

Trevor Phillip's speech at the Human Rights Inquiry Launch

15 June 2009

Good morning. Thank you for being here.

When our Commission was created by Parliament, it was entrusted with a unique mission as the country's first statutory body ever to be tasked with promoting the values of the Human Rights Act.

We recognised - pretty much immediately - that we needed to conduct an exhaustive Inquiry into the state of human rights in the country today in order to carry out our new mandate. We wanted to see how those on the front line of our public services are using human rights principles in their work and what impact they are having.

And we knew that we had to root out where good practice on human rights exists, and find a way to share that with others.

Our central proposition is that human rights are for everyone in this nation. They are for everyone not only because we are not immune from the perils of their arbitrary abuse, but also because human rights do not have a meaning solely in their breach – they can be positive tools to build a healthier contract between the individual and the state and to

enable public officials to plan services that respect the rights of all, particularly the most vulnerable and the voiceless in our society.

In recent years there have been a handful of pioneers who have worked to place human rights at the heart of our culture. I'd like to mention just three.

Firstly, Jack Straw, who as Home Secretary introduced the Human Rights Act into law. It was a characteristically bold move from a man who has been unstinting in his commitment to fairness and justice. This Inquiry is a continuation of the journey he started in 1998 and I'm delighted he is with us here today.

Secondly, the Inquiry's chair – Dame Nuala O'Loan - who in her role as First Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland as well as an international adviser on police accountability, has consistently worked to protect individual freedom against what can sometimes be an over-mighty state. We could not have had a better Chair for this Inquiry.

And finally, our Commissioner and the lead Commissioner on this Inquiry, Professor Francesca Klug - one of our foremost human rights academics. She is, I think, the most tireless, insightful and persuasive advocate of human rights I have ever met.

Without these three individuals, we would not be here today. We will be hearing from each of them soon.

Today, it is our role to begin to tell a new story together about human rights.

It is the Commission's role to be the national leader on articulating the positive impact that human rights can have on people's lives - showing how they can change public services for the better, empowering those

on the receiving end, and also the public officials whose day to day work involves tricky decisions about how best to treat the general public.

It is our role to show how human rights principles can be used to adjudicate in conflicts - when balancing the rights of the child to safety, for example, against the rights of the parent to a family life; when balancing the rights of the criminal against the rights of society at large to live free from harm; when assessing religious minorities' cultural claims to particular forms of expression.

And as Chair of the EHRC, I pledge we will take that leadership role.

But we can't make it happen without the skills and commitment of the people in this room.

Thank you