

**TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS** delivered by: **PROFESSOR AIDAN MORAN**, on 21 April, 2005, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **MARTIN NEWELL**



A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

There was a time when entry to third level in Ireland meant meeting the minimum entry requirements and the primary restriction was the ability to pay the fees. With the introduction of free second level education and a third level grant scheme in the late 1960's demand for third level places increasingly exceeded the number available.

With increased competition, applications to more than one college became widespread, creating significant problems of duplication and delay in the offer of places. A meeting of representatives of the four colleges of the National University of Ireland and Trinity College Dublin was convened by Professor William Watts (later Provost) in TCD in 1971 to explore the issue. This led to the heads of the five colleges accepting the principle that there should be a clearing house for applications which in time should expand to cover all third level institutions. The project was offered start-up support by the Higher Education Authority in 1975 and final agreement was reached later that year. The Central Applications Office or CAO was incorporated as a non-profit company in January 1976 and the first meeting of the Board of Directors nominated by the founding members took place in February 1976 under the chairmanship of Professor Watts.

Dr. Martin Newell was then a lecturer in Computer Science at Trinity College. He was approached by Professor Watts to undertake a two-year secondment to set up the new company. Dr Newell set to work early in 1976 in a short lease office in Clare Street Dublin equipped with the articles of association of the company, the promise of the HEA start-up grant, the prospect of access to a computer and the loan of two staff from UCD, and a can of primrose yellow emulsion which he had to apply himself to make the office habitable. This resourcefulness could be regarded as a defining characteristic of the man who is Secretary and Chief Executive Officer of the CAO.

Martin Newell was born in 1940 in Annaghdown, Co. Galway to a farming family. He attended Annaghdown National School where instruction was mainly in Irish. He boarded at St. Jarleth's College, Tuam where his studies included Classics as well as Mathematics. An exceptional student, he won a scholarship to University College Dublin where he took a degree in Chemical Engineering. At UCD he was among a small group of students selected to spend their summer vacations in the engineering workshops of Arthur Guinness Limited where he gained a lasting proficiency in construction, plumbing and other practical skills. After graduating from UCD with first class honours in 1963 he worked in the United States, France and Ireland with Becton Dickenson, a major manufacturer of medical equipment, becoming Director of Quality Assurance for Ireland and the UK. Following an MSc degree at TCD in automated manufacturing control in 1968, he was invited to join the newly established Computer Laboratory at TCD and later became an academic member of the Department of Computer Science. He was awarded a PhD in 1974 for research on relational databases.

Martin Newell's personal skills as well as his technical expertise were put to the test by his appointment to the CAO in 1976. The appointment had taken place in the aftermath of the attempt by a Minister for Education to merge TCD and UCD in a single university with the other colleges relegated to a residual institution. This had left sensitivities in inter-university relationships which were not

conducive to cooperation in a project requiring changes to long established practices for all concerned. While Martin Newell's association with both TCD and UCD was an advantage, the respect and trust engendered by perceptions of his integrity and sense of fairness were crucial at this critical stage. Within a year he had agreement on the details of the changes and had designed and written the first computer programme to implement the CAO system. It became live for the first time in 1997 with 14,845 applicants for 69 courses in the five university colleges. Martin Newell found the work so interesting he was attracted to continue. It was fortunate for so many that he did.

In 1978 the CAO moved to its permanent location in Galway acquiring its core of key staff and its first computer. Since then Martin Newell has led the development of the CAO during three decades of remarkable change in the scale and structure of higher education in Ireland. In 2004 there were 63,696 applicants for 895 courses in 43 institutions which now include universities, institutes of technology and the many other public and private third level institutions making third level awards with statutory recognition in the State. The CAO is entirely self-supporting from application fees which are now less than 70% of their original levels in real terms. The core staffing of the company is small and has not increased since 1981. In addition to availing of economies of scale, operational efficiency has been increased at every opportunity through technical advances and a full comprehensive website facility for applications was introduced in 2000. The design and structure of the CAO has attracted international attention and has recently been adopted as the model for South Africa and Oman in preference to the University Central Application System (UCAS) in the UK. UCAS itself is showing interest in the Irish model.

Martin Newell is a person of strong convictions rooted in the values of family and community. He appreciates how education opens the door to the enlargement and enjoyment of life. He is particularly proud of his engineering training with its emphasis on finding enduring solutions to real problems. Issues of structures and good governance continue to interest him and his specialist reading includes the history of the early Christian Church as well as modern European fascism. Some sense of the man and his style is captured by his recent observations on resistance to change in the professions in a submission to the National Working Party on Medical Education.

"It is something as immutable as the Second Law of Thermodynamics that any proposal for change or reorganisation will meet resistance even when the need is indisputable. The Newtonian principles of inertia and momentum are real physical factors even in regard to human interaction. While it is said that that the capacity for self-reform is one of the highest manifestations of the human spirit, it is pragmatic not to rely on it. In any situation there will be those in possession of the high ground who will be disinclined to move. The citadels of commerce do not long withstand the brutalities of the market place but long established institutions, particularly ecclesiastical and professional, are highly resistant to storm."

Martin Newell has been a member of the Higher Education Authority and chaired its Physical Development Committee. He has acted on other national bodies and served on the Points Commission and other review committees for the Department of Education and Science. He is currently one of the State Examination Commissioners. His interests in addition to reading and music are many and varied. Vacations spent taking courses at French universities facilitated his acquisition of the language as well as considerable discernment in the selection of a good wine. A man for all seasons with a droll sense of humour, Martin is married with four children and two grandchildren. His good wife

Kathleen and himself are able set dancers and Martin's nimble footwork in tight corners has been much admired.

The CAO is now a national institution. Its commitment to fairness and transparency is supported by its wider organisation of co-workers in higher education providing a model of public service at its best. It is an achievement of which Ireland can be proud and one for which it is right and fitting for the National University of Ireland to honour Martin Newell today.

*Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque universitas.*

*Presento 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.*