



**Acceptance Speech on behalf of the Max van der Stoel Award 2020 Laureate**

**Martin Collins**  
**Director**  
**Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre**

Peace Palace, The Hague

19 November 2021

Minister,

Your Excellency, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is both an honour and a privilege to be here today to accept this prestigious Max van der Stoel Award.

In accepting this award, I do so on behalf of all my colleagues in Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre. I also accept this award on behalf of all those people who have supported or who have been associated one way or another with Pavee Point over the last 35 years. I thank them for their solidarity.

This award to Pavee Point is both a recognition and a validation of our innovative approach in addressing the racism and social exclusion of Travellers and Roma in Ireland. This is an issue that is all too familiar, not just in Ireland but indeed at the European level. We see the ongoing manifestations of this racism and exclusion in the lower educational attainment of Travellers in Europe, poor living conditions, segregation, high unemployment, health inequalities.

Many challenges quite clearly remain at both member state level and, indeed, at a European level to address the barriers to achieving full equality and inclusion of Travellers and Roma. The new EU Framework Strategy 2030 for Roma and Traveller inclusion provides a real opportunity in this regard but it is really important, as was emphasized in the video clip you have looked at, that there is full

participation and inclusion of Travellers and Roma in the development, design and implementation of the new EU Framework Strategy.

It is absolutely essential that Travellers and Roma are involved in setting the targets and the objectives and are involved in the monitoring and the implementation of this new Strategy. Traveller participation is not just important in the context of the new EU Framework Strategy; it is a very important principle full stop, across all policy measures and programmes designed to address the racism and exclusion experienced by Travellers and Roma. It is not rocket science.

Policies, plans and measures to address these challenges are much more likely to be effective when the voices of Travellers and Roma have been heard and have influenced the process. When there is a sense of ownership of these policies among those communities, they are much more likely to succeed.

I can't let this moment pass without acknowledging my late colleague and friend John O'Connell, a founding member and the first Director of Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre. John O'Connell passed away 22 years ago this coming Sunday. John was the husband of Anastasia Crickley, who is the Chairperson of Pavee Point and I know it can't be an easy time at this moment for Stasia and her son Coleen. It was John O'Connell's groundbreaking analysis that changed everything in terms of the work with Irish Travellers.

John broke new ground in promoting a community-development approach to work with Travellers and its inherent principles around Traveller leadership, Traveller participation, Travellers' lived experience and voices being heard in the policy-making arenas. Prior to that, we were completely excluded from these processes. Thankfully, that has changed due to John's vision and groundbreaking analysis.

He also brought a new analysis to cultural rights and the right to one's identity, the right to one's history, the right to one's language and to have this validated and respected by institutions of the State. That was really important because in 1985, when John shared that analysis, it eventually paid off on 1 March 2017 when the then Taoiseach [Irish Prime Minister] stood up in our parliament and unequivocally recognized my community as a distinct ethnic group. That was a really important historic and symbolic moment and it put to bed the racist ideology that my community were somehow deviants, misfits, dropouts from the famine era, and that all we needed to do was rehabilitate, civilize and normalize my community.

On the first of March 2017, as I say, that racist ideology, which prevailed for decades on the island of Ireland, was put to bed. Again, that was John's analysis. I have here a pin which marks that very historic day and there are some of those ethnicity pins over there on top of the table and what's quite interesting about this pin is it's a traditional wagon wheel and it covers the harp — the Irish symbol — so it captures

both of our identities, both our nationality and our ethnicity. And that's absolutely crucial. We're not choosing one over the other. They both can and should mutually coexist peacefully.

And then, finally, John also promoted the whole concept of solidarity with other communities and movements for social change. So there was a collective effort to effect social and positive change. So we accept this award in honour of many people, as I say, who are at present involved in Pavee Point or who have been associated with Pavee Point over the years. But in particular, we accept this award in John's memory and John's vision and commitment to human rights.

So, I want to thank you for this award. It has given us a renewed energy and encouragement to continue our important work in the promotion and protection of the human rights of Travellers and Roma in Ireland. And finally, can I just say, in this context, I'm reminded of something Mr. Juncker, former President of the European Commission, said when he was speaking about Travellers and Roma. He said: "We all know what we need to do, we just don't know how to get re-elected when we do it."

In fighting for human rights it takes courage and leadership. Thank you.