

## **Manchester Memorandum 2024**

### **Welcome Address by IOI President**

**Manchester, 16 January 2024**

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#### **Introduction**

It is such a pleasure to join you this morning for the 2024 Manchester Memorandum. It is a particular pleasure for me, because I also had the privilege of providing opening remarks to the 2021 Manchester Memorandum, and in the intervening three years I have been able to observe closely the significant steps that have led us to today.

I warmly welcome all of those who have gathered in Manchester for this momentous occasion, and all of those joining online. I particularly acknowledge our host and instigator of the Manchester Memorandum, the Vice President Europe and Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, as well as the President Europe and Greek Ombudsman. I also warmly acknowledge all of my IOI World Board colleagues, as well as Ombudsmen and staff, who join us. I finally take this opportunity to thank two very distinguished Life Members of the IOI, Rafael Ribo and Mats Melin, for their invaluable contributions.

#### **The Memorandum and the Learning Academy**

Today and tomorrow, you gather to launch the IOI Europe Learning Academy. This launch has the most propitious timing, coming, as it does, just a few short months before our highly anticipated IOI World Conference and General Assembly in The Hague. On this matter, I am deeply grateful to the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands and his team, for the outstanding work they are doing to ensure the event is a great success.

Over the next two days, you will hear presentations from a range of leading IOI members on the need for the new Learning Academy, the training to be addressed, and the learning styles to be adopted. Very much continuing themes that were explored in 2021, there will be further discussions on Peer Review and Consultancy. As a matter of deep importance to me, and all of the IOI, there will also be discussions on working with vulnerable communities.

It is my view that the IOI, and the institution of the Ombudsman, has a uniquely important role to play at this juncture in our history. These continue to be very difficult times, both in Europe and globally.

But just as we did throughout the tragic COVID-19 pandemic, wherever and whenever hardship for our communities arise, the institution of the Ombudsman will stand resolute to protect and promote fundamental human rights; to champion the rule of law; and ensure that the relationship between the citizen and the State is mediated through the observance of good governance. In all that we do, we will continue to ensure that the most vulnerable in our societies are not forgotten. We will also always be guided by the Venice Principles and the United Nations General Assembly resolution on, *“The role of Ombudsman and mediator institutions in the promotion and protection of human rights, good governance and the rule of law”*.

Over the coming years, there will be a series of both ongoing and developing issues for the IOI and the institution of the Ombudsman to face. These issues will include supporting Ombudsman Under Threat; ensuring that the IOI continues to be as inclusive as possible, and also ensuring that our Members are supported as much as possible in their endeavours, including through our regional subvention program.

And we need to do all of this with a learned conviction.

Here, the Manchester Memorandum and IOI Europe Learning Academy commend themselves to you for particular praise. The Manchester Memorandum will assist us, at a time of great need for our work, to share and inculcate into our institutions the greatest knowledge and experience from our peers. In short, if we are to pursue our work with a learned conviction, then we need a new chapter in Ombudsman learning. This is the Manchester Memorandum.

### **An acknowledgment of Ombudsman Behrens CBE**

Before concluding, I want to recognise one particular date, namely, 31 March this year. Now I suspect 31 March will have different meanings to different people; for the Vice President Europe, it is perhaps the day after Man City defeat Arsenal to go multiple points clear at the top of the Premier League. And as invested as I am in this, as an Honorary Man City supporter, the day has a greater significance for me, and the Ombudsman community. As of 31 March, the term of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman of the UK, Rob Behrens CBE, ends.

I know that Rob will feel a degree of embarrassment about my words, so I shall keep them short, but this is also an occasion that will not forgive of being trite. I first met Rob in 2018 in Brussels, as we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Federal Ombudsman of Belgium. The Senate of the Parliament of Belgium was a suitably auspicious occasion to meet a person of his stature.

From early 2021 in particular, I have had the great honour of working closely with Rob. To borrow from Churchill, Rob is a humble person, but he has little to be humble about.

He is a person of unfailing integrity, penetrating intellect, prodigious work ethic and a profound sense of justice and fairness. I count him not just as a close colleague and wise mentor, but also a good friend.

He has done nothing less than utterly transform the office of the PHSO into one of the world's leading Ombudsman offices, and all along made a significant contribution to the IOI and the institution of the Ombudsman globally. One of Rob's most significant legacies will be, of course, the Manchester Memorandum and all that has, and will, flow from the Memorandum in terms of Ombudsman self-reflection, learning and improvement.

I must make one last comment about Rob. In December 2022, he visited our extraordinary colleague, Commissioner Lubinets, in Kyiv. Put simply, it took courage to visit Ukraine. He never flinched, nor wavered. He distinguished his office and his country during this visit. He again visited late last year, along with a number of my outstanding colleagues, including Regional President Pottakis and newly elected World Board Director, Ombudsman Fardelli.

On 31 March, we lose a true champion of justice, of fundamental human rights, and of common decency. But I will not lose a friend, and the Ombudsman community will not lose the capacity to continue to learn from him.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I wish all participants a thoroughly productive seminar. I, for one, in making my opening remarks three years ago, could have wished for no more than to have the pleasure of witnessing the landmark launch of the IOI Europe Learning Academy. What an extraordinary credit this achievement is to Rob and all my dear friends and colleagues in Europe, who have worked so assiduously for this day to arrive.

As President of the IOI, I thank you for this work, and for the discussions you will have over the next two days. These discussions will be of the most invaluable guidance for our exciting next steps, both as the IOI and the institution of the Ombudsman.

Thank you all and thank you Rob.