

OPENING SPEECH - VICTIMS' RIGHTS: AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE

11 September 2015

Good Morning ladies and gentlemen

I am honoured to have been invited to open this conference – “Victims’ Rights: An Agenda for Change”. In welcoming you to the University of Limerick I am particularly pleased greet those of you who have not visited our campus before.

This conference is timely and appropriate. Traditionally, the voice of the victim has been largely silent from the criminal law, with the criminal process having been seen as an adversarial contest between the State, representing the public interest, and the accused. However, it gradually became clear that the public interest did not necessarily align well with the interest of the victim.

Over the years some reform was achieved, principally on a piecemeal basis: the anonymity of the complainant in certain cases (mainly involving sexual offences); restrictions on the admissibility of evidence (again in sexual offence case); and the introduction of victim impact statements at sentencing stage. These reforms can be seen as having been animated by a sense that the victim was not being adequately protected within the criminal justice process but they did not represent a coherent or comprehensive response to demands for improved protection of victims’ interests.

The Victims’ Rights Directive (2012/29/EU) is a movement in the latter direction. It has firmly established minimum standards on the rights, protection and support of victims of crime and these must be implemented into national law by November of this year. This conference will provide a forum to discuss the implementation of the Directive. It is important that the full range of stakeholders in the criminal justice system is heard in this debate. In this regard, I am

delighted to see that there is representation from the judiciary, an Garda Síochána, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Probation Service, agencies and voluntary bodies that deal with and represent victims of crime, as well as from the world of academia. This broad coalition will ensure that we can avail of the full range of expertise in the area of victims' rights.

At the University of Limerick we intend to act on the growing importance of victims' right. Already we host the *Hate and Hostility Research Group*, an interdisciplinary cluster that has highlighted the issue of hate crime and whose work has culminated in proposed legislation: that is the type of research impact that the University is proud to boast about.

I am also aware that the Centre for Criminal Justice will be renamed the *Centre for Criminal Justice and Victim Studies*, an important change that reflects the work undertaken in the University in this area and which will place a greater emphasis on its future energies. Researchers in the Centre have a demonstrated a strong commitment to victims' rights evident in:

- policy based research reports (on hate crime; on the needs and concerns of victims of crime; on domestic violence; and on victims with disabilities).
- submissions to Oireachtas on the law on sexual offences.
- national and international articles (in journals such as *International Review of Victimology* and *International Journal of Evidence and Proof*).
- the first book in Ireland focused specifically on the first victims of crime (to be published in May 2016 by Manchester University Press)
- A new postgraduate module on Victimology
- Work with key stakeholders such as COSC, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, the Commission for the Support of Victims

of Crime, the Victims of Crime Office, and the National Disability Authority.

I am confident that this solid track record will pave the way for the University of Limerick being further recognised as a centre of excellence in the study of victims' rights.

This conference is hosted by the School of Law at the University of Limerick. I wish to acknowledge the considerable amount of work that went into organising the conference and in particular I must single out the massive contributions made by Dr Susan Leahy and Dr Margaret Fitzgerald-O'Reilly, and the vital administrative support that was provided by Carol Huguet and Emma Foley. I must also acknowledge to support learnt by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and our good friends in Holmes O'Malley Sexton, Solicitors who have kindly sponsored this evening's wine reception – and in my experience, their receptions last fondly in the memory or perhaps not on an especially good night!

In conclusion, I wish you well in your work today. However, I also exhort you to take some time out to enjoy our wonderful campus. This building, the Graduate Entry Medical School Building, was a shortlisted for the prestigious Sterling Prize last year. You might also take the opportunity to visit the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, which is located nearby. Entering that building has been described as being like “stepping into a poem”: and when you see the fantastic Desmond Kinney mosaic inside the building you will understand why. Or may wish to traverse the Living Bridge, Ireland's longest pedestrian bridge, which spans the River Shannon, or take a walk on the flora, fauna and art trails that are mapped on campus: there is even an app to assist you: *UL Trails*.