ethnicity, ability and sexual orientation. The Forum will be open to the views of members of the community and is willing to respond positively to their experiences and aspirations."

The second meeting of the Forum was held in the Europa Hotel, Belfast and concentrated on agreeing shared expectations and operating procedures for the coming months.

Notes to Editors

Chris Sidoti

Since 2003 Chris has been director of the International Service for Human Rights, a non-government organisation, based in Geneva, Switzerland, that works closely with the United Nations human rights system. A human rights lawyer, activist and teacher, he has been Australian Human Rights Commissioner (1995-2000), Australian Law Reform Commissioner (1992-1995), and Foundation Director of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1987-1992). He has also worked in non-government organisations, including the Human Rights Council of Australia and the Australian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. While based in Australia until 2003, he worked extensively in the Asia Pacific region undertaking human rights training, policy and advisory work in many countries. He is a visiting professor at the University of Western Sydney and Griffith University in Australia.

Bill of Rights Forum

Establishment of the Forum, and the timeframe for it to convene its inaugural meeting was announced following discussions at St Andrews. Following a recent consultation on the Forum, the Government announced its final plans for the Forum on 12 December.

The DUP, Sinn Fein, UUP and SDLP each have 3 seats on the Forum and the Alliance Party has 2 seats.

Civic Society is represented by Employers, Trade Unions, and Churches which each have 2 seats, as well as 1 representative from each of the following sectors: children and young people; people with disabilities; ethnic minorities; older people; people of different sexual orientations; women; and the community / voluntary sector as a whole.

The Forum is expected to complete its work by the end of December 2007.