

CommHR(2024)23

IDAHOT+ Forum 2024 The Hague

Speech by Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Opening Plenary Session, 15 May 2024

Minister, Excellencies,
Friends,

It is a great pleasure to be with you.

I'm a 65-year-old gay Irish man, and this means I have lived through significant times of social development. For the first 20 years of my life, I had no idea of my sexual orientation because there were no cultural references whatsoever from which I could draw. For the next ten years, I lived fearfully in the closet. For my first 35 years, I lived under the cloud of criminal law. And it is just six years ago in Ireland that I was able to marry my partner of 27 years.

My story is that of many people, but it is also a story of personal and social realisation and development. It is reflective of the astonishing changes we have seen in so many of our societies and countries. However, there is no room today for complacency given the vast gaps, dreadful abuses, and patterns of backsliding well known to so many in this room.

The challenges are very well brought to our attention today in two important resources that are before us. The first of these is the 3rd EU LGBTIQ survey presented by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights published yesterday. Even though I no longer work for the Fundamental Rights Agency, I feel a little possessive of this survey since the data was gathered and analysed while I was still its Director. The second is the annual Rainbow Map presented by ILGA Europe.

These two resources describe patterns of discrimination, harassment, hate and violence so widespread that they might be described as banal. They describe the higher degree of intimidation, harassment and violence experienced by members of the trans and intersex communities. They tell us of the pernicious role played by intersectional discrimination. I think of the situation of Roma, migrants, persons with disabilities, and many others. They also point to the horrific instrumentalisation of people, especially trans and intersex people, that sometimes even leads to the loss of life.

For reasons such as the ones I have just described, this IDAHOT Forum 2024 is not a moment for business as usual. It is a moment to wake up.

We need governments to wake up to the seriousness of the issues and the challenge that faces them. In this context, I express appreciation to the Netherlands for your leadership and for convening us here today. I also deeply appreciate those states that have drafted today's political Declaration, and I am encouraged that five more states have committed to the Declaration.

We also need regional organisations to wake up. Here I express appreciation to the European Union for its groundbreaking LGBTIQ strategy and my personal appreciation to Commissioner Dalli for her brave leadership on this issue. We must urge that the EU adopt a new strategy to replace the current one.

I also express appreciation to my own organisation, the Council of Europe, for establishing the Committee of Experts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (ADI-SOGIESC). This is a very important initiative, and I particularly appreciate the commitment to adopt a Council of Europe Strategy for the Equality of Rights of LGBTI Persons.

Friends, in addition, we need our societies to wake up to the reality of what is happening within them. We need to engage and trigger the capacity for good in our societies. We can trigger such vast social movements. We have done it before. As an Irish national, I saw how, during the Marriage Equality referendum in 2015, a whole country woke up to the issue.

I too need to wake up in my role as Commissioner for Human Rights.

In that context, I make you three pledges.

First, I will continue the high priority paid to these issues by my predecessors. There will be no let-up in the attention of the Office of the Commissioner to the issues and the challenges faced by LGBTI people.

Second, in continuing the work of my predecessors, I will not work **for** the LGBTI communities. Instead, I will work **with** them. This includes a strong commitment on my part to stand up for LGBTIQ civil society.

Third, I will not hesitate to call out abuses where I see them. This I have already done in the context of the foreign funding legislative developments we are seeing in a number of places in Europe at the present time.

Let me conclude with some words of hope. I would like to borrow the words of Louis-Georges Tin, the founder of IDAHO. About twelve years ago, I was on a panel with him to mark IDAHOT at the United Nations in New York. I do not remember what I said that day and I recall very little of what was said by others. But I remember everything that Louis-Georges Tin enunciated. He did not speak his words. He sang them. He sang Joan Baez's great song 'We shall overcome'. Allow me to conclude with just one of the verses that Louis-Georges sang on that day.

"Oh, deep in my heart
I know that I do believe
We shall overcome, someday".

Thank you.