Just News

Human rights in Northern Ireland

Autumn 2018

Belfast journalists reject attacks on media freedom

Ciarán Ó Maoláin, Secretary of the Belfast Branch of the NUJ

When members of the 700-strong Belfast and District Branch of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) held their monthly meeting on 28 September, the first item on the agenda was a minute's silence in memory of Martin O'Hagan, the branch secretary at the time of his assassination 17 years ago to the day. The botched investigation into that murder of a leading investigative journalist, which continues to be the subject of campaigning by the NUJ, CAJ and others, represents a gross failure by the state to protect the rights of freedom of expression and information.

Much of the rest of the meeting was taken up with discussion of the latest assault on media freedom: the police raids on the homes and offices of two journalists, Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey, who were arrested and questioned about their use of leaked information on another mishandled police investigation. They had worked on a documentary, *No Stone Unturned*, dealing with the 1994 massacre of six people at The Heights Bar, Loughinisland. The documentary drew on a highly critical Police Ombudsman investigation into how the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and since 2001 the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), had failed to bring the perpetrators of the massacre to justice.

The documentary, directed by Academy Award winner Alex Gibney and produced by Belfast-based Fine Point Films, named some of the suspects in the massacre and questioned why no-one had been convicted. The Police Ombudsman's office reported to the PSNI that material used in the film had been "stolen" from it, and the PSNI asked Durham Constabulary to conduct an investigation.

While a handful of officers from Durham were involved in the arrests and raids, which also affected other media companies sharing premises with Fine Point Films, it was apparent throughout that it was largely a PSNI operation.

The raids and arrests sparked fury among journalists and the NUJ vowed to stand with Birney and McCaffrey, both members, to defend the principle that the public interest in uncovering criminality, incompetent policing and, it is suspected in this instance, collusion between state agents and murder gangs took precedence over any claim of confidentiality.

Séamus Dooley, the NUJ's Irish Secretary, said: "The protection of journalistic sources of confidential information is of vital importance and journalists must be free to operate in the public interest without police interference. These journalists are entitled to claim journalistic privilege and to seek the protection of the legal system if there is any attempt to force them to reveal sources.

"We note the confiscation of computers and data held by Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey. Every step must be taken to ensure that data held on computers is not compromised and that the confidentiality of the sources are not put in jeopardy. Journalists throughout the UK and Ireland will support Trevor and Barry in any stand they take to lawfully protect their confidential sources. It is profoundly depressing to note that, yet again, priority appears to be given to tracking down the source of journalistic stories rather than solving murders in Northern Ireland."

On 7 September, when a preliminary court hearing addressed demands for the return of some of the materials seized in the raid, there was a substantial gathering of journalists and other media workers outside the High Court in Belfast. Birney and McCaffrey's arrival, in the company of Dooley and Gerry Carson, the Cathaoirleach (Chair) of the NUJ's Irish Executive Council, was greeted with sustained applause.

The Belfast Branch, in coordination with the NUJ nationally, is considering further action in support of its members.

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Expert commentary on the latest legacy proposals for Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) launched a consultation in May seeking views on a draft legacy bill for Northern Ireland, known as the Draft Northern Ireland (Stormont House Agreement) Bill. This bill contains provisions for the establishment of the four legacy institutions set forth in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement. In the last issue of Just News, we featured articles on two of these institutions: The Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR) and the Oral History Archive (OHA). These articles were written by members of the 'Model Bill Team', who have been working on the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement for the last four years. Now in this edition, we're turning our focus onto the remaining two institutions, with different members of the Model Bill Team giving their views on the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU) and the Implementation and Reconciliation Group (IRG).

Strengths and weaknesses of the Historical Investigations Unit

Daniel Holder, Deputy Director, CAJ

The Stormont House Agreement (SHA) provides for the creation of a Historical Investigations Unit (HIU), an independent body to conduct police-type investigations into 'outstanding Troubles-related deaths' and produce a family report in each case. Detailed provision is made for the HIU in the 2018 draft bill. While there are a number of clear strengths in what is currently proposed, issues nonetheless remain that must be addressed.

HIU Caseload: No 'duplication' of previous investigations
The draft Bill proposes that the HIU Director would have to ensure that the HIU does not 'duplicate' any aspect of a previous investigation, unless such duplication is considered necessary. There is a risk that this provision could be used to preclude re-investigations of cases where the previous investigation was not compliant with Article 2 (the Right to Life) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The HIU remit as specified does not include cases previously covered by the now defunct Historical Enquiries Team (HET), unless a number of criteria are met relating to new evidence and state involvement. There are also a number of unanswered technical questions regarding whether certain cases will fall within HIU's remit.

To address these issues, the provisions in the draft Bill constraining the operational independence of the HIU as regards which cases it investigates should be amended to afford it greater discretion. Additionally, explicit provision should be made for the inclusion of cases where a previous investigation was not ECHR Article 2 compliant, including where evidence was withheld from the HET or the HET review was not effective. Additional clarification should be given around which cases fall within the HIU remit, including whether or not families can still challenge HET reports with which they are dissatisfied.

Appointment of former members of the Northern Ireland security forces
The draft bill departs significantly from existing practice of independent inquiries as it includes provisions that would not just permit, but actually require a quota of former RUC officers to work within the HIU. As well as engaging the independence requirements of ECHR Article 2, the lack of objective justification for such a measure engages requirements under anti-discrimination legislation. Such a provision is neither justifiable nor ECHR compliant. It should be removed and replaced with provisions which would ensure Article 2 compliant staffing, and exclude individuals with work-related conflicts of interest.

Funding of the HIU
Despite previous commitments contained within the SHA and the ECHR duties incumbent on the UK government, the draft bill provides that the HIU would be funded from the Department of Justice's own budget without any provision for additional monies. This risks a replication of the existing problems of legacy inquests where further funding has been unlawfully blocked. This could be remedied by payment instead coming from the Consolidated Fund through the UK Treasury.

Additional limits to the HIU's powers
The draft bill specifies that only police misconduct can be investigated by the HIU, thus excluding misconduct by the military or security services. The provisions on investigating potential misconduct should be extended to include all agencies, rather than just applying to the police. Additionally, the powers of disclosure given to the HIU within the bill do not provide it with the ability to sanction public bodies for noncompliance. It would be preferable if the HIU had some means by which to compel the disclosure of records.

Conclusions
Some provisions in the draft Bill are not ECHR compliant in their current state and should be amended or - where required - entirely withdrawn. The operational independence of the HIU, including in deciding which cases to investigate, needs to be strengthened. Nonetheless, if made subject to a variety of amendments, the provisions could be workable.

The Implementation and Reconciliation Group and the themes and patterns of the conflict

Professor Kieran McEvoy, School of Law, Queen's University Belfast

In addition to the legacy mechanisms discussed elsewhere in Just News, the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) also provides for the creation of an Implementation and Reconciliation Group (IRG). Made up of 11 political appointees, the IRG is designed to put together the 'big picture' that emerges from the other mechanisms, which focus largely on individual cases. Serviced by a group of independent academics who write a report on these themes and patterns, the IRG is also meant to be the primary vehicle for reconciliation and challenging sectarianism. It is to be welcomed that the 2018 draft bill places the IRG on a statutory footing – a previous leaked version in 2015 did not. However, significant elements of the bill will need to be amended to ensure that the IRG fulfils its mandate – all relating to the credibility and independence of the IRG.

Dismissal of IRG members for failing to 'Take the Party Line'
The IRG will be chaired by a person 'of international standing' to be appointed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. Other members of the IRG will be appointed through nominations made by the leading political parties (DUP 3, SF 2 and one each from SDLP, UUP, Alliance). The UK and Irish governments will also each nominate a member. The draft bill also contains details of the process for dismissal of an IRG member. In the current draft, it states that an 'appointing authority' (e.g. political party or either government) may remove a member of the IRG from office simply by giving him or her 'written notice of removal.' In effect, this would allow political parties to remove an IRG for failing to 'hold the party line'. Elsewhere it stipulates that IRG members should work collaboratively towards reconciliation. These measures are not compatible. The grounds for removal from the IRG should explicitly rule out party political considerations.

A permanent Unionist veto regarding any 'decision' of the IRG?
The current draft bill also states that for the IRG to be quorate, two-thirds of the members must agree any decision including the Chair, the UK government nominee and the Government of Ireland nominee. This requirement of two thirds working majority – which was not contained in the SHA - in effect offers the combined voting of the Democratic Unionist Party (3 nominees) and the Ulster Unionist Party (1 nominee) a de facto veto over any decision made by the IRG. The two nationalist parties (Sinn Fein, 2 nominees, and SDLP,

Daniel Holder (left) and Kieran McEvoy (right) discussing the draft legacy bill at an event in QUB

1 nominee) could not exercise such a veto. Moreover, the numbers stipulated in the draft bill are 'frozen' at the 2014 levels, despite the shifts in the political configurations since then. A simple majority of those voting and a change to stipulate that the political representatives should be based upon the most recent Northern Ireland Assembly election results would be the obvious fix for addressing these concerns.

Protecting the independence of the academics.
Given that the IRG will be made up of political appointees, the independence, professionalism, and integrity of academics commissioned to report on the themes and patterns will be central to the credibility of the work of the IRG. The draft bill makes clear that the academic experts must be independent, free from political influence and act in way which can secure public confidence. An accompanying paper on the role of the academics makes the sensible suggestion that the IRG should take advantage of existing mechanisms which fund high quality research and provide an architecture for research governance. In addition, the draft bill needs strengthened to make clear that the academics can take account of all information they consider relevant in drafting their report.

Conclusion
The IRG has a central role to play in ensuring that the individual human rights abuses of the past are located within the context of the broader themes and patterns of the conflict. This can only be achieved by maximising the independence of this body, appointing good people to it and letting them get on with the job without political interference.

Further reading: A more detailed analysis of each of the proposed legacy institutions can be found in *Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past: Response to NIO Public Consultation*. This report was written by the Model Bill Team. Download a copy here: http://bit.ly/2N0Gzrr.

Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill 2018: UN Special Rapporteur's concerns

Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms

On 6 June 2018, the Government introduced the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill to the House of Commons. The Bill amends existing counter-terrorism legislation in significant ways. The Bill consists of multiple parts. The first part entitled "Counter-terrorism" prescribes new crimes and penalties, as well increased penalties for existing terrorist offences; the second part addresses border security; and the third part contains transitional provisions. In line with my mandate as United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, I communicated with the government highlighting a number of concerns related to the legislation. Some of that communication is extracted below. The communication is found in full at https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/SR/OL-GBR-7-2018.pdf.

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4. Terrorism poses a serious challenge to the very tenets of the rule of law, the protection of human rights and their effective implementation. This is a reality well appreciated in the United Kingdom in particular. I recognize the need for an adequate legal and policy framework that enables authorities to efficiently prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism. Consistent with the vision of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, I maintain the view that effectively combatting terrorism and ensuring respect for human rights are not competing but complementary and mutually reinforcing goals.

5. In this context, I express my concern that a series of provisions included in the draft bill fall short of the United Kingdom's obligations under international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Expression of support for proscribed organizations

6. Clause 1 amends Section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000 by criminalizing expressing "an opinion or belief that is supportive of a proscribed organization", to the extent such expression is "reckless" as to whether it will "encourage support" for the organization in question. The amendment expands the scope of Section 12 in that it removes the requirement that the expression "invite support" for the organization. The draft bill does not clarify the criteria for expression to be considered "supportive", a shortcoming that has been highlighted by a number of stakeholders contributing to the debate, including the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Furthermore, the draft bill lowers the threshold for the requisite mens rea from intentionally or knowingly calling for support for a proscribed organization to being reckless as to the effects of the expression on those to whom it is directed, without setting clear criteria detailing what "encouraging support" implies and how such result is assessed or measured.

7. I would like to underscore that the right to freedom of expression extends not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb. While freedom of expression is a qualified right, all restrictions to the right must be interpreted narrowly. As clarified by the European Court of Human Rights, the necessity of any restrictions to the right to freedom of expression must be 'convincingly established' pursuant to a 'pressing social need'. Relevant measures must further be proportionate to the protected interest.

8. I therefore urge that the provision be brought in compliance with the United Kingdom's obligations under Articles 19 and 20 ICCPR as well as Article 10 ECHR.

11. I note that Clause 1, as it currently stands, may not comply with the requirement of foreseeability as established under international human rights law. I further stress in this respect that lowering the required mens rea to recklessness is particularly problematic in case of an offense criminalizing expression as it further reduces the foreseeability element for all stakeholders concerned by the provision.

Publication of images

13. Clause 2 amends Section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000 to criminalize "the publication by a person of an image (whether still or moving image) of an item of clothing or an article (such as a flag) in such a way or in such circumstances as to arouse reasonable suspicion that the person is a member or supporter of a proscribed organization". The clause covers any footage, including footage taken in private as long it is "published". It is not required that the act is done in support of a proscribed organization nor that it call for or encourage such support. The size of the audience reached is also immaterial as is the conduct posing any concrete risk of harm. The government argues the amendment is necessary to address images or videos posted online against the backdrop of an ISIS flag. The Joint Committee on Human Rights, however, pointed out that wearing clothing or displaying an article in a public place where this is likely to arouse suspicion of membership of a proscribed group was already prohibited, together with encouraging terrorism and dissemination of terrorism publications, criminal offences under Sections 1 and 2 of the Terrorism Act of 2006

14. I am concerned that Clause 2 runs the risk of criminalizing a broad range of legitimate behaviour, including reporting by journalists, civil society organizations or human rights activists, as well as academic and other research activity. I consider that the provision falls short of the requirements of the principle of legality under Article 15 ICCPR and Article 7 ECHR.

Border security

25. Clause 20 and Schedule 3 of the bill provide for stop and search and detention powers at ports and borders to determine whether an individual is or has been involved in "hostile activity for, on behalf of, or otherwise in the interests of, a State other than the United Kingdom". The bill provides for a broad definition of "hostile acts" as any act that threatens national security, the economic well-being of the United Kingdom, or is an act of serious crime. It does not provide for a definition of "national security" or "economic wellbeing" nor does it delineate the scope of acts that may be deemed as threats to these interests. While the government contends that the terms "take their ordinary meaning", the lack of proper guidance raises issues regarding the level of foreseeability of the law, both for implementing authorities and individuals impacted by their implementation. The powers can be exercised without any cause or suspicion as to the respective person's involvement in hostile activity, thus further broadening the discretion conferred upon national authorities.

26. Any person subject to this power must provide any information or document requested by the officer under pain of committing an offense - the penalty for which can be imprisonment and/or a fine - and may have their personal belongings copied and retained, including belongings containing privileged information.

27. The exercise of these powers constitutes an interference with a series of rights, including the right to privacy, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and the right to liberty and security of person (as well as other rights). The discretion conferred upon authorities is very broadly defined with insufficient safeguards against abusive implementation and with limited oversight. In this respect, I would like to warn, in particular, of the risk of such powers being applied in a discriminatory fashion on grounds including race, colour, language, religion, or national origin.

Conclusion

28. I stress the importance of bringing the draft bill in line with the United Kingdom's obligations under international human law. I recommend that the Public Bill Committee review the necessity of the offenses criminalized in Clauses 1-3 for efficiently addressing the terrorist threat. I further reiterate that any criminal offense must be precisely and narrowly defined, and the discretion conferred upon implementing authorities must be limited. In addition, I underscore the need to ensure that such provisions do not unduly interfere with human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, to impart information and ideas, and the right to hold opinions without interference. Moreover, counter-terrorism powers must also be narrowly conceived and in line with the principles of necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination. I highlight that the legal framework must incorporate adequate and sufficient safeguards, including independent oversight. I therefore recommend that the draft bill be amended with due consideration of the concerns outlined above.

Sign of the times? How one council's ban on Irish language street signage ended badly in court

At an early stage of the peace process, the UK government agreed to revoke the blanket ban on bilingual streets signs legislated for by the old Stormont Parliament. This 1949 Act, (targeting the Irish language) legally bound council's to put up street signs in 'English only'. It was consequently repealed by the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The 1995 Order empowers councils to put up a second street sign in Irish, or any other language, alongside the English original. The 1995 Order maintained an offence of putting up an unauthorised sign, and is also quite limited given that it both predates and makes no reference in regard to duties to encourage and promote such bilingual signage under Council of Europe treaties. This includes the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages, ratified by the UK further to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Limitations aside, the 1995 Order does not allow an outright ban on bilingual signage, not least as in making decisions on such signage, locals council are required to 'have regard' to the views of residents of the street in question. The Council of Europe treaties, whilst usually not directly enforceable in the local courts, are also, nevertheless, legally binding on public authorities, including councils. Should they not comply, the Department for Communities (DfC) has a power of direction to overturn actions that are not compatible with such international obligations.

In this context (and if we assume public authorities will operate within the law) it therefore may seem somewhat surprising that Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council on the 26 February 2018, voted by a majority to reintroduce a blanket ban on bilingual street signage. The decision for an 'English-only' policy was taken at a council meeting on the back of the council receiving an application from residents seeking to add Irish to signs on five streets. Among the comments made in the council chamber and to the media by those councillors opposed to bilingual signage included the suggestion that the requested Irish signs would make street signage "looking worse than a dog's dinner", or were "an attempt to ghettoise the area". One councillor, on social media, presumably unfamiliar with bilingual signs in Wales and Scotland, reasoned that he opposed the proposed signs as "we live in the United Kingdom… one of the most culturally diverse nations on the planet…[and] the language of the UK is English".

CAJ wrote to the council shortly after this to point out the policy was unlawful in both domestic and international law terms, and sought its reconsideration. Similar concerns were raised by local Irish speakers and Conradh na Gaeilge, a cultural organisation which promotes the Irish language. The council's response was to maintain that its decision on the matter was 'lawful and proportionate'.

The adoption of the policy in such a summary manner at the meeting also entirely bypassed the binding duties in the council's own Equality Scheme, including those on consultation and equality screening. Such duties are there to safeguard against discriminatory policies and any sectarianism in decision making. On foot of the 'breach of Equality Scheme' complaints to the council from affected persons, the council did belatedly complete an equality screening template in May. However, this was little more than a box ticking exercise, which did not (as required) examine equality impacts across the protected grounds, but creatively merged all the boxes in the template into one and curiously concluded there was no impact on equality as "all categories are affected equally". Further complaints for non-compliance with the equality scheme have followed. It also emerged that the council had not fully followed through the processes under its Equality Scheme on a range of other policies in recent years.

CAJ and Irish language campaigners speak outside court

Over the summer, a judicial review was pursued by a local Irish speaking resident on the grounds identified in the CAJ correspondence. Despite having hitherto maintained the policy was 'lawful', a U-turn by the council was confirmed at the High Court in Belfast on 7 September 2018. The council stated in writing that it had rescinded the policy, and agreed to pay the applicant's costs. Solicitor Niall Murphy of KRW Law, representing the applicant, said this vindicated his client's position that the policy was unlawful. Speaking to the waiting media outside the courtroom, he added that other councils should take note that a blanket ban on bilingual signage was not permissible.

This is, however, unlikely to be the end of the matter. There was no statement of regret from the council, who instead maintained that the 'English-only' policy on street signage was not a ban on the Irish language. Whilst it would be hoped the new policy the council are now to develop complies with human rights standards, current domestic legislation - though not allowing a blanket ban - is not as robust as it should be. There is a risk that the council will seek to adopt a procedure that makes it very difficult in practice to get bilingual signs erected. This whole sorry episode is a sign of the need for further domestic law safeguards, including through legislating for the Irish Language Act, which was committed to under the St Andrews Agreement over a decade ago. More broadly, it also shows the importance of developing a culture of compliance with human rights standards across local government.

Researchers find that Brexit will weaken human rights protections in Northern Ireland

The BrexitLawNI team at the launch of the reports

Brexit will have detrimental consequences for the peace process in Northern Ireland and will weaken human rights and equality protections, according to six interlinked reports unveiled by BrexitLawNI in Queen's University Belfast in September.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), BrexitLawNI is an ongoing research partnership between human rights experts from CAJ and researchers from the Schools of Law at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.

Across a period of 18 months, the BrexitLawNI team conducted in-depth interviews, consultations and town hall meetings to explore the possible impact of Brexit on human rights and the peace process. They met with politicians and officials in Belfast, London, Dublin and Brussels, as well as with business representatives, trade unions and community activists.

Each report produced by the BrexitLawNI team draws upon their extensive research and focuses on a different theme related to Brexit. The reports respectively explore the potential impact of Brexit on socio-economic rights, North-South relations, the Irish border, human rights and equality protections, racism and xenophobia, and the peace process.

Across the research, several areas of particular concern are demonstrated. One is the impact Brexit may have upon North-South cooperation, including the potential for it to divide British and Irish citizens and increase racist immigration enforcement along the border.

From the research, it also emerges that there is a real danger that Brexit could re-ignite conflict here: as the leaving process lurches ever nearer to a "hard" or "no-deal" Brexit, nationalists may become more and more disillusioned at the disregarding of the will of the majority here, while unionists may coalesce in defence of Brexit and the border.

Other problems flagged up in the reports include the negative impact the UK leaving the EU could have upon equality protections and the international oversight of human rights in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

Many of the issues explored in the research have so far not featured prominently in negotiations related to Brexit. At what is a profound constitutional moment for Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland, the BrexitLawNI team believe a bespoke solution is needed for Northern Ireland to minimise the negative impact of Brexit and provide a positive way forward.

In each report, the team have included a series of recommendations aimed at reducing the overall detrimental impact of Brexit upon Northern Ireland. All six reports are available for download now from the BrexitLawNI website. Please visit: www.brexitlawni.org.

BrexitLawNI

Key recommendations from the research

1. There is a clear need for a protocol that fully respects the commitments given in the EU-UK Joint Report including that there be 'no diminution' in relation to human rights and equality as a result of Brexit.

2. Urgent detail is required on the undertaking that the people of NI who claim Irish citizenship will be entitled to EU citizenship rights.

3. The UK and Ireland should initiate a process to codify and legally underpin the Common Travel Area (CTA) both in relation to free movement and reciprocal associated rights.

4. EU freedom of movement should be retained in NI. It has so far not proven possible to envisage any other solution that is not going to create multiple new differentials in entitlements - making racial profiling and broader discrimination even more widespread.

5. Official initiatives to monitor and tackle paramilitarism should include specific work on tackling racist (including sectarian) expression, intimidation and violence.

6. There is a need to legislate for a Bill of Rights for NI to enshrine socio-economic rights and help build a rights-based society that will ensure sustainable peace.

7. NI should remain within the single market and customs union and there should be no new barriers to trade either North-South or East-West.

Civil Liberties Diary - July to September 2018

Compiled by Sinead Burns from various newspapers

16 July: A 'UK Freedom Rally' was held in Belfast City Centre as more than 150 people from various far-right groups faced off against 300 counter-protesters. The counter-protest included speeches from representatives of People Before Profit. The Worker's Party and Alliance. The rally and counter-protest was relatively peaceful, with only a few far-right protesters being escorted away by police for minor incidents of disorder.

25 July: The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has stressed that the whole of Ireland should enjoy the same human rights protections after Brexit in its latest annual report. The Commission has warned that the potential loss of the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights of the European Union and the proposed withdrawal from the Court of Justice in Luxembourg would be damaging to the peace process and may result in the diminution of rights.

31 July: A report by the Belfast-based human rights organisation Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) has raised concerns about the living conditions and racism suffered by Syrian refugees in Belfast. PPR has highlighted problems with dampness and rodent infestations in properties, as well as incidences of racist abuse and attacks. Under the United Nations Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, over 1000 Syrian refugees have settled in Northern Ireland.

1 August: Barnardo's has become the first children's charity in Northern Ireland to publicly support the recognition of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. The announcement coincided with Belfast Pride's Coming Out for Change campaign and occurred days before the annual Pride parade in the city.

6 August : The number of rape offences in Northern Ireland has increased by nearly 10% over the last year, police have said. Nexus, the organisation that provides vital counselling to victims has said its workload has increased by 50%. However, Nexus chief executive officer, Cara Cash has said that the organisation firmly believes that there is still under-reporting of sexual crimes. Cash also stated the need for specialist services to support victims and added that appropriate investment was needed to ensure the continuation of support services.

9 August: The Irish Health Minister, Simon Harris, has stated that he intends to ensure cross-border access to abortion for women from Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland. Harris stated that he would include provision for women from Northern Ireland within the legislation drafted following the referendum result in May. The new legislation is due to be introduced in the Republic of Ireland in the autumn.

27 August: Tony Lloyd, the Shadow Secretary of State for NI, called on the government to take action and change the "draconian" abortion law in Northern Ireland and allow women to access termination drugs in the same way as in Britain. The call comes after it was announced that new rules in England would allow women to take the second 'abortion pill' at home.

12 September: International business leaders have called for same-sex marriage to be introduced to Northern Ireland. Business leaders from several international companies that operate in Northern Ireland have called for change in order to ensure an inclusive workforce and retain and attract the best talent from across the globe.

13 September: The Court of Appeal has been told that same-sex couples in Northern Ireland are subject to unlawful discrimination by being denied the opportunity to marry. Senior judges were told that the failure to introduce rights available to those living in the rest of the UK cannot be justified. The comments follow the renewal of a legal case that challenges the ban on same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

17 September: The legalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland is scheduled to be voted on by MP's in Westminster for the first time in October. The Labour MP for Kingston upon Hull North is to introduce a 10-minute rule bill calling for the decriminalisation of abortion. The backbench MP will argue for a new bill in a speech lasting up to 10 minutes.

21 September: An enquiry has been launched that will examine whether government has a responsibility to reform abortion law in Northern Ireland. The Women and Equalities Committee will also assess whether the issue is a devolved matter. The government has been reluctant to step in to legislate for reform in the wake of a Supreme Court ruling that found the current legal framework incompatible with human rights laws.

Just News

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Correspondence should be addressed to the Editor, **Fionnuala Ní Aoláin**, and sent to CAJ Ltd, 1st Floor, Community House, Citylink Business Park, 6A Albert Street, BT12 4HQ

Phone: (028) 9031 6000

Text Phone: 077 0348 6949

Email: info@caj.org.uk

Website: www.caj.org.uk

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