



IRELAND

STATEMENT BY

**HIS EXCELLENCY, MR. BRIAN LENIHAN, T.D.,
MINISTER FOR CHILDREN**

**PRESENTING IRELAND'S SECOND PERIODIC REPORT
TO THE UNITED NATIONS COMMITTEE
ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD**

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**Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations
56-58 rue de Moillebeau
1209 Geneva
Tel: 022 919 19 50**

Final version Minister's opening address

Madame Chair, Committee Members, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to be here today to report the progress which has been made in Ireland giving effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Article 44 of the Convention provides an essential opportunity for us to measure our progress and to take stock of what has been achieved and identify the priorities for the next stage of our development.

Ireland has experienced extraordinary economic growth over the last decade. Fortunately, in this respect, we have managed to overcome a great many historical constraints which for long, held our country back. This has enabled us to make investments across a great many areas - in infrastructure, health services, education and income support. The aim of Government has been to translate our new-found economic success into positive social change. Much progress has been made. For instance, I speak to you today as the first ever Irish Minister for Children to attend meetings of the Cabinet. As such, the interests of children are taken into account in an unprecedented manner across all areas of government, Key government officials whose job it is to look after the interests of children have been brought together in the Office of the Minister for Children to work in a coordinated and integrated effort to deliver the best possible services for children.

Of course, it is not always easy to set priorities when there are competing demands for additional investment, But we have made progress.

I would like to highlight, in particular some of the issues raised in the Committee's observations on the occasion of the last examination.

The most significant development has been the publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000. The Strategy, which is rooted in the Convention, sets out an ambitious series of objectives which has defined children's policy since its publication.

The appointment of the first Ombudsman for Children has been a significant acknowledgement that children and young people have the same right as adults to efficient and equitable public services. As the Ombudsman's Office develops, it give a greater focus to the rights of children.

The establishment of the National Children's Office (now fully incorporated into my new Office) sets us on a clear path to implementing Article 12 and giving children a voice in Ireland. I believe that, from a position of little understanding or regard for the voice of children, my Office has made a very strong start. My own

Office consults regularly with children in its work we are also re-educating and producing tools to support a wider engagement with children as active participants in their own lives. I am delighted to present to you today, a short study undertaken in preparation for the hearing. *"How We See It"* is a short report on children and young people's views on the implementation of the UNCRC in Ireland. The findings demonstrate that the majority of young people surveyed are aware of their rights under the UNCRC and are also aware that those rights need to be asserted more fully.

The Office of the Minister has also done much valuable work in advancing our understanding of the lives of children through the research it commissions. This research is proving a sound evidence-base for policy. We have a great many exciting initiatives underway which will ensure that we can properly benchmark improvements in the lives of children and young people. These initiatives will greatly increase our understanding of how children's experiences growing up impact on their ability to reach their potential, overcome difficulties and show resilience. The first National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland is underway. It will monitor the lives of 18,000 children over an initial period of 7 years and will provide valuable information for future policy formation.

In the area of education, since 1997 we have more than doubled the overall budget for education from 2.9 billion euro to 7.9 billion euro in 2006. We have hired 5,000 additional primary teachers, more than 2,000 extra post-primary teachers which means reduced class sizes.

Child Protection is a key part of the Government agenda: recent years have seen a rebalancing and readjustment of services towards early intervention and support for families in order to reduce the numbers of children who may become dependent on state care. Intensive preventive and early intervention community based services which have been put in place include the Springboard initiative, Youth Advocacy Programme Pilot projects and Teen Parents Support Initiative. Since 1997, the Government has increased the annual provision for child care services by more than 200 million euro in real terms and has invested in excess of 60 million euro in capital projects.

Following a detailed review of our youth justice system, the Government has undertaken a series of important structural and legislative reforms. Responsibility for youth justice and the implementation of the Children Act has been given to a new Irish Youth Justice Service which reports directly to me. Under my strategic direction juvenile justice in Ireland will be governed by the principles of prevention, diversion, education and rehabilitation which are contained in the Children Act 2001. The necessary legislative changes have been passed by Parliament these arrangements provide a new coherent structure for both the policy and operational environments of youth justice.

The elimination of child poverty is a key priority for Government. Inside the last decade, real progress has been made in improving the quality of life of children across the social spectrum. Much of this success is down to our strong economic performance and our achievement of near full employment. But there has also been some crucial developments in the area of income support and access to services including childcare, education, health and housing. Some 100,000 children have been lifted out of deprivation between 1997 and 2005 as a result of targeted measures and supports. Independent economic experts have told us that child benefit is the most effective means of combating child poverty. Accordingly, we have quadrupled child benefit over the last decade: in 1997 the monthly rate for the first two children was 38 euros; it now stands at 150 euros.

Research has identified children of lone parents as one of the major groups at risk of child poverty. A new Government discussion paper 'Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents' puts forward a range of proposals, some complex and others radical, for the reform of restrictive social policies in the area of lone parents and low income families generally. Work has commenced on progressing the recommendations of the discussion paper in consultation with Government Departments and Agencies and relevant stakeholders.

However, in outlining to you our achievements over the last nine years, I do not in any way wish to deny that much remains to be done and I expect you will highlight some of the tasks ahead today.

One particular issue which I would like to refer to is the issue of the rights of children in the Irish Constitution. I know that you are aware that this issue has been the subject of some consideration in Government. Only recently an All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution made recommendations on the need to improve the constitutional rights of the child. However, I think it is fair to say that the specific formula advanced by the Committee has not found favour either with my Office or the non-governmental organizations. I have embarked on an examination, on an article by article basis of the provisions of the Constitution as they impact on children.

Any change to the Constitution would involve a referendum. Time and again, the Irish people have demonstrated their strong attachment to our constitution by rejecting government efforts to change it. Therefore, there is a heavy onus on the Government to approach this issue carefully so that a good formula is devised which would ensure that the best interests of children prevail in matters which affect them and at the same time would meet with the required public support. I hope to complete the examination of these important issues within my Office in a short timeframe.

Notwithstanding this and other challenges which lie ahead, I am confident that Ireland has demonstrated that children and young people are higher on the agenda than ever before. Powerful evidence of that commitment is the Government's landmark decision to establish the Office of the Minister for Children and put myself, as Minister for Children at the Cabinet table. This decision will result in a strategic, integrated approach to legislation, policy-making and service provision for children and young people. We now have the opportunity to "unlock" the barriers to implementation where multiple departments and agencies are involved in the delivery of services and policy outcomes. In addition, the most recent Social Partnership agreement (referred to in the supplementary material supplied in August), now provides for matching structures at national and local level.

It is now generally acknowledged that at central government level, policy making is increasingly integrated. The new administrative arrangements we have put in place allow us, for the first time, to attempt to provide that same integration in policy implementation and service delivery.

I want to conclude by saying again, that I greatly welcome the opportunity presented by this process. My officials and I will make every effort to deal with all of your questions effectively today. I anticipate that, as in the past, the concluding observations of the Committee will help us to decide our priorities, as we work to improve the lives of children and young people in Ireland. There are challenges in setting our agenda for the future and in ensuring that good policies already developed are implemented on the ground. Change will not happen overnight but we have clear commitment and clarity of purpose. Together with the children themselves and civil society (including the non-governmental sector), I am confident that we will continue in our advance towards a society which values, respects and supports all of its children in achieving their full potential.