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THE PRIME MINISTER

22 November 2010

Dear Members of Congress

Thank you for your letter of 12 October regarding a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Your continued interest in, and commitment to Northern Ireland is welcome and I take your concerns seriously. For my part, the UK Government is firmly committed to upholding human rights across the UK, including Northern Ireland, and I believe we can be proud of our record. We are also committed to upholding the devolved, power-sharing institutions that have won the democratic backing of the people of Northern Ireland.

You rightly say that the protection of human rights for everyone in Northern Ireland was a central part of the political agreements reached which allowed the creation of the devolved institutions. But in respect of the specific point you make about a Bill of Rights, there is insufficient consensus within Northern Ireland's political leaders to proceed. Some are in favour of a wide-ranging Bill of Rights, as recommended by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Others prefer a more limited, Northern Ireland specific approach; others still see no need to go beyond the existing UK-wide human rights laws. To illustrate the point, a recent Assembly motion calling for a wide-ranging Bill of Rights was rejected. This lack of consensus is not a new phenomenon; in the 12 years since the Belfast Agreement the previous Government was unable to resolve it.

On issues of such importance for Northern Ireland, the Government's view is that it is important to proceed by consensus. In the absence of such consensus, progress is difficult. The Government hopes that all sides will engage constructively and we stand ready to facilitate agreement.

I hope this response is helpful and thank you for your continued interest in and support for progress in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely
David Cameron

The Members of the Congress of the United States