

## Remarks by President McAleese at the Children's Rights Alliance Biennial Symposium, Dublin Castle, 2nd April 2009

Dia dhíbh, a cháirde go léir. Tá an-áthas orm bheith anseo libh inniu agus muid ag céiliúradh an ócáid mor seo. Ba mhaith liom bhuíochas a chur in iúl daoibh as an gcuireadh agus as fáilte a bhí caoin, cneasta agus croiúil.

It's good to be here with you this afternoon, thank you for that warm welcome. I want to thank Jillian Van Turnhout for inviting me to address this symposium and to pay tribute to the Children's Rights Alliance for hosting the event.

Your conference title "Are we there yet?" certainly has a resonance for most parents who ever set out on a long car journey only to hear after fifty yards that little voice from the back seat ask for the first of what you know will be five hundred times, "Are we there yet?". Although we have a saying in Irish that two shortens the journey, the saying was obviously coined long before the advent of the motor car and the holiday in Donegal. That childish impatience lengthened many a family journey but the same question asked here, of course, has quite a different context and if there is a tone of impatience in it, then that is designed to make of us and our country the place which the Proclamation of 1916 insisted would be a Republic where the children of the nation would be cherished equally.

Almost thirty years ago Dr. Joe Robins wrote a book called *The Lost Children*, a study of charity children in Ireland in the years 1700 to 1900. I used it as a text book in the years when I taught in Trinity College and, wherever I have gone since, that book is always within reach of my hand. It is terrifying. In the push and pull of wars and famine, the story of children, especially those orphaned or abandoned was so often overlooked. Until the end of the eighteenth century they were treated with a "callous indifference" which we would today find utterly shocking. A century later things had changed and there was a growing concern for their welfare expressed in institutions and legislation which sought to protect the young. By the twentieth century that had begun to grow into a sentimental child-centredness in which the voice of the child was still largely unheard but in which a new idealised view of childhood began to grow. We know from the stories of many adults who experienced twentieth century institutional care as children just how dreadfully vulnerable they were and how cowed into silence.

Today we speak of children having civil and human rights. They have a Children's Ombudsman. Most importantly the vast majority of today's children in Ireland have a childhood. They grow up with free education, child benefits, universal vaccination and good health care which has eradicated many once fatal childhood illnesses and reduced to negligible proportions the once staggering statistics of infant mortality. The stigma of illegitimacy that made misery of the lives of many children has long gone. The secret confinements and forced adoptions have disappeared; the physical and sexual abuse which were once taboo are openly acknowledged and perpetrators pursued even decades later.

Now we talk of improving childcare, of parenting classes, of child abuse guidelines, of protection, of help lines, of educating children about their rights and their vulnerabilities. They have champions to advocate their cause and increasingly we hear their own voices telling us in their own words what it is they know and feel. Ours is no longer quite the same world of which Seamus Heaney wrote in "The Railway Children"

"We were small and thought we knew nothing  
Worth knowing"

The world in general also thought that children knew nothing, that things passed over their heads and did not lodge like barbs deep in the heart. Now we know, because a whole new science around behaviour and psychology is telling us that the old adage is true - what is learnt in childhood is engraved on stone. The more competent the engravers, the more the little life flourishes into adulthood. The more incompetent the engravers the greater the struggle to avoid serious dysfunction that can blight a childhood and adolescence and give way to an adulthood full of wasted potential.

Carson McCullers said that "the hearts of small children are delicate organs. A cruel beginning in this world can twist them into curious shapes". Today a veritable army of professionals and volunteers is dedicated to the wellbeing of our children from sports clubs and after schools clubs, to family oriented supports and interventions.

We know that in these difficult economic times the environment is changing dramatically for children as financial pressures and job losses increase the anxiety levels in their homes. They are not immune. They are not hermetically sealed off from those anxieties. They need our reassurance now more than ever and they need space in which to express what it is they know and what it is we need to hear from them so that we can best protect and vindicate their rights, their childhoods.

Are we there yet? Can we yet say hand on hearts that the children of the nation are cherished equally? We can certainly say that in this generation we have come closer than any generation before us but that gives us no cause for complacency or for taking our foot off the accelerator. Every so often a story of appalling inhumanity visited on a child comes to the surface and we are reminded of how still vulnerable they are. Every day we hear of or experience directly in our communities the downstream consequences of childhoods which have been squandered. It shows up in street crime, in unstable family life, in drug and alcohol abuse, in messed up relationships and in lives that got "twisted into curious shapes".

Then there are the children who are carers, those who live with chronic illness or disability, or those who are coming to terms with being gay in a world and even in homes that are still hostile and homophobic. There are children from a hundred other parts of the world trying to cope in a culture they do not know, with a language that is unfamiliar to them.

There are adolescents who are facing unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases or sexual pressures they feel unable to resist. No child has the full range of coping skills to deal with such demands on them though many cope remarkably well. But they still need champions to work for the changes that will allow us to answer the question "Are we there yet?" with a resounding and confident "yes". We have the best-educated generation yet to help us plan how to get to the destination set out in our Proclamation. If we are not there yet but are well on the way, then what should be our next steps? Many children who today suffer in silence here are relying on people like you to keep pushing us towards our best destination. Children around the globe who still experience today the callous indifference that once characterized Irish life and of which Joe Robins wrote so passionately, rely on us to be their champions too. What we get right here sets an agenda for children everywhere. For their rights are human rights, inalienable and their birthright. They are not concessions to be withheld or conceded by higher authority.

WB Yeats once said that "No man has ever lived that had enough of children's gratitude..." . I know that what you do here today is not out of a desire for gratitude, but it is important that we earn that gratitude. Our children depend on us to do what is right and necessary in the years when we are in control and they are not. Thank you for making this work your vocation and for asking the question that can shorten the journey to making Ireland the best possible place each child of the nation.

Go raith míle maith agaibh go léir. Thank you.