

NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Minutes of the 37th Commission Meeting

Held on Monday 14 January 2002

**At 2.00 pm in the NIHRC Offices, Temple Court,
39 North Street, Belfast**

Present: Brice Dickson, Chief Commissioner
Margaret-Ann Dinsmore
Tom Donnelly
Christine Eames
Harold Good
Tom Hadden
Paddy Kelly
Inez McCormack
Kevin McLaughlin
Patrick Yu

Christine Bell (*By telephone*)

In Attendance: Paddy Sloan, Chief Executive

Apologies: Chris McGimpsey
Frank McGuinness

1.0 Minutes of the Previous Meetings

1.1 Minutes of the Special Commission Meeting held on 26 October 2001

The revised Minutes of the Special Commission Meeting of 26 October 2001 were agreed as a true record, subject to a reference being included to the contemporaneous note taken of the discussion.

1.2 Minutes of the 36th Commission Meeting held on 10 December 2001

1.2.1 The Minute at 3.2.1.2 – this Minute should be amended to read “There followed discussion regarding correspondence from the Chief Commissioner to the Chief Constable concerning his position and that of three other Commissioners on the Holy Cross Girls’ School case. Paddy Kelly and Inez McCormack wished to record their concerns regarding this correspondence as a potential breach of confidentiality”.

1.2.2 The revised text under point 2.2.2 is to be checked with Harold Good and Frank McGuinness for ratification at the next Commission meeting.

2.0 Matters Arising

2.1 36th Commission meeting held on Monday 10 December 2001

2.1.1 Programme for Government

The Chief Commissioner is to draft a letter to the Northern Ireland Executive regarding the Commission's interest in monitoring the allocation of public finance.

2.1.2 Committee for Victims

The role of the Committee for Victims in making a range of contacts regarding so called punishment attacks was discussed. It was agreed that no contact had been made with "paramilitary groups" as described in the Minutes at point 8.2. No contact had been made with paramilitary groups and no decision had been taken on whether such contact should be made.

2.1.3 World Conference on Racism

The Report on this Conference was released during the first week in January. The Council of Europe is hosting a follow-up Conference on the European and United Nations Reports which will be held on 27 and 28 February 2002. Patrick Yu will forward information to the NIHRC office and it will also be referred to the Joint Committee Sub-Group on Racism due to meet later in January.

2.1.4 Bill of Rights

Commissioners discussed the number of submissions made by political parties and the Chief Executive is to check which submissions have been received.

2.1.5 Plastic Baton Rounds

The discussion of the Commission's position on the use of plastic baton rounds scheduled for the February Commission Meeting is to be postponed until March so that all interested Commissioners can attend.

3.0 Chief Commissioner's Report

3.1 The Chief Commissioner sought the agreement of all Commissioners to make contact with the office, ideally by telephoning Lisa, at the start of each week to confirm their attendance at meetings during the incoming week. This will greatly facilitate the administration and Commissioners agreed to do so. Commissioners were also reminded of the existence of their pigeon holes and they agreed to check these regularly.

3.2 Holy Cross Girls' School

Commissioners had agreed to meet with the Governors and teachers of Holy Cross Girls' School and with the relevant agencies such as North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust and the Belfast Education and Library Board. Commissioners spent some time reconsidering their position with regard to meeting public bodies in the light of the Commission's current support for a case against the Police Service of Northern Ireland regarding its policing of the protest at the school. It was agreed that the Commission must balance confidentiality with its commitment to openness and transparency when meeting public bodies. Whilst the full Commission may wish to discuss this issue in more detail, at present the current position remains that all meetings remain confidential and the Commission will not disclose information about those meetings without the agreement of the other party or unless the purpose is to meet legal obligations. It was agreed that the confidentiality policy would be further reviewed on 21 January when the Commission meets to discuss its values and procedures.

It was agreed that the Chief Commissioner should seek legal advice on the appropriateness of conducting further meetings with public bodies while the case is *sub judice* and that in the meantime he would prepare a statement concerning the purpose of any future meetings to be held in connection with the disputes in Ardoyne.

3.3 Induction of New Commissioners

Thanks were expressed to the Chief Commissioner for the induction provided to date which will be consolidated by the forthcoming meeting to discuss the Commission's values and procedures on 21 January at the Ramada Hotel in Belfast.

3.4 Working Group on Parading

Draft terms of reference for the proposed Working Group were discussed. It was agreed that the Chief Commissioner should contact the Parades Commission to clarify the intended role of the NIHRC in this Working Group. Commissioners' attention was drawn to a conference on parading which was to take place on 26 January. The Chief Commissioner agreed to make inquiries as to why some Commissioners had received invitations but not others. Once that information is provided Commissioners will further consider the request.

3.5 Joint Committee with the Irish Human Rights Commission

The next meeting of the Joint Committee is in Belfast on Thursday 31 January 2002. The Joint Committee Sub-Committee on Racism will meet in Dublin on 23 January 2002 with the Equality Authority and NCCRI and on 31 January 2002 in Belfast with the Equality Commission. Confirmation of these meetings is to be forwarded from the IHRC office.

3.6 Commission Meeting outside Belfast

It was agreed to hold the 11 March Commission meeting in Armagh. The meeting should begin earlier in the day with a local event to be arranged.

3.7 Peter Hosking's Evaluation

Special meetings of Commissioners will be arranged to consider this evaluation and also to discuss the Commission's draft Strategic Plan for 2002-2005.

3.8 Parliamentary Questions

All Parliamentary Questions submitted to the Commission together with our response will be circulated to all Commissioners as requested.

3.9 Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill

The Commission's preliminary response has been submitted to the Northern Ireland Office and it is acknowledged that supplementary comments may also need to be provided. The Chief Commissioner acknowledged the difficulties experienced with this deadline given the Christmas break and it was agreed to prepare a supplementary paper to be submitted to the NIO as soon as possible.

3.10 Visits to Places of Detention

It was agreed to prioritise the visit to Mourne House. The Chief Commissioner plus one other at a minimum, either a Commissioner or member of staff, should arrange to visit Mourne House as soon as possible.

3.11 Visit by the Secretary of State

The Secretary of State would like to meet with the Commission, formally for the first time since his appointment, on either the 28, 29 or 30 January. The Minister Des Browne would like to meet with the Commission at the February Commission meeting on 11 February 2002. It was agreed to seek a meeting with the Secretary of State at 9.00 am on 30 January at the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and to confirm Des Browne's attendance at the February meeting.

3.12 Commissioners' Remuneration

This is currently under consideration by the Northern Ireland Office and Commissioners will be kept informed of any developments.

3.13 Visit of the Westminster Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights

The members of the Joint Parliamentary Committee will be visiting Belfast in February and would like to meet with the Commission on the morning of Thursday 7 February 2002.

3.14 Invitation to the Irish Child Abuse Commission

Three Commissioners showed particular interest in attending this meeting, Christine Eames, Paddy Kelly and Margaret-Ann Dinsmore, with Mrs Justice Laffoy, Chair of the Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse. A meeting should be arranged as soon as possible and any other Commissioners who are available and interested are welcome to attend.

3.15 Annual Report

Staff were congratulated on the production of the current Annual Report. The Chief Commissioner suggested improvements to the current format and re-stated his commitment to lay the next Annual Report in Parliament before the summer recess in 2002.

3.16 Commissioners' Register of Interests

The publicly available Register of Interests of Commissioners requires a regular update and completion by new Commissioners. The existing Register will be circulated to all Commissioners for necessary amendment and for guidance to new Commissioners. Commissioners agreed to prioritise this exercise.

4.0 Chief Executive's Report

4.1 Staffing

The Finance and General Purposes Committee recommended to the full Commission that a job evaluation exercise should be undertaken to cover all existing and proposed new posts within the Commission. Commissioners agreed that this is a necessary step both for good practice and to inform the Commission's Strategic Plan and Business Plans up until 2006. The Chief Executive will begin this process with immediate effect.

4.2 Peter Hosking's Evaluation

It was agreed that a special meeting is needed to consider Peter Hosking's Report, the draft Strategic Plan outline and the Business Plans prepared for

2002-2003 and 2003-2006. Clearly these three documents are closely connected and Commissioners need to give time to their consideration. It was also agreed that at a future date there should be an opportunity to interact with Peter Hosking, either by telephone or by video-conference to discuss the detail of his Report, when it has been submitted.

It was agreed that a special meeting to consider these documents should be held on Thursday 24 January from 2.00 pm – 5.00 pm at the NIHRC.

5.0 Bill of Rights

- 5.1 A draft agenda for the Bill of Rights residential on 22/23 February 2002 was circulated by Tom Hadden. Christine Bell and Patrick Yu had also agreed to contribute to this agenda. This will be done as soon as possible and co-ordinated through Rachel Rebouche at the office.
 - 5.2 A summary of key issues in submissions will be prepared by staff to give guidance to Commissioners in considering all submissions.
 - 5.3 The Northern Ireland Office officials will meet again with the Commission to discuss the UK Government's response to the Bill of Rights consultation document. This meeting will be arranged through the Chief Executive.
 - 5.4 The Minister Des Browne has initiated meetings with political representatives at the Northern Ireland Assembly to discuss the Bill of Rights proposals. One particular party also seems to be arranging inter-party talks and Commissioners will consider how best to engage with this process of debate among political parties.
- 6.0** At 6.05 pm the meeting closed, concluding item 6.0 of the agenda. Items 7.0 to 14.0 will be carried over to the agenda of the next Commission meeting on 11 February 2002.