

# Human Rights 'a must'

News Letter - 15<sup>th</sup> December 1997

Last week there was International Human Rights Day (commemorating the day the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights was adopted - December 10, 1948) and this week the talks process is in a 'review mode' as to progress to date.

It is thus timely to reflect and ask, is the Government living up to its human rights commitments with respect to Northern Ireland? The clear answer is no.

This is particularly disappointing when one considers that the Labour Government views human rights protection as being at the heart of a parliamentary democracy.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister takes over the presidency of the European Union in January 1998 and the EU has clearly laid down human rights practices that are to be applied to conflict resolution in a divided society.

Does the government abide by these with respect to Northern Ireland? The clear answer is again no. The Irish government is equally at fault in this respect.

In sharp contrast to its attitude towards Northern Ireland, the UK Government places human rights at the heart of its foreign policy. If the Government promotes the importance of fundamental rights and freedoms abroad, how much greater is its responsibility to ensure that these are honoured within the United Kingdom?

There is no better time to re-emphasise the damning fact that the unionist community in Northern Ireland is being asked to accept, by way of the 'Framework Document', what no other region is being asked to accept anywhere in the democratic world. Look at the facts.

Democrats throughout Europe accept that the foundations for peace and justice are best maintained by effective democracy and a common understanding and observance of human rights. They reject aggressive nationalism and they accept and respect territorial borders by way of the institutions of government.

Where there is dissension within a region of a state, regarding the validity of that state, autonomous regional government is developed and institutions are expected to be created within that state in order to protect all ethnic groupings.

Where there is tension and a lack of trust across borders within Europe, co-operation is encouraged and expected to be built-up slowly from the base of already existing, and functioning regional bodies.

Where there are states that have an ethnic affinity with a group of people in a neighbouring state, their only interest is to ensure that their kin flourish under conditions of good government in that neighbouring state and not to have a say in its government.

These democratic fundamental rights and freedoms are being advocated and applied both fairly and equally, on the same footing and with the same emphasis everywhere in the modern Europe - except in Northern Ireland.

For example, in Northern Ireland there is strong support for regional all-party government, but this has been denied unless unionists agree to all-Ireland institutions with governmental powers. This is unacceptable political blackmail.

Trust will not be built up by trying to create all-Ireland political decision-making bodies that do not have the support of the majority in Northern Ireland.

In all other areas where cross-border tensions exist, such as Slovakia/Hungary and Croatia/Serbia to name but two, the principles applied bear no resemblance at all to the Government's approach in Northern Ireland.

And, can it be said that the Irish Government's only interest is in the good government of Northern Ireland? I think not.

In short, both the UK and Irish governments, by way of the 'Framework Document', are trying to impose something which is anathema to governments elsewhere in Europe. It must be emphasised that there is no precedent anywhere in Europe for the proposals that the pro-Union people in Northern Ireland are being asked to accept in the 'Framework Document'.

In the absence of agreement at the talks, what will the UK Government advocate by way of referendum? It will have to make a choice. Advocate something likely to be acceptable by the greater number and in line with practice elsewhere in the democratic world or alternatively advocate a 'Framework Document' solution not found anywhere else in the democratic world.

The Ulster Unionist Party's response to this situation is clear. Politically we want to see progress. We want to see participation in government in Northern Ireland at all levels by all constitutional parties; we want to see all traditions respected; and, in turn, we want to see practical sensible co-operation between the United Kingdom's regions and the Irish Republic on matters that are of mutual benefit.

Our vision is clear and the message is simple: unlike others, we want to see the same rights, same stability and same principles of government, including structures of government to accommodate minorities that operate everywhere else in the democratic world.

Unionists must not be despondent; there is an argument to be made and a solution to be found. We will continue to advocate strongly Unionism's just cause and will endeavour to obtain a referendum situation that Unionism can support. In the event of having to call for a 'no' vote it is perhaps ironic, but true, that we are more likely to secure the necessary 'no' majority if in the meantime we have made every effort to obtain a positive outcome to the present talks process.

At present, there is no viable alternative than to constantly confront government (and the other participants) in the talks process as to their obligation to implement the principles applied elsewhere in the democratic world.

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