**NOW WE CAN RESHAPE HUMAN RIGHTS BODY**

Two years ago this month, Monica McWilliams presented her Commission’s advice to Shaun Woodward on a bill of rights for Northern Ireland.

Its decade-old task under the 1998 Belfast Agreement was over.

All that had been required in the Agreement, was to seek advice from the Commission on the “scope for defining in Westminster legislation rights” to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland.

In the event, the advice contained nothing particular on, for example, parading, segregated education or the teacher exemption from fair employment law. There were instead dozens of universal social and economic demands. Nor was there anything, as required, on parity of esteem or how to avert future conflict. The Commission had simply ignored its remit, and continued to insist on doing politics through human rights.

The McWilliams Commission is finished. However its death throes will not end until the summer when all current members leave.

Aside from the two Unionists who were denied a minority report in 2008, none had had the wit to follow the remit and present a slim bill to the Secretary of State, one that could be built on.

Arrogant maximalism, the hallmark of the human rights industry here, where money is no object, had prevailed.

Even Shaun Woodward baulked at the advice he received and straight off rejected 90% of the demands because they were UK-wide in scope and application. He put the rest out for consultation.

Before the consultation results have even been published, the new Secretary of State, Owen Paterson, has delivered the coup de grace to any bill.

Speaking in the Isle of Man on 22 November, he washed his hands of the project saying that the consultation revealed deep divisions and a lack of consensus on a way forward.

Particularly, he pointed out that the Assembly would need to consent to the relevant Westminster legislation and on past history there was no prospect of agreement.

He added, somewhat forlornly, “building consensus is therefore crucial and I will ask supporters of a Bill of Rights to focus their energies on engaging with those members who are sceptical.”

Basically he was saying it was not his fault or responsibility, and if the industry wanted to blame anyone they could start with the local politicians rather than follow the usual path of applying pressure on the NIO by heading to Dublin and Washington.

Earlier Paterson had infuriated Ms McWilliams by stopping her taking any more money from Chuck Feeney’s charity, Atlantic Philanthropies. [Its Northern Ireland section is run by the former boss of CAJ, a key partner of the Commission.] In effect, the new government has said foreign money cannot be used by a statutory body for political lobbying.

Professor McWilliams then scrapped the extra year of appointment she was granted in her second term and announcing she was leaving next summer.

Coupled with the standard cut of 25% experienced by all quangos, it also resulted in the somewhat mysterious departure of the Chief Executive. He is not to be replaced which calls into question somebody’s wisdom creating the post, as well as the need to squander so many workers’ taxes on the bill of rights fiasco.

The departure of all the commissioners is a great opportunity. The first commission under Brice Dickson had no discernible unionists amongst its ten members.

The second had five nationalists to two unionists plus three others who all backed its maximalist demands. This discrimination occurred due to deceitful “transparency” in the appointment process, and despite the 1998 Northern Ireland Act requiring that “the Secretary of State shall as far as practicable secure that the Commissioners, as a group, are representative of the community in Northern Ireland.”

The onus is now on a new type of Commission to be appointed, and for appropriate people to apply, and be chosen on criteria that no longer require industry endorsement.

Parity of esteem in membership must be the watch word, neither must the liberal, Labour and secular constituency be overlooked.

In the future, as the coalition promises, there may be a bill of rights and responsibilities for the whole of the UK. If it is to have any Northern Ireland-specific rights they need to be considered by the new Commission.

It must first consult and seek ideas. Its concentration otherwise should be on localised issues some which may indeed be unpopular.

Perhaps the human rights of police officers, as Matt Baggott said last week, when he called for the human rights debate to be “re-adjusted” could be seriously considered.

“Too often” he said “what we do is seen through a one-dimensional view of human rights. Those officers deserve to be protected”.

And remember it is in England, which foots the Commission’s bill, where rights are vastly more in jeopardy than over-regulated Northern Ireland.

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