

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR KEVIN BARRY**,
NUI Galway on 25 June, 2010 on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor
of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **SEÁN Ó HUIGINN**.

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

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries when so many hoped for a lasting and just peace in Ireland (with three and a half thousand deaths counted and whole communities living in bleak hatred and fear) one play appeared again and again on the Irish stage: the *Antigone* of the Greek playwright Sophocles about the collapse of a civilisation. Antigone, a teenage girl, had wished to bury her brother, who had died in battle as an enemy to the state. She wanted to give the dead man the honor the gods require before his soul can take its place in the world of its ancestors. The state forbids the burial. Antigone disobeys the state and is condemned to death. In the end everyone is ruined: Antigone herself, the state's ruler Kreon, his son whom Antigone was to marry, and his wife who kills herself cursing her husband as the killer of his own children.



Diplomats are those whom we charge with a duty to attempt the impossible: that such tragedies, historically and in the lives of nations, cease. We ask diplomats to use their extraordinary competence, both intellectual and political, to find solutions to irreconcilable conflict. '*When an immovable object meets an irresistible force,*' wrote the Belfast poet Derek Mahon, '*something has got to give.*' Diplomacy is the art of provoking and achieving give ... and take. Whatever it takes.

Seán Ó hUiginn is a diplomat who, during his 40 years at the Department of Foreign Affairs, has achieved more than most in turning irreconcilable forces towards a process of peace. Shortly after joining the Department in 1968 he acted as Deputy Head of the Irish Delegation to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. In 1976 he entered for the first time the Anglo-Irish Division of Foreign Affairs, and from 1992 until 1997 he was Head of that Division drafting the documents that would enable the patient building of the Good Friday Agreement, under which the British and Irish states and the North of Ireland work in concert, secured by referenda of all the people of Ireland.

Negotiations towards the Good Friday Agreement had their blueprint in the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 and the Joint Framework Documents of February 1995 both of which were jointly agreed and published by the British and Irish governments. Seán Ó hUiginn was the key drafter of these documents and their impact was immediate and widely felt. The Downing Street Declaration was described by the Government of the time as a charter for peace and reconciliation in Ireland and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds credited Seán Ó hUiginn with being a good and tough negotiator, at times not acceptable to the British 'because he was so tough and good.' The international journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in the later months of 1995 rushed to press a strongly positive assessment of the Framework Documents. Its tone of renewed and justified hope makes interesting reading again now in hindsight.

The Northern Irish public has been muted and nuanced in its response. So, significantly, have been the paramilitaries. Unprecedented numbers of the public have asked for and read the texts in detail. Softer voices can be heard emanating from people with reputations for being uncompromising republicans or loyalist rocks. ... The politics of Northern Ireland will never be the same again. At worst there is a new and calmer stalemate. At best, there is hope for something rather extraordinary. ... Some of the pain caused in the last quarter of a century will certainly be more bearable if, as a result of these texts, the construction of an agreed Ireland becomes a benign model of conflict-resolution for others.

In conflicts between insurgents and the state, the lives of how many Antigones and how many Kreons, in Ireland and further afield, have these diplomatic texts saved?

The drafting of such crucial texts was only one part of the work Seán Ó hUiginn had in hand. There was also the diplomat's task of persuasion and forcing the pace of negotiation. At least one political memoir records a brief and illuminating cameo in which Seán (reversing the game of Lloyd George in 1921) closes down London negotiations with the British, and taking the Irish team on the road home, compels No. 10 Downing Street to keep its word. Commenting on what he has learned from his work, he has said that one of the responses to terrorism should be 'an analysis of where the roots of this phenomenon lie. Generally speaking (he argues) broad patterns never are merely psychopathic. There usually are serious reasons why people go into what is obviously the perversion of violence and terrorism.' As a negotiator he respects the wisdom of the Chinese proverb which advises that you 'build a golden bridge for your enemy to retreat.'

In 1997 Seán was appointed Irish Ambassador to the United States where, in addition to strengthening links between the Irish and United States economies and supporting exchanges that would bring many American students to this and other Irish universities, he could continue to persuade the State Department to work with less orthodox perspectives on Northern Ireland. He could also address to an American audience his informed judgement that Ireland is not all that unique and that the Northern Ireland conflict is one of the many classic ethnic conflicts that have become tragically familiar in other parts of Europe and globally. Seán Ó hUiginn graduated from University College Galway with a degree in Languages, French and German, and (as one of the many students fortunate enough to study at university other languages and other cultures) he has been well-placed to recognise as a disciplined intellectual that only comparative study of the past allows us to understand the present and to draft a better future. It has also allowed him one of his dearest pleasures: reading the novels of Marcel Proust.

Seán Ó hUiginn was educated at Srah National School in Tourmakeady in County Mayo, at St. Jarlath's College Tuam, at this University and at the University of Bourdeaux. Besides his role in the Anglo-Irish Division, and as Ambassador to the United States, he has served abroad in the Irish Embassy in Berne, as Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy. The Italian government have honoured his outstanding contribution to modern Italy and several north american universities have stolen a march on us in awarding Seán an Honorary Doctorate. We have waited until the first decent opportunity for an Irish university: his retirement from public service in 2009.

Seán has had the good fortune to be married to another Galway university graduate, the distinguished sculptor Bernadette Ní Gallchoir. We welcome Bernadette with Seán today back to their *alma mater*.

PRAEHONORABILIS PRAESES, 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.