

## NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND / OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

**TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS** delivered by **Dr Iognáid ÓMuircheartaigh**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, President, National University of Ireland, Galway on 10 April 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **The Hon Mrs Justice Catherine McGuinness**

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

Law has many positive functions and attributes, but perhaps its greatest, though often unexplored, asset is its potential to generate social transformation. When used creatively and with a strong sense of its inherent ethical values, law has the capacity to promote justice and equality, to remove discrimination and, in many other ways, to improve the quality of our lives. These goals cannot, however, be achieved unless the administration of justice is committed to people who, apart from being deeply knowledgeable about the law, have a deep sensitivity to its capacity to transform and to integrate. Today, we honour a truly great lawyer and jurist who, throughout her legal and judicial career, has worked tirelessly to promote the ideals of legality, justice, equality and integrity within Irish society.

Rugadh an Breitheamh Catherine McGuinness i mBéal Feirste, áit a bhfuair sí a cuid bunoidreachais. D'fhreastal sí ar mheán-scoil (Coláiste Alexandra) agus ar ollscoil (Coláiste na Tríonóide) i mBaile Átha Cliath, áit a bhfuair sí céim onórach den chéad grád sa Ghaeilge. I measc na ndaoine go raibh tionnchar acu uirthi i roinn na Gaeilge i gColáiste na Tríonóide bhí Máirtín Ó Cadhain agus Dáithí Ó hUaithne. Cé gur chaith sí an chuid is mó dá saol in oirthear na tíre, is de bhunadh an iarthair í; dob as Spanish Point i gContae an Chláir dá hathair, agus d'fhreastal sé siúd ar an Scoil Graiméir sa Ghailimh (foirgneamh, dála an scéil, a bhí is seilbh Choláiste na hOllscoile Gaillimh go dtí le déanaí). Agus tá tigh aici féin agus a fear céile, Príoinsias Mac Aonghusa, gar do Ros Muc i nGaeltacht Chonamara.

Her deep interest and active involvement in public and political life led her back to Trinity College to study law in the early 1970s. Her call to the Bar in 1977 marked the beginning of a distinguished legal career that has few parallels in modern Irish history. She was admitted to the Inner Bar in 1989 and in 1993 became a Judge of the Circuit Court. Three years later, she was appointed to the High Court and in 2000 to the Supreme Court. She thus became the first person in the history of the state to progress from the Circuit Court to the High Court to the Supreme Court. While Mrs Justice McGuinness has, during the past decade, delivered numerous outstanding judgments of lasting value in many areas of law, she is perhaps most associated with the area of family law in which she has unrivalled expertise and to which she has contributed so much of enduring worth within the past twenty five years or so.

However, to concentrate on Mrs Justice McGuinness's legal and judicial career would be to ignore the richness and diversity of her contribution to public life. While practising as a barrister, she served for two terms in the Seanad, representing Trinity College Dublin. She also served as Chairperson of the Employment Equality Agency, Chairperson of the Board of the National College of Art and Design and Chairperson of the Kilkenny Incest Investigation. This investigation was established in response to a particularly harrowing and tragic episode. The report produced under Mrs Justice McGuinness's leadership was a most thorough and sensitive analysis of the many complex areas of law and social policy brought to the surface by the case which prompted the investigation. This report created a new understanding and awareness of

the phenomenon of abuse within families and made many excellent recommendations for reform in the relevant law and professional practices.

It is little wonder that, even since her appointment to the Bench, Mrs Justice McGuinness has been in constant demand as chairperson or member of important public bodies. She served with great distinction and dedication as a member of the Working Group on a Courts Commission, chaired by Mrs Justice Denham, which led to the establishment of the Courts Service which, itself, has truly revolutionised the entire organisation of the courts system. She subsequently served as a member of the Courts Service Board and of many other bodies within the courts system. One of her outstanding achievements and one for which she has earned the lasting gratitude of the Irish people has been her chairing of the Forum For Peace and Reconciliation.

The Forum was established in October 1994 following the announcement of ceasefires by paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland. It was a consultative body with the goal of pursuing lasting peace and reconciliation by agreement among all the people of Ireland. Mrs Justice McGuinness was certainly an inspired choice as chairperson. She brought to that position a deep and abiding commitment to peace and reconciliation, a unique personal capacity to welcome and integrate a wide diversity of views into the fabric of the Forum's deliberations and, above all, a wonderful sympathy with the very concept of diversity together with a vision of the social context in which such diversity can thrive and flourish. She insisted throughout on the inherent value of dialogue as a means of advancing mutual understanding and trust. Few others could have brought the breadth of knowledge, the intellectual capacity and the sheer personal commitment to such a complex task, particularly as the Forum explored a large number of sectoral topics ranging from the economic consequences of peace to matters connected with policing, human rights and justice.

During the Forum's deliberations and afterwards, Mrs Justice McGuinness proved to be an outstanding ambassador for the cause of promoting peace and reconciliation on this island. She is held in the highest respect and esteem throughout the world for her commitment to the achievement of peace and justice in divided societies. Audiences at home and abroad have been inspired by the wisdom and vision that she has tirelessly shared with her characteristic generosity.

One of the many reasons why it is appropriate for the National University of Ireland to honour Mrs Justice McGuinness here today is that, in addition to her many other duties, she has been an indefatigable contributor to academic discourse on matters of law and public policy. Nobody could be more generous with their time and talents than she has been, whether in terms of chairing conferences, serving on advisory boards or helping in other ways with the promotion of ideas and learning. There are few young lawyers today who are not indebted to her for the way in which she has enriched their educational experience, and for her constant and sincere encouragement, not to mention her unfailing courtesy on the bench.

Today, we honour a great lawyer, a great judge and, above all, a great Irishwoman. Her dedication, generosity and idealism have made this country a better place. And, her undimmed enthusiasm for the capacity of the law and of honest dialogue to transform our society now and for future generations remains an inspiration to us all.

Is mór an onóir dúinne anseo in Ollscoil na hÉireann gradam a bhronnadh inniu ar dhuine de mhórfhigiúirí dlí na tíre seo. A bhreithimh Catherine McGuinness, fáiltimid romhat inár measc agus tréaslaímid ó chroí leat.

*Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque Universitas, praesento vobis, hanc meam filiam quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.*