

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR JAMES BROWNE**, Registrar, National University of Ireland, Galway, on 27 June 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **JOSEPH HIGGINS**

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

The novelist L.P. Hartley put it rather well when he wrote ‘The past is another country. They did things rather differently there’. The Ireland of the 1950s was in stark contrast to the Ireland of today: a stagnant economy had failed to provide a decent livelihood for its citizens, many of whom, particularly the young and talented, formed a mass exodus, which threatened the very viability of the state. The Ireland of today, despite the recent downturn and reported demise of the Celtic Tiger is one of the most dynamic economies in Europe, attracting immigrants to its shores from across the globe. Ireland has come a long way in a short time in the context of international economic development.

There are many competing explanations for this phenomenal transformation: EU membership, foreign direct investment, enlightened public policy, a strong education system. One critical factor, and one that has failed to gain the prominence it deserves, has been the entrepreneurial spirit of a small number of Irish people, who have been responsible for driving the indigenous sector of the economy. They are responsible for firmly rooting this economic development in Ireland, a necessary ingredient for its long-term sustainability. Galway is privileged in being home to a number of these entrepreneurs, who were able to shake off the failures of the past and make a vital contribution to the creation of this dynamic new environment. As one such entrepreneur wrote, ‘Galway has gone from a dull grey town to a large bright city’.

Joe Higgins is one of that small, distinguished group representing the best of Irish entrepreneurial energy; he is one of those who have made a highly significant contribution to creating the Ireland of today and the Galway which is an outstanding example of that Ireland.

A native of Castlegar, Co. Galway, Joe attended Briarhill National School and Galway Technical School, leaving at the age of fifteen. This was followed by a number of years of varied employment throughout Ireland and the inevitable emigration to the UK. In the early 1970’s Joe returned to Galway to work with an engineering firm, manufacturing components for multinational firms newly attracted to the region in that first wave of internationalisation of the Irish economy.

In 1978 Joe established J. Higgins Engineering (Galway) Ltd. (JHE), providing an engineering subcontracting service to the expanding multinational manufacturing base. The success of JHE was assured because not only is Joe Higgins an enterprising businessman but he is also an industrial innovator. He saw the opportunity offered by the newly emerging practice of large original equipment manufacturers to outsource the production of components and the assembly of partial products. He positioned his enterprise to win this business. His was one of the very first Irish companies to participate in outsourced manufacturing, where partial or even complete products are assembled to specification and delivered as a complete unit.

He clearly made a success of this venture. His achievement in growing his company from a single employee, himself, to one that employed approximately two hundred skilled people, with plants in Galway, Cork and Canada was outstanding by any standards. All the more so when one considers that this growth was achieved through winning contracts from international competitors in a very demanding global market. In the business of subcontract manufacturing there is little room for sentiment; the very demanding customers whose business J.Higgins Engineering succeeded in winning were simply responding to the quality of the service which the company offered. This recognition in the market place was reflected in the many quality and customer excellence awards garnered by J.Higgins Engineering throughout this time.

In 1996 JHE was bought by the Rubicon Group, a UK based engineering company with 3000 employees. Joe became a major shareholder and executive director. In 1999, the Rubicon Group was bought out by APW, a US based corporation. Later that year, Joe retired from the engineering business.

Although heavily committed to and engaged in the development of his own engineering business, Joe Higgins willingly gave of his time, energy and business skills to serve the community in Galway. He is an active member of Galway Chamber of Commerce and Industry, working on both the Council and Executive for a number of years. The announcement of the closure of the Digital Equipment Corporation hardware plant in 1993 was a watershed in Galway's development. It created widespread concern about the industrial future of the city. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry with the support of many groups in the city, including Digital Equipment Corporation itself, established the Galway Technology Centre.

Joe Higgins became its first Chairman. The Centre sought to encourage the development of new high tech, high value added businesses, providing a range of supports including business advice, mentoring and networking with peers. Under Joe's active leadership the Centre expanded in the following years and by 2000 employed 180 people. Moreover, at

this stage, 15 start-up companies had successfully moved on to their own premises. Joe oversaw this growth and expansion culminating in the opening of a new state of the art 50,000 square feet facility in 2001, with the potential to create a further 350 jobs.

I can personally attest to the dedication and quality of leadership offered by Joe Higgins at the Galway Technology Centre, having served on that Board with him for three years.

Joe Higgins is the current chairman of Galway Airport, and in that capacity is overseeing its recent and welcome expansion with new routes to London and Manchester. For a number of years, Joe was also Chairman of the Flags & Banners Society, training and employing female members of the travelling community. He has acted on the board of the Galway Lawn Tennis Club and is currently an active member of the board of the Galway University Foundation.

Having moved on from the engineering business Joe has now turned his attention to the business and sport of horse racing. He is the owner of Gerrardstown House Stud in Co. Meath, a commercial thoroughbred breeding farm. He also has other business interests in Ireland and the UK.

Despite Joe's heavy work schedule he was always managed to exercise his keen interest in active sport, which includes golf, tennis and squash. He has played squash for Connaught at both senior and veteran level, and indeed has represented Ireland at veteran level.

Joe and his wife Ann live in Galway. Three of their four children Emmett, Owen and Fiona are graduates or students of NUI, Galway and Brian is at secondary school.

Today we celebrate the career, business success and contribution to his community of Joe Higgins. He has used his exceptional entrepreneurial talents and business acumen to develop his own successful engineering business, to provide opportunities for his fellow citizens, to mentor the young promoters of start-up enterprises and to make his skills available to the wider community. Joe Higgins may not be of royal blood but he is king among his peers. There is little doubt that the same energy and insight, which ensured his success in manufacturing engineering will also be used to advantage in his current venture into the business of the Sport of Kings. We wish Joe and his family every success.

*PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:*

*Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.*