

Equality and Rights Alliance Conference

November 24th 2009

A FAIRER IRELAND

EQUALITY & RIGHTS

at the heart of recovery

A conference hosted by the

**EQUALITY
& RIGHTS
ALLIANCE**

Ireland Can't Afford
Cutbacks in Equality
& Rights.

November 2009

Equality and Rights Alliance

Excerpt from Introduction by Joanna McMinn

Chair of the Equality and Rights Alliance

Over the past few weeks, Equality & Rights Alliance has been running workshops in towns around the country. What has been remarkable about these workshops is the revelation that people are genuinely concerned about growing inequality in areas like health, education, access to justice or income disparity. At first, people don't see the connection between these everyday experiences and the need for a strong state equality and human rights infrastructure. But when we get them to discuss actual case studies where people have been helped and supported by the system, things change dramatically. Participants don't just want to join us in protecting the equality and rights system we have, they want to work to make it even stronger.

If there's one thing these workshops have taught us is that we can never underestimate the sophistication of people to figure out what is fair and what is not, what is right and what is not. Perhaps government doesn't always appreciate how smart people are, which goes some way towards explaining why they felt that they could get away with muffling the independent voices of our equality, rights and social justice infrastructure last year. Nobody would notice. Nobody would care.

Well Equality & Rights Alliance noticed and we're still taking notice, over a year later. Let's remind ourselves, Equality & Rights Alliance started as a few people sitting in a room when we first heard that the Government was proposing to amalgamate five equality and human rights bodies. Amalgamation did not come about, but

what actually happened was perhaps more damaging.

Ironically, this move to dismantle the equality and rights infrastructure served to galvanize and strengthen one of the strongest movements to emerge in Ireland in recent years. Since August 2008, Equality & Rights Alliance has grown from 40 to over 130 organisations and activists. We want to strengthen political commitment to an effective and resilient equality and human rights infrastructure and we want to provide strategic leadership in protecting, strengthening and critiquing that infrastructure.

This means that we will often have to hold the government of the day and the other pillars that make up the equality and rights infrastructure, including the present Equality Authority and the Irish Human Rights Commission, to account for their delivery of these goals; that sometimes we will have to challenge what we see as compromise, complacency, lack of independence or ineffectiveness; that we may sometimes irritate or agitate the consensus that has been a dominant part of organisational relationships in Ireland.

In their paper, *A Better Ireland is Possible*, published nearly a year ago, Dr Mary Murphy and Peadar Kirby talked about switching public discourse and democratic participation from the "elite to the street". They suggest that the voluntary and community pillar has concentrated too highly on talking to "the elite". If change is to happen, it needs to switch its attention to talking to "the street". I take some pride in saying that Equality & Rights Alliance is very definitely "out on the street." We are a movement, not another NGO. We are whistleblowers not allies. We challenge rather than make friends. We imagine what can be rather than just accepting what is.

Despite the battered landscape we have been left with, I firmly believe



that the present crisis can be used as a time of reflection for the overhaul of the current equality, human rights and social infrastructure, and for a fresh start. What we had before the cuts wasn't bad. What we have now is unacceptable. But what we can have, with fresh thinking, political will and strong civil society involvement – real street-cred, if you like - can be much better.

Civil society is challenged, as rarely before, to imagine, devise and construct a renewed and fresh equality and human rights infrastructure that can resume, rebuild and extend the progress so sharply interrupted last year. Starting today, we must re-think how we can do business competitively and fairly, plan how we can protect the most vulnerable in our society, face up to the gap between formal and substantive compliance with much of our domestic, international and European laws and challenge the backlash that means that diversity is often viewed as a problem rather than a cause for optimism. The speakers and workshops in today's programme will pick up on some of these themes no doubt. I now look forward to hearing their observations and I particularly look forward to your own active involvement and to your thoughts and observations from the street.

Click [here](#) to watch Joanna's speech

“Inequality Costs”

Karen Chouhan came to Ireland at the invitation of the Equality and Rights Alliance, to make a the first presentation of the Conference. The theme of Karen’s presentation “Inequality Costs” is about tackling inequality through economic justice; that economic justice has to be at the heart of any movement for equality.

In her presentation she draws parallels between Ireland and the UK in terms of equality and social inclusion. How both governments are taking retroactive steps in light of the economic crisis, and how damaging this is to vulnerable individuals. She touches on the complex relationship between poverty and inequality, and outlines how the US has attempted to deal with this through a Community Reinvestment Act, aimed at financial institutions.

To watch Karen’s presentation click [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#) [Part 3](#)

To download Karen’s slides click [here](#)



Karen Chouhan

Founder and Director of Equanomics – A UK initiative that seeks to build a community led alliance that re-shapes race related policy through an economic lens. Karen was Selected from 1600 applicants by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust in 2005 to be one of seven ‘Visionaries’ with ideas to change the world.

“Protecting Equality and Human Rights – Institutional Choices”

Colm follows Karen’s presentation by getting down to the basic principles of why equality and human rights are extremely important. He discusses the justification of spending tax payers money on Equality and Human Rights bodies, and how they are essential in filling a gap in our social architecture.

He then moves from Karen’s big picture analysis to talk about the institutional machinery needed to promote equality and human rights in Ireland.

To see Colm’s presentation click [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#) [Part 3](#)

To download Colm’s slides click [here](#)



Colm O’Cinneide

Reader in Law at University College London. He previously worked as Legal Officer to Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC (1999-2001), providing legal advice to parliamentarians, NGOs and the media on domestic and international human rights law, discrimination law and public policy.

Downgrading Equality and Rights - Assessing the Impact

Research Findings and Analysis - Dr. Kathy Walsh & Brian Harvey



Dr Kathy Walsh

To see Dr Walsh give her presentation introducing the report, click [Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)



Brian Harvey

To see Brian Harvey discuss the conclusions of the report, click [here](#).

To download their presentation click [here](#)

The purpose of this research was:

- To document and review the work of the Equality Authority and the Irish Human Rights Commission
- Narrate and analyse the cuts and changes which took place to both bodies in autumn 2008
- Measure and assess the effects of the cuts on their operations
- Devise a methodology to enable the non-governmental community to track their future activities and the impacts of those cuts.

The research was carried out in summer 2009 and involved interviews with over 38 stakeholders, officials, experts, political leaders, academics and activists.



Donal Toolan

Donal has worked as a disability rights activist, actor and award winning journalist. He was founder and coordinator of the Forum of People with Disabilities. He is Chair of International Service Ireland and a board member of European Anti-Poverty Network.

Click ([Part 1](#), [Part2](#)) to watch Donal's speech to the conference.

International Standards

The Paris Principles of the United Nations and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)

Recommendations of the Council of Europe

These provide objective standards by which to measure the operations of both bodies, supplemented by the requirements for equality bodies of the European Union Race Directive.

International commentaries have highlighted the importance for such agencies of:

- Independence from government
- Adequate and stable funding
- Appointments through transparent procedures
- Consultation with civil society
- Effective complaint handling
- Representativity of society as a whole
- Focus on awareness raising, education and training activities

"In constructing the Irish equality and human rights infrastructure, the government appears have given insufficiently detailed attention to the Paris Principles, the ECRI recommendations, or the exhortations toward independence in the 2000 Race Directive."

Political Vision - An Invitation to the Main Political Parties to outline their vision for Equality and Human Rights

Chaired by John Bowman

Panel:



Aengus O'Snodaigh

Sinn Fein



Ciaran Cuffe

Green Party



Joe Costelloe

Labour Party



Michael D'Arcy

Fine Gael

Watch the Debate:

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

[Part 4](#)

[Part 5](#)

[Part 6](#)

[Part 7](#)

[Part 8](#)

Final Words from Niall Crowley

Equality Expert

Niall is an independent equality and diversity expert. He was chief executive officer of the Equality Authority from its establishment in 1999 until 2009. He worked in with the Travellers' rights organisation Pavee Point for twelve years. He is author of 'An Ambition for Equality', published in 2006.

To see Niall Crowley's speech click [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#)



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