



Address to the 16th Europe International Gay and Lesbian Association

by

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Dublin: 21/10/2012

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Distinguished delegates Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Irish poet WB Yeats once said, 'with dreams begin responsibilities'.

The dream of realisation of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one that Conferences like this work towards; that is that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

That you should choose our capital city, Dublin, for this conference is a source of pride for us. This city, and this Republic, have been on their own remarkable journey in relation to the rights of LGBTI persons.

There is a generation of young Irish people, for whom the Ireland of twenty or thirty years ago would be almost unrecognisable. An Ireland where divorce was illegal. Where contraception was banned. Where, until 1993, homosexuality was a criminal offence. The campaign to liberalise Ireland's laws was, at times, a difficult and divisive struggle. Some of its veterans are here in this room. But the result can be seen in the vibrant, modern, open country we live in today.

Thousands of young LGBTI persons, who in the past would have felt the need to live elsewhere, have opted to stay in Ireland. And by doing so, have enriched the country and made it a more tolerant place. Many in public life have emerged as role models for young

LGBTI people and, in recent years, civil partnership ceremonies have been occasions of great celebration around the country.

I speak of these developments not just to praise Ireland. I speak of them to praise all the activists, civil society organisations, politicians and individuals from all walks of life, who kept the dream of human rights alive, and who also acted out of responsibility to change this country for the better. That journey is still incomplete. As a Government, we are committed to developing legislation to provide for the recognition of transgender people.

And as I have stated elsewhere, the right of same-sex couples to marry is not a gay rights issue, it is a civil rights issue, and one that I support.

The question of same-sex marriage is one that will be considered by our forthcoming Constitutional Convention. This is an innovation in Irish democracy, where citizens and public representatives will come together to consider what changes might be made to our Constitution, so that it better reflects not just the society we are now, but the society we aspire to.

Ireland is already a very good example of how with work and dedication, human rights defenders can transform awareness. It has been said that for societies to prosper economically and socially, there is a need for three Ts: talent, technology and tolerance. It is certainly of benefit to Ireland that its reputation now as a tolerant society makes it an attractive place for people to travel to, to invest in and to work.

When I speak of responsibilities I also speak of our need to keep international human rights firmly in our consciousness, particularly at times when many in Western countries could think that LGBTI rights are a *fait accompli*.

Let me quote from a report by the then UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Mr. Manfred Nowak, from February 2010: *“Most human beings would not like their dogs or cats to be treated in the same way that many human beings are treated in detention. They usually belong to the most disadvantaged, discriminated and vulnerable groups in society, such as the poor, minorities, drug addicts or aliens. Within detention facilities there is usually a strict hierarchy, and those at the bottom of the hierarchy, such as children, the elderly, persons with disabilities and diseases, gays lesbians bisexuals and trans-gender persons, suffer double or triple discrimination.”*

Separately the report of the High Commissioner to the Human Rights Council last March noted how violence against LGBTI persons tends ‘*to be especially vicious compared to other bias-motivated crimes. According to the OSCE, homophobic hate crimes and incidents often show a high degree of cruelty and brutality and include beatings, torture, mutilation, castration and sexual assault*’.

The report is just a condensed reflection of what the High Commissioner has described as a huge volume of evidence her Office receives, which bears witness to the sheer difficulty of life for LGBTI persons around the globe.

And it is worth being clear about this. Protection from murder, torture, sexual violence and arbitrary detention, or from discrimination in relation to access to employment or basic services is not a new category of rights; it is the birthright of every human being. Human rights principles are simply the basic rules of human decency and human dignity, wherever you live; whatever your background.

Behind the sombre picture painted in the reports I have just mentioned there are, however, signs of great hope. Great progress has been made at the United Nations in recent years. Back in 2007 when the Universal Periodic peer human rights review of all UN members began, there were objections to issues relating to sexual orientation even being raised. Now it is routinely discussed and countries are engaging in a more considered exchange of views on the issue at the UPR.

In 2009, Ireland, along with the United States, Czech Republic and Colombia, organised a side event at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on the issue and secured the attendance of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay. I want to take this opportunity to commend her for the courageous and persuasive leadership she has given on this issue throughout her term as High Commissioner. In 2010 she spoke at another side event that Ireland co-sponsored on the issue which was also addressed by video by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

This paved the way for a new cross-regional statement in early 2011 at the Council, and finally, for the first time in June 2011, a resolution that condemned the ongoing violence and discrimination suffered by LGBTI people. This milestone resolution is an important statement, by the UN, about the universality of human rights protection. South Africa, who led on the resolution, deserve great praise for their leadership on the issue.

The comments of the South African Ambassador at the time of the adoption of the resolution were particularly significant. He recalled how the LGBTI movement had consistently opposed apartheid, and that the time had come to give something back. I also believe that great credit is due to the civil society organisations in Geneva and elsewhere, many of whom are present today, who consistently and persuasively continued to argue this case with great dignity in an often hostile atmosphere. I am also pleased that Ireland was an active member of the steering group which paved the way for the 2011 resolution.

Today it is up to all of us to ensure that this momentum moves from the page, to action. The Human Rights Council must continue to address these issues, and to seek wider agreement on this basic principle: that the protection afforded by human rights law applies to everyone, simply by virtue of their humanity.

It is not a question of other values being 'imposed' from the outside. Rather, to believe in human rights is to believe in the equality of our fellow human beings, whatever their culture, their creed, the colour of their skin, their sexual orientation or their gender identity. To deny equality, is to look another in the eye, and proclaim them to be a lesser person. It is to distinguish between the quality of one person's humanity over another. The case for human rights is not a radical one. It is simply the logical conclusion of that

fundamental belief – a belief that transcends national boundaries, and narrow national interests.

For Ireland, that belief is reflected throughout our foreign policy, and our engagement in the institutions of which we are a member.

As human rights defenders, many of you know what it is like to live in fear, to be harassed. The protection of human rights defenders has been a national priority for Ireland, and we were closely involved in the preparation of the EU guidelines on human rights defenders which give guidelines on how EU Missions can assist defenders in their mission.

This year, in our capacity as Chairmanship-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Ireland, Ireland is prioritising the so-called human dimension of the OSCE, which addresses human rights, democratisation and the rule of law. Regrettably, there are no explicit OSCE commitments relating to discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity. Indeed, these are conspicuous in their absence from the body of OSCE commitments, due to consistent opposition from a number of participating States and the requirement for decisions to be taken by consensus.

Together with our EU partners and other like-minded countries, Ireland will continue to ensure that serious violations of the rights of LGBTI persons are highlighted in OSCE meetings, and that OSCE commitments relating to tolerance and non-discrimination are as inclusive as possible. We hope that ILGA and other civil society organisations will continue to make use of the inclusive regime which operates in OSCE human dimension meetings – a regime which allows civil society to bring its concerns directly to participating States.

I spoke earlier about dreams and responsibilities. I think it is our responsibility not to lose sight of the universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated nature of human rights. I encourage the LGBTI movement to stay active in the struggle of all rights for all people. Because of their historical experience, LGBTI persons have a unique insight into the importance of rights, and the human cost of their not being realised.

I was struck recently by the words of Irish hurling star, Dónal Óg Cusack, at a recent Pride event in Derry. (Hurling, by the way is our national field game and is a great spectacle to watch if any of you get a chance!).

Dónal said:

‘What unites us at the end of the day is pride in being who we are, pride in the totality of who we are as people. Pride in the fact that we refuse just to fit the label hung on us by prejudice’

These fine words could be said to sum up the essence of human rights work. It is prejudice that too often leads to violations of human rights, to discrimination, poverty and to conflict. The LGBTI movement has done much to fight that prejudice. It still has some road to travel. But LGBTI rights are human rights. Know that in your endeavours, you are not just making a difference to LGBTI people around to the world, but to all of us who benefit from a

more tolerant, more humane, more equal society. Ireland will be here to help you in that task: ready to dream and ready to take responsibility.

Thank you.