

## OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH

### NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **Professor Donncha O’Connell**, National University of Ireland, Galway on 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2014 on the occasion of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **MÁIRE GEOGHEGAN-QUINN**

A Uachtaráin, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle...

Too often we speak of power in pejorative terms. We speak, without the need to disapprove explicitly, of ‘a lust for power’, of the inevitability of power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely, of ‘power-grabs’ and of some people being ‘power-mad’. The morally certain proclaim the virtue of ‘speaking truth *to* power’ but sometimes it’s more helpful to speak truth *about* power.

Power, when exercised with good authority by someone who understands that power – its potential and its boundaries – can be both a progressive and moderating force. Some politicians use power well. Máire Geoghegan-Quinn has, in the best sense, been a powerful woman in politics.

I gCarna, i nGaeltacht Chonamara, a rugadh agus a tógadh í. D’fhreastail sí ar an meánscoil cháiliúil, Coláiste Mhuire, Tuar Mhic Éadaigh i gContae Mhaigh Eo agus cháiligh sí mar mhúinteoir bunscoile ina dhiaidh sin i gColáiste Dhún Chéirí i mBaile Átha Cliath. Phós sí John Quinn sa bhliain 1973 agus tá beirt mhac agus garíníon amháin acu.

In 1975 Máire Geoghegan-Quinn was first elected to Dáil Éireann in a by-election resulting from the death of her father, Johnny Geoghegan, who had been a TD for Galway-West for the previous nineteen years. That by-election was also contested by an emerging young politician, Michael D. Higgins, who perhaps playing a longer game, polled a respectable 18.9% of votes.

Máire Geoghegan-Quinn was re-elected to the Dáil in the General Election of 1977 and became Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry & Commerce, Des O'Malley. Two years later she was appointed to Cabinet – *mar Aire na Gaeltachta* – by the newly-elected Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. This was the first appointment of a woman to an Irish Cabinet since the appointment of Constance Markievicz, sixty years previously, as Minister for Labour in the First Dáil of 1919.

From 1987, when Fianna Fáil resumed power as a minority government, and from 1989 to 1992 when it shared power with the Progressive Democrats – an arrangement that was not entirely to the liking of Máire Geoghegan-Quinn and others in Fianna Fáil – she served as Minister of State with Responsibility for European Affairs.

When Charles Haughey was succeeded by Albert Reynolds as Taoiseach and leader of Fianna Fáil in 1992, she was appointed initially as Minister for Tourism, Transport & Communications and, later, in 1993, as Minister for Justice. Although her tenure in that Department was brief she is widely acknowledged as a reforming Minister for Justice.

Her outstanding achievement in that Department was the introduction of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act of 1993 in response to the case taken successfully by David Norris to the European Court of Human Rights challenging the effective criminalisation of homosexuality.

Máire Geoghegan-Quinn received deserved praise not just for taking the first and crucial step in the advance towards greater equality but for the courageous and generous-spirited manner in which she did so, adopting also, in the face of considerable opposition, a uniform age of sexual consent.

Doing the right thing for no political gain but because it is the right thing to do defines a person as truly powerful. As a legislator, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn spoke to our better selves, beginning the process of welcoming to full citizenship at least one group of internal exiles in this state and ending decades of painful public and private strife. We would not now live in a society where it is possible for people, regardless of their sexual orientation, to live full lives within the law, with legal recognition for loving and committed relationships, were it not for the power exercised by Máire Geoghegan-Quinn.

During her time at the Department of Justice she was also a member of the Irish delegation that negotiated the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993, a key piece in the architecture of necessary pragmatism upon which the historic peace settlement, represented by the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement of 1998, was built.

Following her retirement from national politics Máire Geoghegan-Quinn wrote a chick-lit novel, *The Green Diamond*, about a young woman, Derva, studying in Dublin whose father is a TD and who dreams of becoming the first woman Taoiseach. In this self-proclaimed 'savvy sexy novel' in which the characters, situations and events are declared to be 'entirely imaginary' we share in the lives, loves and adventures of Derva and her girlfriends who live across a fictitious park, *The Green Diamond*, from three lads. What is it about short-lived, reforming Ministers for Justice with a talent for writing saucy novels!

Chomh maith le saothar 'chick-lit' a scríobh, bhíodh colún seachtainiúil ag Máire Geoghegan-Quinn ar an *Irish Times* sular thosaigh sí ag obair – ar feadh

deich mbliana – mar bhall de *Chúirt Iniúchóirí na hEorpa* i Lucsamburg. Tá tábhacht bhunreachtúil ag baint leis an gCúirt chéanna. Ní hionann cuntasáíocht agus freagracht, ach tá an dá rud ceangailte. Sa chomhthéacs Eorpach, is cinnte gur féidir a áitiú go dtagann cúrsaí freagrachta chomh maith le cúrsaí eacnamaíochta nó airgeadais phoiblí i gceist maidir leis an ngéarchéim a bhuaíl an oiread sin ballstát.

Sa bhliain 2010 ceapadh í mar Choimisinéir Eorpach don Taighde, Nuálaíocht agus Eolaíocht.

The European Union – a radical experiment in pluralist statehood and a peace project of seemingly miraculous dimensions – has a heritage that transcends neat narratives of war and peace, politics and regulation, prosperity and austerity. Its heritage of knowledge is monumentalised in the titles of policy programmes adopting the great names of European humanistic and scientific learning – the truly transnational networking genius of Erasmus and the inspirational gifts and sacrifice of Marie Skłodowska-Curie.

Uniquely, innovation holds the twofold promise of addressing the higher human needs to explore, to discover, and to create in the worlds of things and of ideas; but also the promise that these lofty human ambitions deliver practical benefits, material welfare, wonders of technology, a salve for a broken environment, healing for those who are suffering. There are hardly other objects of public policy at once so elevated and yet so direly needed. And the European Union, to its credit, stakes a claim for Europe to support this effort, and to lead, and to do so, led by the creativity and energy of all those who are ‘ambitious for knowledge’.

Europe still reels from economic crisis, claiming only stability and not yet growth, and seeing vast swathes of young people languishing without useful and life-affirming work across the continent — a crisis so serious that political

ferment in some countries seems to have called hard-eyed uniformed ghosts from the past. It is in the apparently technocratic portfolio of Research, Innovation and Science held by Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, that the European Union can offer what it has so far struggled painfully to provide – Hope. Hope for a democratic union of democratic states, not a monochrome empire.

As EU Commissioner with responsibility for Research, Innovation & Science she has led the development of Horizon 2020, a pivotal funding instrument that seeks to catalyse research that leads to solutions as opposed to research for its own sake. This orients academics and other partners towards impact and not merely added-value, and invests Europe’s key intellectual assets in the challenge of economic and social renewal. In this context, universities function as corporate citizens enhancing the democratic dividend. Máire Geoghegan-Quinn’s legacy as EU Commissioner is to have sown that seed of societal renewal and economic regeneration.

Throughout a life lived greatly in politics and the public square Máire Geoghegan-Quinn has broken new ground, exemplified authenticity and shown confidence and strong purpose in the exercise of power. She has been a leader among women and men whose journey from Carna to Brussels – via Galway and Dublin – was always a powerful journey, a journey that is not yet over.

***PRAEHONORABILIS PRAESES, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS!***

***Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio, tam moribus quam doctrina, habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae***