

5 April 2023

Good Friday Agreement anniversary: Solidarity with Northern Irish civil society organisations

We represent 40 organisations working across the UK, spanning the human rights and civil liberties, pan-equality, racial justice, faith, military justice, criminal justice, democracy, refugee and migrants' rights, disability rights, voluntary, violence against women and girls, racial justice, LGBTQ+, environmental, and other sectors.

We stand in solidarity with our civil society partners across Northern Ireland on the anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and echo their demands for the UK Government to take forward its responsibility to deliver a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, protect the Human Rights Act and guarantee full access to the European Convention on Human Rights. Continued failure to fulfil the promises made 25 years ago is a betrayal of the values of the Northern Ireland peace process.

Please see the attached letter signed by 50 Northern Irish groups, which we endorse and forward for your consideration (below).

Dear Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak MP), Leader of the Opposition (Sir Keir Starmer MP) and Taoiseach (Leo Varadkar TD),

We write to you as civil society organisations from across all communities, sectors and areas of Northern Ireland who believe that strong and inclusive human rights protections must be a core part of improving this society.

On the 25th anniversary of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, we call on you to help deliver the outstanding human rights commitments that our peace deal originally envisioned a quarter of a century ago.

The main undelivered commitment of that Agreement is a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. There continues to be overwhelming public and widespread political support for a new Bill of Rights, with 80%+ support in a public survey commissioned by the Assembly.

Yet the UK Government continues to block progress by insisting on complete party political consensus before a Bill of Rights can proceed. If such a veto had been allowed to apply to the Agreement itself, or for instance to the reform of policing, they would never have happened.

We now need to remove the veto on the Bill of Rights and move to delivery mode.

We are also deeply concerned at ongoing attempts to remove or undermine existing human rights standards that are fundamentally linked to the Agreement. Recent government proposals to scrap the Human Rights Act would have represented a substantial weakening of human rights across the United Kingdom by diminishing the level of protection we enjoy under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), a cornerstone of the peace agreement.

The signatories to the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement committed themselves to 'the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.' The lack of progress on the Bill of Rights and the threat to diminish existing rights is a betrayal of those values and a failure to fulfil the promises made 25 years ago.

The UK Government must take forward its responsibility to deliver a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, protect the Human Rights Act and guarantee full access to the European Convention on Human Rights.

We call on you and all of those in positions of power and leadership to commit to this goal and to a specific and timetabled plan to make it a reality.

It is time to Make Our Future Fair.

Sincerely,

1. Martha Spurrier, Director, Liberty
2. Sacha Deshmukh, Chief Executive, Amnesty International UK
3. Andrew Copson, Chief Executive, Humanists UK
4. Sonya Sceats, CEO, Freedom from Torture
5. Kamran Mallick, CEO, Disability Rights UK
6. Sanchita Hosali, CEO, The British Institute of Human Rights
7. Emma Norton, Director, Centre for Military Justice
8. Sarah Vibert, Chief Executive, The National Council for Voluntary Organisations
9. Mia Hasenson-Gross, Executive Director, René Cassin, the Jewish voice for human rights
10. Lubia Begum-Rob, Director, Prisoners' Advice Service
11. Sam Smith, CEO, C-Change Scotland
12. Naomi Smith, CEO, Best for Britain
13. Mark Kieran, CEO, Open Britain
14. Emma Hutton, CEO, JustRight Scotland
15. Isobel Ingham-Barrow, CEO, Community Policy Forum
16. Declan Owens, CEO, Ecojustice Ireland
17. Clare Moody, co-CEO, Equally Ours
18. Deborah Coles, Executive Director, INQUEST
19. Julie Bishop, Director, Law Centres Network
20. Sam Fowles, Director, Institute for Constitutional and Democratic Research
21. Annie Campbell, Director, Bail for Immigration Detainees
22. Joyce Kallevik, Director, WISH
23. Jess McQuail, Director, Just Fair
24. Tom Brake, Director, Unlock Democracy
25. Chris Jones, Director, Statewatch
26. Clare MacGillivray, Director, Making Rights Real (Scotland)
27. Louise King, Director, Children's Rights Alliance for England, part of Just for Kids Law
28. Deniz Ugur, Deputy Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition
29. Danielle Roberts, Senior Policy and Development Officer, Here NI
30. Shoaib M Khan, Principal, SMK Law Solicitors
31. Jacob Smith, UK Accountability Team Leader, Rights & Security International
32. Liz Crosbie, Project Director, Reboot GB
33. Boyd Sleator, Coordinator, Northern Ireland Humanists
34. Rosalind Stevens, Project Manager, Civil Society Alliance
35. Kyle Taylor, Founder, Fair Vote UK
36. Declan Owens, Chair, Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers
37. Maurice Mcleod, Policy Advocate, UNJUST
38. Clare Lyons, Director of Campaigns, Policy and Advocacy, Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland
39. Lee Jasper, Co-Founder, Operation Black Vote
40. Lee Jasper, Co-Founder, Blaksox

Cc: Northern Ireland party leaders and MPs