



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

Concluding Remarks

**Éamonn Mac Aodha
Chief Executive**

I would like to reiterate the thanks of the President to the Tánaiste for agreeing to give this year's Annual Lecture. We have always been honoured to hear interesting and thought provoking lectures as part of this lecture series, and this year has again proven to be no exception.

The President has also set out in global terms our achievements over the last decade but I wanted in my concluding remarks today, in addition to thanking the Tánaiste on behalf of the Commission, to capture some of the highlights from the Commission's most recent work.

In doing this it is worth bearing in mind that when I became Chief Executive in late 2007 the Commission had 21 staff, three contractors and a budget of €2.32M. Today the Commission has 11 staff and, as is well known, has taken a cumulative cut approaching 40% in its budget.

I mention these figures to put into perspective the ongoing achievements and to pay tribute to the Commission's staff and Commissioners who are the lifeblood flowing through all that it succeeds in doing.

The Commission, in facing its initial cuts in 2008, decided on three coping strategies. It established a volunteer internship and professional placement programme, it called on pro bono assistance from the Law Library and it decided to source philanthropic support. In all three respects we have been successful. While helping to plug a huge gap these are not long term sustainable strategies for a public body but nevertheless have been hugely important in allowing us continue to fulfil our mandate.

I want to refer to two specific pieces of work undertaken by the Commission over the last six months using our enquiries and legal functions. These relate firstly to the Magdalene Laundries, and secondly to Religion and Education in Ireland.

On the first, we undertook – at the request of a group representing women from the Magdalene Laundries - an independent assessment of the treatment of women and girls in the **Magdalene Laundries**. Our assessment Report found that serious human rights issues arose in relation to the treatment of women and girls in the laundries.

We called on the Government to immediately establish a Statutory Inquiry into their treatment and to provide redress to the survivors as appropriate. Just this month, we were pleased to welcome the

Government's announcement of the establishment of the Inter-Departmental Committee – under an independent chair - as a positive first step in establishing the level of State responsibility in relation to what occurred in the Magdalene Laundries and bringing about a process of redress for the women concerned. We will continue to follow this issue closely and to assist wherever we can. We look forward to a swift resolution of this issue.

The Commission also published a report on **Religion and Education** in Ireland, calling on the Government to increase the diversity of school type in Ireland. This is to accommodate the diversity of religious and non-religious convictions in the State and to allow Ireland meet its human rights obligations. The report followed a consultation process in which 60 individuals and organisations made submissions to the IHRC and we hope that it will be of assistance to the important debate on this issue that is currently taking place in Ireland, not least through the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector.

It is important to note following some recent criticism of our conclusions on these two matters that the Commission approaches this – and all its other work – in a professional and technical manner. In keeping with our statutory mandate we examine the domestic and international human rights implications of issues and offer a view on compatibility of law, policies or practices with these standards under the terms of Section 2 of our legislation which defines “human rights”. We do no more or no less. We strive to avoid a polemical approach and it is increasingly recognised that we can be of particular

assistance to the State in providing an independent scrutiny on these types of issues.

In November of last year, we published our report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, highlighting our concerns across a range of areas. In our role as the National Human Rights Institution, we also briefed the Committee directly in February during their consideration of the State's report. We were very pleased with the strong recommendations subsequently made by the Committee, and hope that they will be used as a template for State action in the coming year.

In May, we reported our concerns on Ireland's implementation of the Convention Against Torture to the UN Committee Against Torture. Again, our concerns ranged across a large number of topics, from care homes to prisons, particularly highlighting the lack of independent oversight that exists for people who are in institutions.

Over the past year, we have also given a particular focus to human rights education. Just next Tuesday, the Minister for Education and Skills will publish our report giving an overview of human rights education in Ireland.

In addition since April of last year, we have been running a project, with philanthropic support, to provide human rights education and training to the civil and public service. As part of this project, we published a Guide on human rights for the service (4000 copies of which have been distributed, including copies to every Garda station),

and since the end of last year we have been rolling out direct human rights training for civil and public servants . In so doing we have been stressing the practical benefits to the civil and public service of engagement with this training, including through minimising legal risk.

We are heartened by the positive attitude of many Departments and State services to engaging with human rights training, and we look forward to working in partnership with the civil and public service in taking this work forward.

Indeed, this project is another good example of the importance of our connection at the international level, as it has drawn considerable interest from National Human Rights Institutions in other countries as well as from regional and international bodies. The project also formed the basis for a human rights education conference we held last week with the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. Again we were heartened by the range of Government Departments and services represented at the Conference. It is also worth noting that the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination has encouraged the State to work with us in rolling out this project.

As mentioned by the President one of the major pieces of work we have been undertaking since the end of last year, and which will continue for the rest of the year is in relation to Ireland's first examination by the UN Human Rights Council under the Universal Periodic Review. We will shortly publish a set of voluntary commitments which we will urge on Government to make in advance of Ireland's review.

Finally in terms of use of our legal powers at the international level, just today the IHRC submitted a request to the European Court of Human Rights for leave to intervene as *amicus curiae* in the case of *O’Keeffe v Ireland*. The case concerns the extent of the responsibility of the state to identify, prevent and address abuse by teachers in primary schools. Such amicus interventions by NHRIs are increasingly common before the European Court due to the vital role NHRIs play in promoting and protecting human rights in their states.

These are just some of the highlights from what has been an extremely busy period for the Commission. We will of course set out the full range when we publish our annual report next month.

Finally, I would also like to note that over the past year – as in previous years - we have had very welcome engagement with the Department of Foreign Affairs. This year, in collaboration with Irish Aid, we will launch a project focussing on building the capacity of National Human Rights Institutions in Irish Aid programme countries. This project is in line with Ireland’s development cooperation policies and reflects the country’s longstanding commitment to human rights in Irish foreign policy as a whole. We look forward to continued strong engagement from the Department of Foreign Affairs on this project.

It is particularly valuable to have the Tánaiste here tonight as we also frequently interact with his Department in our engagement with international human rights monitoring mechanisms – both in the UN and at the Council of Europe. It has been insightful to have his

perspective on the importance of Ireland's relationship and work with these bodies and the value he places on the role of National Human Rights Institutions generally, and on the Irish Human Rights Commission, more specifically.

Thank you again Tánaiste for your address.

To conclude, I would like to thank all the Commissioners and staff of the IHRC for their work in organising the lecture, and all of you for attending tonight.

We have largely discontinued the practice of offering hospitality at our functions but are making an exception tonight. I hope you can join us at a reception to mark this evening's special occasion.

Thank you all for coming.