

Speech by the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, at the 10th National Seminar of the European Network of Ombudsmen

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Opening of the Seminar Speech by the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, at the 10th National Seminar of the European Network of Ombudsmen Warsaw, Poland, 27 April 2015

Madame Undersecretary of State, Mościcka-Dendys, Madame Ombudsman Lipowicz, friends, colleagues and honoured guests, it is a great privilege and pleasure to be co-hosting the 10th National Seminar of the European Network of Ombudsmen in the beautiful and historic city of Warsaw.

I would like to thank Madame Lipowicz and her wonderful colleagues for all of the preparation they have put into this event, alongside my own team, and I think it promises to be not just an enjoyable seminar but one that will inspire us and refresh our motivation for the important work that we all do.

We come together in a year and a time when we commemorate a period in our shared European history where threads of discrimination linking race, religion, sexual preference, ethnic origin, class, age, and physical and mental capacity were drawn together to give expression to some of the most evil human acts of our modern age.

In the midst, over these next few days, of some of the great scholars of the holocaust and of European history, it is not for me to ponder origins and aftermaths but this much I do know, that discrimination rarely appears in its most evolved and murderous guise, but develops rather over time. It starts life as a river starts life, as a trickle, barely perceptible until eventually, joined by other trickles and streams and rivulets, it reaches its full flow.

And in that slow build, human nature can act in ways, that with the passage of time and historical amnesia can seem astonishing. It can see but disregard that first tiny trickle of discrimination; when it gets bigger, it can deny its significance or future trajectory, when it gets too big to ignore, it is either challenged for what it is, or else absorbed as a new and acceptable norm. Either way there is suffering as one section of humanity chooses to exclude another essentially from the human race.

We come together at a time also when European countries face what many of their leaders see



as the uncomfortable political challenges of migration. Migration has become in part the sound track of the general election in the UK but few EU states are immune to the siren calls of those who blame migration policies for real or imagined ills. Many of us fail to join the dots between the horrors of Syria for example, and the washed up dead on our southern shores. Yes there are challenges and compromises and contradictions, but which one of us would not at least contemplate striking out not even for a better life but simply for a chance to live at all.

Over the next few days, we will share our experiences of dealing with discrimination, we will discuss a parallel investigation carried out by my office and the offices of member state colleagues into how so called, failed asylum seekers are transported out of the EU. I hope that the template we will present will serve as an example of what we may do together in future, fusing our collective expertise, our experience, and hopefully our wisdom into producing more powerful insights and possible remedies for problems that are not the preserve of either my office or of the individual Network members.

And then we will go to a place where more than two million men, women and children were murdered because discrimination had reached its point of flood, unstoppable, unchecked, ignored, denied.

On Saturday I was asked by a Warsaw journalist if this seminar could do anything to deal with the problems we will discuss. I said that culture change comes about not through the work of one actor, but through the work of many, but that is not a reason for the one to lose faith in their ability to bring about change no matter how small.

I also said that the spread and the growth of the institution of the Ombudsman was one of the great achievements of post-war Europe and later towards the end of the last century when democracy came to flourish again in this region. Our institution speaks to some of the finest values of democracy, of freedom, of respect for the rule of law but most importantly it speaks truth to power on behalf of the citizen, on behalf of those without a voice, and on behalf of our common, shared humanity.

And in that powerful role, in that role that speaks to and stems from the highest of human values, we can check discrimination before its point of flood, we can see that first emerging trickle and name it and call it what it truly is. And then we can work to develop a shared consciousness around a state's obligation to protect and defend those that others would seek to exclude and to hurt.

I hope we will all profit from our time together over the next few days and I greatly look forward to renewing old acquaintances and forging new ones.