

## Department of Justice Contradicts Minister for Education on State complicity

Representatives from Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) traveled to Dublin and met with senior officials in the Department of Justice on December 15, 2009. Officials from the Department of Education were scheduled to attend the same meeting but did not keep the appointment. The meeting resulted in a number of important developments in the ongoing campaign to effect a distinct redress scheme for survivors of the Magdalene laundries.

Mr. James Martin, Assistant Secretary, stated unequivocally that the Department placed women "On Remand" at the Sean McDermott Street Magdalene Laundry (also known as the Gloucester Street laundry) after the passage of the Criminal Justice Act, 1960 and that it paid a capitation grant for every woman so-referred. The Department possesses some records for these women.

Mr. Martin also acknowledged the Department's awareness that historically women were indeed referred to various Magdalene Asylums via the Irish court system. He also acknowledged that there was no legal basis supporting the courts' use of these institutions to confine women and, likewise, that there was no

legal basis for members of the Garda Síochána returning women who escaped from the laundry institutions.

JFM also submitted archival evidence to the Department that women were placed in Magdalene Laundries "On Probation" from the courts, in some cases for periods of up to 3 years. Officials are following up on this evidence.

The meeting concluded with JFM requesting that the Minister for Justice now demonstrate conclusively what became of each woman referred to the Magdalene Laundries either by the Department of Justice directly or via the judicial system. Moreover, JFM asked that the Minister for Justice request all records related to these women from the four religious congregations.

In light of these developments, Professor James M. Smith, who attended the meeting on behalf of JFM, wrote to the Minister for Education on December 22nd and requested a retraction of Mr. O'Keefe's earlier assertion that the "State did not refer individuals to Magdalene Laundries nor was it complicit in referring individuals to them" (4th September 2009).

## *Justice for Magdalenes meetings held December 14-15, 2009*

### **Monday, December 14**

Officials from the Department of Justice  
Officials from the Department of Education, *No Show*

Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D., Labour Spokesperson on Education and Science, together with Ms. Katherine Dunne, Chairperson of Labour Women, Ms. Kirsí Hanifin, Labour Party Women and Equality Officer

### **Tuesday, December 15**

Ms. Joan Burton, Deputy Reader, Labour  
Presentation before an Ad Hoc committee at Dáil Éireann, hosted by Mr. Tom Kitt, T.D., FF  
Mr. Enda Kenny, T.D., Leader of FG, Tuesday afternoon  
National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi), Ms. Rachel Doyle (Outreach Officer)  
Ms. Katherine O'Donnell, Director, Women Studies, University College Dublin

## *Oireachtas Committee formed to pursue Redress for Magdalene survivors*

Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) announces that members of the Dáil and Seanad have formed an ad hoc committee to pursue redress for survivors of the Magdalene Laundries.

Dr. James M Smith, of JFM's advisory committee, made a presentation to the members of the ad hoc committee at Dáil Éireann on December 15th. The presentation consisted of a brief history of the Laundries, an outline of the proposed distinct Redress Scheme for Magdalene survivors, and evidence that the Irish State was complicit in referring women to the laundries. He also informed the committee of the outcome of JFM's meeting with Department of Justice officials the previous day.

Justice for Magdalenes PRO, Claire McGettrick also attended the meeting and explained the impact on adopted people whose natural mothers were incarcerated in Magdalene Laundries. "It can come as a huge shock to adopted people who assume that their natural mothers went on to live a happy life, only to discover that they ended up in a Magdalene Laundry and in some cases were never released and are still living in the care of the nuns."

The TDs and Senators in attendance all agreed that the issue of the Magdalene Laundries could not be ignored. They have committed to form an all-party committee in order to pursue political redress. Dr. Smith said, "We welcome the formation of this committee, as it is time for the State to honour its commitment to 'cherish all the children of the nation equally' and children incarcerated in Magdalene Laundries must not be treated differently."

## Recent media coverage

**James M. Smith, “Magdalene girl: ‘I cried for weeks and weeks. I was nobody. I was 16.’” Letter-to-the-Editor, *Irish Examiner* 12/31/09**

Claiming that the new “information wasn’t available” when he rejected a distinct redress scheme for Magdalene survivors, Education Minister Batt O’Keeffe’s response rings hollow (*Irish Examiner*, December 17). It is important, moreover, to emphasise that evidence of state complicity rests not only with the materials laid before the Department of Justice on December 14.

Indeed, the Department of Education must also acknowledge its own complicity in this matter.

Had officials from the department attended the scheduled meeting with Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), I would have pointed to the department’s awareness of children being placed in Magdalene laundries as late as 1970 (beyond those transferred from state residential institutions).

This awareness never led to direct corrective action or intervention. Indeed it is still unacknowledged. As such, it calls into question the department’s commitment to “cherish all of the children of the nation equally.”

The Reformatory and Industrial School Systems Report 1970 (i.e., the Kennedy Report), commissioned by the Department of Education, documents two distinct populations of children so confined. In a discussion of children placed in “religious convents” by “parents, relatives, social workers, welfare officers, clergy or garda”, the report states that “the committee is satisfied that there are at least 70 girls between the ages of 13 and 19 confined in this way who should properly be dealt with under the reformatory schools’ system”.

Likewise, in a table attempting to capture the “total number of children in care”, the report asserts that there were 617 children resident in “voluntary homes which have not applied for approval”. As the department can affirm, these “voluntary homes” were typically Magdalene laundries and other “religious convents”.

The report’s two figures – 70 and 617 – offer a snapshot for the scale of the problem in 1968/’69. My questions to the officials from the Department of Education, again if they had attended, would have been the following:

1. Given the department’s awareness, and the moral and constitutional obligations to protect children and provide a basic minimum education, can the minister now account for each of these children?
2. Given its awareness that children were being “cared” for in these institutions, did the department ever visit, inspect or license these “religious homes”?

I ask these two questions in light of the Ryan report offering a window into what life was like for children transferred to the laundries from a residential institution.

We are told the regime was “like a prison”, that doors were locked all the time...working conditions were harsh, “constantly washing laundry in cold water and using heavy irons for many hours”. One survivor remembers her child labour: “I did collars; you had to keep ironing them until they became real stiff. There was a little wooden thing you could stand on.”

One young girl remembers being “put in the middle of older and middle-aged women. I cried for weeks and weeks on end. I was nobody. I was 16.”

In his letter rejecting a distinct redress scheme (September 4, 2009), Minister O’Keeffe asserts: “The situation in relation to children who were taken into the laundries privately is quite different to persons who were resident in state-run institutions.” But surely when one is addressing institutional child abuse such distinctions are meaningless. Either it was child abuse or it wasn’t. How a child ended up in the laundries is hardly the issue at hand.

Finally, it is disingenuous for the Department of Education to infer that the new evidence presented to Department of Justice officials on December 14 wasn’t available in September when Minister O’Keeffe rejected the JFM proposal.

Indeed, the proposed scheme was first circulated to all members of Dáil Éireann on July 3 last and both the “key terms” and “elements of an apology” sections refer explicitly to women referred to and/or placed “on remand” in the laundries by the courts. Likewise, I wrote to the Taoiseach on September, 22, 2009, and outlined in some detail the evidence of state complicity. Mr O’Keeffe was copied on that letter, as were other ministers. I am still awaiting a formal response.

After the “scheduling error” on Monday, December 14, an official from the Department of Education spoke with me by phone the following afternoon and I offered to meet with him later that evening. I also offered to meet on Wednesday morning (December 16) before travelling back to Boston. Neither offer was taken up.

In conclusion, it is significant that the Department of Justice has come forth and accepted its role in placing women “on remand” at the Seán McDermott Street Laundry. The Department of Justice is also examining other archival material addressing women placed “on probation,” and it is formulating a response to a series of questions put to them at our meeting.”

Hopefully, the New Year might see the Department of Education resolve to do likewise.

### Other recent coverage

Jamie Smyth, “**Minister considers new Magdalene evidence.**” *Irish Times* 12/16/09

Marie O’Halloran, “**Taoiseach urged to extend redress scheme to Magdalene women.**” *Irish Times* 12/18/09

Clare O’Sullivan, “**O’Keeffe under pressure to withdraw statement.**” *Irish Examiner* 12/16/09

Clare O’Sullivan, “**Group to get redress for Magdalene laundry victims.**” *Irish Examiner* 12/17/09

## Glasnevin Cemetery resolves Mecklenburg Street Laundry Gravesite

As reported in the previous Newsletter, JFM wrote to Glasnevin Cemetery last November to complain about the placement of a construction storage facility surrounding the Mecklenburg Street Magdalene Laundry memorial site.

Claire McGettrick, PRO, has since spoken with Mr. George McCullough, CEO of Glasnevin Cemetery, and is pleased to report that the area around the memorial stone has now been cleared and that the construction company have been asked not to place anything else near the site.

JFM would like to acknowledge Mr. McCullough’s assistance in resolving this issue.



## Calling all survivors and families!

Justice for Magdalenes would like to begin hosting support meetings. We need your input – ideas for locations (in Ireland, the UK, US and Canada), to spread the word, etc. Let us know if you’re interested in attending a support meeting by e-mail to [info@magdalenelaundries.com](mailto:info@magdalenelaundries.com) or by phone:

**In Ireland: (353) 86 4059491**  
**In the US: (1) 215-589-9329**  
**In the UK: (44) 208-346-7479**

Distribute this newsletter to anyone you know affected by the Magdalene Laundries. We would also like to begin collecting oral histories of survivors, so if you know someone willing to share their story, please let us know.