Bulletin of the Committee on the Administration of Justice
October 2005
Just News
Human Rights in Northern Ireland

Court Dismisses NIO Challenge to Equality Law

It has become common for CAJ to complain about the amount of time we spend trying to protect the existing equality and human rights arrangements, particularly those that were contained in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. On more than one occasion we have referred to a phenomenon which we term "institutional resistance to change". Most of the time however, such "resistance" has been of the administrative variety, with public bodies, particularly government departments, failing to live up to the requirements that the legislature has placed upon them.

Recently however, we have seen the first instance of a serious judicial challenge to the equality duty arising out of the Agreement – Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. The Northern Ireland Office has now embarked on a litigation strategy which, if successful, would undermine the existing provisions for promoting and enforcing equality.

To put this in context, CAJ, along with other Equality Coalition members, pointed out to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) during the passage of the legislation to introduce Anti-Social Behaviour Orders that there was a clear requirement to carry out a full Equality Impact Assessment, given the obvious potential impact on certain Section 75 groups.

The NIO insisted, however, that an EQIA was not required, and proceeded to introduce the Anti-Social Behaviour Order legislation. CAJ and others lodged a formal complaint with the Equality Commission about the failure of the NIO to comply with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act on three grounds, namely, lack of consultation with children, lack of proper screening procedures, and failure to carry out a full EQIA of the proposals.

The Equality Commission found that there were insufficient grounds for our complaint to be upheld on the first point but upheld the complaints regarding the need for an EQIA and lack of proper procedures regarding screening. The Commission recommended that the NIO carry out a full EQIA of the ASBO policy, and that future screening exercises provide much more information to consultees regarding the reasoning behind the decision-making process.

Following this recommendation, an individual against whom an application for an ASBO had been lodged sought to have the ASBO legislation overturned, arguing that as a result of the finding by the Equality Commission the legislation introducing Anti-Social Behaviour Orders was *ultra vires*. In challenging the judicial review, the NIO could merely have argued that the finding by the Equality Commission had no bearing on the *vires* of the ASBO legislation. The NIO did make this argument, but they also went on to make another series of arguments which amounted to a direct and deliberate attack upon the core elements of Section 75 and the role and authority of the Equality Commission.

Given CAJ's long history and expertise in the equality debate, and the potential implications should the NIO challenge prove successful, we applied for and were granted leave to intervene. In doing so, the striking down of the ASBO legislation was not the primary interest of CAJ; CAJ's intervention was to ensure the protection of Section 75.

In the recent judgment, the court refused to overturn the ASBO legislation. However, during the case itself and in the judgment a number of important equality arguments made and decisions given are worth highlighting.

The key points of the NIO argument in relation to Section 75 were that the Equality Commission findings were unlawful because the findings were based on a complaint that the Commission had received from the Children's Law Centre. According to the NIO, the Children's Law Centre were not "directly affected" within the terms of the legislation.

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Incredibly, when Mr Justice Girvan asked the NIO in court, who would in their view be "directly affected" and therefore legitimately able to take a complaint, the NIO counsel response was "the PSNI or the Housing Executive". In other words, if the NIO refuses to carry out an EQIA, the only people who are in a position to complain about this are the agencies responsible for implementing the eventual legislation!

While Justice Girvan did not in his judgment accept the NIO Counsel's argument in this respect, he did rule that in this case the Children's Law Centre were not "directly affected" in that they themselves could not be subject to an ASBO. However, he made it very clear that the Commission could have used the information provided by the complaint to generate their own "paragraph 11" investigation. In other words, the same investigation could take place and lead to the same report - but just under a different part of the legislation. This is an important point, in that the door is very clearly left open for NGOs to pursue complaints about breaches of Equality Schemes by this route.

On a different point, the NIO argued that the Equality Commission findings were unlawful because the Commission had not accepted their explanation for refusing to carry out an EQIA. The NIO admitted that children and young people would be disproportionately affected by the ASBO legislation, but went on to argue that since those affected had chosen to behave in an anti-social way, they were disproportionately affected by reason of their being "self-selecting". In other words, the policy did not "pick on" children and young people, but rather by acting in a certain way, certain children and young people removed themselves from the protection afforded by Section 75. The NIO also argued that the self-selecting issue meant that Section 75 had limited application in relation to criminal or quasi-criminal matters: i.e. those affected by criminal justice policies are 'self-selecting' and no equality of opportunity issues thus arise. This is essentially the same argument that certain racial groups might be disproportionately represented in the prison population,but this is as a result of behaviour on the part of the group, and has nothing to do with any structural inequality or institutional racism.

CAJ, following what we believe to be the intention of the law, totally rejected the argument put forward by the NIO that ASBOs apply to all people equally, and particularly rejected the notion that by somehow choosing to behave in an anti-social way, those concerned have removed themselves from any protection otherwise afforded by Section 75. Significantly, Justice Girvan adopted a different position to the one he had taken in an earlier case – recognising that the present case had been argued very differently.

Of particular concern to CAJ in this case was the attempt by the NIO to "over-judicialise" the entire process. They essentially argued that any investigation by the Commission would have to be of "judicial standard", which would effectively tie the s.75 process in legal knots. By challenging so many aspects of the process, the effect of the NIO's arguments - if successful - would have been to nullify any future investigations by the Commission.

CAJ argued strongly that the Northern Ireland Act had given the Equality Commission responsibility for receiving complaints, investigating those complaints, and subsequently reporting on those complaints. In other words, the intention of the legislation was to provide the Equality Commission with discretion in carrying out their functions relating to Section 75, and that it was wholly inappropriate for the NIO to query every aspect of any investigation.

It should be noted, however, that we were not arguing that there should be no right of resort to the courts in relation to enforcement of Section 75, which is clearly one of the central principles of a "statutory duty". However, this should not be the norm, which requires that Section 75 should be pursued between public bodies, consultees, and the Equality Commission.

Crucially, Justice Girvan agreed with CAJ in relation to this point. His judgment made it clear that for a successful challenge to be made to the Equality Commission, ***"****the report would have to be shown to be irrational, a report which no body such as the Commission carrying out such functions could have made. The powers and duties of the Commission must be interpreted in a way that does not emasculate the role of the Commission".* Of course, such a clear ruling places a great onus on the Commission to live up to the highest standards

This particular challenge, including the original complaint, has taken up a significant amount of CAJ resources, in terms of people, time and money. Our view is that central government speaks favourably about its commitment to the promotion of equality in some contexts, while simultaneously undermining equality in other arenas. Furthermore, this whole process has underlined the need for strong and independent NGO representation to ensure that government abides by both the letter, and the spirit of existing legislation.

Children's Rights in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), commissioned a research team to conduct a major review of children's rights in Northern Ireland. Their report was launched on 13th October 2005. The research team identifies their objective as highlighting "the gaps, problems, promotion and implementation of children's rights in Northern Ireland". To achieve this end they have summarised the main aspects of law and policy affecting children's lives and compared the statutes and policies to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other international instruments.

The report also reviews local statutes, policy and processes affecting children's personal, family, social and community life. One of the best aspects of the report is the genuine efforts made to apply the principles of the UNCRC to the participation of children in the research (art.12).

Age-appropriate methods were used to elicit information from children including drawing, stories, poster making as well as discussion. The children's own words are used in the evidence provided, as is their art work. When the research was completed, versions of the results were written and published for children. It was important to provide a model of how child sensitive research can be done and to highlight the importance of providing feedback to young people on the results. Many young people commented in the body of the report about the frequency with which adults consult but do not listen or promise changes, which never happen.

The report suggests remedies and priorities for NICCY to action. The Commissioner should:

General

• Lobby for incorporation of UNCRC into domestic law • Establish NICCY as the central point for information on children's rights • Take the lead in promoting the right of children to be heard and have their views considered • Lobby for child sensitive complaints procedures

Family Life and Alternative Care

• Promote overarching policy focusing on positive parenting, prevention strategies and 'early years' support • Encourage and develop multidisciplinary training in children's rights for professionals • Consider how the retention and recruitment of social work staff be ensured, and review the lack of specialist staff in therapeutic work • Review the operation of the court system and consider lobbying for the provision of separate representation for children in private law cases

Health Welfare and Material Deprivation

• Lobby for changes to the rates of benefit and the minimum wage paid to 16 & 17 year olds • Lobby urgently for proper mental health services • Address the serious lack of accommodation and support for 16 and17 year olds leaving care and/or homeless • Challenge the inequalities and discrimination in health care policies and practices for children from ethnic minorities, children with disabilities and gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual children

Education

• Proper and prompt assessments should be made of children's special educational needs • Lobby for staff to be trained in the implementation of a bullying policy, which is properly monitored and recorded • Lobby for legislation to be enacted to ensure that children's views are taken into account and given due weight in school decisions affecting them • Consider a strategy to address the impact of the conflict and religious segregation in schools

Leisure, Play, Recreation, Culture and the Arts

• Identify areas where children's access to these resources is limited • Promote the inclusion of young people especially those from marginalized communities and groups • Promote the creation of safe spaces for children

Policing and Youth Justice

• Lobby for the abolition of the use of plastic bullets • Promote the development of a coordinated strategy to reduce child deaths • Advocate raising the age of criminal responsibility • Lobby for the withdrawal of Anti Social Behaviour Orders • Consider a strategy for responding to children who self harm and/or attempt suicide • encourage community based initiatives for combating drug and alcohol abuse • Help build on initiatives for children and families of ex-prisoners • Monitor restorative justice initiatives

The report is a broad spectrum mapping exercise, and a very useful starting point for the Commissioner.

Care has been taken to give children's views due weight in the report and to feedback on the research findings. It will be interesting to see in the months and years ahead the extent to which the Commissioner can ensure that something happens to justify the hopes raised.

Anne McKeown

Human Rights p

In early August, CAJ's former Director, Martin O'Brien, was asked to deliver the P. J. McGrory Lecture at the West Belfast Festival. The title of his presentation was "Progress and Setbacks in Civil Liberties – how far have we come since the signing of the Agreement?" The following article is an extensively edited version of the lecture (the full text will be available shortly).

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There have undoubtedly been great improvements flowing from the Agreement, and we would be unwise to disregard the advances made. We would be equally unwise to disregard the extent of work that still needs to be done.

A very important commitment in the Agreement related to a Bill of Rights. A Bill of Rights has greater legal status than ordinary law, and the rights it enshrines are safeguarded, irrespective of the government of the day. Moreover, the debate about what should be in a Bill of Rights allows the creation of a shared vision of justice. But we are a long way from having an agreed Bill of Rights, and a very long way from having an agreement about the shared vision of the future that the debate was meant to engender. Why is that?

There were weaknesses in the process and approach adopted by the NI Human Rights Commission, which was given primary responsibility in the Agreement for moving the debate onwards. But why did the British and Irish governments not insist on greater movement? On the local political front there has also been foot dragging. Civil society has urged the establishment of a Round Table Forum, consisting of politicians and civil society, and such a forum should be established quickly.

A second major human rights building block in the Agreement was the creation of specialist institutions responsible for the protection of human rights and equality. Human rights activists vested great hope in the creation of a NI Human Rights Commission, but it was dogged by problems from the outset – subjected to a campaign of vilification intended to send the human rights agenda to the 'margins', and banish it from the mainstream, where the Agreement had firmly placed it.

Government had a clear duty to protect the agenda and the Commission as an institution and yet it failed miserably. A new Commission expects to be up and running in September. I sincerely hope that it will have a better fate than its predecessor, but early signals do not necessarily bode well.

The Equality Commission has been dogged by less public controversy than the NIHRC, but one should not conclude that this means all is well. For example, even before the Agreement, we were aware that the fair employment legislation was making significant progress towards eradicating discrimination at the point of recruitment. But what about the long legacy of disadvantage? A recent study provided stark statistics suggesting that long term unemployment, life expectancy, long term sickness rates etc. – and the disparities that were at the heart of the civil rights struggles nearly forty years ago - are not much better now. While people who should know better might suggest that the equality problem is sorted, the evidence categorically shows that it is not. Similarly, the equality duty, secured after extensive lobbying in the Agreement and subsequent legislation, is at this very moment being challenged in the courts by the Northern Ireland Office.

In the crucial area of criminal justice, the Agreement required a "wide ranging review" to look at judicial appointments, the prosecution service, measures to improve the responsiveness and accountability of the system, and devolution options. Movement was inordinately slow and dogged by resistance, but appropriate legislation was only passed in 2004 so that many of the recommendations made in 2000 are only now coming into operation.

Looking ahead to the debate on the devolution of criminal justice, a key priority must be how to ensure that these key functions within society are devolved in a way that maximises protection for human rights rather than minimising them. Recent announcements about changes in the handling of intelligence, with a major role being given over to MI5, are extremely problematic.

With regards to policing, the police have a new name, a new uniform, a new Chief Constable and senior officers, more Catholic recruits, more female recruits, and a whole range of new policies and procedures that address human rights concerns. There is a completely independent police complaints system; a potentially powerful civic oversight body in the Policing Board; and there are a whole range of local partnerships; which are intended to hold the police to account and represent the community's concerns to the police. The police have a full time Human Rights Legal Adviser, they have to comply with a disclipinary code which makes frequent reference to the upholding of human rights, and they are routinely assessed by the Policing Board against a human rights monitoring framework.

So, can I say that policing is 'sorted'? No. CAJ has produced Commentaries on several of the new policing institutions and, while welcoming many of the changes, has noted that there is much room for improvement. CAJ and others have been critical of the closed nature of the Board's meetings and its decision making processes.

ost Agreement

Major decisions with human rights implications (such as the purchase of a new form of plastic bullet, or the introduction of CS spray, oversight of police training etc.) do not lead to significant substantive engagement with people outside of the current policing establishment.

The test of policing change on the ground is whether or not migrant workers facing racist attacks believe that the police service is effective; young people believe that the police are fair; Travellers have confidence in police accountability; or nationalists and republicans expect the police to be representative of their communities?

Yet, at least with regard to policing and criminal justice issues, a clear agenda for action is laid down in the Agreement; elsewhere, the "new beginning" is much less clear.

One obvious gap is the whole area of socio-economic rights. The Agreement addressed these concerns - with a commitment to social inclusion, community development initiatives, a regional development strategy, Targeting Social Need, tackling the unemployment differential, and addressing the needs of young people particularly at interface areas. But here it is much more difficult to point to progress. No clear vehicle exists for a continued debate, and efforts are all too easily dissipated in one-off initiatives largely dictated by action or inaction on the part of government.

Whatever happened to important initiatives such as the pioneering work carried out by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce?

But the socio-economic agenda is at least alluded to in the Agreement; the legacy of the past is only addressed indirectly. Some mechanism will have to be developed to deal with the past if its horrors are not to undermine our future. It is not appropriate that the government unilaterally, still less the police, set the agenda for the discussion. There must be wide ownership of the project, and victims must be centre-stage.

It is disturbing that even in high-profile cases – such as Finucane and Wright – the direct victims seem to be disregarded at all turns. David Wright was informed 48 hours before the opening of the inquiry into his son's murder that the judge intends to change the legislative basis of the inquiry.

The government created an Inquiries Act specifically to deal with deeply troubling cases, such as the murder of human rights lawyer and campaigner Pat Finucane. But who believes it is possible to come to the truth of Pat's murder when a government minister has the authority to seriously limit the inquiry's access to papers and witnesses, can exclude the public, and can limit the public nature of any final report? Who believes it is possible to have stable and widely accepted policing without a truly independent inquiry into the murder of Patrick Finucane?

In conclusion, the challenge is to move beyond banner headlines, work in coalitions, and recognise "the devil is in the detail". It is important that:

- **a Bill of Rights Round Table process is promptly established;**
- **there is a close monitoring and critiquing of institutions established to promote human rights and equality;**
- **close attention be paid to the promotion of equality especially by bodies such as the Strategic Investment Board;**
- **policing and criminal justice oversight bodies are monitored closely;**
- **all emergency type legislation is immediately rescinded and not replaced by similar legislation;**
- **mechanisms are established to deal with the past commanding legitimacy across the community;**
- **clear signals are given on the absolute unacceptability of the Inquiries Act**

But the real challenge is persistence. My friend's young son, Joseph McCrudden, said years ago "*Daddy, I hate human rights, because you have to work at it all the time.*" How right he was!

In the Headlines

CAJ holds newspaper clippings on more than 50 civil liberties and justice issues (from mid 1987- December 2000). Copies of these can be purchased from CAJ office.

The clippings are also available for consultation in the office.

Anyone interested in this service, should phone (028) 9096 1122.

The Hurt Inside: Imprisonment of women and girls in Northern Ireland

This is a deeply distressing, meticulously researched report which methodically constructs a most damning account of how women and girls are imprisoned in Northern Ireland in the 21st century. It could have been written in the 19th century, when punishment rather than rehabilitation defined penal policy, and prisoners patently suffering from mental illness were characterised as 'bad not mad'. Sadly, as Phil Scraton and Linda Moore make abundantly plain through interviews with inmates, prison officials and education staff, this would still appear to be the attitude of many within our contemporary penal system.

The NI Human Rights Commission, prompted by the suicide of nineteen year old Annie Kelly in Mourne House in 2002 and the highly critical report of the Prisons Inspectorate in 2003, commissioned Professor Phil Scraton to carry out research into the treatment of women prisoners in Mourne House. Reports such as this provide ample justification for the necessity of having a Human Rights Commission. Given the denial of access to Mourne House during one critical part of the research process, it is also evident that the investigatory powers of the Commission must be increased, in line with the Paris Principles, governing the standards applicable to national human rights institutions.

A total of 304 women were in prison during the period studied. 137 of the women were on remand and a third of all admissions were for fine default. The average population in any month was 25, with the majority of those sentenced receiving tariffs of less than three months. Four admissions were of children aged 14 to 17. Not only was there no gender or age-specific training for prison officers, there were very few female officers in Mourne House: 80% were men and the night guard was often all male.

This research report should be required reading for every individual employed within the prison system, as well as human rights activists, lawyers and criminology and social policy students. It is much more than an empirical study of female imprisonment, invaluable though that is. It includes consideration of UN standards, UK laws, theoretical and primary research on the punishment and imprisonment of women, NGO research, and the findings of Ann Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons. Her review provides a robust rebuttal for those who continue to maintain that Section 75 prohibits treating women differently from men. As Scraton and Moore state, 'Treating male and female prisoners with uniformity does not amount to equality' and Owers is very clear that 'women have different physical, psychological, dietary, social, vocational and health needs and they should be managed accordingly.' Her preference is that 'prisons dedicated to women only best meet their overall needs'. (pp.37-38)

When one reads the heartrending studies contained within this report it is inconceivable that anyone could argue otherwise. The litany of misery includes women imprisoned because of the lack of any appropriate mental health facilities; self-harming children locked up from 4.30 and allowed no food after that time because they were on the 'basic regime'; women so desperate they would try to drown themselves in the sink in their cells; mothers frantic to speak to their children, but dependent on the vagaries of a prison system that often did not unlock cells in the evening. The lack of contact with children was an overriding concern. Access to phones was difficult and expensive. One woman stated she spent thirty pounds a week on calls and could not understand why the prison charged such rates. Most shockingly, while Scraton and Moore were engaged in this research another suicide took place in the prison with the death of Roseanne Irvine in March 2004. The internal prison investigation into her case has not been made public and no date has yet been set for the inquest.

It is bitterly ironic that the underlying context in this report (which helps to explain some of the inertia and indifference to the needs of the most troubled and vulnerable women) is the knowledge that female prisoners in Mourne House would shortly be moved to Hydebank Wood – a young male offenders centre – to be put into cells that lack in-cell sanitation, and housed in disturbingly close proximity to young men. The report ends by considering the Equality Impact Assessment consultation process on the implications of the transfer, which the authors believe was "thin in content, short on detail and significant in omission" (p.166). No children's sector organisations were invited to make submissions. The conclusion is damning:

> *It is clear from the documentary analysis and the research interviews, that the decision to move women prisoners from Mourne House to Hydebank Wood was taken prior to the Equality Impact Assessment consultation and was based on financial considerations, reinforced by the overall operational imperatives at Maghaberry with its expanding male population.* (p.163)

The Human Rights Commission has been granted access by the Prison Service so that the situation of women prisoners in Ash House, Hydebank Wood, can be investigated. From the evidence presented in this report, the need is urgent.

Margaret Ward
Women's Resource and Development Agency
The report was highlighted in November 2004 Just News, and was formally launched by the NIHRC at an expert seminar this month see www.nihrc.org

Law ... in the public interest?

Well over 300 people turned up on 6th October for a conference in Dublin on Public Interest Law, organised by the Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC). They weren't disappointed. Keynote speakers Julian Burnside QC from Australia and Geoff Budlender from South Africa really moved the audience when they spoke about combating the ill-treatment of asylum seekers in Australia and the struggle for civil rights under the apartheid regime in South Africa. US lawyer Robert Garcia explained how Hurricane Katrina had exposed the ugly legacy of racial oppression and segregation that lay just beneath the surface of New Orleans.

Several local lawyers who have battled away for years on behalf of disadvantaged groups like Travellers said the conference had given them new heart to carry on.

The conference was called because the civil legal aid system in the Republic is failing poor and marginalised communities. It is seriously underfunded, the income limit threshold is impossibly low and the service covers hardly anything except family law. It is specifically prohibited from representing people at employment or social welfare tribunals or from taking test cases. The staff do their best but against unsurmountable odds.

FLAC, which has recently published a highly critical report on the civil legal aid scheme, had also commissioned a study of public interest law by Mel Cousins, an expert in social welfare law with a long background in the community law area. He had looked at ways of organising community legal education so people will know their rights, and strategic public interest litigation – taking test cases to challenge injustice and social exclusion.

Mel Cousins outlined his findings at the conference, defining public interest law as working with the law for the benefit of disadvantaged groups. He called for legal aid law centres to be properly funded and allowed to provide a full range of legal services.

He also called for the establishment of a Centre for Public Interest Law to involve the university law schools in community legal education, for a Legal Policy Unit to link communities and NGOs with sympathetic legal practitioners, and for a Public Interest Litigation Fund to be established to support the taking of strategic test cases. He also stressed that to be effective, public interest law must have community support and be involved in campaigning for changes in the law.

FLAC had also invited speakers involved in public interest litigation in Britain and Canada, as well as Australia, South Africa and the US to talk about their work and how this type of litigation is organised and financed in their countries. In a packed programme, Monica Mc Williams, new Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, gave her first public address in the Republic, speaking about how the planned Bill of Rights could be used by disadvantaged groups in the North.

The Republic's Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, also outlined how her office could act to promote social exclusion and assist marginalised communities, and argued strongly for her remit to be extended to cover immigration issues from which she is currently excluded.

The surprisingly large turn-out of lawyers and people from state agencies as well as NGOs suggests that the conference tapped into a deep sense of frustration and anger that so much poverty and social exclusion persists in what is now one of the wealthiest states in the world. Many clearly felt that the law could be a valuable tool for securing social change and that the human rights provisions in the Constitution and international human rights treaties could be used to try to enforce the rights of those who have been pushed aside by the Celtic Tiger.

The conference has created high hopes. There will now be an onus on FLAC and the other community law centres, the law schools, legal practitioners and NGOs to keep up the momentum and carry this project forward. Mel Cousins' report will be published shortly and FLAC is planning a series of more detailed workshops involving other independent law centres, NGOs, law teachers and practitioners, to discuss specific aspects of public interest law and litigation and how to organise it. The workshops may be followed by a further conference to assess progress in 12 months time.

The need is there. It will be up to the new public interest law movement to deliver on at least some of the expectations that have been raised.

Michael Farrell
FLAC

Michael Farrell has recently joined FLAC as its senior solicitor. He is also a member of the Republic's Human Rights Commission.

The conference was supported by Atlantic Philanthropies. The conference papers will be available shortly from the FLAC website: <http://www.flac.ie>.

Civil Liberties Diary

Sept 1 The annual report of the NI Civil Service Commissioners has raised fresh concerns about the community and gender composition of the upper levels of civil service.

NIO criminal justice minister David Hanson welcomed new statistics showing Northern Ireland crime levels to be at a seven year low.

New laws to strengthen the right of children with special educational needs to be taught in mainstream schools came into force. The Disability Order removes the education exemption from the Disability Discrimination Act, aiming to increase access to schools, colleges and universities for people with disabilities.

Sept 2 Chief Constable Hugh Orde announced that he will oppose any bid to allow convicted paramilitaries to join the police force.

Sept 7 The Review of Public Administration should offer a very real prospect of putting equality at the heart of policy making in Northern Ireland, the new equality Chief Commissioner Bob Collins says.

Ageism, affecting both the young and old, is the most widely experienced prejudice in Britain, according to a study by Dominic Abrams, professor of social psychology at the University of Kent. His study of 1,843 interviewees found that 65% said they had experienced discrimination first hand.

Sept 9 The Metropolitan Police Chief Commissioner announced the end of Special Branch. It is to be merged with MI5 and the terrorist squad and is to be recalled the Counter Terrorism Command.

Sept 10 Despite rising sales, Minister Jeff Rooker has ruled out the possibility of placing public sector job advertisements in Daily Ireland and rejected the argument that excluding the paper from the public advertising budget is discriminatory.

Sept 11 Police report that 450 plastic bullets were discharged by police and army amid serious rioting following the Whiterock parade. Seven live rounds were also fired. The Police Ombudsman will investigate the use of both.

Sept 12 The Guardian newspaper reported that senior judges are preparing to face down ministerial pressure over the proposed deportation of foreign terror suspects under the British government's controversial security measures in the wake of the July 7th bombings. This comes after British ministers have concluded a memorandum of understanding on torture with Jordan.

Sept 16 Mainstream unionist politicians withdraw support from the District Policing Partnership arrangements.

Mr Justice Gillen called for the extension of dedicated domestic violence courts to Northern Ireland to make the legal process less intimidating for victims. The scheme is currently being piloted in England and Wales.

Sept 19 DUP calls for the Parades Commission to be dissolved and replaced by an organisation operating on the premise that everyone has a right to march.

Sept 20 NIO minister Lord Rooker launched a major review of the legal profession. The review is designed to ensure that the public has access to competitive legal services while ensuring a transparent complaints procedure.

Sept 22 The decision to build a Travellers emergency halting stop next to a housing estate on the Springfield Road in Belfast has been dropped after protests.

Sept 23 The number of reported sectarian crimes has more than doubled in the last year according to police statistics. From April 1st until August 31st of this year 726 incidents were reported, up from 339 the previous six months.

Sept 29 The family of Neil McConville made fresh demands to the Police Ombudsman to publish her findings into the April 2003 killing.

Compiled by Mark Bassett from various newspapers.

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Just News
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Just News welcomes readers' news, views and comments.
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