



CHURCH of IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD  
CHURCH in SOCIETY COMMITTEE

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Response to the consultation paper on a Forum on a Bill of Rights for  
Northern Ireland

- 1 The Church of Ireland's Church in Society Committee welcomes the proposal to create a body to engage with the preparation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The Church in Society Committee previously responded to a consultation regarding a proposed draft bill in 2004 with concerns regarding the approach to be adopted and to call for the appropriate budgetary planning, training and provision of infrastructure and services to support the rights enshrined in any such legislation in the future. We attach this earlier response and would recommend that our own response and others gathered previously by the NIHRC would be reviewed and given serious consideration by the proposed Forum.
- 2 The Church in Society Committee also welcomes the inclusion of Churches in the proposed membership of the Forum. We would urge that both main traditions are represented within the constituency of the Forum to ensure the participation and ownership of the process within the two main communities in Northern Ireland. Church membership in Northern Ireland is significant. Churches represent the needs of a large number of people. Church affiliation still helps to define a significant part of identity for many people in Northern Ireland. The Church of Ireland estimates that its membership in Northern Ireland is some 290 000 people. Therefore, we urge that at least two places are allocated to the Churches.
- 3 We also welcome the inclusion of minority interests in the community and view this as a positive element in the composition of the Forum. The widest possible inclusion of both majority and minority participants representative of civic society should be emphasised, while paying due accord to the role of political parties in NI society and the contribution they may make to the development of a Bill of Rights.
- 4 The Church in Society Committee agrees with the proposal in the consultation that a Chairperson with international experience of human rights issues should be appointed, but would also ask that, in seeking a person to fill this appointment, more emphasis is given to the need for some firsthand knowledge of NI as this Bill of Rights is specifically intended to address the NI context.
- 5 The Forum's independence from both the NIHRC and the political process must be safeguarded to ensure the credible delivery of its consultative and advisory functions.

- 6 A public education programme should be implemented to ensure that the various distinctions between the Forum and all other bodies are well signposted and understood. An appropriate budget should be included in the funding allocation to enable the Forum to engage in a public information process regarding appointments made to it, its objectives, its consultation process and advice rendered by it in terms of developing a Bill of Rights. Careful planning needs to be done to ensure that this programme is effectively delivered locally.
- 7 The work already undertaken and published by NIHRC should be placed before the Forum for consideration.
- 8 The Forum should pay attention to the context of rights articulated in other regions of the UK and in the Republic of Ireland.
- 9 Adequate funding to enable a broadly-based consultation process is essential to civic participation and subsequent support for the proposed Bill of Rights.
- 10 The recommendations of the Forum must be credible to all parts of NI society. For a Bill of Rights to gain widespread acceptance, the Bill must clearly enshrine the values of justice, accessibility and equality.
- 11 The consultation seeks comment on the timeframe for the production of a Bill of Rights. The Church in Society Committee believes the time frame is too short. The difficulty of some of the issues to be addressed and the need for public consultation, participation and agreement on the fundamental values will require a much more lengthy process. The recognition of human rights might be viewed as a significant part of the healing process in Northern Ireland. It would be better to engage society deeply and at length in consultation and development of consensus around the key components of any possible Bill, rather than to rush that process.

*The Rt Revd Dr Michael Jackson,  
Chairperson of The Church in Society Committee  
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