



Children's Rights in Ireland: Are We There Yet? Are We There Yet? Are We There Yet?

Dublin Castle, 2 April 2009

Opening Speech: Jillian van Turnhout, Chief Executive

Minister, esteemed speakers, and delegates, welcome to the first Children's Rights Alliance symposium. The Alliance is delighted and honoured to be hosting this event and wishes to thank the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs for their support in securing this fantastic venue.

I know many faces here today, but for those of you who do not know me, I am Jillian van Turnhout, Chief Executive of the Children's Rights Alliance. The Alliance is a coalition of over 90 non-governmental organisations working to secure the rights and needs of children in Ireland. Our strength is in our membership: organisations that work with and for children every day. They are real champions of children's rights.

Joining me on the podium is the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Barry Andrews T.D. you are most welcome; and Professor Nóirín Hayes, Chairperson of the Children's Rights Alliance.

Let's begin with the title of today's Symposium. Some people have asked us what it means. Let me explain. We are all familiar with the family car journey where children ask parents over and over '*Are We There Yet?*'. They are excited, but a little impatient. They can imagine the place they are travelling to – full of delight, charm, and fun – but they want to be there NOW. Well, that is how we feel about our journey towards realising children's rights in Ireland, and that is what today is about. We know we are on the way, we are filled with anticipation, but we are getting increasingly impatient and, we are still not there yet!

And no wonder we are impatient – the journey towards articulating children's rights began 85 years ago, in 1924, when the League of Nations adopted the first Declaration of the Rights of the Child, a fore runner to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. A child born in that year in Dublin, not very far from where we are seated now, was born into a city filled with miserable poverty, tenement living and rampant disease. That child lived in a society where children were seen and not heard, where education and healthcare were luxuries not rights, and where corporal punishment was the norm.

Today, in 2009, it is fair to say that we *have* travelled some distance from the widespread hardship that was experienced by the dwellers of inner city Dublin in the 1920s. We have accumulated great wealth – even taking the recent losses into account. But the rising tide didn't lift all boats. There are still far too many children living in poverty in Ireland. Ending this must be part of our journey.

In 1992 we reached a key milestone. By ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Ireland made a clear and resounding commitment to its children. A child born in 1992 will turn 18 this year – thus an entire generation of children has grown up cloaked and protected by the rights enshrined upon them in the Convention. And so we *have* started to make the rhetoric of children's rights a reality. Much of what has been achieved would have been unimaginable just twenty years ago.

But we are not there yet, and the road ahead is full of challenges. We must face these challenges, and in doing so we must hold in our hearts and in our heads the vision of childhood outlined in the Convention. Until we achieve that vision, and Ireland *really* is one of the best places in the world to be a child, our journey continues.

The Alliance has long drawn attention to the very real gap between the rhetoric and the reality of children's rights in Ireland. We have good policy, but our ability to implement it lags shamefully behind. We are not committing our words into actions. To highlight this, the Alliance launched *Report Card 2009* in January of this year. This Report Card is the first of an annual publication, which grades the Government – just like a school report – on whether it is keeping its promises to children. This year they barely scraped a 'D' grade. A 'D' means that our Government is willing to watch thousands of children fail to reach their unique potential, because the things they need – decent schools, timely access to health and therapeutic services, and proper support for children with special needs – were denied. We will not accept this.

But society does accept it, by ignoring the alarming facts and figures we hear about children's lives in Ireland every single week.

I'd like to remind you of some of those figures to give you a sense of where our journey still needs to go. Today:

- Over 76,000 children live in consistent poverty. That means that one in every fourteen children does not have a warm, waterproof coat; lives in a home their parents can't afford to heat; or cannot buy a single present for a friend once a year, not even a best friend
- One child in every ten leaves school with literacy problems; and that rises to one child in three in disadvantaged communities. In a disadvantaged school, in a class of 30 children, we are talking about ten children leaving school unable to read and write properly
- 200 children with mental health problems were placed in beds in adult psychiatric wards during 2008, due to a lack of services for adolescents
- 441 separated children, who came to this country seeking asylum and hoping for a better life, have gone missing over a 7 year period. 388 of them have never been found. Would we accept it if an entire primary school went missing? We would not. So why do we accept this?

I could go on, but I won't, because I want to focus on how we *can* make a difference. We are meeting at an important time. Over the coming weeks, critical decisions will be made that will have a profound impact on children in Ireland – the Budget and the findings of the Committee looking at the proposed constitutional amendment for children.

First, the Budget. We face a deeply worrying deficit in the public finances. Next week's Budget will undoubtedly be harsh; but it must also be fair. It needs to have foresight. The Alliance is not naive; but we do firmly believe that we have a duty to uphold children's rights and that doing so makes economic sense. Cuts in education and health services that directly affect children are a false economy; it's as simple as that. What costs more: maintaining and developing early years education or not doing so at all? Remember that in early years education, for every euro spent a return of up to €7.10 can be expected. Not only that, investing in early years education has proved effective in the long-run in promoting social skills, improving the life chances of children born in disadvantaged communities, and in reducing criminal activity. What could be a smarter investment than that?

Our message is clear. We cannot afford to put the childhoods of a generation on the long finger. We urge the government **not** to victimise children in its Budget next week. We plead with our politicians **not** to roll back on valuable progress and hard-fought commitments to children. Children didn't cause this crisis, and they shouldn't have to pay for it.

The Budget is not the only arena for realising children's rights. The law is another one. The Alliance is deeply committed to strengthening children's rights in the Constitution; in giving children explicit recognition, as individuals, in the fundamental law of our land. An Oireachtas Committee is currently examining the wording of a proposed constitutional amendment. This is a hugely important, and complex, task. In addition to Minister Andrews, we are joined today by two members of the Committee Deputy Alan Shatter and Senator Alex White.

The courts interpret the legal status of individuals on the basis of the weight given to their rights under the Constitution. Since the rights of children (as individuals rather than members of a family) are not expressly stated in the Constitution, it is often not possible for their rights to be taken into account. Without constitutional reform, we cannot fully value children in our judicial decisions, in our laws, and in society as a whole.

The successful passage of an amendment would be a powerful symbol that Ireland wants the best for its one million children and their families. It would both change children's status in the eyes of the law, and state loud and clear that, in Ireland, we are committed to children's rights. This is something that we could be proud of.

It is my hope that we can prove to you that children's rights are not just a theoretical exercise, or confined to a Committee room in Geneva. They are real and achievable.

We are talking about *children* and *their rights*; your son, my niece, his grandchild. These children are not statistics to us, they are people in our lives that we love and care about. It could be your neighbour's child sleeping rough because there was no bed available, your nephew waiting for the attention of a dedicated, but over-worked, social worker; or your child's classmate seeking asylum while living in a hostel and vulnerable to traffickers.

I know that among the high-level delegates and speakers present today there is a deep and genuine commitment to children's rights: each and every one of you can affect change and make a real difference to the lives of children in Ireland. We want you to see today's symposium as a call to action. We invite you to take the first step by signing our pledge wall as your symbolic commitment to valuing children's rights. When you leave here today we want you to translate that commitment into action.

We must act now to ensure that the current generation of children really do *live* the UN Convention. In the Alliance, we believe that Ireland can be one of the best places in the world to be a child. Many of our goals are just within grasp. We hope that you will join us as we continue our journey. We need everyone here today to become a champion for children's rights.

Thank You.

I am now delighted to introduce the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Barry Andrews, T.D. I would like to thank the Minister on behalf of the Alliance, and its Board, for agreeing to formally opening today's symposium.