



**Sunday Opening Remarks by Chairperson, Ms. Justice Mary Laffoy,
at the Fourth Meeting of the Citizens' Assembly
on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution
The Grand Hotel, Malahide, Sunday 5th March, 2017**

Good morning and welcome back to all our members and to those joining us online and on RTE News Now. I also want to extend a warm welcome to all the groups who are with us this Sunday morning.

It is an early start for us all this morning and it will be a long day. We have extended today's meeting to accommodate this weekend's demanding agenda. It is important at this stage to acknowledge the work ethic of the Members before me today. Their commitment to each weekend of the Assembly, their willingness to listen and to engage with the subject matter before them has been a genuine source of inspiration and motivation to myself and the Secretariat.

From the outset, I hope that everyone who comes before them today appreciates the effort the Members make and shows them the respect they deserve.

Today's agenda will again be informed by the submissions we received on the topic of the Eighth Amendment. Over 120 submissions were received by advocacy groups and many of these submissions were of a very high standard and it was immediately obvious that much time and consideration had gone into them.

I am very grateful to the groups for their work. These submissions have been made available to you since January and are also available on-line for members of the public to access.

Ultimately 17 groups will present to you today. Even by extending an invitation to 17 groups we are aware that others are disappointed or frustrated that they are not here. I think therefore it is appropriate to thoroughly explain the process to you.

At the February meeting of the Assembly you the Members were asked to indicate which groups you would like to present to the Assembly. To ensure balance, both on the day and in our overall work programme the final decision fell to me. In making this decision I took into account your perspective and was further informed by the following:

- The extent to which the submissions provided by a group addressed the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution
- The extent to which the submissions covered new material not previously considered by the Assembly;
- The need to ensure balance on either side of the debate, today, over the course of the weekend and across the work programme of the Assembly in it's entirety.

Finally, even with an extended timetable to accommodate as many Groups as possible, it has simply not been possible to accommodate all. While this is regretted, it is a function of inevitable time constraints. The Secretariat has detailed the entire process on the website should anyone require further information on this.

We will be hearing from the 17 groups across five sessions, each speaker will have the floor for 10 minutes, at the end of each session there will be a short Q &A.

Before we go any further I want to establish the rules of engagement and it is appropriate at this juncture to recall the Key Principles of the Assembly;

- *Openness*: The Assembly should be open to hearing from all sections of society

- *Fairness*: it is important that we allow the full spectrum of views to be heard on every issue and that our briefing material for Assembly members is of the highest quality;
- *Equality of voice*: amongst all Assembly members. Each member will be given an opportunity to voice their opinions, should they so wish;
- *Efficiency*: The Assembly will make best use of our limited time together and ensure that all documentation is circulated in advance so members can properly prepare for meetings;
- *Respect*: it is important that members can freely and confidently make contributions and express their views without fear of personal attacks or criticism; and
- *Collegiality*: we will work together in a spirit of friendship as together we embark on this task.

In the three meetings of the Assembly to date all speakers and members have been very respectful of those principles. This has been to the benefit of the discourse on this topic in Ireland. I want to be very clear that I want to see that respectful tone preserved at today's meeting.

In Ireland conversation around the Eighth Amendment often leads to individuals or groups taking diametrically opposed viewpoints. Debates in the past have frequently been marked by heated and difficult exchanges. I am conscious that many of the people we are going to hear from today have been campaigning on this issue for many years and thus have very deeply held views convictions on the topic we are discussing. However, I must stress this is not the space for personal attacks of any nature from whatever side. Such conduct will not be tolerated.

I wish to advise the Members that much of the material they may hear today from either side may provoke a strong reaction. In keeping with rules and procedures of the Assembly to date all references included in presentations and papers made to you the members must contain all relevant citations. All groups presenting to the Assembly have been asked to submit their presentations to the Assembly for review in advance of this weekend's meeting but I must flag to you all that it would

be beyond the expertise of the Assembly to guarantee or validate the content from these groups.

Unlike previous weekends this is not our content and we cannot be responsible for it.

However, should the Members seek clarification on any points raised over the course of the weekend, we will endeavour to provide these in advance of the final weekend.

As Members, we also have a responsibility to the speakers and the groups they represent. Let us listen to them in good faith. Acknowledging the spectrum of opinions let us lend them our ears, hear their voices and realise the value in that.

Let us begin what hope it will be a calm, reasonable and enlightening series of presentations.

I would now like to introduce our first session, where we will hear from Professor Veronica O'Keane from Doctors for Life Ireland. Following this we will hear from Dr. Orla Halpenny from Doctors for Choice.

ENDS//

