

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR MARY E. DALY on 26 July 2017 in the Hibernia Conference Centre, Dublin Castle, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **BRIAN COWEN**

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

Brian Cowen was born in Clara, county Offaly into a family with deep roots in Irish politics and the local community. Offaly and Fianna Fáil have been central to Brian Cowen's life. His grandfather was a member of the party from its inception and a county councillor. His father Bernard (Ber) was a county councillor and



TD, who served as a junior minister of agriculture. Brian, his second son, was active in political campaigns as a teenager. Following secondary schooling at St Joseph's Cistercian College Roscrea, he graduated in law from UCD and set up practice as a solicitor in Tullamore. He was also actively involved in the GAA at a time when Offaly had finally achieved all-Ireland glory, but his sporting career had to give way to politics when he was elected to Dáil Éireann in 1984 in the by-election that followed the sudden death of his father. Despite his youth – a TD at the age of 24 – he was soon recognised by politicians in all parties, as someone with the capacity to master complex issues, who was not afraid to argue his case in clear language – a future minister.

In 1992 he joined Albert Reynold's Cabinet as Minister for Labour, without first serving an apprenticeship as a junior minister, further recognition of his talents. At this time the process of social partnership was being honed as a key instrument in Ireland's economic recovery, and Brian Cowen remained a strong supporter of social partnership throughout his career. As Minister for Transport, Energy and Communications, in the Fianna Fáil/Labour coalition of 1993/4 he initiated the Luas, and began the process of transforming Aer Lingus to ensure that the national airline would survive in a deregulated aviation market. Commitment to a dynamic, but reformed public sector is another hallmark of his career. As Minister for Health from 1997 to 2000, he successfully avoided many of the land-mines that bedevilled others who held that portfolio. His greatest achievement was to secure a major expansion in services for intellectual disability. He also sought to improve governance and accountability within the hospital sector, and apply 'a structured coordinated and multidisciplinary approach – to tackling waiting lists – issues that have haunted successive ministers for health.

His term as Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2000-04, had three major themes: Northern Ireland, the United Nations, and Europe. He had worked on an informal basis with Albert Reynolds to secure the first IRA cease-fire of 1994, and now played a crucial role in implementing the Good Friday Agreement: - decommissioning, reform of the police services, establishing a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. In an address to UCD IBIS in December 2001, he said that Northern Ireland had 'provided some of the most challenging and frustrating, but also some of the most rewarding moments' of his career. Ireland's membership of the UN Council coincided with the 9/11 attack and the Iraq war. He sought to balance Irish interests – distinguishing carefully between political and military neutrality. Europe proved more problematical – Ireland's presidency coincided with a major expansion in membership, but Irish voters rejected perceived threats to neutrality and sovereignty in the Nice and Lisbon Treaties.

His move to Finance in 2004 came at a time of record economic growth, a booming property market fuelled by low interest rates, bulging tax revenues, and escalating demands for increased public expenditure and tax cuts. For several years it appeared that all could be delivered: - a budget surplus, falling

national debt, an expanding National Pension Reserve Fund, coupled with higher spending. He also provided the first support for child-care – which is now accepted as a mainstream item in national spending. But there was a failure to control the overheating property market and implement a regulatory framework for financial institutions that reflected Ireland's membership of the Eurozone.

Fianna Fáil was not expected to win the 2007 general election, and it is generally believed that Brian Cowen's efforts to focus attention on the economy during the final week of the campaign, was decisive. He probably wishes that the campaign had been less successful, given what followed. He succeeded Bertie Ahern as Taoiseach in May 2008. The smooth, uncontested transition was reminiscent of the transition from de Valera to Lemass – Brian Cowen's political hero. The celebrations marking his election reflected many aspects of his complex personality: - his Offaly roots, strong support in the community and parliamentary party; the combination of spontaneous singing, jovial pints, plus two philosophical, apparently unscripted speeches delivered to cheering crowds.

So it is timely to reflect on his beliefs and aspirations as reflected in those speeches and an e Indecon lecture at the Royal Irish Academy in 2007. He is passionate about Ireland, but claims to be 'more of a pragmatist than a visionary' – a practical patriot like his hero Seán Lemass. He spoke of achieving full equality of opportunity over the next decade; significant investment in education, a reformed and dynamic public sector; providing for those with disabilities ; the 'pre-eminence of community over self'; 'making sure everything we've built is not wasted by a me generation'; caring for people on the margins of society. He described Ireland as 'one of the most diverse nations'.

But this vision had to give way to crisis management; unprecedented challenges to political institutions and vilification of government ministers. The story of the Irish economy after 2008 is well-known: the bank bailout; property crash; soaring budgetary deficits; reductions in spending; tax increases, culminating in a request for a bailout and the arrival of the Troika in November 2010. That Brian Cowan, now Taoiseach had been Minister for Finance from 2004-08 added significantly to the personal responsibilities that

were laid at his door. Yet I would concur with Professor Brigid Laffan that ‘the Irish state was not found wanting in hard times’ and was unique among EU member states in taking steps to address the fiscal crisis in 2008. The adjustments were extremely painful, but they were implemented without major social unrest – in contrast to other countries. As Taoiseach Brian Cowen succeeded in holding a government together – albeit with defections – until most of the tough measures had been implemented. While the Troika has been widely blamed for imposing an austerity regime on Ireland, it is not fully recognised that the programme was drafted by the Cowen government, and it avoided cuts in basic social welfare and compulsory redundancies in the public sector. The Croke Park Agreement of June 2010 reflects the capacity to secure trade union support for some difficult decisions; however the Taoiseach and his government failed to secure comparable support from the wider public.

British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli described becoming Prime Minister as being ‘on top of the greasy pole’. Brian Cowen truly experienced that greasy pole. He has accepted the judgement of the electorate on the performance of the Cowen government without rancour. The only person in the history of the state to hold the four key offices of Minister for Foreign Affairs, Finance, Tanaiste and Taoiseach – he is still held in high regard by those who worked with him. Almost unique in an age of spin doctors and make-overs, he refused to conform, remaining true to his roots, and his habit of plain speaking. Stephen Collins described his ‘capacity to combine intelligence and belligerence to withering effect’. So it’s no surprise that during the celebrations following his election as Taoiseach, he sang ‘My Way’.

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.