

**Remarks by Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D., Minister for Community,  
Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on the occasion of his visit to  
Ireland Park Toronto, Saturday 9 May 2009 where he will  
lay a wreath on behalf of the Irish Government in honour  
and memory of those who suffered and emigrated to Canada  
and around the world during the Great Irish Famine**

Ladies and Gentlemen, a dhaoine uaisle,

Is mór an phribhléid dom bheith i dteannta libh inniu i bPáirc na hÉireann anseo i Toronto. Níl amhras ach gur ócáid fhíor-speisialta í seo agus gabhaim buíochas libh, mar bhall de Rialtas na hÉireann agus mar Chathaoirleach ar an gCoiste Náisiúnta Cuimhneacháin don Ghorta Mór, as an gcuireadh a thabhairt dom.

As I have just said in the Irish language, I am deeply honoured and privileged to be with you today, here in Ireland Park in Toronto, representing the Irish Government and the National Famine Commemoration Committee on this very special occasion.

This is the first overseas commemorative event to be organised by the National Famine Commemoration Committee in honour

and memory of those who emigrated and took to the seas during An Gorta Mór - the Great Irish Famine - and I think you will all agree that it is indeed fitting that it is happening here in Canada.

At the outset, I would like to thank all here at Ireland Park, especially the Ireland Park Foundation, for their kind invitation to this truly magnificent, inspirational and distinguished memorial in honour of all those who made the voyage to Toronto during the Great Famine.

The memorial that has been constructed here is special for so many reasons and all associated with it can be truly proud. It commemorates and honours the Irish famine victims in a dignified and respectful manner and, very importantly, it recognises and expresses the gratitude of the Irish community here for the welcome, support, kindness and care offered by the City of Toronto during the Irish Famine, which was undoubtedly one the darkest periods in the history of Ireland.

On entering the Park here, one is immediately struck by its stunning location and the inspirational design and atmosphere created by Jonathon Kearns, who has managed to produce a most appropriate and dignified memorial.

I am especially touched by the five statues in the centre of the Park, all facing the City of Toronto and sculpted by Rowan Gillespie. This time last year, the Irish Government held the inaugural national commemoration ceremony for the victims of the Great Irish Famine at the Custom House in Dublin, where the same sculpture, Rowan Gillespie, has sculpted seven statues of Irish famine emigrants leaving Ireland. Looking at the five statues of the emigrants arriving here, one can't help thinking of the hardship and horrific voyage that such emigrants had to endure before they arrived at their final destination. Their devastation, despair and the depth of their suffering is something we must never forget – and, most importantly, learn from and never let happen again.

The compassion and generosity offered by the people of Toronto and across Canada at that time is something that Irish people will also never forget and is something which I, on behalf of the Irish Government and the people of Ireland, would like to thank you all for today. Go raibh míle maith agaibh - a thousand thanks is all I can say from the bottom of my heart.

Yesterday evening, I delivered a lecture in relation to the legacy of the Great Irish Famine at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto. In preparing for that lecture, I read with great interest some of the research on the period undertaken by Professor

Mark McGowan of the University of Toronto, which I know was sponsored by the Ireland Park Foundation.

One of the things that has most amazed me were the statistics I analysed in relation to 1847, when, during the summer of that year, over 39,000 thousand people arrived in Toronto. What is most astounding is that the population of the city was only some 20,000 at that time. The response of the people of Toronto to the influx of refugees, the majority of which were sick and dying, is a testimony to the human condition and to the goodness and kindness of the people of Canada.

The summer of 1847 brought the best out of many of Toronto's citizens and produced heroic acts from some such as Dr George Grasett, Bishop Michael Power, Nurse Susan Bailey and Agent Edward McElderry.

Today, I would like to remember those fine people and indeed all the citizens of Toronto who helped out during the great crisis of 1847. Without the help and assistance of all of those people, who put their own lives at risk and who selflessly reached out to the sick and famished Irish as they arrived in Canada, the numbers that perished during that awful time would have been much higher.

The events of 1847 and response of the people of Toronto has created a bond and a unique relationship between the people of Ireland and the people of Toronto. That bond will always exist, as will the gratitude of the Irish people to the generosity and compassion shown to our nation and to our ancestors in dark and difficult times.

By the end of 1847, Toronto was a very different city and the Irish Famine had impacted enormously on its people and public services. The end of 1847 saw the death of over 1,100 men, women and children, who are buried in Toronto, either in the plots set aside by St. James' Anglican Cathedral, or in the graveyard adjoining St. Paul's Catholic Church. It was a privilege and an honour for me to visit both these cemeteries and to honour those who are buried there within hours of my arrival into Toronto on Thursday evening last.

It is also a great honour for me to be here today among so many distinguished guests and people who have been involved in developing this fine park, commemorating and honouring the dead, and who continue to be a voice for those who suffer around the world because of famine and lack of food.

It is my strong view, as I said previously, that nobody should suffer in today's world because of lack of food or water and we

all must work together to address areas where famine and hunger continues to exist.

I look forward shortly to laying a wreath in honour of those who died and suffered during the Great Famine. Tomorrow, I will visit Grosse Ile, another example of the great generosity and kindness shown by the Canadian people to the Irish during the blackest and darkest of times.

Finally, I wish to thank you, the people of Toronto and Canada, for the amazing compassion and generosity of spirit shown to Irish famine victims, and indeed for your continued support of emigrants who continue to take the voyage to this great country.

Gabhaim buíochas ó chroí libh as an bhfáilte croíúil a cuireadh romham anseo inniu. Gura fada buan sibh uile.