

## **Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern TD, at the official opening of the new offices of the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN).**

I would like to thank the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network for inviting me here today to officially open their new offices in Fumbally Court and to launch their Work Programme. Fumbally Court is now shared by a number of organisations ranging from design companies, international architects such as Murray O'Laoire and national organisations like the Disability Federation of Ireland and GLEN. This type of development reflects the ongoing rejuvenation of The Liberties. The Liberties are at the heart of our thousand year old city. Today, these historic streets are again on their way to becoming one of the most successful, vibrant, diverse and liveable communities in Dublin.

Given the positive air of change here in The Liberties, it is particularly appropriate that GLEN has located its new offices here. I am delighted, as Taoiseach, that our gay and lesbian community are taking their rightful place at the centre of our capital city's cultural, community and civic life.

The most successful cities in the world are those that foster cultural diversity. This success manifests itself economically as well as socially. A touchstone of this diversity is the manner in which gay and lesbian rights are respected. We all want Dublin to be viewed as a successful city, a city where all our citizens, including our gay and lesbian citizens, are fully respected.

As a trailblazing, independent, non-governmental organisation, GLEN aims to achieve gay law reform based on equality, as well as broad-ranging anti discrimination legislation. It is good to see that you are a rapidly expanding organisation today. One year ago, you had one full time employee. Now you have four and that is soon expected to reach eight. You have been a courageous leader for the equality agenda in Ireland. Enormous credit is due, in fact, to a small number of people who, when it was difficult to stand up and be counted, were not afraid to say that they were gay or lesbian.

I pay tribute to these people. I acknowledge their courage. Their fight against the prejudice and ignorance has challenged our community. It has changed our culture and it has led the transformation of public opinion in Ireland today.

Our sexual orientation is not an incidental attribute. It is an essential part of who and what we are. All citizens, regardless of sexual orientation, stand equal in the eyes of our laws. Sexual orientation cannot, and must not, be the basis of a second-class citizenship. Our laws have changed, and will continue to change, to reflect this principle. Ireland today enjoys a comprehensive legislative framework to protect people against discrimination both in employment and in other important areas of life.

The Employment Equality Acts 1998 and 2004 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004 prohibit discrimination in employment and the provision of goods and services on nine separate grounds. These include sexual orientation. These significant legislative measures, introduced during my time as Taoiseach, are helping to deliver practical results for lesbians and gay men.

Recently the Government introduced an amendment to the Parental Leave Act. This extends *force majeure* leave to employees in respect of persons, with whom they have a relationship of domestic dependency, including same-sex partners.

GLEN's five-year work programme now seeks to advance equality around legal recognition of relationships. Important issues raised include equal access to civil marriage, equality in legal recognition of de facto relationships, as recommended by the Law Reform Commission, and equality in other proposed models of legal recognition such as civil partnership. I want to state clearly today that the Government is unequivocally in favour of treating gay and lesbian people as fully equal citizens in our society.

Giving effect to this principle in legislation is necessarily complex and challenging. Legislating for civil partnerships requires thinking through a host of related matters. The British Civil Partnership Act, 2004 has 264 sections and 30 schedules. Moreover, our written constitution gives rise to complexities that did not arise in the British case.

This challenge, however, is one that the Government is determined to meet. We are committed to legislating on this issue.

The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform has recently established a Working Group on Domestic Partnership, chaired by Anne Colley, to progress work in this area. Relevant Government Departments and Offices, the Equality Authority, the Family Lawyers Association, economist Finola Kennedy and, of course, GLEN are represented.

The Group is charged with preparing an Options Paper for presentation to the Minister by October this year. It will provide an analysis of the categories of partnerships and relationships outside of marriage to which legal effect and recognition might be given, consistent with constitutional provisions. It will identify options as to how and to what extent legal recognition could be given to those alternative forms of partnership, including partnerships entered into outside the State. Civil partnership models in place in other countries will be taken into account.

I welcome the fact that the Group is now up and running and inviting submissions from interested parties. The All Party Oireachtas Committee Report on the Constitution, as well as the deliberations of the Law Reform Commission, will also inform its work. I understand that the Human Rights Commission is also preparing a report on protection under international human rights law for unmarried couples. This work appears to complement the ongoing review by the Law Reform Commission.

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is also currently working on an Immigration and Residence Bill. A discussion document, entitled 'Immigration and Residence in Ireland', was published in April 2005. Among the issues the document identifies for consideration are non-marital partnerships and same sex relationships. Work is continuing on the Bill and it is intended to bring proposals to Government later this year.

Furthermore, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform is currently preparing regulations to implement the Council Directive on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States. This will provide certain entitlements to the partner of a Union citizen where there is a durable and duly attested relationship. The procedures that will operate in this area are currently being developed.

Of course, legislation alone will not address all the issues facing lesbians and gays – a lot of the focus is on services and how they are delivered. The National Economic and Social Forum published a report entitled 'Equality Policies for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People: Implementation Issues' in 2003. The active involvement of representatives of the gay and lesbian community in the preparation of the report contributed immensely to its quality.

This report is a useful examination of lesbian and gay issues across a range of government activity. For example, the Garda authorities have since established a National Advisory Panel, which includes members who represent the gay perspective. They assist and inform the Gardaí on matters relating to the community. Designated Gardaí have received special familiarisation training and have been appointed as liaison officers to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

The Government agreed that each Department should take steps to implement the relevant recommendations and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has overview responsibility in relation to implementation. GLEN and the Department have established a structured relationship to follow up on this Report. And the Department has provided a grant to assist GLEN in recruiting a research officer to support it in its work with Government Departments.

Although there is a growing climate of equality and support for anti-discrimination action, I also recognise that members of the gay community still face isolation, abuse and victimisation on the basis of their sexuality.

In its ambitious five year work programme, 'Building Sustainable Change', GLEN aims to advance progress under three key areas: legislation and policy; education; and building community capacity. This approach recognises the significant progress that has been achieved and focuses on practical further steps required to deliver improvements across key policy areas.

I must compliment GLEN and acknowledge that they have proved themselves a knowledgeable, competent and business-like organisation in their dealings with Government, while maintaining their independence and their own strategic vision.

My presence here today on behalf of the Government, is to congratulate GLEN on their success to date. I look forward to an ongoing, successful partnership in the future. The issues of equality, of fairness and of esteem that you champion are issues that go to the heart of the kind of community that we are. They are issues that I care deeply about as a politician. In a short time, we have made substantial progress. Now we have the opportunity to do more – and we will.

I wish you every success as you embark on an exciting and challenging programme of work from this wonderful base in Fumbally Court.

Thank you.

3<sup>rd</sup> April 2006