

MINUTES OF THE FIRST OFFICIAL MEETING OF
THE NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION AND
THE IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Held at 10.30 am on Thursday 8 November 2001

At the Hilton Hotel Belfast

- Present:** Brice Dickson, Chief Commissioner, NIHRC
Margaret-Ann Dinsmore
Tom Donnelly
Harold Good
Tom Hadden
Paddy Kelly
Inez McCormack
Frank McGuinness
Donal Barrington, President, IHRC
William Binchy
Robert Daly
Michael Farrell
Nuala Kelly
Jane Liddy
Tom O'Higgins
Gerard Quinn
Mervyn Taylor
Katheryn Zappone
- In Attendance** Paddy Sloan, Chief Executive, NIHRC
Sophie Magennis, Temporary Administrator, IHRC
Gráinne Blessing, Assistant to the President, IHRC
- Apologies:** Christine Bell, NIHRC
Olive Braiden, IHRC
Martin Collins,
Suzanne Egan
Clodach McGrory
Fionnuala NI Aoláin

1.0 Minutes

The notes of the meeting held between the NIHRC and the Shadow Irish Human Rights Commission held on Wednesday 30 May 2001 in Dublin, were agreed as an accurate record.

2.0 Matters Arising

2.1 Joint Committee

It was agreed to adopt the recommendations from the previous meeting on the operation of the Joint Committee.

2.1.1 The Chief Commissioner and President should be joint Chairs of the Committee with each presiding in their home state.

2.1.2 The Chief Executives of the two Commissions, and initially the Temporary Administrator IHRC, should be joint secretaries to the Committee.

2.1.3 The Committee will hold in reserve the option of employing its own staff at a later stage.

3.0 Joint Working of the two Commissions

3.1 Aside from the establishment of the Joint Committee, Commissioners discussed opportunities for other forms of collaboration between the two Commissions. Following discussion it was agreed that the two Commissions would currently meet in plenary as the Joint Committee but that they can when appropriate meet as two Commissions. At this point the two Commissions meeting in plenary constitute the Joint Committee required to be established by statute.

3.2 There is an opportunity to establish specialist issue based working groups which will have a relationship to the Joint Committee and which will report to it.

4.0 Programme of Work

4.1 A range of issues was identified presenting human rights concerns both north and south of the border. These included:

Racism

Asylum seekers

Children's issues

Education rights

Poverty

Disability

Issues connected to the border

An audit of human rights instruments north and south.

4.2 It was suggested that the Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland, as described by statute, has to be a priority of the Joint Committee. A paper on

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the possible options for a Joint Charter prepared by Tom Hadden was tabled for discussion.

4.3 It was proposed to contact all the political parties in the island to seek their views on a Charter of Rights.

4.4 It was agreed after considerable discussion that the Joint Committee needed to discuss in plenary the options for the development of a Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland. Subsequently a working group would be established to consult with political parties and with civil society on the Commission's proposals. In the interim the Commissions can take the views of the political parties in their own jurisdiction, north with north, south with south, but no pre-eminence will be given to those views prior to the commencement of a formal consultation process.

4.5 Should any complication arise in this process the joint Chairs can liaise to resolve it.

5.0 Racism

5.1 Both Commissions will have to respond to the declaration from the World Conference on Racism held in Durban in August 2001. Participating countries agreed to produce national action plans to which each Commission would want to contribute. There will be a conference in March 2002 held in the Republic of Ireland to review their national plan. The UNHRC expects national human rights institutions to monitor their governments action plans.

5.2 The final document from Durban is not as yet available but it is expected that human rights institutions will be required to contribute to the national action plan, to comment on it to the United Nations and to their national Parliament and subsequently to monitor its implementation.

5.3 It was agreed that the Joint Committee would establish a working group on racism. This group will focus not only on the outcome from the Durban conference but will also have a role in raising human rights standards north and south on general race issues, in particular with respect to asylum seekers.

5.4 The working group will comprise Michael Farrell (Convenor), Inez McCormack, Frank McGuinness, Harold Good, Tom O'Higgins and Nuala Kelly.

5.5 The Chief Commissioner and the President are at liberty to attend any working group at any time.

6.0 Working Groups

6.1 Such working groups should have the authority to consult and work with

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outside agencies as appropriate.

6.2 Gender balance should be sought where reasonably possible. For ad hoc working groups it is not necessary to have an exact gender balance although it must be reasonable.

6.3 Working groups established in the absence of some Commissioners should ensure that all Commissioners have an opportunity to participate.

7.0 Other Issues

7.1 It is difficult to prioritise issues in the absence of a strategic plan for the Irish Commission. It was agreed that the Joint Committee's discussions would inform both the Irish Commission's strategic plan and the Northern Ireland Commission's next strategic plan for 2003 — 2006.

7.2 A Joint Committee needs to be conscious of the resource limitations at this point in time and should not undertake work that cannot be delivered.

7.3 It was agreed that the NIHRC Education Committee would keep the Irish Commission informed of its work.

7.4 The existence of emergency laws in the north and south together with proposals for new legislation following the September bombings in New York will require further examination by the two Commissions.

7.5 Audit of international instruments

7.5.1 An audit of international instruments applying north and south has been suggested as a useful piece of work. Christine Bell has already developed a database of ratification of international instruments which is available on the website of the Human Rights Centre at Queen's University. Updating of this database should be explored. It was agreed that Jane Liddy would work with Christine Bell and circulate a proposal for the next Commission meeting.

7.6 It was agreed that the Commissions are both operating with limited resources and should therefore exploit the current competencies around the table. For example work on disability currently being undertaken by Gerard Quinn should be considered at a future meeting.

8.0 Funding

8.1 It was agreed at this stage that the two Commissions would share costs equally. The Irish Commission is not in a position to give a clear estimate of its expenditure for the current financial year given that it has not as yet employed permanent staff.

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8.2 Costs will be kept under review as the Joint Committee implements its decisions.

9.0 Standing Orders for the Joint Committee

9.1 Draft Standing Orders should be tabled at the next meeting of the Joint Committee.

9.2.1 The minutes of the Joint Committee will be posted on the website of the NIHRC and subsequently when established, the website of the Irish Commission, once they have been approved.

9.2.2 Minutes will not record general discussions, simply highlight decisions made.

10.0 Council of Europe Roundtable of Human Rights Institutions Bi-Annual Conference

10.1 Further information regarding the dates and agenda and funding for this conference, due to be held in both Dublin and Belfast in February/March 2002 is required from the Council of Europe.

10.2 The Chief Commissioner and the President together with the Chief Executive and Administrator will take this forward and report to the next Joint Committee meeting.

10.3 It was agreed that Michael Farrell as Convenor of the Working Group on Racism would be kept informed of the agenda.

10.4 It was also noted that the World Conference on Human Rights Institutions will be organised by Denmark and Sweden and will take place in April 2002.

11.0 Commission Updates

11.1 An update on the activities of each of the Commissions was circulated to the meeting.

11.2 In addition a report from Michael Farrell on the World Conference on Racism is available to any interested Commissioner.

11.3 The appointment of new Commissioner(s) to the NIHRC is expected to be announced this week.

11.4 Copies of the Review of Powers of the NIHRC, produced in February 2001 will be sent directly to IHRC Commissioners.

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12.0 Dates of Future Meetings

12.1 It was agreed that the meetings would alternate north and south. The next meeting would therefore be held in Dublin.

12.2 The next meeting will be held on Thursday 13 December at 10.30 am.

12.3 The following meeting will be in Belfast on 31 January 2002 at 10.30 am.

13.0 Any Other Business

13.1 The Chief Commissioner of the NIHRC invited all visiting Commissioners to view the NIHRC offices after lunch.

13.2 A press release and photograph of this first meeting will be issued later in the afternoon by the NIHRC office and forwarded to the IHRC office.

13.3 The Chief Commissioner of the NIHRC congratulated the IHRC on its establishment and offered all best wishes and good luck for their progress.

13.4 The President thanked the Chief Commissioner for his good wishes and for the Commission's hospitality in Belfast.

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