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## Equality body 'may falter' without legislative support

David Callaghan  
Wednesday May 12, 2004

Campaigners have voiced their support for a long-awaited white paper on a single equality commission, published today by the government, but warn that the new body may falter without legislation to enhance its powers.

The new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) will replace three existing bodies, and take on responsibility for promoting human rights and policing new laws against workplace discrimination.

One of its main areas will be disability discrimination, and despite concerns that it will become a neglected subject behind sex, age or racial discrimination, the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) is behind the move for a single body.

Bert Massie, the chairman of the DRC, said: "The white paper marks a historic opportunity to place equality and human rights at the centre of public life and to build a much-needed consensus on the barriers that must be eliminated to create a truly equal society for all our citizens."

But Mr Massie warned: "The need for single equalities legislation to accompany the work of the CEHR is very important. Without it, it would be easier for the CEHR to fail than to succeed. It is not too late for the government to think again on this and give the CEHR a better start."

The CEHR will bring together the work of the DRC, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission. Among its main aims are:

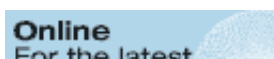
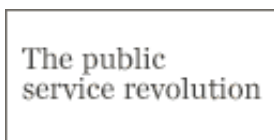
- to be a 'champion' for diversity by using a range of experts from different backgrounds to make policy making more inclusive;
- to focus on individuals who may face discrimination on several different grounds;
- to build closer relations between community groups;
- to provide one source of information and advice to

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individuals and organisations;

- to prevent employment tribunal cases by working closely with businesses to raise awareness of equality issues;
- to "drive a human rights culture" throughout the public sector, and
- to develop a regional presence and be responsive to local concerns.

The CEHR will cover the whole of Great Britain, and will need to work closely with the Scottish Human Rights Commission.

The trade and industry secretary, Patricia Hewitt, who announced the white paper jointly with the constitutional affairs secretary, Lord Falconer, said: "The CEHR will bring together knowledge and experience to overcome and challenge all types of discrimination, and will have a broader range of tools to tackle the complexities of our diverse society."

Help the Aged has voiced its support for the new commission. Tessa Harding, a senior policy adviser, said: "The Commission for Equality and Human Rights is essential if we are to tackle pervasive age discrimination and the widespread abuse of the human rights of older people."

Julie Mellor, the chairwoman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, said: "Having a single champion and a 'one-stop shop' for equality and human rights issues makes sense for individuals, employers and service providers.

"It will help make sure that all our equality laws, including new laws on age, belief and sexual orientation, are equally well understood, promoted and enforced."

The white paper follows the announcement of a single equality body in October last year, and the establishment of a taskforce chaired by Jacqui Smith, the deputy minister for women and equality, which advised on the content of the white paper.

The parliamentary joint commission on human rights also recommended a single equality body to cover human rights in a report published in April.

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