***From Pete Kissel, Member of the American Brexit Committee & National President of the Irish American Unity Conference December 14, 2021***

UK government plans to reform human rights laws have been branded “a blatant, unashamed power grab” by human rights campaigners.

Justice secretary Dominic Raab today announced a three-month consultation on proposed reforms to the Human Rights Act 1998.

The government’s plans include the introduction of a new bill of rights to “strengthen typically British rights like freedom of speech and trial by jury, while preventing abuses of the system and adding a healthy dose of common sense”.

However, Martha Spurrier, barrister and director of human rights group Liberty, said the government is “quite literally rewriting the rules in their favour so they become untouchable”, and Amnesty CEO Sacha Deshmukh warned of an “aggressive human rights roll-back”.

Ms Spurrier said: “The Human Rights Act has changed many lives for the better. It must be protected from political interference intent on making state power unaccountable.

“This reform is a threat to how and when we can challenge those in power – including stripping some people’s rights away and requiring everyone to get permission from a judge before they can take the state to court.

“Whatever you think of this government, they must respect the rule of law. This change will mean future governments, of all political leanings, will be beyond the reach of public accountability.”

She added: “Today’s announcement is being cast as strengthening our rights when in fact if this plan goes through, they will be fatally weakened. This government is systematically shutting down all avenues of accountability through a succession of rushed and oppressive bills.

“We must ensure the government changes course as a matter of urgency, before we very quickly find ourselves wondering where our fundamental human rights have gone.”

Mr Deshmukh said: “Human rights laws and standards are hard-won, built from historic struggle and impassioned campaigning - politicians of the day must not be allowed to redefine rights based on which the government likes and which it does not.

“Hillsborough, Mid Staffs, a proper inquiry into the government’s handling of the Covid pandemic – when it comes to righting wrongs, the Human Rights Act is the most important tool in the box. It has been, and will continue to be, absolutely vital in the fight for justice, not least when the authorities have something to hide.

“If ministers move ahead with plans to water down the Human Rights Act and override judgments with which they disagree, they risk aligning themselves with authoritarian regimes around the world.”

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in danger of losing UN accreditation

14 DEC 2021

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) could lose its A-status accreditation from the United Nations due to a lack of funding.

The watchdog, led by barrister Alyson Kilpatrick, is funded by the UK government through the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) but has seen its budget slashed by nearly 50 per cent over the past decade.

Under the Brexit deal, the NIHRC has taken on an enhanced role in monitoring and reporting on the UK government’s promises that Northern Ireland will keep pace with changes in EU equality and human rights laws.

The sub-committee on accreditation (SCA) of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) has deferred the re-accreditation of the NIHRC to its second session of 2022.

The SCA expressed grave concerns regarding NIHRC’s current financial environment, describing the situation as “very serious and time sensitive” and “strongly recommend[ing] that an improved and sustainable position is reached within this deferral period”.

A-status accreditation shows that a national human rights institution (NHRI) is in full compliance with the UN Paris Principles. A-status NHRIs have specific participation rights in international and regional mechanisms, such as speaking rights in the UN Human Rights Council and before some UN treaty bodies.