

- ① cc David McNamara } to note 1/ Susan - to see
 Mary Bunting } 2/ PA HR 8/00
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 ② First Minister & info. P 16/9

22 Lawrence Hill
 BT48 7NJ

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Dr John Reid MP
 Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
 House of Commons
 Westminster
 London

9 September 2002

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to notify you formally that I am resigning as Commissioner from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission with effect from to-day. The Belfast Agreement stated that a new Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission would be established 'independent of government, with an extended and enhanced role beyond that currently exercised by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights. . .'. I was immensely honoured when I was chosen to be a Commissioner on the new body. However, I am resigning as I believe that the Commission is not the body described in the Agreement. I understand that Inez McCormack is also resigning with similar concerns.

First, the powers and resources given to the Commission are inadequate to its task, compromising the Commission's independence and effectiveness, as the Commission comprehensively documented as far back as its review of powers report in February 2001. The government's tardy consultation document responding to the Commission's recommendations is essentially dismissive and this does not augur well for the future of the Commission.

The evolving mechanisms for granting additional funding further compromise the independence and effectiveness of the Commission. The need to negotiate a supplementary bid for most Commission projects and engage in discussion with the Northern Ireland Office around whether our choice of work is appropriate and how we should approach our work, clearly undermines the Commission's independence as we have recorded at Commission meetings, in letters and in comments on powers. The Commission has clearly failed to secure a serious government commitment to remedy this situation.

I have also been concerned for some time as to whether the Commission, even within its limited powers and resources, was developing a sufficiently strategic and organised approach to enable it to carve out a positive role for itself in protecting and promoting

human rights. I endeavoured to raise these concerns during my time on the Commission, but rightly or wrongly, I have come to the conclusion that there is not the required shared degree of concern to address them. I am now convinced that the failure to address these matters is compounding the original failure to resource and empower the Commission adequately. Accordingly after giving it much thought and with regret, I have decided to resign from the Commission.

I still believe that an effective Commission as envisioned in the Belfast Agreement could make a profound contribution to building peace and it is my sincere hope that this is achieved. I also hope to continue myself to contribute in whatever way I can to promote and advance human rights and building peace.

Yours sincerely,

Christie Bell

Professor Christine Bell

It was obvious to me that when the Commission was established it was not provided with either the powers or the resources to meet the requirements set out in the international standards for human rights commissions on independence and effective action.

However, I felt that the Commission could still achieve clear objectives in promoting and protecting human rights. I have now been concerned for some considerable time that what I see as a lack of direction in the strategies, policies and practices of the Commission, means that it cannot.

I considered initially that these problems were merely the problems of any newly established organisation. I engaged fully with the Chair and other members of the Commission in attempting to remedy these problems. When it became apparent that the problems were more fundamental I consistently expressed internally my profound disagreement with several aspects of the policy and practice of the Commission.

In particular I have been concerned by the Commission's activities in relation to the Bill of Rights. I campaigned for a Bill of Rights for over thirty years. I believe that it has the potential to help make real the ethos of mutual respect that underlies the Good Friday Agreement.

There was a huge response from constituencies to the initial consultation. This response provided the opportunity for the Commission to engage positively with those constituencies and use the opportunity for consensus building across all communities. However, often in internal debate this opportunity was greatly diminished by the Commission taking an approach which in my view had the effect of undermining key aspects of the Agreement.

Inez McCormack
14 Toalstown Meadows
Gloverstown Road
Toomebridge
BT41 3PG

Dr John Reid MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Westminster
London

9th September 2002

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to you, with considerable regret, to tender my resignation from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission with effect from today. I do so because I believe the present Commission cannot deliver its remit under the Good Friday Agreement. I understand that my colleague on the Commission, Christine Bell, is writing in similar vein.

It was obvious to me that when the Commission was established it was not provided with either the powers or the resources to meet the requirements set out in the international standards for human rights commissions on independence and effective action.

However, I felt that the Commission could still achieve clear objectives in promoting and protecting human rights. I have now been concerned for some considerable time that what I see as a lack of direction in the strategies, policies and practices of the Commission, means that it cannot.

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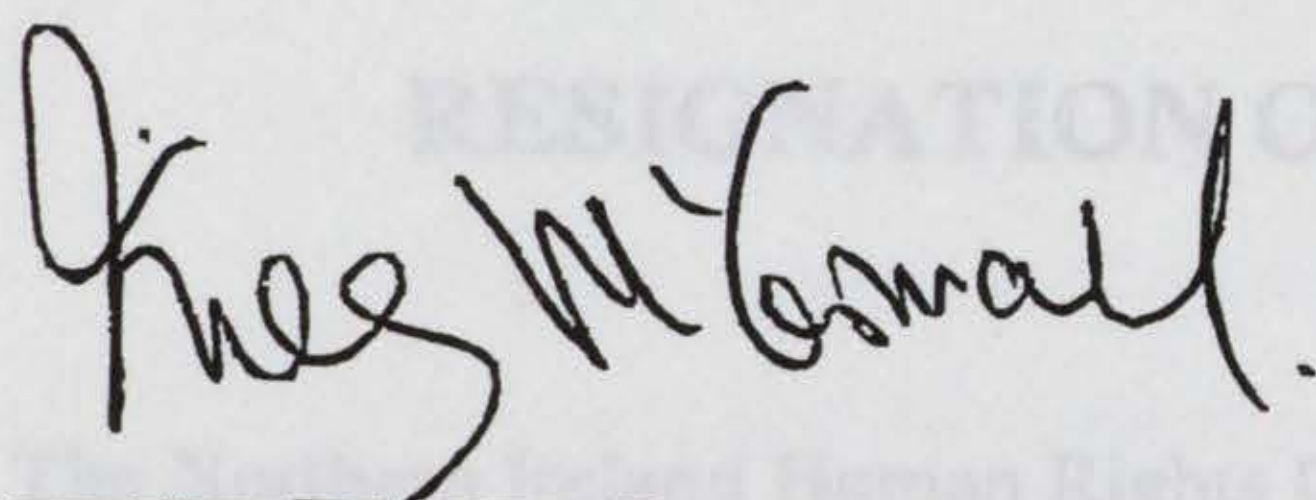
There was a huge response from constituencies to the initial consultation. This response provided the opportunity for the Commission to engage positively with those constituencies and use the opportunity for consensus building across all communities. However, often in internal debate this opportunity was greatly diminished by the Commission taking an approach which in my view had the effect of undermining key aspects of the Agreement.

I still believe that an effective Human Rights Commission such as that contemplated by the Good Friday Agreement, is vital to protecting the rights of all, and that by so doing it could create values and practices of cross community understanding which are key to a peaceful future. Political parties and civil society are just at the beginning of an exploration on how best to engage in the debate on a Bill of Rights. This difficult, serious process needs time and space. The Commission, however, in my view still is pursuing an approach to this debate that risks polarising it and rushing it, thereby closing its potential as a process that can assist in building peace.

I came to the work of the Commission with a long track record in relation to issues of equality and rights, believing that the Human Rights Commission envisaged by the agreement must be able to work for the most marginalized and vulnerable in society and, by doing so, create cross community consensus that will assist in building a peaceful future.

Correctly or not, I believe that the Commission has been ineffective in the past and will continue to be in future without substantive change. Consequently, I am unable in good conscience to continue to serve on it. I now feel that my energies in relation to furthering the practice of that vision can best be pursued outside the Commission.

Yours sincerely,



Inez McCormack

The Human Rights Commissioners and staff very much regret the resignation of two of the founding Commissioners, Inez McCormack and Christine Bell. Both have made a significant contribution to the establishment and early development of the Commission and their human rights knowledge and experience will be greatly missed.

The remaining Commissioners share the frustration expressed by Dr McCormack and Professor Bell at the lack of powers and resources that have been made available to the Commission since its inception in 1998. The Commission has had to take a case to the House of Lords to establish its right to intervene in the courts on human rights issues and a dossier of recommendations for changes to its powers has been with the Northern Ireland Office since March 2001. The Commission now calls on the Northern Ireland Office to demonstrate its support for the Commission by responding positively to those

To rel

NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

PRESS STATEMENT – Tuesday 10 September 2002

For immediate release

RESIGNATION OF TWO COMMISSIONERS

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commissioners and staff very much regret the resignation yesterday of two of the founding Commissioners, Inez McCormack and Christine Bell. Both have made a significant contribution to the establishment and early development of the Commission and their human rights knowledge and experience will be greatly missed.

The remaining Commissioners share the frustration expressed by Dr McCormack and Professor Bell at the lack of powers and resources that have been made available to the Commission since its inception in 1999. The Commission has had to take a case to the House of Lords to establish its right to intervene in the courts on human rights issues and a dossier of recommendations for changes to its powers has been with the Northern Ireland Office since March 2001. The Commission now calls on the Northern Ireland Office to demonstrate its support for the Commission by responding positively to those

recommendations. The Commission must be given the powers and resources that it needs to ensure the effective protection and promotion of human rights in Northern Ireland.

As regards its strategic direction the Commission acknowledges that it has been ambitious in what it has set out to achieve. But it is still a young organization operating in a controversial and complex field. It is currently working on a Strategic Plan for 2002-2006 which will allow Commissioners to refine their focus in light of the first three years' experience and of any improvements that may be made to its powers and resources. An evaluation report compiled by an international expert recommended by the UN is also under consideration. This is a critical time of change within the Commission and the concerns of Christine Bell and Inez McCormack will be given full consideration during that process.

Chief Commissioner Brice Dickson said:

"Over the past three years, the NIHRC has been extremely productive. We have investigated, commented on and published extensively on a wide range of human rights issues and have made substantial progress on developing proposals for a Bill of Rights. I very much regret that we are moving into the next planning period without the expertise of Christine and Inez."

Notes for editors:

1. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was established in March 1999 to protect and promote the human rights of everyone in Northern Ireland. It has a range of duties and powers, including the duty to keep under review law and practice relating to the protection of human rights, the duty to promote understanding and awareness of human rights and the power to give assistance to individuals with court proceedings involving the protection of human rights.
2. Brice Dickson or Paddy Sloan (Chief Executive) can be contacted on 07901 853005 or (at the office) on 028 9024 3987.