

PRESS RELEASE: 28 April 2010

Taoiseach dismisses abuse of children in Magdalene Laundries – JFM outraged

Mr. Cowen was responding to a series of Parliamentary Questions (copy below) tabled on behalf of Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), the survivor-advocacy group, by Mr. Michael Kennedy, T.D. (FF) [27 April 2010]. According to Mr. Cowen, the government contends "that the position of women in such laundries was not analogous with that of children in the residential institutions that were the subject of the Ryan Report."

JFM has demonstrated over the past number of months that the Departments of Justice, Education, and Health were indeed complicit in referring women and children to the Magdalene Laundries. Mr. Cowen does not contest this fact. He merely seeks to deny its implications."

JFM refutes Mr. Cowen's stated distinction between "children in the residential institutions" and "women in [Magdalene] laundries." There were children in the Magdalene laundries. The Department of Education acknowledged its awareness of this fact when JFM met with senior officials on 2 February 2010. The Ryan Report (Vol. 3, Chapter 18) underscores this fact (although the term 'Magdalene Laundries' is conveniently elided and replaced with 'residential laundries'). The Kennedy Report (1970), also commissioned by the Department of Education, signals the scale of this reality, stating that "the Committee is satisfied that there are at least 70 girls between the ages of 13 and 19 years confined in this way who should properly be dealt with under the Reformatory Schools' system" (39). The "girls" referred to here were put in the laundries by "parents, relatives, social workers, Welfare Officers, Clergy, or Gardaí." These "girls," in other words, joined the other population of children in the laundries, those transferred illegally from State residential institutions.

The Taoiseach's response signals the State's primary concern is to limit liability with respect to anticipated claims for compensation. Mr. Cowen and his government should, of course, be focused on providing justice for women and children denied their constitutional rights. Does Mr. Cowen believe that the State, and in particular the Department of Education, did not have a moral and Constitutional obligation to protect *every* child from the exploitative work conditions in the laundry institutions? Or, is it the case that the Residential Institutions Redress Act (2002) now trumps the Constitution's promise to "provide the place of the parents" (42,5), to "provide a minimum basic education" (42,3,2), and to "ensure that the strength and health of workers and the tender age of children shall not be abused" (45,4,2)?

Mr. Cowen, in his response, also states that government "Departments would be ready to help ... with further enquiries as far as possible." Justice for Magdalenes has asked the Department of Justice to produce records for women sent "On Remand" to the Sean MacDemott Street Magdalene Laundry after 1960. We have asked for details of the 29 women "On Probation" at various religious convents, including Magdalene laundries, in March 1944. We have asked for details of the 54 women referred to Catholic Magdalene laundries by the courts between 1926 and 1963. We have requested information regarding the official policy of transferring women from state-funded mother-and-baby homes to Magdalene laundries after 1934. And, we have asked for details regarding capitation grants paid to religious institutions by both the Departments of Health and Justice as late as 1972. To date, our "enquiries" have been met with polite acknowledgement and nothing more.

Finally, Mr. Cowen acknowledges his awareness that JFM, and other groups advocating on behalf of Magdalene survivors, have contacted the four religious congregations involved: "The Government is also conscious that the Magdalene laundries were run by a small number of religious congregations with whom it is understood Magdalene women and their representatives are in contact; it is also understood that they are in contact with the person referred to by the Deputy." JFM has, in recent months, twice written to the four congregations involved (Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Charity, Good Shepherd Sisters, and Sisters of Our Lady of Charity) all to no avail. We have also written to Cardinal Sean Brady, who alone has acknowledged publicly his intent to work towards "a just" solution for Magdalene survivors. JFM's request that the government follow-up on this important signal, and engage Cardinal Brady in discussion regarding the Magdalene laundries, has fallen on deaf ears. As Mr. Cowen makes evident in his cryptic concluding remark, the government disclaims any involvement in seeking justice for this most marginalized community of women and children.

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QUESTION NOS: *106 &*107
DÁIL QUESTIONS addressed to the Taoiseach
by Deputy Michael Kennedy

for **WRITTEN ANSWER** on **Tuesday, 27th April, 2010.**

QUESTION NO: *106

To ask the Taoiseach in view of the fact that Justice For Magdalene's has demonstrated the State's complicity in referring women to the Magdalene Laundries, will he enter into discussions with a person (details supplied) who recently asserted their intent to find a just solution for survivors of the laundries; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

- Michael Kennedy.

QUESTION NO: *107

To ask the Taoiseach further to reports in a newspaper (details supplied) that he has promised to look into the situation of women who had been in Magdalene Laundries, if he will clarify the position with respect to issuing a formal apology and establishing a distinct redress scheme for survivors of the laundries; if the Magdalene Laundries was discussed at the recent meeting with representatives of the religious congregations; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

- Michael Kennedy.

REPLY

Along with the Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Science, the Ministers for Justice, Equality and Law Reform and Health and Children and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and following on from the publication last year of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (the Ryan Report), I met separately on 15 April 2010 with representatives of religious congregations and representatives from organisations of victims of abuse in residential institutions.

The context of the meetings was the Report of the Panel set up by the Government last year to report on the adequacy of the statements of resources to be submitted by the congregations to the Panel as a basis for assessing the responses to be made by the congregations to the call made to them last year by the Dail and the Government for additional contributions by way of reparation for the abuse suffered by children in residential institutions. The Government published the Panel Report and the congregations' responses later on 15 April, along with a statement on the matter.

The position of women who had been in Magdalene Laundries was raised by representatives of some victims' groups. While the matter was outside the focus of the meeting, the Government side indicated in response that the position of women in such laundries was not analogous with that of children in the residential institutions that were the subject of the Ryan Report. It was noted that the Departments of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Education and Science and Health and Children had each already held meetings with Magdalene women and their representatives and I made it clear that those Departments would be ready to help them with further enquiries as far as possible.

The Government is also conscious that the Magdalene laundries were run by a small number of religious congregations with whom it is understood Magdalene women and their representatives are in contact; it is also understood that they are in contact with the person referred to by the Deputy.