



AN COIMISIÚN UM CHEARTA AN DUINE
IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

**IHRC 5th Annual Human Rights Lecture
Tuesday, 28 June 2011**

Welcome

**Senator Katherine Zappone
IHRC Commissioner**

On behalf of the Irish Human Rights Commission, I wish to welcome our guest speaker, Mr Eamon Gilmore-- Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

We are all, no doubt aware, of his personal and professional commitment to human rights, and to the ways in which he has pledged a concern for human rights to be integral to his leadership in Government. I also want to welcome each one of you who has come this evening, in particular, members of the judiciary, the diplomatic corps, my colleagues in the Oireachtas, members of the civic and social sectors and those in the legal profession. It is heartening to us to host a capacity crowd as it bodes well for the on-going promotion of human rights in Ireland.

As one privileged to be a Founding member of the Commission—along with several of my colleagues here this evening—I want to take this moment of

welcoming to offer a brief reflection on the work of the Irish Human Rights Commission over the past decade since its founding. Our President and Chief Executive will speak at greater length about our work, focusing on *what* we have done during these past ten years. I wish to begin with a couple of remarks about *how* we have done our business for, in my view, this holds equal importance, especially during this moment in Irish time – with Comprehensive Spending Reviews and struggles to regain our Economic Sovereignty.

First, Commission members have worked diligently towards carving out our role as an **INDEPENDENT** body that offers analysis and opinion on how best to promote and protect the rights of Irish citizens and those who reside with us here. This has not always been easy, especially in light of the contested origins of Commission membership, though also due to the fact that this was new territory for Commissioners. We asked ourselves – what could be the best ways to exercise our independence of the state as well as independence of the bodies, sectors, personal and professional interests that were part of our own backgrounds? What I discovered was that independence was fashioned through our efforts to debate issues with respect for our differences, with a commitment to rational integrity and a willingness to maintain the empathy of connections we held with those whose rights were not being adequately protected or promoted. This way of doing business at the Commission Table has underpinned the outcomes of all our work.

Second, the Commission has benefited from the ways in which its Presidents and Chief Executives have exercised their **LEADERSHIP**. Dr Alpha Connelly and Mr Eamonn Mac Aodha, our CEO's, have brought the professional expertise of those exceptionally competent in human rights law, alongside their strategic managerial approach. Justice Donal Barrington, our founding President, offered leadership that guided us through the complex territory of linking international human rights law with constitutional and domestic law – this was particularly helpful in one of our earliest submissions to government on the issue of how to incorporate/give further effect to the ECHR in Irish law. Dr Manning has brought the substance of a seasoned lawmaker to his leadership role, and he has worked diligently over the years to ensure that all voices are heard equally at our Commission table, and that all people who reach out to the Irish Human Rights Commission have been responded to with great respect, dignity and an appropriate hearing.

Third, and in conclusion, I think it is accurate to say that the Commission has made efforts all throughout this past decade to consistently **REFORM** the way we have done our business. For example, we have reformed our Committee structure, making it more efficient I think over the years. A case in point, in the early life of the Commission we had a committee on Gender and women's rights. Over the past couple of years, we concluded the formal work of that committee as we made a conscious decision to mainstream our focus on gender and women's rights into the work of all our committees. The Government's

commitment to gender balance of Commission membership (meaning 50% - not 30% or 60%!) has assisted greatly in the support of such reform.

With these opening remarks, then, on Independence, Leadership and Reform, I invite you to listen to our Leader and President, Dr Maurice Manning.