



Promoting and Enhancing the Lives of Refugees

Reception Marking the Twenty-First Anniversary of The Irish Refugee Council, Áras An Uachtaráin

Speech by

Mrs Justice Catherine McGuinness

Until the mid-1980s, asylum seekers were largely unheard of in Ireland. Occasionally, some, known as “jumpers” for embarking planes en route to or from Russia, began to arrive at Shannon Airport. Despite Ireland signing the Refugee Convention in 1956, there was no Refugee Status Determination system in place. In the case of a Chinese man who challenged his detention without charge at Mountjoy Prison, the Department of Justice accepted that Ireland had signed the Refugee Convention but argued that it had no actual obligations under the Convention!

As well as there being no refugee status determination process, there was no legal aid available. A handful of lawyers – Bobby Eagar, Suzanne Egan, Teresa Blake, Derek Stewart, Noeline Blackwell – began to take on cases. Eventually a framework for dealing with asylum claims began to emerge through UNHCR. The Head of UNHCR in London, on his visits to Ireland, would meet with Bobby Eagar and Bill Shipsey. Bill Shipsey was already involved in Amnesty International, and began to attend conferences of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) which helped inform the thinking of the lawyers involved.

Wendy Cox and Nadette Foley were also involved with Amnesty and they, together with representatives from organised Roman Catholic groups, came together in response to the perceived need to assist those arriving in Ireland in need of protection.

In late 1988, a conference, entitled *Refugees in Crisis*, was organised in Dublin by Aidlink, an overseas development agency then based in Blackrock College. The organisers and the 120 participants were drawn mainly from religious orders and from development agencies working overseas. These included the Jesuit order, Holy Ghost Fathers, Medical Missionaries of Mary, Viatores Christi, and the Church of Ireland Missionary Society. The central theme was building a more effective Irish response to refugee situations in the countries where they worked. The conference concluded by setting up a working group to generate a plan of action, which would include increased public awareness, more coordination among agencies and possibly the establishment of a new network or organisation to facilitate better support and services to refugees.

After several meetings, it was decided to begin the work of setting up an Irish Refugee Council, intended as an ‘umbrella group’ for existing NGOs and agencies, and with a brief covering refugee and asylum work both at home and abroad. The group ‘went public’ with its plans at a meeting in 1989 with the Irish government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and

other interested parties such as the government-sponsored Refugee Resettlement Committee (supporting Programme Refugees) and the Irish Red Cross (running a small refugee hostel in Dublin). This meeting focused largely on the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland, and was also attended by representatives of the Refugee Advisory Service (a group of independent asylum lawyers set up in consultation with UNHCR), of Amnesty International's Irish Section, which had been a crucial contact point for asylum seekers arriving in Ireland, and of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement. In 1992, the Irish Refugee Council was formally registered as a limited company and its first CEO, Nadette Foley, took up an unpaid post! Other staff followed, including many acting on a voluntary basis such as Deirdre Murray. A number of those involved were returned development workers.

The initial campaign was to achieve the recognition of the right to claim asylum and the implementation of a proper legislative system. It resulted in the Refugee Act 1996 although this wasn't implemented until 2000.

The focus of the IRC moved to establish itself on a more secure footing. Reluctantly the Department of Justice provided some funding, alongside organisations such as the Irish Missionary Union. Lawyers such as Teresa Blake joined the Board, Teresa drafting the first appeal forms which were eventually adopted in large part by the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

Peter O'Mahony took over the post of CEO and the first significant funds were secured from Atlantic Philanthropies, putting the organisation on to a more secure footing. The organisation moved in and out of service provision, at one point having a very busy office in Ennis staffed by people such as Orla Ni Éilli. Advocacy around issues such as Direct Provision and Separated Children then became more prominent and service provision reduced.

Two CEOs later and numerous interns, volunteers and Board members, the IRC is now a staff of 12 with additional support from interns and volunteers. It is one of just eight independent law centres and has pioneered early legal advice now taken on by others including A&L Goodbody solicitors. The IRC also has specialised support for children and young people, a drop-in service for those who need information and guidance on numerous matters and is an authoritative and credible voice for those in need of international protection.

In its official 21st year, those now involved with the IRC would like to pay tribute to those who had the vision, dedication and expertise to set up the Irish Refugee Council. From the days when more than 11,500 claimed asylum in Ireland in 2002 to less than 1000 today, we are nevertheless seeing the biggest refugee crisis in nearly 20 years. It is an organisation which is needed as much now as it was in the early 1990s.