

Community Workers Co-operative

Press Release

September 5th, 2008



Equality Infrastructure vital in the struggle for equality

The Community Workers Co-operative today issued a statement in relation to the plans by Government to merge the Equality Authority, the Equality Tribunal, the Disability Authority, the Irish Human Rights Commissions and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner into a single agency, and in relation to concerns about the future of the Combat Poverty Agency.

A number of arguments have been put forward by the Government to justify its intention. One argument is that this rationalisation is a cost cutting exercise. This is clearly untrue as the budgets for these agencies are so small that the gains to be made by the merger will be negligible. In addition, it has been stated by the Government that arguments in relation to whether or not the amalgamation will achieve savings or not will have no impact on the final decision. Another of the arguments is that the Government is concerned to simplify the delivery landscape. Logically this is nonsense – each of the organisations has a distinct and incompatible set of functions.

The real reason for the rationalisation process may actually lie in one of the other arguments being put forward by Government. The Government is concerned to *assert the authority of government*. It has been suggested by some commentators that the Equality Authority has been

a thorn in the side of the establishment for some time due to its meticulous pursuit of its remit, and the Irish Human Rights Commission has also been critical of Government in the past. The CWC would argue that the rationalisation process is an attempt by the Government to silence the critical voice presented by the Equality Authority and the IHRC. Recent media performances by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs would also suggest a lack of understanding of poverty and disadvantage in Ireland and of the importance of the work of the Combat Poverty Agency. A spokesperson for CWC stated that, “the argument about cost-cutting is a smokescreen, an opportunistic exploitation of the current concern for our economic situation, for the Government’s real purpose – silencing the voice of those who raise the difficult issues and who dare to criticise it.”

The use of the term “quango” is worrying, designed, as it is, to give the impression that these organisations and agencies do not fulfil a meaningful function. The opposite is true. These organisations were established as a result of the identification of a deficit in the equality and social inclusion infrastructure of the time. Since then Ireland has been congratulated internationally by, for example, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination for establishing independent institutions with competence in the field of human rights, equality and racial discrimination, and these institutions have built up a significant body of expertise over the years that they have been in existence.

People may feel that these organisations are not important to their lives. However, as recent cases supported by the Equality Authority prove, it is beneficial to all of Irish society. We all have a gender. We all have an age. Some of us have a disability or know someone who has a disability. We all have an ethnic origin and some of us are members of the Traveller community. We all have a family status and many of us have a marital status. Many of us are gay or lesbian, and many of us have religious beliefs. Any one of us could be discriminated against on these grounds and if we are the Equality Authority is one of the few places that will support us.

Far from diluting the functions of these organisations, the Government should be concentrating on strengthening them. ESRI research has indicated that only a small fraction of those that experience discrimination make a formal complaint. Yet the Equality Authority has a large case load indicating that an increase in resources is imperative to enable them to carry out their functions optimally. In addition, the legislation that the Equality Authority functions under only outlaws discrimination in employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements, the provision of goods and services and other opportunities to which the public generally have access on nine distinct grounds. There are a range of other grounds and areas of life that need to be protected. The work of the Combat Poverty Agency will become even more important as a result of the recent economic downturn.

There is also a strong business case to be made for the strengthening of the remit of these organisations. A recent report commissioned jointly by the Equality Authority and the National Centre for Partnership and Performance was compiled by Professor Kathy Monks of the Learning, Innovation and Knowledge Research Centre at Dublin City University Business School. The report, *The Business Impact of Equality and Diversity - the International Evidence*, suggested that diversity in the workforce across all the grounds covered by our equality legislation holds significant potential for business success.

According to Siobhán O’Donoghue, Chairperson of the CWC, “sometimes what these the Equality Authority, the IHRC and the Combat Poverty Agency represent may be difficult to hear but it is all the more important that this voice is independent so that difficult and challenging issues may be raised. Further, we would argue that, far from being a ‘thorn in the side’ of the

State, the equality infrastructure provides a key service to the State and enables the State to engage with the equality agenda in a way that would otherwise be impossible”.

The National Co-ordinator of the CWC, Ann Irwin, added, “We understand that we are living in less favourable economic times than the recent past and there is a need for optimum efficiency in the use of resources. However, we are concerned that the argument for rationalisation may be used as a façade for what is really an attempt to silence the critical voice of society.”

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Notes

The Community Workers’ Co-operative (CWC) is a national organisation founded in 1981 whose members are committed to promoting and supporting community work as a means of achieving radical social change. There are approximately 800 members - individuals and organisations – of the CWC. The CWC supports its members through the provision of information and analysis of change in social and economic policy, which will impact directly on the communities with whom they work.

The cartoon is attached as a jpeg.