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| New post on **UK Constitutional Law Group**  |  |

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|  | [**Brice Dickson and Colin Harvey: Options on the way forward for human rights in Northern Ireland**](http://ukconstitutionallaw.org/2013/02/23/brice-dickson-and-colin-harvey-options-on-the-way-forward-for-human-rights-in-northern-ireland/)by [Constitutional Law Group](http://ukconstitutionallaw.org/author/nwbarber1974/)  |

Advice on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, submitted to the Secretary of State by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in 2008, was roundly rejected by the UK government in 2009 and there seems to be little appetite within the Northern Ireland Office for revisiting the issue in the foreseeable future. In London, the coalition government’s Commission on a UK Bill of Rights, set up in 2011, reported in 2012 but could not suggest an agreed way forward on a UK basis. In Scotland, on the other hand, bearing in mind the forthcoming referendum on independence in 2014, there is renewed interest in whether legislation should be passed by the Scottish Parliament to guarantee a range of social and economic rights. The Republic of Ireland, for its part, is currently re-examining its Constitution and has recently voted in a referendum to enhance the protection of children’s rights.As the nature and extent of the protection of rights continue to vary within these islands, we think it is worthwhile putting forward a list of options for what might next be done in this context within Northern Ireland. We are doing so under the auspices of the Human Rights Centre in the School of Law at Queen’s University Belfast. The Centre is keen to play a leading role in promoting critical thought and further discussion about this issue. We believe that Universities must play their part in encouraging such society-wide debates.Option 1, of course, would be to do nothing regarding the protection of human rights in Northern Ireland. For those who favour that approach such a position is fine. We do not ourselves want to let things rest where they are. We would prefer to keep talking and thinking about how best to enhance the protection of rights in a way that works to the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.Option 2 would be to push harder for government acceptance of the NIHRC’s advice on a Bill of Rights. There may be some legal merit in that approach but there are also likely to be very significant political difficulties in doing so. No doubt the NIHRC will itself wish to continue to promote its thinking, and there may be others who will want to support them in doing so. But we believe there are further options which are worth considering too.Option 3 – less ambitiously perhaps – would be to nudge matters forward by bringing people together to consider in a transparent and honest way the full range of means by which human rights could be better protected in Northern Ireland, including perhaps by a Bill of Rights. Doing so will raise at least four further issues which will need to be considered, namely:(1)  Which, if any, human rights are not fully enough protected in Northern Ireland at the moment?(2)  How might improved protection of those human rights be brought about?(3)  What discussions need to take place to arrive at consensus answers to questions (1) and (2)?(4)  How could those discussions be facilitated?We accept that consensus answers to questions (1) and (2) need to be reached primarily at a political level within Northern Ireland and that unionist and nationalist parties currently hold different views about the degree to which human rights need to be protected in Northern Ireland. We are firmly of the opinion, however, that reaching such consensus is possible. We believe that doing so would bring greater stability to the political arrangements in Northern Ireland, better define and protect the various identities of all the people living in Northern Ireland, and help to bring about a truly shared society based on respect for the rights of everyone. It might also help to reassure those factions who, for whatever reason, are antagonistic to the peace process as underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the St Andrews Agreement of 2006.Our aim here is to initiate an inclusive discussion with all those committed to enhanced human rights protection and promotion. We look forward to continuing the conversation across these islands.*Brice Dickson and Colin Harvey are based at the Human Rights Centre, School of Law, Queen’s University Belfast*Suggested citation: B. Dickson and C. Harvey, 'Options on the way forward for human rights in Northern Ireland' UK Const. L. Blog (23rd February 2013) (available at [http://ukconstitutionallaw.org](http://ukconstitutionallaw.org/))[**Constitutional Law Group**](http://ukconstitutionallaw.org/author/nwbarber1974/) | February 23, 2013 at 8:30 am | Tags: [Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland](http://ukconstitutionallaw.org/?tag=bill-of-rights-for-northern-ireland), |

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