



**Opening Speech by Chairperson, Ms. Justice Mary Laffoy,
at the Third Meeting of the Citizens' Assembly
on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution
The Grand Hotel, Malahide, Saturday 4th February, 2017**

Introduction

Good morning and welcome everyone, both present here in the room with me and watching online.

We are gathered here again to continue our consideration of the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

This meeting marks the half-way point in our considerations of the first topic the Houses of the Oireachtas has tasked us with.

The previous two weekends have provided us with a overview of the factual background to and a solid grounding in the legal, medical and ethical considerations that surround this controversial constitutional provision.

We have gained a understanding of the legal principles applicable to what is a complex area of Irish law. We have heard from medical professionals about the complicated area of healthcare around pregnancy. We have also had our assumptions challenged by the

presentation of the moral and ethical arguments on both sides of the debate.

We will continue to build on all of this at this meeting. This weekend's agenda, which as always demands our fullest attention, is reflective of the work programme proposed by the members at our first weekend and the ongoing feedback and communications with them. I have taken onboard the issues members would like hear being discussed and the information they need to help them to come to greater understanding of the topic before them. As always this feedback is taken alongside the work being done by the Secretariat and myself and the Expert Advisory Group.

Submissions

To begin this morning however, unlike other weekends, we will be going into private session immediately after this address whereupon members will spend forty-five minutes discussing the submissions the Assembly received.

The Assembly received in excess of 13,500 submissions on this topic, by post and online.

The members were eager to incorporate the submissions into their considerations. To assist with this, and following requests from members themselves, the Secretariat generated a random sample of 300 submissions which was circulated to members in advance of this meeting. Apart from that, many the members have been reading the submissions online as they are being published. A copy of the sample together with a note on the methodology as to how they were selected will be made available on the website.

This morning the Members will debate and discuss what they have read to date.

I would like to take the opportunity again to thank all those who made a submission. It was a demonstration of genuine engagement, not only from advocacy and interest groups in this space but from members of the public submitting their views and, often personal, experiences as private individuals.

This is undoubtedly a topic that many people possess strong opinions on.

The Secretariat continues to work tirelessly to ensure all submissions made are available to view online. The Secretariat has been reading each and every one prior to publication. They are being published on a rolling basis on the website and are available to view in chronological order from date received.

I should mention that following the decision made at the last meeting, all submissions received from advocacy groups and other interest/representative bodies have been published, out of date sequence, at the request of the members.

Similarly, personal stories received from women and their families with experience of the Eighth Amendment are also in the process of being prioritised for publication.

As of this morning there are over 6,700 [Check before delivery] available to view on the website and I would encourage anyone with an interest in this topic to read a sample to get a sense of the type of issues that are being raised.

Public session will resume at 11am when we will be provided with feedback from the members on their discussions.

This Weekend

Later this morning we will take a look at the international position with regard to abortion. Members have sought further information on this and so we have invited Gilda Sedgh from the Guttmacher Institute in the USA to address this topic. Following this, and again at the request of members, we will look more closely at the UK and the experience there. We will be joined by Patricia Lohr, Clinical Director of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, and Peter Thompson, Consultant in Fetal Medicine from Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust. I will say more about what each of these speakers have been asked to address immediately before the session.

This afternoon we will look at the area of rape. In the first session we will be joined by Dr Maeve Eogan from the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit in the Rotunda Hospital and Noeline Blackwell from the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. They will provide us with information around the medical and care path issues for women who are victims of rape and the potential consequences involving pregnancy.

It is important to say that Dr Eogan and Ms Blackwell will not be advocating for an exception for rape within the current legal regime, but will simply be providing us with factual details of the treatment of a woman who presents in such a situation.

Tom O'Malley from NUI Galway will then discuss the current law around rape. He will address, in broad terms, the issues which may arise if termination of pregnancy were to be permitted on grounds of rape.

Tomorrow morning our re-scheduled second ethics discussion will take place. In January the moral status of the foetus was looked at. This time the reproductive autonomy of the woman is being addressed. Dr Joan McCarthy from UCC will present the pro-choice arguments and Dr Dónal Ó Mathúna from DCU will present the pro-life arguments.

We have specifically requested that our speakers present the two opposing perspectives to us, mirroring the approach we took at our January meeting.

Finally, the weekend's proceedings will conclude with a presentation from Professor Gerard Bury from UCD about the regulation of the medical profession and issues arising there including conscientious objection. He will speak about what can sometimes be a conflict between the law of the state and the regulation of the profession.

The agenda for the weekend is available to view online and all of our speakers' papers prepared for the Assembly, and their accompanying slideshows, will become available on our website throughout the course of the weekend.

I would encourage all of you watching to continue to do so as we are generating a detailed body of information on this topic, which I hope will be of value beyond the lifetime of this Assembly, particularly to the Oireachtas Committee which in due course will consider the report and recommendations of the Assembly . All material that is given to the members is also available to the general public on our website, www.citizensassembly.ie, in the interests of openness and fairness – two of the Assembly's key principles.

Conclusion

We will now go into private session for forty-five minutes as the members discuss the submissions. We will be live again at 11am.

Thank you.