

## JCIGFA Meeting on Ballymurphy

1 July 2021

### Opening Statement

Cathaoirleach,

Thank you for the invitation to meet with the Committee today.

I was honoured to meet with the Ballymurphy families on several occasions in recent years, as the Government worked with them to support their long campaign for truth and justice. The Coroner's verdict last month was a moment of complete vindication for their loved ones, and a testament to their own determination and unyielding pursuit of justice.

It was important that the significance of that verdict was marked by statements in the Dáil, and I was glad to learn that you met with the families at the end of May.

When dealing with the legacy of the Troubles it is unfortunately all-too-rare that we see such moments of progress, so it was very heartening to hear John Teggart say when he met with you that he was "overjoyed at the verdict" of the Inquest.

As John said that "every victim should have a right to pursue justice", and that is a view that the Government has consistently shared, as I know do members of this committee: every family bereaved in the Troubles should have access to effective investigation and to a process of justice, regardless of the perpetrator.

The Government is committed to helping all of those who seek truth and justice, on behalf of loved ones lost during the troubles, to find it.

The Stormont House Agreement was reached between the two Governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland in 2014, after a long and intense period of negotiation. It set out a path forward – a balanced framework that encompassed the core principles of truth, justice, and reconciliation.

I know that recent reports of plans by the UK Government to introduce a statute of limitations have caused significant upset, shock and concern – including, I know, for the Ballymurphy families.

We know that the Stormont House Agreement is not perfect. I am not sure there can be a perfect solution to such a complicated, sensitive problem. But it gives us a framework, an agreed path forward. Where there are concerns about any aspects of the implementation of Stormont House, these need to be addressed as part of a collective process, and one that has at its heart the voices of those who this process impacts the most.

When I discussed this with Secretary of State Brandon Lewis last week during the British Irish Intergovernmental Council, I made this position very clear, while also making clear, as we have always done, that the Government is ready to discuss any concerns on the Stormont House Agreement and to try to find workable solutions. The views of victims and survivors must be central to any new discussions. It is also of course essential that a comprehensive framework to address legacy complies fully with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Both governments agreed at the BIIGC last week that there is a need now for a process of intensive engagement with the Northern Ireland parties and others on legacy issues. I look forward to this engagement beginning immediately and we wrote to the parties on Monday to this effect, asking them to nominate representatives to take part in these discussions. The talks will have as their objective to

find an agreed way forward that will allow implementing legislation to be introduced in both UK and Ireland by the end of this Autumn, but there will be no predetermined outcomes. We know that it is vital that we make progress – for victims, for families, and for society as a whole as we seek to build deeper reconciliation and lasting peace.

There will be no approach to addressing the painful legacy of our past that is without complexity or difficulty, or that does not bring challenges. We know that we may not find complete consensus across the spectrum of parties, stakeholders and of victims' representatives.

But it is crucial that we have a collective approach, that works in both jurisdictions, and that is in accordance with the ECHR. We have that in the Stormont House Agreement. We need to have that collective approach again to its implementation, or to any changes we may agree to make together.

The Ballymurphy inquest showed that breakthroughs are still possible. Important truths are still recoverable. Hugely important outcomes for families are still achievable. We need a system in place that maximises the chances of those things for all families and supports reconciliation. But it needs to be workable and deliverable and it needs collective backing from the two Governments and the parties to the Northern Ireland Executive for that. That is what we are seeking to achieve in these current discussions.

I look forward to your questions