



## **IHRC Sixth Annual Human Rights Lecture Monday, 10 December 2012**

### **Opening Remarks**

#### **Des Hogan, Acting Chief Executive Irish Human Rights Commission**

President, distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of the Commission, I am delighted to welcome you all here this evening for the Irish Human Rights Commission's 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights Lecture. You will agree with me that tonight we are very honoured to have as our guest speaker, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. The President is also President of the Rotunda Hospital and so it is particularly fitting that this year's Address should take place here in the Pillar Room.

I am very pleased to see so many of you here this evening and I want to welcome in particular distinguished members of the diplomatic corps, the Oireachtas, the judiciary, the legal profession and civil society. I would like to welcome the Commission's first President Mr Justice Donal Barrington. I would also like to welcome Dr Maurice Manning, the Commission's second President whose ten years at the helm of the Commission concluded this summer. I also welcome Dr Alpha Connelly, the Commission's first Chief Executive. I am delighted to see so many former members of the Commission here tonight. I welcome Renee Dempsey and colleagues from the Equality Authority with whom the Commission will be merged next year. Finally but not least I also welcome the representatives

from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The work of the Joint Committee of the two Human Rights Commissions on this island is in fulfilment of an obligation mandated under the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, to which of course both Commissions owe their origins and one we expect to take forward in the years to come.

It is really such an honour to have the President address us tonight. This year's theme for International Human Rights Day - 'My Voice Counts' - has a special resonance this evening as the President has championed human rights throughout his career. In this he has been principled and steadfast. His unflinching commitment to advancing social justice and human rights, made him a public figure unafraid to address human rights issues at home or abroad. Indeed, he received recognition for this in 1992 when he was the first recipient of the Seán MacBride Peace Prize from the International Peace Bureau in Helsinki.

From his background in human rights and equality, speaking up for those without a voice to his passion for a modern form of citizenship, the President has spoken and continues to speak to us not only about whether, but also about how, we should engage in this idea of active citizenship. For those of us in the public service, this call for further and better action cannot be underestimated and what I might inelegantly describe as the President's exhortatory shadow stretches before us.

Human rights - and equality - have never been more important in Ireland. Earlier this year the Commission published a legacy document highlighting many of the areas on which we have worked over the years. The list covers almost all the major societal issues facing Ireland today including the economic crisis, immigration, racism, policing, the criminal justice system, education and minority rights. In recent weeks we have seen significant public debate on children's rights, the rights of women and older persons and on the issue of assisted suicide. We have seen an increasing focus on the impact of austerity measures on the vulnerable and disadvantaged. Many of these societal issues are coming

before our courts where the foresight of the fundamental rights provisions of Bunreacht na hÉireann allow the human rights aspirations of the People to be vindicated by our judiciary.

We also have Ireland's international obligations, under the European Union, the European Convention on Human Rights and the standard UN human rights treaties we like most other countries have signed up to. It is a year since Ireland's examination by the UN Human Rights Council as part of the Universal Periodic Review. A vibrant civil society has allowed the space for considered discussion and thoughtful responses to Ireland's international obligations. How we mesh these developing norms with our values remains a challenge but one which I believe we can embrace.

Although a small organisation, the Commission has operated as Ireland's National Human Rights Institution with "A" Status under the UN Paris Principles for nearly ten years now. The basis for this is our wide mandate, our independence from Government and our ability to fulfil our mandate. We look forward to building an enhanced Human Rights and Equality Commission with our colleagues in the Equality Authority, but to do so we will need assistance in firmly securing a new Commission which is fit for purpose. We will need the resources – human and financial – to be able to carry out our new and extensive mandate. We know that Government understands this point but we need to ensure it will be turned into a reality. Successive cuts to both bodies means that we are starting at a significant disadvantage. In short, we want to make sure that we can deliver for the public the Human Rights and Equality Commission they expect.

An enhanced commission is of course one aspect of public sector reform which is being undertaken. The crisis currently facing this country illustrates what can happen when the State has insufficient structures for independent oversight; where sufficiently robust independent bodies can give frank - and sometimes unwanted - advice to Government. This lesson applies as much to human rights and equality as it does to economic oversight.

In recent times we have put particular emphasis on human rights education and in creating a society with a strong awareness of human rights. Thanks to philanthropic support, we are delighted to make available today our *European Convention on Human Rights Guide for the Civil and Public Service*, developed through our Human Rights Education and Training Project which offers free, tailored human rights training across the sector. This guide complements our 2010 publication, *Human Rights Guide for the Civil and Public Service*. These publications provide an easy, accessible reference guide to both the overall human rights framework applicable in Ireland and more specifically with the new publication, a helpful summary of the European Convention, relevant to all staff across the Civil and Public Service.

Of course education, awareness, understanding and cooperation are all themes which the President has spoken on during his many years of public service. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is now my great privilege to welcome Uachtaráin na hÉireann, Michael D Higgins.