



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

ADDRESS GIVEN BY

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**following his conferring with the honorary degree of
Doctor of Laws (LLD) of the National University of Ireland
in NUI Galway on
Monday, 23rd October 2017**

Go Raibh maith agaibh.

Tá fáilte róimh ar fad anseo inniu chuig Ollscoil na hEireann Gaillimh.

Gratias tibi. Concedo pro gloria gentis. Vos omnes estis hodie hic grata.

As we walked in here today, I couldn't help but think, didn't some of my friends do very well for themselves!

My dear friend, Chancellor Manning and I have shared much fun, laughter, mischief and a few trials and challenges over many long years. But his dedication and commitment to the public good have always been nothing but exemplary and his generosity with his time and his ability has always been truly exceptional.

So, it is a wonderful honour for me personally that he oversees proceedings here today.

Thank you Maurice for everything you do.

Let me also say that I recall your esteemed President, Professor Jim Browne, as an undergraduate about the same time as myself here, in what was then University College Galway. Jim was an engineering student while I studied, or tried to study at weekends as I was teaching at that time. That was when my grá for this institution really took off and I have many fond memories of fellow students and teachers and of course the occasional parties in Salthill. Days of innocence indeed.

You should know that Galway is part of my very being. I am of a marriage following the meeting of my parents in Galway. My mother, from Donegal and a teacher of Domestic Economy from Cornamona to Connemara, and my father who taught in Doire Bhó Riada, north of Recess, and later in Leitra school near Williamstown, and who played football for Oughterard and Mayo; to my Grandfather who tended the light on Inis Thoir lighthouse over the course of a long career.

So, it's not just an honour to receive this Doctorate today but it's particularly appropriate that the NUI should choose Galway as the location for the event.

No University was closer to me during my tenure as Taoiseach and I took great pride in being present for some of the University's very significant achievements of the past decade including the opening of the outstanding engineering campus, the development and expansion of medical and research facilities and the wonderful and truly inspiring 1916 Commemorative Conference last year.

The Presidency of a modern day University is not an easy job. Your President, Professor Jim Browne has been a dynamic and visionary leader, a man of total commitment, enormous energy and clarity of focus about the future of this University. I saw him working on your behalf in China, in

Japan in Europe and across America. His contribution to the development of NUIG will be lasting and never forgotten.

Jim Browne's work is broader than just NUIG. His impact has been such that NUIG has fully integrated into the life of the wider community, economically, culturally, socially and in sport.

There is no Town-Gown divide here. NUIG is in the truest sense the people's university agus tá súil agam gur mar sin a bheas sé go deireadh ama.

That ethos is reflected in his outstanding work in chairing and in sorting out the many complications associated with the getting under way of the National Children's Hospital, one of the largest infrastructure and engineering projects ever undertaken on this island. Indeed over the next 100 years mothers to be and their children will avail of its world class services, which Jim Browne and his team facilitated.

I have mixed feelings about today. I am very proud to receive an NUI degree.

The National University of Ireland predates the foundation of our State and was set up in 1908 to ensure that the new State, in whatever form it might take, which most assumed would be Home Rule, that this new Institution would provide the Leaders, the Administrators, politicians, doctors, economists, engineers and lawyers, to make it happen, and to allow a new generation of Irish men and Irish women make a reality of Independence, and so it did.

The NUI has always had the closest of relations with the Irish State.

Two of its 5 Chancellors, Eamon De Valera and Garret Fitzgerald, held the office of An Taoiseach, and another Ken Whitaker was recognized as the greatest Irish civil servant of all time. So, when this institution offers me an honorary doctorate, I value it greatly and accept it with gratitude and humility.

I have spent 46 years in public life between teaching and politics, and I know that in honouring me the NUI also honours the concept of public life and public service; in short it honours Politics.

Our Democracy was hard won, but it has been sustained in a way that makes us one of the oldest continuously surviving parliamentary democracies in the world.

Two factors are important here.

Firstly, the Irish people have always had an extraordinary commitment ever since the days of O'Connell and Parnell to parliamentary democracy and the rule of law.

And secondly has been the quality of those who serve in public life.

It's not for me to single out individual leaders, but when we look back I do believe that we can be proud of the legacy of probity and integrity and old fashioned Patriotism bequeathed us by so many of our leaders.

We live in an ever changing world, in uncertain times and it has never been as important that good people, irrespective of their persuasion so long as that persuasion sits within the principles of democracy, that those good people continue to offer themselves for election or to help those who do.

Politics is a tough life with more downs than ups, and those who do enter should not look for either credit or gratitude but focus on the job and the challenge of everyday.

Edmund Burke's words still have value... All that is necessary for evil to prevail is that good men should do nothing.

James Dillon, an admirer of Burke described politics as a vocation. He was correct in his description.

It is important in a time of cynicism, and we live in just such a time, a time of insatiable appetite and search for novelty, political and otherwise, when traditional values are casually dismissed, when politics becomes a sideshow, a spectacle and an irrelevance, to reassert the primacy of politics and see politicians as being on " our " side, representing and defending the real interests of real people as essentially decent ordinary men and women, doing their best for the people they represent and not as often portrayed as enemies of the people or some removed elite.

Democracies now face cyber attacks on a global scale, Govts face an unprecedented scale of social media making it exceptionally difficult for legislative processes to continue to lead in the people's interests and the resultant weakening of the centre ground drives people to extremes of right and left through fear and anger.

That drift away from the centre and the attendant fracturing of old politics are warnings we should heed. The new hard right will not be dressed as the old. It will be subtle and social. It will not be televised, it will be tweeted.

Therefore the centre must hold and if we fail in this duty our children will not thank us.

Tom Kettle, who wrote "The Days Burden" was described by AE as "Tom Kettle of the generous heart"

His description of the purpose and meaning of politics is as true today as it was 100 years ago.

‘Politics is not as it seems in clouded moments, a mere gabble and squabble of selfish interests, but it is the State in action. And the State is what we call that great human conspiracy against hunger and cold, against loneliness and ignorance; the State is the foster mother and warden of the arts, of

love, of comradeship, of all that redeems from despair that strange adventure we call human life’.

I was fortunate in my career to have been one of only thirteen people who have held the office of Taoiseach or Head of Government. It was a huge privilege which brought with it awesome responsibilities.

Sometimes in the few free moments – and they were few – as I sat in Government Buildings, I thought of those in whose steps I had followed and wondered what they might have done in my circumstances.

I thought especially of W.T. Cosgrave, the first holder of the Office. He was the man who had to put it all together. And against the odds he did, with no external help, and having to fight a civil war. And yet within a decade all the major institutions had been established, a solvent and stable State put in place, a merit based and honest public appointments system established, full international recognition achieved, and there was even time to build the Shannon Scheme.

The lessons for me was how this was done – and it was done by staying focused on clear objectives, by sustained hard work, by a willingness to be unpopular and by telling people the truth.

These were the signpost values which guided me and which I tried – maybe not always successfully – to emulate.

And in those dark days in 2011 when our economy was shattered, our reputation in shreds, our country vulnerable and we had had to stand alone, isolated and fighting for survival, I thought of another predecessor, Eamon de Valera and how he faced similar problems.

At a time when Ireland was friendless and vulnerable, surrounded by international hostility he had to fight with guile and courage to maintain a difficult and fragile neutrality.

So, Leadership in Politics is about having the courage to say no, having the courage to take a risk and indeed having the courage to sometimes fail.

While I am very proud to receive this honour I am also a bit embarrassed by it because, as my children never tire of reminding me, I never actually graduated! Life, death and politics intervened. But reflecting on their mirth, perhaps my path here was more circuitous and certainly a lot longer, but probably no easier than actually studying for a doctorate.

But more than the pride and embarrassment, today I feel enormous joy and satisfaction that our small country sees the granting of doctorates as an honour of the highest order. This reflects the importance with which we as a people have always regarded education. It was this emphasis on education that enabled the emerging republic grow, to thrive on entry to the EU and allowed us recover more quickly and successfully from the economic collapse a decade ago. We must never forget that education is the key to the future now more than ever.

Change is now happening at an ever greater pace and equipping our children not just to cope with it, but to embrace it and drive it, must be our education system's top priority.

That constant change brings with it new and unprecedented challenges; conflict and migration, threats of nuclear war, cyber war and international security; a world of block chain and bitcoin, of robotic influence and artificial intelligence, of cashless societies and driverless transport, of interference with and manipulation of the human genome and 3D printing of human organ replacement.

This world as yet unknown but on its way.

Teachers therefore will no longer be transmitters of secret information, but will be Counsellors, Directors, Leaders, Developers of academic talent as students deal with the possibilities of analysed data and the critical thinking behind new ways of moving forward. Exciting and challenging indeed.

Therefore, we must teach our children not just to learn but to think, to imagine, to dream. And we must, in a world where too often it is trash that fascinates, encourage them to always be themselves, to be always kind to themselves and to always be their best selves.

I have every faith that NUIG will continue to play a critical part in Ireland's embrace of that future.

The people of this region, of personality framed by History and Geography of Character forged by poverty, conflict, emigration and the influence of the Eternal Atlantic will play their part in ensuring that our young, the most important people of all will keep Ireland up in the ranks of World performance.

Why would they not, when as Yeats discovered the people have within themselves

'That vast and vague extravagance that lives at the bottom of the Celtic Heart'.

So bring it on – NUIG will play its part.

Thank you, go raibh maith agaibh.