



Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **Dr James J. Browne**, President National

University of Ireland, Galway on 23rd October, 2017 on the occasion of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **ENDA KENNY**

A Sheansailéir, a Mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle

For over four decades, Enda Kenny has been a member of Dáil Éireann, conscientiously representing his Mayo constituents while simultaneously making significant contributions to national and international politics.

He entered the Dáil as its youngest member in 1975 and having been returned at every general election since he is now the Father of the House.

In 1986 he was appointed Minister of State at the Departments of Education and Labour and later served as Minister for Transport and Trade from 1994 to 1997.

He chaired the European Council of Trade Ministers during Ireland's remarkably successful presidency of the European Union in 1996.

He was also a member of the New Ireland Forum established by Taoiseach Garrett Fitzgerald in 1983 and chaired by Dr Colm Ó hEocha, then President of this University. Indeed, our Chancellor here today, Dr Maurice Manning, was also a member of the Forum.

However, it was his election as leader of Fine Gael in the aftermath of the 2002 General Election that gave Enda Kenny the opportunity to show his true political skills his work ethic and his unwavering commitment to his party and his country.

As he set about rebuilding and rejuvenating the party, he inspired many with his vision his sense of purpose his tenacity and no less important his innate humanity and personal decency.



His efforts were well rewarded. In the 2007 General Election his party won 51 seats 20 more than in 2002.

During this period also under his leadership Fine Gael had considerable success in local and European elections.

Then in 2011 he led his party to victory with 76 seats, making it, for the first time in its history the largest party in the Dáil.

He was elected Taoiseach on 9th March 2011 leading a Fine Gael-Labour coalition government. There was little time for jubilation. The financial crisis of 2008 had left the State struggling for its economic survival. In November 2010 just months before the General Election the Irish government had agreed a bailout package with

- the European Commission,
- the European Central Bank
- and the International Monetary Fund (the so-called Troika)

which provided vital financial assistance but only in return for far-reaching austerity measures.

It was against this background that Enda Kenny and his government took office.

Over the next number of years, he and his ministers were forced to navigate very challenging political waters.

While answerable to the Troika they had to try to mitigate the worst effects of austerity for the most vulnerable members of society and at the same time do everything possible to revitalise the economy by attracting inward investment and encouraging local enterprise.

Were it not for Enda Kenny's infectious optimism his boundless energy and, to put simply, his sheer patriotism it is unlikely that Ireland would have exited the bailout programme as quickly and successfully as it did.

It was fitting therefore that he should have been the first Fine Gael leader in history to be re-elected as Taoiseach following the 2016 General Election.

Enda Kenny's achievements at home and abroad during his two terms of office as Taoiseach cannot easily be summarised.

Under his wise stewardship,

- the country regained its economic sovereignty,
- its finances were stabilised,



L-R: Dr Attracta Halpin, Registrar NUI, Dr Enda Kenny, NUI Chancellor, Dr Maurice Manning

- business confidence rebounded
- and there was an impressive drop in the rate of unemployment.

A new optimism permeated Irish society, and continues to do so.

Once again, our young people can look forward to living their lives and pursuing worthwhile and fulfilling careers in their native country while older generations can be confident of having the support and services they deserve during their years of retirement.

Of course, we are still on the road to recovery but it is a tribute to Enda Kenny's vision and leadership that we have already travelled so far along that road.

No less significant were the impressive diplomatic skills that Enda Kenny exhibited in his dealings with political leaders in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

Particularly during his early years as Taoiseach, he had to engage in very difficult conversations and negotiations with leaders of the European Union and of the major European economies.

The skill and patience with which he conducted those negotiations his commitment to seeking solutions to Ireland's problems within the framework of the European Union and his personal affability earned him the respect of his fellow European leaders.

This in turn was in no small measure responsible for Ireland's rapid re-emergence as an economically sovereign state and may yet prove invaluable in withstanding the pressures on this country resulting from Brexit.

It takes a very special combination of personal qualities and skills to overcome the challenges that Enda Kenny faced on becoming Taoiseach and to accomplish all that he did.

Perhaps the most salient of Enda's qualities is what Aristotle in his *Ethics* described as "phronesis" usually translated as "practical wisdom".

This was the quality that Aristotle and other leading thinkers saw as the defining quality of true statesmanship.

A person endowed with practical wisdom understands the theories and principles underpinning good governance but equally importantly he or she is able to apply them in practical ways always seeking effective solutions to real problems.

Time and again throughout his political career and especially during his term of office as Taoiseach, Enda Kenny showed that he possessed this gift of practical wisdom in great abundance.

For example, enshrining children's rights in the Irish Constitution, as we did in 2012, would be devoid of meaning if it were not accompanied by concrete measures such as the building of a National Children's Hospital, a project finally underway under the stewardship of Enda Kenny.

The gift of practical wisdom if not wrapped in empathy and compassion is, truly, a poorer gift.

Enda Kenny brought a keen emotional intelligence to bear on the acknowledgment by the State in 2013 of dreadful wrongs done to those who lived lives of *and I quote* 'profound and studied indifference' *end of quote* .

He was of course referring to the Magdalene women and children.

He called out the 'flattering self-portrait' of the Ireland in which these women existed as a fiction. And he named it for what it was 'a judgemental, intolerant, petty and prim place'.

He correctly identified the incarceration of the Magdalene women as symbolising the incarceration of a Nation's conscience.

In saying sorry - *and meaning it* - he spoke with real remorse from the heart - from *our* mortified hearts.

He also showed compassionate leadership in rectifying the marginalisation of LGBT people by supporting the case for marriage equality as a constitutional right.

While the joy of marriage equality in May 2015 evinced a collective push by families and communities for a more inclusive and pluralist society, it was also for some, a thoughtful journey from certainty to imagining.

Enda Kenny grew up in that Ireland from which we have all 'journeyed'.

He was no passenger on that journey. Rather, he was emblematic of the journey itself.

Accompanying him on that journey was his wife Fionnuala.

Described by some as his 'secret weapon', Enda clearly made a personal virtue of bi-partisan-ship politics when he won the heart of the FF Press Officer.

FF's loss was most certainly Enda's gain. She has been his steadfast companion over the years.

Tríd a shaol, bhí Enda Kenny i ndáiríre faoin Ghaeilge. Is fada ó bhí Taoiseach againn a labhair oiread Gaeilge.

Léirigh Enda Kenny dúthracht mhór phearsanta don Ghaeilge i gcónaí – ag preasagallaimh i ndiaidh cruinnithe an Aontais Eorpaigh ag ócáidí poiblí agus stáit agus go mór mór i dTeach Laighean.

Ba le linn a chéad téarma mar Thaoiseach a ritheadh Acht na Gaeltachta teí an Oireachtais (2012) agus is ar an reachtaíocht úd atá próiseas na pleanála teanga sa Ghaeltacht bunaithe.

In his farewell remarks in the Dáil when he was stepping down as Taoiseach Enda quoted the words of Theodore Roosevelt: "The best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."

It was a characteristically modest reflection on his part but also a remarkably accurate one.

Life has indeed awarded him that prize and he honoured it to the full.

Enda Kenny has much more to give, whether at national or international level.

But today we salute him as the Quiet Man from Mayo who, when the call came, rose to lead his country out of difficulty to restore it to its place among the nations and to give all of us a reason to hold our heads high once more.

For that, he deserves our gratitude.

On the occasion of the inauguration of President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins in late 2011, Enda Kenny concluded his speech with the words “Tá fear ón Iarthar taghta chun chin.”

The same words may be said of the man we honour today.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

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 testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.