

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR JIM WALSH**, Vice-President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth on 3 December 2012 in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Education *honoris causa*, on **PROFESSOR JOHN COOLAHAN**

A Sheánsailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, it is my great privilege and honour to propose Professor Emeritus John Coolahan for the Degree of Doctor of Education , *honoris causa*. It is a challenge to capture within a few minutes the enormity and impact of the sustained contribution by John to education in Ireland, and internationally over a long period.



The honorary degrees of the NUI are unique awards that recognise and honour extraordinary levels of distinction and eminence. John Coolahan, Professor Emeritus of Education at NUI Maynooth has an exceptional array of talents and achievements as an innovator in education; as an inspirational and courageous leader who has successfully confronted vested interests; and as a facilitator of consensus on difficult issues of national importance while remaining above party politics. John is passionate about the potential of education to open minds, foster curiosity, and extend knowledge and to promote good citizenship among pupils and students of all ages, and in so doing to liberate society. John's unparalleled knowledge of the history of Irish education gives him a frequently articulated perspective on the need to be ever aware of the moment we occupy in the longer sweep of history, and that we should not lose sight of our achievements as a small nation in the wider world of education and social development.

John carries all his achievements very lightly. He is a humble, very warm and engaging person, always exuding human interest, and very much a family man. I am delighted to welcome his wife Mary and three of their children: Marie Louise, William and Iseult. Unfortunately, Deirdre who lives in London is unable to be present.

John Coolahan grew up in the village of Tarbert, the gateway to county Kerry at the mouth of the Shannon estuary which has given him a place identity that he cherishes and to which he frequently returns. He is the second youngest of a family of eight, his brother and sister, Vincent and Margaret, are with us today. Growing up on the windswept margins of rural Ireland in the late forties and 1950s was a challenging and a formative experience. After attending the local primary school John went to a small private secondary school, St. Ita's, where he excelled, and from which he went on to St. Patrick's College in Drumcondra to train as a primary teacher.

After graduating as a primary level teacher in 1961 he began a career which has involved teaching at all levels, ten years at primary and secondary followed by 34 years at third level educating future primary teachers in Carysfort College of Education, and future second level teachers at UCD, and Maynooth where he was Professor and Head of the Education department from 1987 to his retirement in 2004.

Professor Coolahan has made outstanding contributions to each of the institutions in which he has worked. In Maynooth he led the Education department through a period of great expansion which included the development of new courses in several areas, especially programmes for in-career professional development. He has sustained a vibrant interest in research and scholarship, especially on the history of 19th and 20th century education systems, and the history of educational ideas, publishing three books, over 120 articles in

Irish and international journals, and several edited compilations of articles on education. He has also given countless public lectures all over Ireland.

His work on '*Irish Education, its History and Structure*' published in 1981 is still the seminal text for students of the history of Irish education – many of us await a successor volume covering the last 30 years which might well be titled the *Irish Education – the Coolahan Era!* His most recent work, '*A History of Ireland's School Inspectorate*' (2009) is an exemplary work of scholarship tracing the origins of the modern inspectorate. In addition to his own research John mentored and supervised over twenty PhDs which have added considerably to the store of knowledge on education.

John has provided extensive service to higher education in Ireland. In Maynooth his contribution extended well beyond the dual role of Professor and Head of Education. He generously shared his shrewd wisdom and tactical advice with the President and colleagues in Academic Council and on the Governing Authority at times of great change. He is a former President of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland and editor of its journal *Irish Educational Journal*. He is also a former member of the Senate of the National University of Ireland, and of various committees of the Higher Education Authority. He is currently a member of the Governing Body of Mater Dei Institute and Chair of the Governing Body of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

Most academics achieve distinction through their teaching, research and scholarship. There is a fourth dimension which for many is the most challenging – that is, external engagement. It is no exaggeration to say that John Coolahan has been involved in one way or another with almost every initiative in Irish education over the past 20 years. I can only touch on examples of his contributions here.

The 1990s was the decade of great reform in education. John made outstanding contributions as a facilitator of the reform process and to the writing of key documents most notably the White Papers on *Charting Our Education Future* in 1995, and *Learning for Life* in 2000. He was appointed Secretary General and Chief Rapporteur of the National Education Convention in 1993. This radical initiative was unprecedented in the history of Irish education. It broke with the tradition of bilateral discussions between civil servants and major interest groups in the formulation of education policy, and provided an open forum where representatives of over 40 key groups could come together to exchange views and interrogate each others' ideas. The success of the Convention was achieved through Professor Coolahan's expert synthesis, interpretation and integration of the key ideas, and the controversies, in his report, which informed the White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* in 1995, and ultimately the 1998 Education Act. This innovative Act defined for the first time the statutory framework for Irish education and clarified the roles and the responsibilities of teachers, principals, school patrons, and Boards of Management. In 1998 he became a member of the Ministerial Steering Committee on the establishment of a Teaching Council which made the preparations for the establishment of an independent professional body for the teaching profession.

In recognition of his achievements and a long-standing commitment to cooperation on education matters with colleagues in Northern Ireland he became a member of the Review Body on Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland in 2000-01. He was also a co-founder and co-Chairman of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (2000-08).

He has continued to remain active on the domestic education front, regularly providing informal advice on the direction of education policy at all levels. His most recent formal appointment was as Chairman and Rapporteur for the National Forum on School Patronage and Pluralism in 2010/11. In most of these policy advisory roles, he has grappled with powerful vested interests including the churches, the vocational education committees, and the teacher unions. It is a measure of his extraordinary patience,

diplomacy, energy, perspicacity, tenaciousness and even handedness that he managed to consistently achieve outcomes that were widely welcomed, and that his advice continues to be sought and respected.

His talents have not gone unnoticed on the international stage. For many years he has had a close involvement on education reviews with both the OECD and the World Bank. To date he has participated in reviews in at least 13 countries.

Interwoven with his exceptionally busy academic life John has had a lifelong interest in theatre and drama. As a young teacher he set up a theatre group in Bray. He later completed an MA in English Literature on the 16th poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe. John's enthrallment with Marlowe was such that on his first date with Mary he presented her with a copy of his thesis! He has combined his interest in theatre with his education career through engagement with the TEAM theatre in education company and with the Ark Cultural Centre for Children where he is a Board member. He also has a keen interest in classical music and frequently attends performances in the National Concert Hall. His outdoor recreation is not on the golf course. For many years he and some colleagues participated in Comhluadar an Portaigh, a small meitheal of educationalists who annually took themselves to the slopes of Kippure where armed with his sleán he would cut and harvest turf for the winter fires.

And then, of course, there is Kerry football! His interest and capacity to read the game and remember players is legendary and the product of many visits to Croke Park – though he grew up just inside the entrance to Kerry at Tarbert his attachment to his roots is as strong as if he had come from Corca Dhuibhne or the valleys of Iveragh.

In conclusion John Coolahan's sustained contributions to teaching, research, scholarship, education policy are such that he is a most worthy recipient of the Degree of Doctor of Education, *honoris causa*.

*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 Arte Paedeutica, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.*