

Mr Bertie Ahern, Former Taoiseach of Ireland (1997 – 2008)

Recording given to Mark Vincent Healy on the 26th April 2019 for the commemorative event held in the Oak Room in the Mansion House in Dublin for the State Apology and State commitment to a Commission to Inquire in Child Abuse in Ireland.

“Reflecting back on over twenty years, since I made the apology. I suppose looking back now, there was a few years of a run into the apology. I was lucky enough to represent the constituency of Inchicore, Goldenbridge and all that area of Dublin. And through various constituency clinics and places where there were meetings that I would hold with people in the locality, I met up with a number of survivors of abuse. Christine Buckley probably the best known but many others that she brought and Carmel who runs the Aislinn Centre and others whom I got to know.

At the time, I was horrified with the stories. I actually hadn't seen the first of the TV series in 1996. But I got what I thought was a first-hand account from people who were in Goldenbridge, people who knew what they were talking about and impressed me with their story. I was leader of the opposition but a constituency TD in that area. And it was that that lead to my interest. And of course, when you meet one or two people who impress you, you agree to meet more.

As time went on and before I was Taoiseach in the summer of 1997, I had built up an interest. I readily admit that I thought this was probably a confined issue and that there were a limited number of cases but was still a very serious issue.

When I was Taoiseach, and with Micheál Martin, we were looking at the issue, we were discussing the issue with our officials. And moving on, I believe that it was important that we dealt with this in an upfront way. This was something really appalling, something that had to be dealt with by the State.

After several meetings in the Sycamore Room in government buildings, which is known because all the wood is made from the Sycamore tree, I watched the trauma, the fear, the bitterness, the anxiety, the lost lives of several people. I remember one such meeting that there must have been thirty or forty in the room, and I sat back and we listened to the stories with Micheál Martin of the individuals, not the stories but the truth.

After that, we believed that something had to be done. And it also was striking me that this had to be more widespread, not as much as I thought I readily admit but I felt if we were really to deal with Christine Buckley and the other groups, and there were different groups, disparate groups at the time. They didn't all neatly come under one umbrella, but I met as many as I could.

And I made that apology, I made the State apology, and said that we would apologise and then work to try find a solution.

I don't need to go through blow by blow of the legislation, and the discussions, and how we would deal with the legislation, and how we would have inquiries, and how we would have

redress boards. It was a fairly long and arduous process. But I think we moved through it relatively quickly. I would be the first to say that having been a person who went to give my case to the inquiry at the time. But the more it went on the more I learnt that this was more widespread. It affected more people. I had met people in London and Manchester and other parts of the UK who had left the country. People's whose lives were clearly broken. And I got to like them and be friendly with them. And to this day they are people that I meet. I think I have built up a very strong relationship with them. I have helped them with the Aislinn Centre. We helped them through the Redress Board and all the other issues.

But I suppose that now we have to look at that as that was the history of it. And I think it is important to point out is that what I was dealing with at the time were by and large older people, not ancient people but more elderly people, more mature people who had been through this. Their story had not been told. Their life case had not been told or unfolded, and I think we helped to do that.

Were all the processes we put in place perfect? I don't believe they were. But we did our best I think to create the circumstances of their case being heard.

We didn't reflect at all I think on the generation that was coming through. We were dealing with legacy issues. It's as if the line was stopped and that there were no more cases. So, I think now, and from my position on the side-lines of political life, to be able to look back on that, we didn't deal with the cases that were coming after that, whether they were coming from religious institutions, whether they were from schools, whether they were from homes, whether they were from anywhere else in Irish society, that process we did not deal with.

And I think as time has gone on, and as cases have happened, and stories have been told, and as facts have been unfolded, and issues and statistics that I have even looked at in these days, show that this is a huge case, that there is still abuse, there is still people's lives being broken, being wrecked, people who have been in prison, unemployment, disadvantaged, all of the traumas that have come from sexual abuse in the more wide and general sense.

What we did twenty years ago, was an apology for a certain sector of people who through television their case was told but for me they were told to me as a constituency politician.

Luckily, I was in a position to deal with some of that, and to be able to move some of that forward, but I think we must now reflect on all of the other cases. As is I'm told in research now, that there is increasing number of cases. This has not stopped in Irish society. It has not segregated just to religious institutions of the past or now might be closed. That it is prevalent in many parts of Irish life, and the facts are there for that.

So, I think what my advice now is that we have to look far more deeply at this. Resources have to be put in. Otherwise, somebody will have to do it all over again, in another period of time, and that would seem to be a bit insane. What is required is, looking at the facts, looking at the statistics, trying to learn from the experiences, the good things that were done, the mistakes that were made, the bad things that were done, and try to turn that into coherent sustainable policy that deals with the totality of the difficulties of Irish life and

abuse of children in every form. That is an exercise still to be done. It is an exercise that requires resources. But it is an exercise, rather than people throwing their hands up, and saying, “oh, it is exaggerated, or maybe it is happening or it is not happening”, is to look at facts in the cold light of day and see that what we dealt with was a part of the issue, what needs to be dealt with is the totality of it. And I wish all those who are involved in it, who are trying to their best for it, and to highlight it, and look for resources, that they can be successful in this mission as I think we were partially successful when I gave the apology twenty years ago.”

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