

# 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.

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

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Unison

CC: All MPs and Peers