



A hymn to human rights

*Brian Gormally, outgoing
Director, CAJ*

It is a singular honour to have a special edition of Just News produced to mark my retirement as Director of CAJ. I am very grateful to all my colleagues and comrades and I look forward to reading what some of them will write in this edition. It is only right that I particularly pay tribute to Fionnuala Ni Aolain, who for many years has taken time out from her very busy life as an international human rights activist to edit Just News. It has been a privilege to have been involved with remarkable people, a remarkable journal and a remarkable organisation. However, in this piece I don't want to talk about my personal experiences with CAJ over the past decade and a bit, but rather about the set of ideas that it exists to promote. I cannot do justice to the multiplicity of ways in which the principles and practice of human rights advance human dignity and wellbeing – indeed one of the things I have realised is that the supply of new forms of engagement and application of human rights appears inexhaustible. Yet I want to give a flavour of the transformative potential of adopting a human rights approach.

As we all know, human rights are a series of rights and freedoms that all human beings are entitled to merely by the fact of being human. They promote the dignity and equality of all humanity. The concept goes back centuries, but it was after the Second World War that they were codified in a series of international treaties at global and regional level, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations) and the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe). These treaties protect the “inherent dignity and ... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (as stated in Universal Declaration of Human Rights Preamble).

It is sovereign states that sign up to these treaties and agree to be bound by their provisions. Human rights work therefore relies on the standards of international human rights law to hold the state to account for abuses, but also to strengthen the protection and promotion of rights through the rule of law. In this way, human rights and the rule of law set the framework for relations between people and people as well as between people and the state. We focus on the state to prevent its abuses; to advocate for an improved criminal justice system that is more effective because it is

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human rights compliant; and to reduce the harm caused by social, economic, cultural, and environmental injustice through the passing of human rights legislation. This approach destroys the libel that human rights activists care only about state crimes and ignore the depredations of criminals.

The guiding principles that underlay human rights are an appropriate framework for the collective search for human progress and a better life. It is important to reflect on their significance and implications for our goals and methods of achieving them.

Human rights demand the construction and adherence to the rule of law. Not the rule of law that is designed to keep people in subjection and to provide a cover for exploitation and repression, but the necessary ordering of society with principles of human dignity and equality written in. The actual treaties, laws, statements and codifications produced over the years at an international level represent not necessarily the highest imaginable aspirations for humanity, but the highest aspirations that are practically and concretely achievable at this stage of history – they are the most appropriate goal and moral framework for an imperfect world.

The principle of universality means that human rights are the enemy of racism, xenophobia, and all forms of prejudice and discrimination. Human rights are not relativist or contingent but apply to all cultures and all circumstances. Human rights are not comparative – the fact that worse violations occur elsewhere does not excuse any level of violation. Human rights begin at home; we dare not criticise the violations of others, however bad, without condemning the violations that take place on our own patch.

Human rights are interdependent, meaning that civil and political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental rights have the same status and make an equal contribution to human dignity and progress. Solidarity between the proponents of different causes and facets of universal and interdependent human rights is inherent in the approach.

Aspects of the process of human rights activism become part of the substantive goal we are working towards. Empowerment starts with a recognition that people in a society have rights — entitlements that give rise to legal obligations on the part of others. It also involves engaging with those suffering particular denials of rights and taking on board the lessons of their lived experience. Participation in all aspects of a society is itself a human right which cannot be achieved as a goal if it is not recognised as part of the process. Accountability is a crucial characteristic of a rights-based society; rights imply

duties, and duties demand accountability. It also needs to be built into the practice of human rights activism.

Equality runs like a golden thread throughout human rights theory and practice. It is inherent in the concepts of human dignity, the rule of law, universality, and interdependence. It demands a focus on fighting discrimination of all kinds and is the essential basis for conflict resolution and reconciliation. It is one reason why the struggle for peace – in particular conflict zones and at the world level – and the fight for human rights are fundamentally interconnected.

The Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “...it is essential, if man [sic] is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law”.

So, the basic human rights text says that tyranny and oppression – a lack of human rights – leads to insurrectionary violence. The implication is that a durable peace is not just the absence of violence, but a state based on human rights protected by the rule of law. Many things can lead to violence, but most rank and file combatants in violent political conflicts are motivated by a sense of injustice or unfairness. That sense relates directly to the idea of rights denied, however distorted it is by sectional interests, racism, or nationalism. Human rights protected and fulfilled can be seen as the opposite status to political or ethnic division and violence. When it comes to wars waged by states, the achievement of an international order based on human rights and a commitment to the rule of law at the international level is the only feasible method of prevention.

Human rights standards represent both a goal of peacebuilding but also a set of principles that should inform the process. As a goal, human rights are not a substitute for a political aim and detailed programme but are a necessary check on that programme’s morality and humanity as well as lawfulness. A human rights approach will not create a perfect society but will put limits on its imperfections.

In conclusion, then, our ‘hymn to human rights’ is not praise for a utopian ideal, but a celebration of a set of certainly lofty aspirations that are practically attainable in the real world. That combination of adamant principle with pragmatic realism is perfectly expressed in CAJ’s practice. I know in the future that we will never compromise on principle, but will continue to work for practical solutions to practical problems. I have been privileged to engage in that quality of human rights activism.

Thoughts on Brian's departure from the Chair of CAJ's Executive Board

Dr Anna Bryson, Senior Lecturer, School of Law, QUB

I first got to know Brian Gormally when I was elected to the CAJ Executive Board in 2014. What immediately struck me was the high esteem in which he was held both by CAJ staff and the wider human rights sector. I cannot recall a single negative conversation with or about him in the course of the past decade. In a very understated way he exudes authority and has always managed to bring people with him – or at least all those who share his passion for defending human rights.

In the aftermath of the 2014 Stormont House Agreement, CAJ entered into a partnership with academics to form what became known as the 'Model Bill Team'. It comprised three CAJ staff members (Brian, Daniel Holder, and Gemma McKeown), alongside Professor Kieran McEvoy (QUB Law), Professor Louise Mallinder (then TJI, Ulster University, now QUB Law), and myself. Our primary task was to develop 'model' (i.e. human rights compliant and workable) legislation for the legacy mechanisms agreed at Stormont House. Completion of the 'model bill' then provided the foundation for a substantial body of ongoing policy-focused research and advocacy work that has directly impacted political negotiations and policy debate. You can read more about the work of the Model Bill Team on the CAJ website: www.caj.org.uk/our-work/solidarity/model-bill.

In addition to dozens of bilateral meetings, the Model Bill Team organised more than twenty public seminars and six major conferences. The reports that emerged from this programme of work exemplify the very best of CAJ's wide-ranging contribution to society. The hallmarks of legal rigour, political nous, and adherence to international best practice are precisely what the public has come to expect of CAJ's contribution to human rights debates under Brian's watch.

Brian has played a crucial role in ensuring that CAJ is now a highly respected human rights NGO, both nationally and internationally. With an uncanny ability to connect grassroots credibility and legal expertise to a clear strategic vision, he has always had a clear sense of where, when, and how CAJ can most effectively intervene to address human rights challenges.

The work of the organisation has expanded significantly in recent years to include the causes of: democratic



Brian (grey coat) and Anna (beige jacket) at the launch of the 'model bill' in the House of Lords

progressive governance; accountability in policing; criminal justice and public administration; combatting prejudice in society; achieving a fair and humane immigration system; improving equality; developing international solidarity; and advancing a just resolution to the legacy of conflict.

With a relatively modest budget and a staff complement of just seven, the volume of work that Brian and his team typically completed from one month to the next was staggeringly impressive. Since my election as chair of the Executive Board in 2020 I have been able to witness at close hand how Brian manages staff, budgets, projects and strategic priorities. A recurring theme in his modus operandi was an unwavering commitment to human rights, cut through with common sense, imagination and quiet authority.

Brian was a steadying and calm presence throughout the COVID 19 pandemic. When he wasn't troubleshooting the practical challenges it presented for CAJ, he was busy documenting and strategising about the new human rights challenges emerging as a result of the pandemic.

He is succeeded as Director by his close colleague and highly impressive deputy, Daniel Holder. It has been an absolute privilege to work with Brian over the course of the past decade. He will be sorely missed by all at CAJ, including my fellow members of the Executive Board.

As the curtains draw on 12 years at the helm of CAJ, no-one can deny that Brian Gormally has fought the good fight and kept the human rights faith. Here's hoping he can now enjoy a more relaxed pace of life with Avila, his children and grandchildren – and that he will tolerate the odd interruption from close colleagues and friends!

A fond farewell from the Editor of Just News

Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights

Brian's tenure at CAJ is marked by steady leadership, unstinting determination, and a clear vision of maintaining the pre-eminence and reliability of the organization as the central hub for all things human rights in Northern Ireland. His tenure as Director overlapped with a number of significant challenges and we weathered them well because he kept an eye on the things that matter most – the people who work for CAJ; the communities we serve and are in relationship with; our neutrality and independence; and ensuring that we remained financially viable so that we could do the work we have been doing so well since we started.

His time of Director overlapped with a general drop in funding to the NGO sector in Northern Ireland, and required deep skill to ensure that we could diversify our funding to ensure the breadth and substance of our multiple work streams.

Many human rights organisations do not manage post peace-agreement life well, and it has generally been observed that in many post-conflict sites human rights organisation struggle profoundly at the time when they continue to be needed most. Brian's leadership was essential to maintaining CAJ's relevance and capacity so that we have continued to accompany not just the struggle for rights that marked the 'Troubles', but that we were ready to take on new challenges and did so competently.

One of the things that has also defined Brian's leadership at CAJ is the ways in which the organisation has been a reliable partner and enabler for other civil society organisations. CAJ has always created and opened space for others, and Brian's own humble approach to the work we do, and who we do it for, has meant that CAJ is a protector of space for all, not just a taker of space for itself. This is most keenly seen in the work of the Equality Coalition and the role CAJ and Brian as Director has played in building alliances, being a good ally, and a reliable partner.

Brian came to CAJ with a proven track record of defending and promoting the hardest human rights

issues in Northern Ireland. Previously, as Deputy Director of the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), he was known as a fierce advocate for a community whose



rights were under-protected and often disregarded. I first met Brian through NIACRO as a young law student and was always amazed not just by the quiet and unassuming way he went about his work, but the effectiveness of his advocacy skills by bringing an open heart, a willingness to talk, and a lightness of spirit to every conversation. For those who have known and worked with Brian a long time, they know that he is also good fun to be with, a person of substance who brings cheer to the work, no matter how difficult it is.

Brian has also been a 'hand-on' and intensely practical leader at CAJ. He has led by example, never shirking the hard work or the hard issues, able to pick up big and small tasks equally and showing that the best kind of leadership is through immersion in the work itself, comradery with those you do it with, and a direction of substance – ensuring that all in our society are treated with dignity and equality.

As Editor of Just News, I will miss our many meetings as we pull together stories big and small, that capture the current state of human rights in Northern Ireland and the world beyond. But it is precisely because Brian has built such an able team at CAJ, evidenced by his deep partnership with Daniel Holder when Deputy Director, that we know we are all in safe hands and traveling on in the direction of rights protection when he retires.

That said, the CAJ family is a pernicious one, a little like the refrain from Hotel California – one can check out but never leave. We know that Brian will remain in the orbit of human rights in Northern Ireland long after his retirement, and we wish him and his family well for the years ahead.

Brian's contribution to human rights and the peace process in Northern Ireland

Professor Kieran McEvoy, School of Law, QUB

My brief from the Just News team has been to reflect on Brian's broader contribution to the struggles for human rights, social justice, and peace in the pre CAJ era. I have just spent two days at the Queen's University event marking the 25 year anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which saw many people rightly honoured for their contribution to establishing peace here. It occurred to me, as I sat in that audience, that Brian too is one of the unsung heroes of the peace process.

By way of background, Brian was my boss at NIACRO in my first grown up job as their Information and Research Officer, and he has been my good friend and mentor for over thirty years. Brian took a chance by appointing me to that position in 1990 as I had just finished my undergraduate degree. He managed not to laugh out loud as I made an earnest pitch at interview that I met the essential criteria regarding middle management experience as I had previously worked as 'head bus boy' in a Wildwood New Jersey restaurant – the primary responsibilities of which involved clearing and resetting the tables. NIACRO obviously had a poor field as I got the job and that lucky break for me meant that I had a ring side seat to Brian's contribution over the decades to come.

As NIACRO's Deputy Director, Brian was a steadfast and vocal proponent arguing that the human rights of prisoners, their families, and, indeed, those with criminal convictions needed to be protected. Articulating such a position, particularly during a violent political conflict, was not always popular. Bearing in mind that NIACRO was in receipt of significant amounts of state funding, Brian and his senior colleagues were able to take positions that were highly critical of sensitive aspects of government policy on criminal justice and prisons. He did that by always sticking rigorously to the relevant human rights standards, in addition to taking a pragmatic approach to effective criminal justice management.

In 1994, as it became clear that ceasefires were likely to emerge, Brian and I put together a project examining how the issue of prisoner release had been addressed in other societies. Our view was that, although inevitably controversial, there was no way that the political parties linked to armed groups could sign up to a peace agreement without early releases being part of the deal.



With the support of NIACRO's senior team and the then Chair (the legendary Reverend Harold Good), Brian and I conducted research in South Africa, Israel/Palestine, Spain, and Italy looking at how prisoner releases had been done there. We wrote up a report, held a major conference at Queen's, and then spent the next several years briefing politicians, the two governments, civil society, and anyone else who would listen. At the time, the former Irish Foreign Minister, Dick Spring, described that piece of work as 'hugely influential' in the shaping of the ultimate mechanisms in the Good Friday Agreement, which saw qualifying prisoners released within two years of the Agreement.

Brian was not done there in terms of influencing the peace process. In 1996/1997, he led a team of us with NIACRO links (Mike Ritchie, Jim Auld, and myself) through a process of engagement with the republican movement, attempting to encourage the IRA to stop punishment violence. Again, this was incredibly challenging and sensitive work which took several years. It ultimately led to the creation of Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) – an organisation designed to ensure that problems in the community should be resolved in a lawful and human rights compliant fashion based on the principles of restorative justice. Brian wrote CRJI's first constitution. CRJI became not only the vehicle for the IRA to (in their terms) 'responsibly disengage' from punishment violence but also became a key bridge in building grassroots relations between historically estranged republican communities and the PSNI.

If you put these experiences and all the others in which he has been involved together with all Brian has done at CAJ – what a contribution he has made! Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Some of them have strong North of England accents, bandido moustaches, the capacity to get a tan by opening the fridge, and an annoyingly resolute hair line. It also helps if you are blessed with a razor sharp intellect, dogged integrity, and an implacable commitment to human rights. He really is a class act.

Goodbye and good luck from the CAJ team

In preparation for this issue, each of the six remaining CAJ team members were asked to share their thoughts, in writing, on Brian's retirement. Some of us have worked with Brian for many years, others for only a few months, but it is very clear from reading these snippets that he will be missed and remembered fondly by all of us.



Daniel Holder, former Deputy Director (now Director): There are many highlights from my time working with Brian over the last 12 years as Deputy Director (we both started at the same time), but what stands out is the constant calm presence he provides among the dynamic mayhem of human rights work in our times. Brian is also great in a crisis, able to grasp and provide perspective and swiftly move on to problem solving.



There are of course also many memorable moments over 12 years, including media performances on Talkback and other platforms. Brian taking on Edwina Currie stands out, in particular, as does Brian delivering some fearless common sense at a Westminster Committee on the application of the 'military covenant' in NI.

As time moved on who could forget our day in Fermanagh donning 'human rights observer' vests for the G8 summit only to find its peripheral location (in Europe!) had successfully ensured police and journalists outnumbered protestors. The one regret I have was missing Brian's 'unmissable' stand-up comedy routine at the Human Rights Festival.

Back to more mainstream work, developing new CAJ policy lines with Brian was seamless and easy as we almost never disagreed on anything meaningful – this meant all our energies went into the end products. One thing I consider of particular note is that it was Brian who made the early call on Brexit for CAJ, setting out our vision and strategy on this subject well before the idea that the UK's exit from the EU would damage rights and the peace process had become common currency.

A lot of the work of Brian did as Director remained, of course, unseen. All of his corporate work of keeping an organisation running and sustained throughout his time has left CAJ in good shape.

Gemma McKeown, Solicitor: Brian has calmly and fearlessly led CAJ through many challenging times when the fight to protect human rights has never been more widely tested. In particular, he has dedicated himself to ensuring that key commitments from our peace settlement are implemented.

His leadership and support have proved fundamental to the effective delivery of CAJ's key policy work and strategic litigation. The successful judicial review challenge that CAJ took in respect of the NI Executive's failure to adopt an anti-poverty strategy in accordance with commitments of the St Andrews Agreement is just one such example.



Brian has also worked consistently over the years both within CAJ and in collaboration with QUB academics as part of the 'Model Bill Team' to ensure that the investigative duties of the legacy of the past are complied with. Indeed, his years of expertise have been key to working to resolve this difficult issue.

With a combination of wise counsel and witty humour Brian has steered the CAJ ship with great vision. He has been a great friend to us all at CAJ and to those working for human rights. He will be deeply missed but I greatly hope that he will get to fully enjoy this richly deserved next chapter in his life.

Robyn Scott, Communications and Equality Coalition Coordinator: In the years to come, I will fondly remember Brian not just as a devoted advocate for human rights, but also as a decent and kind human being – two character traits that are woefully underappreciated nowadays, particularly in the workplace. I worked with Brian for four and a half years and throughout that time he was a steadying, calming presence, no matter how demanding external and internal pressures on CAJ became. However, when highlighting human rights abuses, he could be (rightfully) ferocious! I will always admire how eloquent and composed Brian remained when standing up to those in positions of power and influence (who did not necessarily repay him with the same courtesy). A few months after I started my role with CAJ, we had our annual Christmas meal. At the end of the night, it was just me, Brian, and our Eirene volunteer, Lars, left at the bar, still talking shop and setting the world to rights (as you do). I will always remember that evening because it was when I realised that I was where I was meant to be and would be staying with CAJ for a long time.



Úna Boyd, Immigration

Solicitor: Brian has been the Director at CAJ since I started working for the organisation in 2019. I'm continuously honoured (and still slightly shocked) that he trusted me to take on the Immigration Project, which was a new endeavour for CAJ at the time.



I absolutely love the work that I get to do with CAJ, and Brian plays a huge part in that. I am struggling to get my head around him retiring, as Brian has more energy than most of his younger colleagues! During a 2020 'Zoom social', when he revealed his age, I seem to remember him getting screams of disbelief in response. He is passionate and dedicated, and I will really miss him knocking the office door with a new idea, insight, or crafty plan. Brian exemplifies the old saying that you should never be so clever that you forget to be kind. He has incredible knowledge and experience in human rights and equality in Northern Ireland (and beyond!). He would be intimidating indeed, except for the fact that he is always open and kind with everyone he works with. I have really benefitted over the years from Brian's constant support and kindness. I'm sure I'm not the only one.

Eliza Browning, Policy

Officer: I'm going to greatly miss Brian's calming and supportive presence in the office. The comfort in knowing that with any thorny issue we could 'go to Brian' and get wise direction and guidance has supported and encouraged my own work, and I am sincerely grateful for that. His easy-going and laid-back exterior hides a steely core of strength, which he used to great effect when necessary.



Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Brian always makes people feel respected and valued and one of Brian's enduring legacies is his ability to be a fierce advocate while not sacrificing relationships.

Having said all of that, I have a regret that I never did get to experience one of Brian's most legendary and hailed achievements, the home-cooked staff Christmas dinner... perhaps in your retirement you will have time to repeat this for us, but sure we can sort the details and place our orders closer to the time.

Roisín Brennan, Office Manager: Life is full of changes, and I wish Brian the greatest success in this new phase of his life. I sincerely hope our paths cross in the future. I'm truly thankful to Brian for everything he has taught me since I joined CAJ last year and for being an inspiration. The knowledge he's passed onto me has been so important in my career development. A boss like Brian doesn't come around every day. His ability to make every team member feel valued is an irreplaceable quality. Brian has been a driving force in our organisation's success. Truly, he is one-of-a-kind. Brian, you will be missed and even though it's tough to say goodbye, I know retirement will look good on you. Wishing you all the very best, and luck.



The life of Brian - Photos from Brian's time as CAJ Director



CAJ observers for anti-G8 demonstrations in June 2013, including Brian (back row).



Brian and the CAJ team at a 2019 leaving lunch for Eirene volunteer, Lars.



Brian outside of the current CAJ office in Belfast.



Brian (back right) at the 18th informal ASEM seminar on human rights, held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2018.



Celebrating 'Aloha Day' - a Hawaiian tradition - with other members of the CAJ team in 2019.



Brian speaking at CAJ's conference on 'A renaissance of the Peace Process?' in Queen's University Belfast, 2019.

Just News is published by the Committee on the Administration of Justice. Readers' news, views and comments are welcome. 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. Email: info@caj.org.uk. Website: www.caj.org.uk.

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