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Bill of Rights - Important Milestone

Published: 12 December, 2008

Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams MP MLA has welcomed the handing over by the Human Rights Commission of its advice to the British government on a Bill of Rights.

Mr. Adams described this "as potentially one of the most important milestones since the Good Friday Agreement ten years ago".

The Sinn Féin President said: "The Bill of Rights is a fundamental and essential element of the Good Friday Agreement and is crucial to ensuring that the process of building equality, defending human rights and ensuring that there is no return to the abuses of the past, is achieved."

Mr. Adams said:

"An effective, legislatively based and robust Bill of Rights can make a significant contribution to protecting the fundamental rights of every citizen in the north, and in particular the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society.

The history of this jurisdiction has been one in which citizens rights were trampled on and ignored. Discrimination and injustice against one section of people were integral parts of the fabric of this society since partition, and before.

Today the political institutions now have the hard task of overcoming that legacy of structured political, economic and religious discrimination. This goal is made all the more difficult because some unionists are trenchantly opposed to change and refuse to accept that discrimination was and remains a problem and actively seek to undermine those measures which are intended to end it.

The Bill of Rights must be more than a set of pie in the sky, aspirational rights that sound good on paper but mean nothing and have no impact on people lives.

The Bill of Rights that Sinn Fein is working to introduce will be an indispensable part of building equality and defending human rights.

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It will be part of the legal framework that can protect citizens against discrimination and injustice.

This will include creating an imperative on government to eliminate child poverty, provide the best possible decent health care and social system, accommodation that is safe and affordable, a decent standard of living, including adequate food, water, fuel and clothing, and safe neighbourhoods, and much more.

Sinn Féin supported the incorporation of a Bill of Rights into the Good Friday Agreement and over the years through the working groups which were created to produce the draft report, the party has championed the need for a strong, robust Bill of Rights.

The onus is now on the British government to take the Bill of Rights forward.

It must not veto nor dilute the potential that exists to put in place a comprehensive Bill of Rights for the North.

Moreover, the Irish government needs to look closely at what has been produced with a view to moving forward to create the charter envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement which would endorse "agreed measures for the protection of the fundamental rights of everyone living in the island of Ireland."

To advance all of this work Sinn Féin believes that it is essential that an all-Ireland Constitutional Court is established to serve as an independent and impartial body to which citizens, special interest groups and those charged with advancing and protecting Human Rights can refer cases for decisions.

We believe that if rights and case law are to harmonise and converge throughout the island, as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, then a Constitutional Court is a logical and appropriate model to advocate."

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