

Presentation To Oireachtas Sub-Committee

Talk On African Rainforests Given By Tullamore Man

A talk on the destruction of rainforests in Africa has been given by a Tullamore man, Tom Roche to an Oireachtas Sub-Committee on Development and Co-Operation.

Mr Roche, who is the founder of the Irish Woodworkers for Africa organisation, expressed concern about the adverse effects on local population and environments by the depletion of the forests from which these tropical hardwoods are extracted and about the consequences for future supplies of these woods.

The sub-committee, which is chaired by Laois/ Offaly Labour Deputy, Pat Gallagher, heard that most of the local authorities with whom Mr Roche has come into contact with, use only tropical hardwoods in the course of their construction work.

The sub-committee was also informed that, in many instances, tropical hardwoods are used where Irish substitutes are available and that organic chemicals can be used to render other Irish woods suitable as alternatives.

Speaking at the sub-committee meeting prior to Mr Roche's presentation, Deputy Pat Gallagher said that Mr Roche had worked very conscientiously raising issues surrounding the destruction of rainforests and the use and misuse of tropical hardwoods.

He added that during the past summer, Mr Roche had an opportunity to gain some first hand insight into this problem in Africa thanks in part to some assistance which he received from the

development education section of the Department of Foreign Affairs. At the moment, Mr Roche is working on the policy issue of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

In his presentation, Mr Roche explained that he is a cabinet maker and furniture restorer by trade. When learning his trade in Australia, he learned through experience that trees are essential to the survival of humans and animals.

When he returned to Ireland, he set up in business in his hometown as a self employed cabinet maker working specifically in tropical woods. But he discovered that tropical woods were becoming a cause of very heated international discussion and started questioning where the wood came from, how much we were using and what we were using it for.

'I discovered that we import on average 25 acres of African forest every day of the year and have done so for a number of decades. I also discovered that where there was a lot of good forest cover there were healthy, thriving communities which did not want international aid because they had everything they needed in the forests.'

He added that the best way he could describe a good forest is that it is like a supermarket here in Ireland.

'We go to Dunnes Stores or Quinnsworth and get everything we need under the one roof. The forest serves the same purpose for indigenous people in rain forest lands, particularly in West Africa'.

These questions made him examine what he was doing and made him afraid for the future. 'Anything I am doing today is for self-preservation. I am not doing it for the Africans, that just happens to be part of it. I am doing it for myself because I know from my own experience what trees mean to my life.'

This summer, Mr Roche said that he had gone to Africa and visited tree planting programmes run by Concern and our Government. He also visited a number of primary schools where tree planting is central to the curriculum and went to Cameroon where he visited a rain forest project which is completely funded by the European Union.

Mr Roche also stressed that conserving rain forests is not just about wood. 'It is about biodiversity and the other tremendous benefits which we derive from the rainforests. In Ireland, 25 per cent of our medicines come from West Africa. We only see them in bottled form, we do not know what the basic ingredients are.'

Turning to a related issue, Mr Roche said that he had recently discovered that Ireland is not a party to CITES



Tom Roche, Irish Woodworkers for Africa (on left) pictured with the Chairman of the Oireachtas sub-committee on Development and Co-Operation, Deputy Pat Gallagher. Mr Roche is pictured here receiving a letter which the Oireachtas Sub-Committee sent to all local authorities after his submission.

the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. From early November, Germany has proposed that all 18

species of West African mahogany be included in this year's convention because they are seriously over exploited.

'We import 25 acres of West African forest each day of the year to use in places where it is totally unnecessary. Nobody can convince me that West African mahogany or iroko is necessary for a shop front. I did not see tropical woods until I went to Australia when I was 18 years old. Up to then every piece of wood we used in Tullamore came from Charleville forest.'

Mr Roche stressed that Irish wood serves us well and it is only in recent years that it has become fashionable to use tropical woods. As a result we have now gone overboard and are interfering with development in Africa.

Calling on the sub-committee to endorse CITES as a step forward, Mr Roche said that it will not ban tropical deforestation but it will help to control it. Another step which Ireland could follow is to endorse the forest stewardship principles which were passed at a conference in London on St Patrick's Day this year.

Mr Roche stressed that if Ireland was to get the maximum benefit from the millions of pounds put in forestry in recent times, we must start to use the produce of those forests. 'It does not make sense to plant trees and continue to take wood from Africa. Millions of pounds have been spent on forestry and we must now educate people that timber is a natural resource which will generate work. By using Irish timber we will also help to conserve Africa's forest thereby making Africans better off'.



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE

Tuairisc Oifigiúil —
Neamhcheartaithe

OIREACHTAS ÉIREANN

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Official Report —
Unrevised

Comhchoiste um Ghnóthaí Eachtracha

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs

Wednesday, 2 November 1994

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Ní bhfaighfear aon phrofa de na
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agus an chóip a chur go dtí an
tEagarthóir roimh 30 Samhain,
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OIREACHTAS ÉIREANN

COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

Dé Céadaoin, 2 Samhain 1994.

Wednesday, 2 November 1994.

The Sub-Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy J. Connor,
 „ P. De Rossa,
 „ M. Ferris,
 „ S. Ryan,

Senator M. Lanigan,
 „ M. Taylor-Quinn.

In attendance: Mr. N. Andrews MEP., Mr. J. Fitzsimons MEP., and Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher MEP.

DEPUTY P. GALLAGHER (*Laoighis-Offaly*) IN THE CHAIR.

[Mr. Doss.] payments. The USA is the most obvious example in this respect. The EU contribution is a legal obligation and cannot be touched but voluntary funds which are not mandated, such as to the UNDP or UNICEF, and which must be voted on every year tend to be the easy hit. Fortunately with respect to these two voluntary funds Ireland is proving to be an exception and I hope this will continue.

People do not see the return on their foreign aid, but there have been returns, and progress has been made, especially in east Asia, but even in Africa. We have calculated the rate of return of Ireland's contribution to UN development projects. It has varied from 1,200 per cent to 600 per cent last year. In other words, what we spend in Ireland, on such matters as expertise, fellowships, training and goods, gives a return of approximately 600 per cent. In other countries they get less than 100 per cent back. The Nordics, especially, get upset with us because they argue that they give us a lot more than we return to them. However, that is the nature of multilateralism and the swings and roundabouts must be accepted. Nevertheless, Ireland is getting a good return on its investment in this area.

The Members of the Sub-Committee represent the tax payers and they have a right to know what we are doing. There are formal accountability mechanisms through our executive boards and auditors, but it is important that Members of the sub-committee should know, and feel that they have the right to know what we are doing with their tax payer's money. This is why we must address the sub-committee much more often than in the past. This issue is a continuing problem at the UN. We have tended to look too much in on ourselves. In this respect, public opinion must be involved outside of the narrow circle of Governments and diplomats, and we are trying to move in that direction.

Debt servicing is a crucial issue for Africa, and especially its least

developed countries. Even with the best economic management, which admittedly most do not have, they will not be able to grow themselves out of debt. Sooner or later, a major reform of debt will be required. It is happening with the Trinidad terms, but increasingly the problem is focusing on multilateral debt, World Bank and IMF debt, which cannot be rescheduled as it is preferential debt.

The UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Kenneth Clarke made a proposal on gold sales at the recent IMF and World Bank meetings in Madrid to partially alleviate some of the problems of the least developed countries, and got nowhere with it. That will require concerted pressure through the European Union to support that or similar proposals. That is where we must put the emphasis.

The Tobin tax is a great idea which, so far, has gone nowhere. However, it takes time, 20 years ago nobody was talking about environmental protection. Often one has to launch these ideas and perhaps in time they will come to fruition. We often make the comparison with emancipation and the end of slavery. It was inconceivable to our forebears that such an institution would not exist. Today, it is inconceivable that it would exist. Perhaps in 100 years we will regard the persistence of mass poverty as unthinkable and we will have solved the problem, or at least gone a way towards so doing.

Thank you, Chairman, for your indulgence.

Chairman: Thank you Mr. Doss for a very useful exchange. You will have gained an appreciation of the Members' favourable view of this report and the agenda of human development. We look forward to returning to the subject in the run-up to the social summit. It is very useful for us, as representatives of the taxpayer, to get a chance to talk to people like you.

We often criticise the UN as an agency without realising that we are a member state and that the UN is the

sum of its parts. We can also fail to distinguish between the various agencies of the United Nations. I compliment the UNDP on its work, presentation and the value for money which it is giving Ireland. I wish to keep our communication open and look forward to your return, perhaps in preparation for the social summit and certainly to discuss next year's report.

Mr. Finn: On the question of awareness, all of a sudden we are *au fait* with the outside world, as can be seen from the informed comments which we received from the legislators today. However, when I first came back from my first assignment abroad in 1958 I met the local parish priest. He said to me that he had not seen me around for a while and asked where I had been. So, grandly, full of myself and trying to impress him I said that I had been in the Middle East, to which he replied that he had never liked Mullingar people.

Irish Woodworkers for Africa.

Chairman: The next item on our agenda is a presentation by Mr. Tom Roche of Irish Woodworkers for Africa. I am aware of the very good work which Mr. Roche has done in relation to an issue which has been put before this committee by organisations such as Earthwatch; that is, the destruction of the rain forests and the use and abuse of tropical hardwoods. Mr. Roche has worked very conscientiously for a number of years in this area. Members may be familiar with the Wood of Life exhibition with which he successfully toured around the country.

During the summer he got an opportunity, with some assistance from the development education section of the Department of Foreign Affairs, to gain some further firsthand insight into this problem in Africa. He is at the moment working on the policy issue of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

I welcome him to our meeting and thank him for taking the time to attend. A file has been circulated to Members which Mr. Roche kindly provided in advance of this meeting. I ask to make his presentation to the committee and then we can discuss the issues which arise.

Mr. Roche: I am a cabinet maker and furniture restorer by trade. After serving my apprenticeship I emigrated to Australia in 1967 at the age of 18 years. I worked at the trade for a number of years but I left it for a while and went to work on a sheep farm. Part of our Saturday night ritual was that three of us would have share the same bath water because it was so precious. The last person out of the bath had to scoop all the water into a bucket and pour it on the trees around the house because we could not have survived in Australia without those trees due to the sun. I learned at that age that trees are essential to the survival of humans and animals.

After I returned to Ireland I set up in business in my home town as a self employed cabinet maker working specifically in tropical woods. Over the years, I discovered that tropical woods were becoming a cause of very heated international discussion. I started questioning where the wood came from, how much of it we were using and what we were using it for.

As Members can see from the report, I discovered that we import on average 25 acres of African forest every day of the year, and have done so for quite a number of decades. Certain African countries which were largely afforested at one time are now suffering from environmental bankruptcy because of deforestation. I also discovered that where there was a lot of good forest cover there were healthy, thriving communities which did not want international aid because they had everything they needed in the forests. They had medicines from the trees, fodder for their cattle, timber for building, shade and everything else they needed. The

[Mr. Roche.]

best way in which I can describe a good forest is that it is like a supermarket here in Ireland. We go to Dunnes Stores or Quinnsworth and get everything we need under the one roof. The forest serves the same purpose for indigenous people in rain forest lands, particularly in west Africa.

All those things made me think about what we were doing and I became very afraid for my future. Anything which I am doing today is for self-preservation. I am not doing it for the Africans, that just happens to be part of it. I am doing it for myself because I know from my own experience what trees mean to my life. Apart from the wood issue, there are spiritual and other intrinsic values which we get from forests.

I went to Africa, as Deputy Gallagher said, this year and visited tree planting programmes run by Concern and the Irish Government. I visited a number of primary schools where tree planting is central to the curriculum. Children must know how to plant trees and care for them and be educated about the value of trees to their survival.

I then went to Cameroon where I visited a rain forest project which is completely funded by the European Union. Part of the mandate of that project is to conserve the rain forest. A very important plant has been found in that area which has proven *in vitro* to inhibit the replication of the AIDS virus. This has created a great deal of interest in medical circles.

Conserving the rain forests is not just about wood. It is about biodiversity and the other tremendous benefits which we derive from rain forests. In Ireland, 25 per cent of our medicines come from west Africa. We only see them in bottled form, we do not know what the basic ingredients are.

I discovered recently that Ireland is not a party to CITES — the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Beginning next Monday, 7 November, Germany has proposed that all 18 species of west African mahogany be included in this year's convention

because they are seriously over exploited. We import 25 acres of west African forest each day of the year to use in places where it is totally unnecessary. Nobody can convince me that west African mahogany or iroko is necessary for a shop front. I did not see pieces of tropical wood until I went to Australia when I was 18 years old. Up to then every piece of wood we used in Tullamore came from Charleville forest.

Irish wood serves us well and only in recent years has it become fashionable to use tropical woods. We have gone overboard and we are now interfering with development in Africa. Millions of pounds have been sent to Africa in recent years. I would prefer to see the forests left untouched. Giving money to Africa is not enough, although necessary and I would not knock it. I am delighted the Government is giving so much but it is important to look at the other issues which are preventing Africans from progressing. That they must cut down forests to service their debts is a tremendous drawback because when the forest is gone all the money in the bank in Cameroon will not feed them; it will not do them any good.

We must look at the other issues more closely. If the issue I mentioned is not addressed it will cause untold problems. I do not believe west Africa is getting much financial aid from Ireland compared to east Africa, although given present logging rates, it is only a matter of time before those people will have their hands out. I would like the sub-committee to endorse CITES as a step forward. It will not ban tropical deforestation but it will help to control it. Africans will thereby get a better return for their produce.

Another step is to endorse the forest stewardship principles. I attended that meeting on St. Patrick's Day in London this year. Some 400 delegates from Europe attended and I was the only one from Ireland who took an interest in this area of timber, where there is a serious problem. Germany has already seen the need to cut back on the use of tropical woods and 200 cities have

banned the use of tropical hardwoods. The Netherlands has also cut back and 51 per cent of its municipalities do not use tropical woods.

If we are to get the maximum benefit from the millions of pounds put into forestry in recent times, we must start to use the produce of those forests. It does not make sense to plant trees and continue to take wood from Africa. Millions of pounds have been spent on forestry and we must now educate people that timber is a natural resource which will generate work. By using Irish timber we will also help to conserve Africa's forest thereby making Africans better off.

I thank Deputy Gallagher (*Laoighis-Offaly*) for inviting me to this meeting and members for listening. I will do my best to answer any questions.

Chairman: Thank you for that clear presentation.

Deputy Ferris: I congratulate Mr. Roche on the presentation of a case which will involve his livelihood sometime in the future. Even now he is showing his concern. Young people are more conscious of the environment nowadays, particularly due to the efforts of Earthwatch, which is active in my constituency. My 12 year old daughter reminds me of my responsibilities in this area and about the need to preserve rainforests. Mr. Roche put it succinctly in the documentation we got.

The Chairman lobbied the Minister, the Tánaiste and others about what Mr. Roche is doing on our behalf. Is it possible to initiate any other programme *vis-à-vis* the importation of the hardwoods without being affiliated to CITES? Does affiliation to CITES give us additional powers to do what Germany has done?

Years ago nobody thought a wonderful product like ivory would be banned but it became socially unacceptable to have ivory products because of the implications for wild animals and its production is now illegal in most countries.

The use of costly beautiful hardwoods indicates prestige. We must convince people that other products are as good. A factory in my constituency can produce a fibre board from any type of wood and produce the finish of the best hardwood in the world. There is no excuse for using hardwoods from the point of view of quality. You probably know the Medite product and use it in cabinetmaking.

Do we need to affiliate to CITES to get legislative power to ban the use of hardwoods or can we initiate a campaign through importers and others who make decisions about purchasing? It is time — I congratulate you for doing this — we were made more aware of this problem. We should not wait for our ten and 12 year old school children to remind us of what civics class teachers are reminding them of the importance of such products.

Mr. Roche: It is essential to become a signatory to CITES for a couple of reasons. Already 120 countries have adopted the CITES principles or are CITES members. Our voice would be another voice added to the 120 countries. It would give Ireland power in that if one of our species of wood for example oak became threatened or overexploited we could propose to CITES that we do not want oak to be traded anymore but want it put into perpetuity for the next generation so it can regenerate itself.

In order to apply the CITES principles, one must become a member and that would give us power. Germany, for example, has proposed 18 species of west Africa mahogany not because it wants to ban the trade in it but because it wants it controlled. It is another way of controlling trade while supporting the principles of CITES in which I strongly believe.

Senator Taylor-Quinn: I welcome Mr. Roche and I compliment him on his presentation. We are indebted to people like him for bringing this issue to our attention. Much debate and discussion

[Senator Taylor-Quinn.] has taken place on the importance of tropical forests and the environmental effect they have on the world ecosystem. Mr. Roche has brought it to our doorstep and has shown the effect this has on us and how we contribute to the damage. I was astounded to hear that over 25 acres of wood from Africa is imported each day. That is the most stunning information I have received from this report. It is quite frightening. It seems an enormous amount of wood and something that I would not in my wildest dreams have thought. There must be some reason the Department has not signed the CITES convention. Given that 120 other countries are already signatories to it, perhaps we should have somebody from the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht explain to us why it is not signed. Maybe we can still pass a motion from this committee calling on the Department to become signatories, but before we do that we should get in somebody to explain why we have not signed it. Personally I have no objections, I do not know of any reason we should not sign the agreement. As Deputy Ferris said, performance of wood can be enhanced with modern technology. We are both familiar with the significance of this industry in our respective constituencies. We should pass a motion calling on the Government to sign the convention. Before going ahead with this, we should have someone in from the Department to explain why they have not signed it.

It is unfortunate that there is a convention taking place in a week's time in Florida, to which we will not be sending either members or observers. In correspondence with the Minister clear reasons as to why Ireland will not be there are stated. Ireland has not ratified the CITES convention because Ireland has not responded to and does not recognise CITES. That is fairly serious stuff and we need an explanation for that. I suggest we invite somebody from the Department to explain the reasons to us.

Chairman: You are proposing that we invite someone from the Department prior to a motion being passed on that subject.

Senator Taylor-Quinn: Yes. It is all a matter of finding out the background.

Deputy S. Ryan: It is great to have somebody with a technical knowledge of the issues to speak to us. Is Mr. Roche suggesting or recommending a complete ban on hardwoods in this regard? It would probably be desirable in certain ways to try to reduce the amount of hardwoods coming into the country. What alternatives would Mr. Roche use for some of the hardwoods that would be necessary for outdoor work?

Mr. Roche: I am not advocating a ban on tropical hardwoods. I am advocating control on the amount of timber extracted from tropical rainforests systems and I am advocating that it be done in a fashion that is compatible with the environment, in such a way that it does not destroy the wildlife or put indigenous peoples out of their homes. There is a lot of good quality, highly prized wood in these tropical rainforests and I would personally feel very deprived if I were not allowed to use it. I am not advocating a ban. I have made that very clear to everybody. I am asking that we control our use of it.

There is no need to use tropical hardwood to build a shopfront in Ireland and then paint it. It is contrary to what I was taught as an apprentice. I was told to sand the wood and bring out its beauty. In recent years I have seen people painting it. All these signals are going out to youngsters and they are confused. It must be rectified. I am not advocating a ban, just control. We should be much more conscious of our uses of tropical wood.

There is a lot of wood in this country suitable for use in shopfronts. We have millions of cubic meters of Douglas fir coming on stream, planted in the 1920s and 1930s. This is excellent wood and it

will do the very same job as a tropical hardwood in a shopfront, window or door. It is Irish grown and much more suitable to this climate because it is grown here. We have no excuse for not using Irish wood, because we have all the modern technological means of increasing its lifespan by adding organic chemicals to it. There are organic treatments for wood to make it last longer. We have good wood available as an alternative to tropical hardwoods for certain jobs.

We all deserve a nice piece of furniture in our house but when we started using tropical wood in shopfronts we went overboard and we are now abusing a very precious resource. There is no need for it.

Those are the two points I wish to make. I am not advocating a ban, I am just asking for control, and that we would be much more selective about where we use this wood. Education plays a big part in this and in my exhibition I have tried to educate people and make them understand that there are alternatives to tropical woods.

Deputy De Rossa: Has Mr. Roche had a reply from the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht to his letter concerning CITES? Perhaps, Chairman, you might request the Department on behalf of the committee to send an observer to the convention next week. That at least would be an indication of interest. It does not commit the Department to taking on board the convention itself, but at least it would open the door. Finally, how much of the new timber we have is hardwood? I would not recognise hardwood if I saw it, but I do appreciate that this wood is probably recycled from somewhere else.

Deputy Ferris: It is all recycled Irish wood.

Deputy De Rossa: The reply from the Office of Public Works is fairly weak in terms of the obligation on staff not to use hardwood. Apart from inviting someone from the Department, perhaps

we should talk to the Office of Public Works. Local authorities have a major role in construction. I do not know to what extent, if any, local authorities use hardwood in centres that they may build. It is something we all need to become conscious of on a daily basis in terms of the various decision making roles which we all have, in the Dáil and outside of the Dáil, on issues which may have an impact on this.

Mr. Roche: When I have an exhibition in any town — I have had 30 of them so far — I always try to get a Minister or somebody in the locality to launch it. That way I am more or less guaranteed that council officials will come along. I always offer alternatives to the woods they are using. Most local authorities are using tropical woods in areas that could be well served by using a local wood. If we are to convince people of the forest potential that we have, we must start at council level and let the councils be seen to be using locally produced wood. There is not a council that is not within 10 miles of a forest. Councils must take the initiative by using local woods. Then you will get the people to follow. It can only be good for us all. We have to start with the councils and I try to lobby them on that.

Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Roche. There are a number of courses of action which we can take. The suggestion from Senator Taylor-Quinn that we pass a motion urging the Government to support the convention, in addition to asking an official from the Department to attend our next meeting to discuss Ireland's position, is something the sub-committee could act upon. In addition, the suggestion by Deputy De Rossa that I should, on behalf of the sub-committee, contact the Minister to urge that at least an observer attend, can be acted upon immediately. The point made on the issue of exchange with regard to local authorities can be pursued, because many of them are aware of this issue through the exhibition, and the sub-committee could, therefore, com-

[Chairman.]
municate with local authorities on this matter also.

I noted from the file submitted by Mr. Roche that there was correspondence with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forestry, and in this respect, I suggest we write to the Minister on two issues. The first is to ask him, and also the Minister for Tourism and Trade, to explore what action can be taken, multilaterally and within the EU, on this matter. The second issue is to ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forestry to support the principles of the forest stewardship council, mentioned by Mr. Roche.

Is it agreed that the sub-committee proceed with these suggestions? Agreed.

I thank Mr. Roche for attending the sub-committee. I have been familiar with his work for some time, and I have always been impressed with the way in which the theory of the issue is com-

bined with the practise of it. We often hear of these issues in a theoretical way, and I therefore compliment Mr. Roche on the practicality of his presentation and proposals. He raised issues which the sub-committee can work on and report back to Mr. Roche on progress made.

I wish the sub-committee to consider inviting the Minister for Finance to attend a meeting and discuss the contribution which he made on Ireland's behalf to the anniversary summit of the IMF and the World Bank. The debate which took place on the subject in Ireland earlier in the year had some impact on the contribution which Ireland made at that summit, and I would therefore like the Minister to attend a meeting and provide a resume of his contribution and to take questions from Members. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The sub-committee adjourned at 1.35 p.m.

SUB-COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN IRELAND

The Sub-Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy S. Barrett,
" D. Bree,
" B. Briscoe,
" J. Connor,
" A. Currie,*
" P. De Rossa,
" S. Doherty,*

Senator S. Maloney.

*In the absence of Deputies N. Owen and E. Ryan respectively.

DEPUTY J. O'KEEFFE IN THE CHAIR.

Presentation by Committee on the Administration of Justice in Northern Ireland.

Chairman: I welcome the members of the Committee on the Administration

of Justice in Northern Ireland. Angela Hegarty is the chairman, the vice chairman is Christine Bell and the minutes secretary is Catríona Ruane. The parliamentary liaison officer is Dr. Colm Campbell and the information officer is

Martin O'Brien. They are accompanied by three interns who are Hannes Vallikivi from Estonia, Udamé Essien from Nigeria and Jeanine Bucherer from Germany.

The CAJ is a cross community group interested in ensuring the highest standards in the administration of justice in Northern Ireland. It is proper to point out initially that the committee does not take any position on the constitutional issue. The committee is very clear that a respect for human rights will have to be a cornerstone of any lasting solution in Northern Ireland.

We are very interested in getting up-to-date views on the situation in Northern Ireland. The submission by the group has been circulated. We are particularly interested in their views of the current situation in light of the latest developments. We would like to hear their views on the priorities in terms of human rights in the peace process. It would be very helpful if we had a view of the process from on the one hand west Belfast, and on the other from the Shankill. There is a feeling here that to some degree the grassroots are ahead of the political representatives. We would like the groups informed opinion on that.

There are also other areas such as policing which we would be interested in getting a view on. I know that the group has always been interested in the question of a bill of rights and I invite them to touch on that. After the group has given an outline of their views I will ask for questions.

Ms Hegarty: Thank you for inviting us to speak. It is an opportunity which we welcome very much and we hope that it will be a productive meeting. We are happy to answer any questions Members might have. The committee was formed in 1981 by a group of people drawn from all of the communities in Northern Ireland. There is sometimes a notion that there are just two communities in Northern Ireland. However, we have a number of ethnic minorities including the Chinese, Indian and trav-

elling communities. Our membership is drawn from those communities as well as from the two major communities — the Protestant and Catholic communities.

The committee was set up to ensure that the highest standards of international law were applied in Northern Ireland and to monitor Government action and legislation in this respect. We take no position on the Border but our view is that no matter what constitutional arrangements may pertain, the highest standards of international law should be applied as a minimum to the legal system in Northern Ireland.

I noticed that the Chairman referred to west Belfast and the Falls. I am from Derry. The issues are not just Belfast based. I am always very careful to say to people that we draw our membership from all over Northern Ireland. We also have members from outside Northern Ireland. We work on a range of issues, not just those which are traditionally associated with the conflict. For example, we have done quite a deal of work on the issue of racism in Northern Ireland and the effect of the absence of any anti-racist legislation. It is fair to say that we have been instrumental, in partnership with the Chinese and travelling communities, in persuading the Government that something needed to be done.

We work on complaints and issues raised with us by all the communities. We have worked, for example, on issues of miscarriages of justice in relation to the UDR Four. We did quite a lot of work with the people involved in that campaign. We also worked with the families of those who were accused in relation to the Casement murders a few years ago. We also work with the communities on harassment. A feature of the conflict in Northern Ireland has been harassment in both communities. We have worked with the communities in the Shankill and the Falls and elsewhere on that issue.

Our international work has been a feature of our organisation in the past few years. We are a member of the Federation Internationale Droits du