

**Text of the introductory address delivered by DR MARY P. CORCORAN, National University of Ireland, Maynooth on 3 December 2008 in Dublin Castle, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, on EMILY O'REILLY**

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle (Chancellor, members of the University and Distinguished guests)

The National University of Ireland is proud to honour the distinguished career of Emily O' Reilly, in particular, for the sterling service she has provided to citizens and to Irish democracy through her joint roles as Ombudsman and Information Commissioner.

Born in Tullamore, Co.Offaly, Emily O'Reilly spent her formative years in South Dublin. She attended Sancta Maria College in Ballyroan an all-girls secondary school then run by the Sisters of Mercy. This school also happens to be my own alma mater. Emily was known in the school as a singularly independent-minded person and as a brilliant student of English. Emily continued her studies at UCD and Trinity College, and then went on to a stellar career in investigative and political journalism. She was the recipient of a prestigious Nieman Fellowship in Journalism from Harvard University.



Emily O'Reilly held a number of positions during her journalism career, including Political Correspondent of the Irish Press, Political Editor of the Sunday Business Post, Northern Editor of the Sunday Tribune and political columnist with the Sunday Times. She also worked for a time as a broadcaster with RTE, and authored a number of well received books including *Candidate* (1991); *Masterminds of the Right* (1992) and *Veronica Guerin* (1998). Despite this demanding career Emily somehow found the time to marry Jonathan Ryan and raise five children who by her own account play a crucial role in keeping their high-flying mom grounded!

Emily O'Reilly was appointed as Ireland's third Ombudsman on 1st June 2003. On the same date she was also appointed as Ireland's second Information Commissioner under the Freedom of Information Act, 1997. A member of the Standards in Public Office Commission, she also sits on the Dáil Constituency Commission. As Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly is also a member of the Referendum Commissions which oversees the public information campaigns on referenda.

On the face of it, a move from the maelstrom of political journalism to the upper echelons of the public service, seems a rather unusual one. But the then Minister of Finance, Charlie McCreevy, speaking in the Dail on the motion to appoint Emily Ombudsman on April 10, 2003, knew exactly why he wanted her for the job. The job required an incumbent with a specific set of skills, he said: "a familiarity with public administration and a knowledge of how it works; an ability to listen, sometimes with sympathy; the ability to sense when the plausible just is not true or is deliberately incomplete; and that unexpected scarce property, basic common sense and skill in handling the media without being ruled by headlines. However, the fundamental quality has to be independence." As a hard-hitting journalist with a reputation for fairness, Emily O'Reilly was perfectly suited for the job. As Minister McCreevy went on to observe: "One thread that has run through Emily O'Reilly's writings, whether in newspaper columns or the books she has written, is a willingness to say what she sees, even when it involves annoying politicians, colleagues and the power structures of the world of journalism." Pat Rabbitte proffered a somewhat more pointed opinion on Emily's skills: "We have all had experience of Ms O'Reilly's ability to write or occasionally to use her stiletto, but she has always done so with impartial precision against and for all parties." Emily's appointment received all party support, a fact that testifies to the high regard in which she was held and in which she continues to be held by government and opposition parties.

Emily O'Reilly has excelled in the positions of Ombudsman and information commissioner. She is forensic in her approach to the job, fearless in the face of obfuscation and trenchant in her advocacy for those in our society who lack a voice. As she sees it the core function of her office is "to protect individuals who avail of public services from unfair, unsound and unjust actions on the part of those who are entrusted to deliver those same services", (Speech to Annual Council of the Vincent de Paul, NUIM, 28 April 2007). The Ombudsman's Office covers a wide area of public life from the care and treatment afforded people in hospitals, to disability, immigration, welfare rights, education, local authority planning and so on. Emily approaches her cases with intellectual acuity and consummate analytical skills. But she brings something extra to bear. As she has herself publicly stated: "I will always attempt [however] to make that imaginative leap into the lives of the people that I am talking about so that I can try to make them feel confident that not alone do I know what I'm talking about *vis-à-vis* rules and regulations but that I also have some sort of human insight into the issue at hand," (Speech at Dying In Ireland, Hospice-friendly Hospitals National Conference, 14 November 2007). The Annual Reports detail the many ways in which the Office of the Ombudsman has made a difference to ordinary individuals who have had cause to seek its service: families seeking answers from hospitals about the care of their loved ones (particularly where death has occurred), older people seeking affordable care to which they have an entitlement, parents seeking allowances for their seriously disabled children, homeless individuals seeking accommodation, pensioners seeking their pension entitlements, single mothers seeking welfare assistance or accommodation needs, individuals applying for medical cards or health related personal social services, Exceptional Needs Payments, Rent Supplements, Jobseekers Benefits and Allowances, Illness Benefits.

Apart from her roles as Ombudsman and Information Commissioner, Emily O'Reilly is also an important public intellectual. She has that rare skill of being able to hold a mirror to society and to describe society, as it is, warts and all. In her oft-quoted speech at the Ceifin Centre, Ennis in 2004 she presented an excoriating analysis of Celtic Tiger Ireland. O'Reilly argued that self-absorption and the pursuit of the material had hardened Irish hearts. She suggested that the challenge we in Ireland face is "how to accept this newly secular society and inject it with a value system that takes from the best of that which we have jettisoned and discards the worst." With considerable prescience she called on the political class to shift focus away from a pre-occupation with purely economic pursuits and toward the issue of values and quality of life. More recently she turned her attention (or should I say her stiletto) on the more salacious sectors of the Irish media describing their work as a "a 21st century blood sport, executed for the purposes of titillation with an autistic unawareness on the part of those carrying it out, of the hurt inflicted on those whose prey they are." (*Irish Times*, Dec 11, 2007).

Emily O'Reilly represents the very best of her gender and her generation. She is part of that illustrious cohort of Irish women who, coming of age during the flowering of feminism in the 1970s, smashed through the glass ceiling. As a political journalist she exhibited the highest standards of professionalism and objectivity. She has brought her distinctive voice and independence of vision to both the offices of Ombudsman and Information Commissioner. Her intelligence, confidence and empathy inspires trust not only in those who seek her help, but in all of us who believe in the capacity of democracy to police itself. Emily O'Reilly truly has done the state some service.

*PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, 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.*