**[Published in News Letter 15 August 2011]**

**NO MORE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONS?**

The think-tank Civitas in its recent report ‘Small corroding words,’ says the GB Equality and Human Rights Commission should be scrapped because “it contributes so little to meaningful equality.” Well it isn’t going to be, not while the Conservatives are in coalition with the LibDems, and both it and its equivalent, the NI Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), have statutory duties.

The report came a few days after the government’s Bill of Rights Commission asked the public, do we need a Bill of Rights and, if so, how should it apply to the UK as a whole; and what should it contain?

The short answer is nothing new, as the European Convention on Human Rights at Strasbourg, our real Supreme Court, will still trump any UK law; that and no new Northern Ireland rights. The long answer, if you want reform, is to get the Convention and other international instruments modernised.

It is reasonable to say the local project has been put to bed, largely due to the grandiose notions of its supporters who wanted to do politics through human rights. The new NIHRC chief, Professor Michael O’Flaherty, may however make a final attempt at progress via the Assembly, the remaining local portal.

The appointment of eight new NIHRC members in July was remarkable for what was not said by the NIO (and what the BBC did not want to say). Key details were left hidden for no good reason. The News Letter was one paper that dug deeper, telling readers the new boss was a one-time Catholic priest from Galway, and gay. Not that this would raise more than a few hackles in the new Northern Ireland.

O’Flaherty is a top-flight industry player who may regret coming to a provincial backwater where the human rights tide is going out. The appointments are otherwise noticeable for a lack of politicians.

Where the first Commission was dominated by radical nationalists and the second by the SDLP, this one has no party members. Sinn Fein which never openly had a commissioner is still denied. And there are two fewer, perhaps to save money or minimise mischief-making. Most are NIO trusties or specialists.

The narrow pool from which candidates are picked is plain as all have worked in the public sector. No outsider who might challenge statist certainties is going to get a look in. Less politically charged areas like the rights of older people in care, victims and migrants should be usefully addressed by these appointments.

The old Commission did, in a late and untypical step, commence a judicial review of Stormont’s failure to update the adoption laws, ending the prohibition on gay and unmarried couples. Not much is therefore left for the new chief except the notional all-island Charter of Rights which will run into the sand, if the south has anything to do with it, which it has.

Jeffrey Dudgeon (uninterviewed NIHRC applicant)

10 August 2011