

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **DR RICHARD WATSON**, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 8 June 2011, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **JOSEPH BROSAN**

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

The Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) was established in January 2004 on foot of an agreement signed between the Irish and British Governments in November 2003. Its remit was to monitor any continuing illegal activity by paramilitary groups and the implementation of security normalisation measures by the British government in Northern Ireland. The four members of the IMC were:

- Lord John Alderdice, former Alliance Party Leader and former Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly;
- John Grieve, former Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police and former head of its Anti-Terror Branch;
- Dick Kerr, former Deputy Director, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency;
- Joe Brosnan, former Secretary General of the Irish Department of Justice.

Many folk in Northern Ireland viewed the IMC with grave suspicion at the time of its establishment, and in the usual traditions of Northern Ireland launched what is known in those parts, and elsewhere, as an *argumentum ad hominem*, or perhaps, *argumenta ad homines*. One person described the commissioners as “three spooks and a Lord”. Another asserted that the IMC is “a collection of spies, spooks, retired civil servants and failed politicians”. I do not know why the plurals were used, and I will not try to distinguish between “spooks” and “spies”; but it is not difficult to identify the retired civil servant as the person we are to honour here today: Joe Brosnan.

No doubt Joe was called a “retired civil servant” to suggest that he was somehow broken down, or burnt out, or simply over the hill: but the subsequent contribution of Joe and the other commissioners to the peace process has shown that as a working group they were not in any way “past it”. Further, I would maintain that to call Joe a civil servant is in fact an appropriate recognition of much of the valuable contribution he has made to Ireland, Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom, and indeed the rest of Europe, over many years. His strengths are those of the best kind of civil servant: he has shown himself to be competent, dedicated and professional throughout his career.

Joe Brosnan was born in Castleisland, Co. Kerry, the son of a teacher, Patrick Brosnan and his wife Catherine. He has one sister, Helen, who is happily with us today. After second level education in St Brendan’s College, Killarney, he came to St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, to study for the priesthood, possibly an early indication of a lifelong preference for service to others rather than to himself. He displayed as an undergraduate the intellectual brilliance that has marked his entire career. He graduated in English and Latin before deciding to leave the seminary and join the Irish civil service, where he worked mostly in the Department of Justice. He was detached to work in Brussels for six years, before becoming a consultant on public and European affairs and subsequently a member of the Independent Monitoring

Commission. He is married to Mary Murray and they have two adult children, Catherine and John, and a grand-daughter, Hope; Mary and Catherine are with us today, and I do hope they enjoy the occasion; but unfortunately John is on his way to the US at this moment.

The competence, dedication and professionalism that I mentioned emerge on a closer look at Joe's career. After joining the Department of Justice, and despite having a demanding full-time job, Joe embarked on law studies to become a barrister, and did so with considerable distinction. He received first place each year in the Kings Inns examinations and was awarded the Swift McNeill Memorial Prize, the James Murnaghan Memorial Prize and the John Brooke Scholarship. He was called to the Irish Bar in 1978. With his record, Joe could have moved from the civil service to work as a barrister, and no doubt he would have made a great success of devilling for a living. Fortunately for the Department of Justice, Joe opted to stay, and played several roles over the years, each with increasing demands: Research Counsellor, on secondment with the Law Reform Commission, Assistant Secretary in the Department of Justice and finally, in 1991, Secretary General of the Department of Justice.

This role is of course akin to that of Sir Humphrey in "Yes, Minister", and Joe would have said yes, or no, or perhaps, to a few Ministers when he served as Secretary General of the Department. It would, however, be misleading if I were to suggest that his time as Secretary General was an amusing round of patronizing his political masters, sipping good wine with other senior civil servants, and planning his next outing to the opera, though I have no doubt that Joe could have done all these things very well indeed! One main difference between Joe and Sir Humphrey arises from the very grim backdrop to Joe's entire career provided by the Troubles in the North. Much of his work in the Department of Justice was necessarily concerned with trying to ensure that the principles of justice were adhered to, north and south of the Border: no easy task. In particular, he was involved with North-South cooperation on policing and legal matters, attended regularly at Anglo-Irish Conference meetings, and was a member of the Irish Government delegation participating in the Northern Ireland talks process. It seems to me that the perks of the job consisted largely in the State providing him with enhanced security at his home, a scrambling device on his phone, and many trips to the North in the Government jet or in armour plated cars. Mary has had a lot to endure!

His talents did not go unnoticed, and in 1993 he was invited to Brussels to become Chef de Cabinet to the Irish member of the European Commission, responsible for Justice and Home Affairs and, later, Employment and Social Policy. Once again, his six year stint in Brussels was marked by skillful negotiation and pure hard work for the benefit of Ireland and Europe. The sad thing about such activity is that it never gets noticed when things go right, and hits the headlines when things go wrong. Needless to say, Joe did not get his name in the papers for any wrong reasons.

On his return from Brussels at the end of 1999, he retired from the Irish civil service and began work as a consultant on public and European affairs. From 2000 to 2003 he was Director General of the Institute of European Affairs in Dublin, and he represented the Institute in the Special Observer Pillar of the National Forum on Europe. He also provided his services to the Law Society of Ireland and chaired three task forces set up by the Society to review various aspects of their work. But even at this time he was not in a position where he could look away from the dreadful doings in the North and the overspill in the Republic: in 2002 he was a member of a three-person group set up by the Irish Government to investigate and report on allegations made about Garda security and intelligence operations in the run-up to the Omagh

bombing in 1998. The fact that this report, often referred to as the Nally Report, has been published only in an edited version gives some idea of how sensitive this work was.

Much of Joe's previous experience prepared him well for his most recent role as a member of the Independent Monitoring Commission. That body produced twenty six reports since 2004, the last one being presented to the Irish and British governments in March 2011. Its objective, as set out in the International Agreement, was to carry out its functions with a view to promoting the transition to a peaceful and stable and inclusive devolved Government in Northern Ireland. It did so in an independent fashion, guided by a belief in the fundamental importance of the rule of law in a democratic society. The first twenty five reports are available on the web, and make for very chilling reading. In the reports, the IMC listed the incidents and made attributions which made it increasingly difficult for political parties to be linked in any way to violence. The reports provide an impressive record of four independent minded people who were able to gaze in an unblinking fashion at the activities of paramilitary groups and comment in impartial, non emotive language on those activities. The Irish and British Governments have decided that the IMC has completed its difficult task with the presentation of its twenty sixth report. There is not yet a cessation of all violence in Northern Ireland: but the work of the IMC has helped to produce the situation in which the justice system is owned by and accountable to the people of Northern Ireland: there is now an opportunity to build a safer community for all.

Today we honour Joe Brosnan, and through him all the members of the IMC. He is a worthy recipient of the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*. It is particularly fitting that he should receive this award in his *alma mater*. For myself, I am proud to present such a competent, dedicated and professional civil servant, albeit a retired one, for this award.

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.