

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR JAMES BROWNE, Vice-Chancellor, President, National University of Ireland, Galway, on 25 January 2012 in the Dublin Castle, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **H.E. MICHAEL D. HIGGINS, PRESIDENT OF IRELAND**

A Sheansailéir, a Mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Extraordinary men are more ordinary than the rest of us. Today we honour an extraordinary man who personifies and combines so many decencies that, taken individually, we perceive to be ordinary.

As the ninth President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins is, somewhat paradoxically, the *primus inter pares* or first among equals. This phrase was first used by the late President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh to characterise the Irish presidency and remains apt to this day.



Writing in 2006, Professor Declan Kiberd said of Michael D. Higgins: "Democracy for this man is the dissemination of a common culture as widely as possible among a people audacious enough to imagine their own present and future." This commitment to radical egalitarianism animated his claim to be elected as Uachtarán na hÉireann in 2011.

In the spirit of the late Tony Judt, it posited a moral choice not between the state and the market but between two versions of the state. We were invited to reconceive the role of government in a re-imagined state and to engage without shame in an ethically informed public conversation about the choices that this would entail. It was an unapologetic claim that placed ethics before competence in what he prescribed as 'a real Republic'. It challenged the Irish people to accept that adjustment by daring to re-imagine and revive almost-forgotten decencies. Over one million voters rose to that challenge.

Michael D. Higgins has always been, in the words of An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD: "a noble man of quiet virtue...fear ón Iarthar tagtha chun cinn". As a scholar, public intellectual and poet he has remained habitually resident in the world but domiciled in the world of ideas. For him there is no wall between intellectual analysis and felt experience; rationality can never be compromised by emotional engagement; reason is important but so too is instinct.

This integration of thought and feeling marked him out as a politician of unusual passion and intrepidity. In striving for a version of ourselves and society not yet realised he was and remains a utopian. Few see politics as a utopian enterprise but Michael D. Higgins has gone into 'the heart of the machine' without forgetting the ideals that propelled him into politics. To that extent he is a committed utopian.

Elected to Galway City and County Councils in 1974, he remained involved in local government for eighteen years serving two terms as Mayor of Galway (1982-83 and 1991-92). He was appointed to Seanad Éireann in 1973 by the then Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave. First elected to Dáil Éireann in 1981 he lost his seat in Galway-West in the November 1982 general election and was subsequently elected to Seanad Éireann on the NUI panel. He regained his Dáil seat in 1987 and represented Galway-West as a TD until 2011.

Always prominent in the Labour Party, whether on the front bench or not, he achieved ministerial office in 1992 when he was appointed as the first Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. His period in that office was distinguished. It saw the burgeoning of an indigenous film industry, the establishment of Teilifís na Gaeilge (now TG4) and the termination of the controversial Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act. As Minister, Michael D. Higgins invigorated the process of establishing community-based centres of excellence for the Arts throughout the country, recognising the need for a supportive infrastructure for creativity and artistic endeavour as well as access to the arts for all citizens. Moreover, he drove the revitalisation of Ireland's canal network, resulting in over 1,000 kilometres of navigable waterways, supporting thousands of jobs, and creating wealth in many rural and economically-deprived areas of the State.

Rud is annamh i gcás polaiteora atá sáite i bpolaitíocht logánta agus náisiúnta, chuir Michael D. Higgins spéis láidir i gcónaí i gcúrsaí idirnáisiúnta. Thug sin an deis dó agus chuir ar a chumas comhar agus cearta daonna na gciníocha ar fud na cruinne a chur chun cinn agus a chur i gcrích ar bhealaí praiticiúla.

Whether it involved people in Latin-America, the Carribean, the Middle-East or the African continent Michael D. Higgins identified, amplified and championed the rights and interests of communities that he described as 'comhlúadar faoi bhrón'. He did so without fear, using everything at his disposal: politics, sociology, broadcasting, journalism and poetry. In 1992, he was the first recipient of the Seán MacBride Peace Prize from the International Peace Bureau in Helsinki, in recognition of his work for peace and justice in many parts of the world.

His ability to understand and empathise with the condition of the marginalised drew on real insight born of experience. Born in 1941 in Limerick he was raised from the age of five with his brother, John, by an uncle and aunt in Newmarket on Fergus, Co. Clare. He was educated at Ballycar National School by an inspirational teacher, William Clune, who, in the words of President Higgins, respected all children as 'carriers of wonderment'.

Michael D. Higgins's poetry draws eloquently on the natural beauty of the place in which he was reared but it is not what he terms 'pastoral nonsense'. It does not use nature to hide or obliterate the darker sensations of a lived social reality. It is truthful and powerful, its power deriving from a transcendent immediacy and empathic humanity.

In 1955 he attended St. Flannan's College in Ennis. He describes St. Flannan's as having been placed on this earth for three things: (1) to win the Harty Cup; (2) to win the gold medal in Greek; and (3) to send priests to the diocese. No doubt, attaining high political office will now be added to this list of key performance indicators! Following a period working as a Grade 8 Clerk at the ESB in Galway he entered University College Galway as a mature student where he distinguished himself in curricular and extra-curricular pursuits becoming Auditor of the Literary & Debating Society and President of the Students' Union. He graduated with a BA

in 1965 and a BComm in 1966. Subsequently, he studied as a post-graduate student at Indiana University and Manchester University.

Chaith sé níos mó ná tríocha bliain ag léachtóireacht in Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh, áit a raibh cáil mhór air mar shocheolaí den scoth agus mar scríbhneoir agus iriseoir bisiúil. Freisin tuigin sé tabhacht na Gaeilge i saol agus cultúr na tíre. Tá Gaeilge thar a bheith líofa aige agus glacann sé gach seans an Ghaeilge a úsáid agus a chur chun chin.

He married Sabina Coyne, from Mayo, in 1974. She and their four children – Daniel, Michael, John and Alice-Mary – have shared his many enthusiasms whether political, artistic or cultural.

If the presidency is the sweet branch of the tree of government the blossoms of that sweet branch – to borrow the phrase of the poet, John Montague – are surely Michael D. and Sabina.

The presidency of Michael D. Higgins may well reverse the adage of campaigning in poetry but governing in prose. Already, he is asserting the true value of rhetoric, purposefully and forthrightly deployed, evincing the defining quality of this truly extraordinary man – integrity.

A Sheansailéir,

Is ábhar bróid dom é a Shoilse, Micheál D. Ó hUiginn, Uachtarán na hÉireann, a chur i do láthair le go mbronfá air chéim LLD na hOllscoile, *honoris causa*...

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, 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 testur ac spondeo, totique Academiae.