

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR LAURENCE TAYLOR, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 16 May 2012 in National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **THOMAS J. DONOHUE**

The University is very pleased to take this opportunity to formally recognise the extraordinary achievements and contributions of one of the most influential Irish Americans on the contemporary economic and political scene. Thomas J. Donohue is president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, with over 3 million



Photo Courtesy of NUI Maynooth

corporate members the world's largest business federation. Under his leadership the Chamber has become a lobbying and political force to be reckoned with, but also a force for private enterprise engagement with public issues, including challenging and reforming public education in the United States and around the world. A model of strong and principled leadership, a consistent proponent of democracy and individual rights, a generous contributor to many causes, and deeply committed to education, Thomas J. Donohue is an important friend for Ireland and for this University.

Tom's antecedents left Ireland long ago and there are apparently at least eight unrelated O'Donnchadha clans to be found in all four provinces of Ireland – a fact that should allow Tom to claim or deny ancestry all over the island. However, as those of you with American relations know, the durability of the identity is never a simple function of how long ago one's people left Ireland. Nor is a tie to a townland or county necessary to a strong Irish identity in America – something not always grasped by the Irish here – for another sense of place grounds that identity in the new world, where the specificity of Boston Irish or Chicago Irish conjures up as rich a range of experience and associations as Cork or Kerry on this side (well, maybe not quite).

As for Tom, he is, like myself, a New Yorker. Although I come from a different borough and ethnic background, I must admit that it gives me particular, personal pleasure to present a fellow New Yorker for this honour. Not just in the spirit of local chauvinism – a familiar enough sentiment on this island – but because of the very special character of New York, a city that certainly challenges but also accepts. It offers an open, cosmopolitan experience typically embraced by nearly everyone who moves there and yet, at the same time, nurtures very strong ethnic identities. I believe it was Woody Allen who described New York as “half Jewish, half Italian, half Irish, half Black and half Puerto Rican...” For those who queried his maths, Allen responded “It's a big city!” A city big enough to have five distinctive boroughs as well as (at least) five halves, and when these are put together distinctive worlds of shared values and experience are evoked; for Tom that world was an Irish neighbourhood in Brooklyn . So I am not

surprised to hear that Tom likes to say that simply noting he's Irish and from Brooklyn has gotten him out of a lot of fixes. But I am tempted to guess that these same characteristics probably got him into as many fixes as out of them, unless he's restricted his interaction to others of similar provenance. In my experience, a New Yorker is greeted with as much enthusiasm beyond the east coast as a Dub is in Donegal.

No doubt the size and competitive, entrepreneurial spirit of the city as well as the strong sense of belonging that came with the Irish neighbourhood were important to the development of Tom's character and approach to life and work. I am told that he credits his Irish roots for his tenacity and optimism. Whatever about Irish optimism – the best evidence of which may be the eternal faith that a good summer is bound to come – I would say he's right about the tenacity. Of course, there can be a dark side to that tenacity (as in the definition of Irish senescence, where you forget everything but a grudge), but there is little doubt that both qualities are needed now, when "we are," as our leaders have shrewdly noted, "where we are."

Tom stayed near home to earn a bachelor's degree from St John's University and an MBA from Adelphi. Among his early positions he served as a Vice President for Development at Fairfield University (a Jesuit institution in Connecticut), as an executive in the US Postal Service, and for 13 years as president and CEO of the American Trucking Association. He was a lobbyist for the US Chamber of Commerce for some time, and then took over its leadership in September 1997.

Since that time, as The New York Times writes, "Through Mr Donohue's efforts, the Chamber has become the most visible and effective business lobby in the country." According to the Washington Post, "The organization he inherited was cash-strapped and lacked punch. His goal, he wrote at the time, 'is simple-to build the biggest gorilla in this town-the most aggressive and vigorous business advocate our nation has ever seen.' He has succeeded on many measures. Today the Chamber is by far the most muscular business lobby group in Washington. From its historic headquarters opposite the White House it wields huge political influence and last year (2010) took in \$189m in contributions and grants, roughly five times its pre-Donohue inflows."

Apparently Tom has taken advantage of this proximity to the White House, having visited President Obama with greater frequency than almost anyone in DC. As the Washington Post also noted, "Nobody has mastered the new Washington game better than Tom Donohue." He is known in Washington and the business community as a tenacious fighter for the Chamber and free enterprise. According to those who work with him, Tom stands up for his beliefs and tells it like it is, but does so with good manners and often with a touch of humour. Respected on both sides of the political aisle, Tom is known to give everyone a fair hearing, and a clear and honest account of his own position. He is also known as a champion networker, returning all his calls, remembering names and faces, and always enjoying the challenge of new people and new ideas. All employees are treated with the same level of respect and kindness regardless of their level. And (Like our own President) he is known for outworking everyone around him, leading a complicated organization while making more than 150 domestic and international trips each year.

While advancing the interests of its constituency, the Chamber under Tom's leadership has also devoted considerable energy to bringing the logic and power of competitive enterprise to bear on social issues. In the case of immigration, for example, the Chamber has forcefully argued for an Immigration reform that offers a clear path to legalisation and citizenship for the many millions that currently find themselves in limbo in the United States. And on the issue of public education, once again Tom and the Chamber have not been content to simply point a critical finger, but rather have urged their constituency to take an active

role in educational reform, which they understand to be critical to the success of the US in the global context. And they have led the way in that effort, devising effective evaluation instruments for schools and school boards, and organising conferences and workshops on new approaches to STEM education. In all these activities, Tom has understood the position of business in relation to local, national, and international society, stressing the need for productive engagement, based not on narrow self-interest but rather on a shared interest in fostering enterprise and innovation. In pursuit of these goals, Tom has never hesitated to work with anybody who shares his commitment, and has, for example, been collaborating with Michelle Obama on a very successful program securing jobs for returning veterans. He has also brought his abilities to bear in a wide range of more personal causes and charities, from the Boy Scouts to a program feeding the hungry in DC.

Clearly there is more than tenacity behind Tom's success as leader and negotiator, but we might credit his upbringing back in Brooklyn for others of his qualities as well. The Irish community there was not homogeneous, as Tom's own family well illustrates. His paternal grandfather was a sewer inspector and a Democrat and his maternal grandfather was a lawyer and a Republican. Tom claims that makes him "ecumenical," which may well be the case, but I would say that both sides are also discernible in his successful combination of a Republican faith in the individual and free enterprise, and a Democratic belief in the power of collective interest and political action. Of course, in Tom's case the collective is not a workers' union, but rather an association of businesses. Nevertheless, his striking success in mobilising that association certainly arises from his understanding of how to articulate a compelling common interest and then effectively wield the power that such a group can generate.

But Tom also owes a great deal of his success to his more immediate family: his wife Elizabeth and their three sons. He has been greatly supported and no doubt strongly influenced by Liz, who has her own distinguished record of service, having worked for more than twenty years with the elderly as a volunteer ombudsman in nursing homes, as an advisor in the development of an assisted living business and a caregiver to her own mother and mother-in-law. And we need to thank Liz especially for strongly influencing Tom in a shared, life-long commitment to education: in her case stemming from undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in education and educational psychology, followed by an early career as a primary school teacher and continuing in later years with service on the boards of public schools and universities.

Fortunately for us, Tom has brought his interests, talents and energy across the pond, and has proved to be an important champion of the transatlantic relationship and bilateral ties between Ireland and the United States. Ireland was the first country he visited as president and CEO of the Chamber in 1997, and this is his third visit in the last 18 months. While many nations and their business communities compete for Tom's attention, Ireland has been the focus of a special effort—not only due to the fact that he is the descendant of Irish immigrants but because of his profound respect for the Irish economic achievement, one he is convinced will soon be restored to full vitality.

Speaking at a breakfast meeting with the Taoiseach in Iveagh House last year, Tom advised that he had travelled there to reaffirm the American business community's commitment to Ireland as a vitally important investment and trading partner and to express his "optimism that the Irish and American economies are making real progress." He reflected on the strong economic ties between Ireland and the US and noted that "as each of our countries struggle to repair and grow our own economies, we must never forget that our destinies are tied together." Outlining the resilience that the Irish economy has shown in difficult circumstances, Mr. Donohue commented that "the Irish economy is based on the resourcefulness, intelligence, and grit of the Irish people, who are well educated

and industrious" and that "the American business community still sees Ireland as a good place to invest."

Not surprisingly, Tom Donohue is a 2009 recipient of the Sir Michael Smurfit Lifetime Achievement Award presented by the Irish Chamber of Commerce in the USA (ICCUSA) and a recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor presented by the National Ethnic Coalition. He holds honorary doctorate degrees from Adelphi, St. John's, and Marymount Universities in the United States, but certainly the time has come to recognise his enormous contribution on this side of the Atlantic.

One of the great benefits of the post I have had the honour of filling for the University over the last few years has been the opportunity to meet, interact with, and learn from a broader spectrum than one normally encounters as an academic and even as an anthropologist. They have included a range of often very interesting individuals, but occasionally, someone extraordinary, like Tom Donohue. I take particular satisfaction in having brought him in among us, so that as a fellow American and New Yorker he could see, as I have, the special beauty of place and people, and to get a sense of the enigma that is Maynooth, a university -- like Ireland itself -- at once old and new. I had, of course, told him about our entrepreneurial character across many disciplines and our outstanding record of commercialisation and innovation. I stressed our strong engagement with the private sector, including our partnership with Intel and other companies. But before I took him to the North Campus to see our newest labs and lecture halls, I led him through the South Campus cloisters, past the portraits of the Vicars Apostolic of Madras, India, the Regiopolitica of Canada, and the Bishops of Nairobi and Chicago, suggesting that Maynooth might be the greatest unintended consequence of the British Empire. While Tom had certainly shown interest in my account of the entrepreneurial present, I could see that he was equally taken by the story of our past; it seemed to resonate with him in a very personal way. As an American, he may have wanted to dispute just who or what was the greatest unintended consequence of the British empire, but I think he felt that he had rediscovered something important to him in a cultural and personal way; he had found a home in Ireland.

We certainly hope he feels that way. We live in perilous, precarious, if interesting, times, when the influence of global leaders like Tom Donohue can make an enormous difference in all our lives and the lives of generations to come. We have much to learn in our present struggles, in both the university and the nation, and indeed beyond, and will greatly benefit from a friend and advisor like Tom, who brings tremendous experience, character and wisdom to our table. So, to Tom and Liz Donohue we are very happy to say, welcome home.

Praehonorabilis Pro-Vice-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.