

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR PHILIP NOLAN, President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 2 December 2014 in THE Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **Dr. MARY CANNING**

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, is mór an onóir agus an pribhléid é domsa an Dochtúir Máire Uí Cainín a chur in aithne diaobh agus í a mholadh le céim oinigh.

Chancellor, members of the University, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour and a privilege to present Mary Canning for the award of the degree of Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa* for her contribution to higher education internationally and nationally.

Mary Canning grew up in Dublin and attended University College Dublin in the 1960s where she graduated with a first class honours degree in Italian; this, along with a graduate year spent in Italy, gave her a lifelong love of literature, a lifelong passion for Italy and its culture, and a great desire to travel and to understand the world in its richness and diversity. She proceeded to a PhD in Anglo-Irish literature and an Advanced Diploma in Education Studies, both

from University College Dublin. She taught at high school and university levels both in Ireland and the United States. She loved literature as art and as the subject of scholarly examination, and could have pursued a successful career as an educator, but from the outset wider issues of educational policy interested her and were amenable to her sharp and eclectic mind. She held a number of positions in the Irish public service related to education and training policy, and from there, in 1990, she was seconded to the European Union Phare Program. This move launched an extraordinary career in international higher education policy; her advisory work in Eastern Europe for the EU Phare programme led to her being head-hunted by the World Bank in Washington. She joined them in 1992, to participate in the start of the World Bank's educational work in the former Soviet Union. For more than ten years, she worked very closely with the Russian Minister of Education in reforming all aspects of the former soviet system of education, including the establishment of national testing, textbook production and distribution, and educational finance at all levels. She led the appraisal of all three World Bank education loans to the Russian Federation and has written numerous analytical studies and policy papers on the reform of Russian education. As lead education specialist for the World Bank for Europe and Central Asia her work extended beyond the Russian Federation to include Central and Eastern Europe, with a central theme of education reform in post-transition economies, and she led the educational policy dialogue, sectoral analysis and investment operations in EU accession states. To facilitate this

work, she moved from Washington to the World Bank's office in Hungary in 1998, and to its Warsaw office in 2002. She returned to Ireland in 2006 for a particularly active form of retirement, in that she has continued in an advisory role with the World Bank and the OECD. A sense of the breadth and scale of her international experience and impact can be derived from the following list: she has led or contributed to reviews of higher education and research, in the Russian Federation (1999), Poland (2004) and Slovakia (2005), and following her alleged retirement, in Kazakhstan (2007), China (2008), Chile (2009), Kyrgyz Republic (2010), Brazil, (2010) the Dominican Republic (2012) and Colombia (2013)

While we in Ireland insist on rendering ongoing proof of the adage that no prophet is accepted in their own land, we are deeply fortunate that Mary Canning's is an exception to this rule, so that her many talents and unparalleled international experience have been placed at the service of Irish higher education. She was appointed to the Higher Education Authority in 2007, and is, seven years later, in her second term. In 2009, she was appointed to the National Strategic Review of Higher Education in Ireland, the review group chaired by Colin Hunt, which generated the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, or the Hunt Report, which will prove to be the most important document in Irish higher education in a generation. She served as a

member of the Governing Authority of Maynooth University from 2010 to 2012. In 2010, she was elected to the Royal Irish Academy.

Mary never let go of her formative and lifelong interest in literature, and in addition she is deeply fond of the theatre and of music, especially opera, and I know she is rarely happier than when combining three of her great loves by travelling, with her husband Timothy, to some part of the world to hear opera. When she returned Ireland in 2006, she served as Chair of the Irish section of the European Cultural Foundation. She has subsequently become a member of the Board of the European Movement. She is a member of the Board of the Trinity Long Room Hub.

This catalogue of achievement alone merits the award of the honorary degree to be conferred here today, but it is the quality of Mary Canning's engagement in the art and science of policy that is distinctive and especially worthy of recognition. It says something about a person if you can remember, vividly, the first time you met them, and I vividly remember the first time I met Mary, at a dinner in Farmleigh, where, seated beside each other, we had the most wonderful evening, the topic of our conversation the nature of the academic endeavour, in the sciences and the humanities, and the sheer impossibility of progress under the benighted funding and policy regime then in place - and this was before the crisis! Mary brought to that conversation what she brings to every conversation: intellect, knowledge, experience, passion and seriousness of

intent, all worn lightly, and leavened by a generosity of spirit, a wonderfully subversive tendency and a rich sense of humour. It is these qualities that also make her an influencer and shaper of public policy *par excellence*.

We hear a great deal these days about the need for good governance. Good governance requires that good people govern, people of ability, integrity, energy and persistence. In her role on the Higher Education Authority, in helping shape our National Strategy for Higher Education, and above all in overseeing its implementation, by bringing the scope and variety of her international experience to bear in these issues, Mary Canning has made, is making, and will continue to make a lasting contribution to higher education in this country, a contribution values what is right over what is expedient, the student over the system, and long-term vitality over short-term objectives. Her contribution may not be well known or understood outside the education policy community, but it is a contribution that will matter in the lives of many tens of thousands of students, and in the life of this nation, over the decades to come.

Mary would be the first to acknowledge the support she has received from those closest to her. Her sister Sheila and her two children, Ronan and Sinead. The love of literature has passed to the next generation, and Sinead holds a Ph D in Spanish from UCD, also becoming Auditor of the L+H, the Literary and Historical Society, on the way. Sinead was married last Saturday and has delayed her honeymoon to attend this conferring. Sinead and Ronan had to put

up with a lot over the years when Mary's travels took her to distant places. Indeed, on one memorable occasion, when Ronan had to have a surgical procedure, before giving him the anaesthetic the surgeon asked him where his mother was, he said she was in Siberia working on the educational needs of Russian miners. The medical team assumed he was hallucinating and got on with the operation. Finally, Mary would want to acknowledge her dear husband and constant companion Timothy, former senior economist in the World Bank, whom she met through the Bank, and who has always been a huge source of advice and encouragement.

For her contribution to the development of higher education across so many countries, and for her continuing and selfless dedication to its development in Ireland, I commend Mary Canning for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hanc meam filiam quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse quae admittantur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctorata in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.