

Open Letter from Civil Society Groups on Human Rights Day 10 December 2012

To the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon David Cameron MP and the Deputy Prime Minister,
the Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP

Global Human Rights Day provides an opportunity to reflect on how we can secure progress on human rights, not only internationally but here at home. On this day we seek your assurances that the legal protection of universal human rights in the UK is safe.

The last twelve months have witnessed some developments for human rights in the UK. The UK has completed its second United Nations Universal Periodic Review process, has signed if not yet ratified the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women, and we welcome recent commitments to ensuring equal marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples. Nevertheless the general direction of travel on human rights issues remains a concern. We often see people unable to access justice and fair process and the continued neglect and abuse of some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of our communities.

What has not changed over the past year is the increasingly worrying tone of our domestic debates about human rights and the Human Rights Act. In the UK, what should be a healthy debate about how best to secure the human rights of each and every one of us has, for far too long, lacked political leadership. This places our reputation for international human rights leadership at risk. It also jeopardises the progress we have made at home in ensuring that our human rights obligations lead to real change for people in their everyday lives.

We know from the people we work with that human rights, and the Human Rights Act, play a powerful role in supporting us all through times of difficulty and protecting us from abuse and injustice when the system fails; helping to create a respectful and fair society. This essential role of human rights is all too often obscured; yet it is these unheard stories that demonstrate how essential human rights are to us all.

From the Magna Carta to the Human Rights Act the UK has a long and proud history of recognising the need for legal limits on the exercise of State power. The protection of human rights by the law is fundamental to our modern and diverse democracy. The UK seeks to champion human rights abroad; now is the time to show leadership here at home, to re-connect the debate to the country's traditional values of fair play and our belief in basic human dignity and justice for everyone.

c/o British Institute of Human Rights, School of Law, Queen Mary University London, Mile End Road,
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In the coming weeks you will no doubt be considering the report of the Commission on a UK Bill of Rights. As you do so we seek your assurances that the protection of universal human rights is safe in the UK. For us this means securing and advancing our Human Rights Act. We look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Bowen, Director, British Institute of Human Rights

Gary Fitzgerald, Chief Executive, Action on Elder Abuse

Robert Taylor OBE, Chief Executive, Age Cymru

Duane Farrell, Director of Policy, Age NI

Brian Sloan, Interim Chief Executive, Age Scotland

Caroline Abrahams, Director of External Affairs, Age UK

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Andrew Copson, Chief Executive, British Humanist Association

Ann Chivers, Chief Executive, British Institute of Learning Disabilities

Brian Gormally, Director, CAJ (Committee on the Administration of Justice)

Peter Newell, Coordinator, Children are unbeatable! Alliance and Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children

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Lucy Scott-Moncrieff, President, Law Society of England and Wales

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Paul Farmer, Chief Executive, Mind

Deborah Jack, Chief Executive, NAT (National AIDS Trust)

Annette Lawson, Chair, National Alliance of Women's Organisations

Des Kelly OBE, Executive Director, National Care Forum

Sir Stuart Etherington, Chief Executive, NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations)

Patrick Yu, Executive Director, Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities

Kath Parson, Chief Executive, Older People's Advocacy Alliance (UK)

Karen Chandler, Campaigns Co-ordinator, Pembrokeshire People First

Vaughan Jones, Chief Executive, Praxis Community Projects

Juliet Lyon, Director, Prison Reform Trust

Sarah Crowther, Director, REAP (Refugees in Effective and Active Partnerships)

Shan Nicholas, Interim Chief Executive, Refugee Council

Simon Abel, Director, Rene Cassin

Elizabeth Henry, Chief Executive, ROTA (Race on the Agenda)

Rob Berkeley, Director, Runnymede Trust

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Unison

CC: All MPs and Peers