

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by **DR MARY P. CORCORAN**, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 12 June 2008, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **DAME NUALA O'LOAN**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle (Chancellor, members of the University and distinguished guests)

The National University of Ireland is proud to honour the distinguished contribution of Dame Nuala O'Loan for her groundbreaking role as the first Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland, and for the significant part her work has played in furthering the peace process.

Nuala O'Loan was born in Hertfordshire, England and educated at a convent school, after which she went on to study law at King's College, London. When she married Declan O'Loan, MLA, she moved to Northern Ireland and taught law at the University of Ulster for four years. It was during this time that Nuala was caught up in a bomb blast at the University, as a result of which she lost the child she was carrying. This experience did not embitter her, but rather strengthened her faith and resolve. She has said that she "wasn't afraid of dying anymore". A couple of years later she and her husband Declan decamped to Africa. Their expedition was motivated by a desire to avoid comfort and complacency, to make a contribution where it was needed and to learn from others. Her willingness to move continents, not just countries, while seven months pregnant says much of Nuala's sense of adventure and resilience. Two of her sons were born in Africa, where Nuala recalls a low tech approach to childbirth: egg timers were used instead of watches and instruments were sterilised with Bunsen burners! Nuala is the mother of five sons of whom she is immensely protective and proud.

In 1984 Nuala O'Loan returned to lecture at the University of Ulster, and was appointed to the Jean Monnet chair in European Law in 1992. As an academic and public servant, Nuala O'Loan has produced more than fifty articles and other publications on law, policing, faith and other issues. Her impressive record led to her appointment as the first Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, serving in the role between 2000 and 2007. It was during this period of tenure that she emerged into the public eye, and occasionally into the eye of the storm. She was acutely aware of the qualities required of the incumbent: legal skills, a high degree of interpersonal skills, decision-making and management skills. It is a mark of her exceptional talents that Nuala O'Loan was so highly regarded in the job, and that under her stewardship the Ombudsman's office gained such a high degree of legitimacy and recognition amongst the population of Northern Ireland. The *Belfast Telegraph* described her period in office as "transformational." One of the hallmarks of her tenure was her openness to the media, to the general public, to officials, police, politicians and most particularly, to complainants. The work she has done as Police Ombudsman has been recognised internationally and she has acted in an advisory capacity to government agencies responsible for policing and police accountability across the world.

Nuala O'Loan is the consummate public servant. She has made contributions across a range of fields including energy policy, the environment, policing, consumer affairs, health and social services. A former member of the Police Authority and the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Board, she chaired (with a degree of feistiness!) the Northern Ireland Consumer Council for Electricity. She has been a member of the General Consumer Council and a legal expert member of the European Commission's Consumers Consultative Council. She served as a member of the Ministerial Working Group on the Green economy and as a special commissioner for the Commission for Racial Equality's formal investigation into Racism in Policing in England and Wales. Apart from these high profile contributions, Dame Nuala O'Loan has provided further significant - though lower profile - service to society. For seven years she was a custody visitor to police stations. Her role was to ensure that those held in custody were being treated fairly. For sixteen years she was a voluntary marriage counsellor.

I met Nuala in 2003, when we both participated in a conference in Charlottesville, VA, aptly entitled "Re-imagining Ireland". Given the nature of her work as Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland at that time, she commanded huge respect amongst conference presenters and attendees interested in developments both North and South of the border. Nuala told the conference that she carried an enormous responsibility, but that it was a time of new

beginnings for Northern Ireland. She was honest, up front and upbeat in her assessment. Frankly, I was not just in awe of her but also a little afraid of her. Knowing only her public persona and the immense bravery that she brought to her job, I expected her to be tough and formidable. But in private, Nuala turned out to be disarmingly charming. She has a gentle and engaging personality and a genuine interest in other peoples' lives. When we sat together on a flight I found myself asking her advise on a range of issues including work-life balance. Nuala was warm and generous in her response, quick to acknowledge the love and sustaining support that she had received from Declan and from her sons. In the course of our brief encounter, I learned that Nuala is a deeply grounded person with a unshakeable religious faith, whose life and work is ruled by the twin motifs of love and justice.

Nuala's adventures are not over. Earlier this year, she was appointed Roving Ambassador for the Conflict Resolution Initiative by the Irish government. Her first mission is as Special Envoy to Timor-Leste.

I think the *Guardian* journalist Simon Hattenstone got it just about right when he described Nuala O'Loan as "part austere lawyer, part rockabilly queen". She embodies all that is good and noble about one who resolutely upholds the rule of law. She has lead from the front in Northern Ireland, and has shown remarkable grace under pressure. And she has proved the value of impartiality in bringing accountability and transparency to policing practice in conflict and post-conflict situations. She is a kind, brave, fearless and determined woman.

I think of Nuala as a very special diviner, in the words of Seamus Heaney:

"circling the terrain, hunting the pluck
Of water, nervous but professionally
unfussed".

Nuala O'Loan's great gift has been not to find water, but to divine the truth and in the process to offer solace to those who have been wronged. Her strength of purpose, her fortitude and her moral courage make her a very special hero to men, to women, and to all who endeavour to uphold the rule of law.

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.