

SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR JUSTICE & EQUALITY
GALA DINNER 5 JUNE, 2018 – DUBLIN HONOURS MAGDALENES EVENT

To say that I am privileged to stand here tonight is an understatement, but to be frank, it is also a difficult and daunting place for me to stand.

It's difficult, because I am only too aware that as a Government minister I represent the State which let each and every one of you, down. This State allowed you be incarcerated, and made to work in Magdalene Laundries. We had a duty of care, we had a job of inspection, and we failed. Indeed we even took on the role, in some cases of referring agent. And in so doing... we let you down.

So as I said, it is difficult to stand here representing the State, even though we have apologised. That apology, made by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny, and recalled by the Lord Mayor earlier, was heartfelt and sincere. And I know that in making it, we have acknowledged much of what you went through, and I know we have made efforts to make redress ... but I also know that what happened to you cannot be undone.

And that is why standing here is daunting. It is daunting, knowing what you have endured, to face such resilience, such strength, such compassion, such sheer human spirit. I can only express my boundless admiration for, and thanks to, each and every one of you, for making the effort to come here.

I know it wasn't easy. Many of you have travelled, some of you all the way from America and even Australia. I know you didn't do it so that you could just have a nice dinner and listen to me. So I won't keep you long.

But I hope you did do it, with a sense of hope and determination.... Hope that you might build a real sense of camaraderie and even of peace from meeting others who share such a core part of your past, and determination that tomorrow, you will have YOUR say, about your experiences, if you choose to do so, and also about how you would like your experiences to be remembered.

It was wonderful to be in Aras an Uachtarain with you this afternoon. I know that for many of you, the chance to visit that historic building and be met, on equal terms, with dignity and respect, by our first citizen, President Michael D Higgins, and his wife Sabina, was the real highlight of the trip, the reason you were so determined to make it, and I believe that given the warmth of your reception there, you won't have been disappointed. And I hope you won't be disappointed either, by how the rest of the two days unfolds.

That you would come together like this, so that you could share your experiences with one another, was of course one of the first recommendations of Mr Justice Peter Quirke's Restorative Justice Scheme; and that you would be afforded an opportunity to have your say on how the laundries should be remembered, was another.

So I want to pay tribute to those who ensured that what Justice Quirke wanted, is being delivered over these two days. This event is happening thanks to a very small number, of very determined women.

Three of them, Katherine O'Donnell, Claire McGettrick and Maeve O'Rourke, have been known to some of you for many years. The fourth, Norah Casey, became known to them, only about 2 months ago when they approached her seeking her help - and didn't they make a wise choice! I heard Katherine and Maeve interviewed and I called Katherine and asked her to fill me in on her plans.

It is undoubtedly true that we can be very slow sometimes in Official Ireland, to say Yes. Even when both our heart AND our head might be telling us to, we worry. We worry - about risks, about consequences, about precedents, about how to reconcile the thousands of competing demands on our desks... and sometimes these concerns can prevent us from acting with the speed that justice demands.

But when Katherine, Norah and Claire came to my office, I could see immediately that this was a project I wanted to throw my weight behind and support in any way I could. When I met them in early April, I thought the plans sounded ambitious but what they have achieved is actually all they hoped for and so much more.

I knew this project to give effect to key aspects of the restorative justice scheme was one I just had to support as Minister - practically and financially. And I want to tell you now, that if by any chance, at the end of my political career, I have to be defined by just one decision, I would be not just happy, but I would be privileged, to be defined by that one.

But supporting you now, in the way we have done, was relatively easy. Others supported you when it was neither easy nor popular.

I remember seeing a newspaper article about a sergeant in Cork, who when a call from the convent came in, to say a girl had escaped, would calm the excited young guard who answered the phone down, would put his feet up, and say: 'Let's just have a nice cup of tea now... and give her a bit of time to make her way'.

I also heard about a man in Galway who kept shoes in his house, so runaway girls could get rid of the boots which marked them out as from a Magdalene laundry and on the radio one day, I listened to a couple who lived on Sean McDermott street speak about how they used offer a refuge to escapees too.

So while many ignored, some did get involved.

Some wrote books, some wrote plays, some wrote in papers. Others lobbied, battled to get political attention. I have mentioned Katherine, Claire and Maeve already.... I know they were joined in Justice for Magdalenes by Jim Smyth and Mari Steed, and I know that many others campaigned too. There were journalists such as Conall O'Fatharta.

And you had political support from all parties and none ... Tom Kitt and Michael Kennedy I know worked very hard, as did Kathleen Lynch, Mary Lou McDonald, Maureen O'Sullivan, Dara Calleary and Clare Daly. And my colleagues Alan Shatter and Frances Fitzgerald supported you too, as of course did Enda Kenny.

But official Ireland took its time and the truth is that you had to wait far too long for acknowledgement, recognition and an official apology. I am proud that Enda Kenny was the Taoiseach who finally made that State apology and, following the Ombudsman's report, I need to add my own. My Department worked hard to administer the redress scheme but we didn't always get it right and I am sorry for that. I apologise to you.

I have been working with the Ombudsman for some time and I am very glad that just last week, Cabinet agreed to admit the women who worked in laundries while living in an adjoining institution, into the scheme. I wish we had done it sooner, and I hope and indeed intend that the other issues highlighted by the Ombudsman will be sorted very soon. An experienced senior counsel is working hard on behalf of Government to resolve complex difficulties and I expect real progress soon.

But to get back to the present, can I just finish by again wishing you well for the rest of the two days. Thanks to the incredible event management skills of Norah Casey and her team, I think they are going to be really special. Thanks to the empathy and care of Katherine, Clare and Maeve, I think the listening exercise tomorrow is going to produce rich testimony which I promise you, as a society, we will listen to and learn from, and thanks to you, and your generosity in coming here tonight, we are all, as a society, the richer, as with you, we remember.

Thank you.