

**OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight against Racism,
Xenophobia and Discrimination
Brussels, Monday, 13 September 2004**

Delegation of Ireland

Address by Minister of State with special responsibility for European Affairs,
Mr. Dick Roche T.D.

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Mr Chairman,

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to be present today. I also wanted to associate myself with the remarks conveyed by Minister Verdonk on behalf of the European Union. Can I also warmly thank the Government of Belgium for hosting this important event.

I am conscious that this Conference is a key component in the ongoing programme of work of the OSCE to address the challenges we face in combating racism, xenophobia and intolerance in the OSCE area. At Berlin we expressed the hope that this series of conferences would yield positive and enduring results for our communities. I take this opportunity to reiterate that wish.

I know you have been focussing today in a particular way on the role of governments in promoting tolerance, particularly through interfaith and intercultural dialogue. With your indulgence I would wish not to limit my intervention to this theme alone.

The broader theme of this Conference is tolerance. Tolerance is the key to a stable society. Societies which lack tolerance and the active promotion of equality are inherently unstable.

The promotion of these values is a complex effort relying not only on appropriate anti-discrimination legislation but also on education and public awareness. The latter aspects are especially important in that they project a view of how and why an appreciation of difference is essential to the development of a healthy body politic.

The general focus of this Conference is on delivering a clear message on the value of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. It is a theme which we in Ireland can well relate to at this moment in our own national development.

Ireland is undergoing a demographic transformation unimaginable only a decade ago. For most of the last century Ireland had been a country where emigration had almost always exceeded immigration. The latest annualised figures reveal net immigration running at over 30,000. Nearly a third of our

immigrants in this time frame came from countries outside the EU and the US. 9% are Chinese, while 8% come from Central/Eastern European countries. We have significant communities from various parts of Africa.

The effect of this change cannot be overestimated. It has brought with it the benefits of an increasingly cosmopolitan culture. The vast majority of Irish people have welcomed this increased diversity but a small number have reacted in a manner out of step with our traditional welcoming attitude. While the experience of many ethnic minorities living in Ireland has been positive we are conscious that we need to ensure that we never become complacent about racism and its impact.

Consequently we have been quick to realise that this rich new tapestry requires sensitive and considered policy responses. Two cornerstones of this response are the Employment Equality Act 1998 and the Equal Status Act 2000 together with a comprehensive equality infrastructure.

Other key pillars of our response include the establishment of a Human Rights Commission and a National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism. The latter plays a vital role in providing advice, tackling racism and promoting interculturalism.

We recognize that this issue requires a rolling agenda and a responsiveness to individual situations. Action by Government and civil society needs to focus on the lived experience of those vulnerable to discrimination. The launching last week in Ireland of an anti-racism information pack to community groups around the state is illustrative of this approach. The pack provides information on racism from the perspective of minority groups, and offers advice on how to combat it. Such information is useful not only in the response to racist incidents but in making people aware of their own attitudes towards minority groups.

An underlying philosophy in our general approach is our conviction that action must have two strands; it must address the prevention of a culture of racism and respond effectively to racist incidents and attacks. This approach will be reflected in the process currently underway to finalise the Irish National Action Plan on Racism (a process flowing from the deliberations of the World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001).

UN standard setting has also played a vital role in the effort to promote tolerance. In particular the importance of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) sets an important headline for states. The monitoring of CERD by the relevant UN Committee through the state reporting process enables states to focus on what they have been doing to promote tolerance and to fight discrimination.

Ireland recently submitted its first report to the relevant Committee and looks forward to having this report examined by the Committee in March of next year. The preparatory process for the submission of the report clearly illustrated that much has been achieved but that there is no room for

complacency. The real benefit of the reporting system is that states are enabled to lay foundations and the way ahead becomes clearer.

Beyond the UN, various regional bodies and organisations have embarked upon a series of efforts to combat racism. Civil society has also been, and should continue to be, an integral part of this process. Ireland looks forward to working within the OSCE and with other international organisations in order to promote those standards laid down in the International Bill of Rights and reaffirmed again in Vienna and Durban.

We also look forward to a rich discussion at the appropriate moment on the ways through which to follow up on the achievements of the Berlin, Paris and Brussels meetings.

Thank You