

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS
DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR CIARAN MURPHY,
Professor of Business Information Systems
in University College Cork, on 5 June 2009,
on the occasion of the conferring of the
Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*,
on **MÁIRÍN QUILL**

A Sheansaileir agus a mhuintir uilig na
hOllscoile,



Máirín Quill's life story reflects that of a number of Irish people who left their native parish, village or town and upon settling in their new environment improved the social, cultural or public life of their adopted city or country. Whether they moved from Athenry to Australia, Bandon to Boston nó ó Chill Garbháin go Corcaigh these individuals enriched their new society.

Máirín Quill is an outstanding exemplar of such people.

Máirín was born in Kilgarvan, Co. Kerry under the shadow of the majestic Mangerton Mountain. She was born into a staunchly republican family. Her father Danny Quill was imprisoned in the Curragh while her Aunt Mary was jailed in Tralee having been arrested in the schoolhouse where she taught, caught redhanded typing messages for volunteers who were on the run. The house where Máirín was born was GHQ of the Old IRA in South Kerry and among those who had slept in the house were Erskine Childers while on the run from the British army and Liam Lynch who had slept in the house three nights before he was shot. Subsequently, both her parents were founder members of Fianna Fáil. This transition and commitment to peaceful democratic politics was something that Máirín would embrace as a core value during her own time in politics.

At the age of 3, the precocious Máirín started her schooling in the local National School where she immediately manifested her interest in public performance and the arts by rising up and singing a song whenever the mood took her, regardless of what the teacher was attempting to do.

Those early days of schooling in Kilgarvan were to have a profound affect on Máirín. She has never forgotten that she was the only female from her class of girls in that school who did not have to emigrate.

Her secondary education was in Boarding School in Mountmellick and despite her earlier interruptions in class it is obvious that the teaching bug had taken hold of Máirín.

She studied for two years at Mary Immaculate College of Education qualifying as a primary teacher and commenced her National schoolteaching in Whitegate before moving to Little Island. She studied by night in UCC for a B.A. degree in History and English and completed her Higher Diploma in Education here.

Máirín commenced her secondary teaching career at St. Vincent's secondary school on the Northside of Cork City in 1968 and taught there for nineteen years. From 1997 to 2001 Máirín worked as a Supervisor of teaching practice in the Department of Education here in UCC.

Parallel with her teaching vocation, Máirín had developed her interest in politics by joining the Séan ó Donnchadha Cumann of Fianna Fáil in Cork city in 1965.

Her work and ability were noticed by Jack Lynch and he asked her to stand as a fourth Fianna Fáil candidate for the Dáil in the Cork City constituency in 1977. She was unsuccessful, finishing sixth in the five-seater constituency. In 1979, she was elected to Cork Corporation and was to continue to be a member of that body for the next thirty years topping the poll in every election, bar one, before officially retiring today.

It is one thing for someone to inherit an interest in politics but it requires a totally different level of commitment to put yourself forward for election and to continue to do so for over 30 years. For Máirín it has been her experience in education that has driven her to try to make a difference and to improve the lot of her fellow citizens.

In an interview with Caroline Walsh of the Evening Echo in 1987, Máirín explained what drove her to become a politician and I quote:

“There is no better place than the classroom for seeing the effects that unemployment has on families, you see the children coming in on poor breakfasts, children embarrassed because they can't pay for books or are wearing worn out shoes or runners. And all these are just the physical symptoms of poverty, not to speak of the depression in the home, the frustration, the marital problems and all the allied ills of unemployment that impact mercilessly on children”. She spoke of the frustration of preparing and pushing children who've seen their older brothers and sisters ending up either

on the boat or at the labour exchange and stated “-One of the worst things to see is the slow death of ambition in children watching it dawn on them how futile it is to get good exam results, to strive and to try. As a politician I will be asking myself can I do nothing to change the course of events in their favour”.

If ever, there was a statement of how, bad public policy adversely affects education and how educational experience can shape a noble political commitment then surely this was it. It smacks of a core value system and of, -an integrity; - an integrity that was to manifest itself in a short few years.

Frustrated by the lack of high standards among the higher echelons of her party Máirín took what for her was the most painful decision of her life. She left Fianna Fáil, the party that her parents had helped to found, and with others established the Progressive Democrats in 1985. At the time she described that decision as “like eating my own flesh”.

In 1987 she was elected to the Dáil representing Cork North Central and was to spend ten years in the Dáil followed by a further five years in the Seanad.

Máirín’s election to the Dáil broke the mould of politics in Cork. She was the first female to be elected to the Dáil from Cork city or county who did not replace a family member.

She was the first TD to be elected from Cork City who had not been born and reared in Cork. By this achievement she drove a first nail in the coffin of parochialism – a parochialism that as HL Mencken put it results in the progressive degeneration of the honesty and honour of representatives and (often) blocks the person of sense, dignity and self-respect from being elected.

In her time in national politics Máirín played a lead role in a wide range of activities but most of her work centered on improving the lot of children, one example of which was her Chairing of the Select All-Party Committee on Crime which in the 1990’s produced the first major report on protecting children from becoming involved in crime and which led to the subsequent legislation.

In 1997 the Irish Times stated “her slightly eccentric style camouflages a ferocious intellect and her contributions have been among the better features of the Dáil”.

Máirín Quill has throughout her public life promoted culture and the arts as central to the civic society of Cork and Ireland. She has consistently supported a range of organisations at local, regional, national and international level.

Newbury House in Mayfield, the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork Opera House, the National College of Art & Design, the Arts Committee of Cork City Council, Cork 2005 European Capital of Culture, the Seamus Murphy and Aloys Fleischmann Centenary Celebrations, Wandesford Quay Studios and Gallery, Corcadorca Theatre Company, Cork Printmakers, Cork Orchestral Society, to name but a few, have all benefited from her input and enthusiasm. She has served as Chair or Deputy Chair of almost all of these.

Her professional life as a teacher and her dedication as a public servant have given Máirín a vision which places culture at the centre of an equitable and engaged community.

A review of the buildings in Cork where art is either made, exhibited or performed, shows that she helped to establish or sustain almost all of them. For example, artists now work in the studios in Wandesford Quay, patrons sit in a refurbished and energised Cork Opera House, children learn about and make art in Newbury House. There is an equality of access in this approach, the local is as important as the international if not more so to her. She clearly understands that early engagement with art and artists can lead to a life long love and relationship with creativity which not only enriches the individual, but also the society in which they take their place.

Tá ard mheas aici ar an nGaeilge, ar litríocht, ar an bhfíliocht, ar chultúr ársa na tíre seo agus bhí baint láidir aici le heagrú Oireachtais na Gaeilge nuair a cuireadh ar siúl anseo i gCorcaigh é sna bhlianta 2005 agus 2008.

Political gain or advantage has never been achieved through working in or on behalf of the Arts. Rather it is Máirín's sophisticated but straight forward belief in the value of culture to people and places which led her to champion the arts.

In doing all of this she has benefitted from the wonderful support and encouragement of her sister Ita. The city of Cork has been fortunate to have both Quill sisters working on its behalf.

The concept of service and the greater good are central to Máirín's belief in her role not only as a politician but as a citizen. Through her work she demonstrates the impact which one politician can have through drive, energy and vision. All of this was done with a grace which becomes not only her as a person, but the various public offices she has held.

Her outstanding commitment to education, public service and to the visual, written, spoken and performing arts recalls the words of John F Kennedy

spoken at an honorary conferring in Harvard University on a June day in 1956.

“If more politicians knew poetry and more poets knew politics, I am convinced the world would be a better place in which to live”

Máirín Quill, proud Kerry woman, and citizen of Cork has certainly made Cork and this region a better place to live in and for that she has earned both our gratitude and admiration and is a worthy nominee for the degree of Doctor of Laws.

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.