

NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Minutes of the 18th Commission Meeting

Held on Monday, 12 June 2000

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

Present: Brice Dickson, Chief Commissioner
Christine Bell
Tom Donnelly
Margaret-Ann Dinsmore
Tom Hadden
Paddy Kelly
Inez McCormack
Frank McGuinness

In Attendance: Paddy Sloan, Chief Executive

Apologies: Harold Good
Angela Hegarty

1.0 Minutes

The previous Commission Minutes were reviewed for accuracy.

- 1.1 The numbering requires amendment in paragraph 5 as there are 2 paragraphs numbered 5.3.
- 1.2 In the first paragraph 5.3, amendments to the text were agreed: the second half of the first sentence should now read “firstly seeking a meeting on our budget and secondly focusing on the Pat Finucane case and the British Irish Rights Watch Report as a precursor to a meeting on that issue”. It is to be noted that if there is no reply to this correspondence within 2 weeks the Chief Commissioner will write to the Secretary of State seeking a meeting regarding the Pat Finucane case.

2.0 Matters Arising

2.1 Composition of the Victims’ Committee

The composition of the Victims’ Committee was agreed as Frank McGuinness, Harold Good, Tom Donnelly, Christine Bell and Brice Dickson.

2.2 The Human Rights Commission, Republic of Ireland

The Chief Commissioner has written to the Taoiseach regarding the process of establishing the Human Rights Commission in Ireland. A copy of this letter was circulated to all Commissioners. It was agreed that as suggested by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Chief Commissioner should seek to telephone the Taoiseach regarding the membership of the new Commission.

2.3 Confidentiality Policy

This has been prepared for Counsel's advice and the urgency of this Policy, particularly with respect to the investigations pending as well as casework, was noted.

2.4 Bloody Sunday Inquiry

Harold Good and Margaret-Ann Dinsmore attended the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, which they felt was an instructive and useful day.

2.5 Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

The Chief Commissioner and Chief Executive met the two Junior Ministers, Dermot Nesbitt and Dennis Haughey basically to establish contact between their office and the Commission. The meeting was quite general but both Junior Ministers appeared receptive to the idea of regular seminars on Human Rights issues being held for MLAs at Stormont. This needs to be further explored and the Commission intends to stay in close contact with the Human Rights Directorate of the Office of the First Minister/Deputy First Minister.

2.6 RUC Training

Brice Dickson, Edel Teague and Linda Moore attended the training and will compile a report to be circulated among Commissioners. That report will then go to the RUC also.

2.7 Equality Commission

The Guidance on Equality Schemes has been received. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission has now been revised and will be circulated to Commissioners prior to final agreement.

2.8 Strategic Plan

The final text has been agreed and is currently with PCC for publication in line with the new corporate identity.

3.0 Hamill Inquest

It was agreed to consider this issue now rather than at the end of the meeting. The Commission has met once with Robert Hamill's family and Solicitor and is anxious to do so again. There had been some reluctance on the part of the family and their Solicitor to meet with the Commission until they had explored further evidence. However the Commission needs the family's instructions if it is to comment on the case further so Brice will write to the family again seeking another meeting. If such a meeting is arranged it will be open to the full Commission.

4.0 Chief Commissioner's Report

4.1 Equality Scheme

There has been no further movement on designation and Brice will speak to the Equality Commission about this. A draft Equality Commitment Statement was agreed; it will be incorporated into the draft Equality Scheme to be discussed by the Equality Committee, which will meet again before the end of June.

4.2 Commonwealth Lawyers Association Conference

The Commission confirmed its contribution of £500 towards this Conference. It is acting as an agent for the Commonwealth Lawyers Association in organising it. There has been a limited uptake to date of places at the Conference. One Commissioner indicated that queries had been raised outside of the Commission as to the appropriateness of inviting the Chief Constable to respond on behalf of government at the event. The Chief Commissioner explained the process by which the invitation had been issued.

4.3 Criminal Justice Review Conference

This has been postponed until the end of the summer, as suitable dates in June could not be arranged. The closing date for submissions on the Review is 29 September and it was agreed that the Conference would be held during the week commencing 4 September 2000. It was suggested that a flyer to this effect be circulated widely before the summer.

4.4 Pat Finucane Case

A letter to the Secretary of State was tabled and discussed. It was noted that the advice from Helen Jackson (PPS to Peter Mandelson) concerning the Police (NI) Bill is to contact Paul Priestley and David Watkins rather than go directly to the Secretary of State. Meetings have been sought with the Secretary of State regarding the role of the Human Rights Commission with respect to consultation in general and the budget of the Commission. It was agreed that the Chief Commissioner would also seek a meeting with the Oversight Commissioner. It was further agreed that the Chief Commissioner

would write to Helen Jackson following the meeting with her last week, to establish the distinction of the Human Rights Commission from the NGO sector. In addition the Commissioner will write to Paul Priestley regarding a meeting on the Police Bill.

4.5 Police Bill

A small group of Tom Hadden, Angela Hegarty, Brice Dickson, Linda Moore and Denise Magill is working on the briefing and amendments for the Committee stage of the Police Bill. Inez is available as necessary. The Police Briefing will go to all members of the Standing Committee in question. Meetings have been sought with the Commission by the SDLP and Sinn Féin.

4.6 Investigations by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

The Commission confirmed that it would not make a submission to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry into the Parades Commission until August or September.

4.7 Museum of Tolerance

It was agreed that the Commission would support this proposal in principle, with the recommendation that greater focus be put on human rights and equality.

4.8 Human Rights in Cities

Belfast City Council continues to work with other European cities to develop a Charter of Rights. The Commission has advised the Council on a draft of the Charter and is pleased to encourage this process. A major international conference at which this Charter will be endorsed will be held in Belfast in 2002. The Commission agreed to support the Council in this initiative although is unlikely to contribute financially.

4.9 Human Rights Act Implementation

A Paper has been prepared giving guidance to public authorities on preparation for the implementation of the Human Rights Act. Any comments on this paper should be submitted by Monday, 19 June 2000.

4.10 Meetings

Notes of the meetings with Alex Attwood (SDLP) and Roly Laird (RUC) will be circulated.

5.0 Chief Executive's Report

5.1 Staffing

5.1.1 New appointments were noted:

Nadia Downing as Information Worker
Roisin Carlin and Lorraine Hamill as Administrative Officers.

5.1.2 Advertisements have been placed to cover Linda Moore's maternity leave, the Victims' Rights Project Worker (both 6 month appointments) and Internships for the summer period.

5.1.3 Directories of Researchers, Barristers and Co-tutors have been advertised and compiled and will be updated every 6 months.

5.1.4 A team of researchers has been appointed to undertake the investigations into juvenile justice and the human rights implications of the policing of parades (see Investigations Committee Report).

5.2 Premises

Progress was noted on the attainment of the ground floor as additional office space for the Commission and the urgency of this development was again emphasised.

5.3 Corporate Identity

The Communications Strategy Group of Paddy Kelly, Frank McGuinness, Brice Dickson and Paddy Sloan recommended a corporate identity to the Commission that had been designed by PCC (Public Communications Centre). The design was unanimously agreed by the Commissioners and can now be used for the corporate design of the Annual Report, Bill of Rights Pamphlets and Strategic Plan.

6.0 Annual Report

The draft text of the Annual Report was tabled for Commissioners to consider. Any comments on the text should be forwarded to the Chief Commissioner by the end of the week (16 June 2000).

7.0 Bill of Rights

7.1 Women

There was some discussion regarding Beijing Plus 5 and the need for a working group on women's rights for the Bill of Rights, as there is a shortfall in feedback from Women's Groups as also was the case with the Strategic

Plan Consultation. The Bill of Rights Group will consider the options, including running a special event for women.

7.2 Children and Young People

Brice Dickson, Paddy Sloan and Paddy Kelly will meet later in the week to discuss how best to consult with children and young people.

7.3 Management of the Bill of Rights Project

- 7.3.1 The responsibility for the management of this Project lies with the Chief Executive who should be implementing strategic decisions taken by a Committee of Commissioners.
- 7.3.2 It was agreed that the Education Committee and Bill of Rights Committee would meet jointly for their next two meetings until the next Commission meeting on 18 July, at which the Committee structures are being reviewed.
- 7.3.3 The Chief Executive was asked to produce a staff audit in terms of what needs to be done for the Bill of Rights Project and what resources are available or required to do it.

8.0 Committee Reports

8.1 Bill of Rights

The Reports should be more succinct and focused on a clear timeline for information.

8.2 Casework

Again more focused information is sought, in particular around cases of public controversy. There was some discussion around the selection of Counsel and on the need to evaluate and appraise all commissioned work.

8.3 Education

It was agreed that the proposals for engaging additional staff on education work cannot be considered outside of the context of an overall financial review and the human resources discussion that will take place at the July Commission meeting.

With regard to training courses, it was agreed that it would be appropriate to offer crèche facilities if required and to offer an allowance for carers if necessary. The Bill of Rights Group will meet with the Education Committee on 20 June at 1.00 pm and on 7 July at 10.00 am.

8.4 Investigations Committee

This report was found to be informative and useful. A final draft of the guidelines for investigations should be presented to all Commissioners and approved at a Commission meeting. This will be explored with Linda Moore.

8.5 Legislation and Policy Committee

This Committee has not met recently but is due to meet on 15 June 2000. Denise Magill is now back at work and a report will be included in the next Commission meeting papers.

9.0 Any Other Business

There being no other business the meeting closed at 5.30 pm.

The next Commission meeting will be on **Tuesday, 18 July 2000 and will run all day.**