

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR JOHN G. HUGHES**, Vice-Chancellor of the University, President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 5 October 2006, in Dublin Castle on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **AN TAOISEACH, MR BERTIE AHERN, TD**

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

To sum up all the achievements of a Taoiseach who has just recently become the longest-serving Taoiseach since Éamon de Valéra, in the small amount of time allotted to me, would be impossible. To merely enumerate the personal and public highlights of his career, to just touch on the great events in which he has participated as a main character, to list the world leaders who have visited him in Government Buildings and whom he has visited abroad, not to mention the thousands of speeches he has given and the myriad events he has attended, would keep us all here much longer than would be permissible, or forgivable!

One of the major themes of his period in office is transformation - the transformation of the Irish economy, the transformation of our attitudes to the UK and to the North of Ireland, the transformation of our role within the EU and indeed of the EU itself, and the transformation of how we see ourselves as individuals and as a nation. In each of those areas our special guest and candidate for his honorary doctorate has played a pre-eminent role, not only in formulating and propounding the philosophical, rational and sensible basis for those manifest changes, but also playing a central political and personal role in nurturing them, in implementing them, and in tenaciously sticking to the task, in spite of seeming insuperable difficulties. An ancient Roman aphorism declares: *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*- 'Times change and we change with them'. It is the ability to recognise change and adapt flexibly to the coming trends that guarantees the success of nations in the global economy of today. It is of equal importance to recognise the changing trends in Ireland, North and South, and indeed East and West, where to a great extent, old attitudes are gradually being supplanted by a new openness to partnership and enthusiasm for joint enterprise. Our candidate has been at the heart of that change for his entire political career, and indeed he has been an architect of successful change for the past twenty years.

It is a great pleasure and privilege for me as Vice-Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, to welcome you all here today, on this most special of occasions, for the conferring of an honorary doctorate on our Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern TD. One of his great talents has been the sheer energy and commitment which has propelled him to every crossroads and town-land of Ireland over the past thirty years, to meet as many citizens as possible personally, to listen to their stories and to act on their behalf. A great part of his political life has involved meeting, consulting and listening to people, and based on that engagement, formulating policies for incorporation into national programmes.

It is quite difficult for us to remember the severity of the industrial relations chaos which plagued Ireland (and indeed many other countries) back in the seventies and early eighties and contrast it with the public and private sector harmony and national agreement, which have been the hallmarks of our remarkable economic success over the past twenty years. From his arrival on the political scene in 1977 and throughout the following ten years until he was appointed Minister for Labour in 1987, it is quite clear that Bertie Ahern could see the necessity of putting in place strong, effective social partnership structures to underpin national prosperity. He set about implementing these through the Programme for National Recovery and in the other successful Programmes which followed that, culminating in the most recent landmark ten-year agreement, 'Towards 2016'. Through those powerful vehicles of national consensus and hard-headed negotiations, which now touch every important aspect of national life, the nation has charted its successful voyage away from large-scale unemployment, emigration and national debt, towards a land that has full employment, net immigration and a booming economy, and Bertie Ahern has been there at, or near, the helm, guiding and encouraging all the way.

The conflict in the North represents another broad thirty-year span of our national life, stretching from the Civil Rights Movement of the late sixties, through the convulsions and outrages from the seventies to the nineties. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the continuous painstaking efforts of both Prime Ministers and so many others - not least our Chancellor, Dr Garret Fitzgerald - to build trust, consensus and a lasting agreement since then have been much admired throughout the world. Our Taoiseach came to the task blessed with patience, generosity of spirit and an innate respect for the other point of view, but what gives us all that extra hope is his amazing talent for building consensus, his adaptability when faced by intractability, and his tenacity in keeping the talking going, right up to the midnight hour.

The pinnacle of our EU membership to date was surely that joyous occasion in May 2004, when during the successful Irish Presidency, ten new countries acceded to the EU and Taoiseach Ahern, by dint of inexorable consultation and negotiation, persuaded EU leaders to adopt an EU Constitution. From our EEC accession in 1973, Ireland's role has grown and blossomed through its participation in the Single Europe Act and the Single Market, the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice Treaties, the EMS and the Euro, and through our efficiency in negotiating substantial funding in Agriculture and in Structural and Cohesion Funding. For much of that time Bertie Ahern was there as Labour Minister, as Minister for Finance or as Taoiseach, and what an amazing success that has been for our country. We have become European in spirit, in outlook and in attitude, spreading our own investment wings far beyond our own shores.

Taoiseach Ahern has been our most ardent advocate in espousing a vigorous Asian Strategy, with China and India at its core. He and his cabinet colleagues have travelled East on many occasions with countless Irish business people, educators and investors and we have had distinguished return visits by the Chinese President, Premier, Vice Premier, many Ministers and a great many Chinese educators and business people. It is vital that Ireland carves out its own niche, forges its own partnerships and ensures its own presence in the new Eastern global engines of economic growth, just as we did in the EU, because that is the shape of the future before our eyes. China and India are hurtling through accelerated economic transformation, much as Ireland did over the past thirty years, with the same problems of drastically changing and adapting employment, investment and even social patterns. Ireland had much to offer in advising, managing and partnering those changes through education, enterprise, rural development, tourism and many other facets.

Education has been, in many ways, the engine at the heart of our society and our economy over the past four decades, and we all know that the Taoiseach has always led from the front in supporting that whole spectrum of measures which will confirm and strengthen Ireland's position as a world-class knowledge economy. The very substantial government investment in third-level education, in research and development, in new scientific centres of excellence, have laid the foundations for a new fourth-level Ireland which will serve us well as we progress into the 21st century. In forging new links with business and industry, new partnerships at home and abroad, in adapting our institutions for newly-focused developments, the Irish universities have thrown their doors and windows open to the changes we must embrace, if we are to serve our students, our community and our country.

For his contribution to Ireland's economic development, the development of social partnership structures, the progress towards consensus in Northern Ireland, Ireland's advancement in the enlarged European Union and the strengthening of its links with Asia, and in addition for his support of higher education, the National University of Ireland honours the Taoiseach today. I am proud and pleased to propose him now for the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, of the National University of Ireland.

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.