

**Launch of the BIHR Human Rights Charter
House of Lords, 10 December 2013**

*Remarks by Natalie Samarasinghe
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I am delighted to be here today to support the launch of this Human Rights Charter. The United Nations Association – UK is proud to be among the first civil society groups to sign it and we hope that many more will do so.

Civil society played a key role in securing the inclusion of human rights in the UN Charter, and in laying the groundwork for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the norms, laws and mechanisms we have today.

The human rights treaties and their monitoring bodies, the Human Rights Council and its independent experts, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights – which is celebrating its 20th birthday this year – they all help to protect and empower millions of people around the world.

Important as they are, though, this alphabet soup of instruments can seem distant and perplexing to ordinary people. UNA-UK was founded in 1945 to serve as a bridge between the UN and the UK, and helping people to engage with UN human rights mechanisms remains a core part of our work. We strive to demonstrate why they matter to people in this country.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the UK ratified in 2009, is a good example. It serves as a symbol of hope and recognition, and also has the potential to lead to changes in legislation, policies and attitudes, although much more needs to be done in this regard.

In achieving this, the role of government is essential. Far from infringing national sovereignty, human rights treaties rely on states for their implementation. Governments choose to adopt them and only they can give real meaning to their provisions. The same goes for other parts of the UN human rights system. It can examine countries' records, and make recommendations, but its powers of compulsion are largely moral and relational. This is why domestic laws and institutions are so vital.

The UK has a strong – and long – history in this regard. The Universal Declaration is often referred to as an 'international Magna Carta', a testament to the UK's centuries-old tradition of human rights at home, and to its instrumental role in their global development. From the Levellers to the Wolfenden Report, the European Convention to the Human Rights Act, the UK has proved time and again that it can be a force for good.

For this reason, we are delighted that the UK has been elected to the UN Human Rights Council. And for this reason, we, and others in this room, will continue to push the UK to lead by example on human rights, at home and abroad.

What the UK does domestically, how it interacts with UN mechanisms, how it speaks about human rights – these things matter internationally. Regressive actions send the wrong signal to states with poor records and dismay those struggling for freedoms in those countries. They also diminish the crucial work of the FCO and DFID in furthering human rights around the world.

Alas, this work is not celebrated often enough in the UK. Here, the human rights debate has become mired in negativity. They are not seen as protecting and empowering us all, but as bureaucratic irritations and the preserve of minorities.

There are those who will criticise us for calling on the UK to improve its own human rights record. Why not focus on the worst offenders instead? But it is the role of civil society to act as a conscience and as a gadfly. That we are able to do so openly in the UK is something to be proud of.

So UNA-UK and its partners in the Human Rights Alliance will continue to lobby, and to support, the UK in championing rights. And we will continue to work with people in the UK to promote understanding of, engagement with, and pride in, our human rights laws and mechanisms.

Speaking at the 10th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, Eleanor Roosevelt, one of its drafters, said:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – the neighbourhood; the school or college; the factory, farm or office. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

The Charter we are launching today represents an important step towards this vision.