

**MINUTES OF THE 20TH MEETING OF THE JOINT
COMMITTEE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TWO HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSIONS ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND
(THE JOINT COMMITTEE)**

**HELD ON TUESDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2007 AT 11:00am AT
THE NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION,
TEMPLE COURT, 39 NORTH ST, BELFAST, BT1 1NA**

Present: **NIHRC:** Monica McWilliams, Chief Commissioner (Chair)
Jonathan Bell
Tom Duncan
Christine Eames
Colin Harvey
Ann Hope
Geraldine Rice

IHRC: Maurice Manning, President
Rosemary Byrne
Mervyn Taylor

Apologies: **NIHRC:** Alan Henry
Kevin McLaughlin
Eamonn O'Neill

IHRC: William Binchy
Olive Braiden
Robert Daly
Suzanne Egan
Michael Farrell
Alice Leahy
Lia O'Hegarty
Tom O'Higgins
Helen O'Neill
Gerard Quinn
Roger Sweetman
Katherine Zappone

In attendance: **NIHRC:** Don Leeson, Head of Corporate Services
Ciarán Ó Maoláin, Head of Legal Services,
Policy and Research (agenda item 5)

IHRC: Alpha Connelly, Chief Executive

1. Minutes of the 19th meeting

- 1.1 The minutes of the 19th Joint Committee meeting held on 9 November 2006 in Dublin were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Matters arising

- 2.1 The Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the President of the Irish Human Rights Commission reported on their meeting on 18 January 2007 with the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group to convey the Commissions' joint response to their call for support for a cross-border public inquiry into the Omagh bomb on 15 August 1998 (paragraph 3.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The Omagh Support and Self-Help Group responded positively to the Commissions' view that a serving or retired judge of international standing should be appointed to examine all available material to determine whether it is appropriate to institute an independent, cross-border, public inquiry into the bombing.
- 2.2 The Commissions' have written to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Taoiseach respectively about this matter. Both Commissions have received holding replies to date. The substantive responses, when received, will be discussed by the Joint Committee. It was also agreed that both Commissions will remain in contact with the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group as proceedings develop.
- 2.3 The Joint Committee expressed their appreciation to the Chief Commissioner and President for their work on this important and sensitive matter.
- 2.4 The meeting with the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group generated a good deal of media interest in Northern Ireland. A copy of the press cuttings will be sent to the Irish Human Rights Commission.
- 2.5 At the meeting the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group raised their concerns that the relevant authorities have not spoken to them about lessons for managing similar events in the future, particularly in respect of the handling of victims. The Chief Commissioner has written to the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service about this matter.

- 2.6 The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission expressed appreciation to William Binchy from the Irish Human Rights Commission for speaking at a joint event it held with the Equality Commission on the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to mark the International Day of Disabled People in December 2006.

3. International work

- 3.1 The President of the Irish Human Rights Commission briefed the Joint Committee on a recent roundtable of national human rights institutions held at the Harvard Law School to discuss the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- 3.2 The Joint Committee noted that Gerard Quinn, from the Irish Human Rights Commission, is the focal point for the programme of action by NHRIs in respect of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- 3.3 The Joint Committee noted that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is sending a delegation of Commissioners and staff for a familiarisation visit to the European Court of Human Rights and meetings with treaty bodies in Strasbourg in March. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will report back on its experience as the Irish Human Rights Commission is interested in staging a similar visit.
- 3.4 The Joint Committee noted that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will host a visit by representatives of the Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities on 20 March 2007.

4. Joint Committee sub-committee reports

Racism and Migration Sub-Committee

- 4.1 Invitations to tender have been issued by the Irish Human Rights Commission in respect of researching the Republic of Ireland's compliance with the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. A similar exercise is planned by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in respect of the United Kingdom's compliance. Ideally, the two sets of research will result in a joint document to support work by the Commissions to encourage the respective governments to ratify the Convention. The nature of the document, and funding to publish it, needs to be agreed by the two Commissions.

- 4.2 The Joint Committee noted that plans are well advanced for an investigation by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission into the handling of immigration detainees and asylum seekers. It may be appropriate for the two Commissions to collaborate in reviewing the arrangements for the handling of immigrants and asylum seekers at the Northern Ireland / Republic of Ireland border. The Irish Human Rights Commission will consider this further and report back to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in due course.
- 4.3 The next Racism and Migration Sub-Committee will take place immediately after the Joint Committee meeting.

Charter of Rights Sub-Committee

- 4.4 The Joint Committee noted the minutes of the meeting of Charter of Rights Sub-Committee held on 20 February 2007.
- 4.5 The Sub-Committee proposed a number of actions to progress work on the Charter of Rights for the Island of Ireland.
- 4.6 Both Commissions submitted a bid for discrete funding for the Joint Committee to their respective governments. However, while the Irish government has indicated that it will provide additional funding, there has been no official response from the Northern Ireland Office. The Sub-Committee proposes that a reduced bid is re-submitted for funding to engage a researcher to review existing research and compile a paper outlining various models and options for consultation. The Joint Committee agreed to support such a bid.
- 4.7 This paper would form the basis of a consultation event on models and options for a Charter of Rights, possibly in 2008, when the Bill of Rights Forum in Northern Ireland has concluded its work. The Joint Committee noted that 2008 will also be the tenth anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, which indicated that consideration should be given to a Charter of Rights and an appropriate time to promote serious debate on such a charter.
- 4.8 The Joint Committee agreed a proposal from the Sub-Committee to write to those individuals and organisations who were involved in the pre-consultation process on the Charter of Rights in 2003 to inform them of the plan for taking the work forward. A draft letter was agreed.

5. Activity reports

- 5.1 Each Commission gave an update on their respective activities since the last Joint Committee meeting.
- 5.2 In response to questions, the Chief Executive of the Irish Human Rights Commission gave an overview of two recent inquiries using the powers of the IHRC. The Joint Committee noted with disappointment the limitations to the new powers of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission as set out in the Justice and Security Bill, currently progressing through Parliament and which will be discussed by the Grand Committee in March 2007.

6. Any other business

- 6.1 There was none.

7. Date and location of next Joint Committee

- 7.1 The next Joint Committee meeting will be on 22 May 2007 in Dublin.