



Launch of the 'Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report' in UNISON. Left to right: Shannon Doherty, CAJ, Daniel Holder, CAJ, Patricia McKeown, UNISON, Dessie Donnelly, Rabble Cooperative

## Report Launch Highlights Urgent Need to Tackle Far-Right Narratives Online in NI

*Hannah Loughran, Communications  
Officer, CAJ*

The launch of the 'Mapping Far-Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report' was marked by two significant events, held in Belfast and Derry. The launches brought together campaigners, researchers, and community voices in an urgent conversation on tackling the rise of far-right narratives in Northern Ireland.

The first event took place on 2nd May at the UNISON office in Belfast and drew a capacity audience. Chaired by Patricia McKeown, UNISON Regional Secretary, the event featured a panel including CAJ Director Daniel Holder, report author Dessie Donnelly, and Shannon Doherty, Project Research and Campaigns Worker at CAJ and the Northwest Migrants Forum (NWMF). The panel provided an overview of the report's findings and led a robust discussion with attendees.

Audience members raised pressing questions around the practical ability to tackle the growing presence of far-right rhetoric online, particularly within local communities. The discussion also explored the role of public authorities, as highlighted in the report's recommendations, and the troubling intersection between far-right activity and misogyny. The panel stressed the importance of proactive responses from civic and political institutions, as well as the need for sustained community engagement.

A second, more intimate launch event followed on 6th May in Derry's Guildhall. Chaired by Shannon Doherty, the event offered a focused discussion on the local implications of the report's findings. Dessie Donnelly outlined the research in greater detail, before members of the NWMF contributed to a powerful conversation about the real-life impact of online far-right activity on minority communities. Several participants shared personal experiences, underlining the urgent need for protection, solidarity, and coordinated response efforts. A video message was played of Lilian Seenoi-Barr, Mayor of Derry City and Strabane council at that time, speaking about her very own experience of racially motivated violence online from far-right actors.

The conversations in both cities underscored how far-right rhetoric online is not confined to digital spaces but spills over into threats and violence offline - something brought into stark relief by recent violent events in Ballymena. There, racist intimidation framed around the false claim of "protecting women and girls" has mirrored narratives explored in one of the report's seven case studies. These developments have drawn international attention; and as a result, report author Dessie Donnelly was recently interviewed by the New York Times to discuss the patterns of escalation seen from Belfast to Ballymena.

As both events made clear, this is a moment for vigilance, accountability, and community-led action. The voices heard at the launch mark an important step forward in challenging hate and reaffirming the values of equality and inclusion across Northern Ireland.

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# An Exploration of the 'Mapping Far Right Activity Online in NI' Project Report

*Dessie Donnelly, Rabble Cooperative*

Following the far-right protests in the wake of the Southport killings in August 2024, and the ensuing violent attacks on the homes and businesses of immigrants in Belfast, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and Equality Coalition commissioned Rabble Cooperative, a technology cooperative based in Belfast, to carry out a monitoring exercise of social media platforms.

The research launched in April 2025, titled *Mapping Far-Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland*. It aimed to provide better understanding of the nature and extent of local far-right social media activity by identifying key messaging being used to promote anti-immigrant narratives and any overlap with loyalist paramilitary and far-right online networks outside of NI, particularly in the Republic of Ireland and Britain.

The research's focus spanned incidents from October 2023 to March 2025 and used case studies (rallies and protests, racist attacks, online and offline incidents used to promote racist narratives) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the emerging local far-right social media ecosystem.

## Amplification not Organisation

Social media was primarily used across the research period as a communications tool to construct narratives and amplify disinformation. Local accounts promoting far-right messaging followed a pattern of imposing racist framing on real life events and responding to and justifying racist attacks.

The case studies evidenced these tactics in detail: the erection of anti-immigrant signs in Belvoir (south Belfast) in October 2023, disinformation about immigrant students at the Girls Model secondary school (north Belfast) in October 2024 resulting in the girls having to move schools when their safety could not be guaranteed by education authorities, and the attacks on immigrant homes across the Mourneview estate (Lurgan) followed by the placing of racist and Islamophobic boards outside a primary school in January 2025.

There were common elements to the cases including the general absence of influential external accounts intervening and agitating, the rapid spread of unchecked disinformation, and seemingly innocuous community Facebook pages becoming petri-dishes for racist discourse with little-to-no moderation.

Another tactic encountered was the opportunistic exploitation of any incident – or alleged incident – involving a non-white person in continual attempts to portray a reality where immigrants are privileged and protected by the state while simultaneously being the cause of societal problems: violence against women, homelessness, unemployment, street violence, child abuse, increase in crime rates and many more.

Between October 2024 and February 2025 the research investigated 33 such incidents online. There were a total of 1,302 posts and comments reinforcing this framing across X, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. However there were only 59 accounts posting original content and leading on

the development of these narratives.

This picture of relatively organised and dangerous anti-immigrant groups offline, alongside a relatively small and loose network across social media was reinforced when the research examined the August 2024 and March 2025 anti-immigrant protests.

## Relationship between local and external far-right accounts

The August 2024 protests were initially promoted by a small, local ecosystem of far-right accounts. While the 10 top performing Facebook posts promoting the protest were from accounts that would almost all identify with Ulster loyalism, from the metrics it would be a mistake to believe the messages were representative of any community.

For example the best performing local Facebook account promoting the protest, Shankill Online, received 147 positive reactions and 267 shares. The top 10 local accounts had a combined total of 657 positive engagements. These are extremely low levels of engagement.

In contrast, two days before the protest, far-right accounts from the Republic of Ireland and Britain re-posted identical content on X and secured much higher engagement metrics. Tracy O'Hanlon – a former Irish Freedom Party electoral candidate in Dundalk – attracted 1,900 likes and almost 100,000 views. Similarly the far-right leader Tommy Robinson's post on X got 3,800 likes and over 200,000 views.

Similar patterns were found across accounts providing ongoing commentary as events unfolded on the ground. Local accounts that were involved in the promotion of the protests continued on the theme of Christian unity opposing Islam and immigration and this message of non-sectarian unity continued to fall flat. The top performer on Facebook again was Shankill Online, with 62 shares and 339 positive engagements.

However, this message of historic enemies uniting against the common threats of Islam and immigration found fertile ground when promoted by external accounts.

Posts from southern Irish anti-immigrant activists @Mick\_O\_Keeffe and @CilComLFC went viral when they posted separately on X about "Irish and British nationalists standing side by side against mass immigration" and "Catholics and Protestants are quite literally marching shoulder to shoulder in Belfast...". Their posts, which included video footage and wording which was replicated across all social media platforms, secured 48,000/144,000 positive engagements and 5.7m/7.7m views respectively.

While the "shoulder to shoulder" terminology was used by 175 different accounts on X, the disconnect between external accounts and local accounts was evident: not a single one of the accounts using this copied terminology was based in Northern Ireland.

The external accounts profiling August 2024 rally and riots did not articulate a different message to local accounts. Rather the failure of the local accounts to popularise its message locally online perhaps reflected the absurdity of the claim that the protesters were representing both sides of the historic conflict.

It suggests that local social media accounts promoting far-right narratives lack the sophistication of external far-right networks online who are much more adept at



understanding the platforms' algorithms. The external accounts were speaking to a different audience: they wanted people from New York, Toronto, Hull and Cork to look at social media and say "look what immigration is doing to Belfast". They had the tools and experience to do this effectively.

Ideas for improved enforcement of statutory duties ranged from increased judicial review of enforcement body decision making, to the creation of additional enforcement bodies. The full conference report will be available soon and will be circulated to CAJ and Equality Coalition members.

### Political Responses

The interplay between far-right activity and the political mainstream was an important aspect of the research in detecting if and how anti-immigrant narratives were being normalised.

To gain some insight into this, the social media posts by political representatives in response to 11 hate crime incidents were tracked across local Council, Assembly and Westminster levels. A total of 231 accounts from X, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram were monitored, as were Assembly Ministerial questions submitted by political parties during the period which were relevant to immigration between October 2024 and February 2025.

Social media is not the only, in many instances not even the primary, medium for representatives to respond to racist incidents. And while conclusions should not be drawn from the insights outlined in the report, further monitoring is required to identify patterns and potential normalisation of racist discourse and action.

During the research period, Alliance consistently used social media to condemn racist attacks while the DUP did not despite 9 of the 11 incidents occurring in areas where they have representation. Whether this is due to oversight, opting not to use social media as a communication tool for these matters, the de-prioritisation of anti-immigrant and racist violence as a political priority - or other reasons - would require further investigation.

### Old Wine, New Bottles

The report outlines a series of recommendations by CAJ which identify existing legal frameworks which public authorities and political representatives can use to address far-right intimidation, harassment and incitement to violence online. These include statutory duties, international law, codes of conducts and holding social media providers accountable using criminal law statute which, unlike regulation, is a matter within the competence of the NI Executive. The overarching need for a Racial Equality Strategy framework cannot be overstated.

On a strategic note, allowing public narratives, news cycles, political agendas or human rights agendas to be shaped by the metrics and activities from proprietary social media platforms is both misleading and dangerous.

The report examined social media commentary around the appointment of Cllr Lilian Seenoi-Barr as Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council in April-May 2024. 44 posts from 5 social media platforms, including 4582 comments, were analysed for positive, negative, neutral or malevolent (hateful, racist, anti-immigrant or xenophobic) sentiments.

The results indicated that malevolent commentary

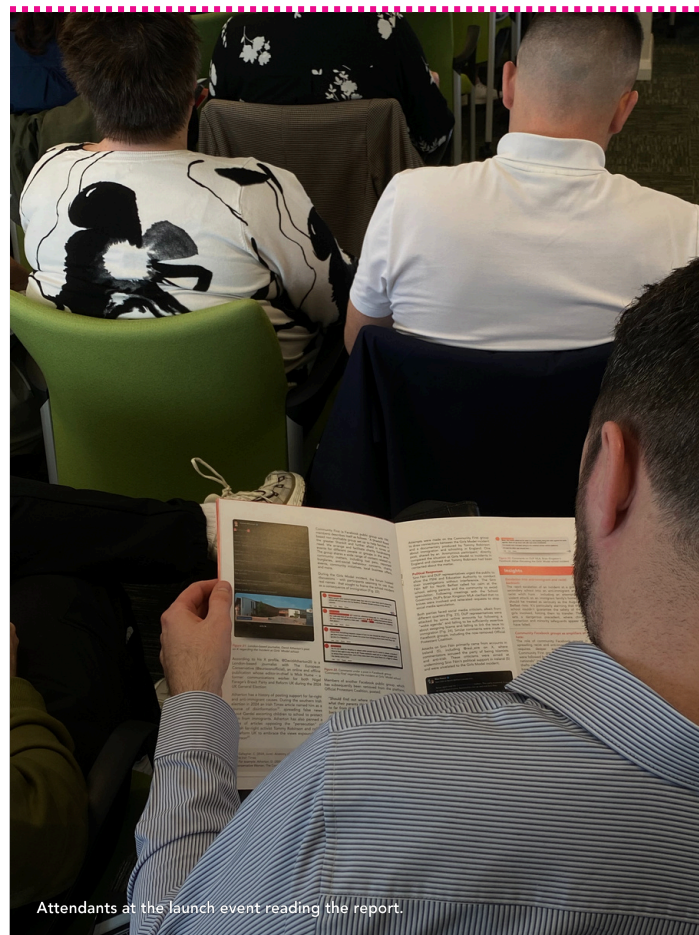
dominated the discussions, and this was generally regardless of the geographical location of the contributor, original post sentiment or platform.

Social media platforms as currently constituted are not spaces for civil discussions, never mind policy development; they are not the 'public square' where democratic deliberation and the free exchange of ideas occurs. These platforms operate under obscure algorithms which, ultimately, serve the financial and political interests of their owners.

It was estimated in 2024 that X hosts 335.7m active users and research by 5th Column AI in January 2024 predicted that approximately 64% of these users were bots. In attempts to utilise these platforms to both promote and counter narratives, the entities with the expertise and resources capable of leverage the power of these bots to affect the platforms' algorithms will win out. The rules of the game, as currently configured, are very much fixed.

The anti-immigrant, racist and islamophobic activity we witness online is a new factor in a tried and tested method of organised intimidation, harassment and violence directed against minority communities. These are playing out in real time across our communities with minimal redress for victims or consequences for perpetrators.

Every time an immigrant family is put out of a community, it evidences the efficacy of this tactic. While social media is a contributory and amplifying factor in this broader strategy, we need to refocus our attention on organised far-right activity in communities – how they are allowed to operate without getting caught, how civic and political leadership responds to racist attacks and how anti-immigrant discourse is sanitised and mainstreamed into our policy development process. This requires further monitoring and vigilant action.



Attendants at the launch event reading the report.

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## ICCL/CAJ 2025 Policing Conference: Policing of Far-Right Intimidation in the Republic of Ireland

*Emily Williams, Policing and Justice Policy  
Officer, Irish Council for Civil Liberties*

In 2023, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) teamed up with the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) to form the "Policing for Peace" project, which convenes stakeholders through a series of North-South expert roundtables and events to produce specific recommendations on different thematic areas in policing. As part of this project, ICCL and CAJ host an annual conference on policing.

The theme of the 2025 annual conference was the policing of far-right intimidation in the Republic. This theme was chosen following a series of high-profile incidents of intimidation in both the North and South, including multiple incidents of arson at accommodation centres for international protection applicants, protests against drag events and the availability of LGBTI+ materials in public libraries, and the racist violence that erupted during the far-right and Islamophobic disturbances of August 2024.

The aim of this conference was to bring police services, policy-makers, academics, civil society organisations and affected communities together to discuss current policing practices, the impact of these approaches on the communities negatively affected by far-right activity, and lessons learned from other jurisdictions on how to effectively police far-right intimidation in line with human rights principles.

ICCL and CAJ opened the event by providing an overview of the partnership and the domestic context.

Professor Andrea Pető then delivered the opening address, focusing on misogyny and the far-right internationally. She explained that the "far-right" is a transnational movement operating on a national level, using fear and misinformation to polarise society. Professor Pető also highlighted one of the new narrative strategies being used by the far-right, which is the co-opting of human rights language and terminology. Examples of this include the weaponisation of "freedom of expression", and the use of terms such as "human rights of the unborn child".

PSNI Chief Superintendent Stephen Murray and An Garda Síochána Deputy Commissioner, Operations, Shawna Coxon delivered the keynote plenary. Deputy Commissioner Coxon highlighted the use of human rights screening tools to review operational plans, the challenge associated with responding to counter-protests and the practice of issuing proactive misinformation notices.

Chief Superintendent Murray reflected on the PSNI's response to the violence in Belfast last August. He emphasised the PSNI's commitment to holding as many people accountable for the violence as possible, due to its devastating impact on minority communities. He also acknowledged that legal limitations can result in a public perception of police inaction. For example, police do not have the power to remove offensive displays. Chief Superintendent Murray also highlighted the lack of standalone hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland and the high threshold for incitement to hatred.

The first panel discussion focused on the impact of far-right intimidation on local communities. Speakers emphasised that far-right intimidation has always existed, and the failure to sufficiently address the issue has now put more people at risk.

The panel also noted that anti-rights intimidation is not confined to just the far-right, as communities may also feel intimidated by the actions, policies and rhetoric of the government and politicians, particularly around mass deportations.

The second panel looked at lessons learned from other jurisdictions. Dessie Donnelly, Director of the Rabble Cooperative, presented his in-depth analysis of online far-right activity in Northern Ireland. His research found that disinformation thrives in community Facebook groups, with sophisticated far-right actors intentionally infiltrating the online spaces of communities they aren't a part of to sow misinformation and distrust. One strategy Dessie identified was the deliberate framing of loyalists and nationalists uniting against "the common enemy: Islam".

Andy George, President of the National Black Police Association, spoke to the issues regarding the Prevent framework in the UK. Andy noted that while on paper, the Prevent framework was designed to prevent radicalisation, its application is not neutral. In practice, it disproportionately targets young Muslim men, damaging the relationships between police and Muslim communities.

Professor Fionnuala Ní Aoláin concluded the event by discussing the human rights implications of the language we use to discuss extremism. Extremism lacks any international definition, and is often weaponised against minority communities and individuals who challenge their government, she explained. "Extremism" may initially be used to refer to something "exceptional," but the absence of an agreed definition becomes more problematic as the term is used more frequently in the context of criminal justice and policy-making.

Professor Ní Aoláin explained why we need a more nuanced and constructive examination of the policies of extremism, arguing that we should not create specialist criminal offences in response to far-right intimidation. Instead, we should use existing criminal law and focus on building safer and more cohesive communities by improving access to housing, education and work, which would help to address the risk factors for far-right beliefs.

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## What Does Gender do for Antiliberal Politicians?

*Andrea Peto, Professor at Department of  
Gender Studies at Central European  
University, Vienna and Research Affiliate of  
the CEU Democracy Institute in Budapest*

Why gender? What is wrong with many far-right politicians like Melloni, Orbán, or Trump and their focus on gender studies? Why did the System of National Cooperation document that replaced the Hungarian constitution have to be rewritten 14 times to include the fact that there are two genders, male and female? Why are the US's DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) programs being closed and funding being cut? Why was gender studies deleted from the accredited study list without explanation?



On the one hand, this is all about gender; on the other hand, it is not.

The trick is that when the expertise offered by gender academia is most needed, this capacity is being dismantled. Before gender became so important, scholars of gender studies either worked in their offices in the attic or the cellar, but were marginalised. Due to the campaign, including by far-right political figures, every news consumer has become a gender expert, and everybody has an opinion about the reading list, learning outcome, or the labour market position. Never have gender, diversity, inclusion, and identity been featured so much in the media, and then they shut down the programs that prepare for these very professional discussions.

### **What does 'gender' mean in the antiliberal vocabulary?**

Gender is and will be at the forefront of ongoing political struggle. Members of the gender academia were surprised **in recent years** by the innovative narrative, which was created by antiliberal forces. This meaning has nothing to do with any meanings of gender discussed vehemently in academic circles. This new meaning focuses on how a new sense of gender serves the political mobilisation of antiliberal forces. Here, the new definition of gender works as "symbolic glue," it refers to a metaphor that can tap into people's feelings of uncertainty about the world around them and direct them towards equality issues.

### **Gender as symbolic glue**

Gender works as a 'symbolic glue' in different ways. First, a dynamic is constructed so that the notion of gender is perceived as a threatening concept. The right has united separate contested issues and attributed them to the umbrella term of "the progressive agenda". And there is the concept of "gender ideology", which is constructed by those who consider gender as a threat that has come to signify the failure of democratic representation. And the opposition to this ideology has become a means of rejecting certain facets of the current social and economic order, from prioritizing identity politics over material issues to weakening people's social, cultural, and political security. And secondly, the demonization of "gender ideology" has become a key rhetorical tool in the construction of a new concept of common sense for a broad audience, from a consensus of what is expected and legitimate. It also glues together and mobilises those interested in fighting against liberal democracy.

### **How did gender as a symbolic glue work in the New Cold War?**

Today, we are living in the New Cold War, which is not that Cold anymore, and is waged along gender lines. The concept of Cold War, as Essig and Kondrakov argued, refers to the stigmatization and exclusion of one part of the population by another along political and symbolic lines, and it is not connected to one specific historical period called the Cold War after 1945. But instead, processes of how images of enemies are being built up are gendered, so the New Cold War is not a descriptive division line between different imagined geographical locations like East or West or South and North, but rather an active political process of alliance making and redefining what normal is. The New Cold War is not waged between two blocs of states but inside the national boundaries to undermine the national units.

It is important to note that this is a social mobilization that is based on an opposition to so-called 'gender ideology' and political correctness that does not just demonize the worldview of their enemies and reject the human rights

paradigm, which has long been the object of relative consensus. But they also offer a liveable, viable alternative centred on the family, the nation, and religious values, and freedom of speech, which is widely attractive because it is rooted in an identification of individuals' own choices, and it promises a safe and secure community as a remedy for individualism and social atomization. And thirdly, the opposition to gender is also a possibility for the right to create a broad alliance and unite various actors that have not been eager to cooperate in the past. That is why fighting against those forces who use gender equality to mobilise hate and exclusion is an imperative not only for gender studies scholars.

### **Lessons Learned**

It is important to note that this is a social mobilization that is based on an opposition to 'gender ideology' and political correctness that does not just demonize the worldview of their enemies and reject the human rights paradigm, which has long been the object of relative consensus. But they also offer a liveable, viable alternative centred on the family, the nation, and religious values, and freedom of speech, which is widely attractive because it is based on an identification of individuals' own choices, and it promises a safe and secure community as a remedy for individualism and social atomization. And thirdly, the opposition to gender is also a possibility for the right to create a broad alliance and unite various actors that have not been eager to cooperate in the past. That is why fighting against those forces who use gender equality to mobilise hate and exclusion is an imperative not only for gender studies scholars.



## **Official launch of the 'Know your Rights to Protest' guide**

*Kate Barry, Director, Public Interest Litigation Support*

In June, the first NI-specific guide to protest rights was formally launched in Belfast: 'Know your Rights to Protest'. The guide is the result of a collaboration between CAJ, Friends of the Earth, the Environmental Justice Network Ireland and Public Interest Litigation Support (PILS).

CAJ's research into policing of environmental defenders inspired the initial idea to produce this guide and it was a recommendation of 'The Policing of Protest: A Shifting Landscape', a report published in 2023 by CAJ and ICCL as part of the 'Policing for Peace' project. ICCL had already produced a guide in the Republic of Ireland, and there were at least two Scotland-specific and multiple guides for England and Wales. While arising from the experience of environmental defenders, this guide is not limited to that context and may be used by anyone planning or attending protests across NI.

## How to use the guide

The purpose of the guide is to provide practical and accessible information for organisers and protestors about the rights of peaceful protest in NI and related policing powers. It is not a dummy's guide. Terminology and legislation are explained, and the scope of rights and policing powers are broken down so that they are better understood.

The guide cannot be a replacement for legal advice on a specific scenario: it cannot cover every eventuality. However, it covers as many scenarios and concerns as possible so that organisers and activists are well informed.

The team took feedback at a 'soft' launch of the guide in September 2023, where activists suggested other points to cover. This included the use of face coverings during protests and how the police deal with instances of 'locking on' where protestors secure themselves to buildings or other structures.

The guide is presented in four sections and each section is presented as a set of questions. The first three sections cover considerations when planning a protest, rights during a protest and rights after a protest. The fourth section provides guidance on defamation law, an area of law which is increasingly being used to silence protest and public participation. There is also a glossary of key terms and a substantial section signposting additional resources and useful organisations.

## A few points of note

Unlike in UK and Ireland, there is the requirement in NI to notify the Parades Commission of any public processions, including protest marches. However, the notification requirement also applies to static counter-protests against another moving protest. Further, the definition of a public procession is not clear and an impromptu movement of a number of protesters from one point to another might be caught by the legislation.

The first and second sections of the guide include information about your personal data and police surveillance rights. This includes participants' rights where the police have videoed or photographed a protest, as well as protestors rights to record the police.

In the heat of a protest, it is not always easy to follow what is happening. The second section sets out a wide range of potential police interventions during a protest from stopping and searching attendees to blocking or containing protests. It also contains detailed guidance on what happens if participants are threatened with arrest or are arrested, and the process which should follow. This is followed up in the third section with guidance on handling wrongful arrests and what happens in the event of the arrestee being charged with an offence.

A point to draw out here is the use of cautions. This alternative to prosecution through the courts is often misunderstood. It is not the same as a penalty notice, such as a parking ticket. Cautions are issued where an officer believes they have enough evidence for conviction and the person accused has admitted to carrying out the alleged offence. The person accepting the caution receives a criminal record, which will remain in place for up to six years and is very difficult to challenge once accepted. Never accept a caution without first seeking legal advice.

The final section is relatively unusual for a protest guide:

the risk of defamation action. We have received numerous reports of activists and campaigners across sectors receiving threats of defamation action for statements made during their campaigns. The threat of lengthy, complex and expensive litigation can be an effective deterrent against activists. This overview is intended to help organisers and protestors to understand and to mitigate any potential risks.

This guide would not have been possible without the support of our authors, a team of barristers who provided their time pro bono: thank you to Andrew Palmer, James Carson, Richard Campbell, Jennifer Price and Matthew Yardley. Thank you also to ICCL for the format of the guide, which closely follows their model.



## A Year on From the Legacy Act's Guillotine on Truth, the UK Faces a Legal Deadline & a Moral Reckoning

*Grainne Teggart, Northern Ireland Deputy Director, Amnesty International UK*

As the UK government drags its heels on justice for Sean Brown and other victims of the 'Troubles', Labour must choose: honour its pledge or continue a shameful legacy of impunity.

One year ago, the UK government's Legacy Act slammed shut the door on proper due process for victims of the Northern Ireland conflict. Legacy mechanisms, as they were, ended. Last month, Relatives for Justice, the Pat Finucane Centre, CAJ and Amnesty UK, victims and families gathered outside the offices of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) in Belfast to mark that anniversary - what many have called the "guillotine on truth."

The protest was not just to mourn what was lost; it was to demand action.

And that demand has only grown more urgent. Just weeks ago, the Court of Appeal ruled that the UK government's refusal to hold a public inquiry into the 1997 murder of GAA official Sean Brown was unlawful. The court gave Northern Ireland Secretary of State Hilary Benn a four-week deadline to reconsider that decision.

What happened next is, sadly, all too familiar. Just hours before the deadline, Benn confirmed the government would seek more time and leave to appeal to the Supreme Court. It is hard not to view this as a calculated move to frustrate accountability.



Mr Brown was abducted outside a GAA club in Bellaghy and driven across the county line to Randalstown, where he was shot six times. Intelligence material has linked state agents to his killing. His widow, Bridie, now 87, has attended court 58 times in her near-three-decade search for truth. The government's latest response? More delay. More litigation. More obstruction.

This is not just inaction; it is a pattern. The UK government continues to challenge court rulings on legacy matters rather than deliver truth to victims or commit parliamentary time to repealing and replacing the widely discredited Legacy Act. Victims' organisations and rights groups have rejected the ICRIR as a credible body capable of delivering the justice they need.

Keir Starmer recently called the Good Friday Agreement "Labour's greatest achievement." But on the anniversary of the Legacy Act guillotine, he must reckon with a sobering truth: his government, like those before it, is prioritising secrecy over justice. Any reset in relations between the UK and Irish governments will require getting it right on legacy.

The passage of the Legacy Act was a betrayal, enshrining impunity under the guise of reconciliation. Since then, the courts have found key provisions of the Act to be unlawful. In the Dillon case, victims secured a landmark legal victory. Victims continue with their calls for repeal to mean repeal. Government could move swiftly to scrap the legislation in its entirety and fulfil its commitment to replace it. Instead, it opts for a piecemeal approach trapping families in a seemingly endless cycle of delay and despair.

The Labour Party pledged during the general election campaign to repeal and replace the Legacy Act. But recent signals from Westminster suggest that promise is

wavering, with partial reforms now replacing firm commitments to repeal. This would be a grave mistake and a political betrayal.

This moment is a test of Labour's moral fibre and commitment to rights. Actions speak louder than words, and the actions of this government do not inspire confidence. The ICRIR, created by the last government and retained by the current one, is no substitute for proper due process and clearly lacks the trust of those it is supposed to serve.

The UK government's approach to "national security" and its use of the "Neither Confirm Nor Deny" policy to block access to information only deepens the wounds of the past. Families seeking answers are stonewalled at every turn. These are people who should be supported in their search for truth not forced to fight the government to get it.

For many, time is running out. They have waited decades. They cannot afford more delays, more appeals, more broken promises. The choice for Labour could not be clearer: it must repeal the Act, restore inquests for all entitled to them, deliver mechanisms that are not only human rights-compliant but also command the support of the community and end the culture of impunity once and for all.

Accountability cannot be withheld. Truth cannot be buried. Reconciliation cannot be forged through obstruction.

The anniversary of the Legacy Act guillotine is not just a grim milestone - it is a moment of reckoning.

Amnesty International stands with victims. The question now facing Keir Starmer's government is this: *will Labour?*



Protestors gather outside the ICRIR offices on the anniversary of its founding

# Strengthening Global Solidarity: Sharing Northern Ireland's Legacy of State Impunity in South America

*Maria-José Gueembe, Human Rights Lawyer*

From May 6 to 18, 2025, representatives from the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and the Pat Finucane Centre, along with a member of the International Expert Panel on State Impunity in Northern Ireland, conducted a mission to Colombia, Brazil, and Chile. The main objective was to present the findings of the report *Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict* and to highlight how the Legacy Act violates the victims' rights to truth, justice, and reparations.

The delegation consisted of Daniel Holder, CAJ Director; Paul O'Connor, CEO of the Pat Finucane Centre and María José Gueembe, Argentinean human rights lawyer and member of the International Expert Panel.

## Colombia

Colombia endured an internal armed conflict from the 1960s until 2016, when a peace agreement was signed between the national government and the FARC-EP guerrilla group. The agreement established a transitional justice system, including the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Truth Commission. Earlier, between 2003 and 2006, the Colombian government had negotiated the demobilization of paramilitary groups, leading to the adoption of the Justice and Peace Law, which created a special process of conditional prosecution for those responsible for serious crimes. The JEP now operates as a transitional justice tribunal that offers conditional legal benefits to those members of FARC-EP and state agents who fully disclose their role in crimes committed during the conflict, with the aim of ensuring accountability, truth, and justice for victims.

In this context, the delegation engaged with long-standing human rights organizations such as the Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo, the Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, the Corporación Jurídica Libertad, the Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, the Espacio de Litigio Estratégico, MoViCe, and the Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos. Discussions centred on the parallels between the Northern Ireland experience and Colombia's own struggles with transitional justice, particularly concerning the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). Critiques were raised about the JEP's effectiveness, including concerns over limited victim participation and challenges in uncovering the full truth about past atrocities.

The delegation met with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), which played a key role in the design of the JEP and provided critical insights on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to post-conflict accountability.

The mission also included academic engagements, notably at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, where a seminar facilitated by the Corporación Jurídica Libertad brought together scholars, judicial representatives, and civil society members. These interactions provided a

platform to discuss the implications of the Legacy Act and to exchange insights on mechanisms for achieving justice and accountability.

Additional meetings were held with Max Yuri Gil, Director of the Institute for Political Studies at the University of Antioquia, and the coordinator of the university's Peace Unit. The delegation was also officially received by the President of the JEP, Magistrate Alejandro Ramelli, and Magistrate Óscar Parra.

A roundtable convened by the Embassy of Ireland in Bogotá brought together former Truth Commission Commissioners Marta Ruiz and María Prada, and Marco Romero Silva, a member of the Follow-up Committee on the Commission's Recommendations. Discussions focused on the challenges of implementing transitional justice measures and the broader societal role of memory and truth commissions.

## Brazil

Brazil experienced a military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985, marked by widespread human rights violations, including torture, enforced disappearances, and political persecution. In 1979, during the process of political opening, the government passed an amnesty law that shielded both political prisoners and state agents responsible for serious crimes from prosecution. This law has remained a major obstacle to accountability and justice. Decades later, in 2011, Brazil established the National Truth Commission to investigate the human rights violations committed during the dictatorship. Although the Commission's 2014 final report identified hundreds of victims and perpetrators, its work did not lead to prosecutions, and the amnesty law continues to be upheld by Brazilian courts despite international condemnation.

The delegation met with civil society groups including Núcleo de Memória, Conectas, the Vladimir Herzog Institute, and the Comissão de Verdade e Justiça. Conversations focused on the enduring effects of the Amnesty Law and the actions undertaken to break the cycle of impunity. They highlighted the role of litigation before the Inter-American human rights system, which led to the establishment of the Truth Commission.

Academic events at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and the Federal Justice School fostered dialogue on the challenges of confronting historical injustices. Notably, discussions with judicial figures, including Federal Prosecutor Marlon Weichert and Eugenia Gonzaga, underscored ongoing efforts to challenge the prevailing culture of impunity.



NI delegation meeting Human Rights NGO in Bogotá, Colombia



## Chile

Chile endured a brutal military dictatorship from 1973 to 1990, following the coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende. During this period, thousands of people were killed, disappeared, tortured, or imprisoned for political reasons. In 1978, the military regime enacted an amnesty law that effectively shielded perpetrators of human rights violations from prosecution. Despite this, Chile has made significant progress in truth and justice. The National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (Rettig Commission) was established in 1990, followed by other truth-seeking initiatives. Chilean courts have gradually narrowed the application of the amnesty law, allowing for the prosecution of some crimes, particularly disappearances and extrajudicial executions. Yet challenges remain in achieving full accountability and in addressing the ongoing demands of victims and their families.

The delegation met with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice's Human Rights Program. A seminar at Diego Portales University, led by Professor Cath Collins, facilitated discussions on transitional justice and the relevance of Northern Ireland's experiences to Latin American contexts.

### Addressing Ongoing Human Rights Challenges through International Cooperation

Exchanges with the South America Regional Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights further emphasized the importance of international cooperation in addressing ongoing human rights challenges. In that context, particular attention was given to aspects of the Northern Ireland experience related to the peaceful management of public demonstrations and policing practices aligned with international human rights

standards. The evolution of protocols to ensure the progressive use of force, accountability mechanisms, and institutional reforms were presented as relevant contributions to broader conversations on peacebuilding and guarantees of non-repetition. These exchanges highlighted the value of interregional dialogue, with a view to mutual learning between contexts that, despite their differences, face comparable challenges in addressing the legacy of state violence.

### Preserving Memory to Prevent Future Abuses

The mission also encompassed visits to significant memory sites: the Center for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá; the Memorial da Resistência and the DOI-CODI site in São Paulo; and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago. These visits provided profound insights into each country's efforts to preserve historical memory and offered opportunities to discuss future collaborations aimed at enhancing collective remembrance and education in Northern Ireland.

### Towards ongoing collaboration

Concluding the mission, the delegation highlighted the value of the connections established with organizations and institutions in Latin America. The exchange of experiences and strategies enriched the collective understanding of how to address state impunity and underscored the importance of truth, justice, and memory in repairing societies affected by past conflicts. It also reaffirmed the need to continue deepening interregional exchanges on both the past and present of human rights, as a way to strengthen shared struggles and enhance responses to today's challenges. Building on these foundations, future activities are being planned to deepen the lines of cooperation that emerged throughout the mission.



Meeting with regional UN Human rights representatives Jan Jarab and Andrea Benavente in Santiago de Chile

# Civil Liberties Diary - April to June 2025

*Compiled from various sources*

**10 April 2025:** SDLP, the Opposition party in Stormont, leader Matthew O'Toole criticised the NI Executive for having introduced fewer than half of its promised 2024–25 bills. He accused Ministers of prioritising “sham fights and culture wars” over the delivery of essential public policy reforms. Notably delayed were bills on housing reform, social care, and education, raising broader questions about Stormont's capacity and focus after its return to operation in early 2024.

**15 April 2025:** The UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Hilary Benn, warmly welcomed a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the UK and the Irish government concerning the Omagh Bombing Inquiry. This pact ensures access to official documents held in Dublin, enabling cooperation and the potential for witness evidence, though it stops short of compelling testimony.

**25 April 2025:** The UK government confirmed it would seek leave to appeal a Court of Appeal ruling which found its refusal to establish a public inquiry into the 1997 loyalist murder of GAA official Sean Brown unlawful. The Secretary of State's decision to appeal rather than initiate the inquiry was widely condemned by the Brown family and political leaders in both Stormont and Dublin. Critics argue this move undermines the UK's human rights obligations under Article 2 of the ECHR.

**6 May 2025:** The Sean Brown family met with Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Tánaiste Simon Harris. Both leaders expressed strong support for a full public inquiry and committed to raising the matter diplomatically with their UK counterparts.

**31 May 2025:** The Brown family revealed they were not informed when the UK formally filed its appeal with the Supreme Court regarding the inquiry ruling. The decision, described as “phenomenally disrespectful”, deepened distrust in the Secretary of State's handling of the case and renewed public pressure on Westminster to reverse course.

**3 June 2025:** Between 21 May and 3 June, the Omagh Bombing Inquiry resolved a key dispute over redacting evidence, after the UK government and PSNI sought to anonymise junior civil servants and suspects. Inquiry counsel warned this could delay proceedings and damage public confidence. On 3 June, Lord Turnbull ruled against blanket redactions, opting instead for a case-by-case approach, allowing disclosures to resume.

**11 June 2025:** The UK Supreme Court heard NI Secretary of State's appeal concerning the 1994 sectarian murder of Paul Thompson, which sought to uphold the “Neither Confirm Nor Deny” (NCND) policy to block the release of sensitive information in the form of a gist proposed by the Coroner. The Secretary of State's case

was supported by the MoD, FCDO, Home Office and Advocate General, challenges earlier rulings that found NCND breached human rights obligations. CAJ, representing Thompson's family, along with the Coroner and PSNI Chief Constable as respondents, and Human Rights Commission as interveners, argued that the legal framework provides that the gist should be released to the family.

**12 June 2025:** The Stormont Communities Committee passed a no-confidence motion against DUP Minister Gordon Lyons, following his handling of racist riots in Ballymena and Larne. The controversy centred around the Minister's online remarks, which critics claimed contributed to hostility. First Minister Michelle O'Neill called on Lyons to resign, citing a breach of ministerial responsibility.

**13 June 2025:** The Secretary of State announced the Chair of the Pat Finucane public inquiry. The inquiry will be chaired by the Sir Gary Hickinbottom, the current president of the Welsh tribunals, who is a solicitor and retired Court of Appeal Judge. Also appointed were Baroness Nuala O'Loan, and Francesca Del Mese, as Assessors to the Inquiry.