

BOOK REVIEW HUMAN RIGHTS

HUMAN RIGHTS ACT TOOLKIT (2nd Edition)

by Jenny Watson and Mitchell Woolf

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GET ON THE RIGHT TRACK WITH THIS ADVICE TOOLKIT

*A book review by Phillip Taylor MBE LL.B (Hons) Barrister-at-Law
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The 'Toolkit' books which LAG have published are stunning works for those with a passing interest in reforming laws introduced by this government which may be difficult to understand for the lay person and his or her advisers. It is always a difficult task for writers to produce a book covering legal matters for managers and front-line staff who have no legal knowledge but who need to understand what the law and what it means for them and their colleagues: the toolkit does this admirably.

Jenny Watson and Mitchell Woolf are to be congratulated on providing a clear and concise introduction to basic human rights principles without resorting to the gobbledegook which so many unreadable law books contain these days. This is an eminently readable book on human rights with clear, worked-through examples which will be invaluable for students as well as those lawyers and professionals who think they know about human rights (but don't really!).

Watson & Woolf also introduce the Human Rights Act 1998 to those people who may not have had much prior knowledge of these laws and know that ignorance of them is no excuse. The authors demonstrate how human rights principles play a part in everyday decisions in the workplace over procedures, policies and service delivery under demanding work ethics.

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In her Foreword, Helena Kennedy rightly describes the law as 'too important to be left to lawyers' and she does tend to say this quite often, especially in the House of

Lords. However, she is in her element here with this legislation which has probably promoted the core values of mutual respect and the dignity of the individual which it set out to achieve. However, I would not go so far as to say (as she does) that the Act is a "positive expression of a mature society" yet as there is still a long way to go and I would like to see a charter of fundamental rights in the next few years which gets away a bit from the knee-jerk reactions of post 1945 Europe.

The Watson & Woolf Toolkit is highly practical as almost a virtual seminar on human rights, with its eleven chapters and a copy of the Act at the end. The contents start with a bold introduction, and then we have Part I which is entitled 'The Checklist' covering 'mini checklists' for the important areas such as the right to a fair trial, discrimination and case examples to give it office credibility. Part II talks about the law in a non-boring way looking at the significance of the Act, a breakdown of the articles, a classification of the rights and principles, and how the legislation actually works.

The greatest asset of the toolkit is, as the name implies, a piece of kit which gives the reader the tools of individual rights and obligations which go to make up this controversial Act, and how they can be made to work in practice. The question and answer structure using a checklist system gives a human face to the subject which is much needed with this revised and improved second edition.

I have always found the continuing debate over the obligations of public bodies under the Act to be confusing (as have many other practitioners). It is good to know that Watson & Woolf have dispelled some of the prejudices, misunderstandings and myths surrounding what we, as the workforce, think the Human Rights Act is about. Many practitioners and students have guarded responses to this legislation but the HRA Toolkit is an excellent, all-round statement of the current principles (before they change) written in a non-nonsense style to prepare you for the impact of equality and diversity issues which continue to arise in this new area of law.

Of the many books I have reviewed on human rights since that fateful morning of 2nd October 2000, this toolkit gets the balance right between the concepts of current human rights philosophy in the early 21st century, and the measure of its limited successes to date. It explains how the system works in simple terms and there are some great case illustrations which many seminars on human rights could do to follow.

The HRA Toolkit is good for students, too, as many often confuse the ideals of human rights with what we actually have in practice- Watson & Woolf give us the practice without the frills of human rights theory which can be seen as such a damaging political label in some quarters. This toolkit is a great addition to the working library of the professional and the layman alike as we prepare for new principles of fundamental rights later this century now the basics have been largely attained.