

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY AN **tOLLAMH MÁIRÍN NÍ DHONNCHADHA**, 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 **BRÍD RODGERS**

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

Tá sé de phríbhléid agam Bríd Rodgers Uasal a chur in bhur láthair sula mbronntar céim oinigh uirthí. Is bean ghníomh í Bríd Rodgers a bhfuil *oineach*, nó ‘onóir’, dlite dí as a gníomhartha gan aon agó.

Luaitear trí comharthaí sóirt léi arís is arís eile: a dúthracht i leith daoine, go hindibhidiúil agus sa phobal, a díograis eipiciúil, agus a cumas ar bheart a dhéanamh. I nGaoth Dobhair i nGaeltacht Tír Chonaill a tógadh í. Tógadh an file, Cathal Ó Searcaigh, sa dúthaigh chéanna, ar an dtaobh eile d’Aragail. Deir seisean go bhfuil ‘eipic na díograise’ breactha sna gabháltais bheaga a shaothraigh a shinsir, le dúch a gcuid allais, ón bhfiántas. Ach ar ndóigh, is duine ar leith an té a thuigeann an eipic sin, agus a ghabhann uirthi féin *go pearsanta* mar dhualgas oibriú ar son na muintire, agus oibriú gan staonadh.

Fuair Bríd Rodgers cultúr saibhir, ilghnéitheach mar oidhreacht. Níor tháinig focal Béarla idir í agus an Ghaeilge íonghlan go dtí go raibh sí cúig nó sé bliain d’aois. San am chéanna, ba dhuine muintire léi an scríbhneoir sóisialach *i mBéarla*, Patrick McGill, a scríobh dánta agus úrscéalta cáiliúla sa Bhéarla caighdeánach agus i gcanúint Dhún na nGall. Tá ainm in airde air fós mar ‘*Navvy Poet*’, agus mar údar *Children of the Dead End*. B’fhéidir linn a rá gur thóg a bhean ghaoil a saol ar fad go diongbháilte ar an bprionsabal nár chóir ‘*Dead End*’ a bheith i ndán do leanbh ar bith.

Tuigeadh dó siúd, agus dise, Alba agus an Bhreatain a bheith in aice láimhe, ar a n-aghaidh amach. Ach bhí domhan eile ina shlanchruinne age baile ag Bríd Rodgers, i dtigh tabhairne a dtuismitheoirí, Tom Stratford agus Seosaimhín Coll, ar an mBun Beag – coláiste tríú leibhéal ar nádúr agus aiteas an chine daonna!

Our honorand left Gaoth Dobhair at the age of twelve, to become a boarder at St Louis Secondary School in Monaghan. She studied modern languages at University College, Dublin, and her particular interest in Italy and the Italian language and culture has deepened over the years. Despite her many commitments, she makes time to holiday there with her family on a regular basis..

Yet Gaoth Dobhair is doubly home to her and her husband, Antoin Rodgers, as they were neighbours' children, and one hears tell that worship at the shrine of Gaelic football provided one pretext for their courtship. Shortly after their marriage they moved to Lurgan, and the new Mrs Rodgers left her career in teaching behind. Her loss to teaching was to be politics' great gain.

Her close, shocked observation of the grievances and discrimination suffered by nationalists - and others - in Lurgan in the mid-sixties led to a swift and thorough politicisation. Influenced by the Campaign for Social Justice, she became involved in Civil Rights activities. On the invitation of John Hume, she joined the Social, Democratic and Labour Party almost as soon as it was founded in 1970. The new party was a mould-breaking mix of Northern Irish Labour, Republican Labour, old Nationalist Party elements and, decisively, of a young generation of Civil Rights activists. The evolution of the SDLP over the last thirty years has been complex and compelling.

It is daunting to recall that Ms Rodgers' career in the party spans this entire period, and lesser mortals can only quail at the thought of the roles she combined. As Chairperson of the SDLP from 1978 to 1981, she was the *first ever* female chair of an Irish political party – and that in the North, where politics were particularly male-dominated. She was General Secretary of the SDLP from '81 to '83, and she served as a member of Seanad Éireann from '83 to '87 – having been nominated by Dr Garret Fitzgerald, our Chancellor, who was then Taoiseach. During these same years, she and Antoin were rearing six children – Mary, Ann and Bríd, and Séamus, Tom and Antoin, some of whom, happily, are here with us today.

Unremitting hard work and the sacrifice of earnings and leisure would win Bríd Rodgers tremendous respect. But even more admirable is the fact that she found the strength of spirit to work at such a high pitch in a period of political despair: the spectre of failure dogged all new initiatives until the outlines of an historic accommodation began to be discerned in the late 80s.

During the 90s, Bríd Rodgers played key roles in the various talks that led, ultimately, to the painstakingly-crafted Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 – the Brooke-Mayhew Talks in 1992, the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in '94–5, and the multi-party talks of '96–8 when she was Chairperson of the SDLP team.

In the new power-sharing Executive she was appointed Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. Though not the ministry she might have expected, it was one in which she covered herself in glory, and in which her deep understanding of the culture of

rural Ireland served her well. That, and her swift, decisive action during the Foot-and-Mouth crisis won her respect across the entire political spectrum, as evidenced, for example, by the praises of the Rev. Ian Paisley as Secretary of the Agricultural Committee, or the alacrity with which John Gilliland, President of the Ulster Farmers' Union, participated in the Annual Conference of the SDLP. More telling still, in 2001 she was awarded 'Politician of the Year for Northern Ireland' by Channel Four television on the basis of an independent poll.

In November 2001, Bríd Rodgers was elected Deputy Leader of the SDLP. Since the suspension of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, the future is once again in the balance. However, that this delicate process has come so far, and still holds out such promise, is due in large measure to her.

*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 testur ac spondeo totique Academiae.*