150 CEOs challenge the PM to secure our Human Rights Act as the government promotes accountability at the International Summit for Democracy

Thursday 9 December, 2021

Embargoed: 0.01am 10 December 2021

On global Human Rights Day, as the UK attends the international Summit for Democracy and the Justice Secretary vows to "overhaul" our protections, over 150 groups across the UK challenge the Prime Minister to secure our Human Rights Act

As the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, attends President Biden's Summit for Democracy, over 150 groups have issued an open letter challenging him to secure our Human Rights Act and safeguard human rights and democratic accountability here at home.

The organisations include those working with children, carers, people with learning disabilities and mental ill-health, women experiencing violence, migrants, older people, and groups campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights, fair trials, access to justice, decent housing and against racial discrimination and to increase the UK's democratic accountability. In our work up and down the country, we see the everyday ways our Human Rights Act helps people across the UK to live more dignified and equal lives; ordinary people whose voices are rarely considered by those in power.

The loud calls to tamper with our Human Rights Act, often by those in government with the responsibility to uphold our protections, does little to reassure civil society groups, and the many people we each support and represent. As parliamentarians quizzed the Justice Secretary Dominic Raab on the government's human rights priorities, the Minister doubled down on his intention to publish plans to change our law imminently, despite not yet having published the report of the Independent Review of the Human Rights Act.

This atmosphere of hostility towards human rights and legal accountability in the UK cannot continue. The organisations are calling on the Prime Minister, and leaders of all political parties to "move from the romanticisation of being human rights pioneers in 1948 and commit to our Human Rights Act protections being a part of everyone's life, every day, today and tomorrow."

Sanchita Hosali, Director of the British Institute of Human Rights, the organisation coordinating the letter, said:

"As the UK enthusiastically participates in President Biden's Summit for Democracy, it is time for our Prime Minister to also turn the lens inwards. The hostile environment towards human rights and accountability cannot continue; if we are a nation that values democracy, we must also value the checks on power."

"At BIHR whether we are working with doctors and nurses, children and parents, teachers or prison officers, women surviving abuse, people with learning disabilities and many others; what we see every single day is the real value and meaning of our Human Rights Act for people across the UK."

"Rather than hyperbole and rhetoric bordering on dog whistle politicking, we need a government that is willing to stand up for Our Human Rights Act, our way to hold them to account. As we all work hard to mitigate the impact of the pandemic – a crisis in which our Human Rights Act has provided vital protections – we stand with over 150 other organisations calling for a world in which our political leaders move from the romanticisation of being human rights pioneers in 1948 and commit to our rights being a part of everyone's life, every day, today and tomorrow. It is a challenge we urge Mr Johnson to take on."

The letter reads:

"Dear Prime Minister and Political

Leaders Every year on 10 December, the world marks Human Rights Day, commemorating the day when, in 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, recognising the dignity and equal rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and

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peace in the world. This is the foundation of our Human Rights Act; this is why it matters. Our law here at home, setting out each person's protections, and the responsibilities of government and those with public power to realise that vision of the UDHR; for us all to live in equal dignity.

Our politicians often proudly recall the UK's role in setting down human rights law in the aftermath of World War II, standing shoulder to shoulder with nations to affirm our commitment to ensuring that human rights should be protected by the rule of law, that a common understanding of these rights should be shared by every person and part of society. Now, in the midst of this modern era global crisis, human rights must inform both our responses to the pandemic and our recovery from it. No one has escaped the impact of this virus. And sadly, we have witnessed the disproportionate and discriminatory effects of Covid-19 and government measures among too many, including among black and minoritized communities, for disabled people, and people who live in care homes, alongside significant educational impacts for children and young people, deepening poverty, increased reporting of domestic abuse, and even more difficulty accessing justice. There is much more than we cannot do justice to in such a short space, but which has been documented by parliamentary committee inquiries and research from our national human rights institutions, academics and across civil society. If recovery is to be resilient and just it must be focused on upholding our human rights.

And yet, here in the UK, rather than renewed commitment to upholding rights we face a hostile environment for human rights. Rather than addressing the inequalities fuelled and exacerbated by the pandemic, we are facing a political climate filled with threats to "overhaul" the very protections we all need upheld. The loud calls to tamper with our Human Rights Act, by those with the very responsibility to uphold them, does little to reassure us, and the many people we support and represent.

Human Rights Day should be an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of human rights in rebuilding the world we want. We call on the UK Government, and all political leaders, to share our commitment to universal human rights, as set out in our Human Rights Act. As civil society groups working hard to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, we want a world in which our political leaders move from the romanticisation of being human rights pioneers in 1948 and commit to our Human Rights Act protections being a part of everyone's life, every day, today and tomorrow."

ENDS

Notes for Editors:

- For a BIHR spokesperson please contact Sanchita Hosali (Director) shosali@bihr.org.uk (020 3039 3648 including out of hours) or Carlyn Miller (Policy & Programmes Manager) cmiller@bihr.org.uk (020 3039 3652)
- A full list of the signatories to the letter is available from BIHR prior to 10 December; please contact the spokesperson.
- For over 45 years the British Institute of Human Rights, a UK-wide independent human rights charity supporting social change through the practical use of human rights law. For more information visit www.bihr.org.uk, Twitter: @BIHRhumanrights
- Human Rights Day, on 10 December, marks the day in 1948 when the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UK provided one of the eight drafters who, alongside US former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, produced the 30 Articles of the UDHR, recognising the "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family". The European Convention on Human Rights enforces many of the rights set out in the UDHR and the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1998 brings those rights home in the UK.
- On Wednesday 8 December 2021 the Justice Secretary, and Lord Chancellor, Dominic Raab MP appeared before the UK parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights and was questioned on the Government's human rights priorities: Committees - UK Parliament
- All information about this joint action from 150+ civil society groups, including Easy Read materials and videos will be available on this page from 12.01am on Friday 10 December: https://www.bihr.org.uk/human-rights-day-2021/

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Additional Assets:
Audio visual video of letter to the Prime Minister from over 150 organisations calling for our Human Rights Act to be secured.
EASY READ version of the Human Rights Day Letter coproduced with people with learning disabilities

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