

Ms. Mary White T.D.
Minister of State for Equality, Integration & Human Rights

Launch of the Irish Human Rights Commission Annual Report 2009

24th August 2010
Office of the Irish Human Rights Commission

I am delighted to be here today with you all to launch your 2009 Annual Report. This is my third visit to the Commission since I became Minister of State for Equality, Human Rights and Integration and it is always a pleasure to be here with you all. The purpose of today is twofold, reflect on the work undertaken by the Commission in 2009 and also look forward to the important role the Human Rights Commission will play over the coming years.

Review of 2009

- 2009 was a difficult year with funding cuts.
- I acknowledge that such cuts have a major impact on small organisations such as the Commission.
- But you have achieved much with your limited resources, including the publication of a major Policy Statement on the Human Rights Compliance of the Garda Síochána.
- Work with the Northern Irish Human Rights Commission in the area of racism and migration (this is a vital issue in our society right now – the economic downturn and the rapid changes in our population profile means there can be no complacency in our efforts to combat racism or xenophobia and show that there is no place for it in this country – and the work of the Commission is valued greatly in this regard), with focus on the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families, the purpose of this research was to gather evidence to build a stronger case for the ratification of this Convention by both the Irish and UK Governments.

International Role of the IHRC

- During 2009 the IHRC continued to chair the European Group of National Human Rights Institutions. This European group consists of 34 National Human Rights Institution from across Europe.
- Important role for Ireland which allows for the opportunity to build capacity and share information across Europe.
- Also increases awareness of human rights and human rights institutions including the Council of Europe and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency.

Looking forward

- The creation of the new Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs presents us with opportunities in the area of human rights. I see the presence of the Commission within the new department as fitting because of the central role human rights should play in building communities and in bringing about greater equality. I aim to bring about greater awareness of the work of the Commission on our department's website in the coming weeks.

- You are well aware I intend carrying out a review of existing legislation, structures and arrangements in order to enhance equality and human rights framework in Ireland, and to see how we can link policies in these areas with those concerning social inclusion. Where there are current difficulties or pressures of capacity being experienced by the Commission, and I acknowledge that there are, I will continue to work with the Commission to address these deficits. I say this before any review is complete, not in response to any review's findings. The review is not about addressing basic needs for our equality and rights institutions but about enhancing the role of this highly valued institution, and that of the equality bodies. Aristotle once asked: "Are things valuable because desired, or desired because valuable?". (cf mm) Well I'm with Aristotle on the latter part of that quote.
- In a perfect world we wouldn't need human rights institutions, but we don't live in one. The Government values the Commission because it is vital in monitoring the State's protection of human rights; it is vital at speaking out when the security of rights and freedoms is challenged. The Commission has been internationally recognised as being of excellent standard, and I want to make sure it has the resources and independence to stay that way. This is my commitment to you today.
- I want the Commission to continue assisting Government Departments by providing observations on human rights implications of new legislation.
- I want you to continue with your enquiry function - I recently visited the John Paul Centre in Galway the subject of your recent enquiry report, and was impressed by both your report and the work and rights focus which it brought about amongst the interested parties at the Centre.
- I like that new focus on certain policy areas, such as integration, racism and transgender which I know you have shown through previous policy statements; areas where the State is now making progress in no small part because of your work and awareness. I value this work.
- Next year will be an important year in Ireland's work to secure human rights. I know Maurice and Eamon and all at the Commission are keen to engage meaningfully with the Government and the OHCHR in the universal periodic review, and I will be listening very carefully to the Commission's assessment of our record, how it can be improved, and what suggestions the Commission has.

Concluding Remarks

I am so glad that I can be with you all today. I hope in September to be able to launch your new training programme on human rights education for Civil and Public servants. This will be another example of the fine work you do protect human rights in the public domain.

In conclusion, friends, I think of the words of Former American President Jimmy Carter, who once said that "America did not invent human rights, but that in a very real sense human rights invented America." Let us work towards seeing this country defined by its protection of human rights. This would be impossible without the Commission, and I want to acknowledge that here today, to thank you for the work you have done over the past year, and for the progress we have made. Thank you.