**Human rights move welcomed**

News Letter

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A UNIONIST former member of the Human Rights Commission yesterday welcomed a government move to block funding for the body from a multi-billion dollar charitable foundation.

Daphne Trimble spoke out after the chief commissioner Monica McWilliams said she would leave the rights watchdog early, partly because of the funding decision.

The Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) has to date received donations from Atlantic Philanthropies, an American foundation founded by the tycoon Charles "Chuck" Feeney.

The Northern Ireland Office said that it had blocked the latest application to receive such funding.

Professor McWilliams is now intending to leave office in August next year – along with the current group of commissioners – rather than the intended date of 2012.

An NIO spokeswoman said that the NIHRC was required to seek approval to receive external funding and that Owen Paterson, the secretary of state, had decided that the projects for which funding was most recently sought fell outside of the commission's statutory remit.

"He was also concerned to preserve the commission's independence, which could be compromised were it to start regularly receiving large amounts of money from external sources."

Lady Trimble, who is the Ulster Unionist Party's spokesperson on human rights issues, spoke out in favour of the NIO decision: "I have long taken the view that taking money from outside organisations could prejudice the independence of the commission or indeed any similar statutory body.

"I believe that the independent execution of its statutory functions is the key priority for any such body."

The NIHRC responded: "The personal views of Lady Trimble are not shared by the (commission] or indeed by the UK government.

"The (commission] has not, nor would it ever, accept funding that might risk its independence.

"Lady Trimble should know that external grants, including European Union Peace Funds and assistance from the Atlantic Philanthropies, have been accepted by many public bodies in Northern Ireland.

"The Northern Ireland Office has itself accepted this money in the past."

An NIHRC spokesman said the decision of Prof McWilliams to stand down early had "been taken to allow a new chief commissioner and future part-time commissioners to be appointed at the same time and through the same process".

"This should facilitate a smooth transition," he added.