

***Address to the Annual Meeting of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association (Dublin Castle – 23 May 2006) by Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Republic of Ireland.***

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here to day and to address such a distinguished audience.

I would like to thank Ann Abraham for her kind introduction. I know that Ann has made an enormous contribution as Chair of this organisation and will be a tough act to follow!

Thanks also to Emily O'Reilly and her team for hosting this year's excellent conference in Dublin.

I am particularly pleased that so many of you have travelled to Ireland for this year's annual meeting. This is a unique forum, bringing together those with responsibility for seeking redress for citizens, across a range of sectors, on these islands. I know that we have here today Ombudsmen from the various jurisdictions on these islands. All of you share a common purpose – to uphold the right of the ordinary citizen to a high and fair standard of public service.

As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I am perhaps more aware than most of the broad range of contacts that exist between Ireland and Britain. These include contacts at parliamentary level, via the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, at executive level, including via the British-Irish Council, and through a multitude of public and private organisations.

The initiative of the Ombudsmen to come together to form the British Irish Ombudsman Association in 1994 is an important contribution to closer co-operation on these islands. Your experience, and that of many other organisations, is that we can achieve more through working together, than we could alone.

It is now some 40 years since a proposal to establish an office of the Ombudsman here in Ireland was first made. I think it is fair to say that the reaction of both the political and the administrative establishment of the day could at best be described as conservative.

It was not until almost 20 years later, in 1984, that the first Ombudsman was finally appointed in Ireland. This was considerably later than in the United Kingdom where a 'Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration' had been appointed in 1967.

Although you could say that we got off to a late start, we in Ireland have embraced the Ombudsman concept wholeheartedly. In addition to the office of the Ombudsman, we now have a Pensions Ombudsman, an Ombudsman for Children, a Financial Services Ombudsman, and most recently, a Defence Forces Ombudsman. Work is well underway for the establishment of the new Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission which is expected to be operational by early 2007. In addition there are a number of other complaint-handling bodies, many of which are represented here today. However, it is important to recall that of these, the office of the Ombudsman, currently occupied by Ms. Emily O'Reilly, has primacy both in years and in the range of organisations it covers.

The high standing in which the Office is held today is I believe a measure of how much we have developed as a society over the past 40 years, as well as a tribute to the individuals who have

filled the Office over its 22 year history. Uniquely in Ireland, the Ombudsman is appointed by the President following a resolution passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas. The remit of the Office has expanded over the years, most recently following the Disability Act 2005, which extended the Ombudsman's jurisdiction to cover complaints in relation to the failure to provide access to people with disabilities in accordance with legislation.

The importance of the role of the Ombudsman in a modern democracy is that it places the individual and the rights of the individual centre stage. These rights are guaranteed for every citizen regardless of their standing in society.

As public representatives, politicians play a key role in advocating and promoting the welfare of our citizens. It is in all of our best interests that the highest standards of public service are maintained. And the provision of an effective channel for communicating complaints and seeking redress is key to the ongoing improvement of these services.

I would like to pay particular tribute to the strong co-operation between the two Ombudsman's offices on the island of Ireland. The two Offices have an excellent relationship. Significantly, the two Offices also have a formal role regarding the North/South Bodies established under the Good Friday Agreement. These unique all-island Bodies are within the jurisdiction of the Ombudsmen, North and South, who are mandated to liaise and consult in dealing with the Bodies. More recently, the two Ombudsmen also took on a role covering Freedom of Information and the Bodies.

Through these functions, the two Ombudsmen make an important contribution to the public accountability of the North/South Bodies.

I know that you were addressed yesterday by the Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman. I would like to take this opportunity to pay particular tribute to the work of Nuala O'Loan and her dedicated staff.

The project of policing reform has been crucial to the wider peace process in Northern Ireland. The policing landscape in Northern Ireland has been transformed, which is why the Government has consistently called on all parties to give their full support to the PSNI.

In that context, the office of the police ombudsman has played a critical role in establishing a belief in the impartiality and fairness of the policing structures – a significant achievement given the background, and the enormous institutional change and upheaval which have occurred.

The fact that - in such a politically charged environment - confidence in the impartiality of her office has grown to a remarkable 78% of the public, almost equally spread across the two communities, is a tribute to all concerned. It is a striking affirmation of her success and a very hopeful indicator for the future of policing in Northern Ireland.

These developments form part of a wider architecture of rights and their protection that now exists on this island.

Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the Irish Government gave a solemn pledge to actively promote respect, reconciliation and mutual understanding between the two main traditions on this island. I believe it is worth noting some of the major progress made since 1998 in relation to human rights and equality.

The Agreement provided for the establishment of Human Rights Commissions, North and South. Since its establishment in 1999, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been working to ensure that the human rights of every individual in Northern Ireland are fully and firmly protected. I look forward to its work being further developed under its Chief Commissioner, Professor Monica McWilliams.

The Irish Government, for its part, committed itself in the Agreement to further strengthening the protection of human rights in the South and to ensuring at least an equivalent level of protection of human rights as in the North. Consistent with this, the Government established in 2001 a Human Rights Commission with a mandate and remit equivalent to the Commission in Northern Ireland. It is working well under the able stewardship of Dr. Maurice Manning.

Both Commissions work together in the Joint Committee on Human Rights, established under the Agreement as a forum for consideration of human rights issues on the island. This Joint Committee is a working example of practical, fruitful all-island cooperation on issues of mutual concern. Issues currently under discussion in the Joint Committee include racism and immigration and the possibility of establishing an all-island Charter of Rights.

Co-operation is also deepening in the area of equality. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and our own Equality Authority cooperate well on a range of issues and have regular joint meetings. For instance, earlier this year they launched a joint study on the implications of the equivalence provisions in the Good Friday Agreement. I know that you benefited yesterday from the perspectives of Chief Commissioner Bob Collins on all of these issues and I wish him well in his ongoing work.

All these structures are playing an important role in bringing accountability, transparency and reform to Northern Ireland and to North/South co-operation. But as an elected representative, I am acutely aware that Institutions work best when there is balance between the direct involvement of the people's representatives and impartial, objective monitors, such as Ombudsmen.

On the 6th April in Armagh, the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair set out the Governments' joint strategy to achieve restoration of the devolved institutions of the Good Friday Agreement this year. That strategy is founded on the shared conviction that devolved partnership government, as enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, provides the best opportunity to create a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland.

Last week Members of the Assembly convened at Stormont for the first time in over three and a half years. This was an important step. It was very encouraging to see active political engagement at Stormont again.

We now want to see all the parties build on this positive start and continue serious and thorough preparations for power-sharing government, so that an Executive can be formed as soon as possible and before the deadline of 24th November.

The recall of the Assembly brings with it a precious opportunity to foster real political progress, and to chart the way for important decisions affecting the lives of every section of the community to be taken by locally elected politicians. This is right, not only in terms of effective government for Northern Ireland, but in creating a truly common future for all.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The British Irish Ombudsman's Association plays an important role in bringing together those on these islands who have been entrusted with responsibility for ensuring the rights of individuals are upheld by the organs of the State. It is important that we all aspire to common standards of fair treatment and equality, regardless of where we live.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you well in your work and assure you of the full commitment of the Irish Government to the promotion of equality and human rights for all the people of this island.

Thank you.