

Speech by President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins at the Centre for Public Ethics

University College Dublin, 5 February 2018

Is mór an pléisiúir dom a bheith anseo i Lárionad UCD d'Eitic sa Saol Poiblí, a seoladh go hoifigiúil Mí na Samhna seo caite. Bhí aiféal orm nach raibh méin ann freastail ar an seoladh, toisc go raibh mé ar Cuairt Stáit ar an Astráil agus an Nua Shéalainn. Mar sin féin is mian liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an tOll. Andrew Deeks as a chuireadh caoin dom ag an am, agus leis an tOll. Mark Rogers, an tOll. Rowland Stout agus an tOll. Maria Baghramian a d'fhear fáilte romham anseo inniu.

[It is a great pleasure to be here today at the Centre for Public Ethics in University College Dublin which was officially launched last November. Indeed, I greatly regretted not being able to attend that launch, due to my State Visit to Australia and New Zealand. I would, however, like to thank Professor Andrew Deekes for his very kind invitation at that time, and Professor Mark Rogers, Professor Rowland Stout, and Professor Maria Baghramian, who have also welcomed me here today.]

May I begin by commending the vision and ethical commitment of all those who have worked, with scholarly dedication, to bring this Centre to fruition. I have no doubt that the work of this Centre will make a profound contribution, in years to come, in tackling the sources and consequences of a version of society – in Ireland, in Europe, and across the world - which has become disconnected from ethical considerations; and, in so many ways, from the philosophical and ethical roots that might lie at the foundation of any just and sustainable world.

As we stand at a highly critical juncture in world history we must ask ourselves not merely what kind of society, served by what kind of economy, do we wish for Ireland, for the European Union and for those living in vulnerable conditions across the globe? But more fundamentally we must ask is our scholarship, as source of policy, capable and willing to forge new connections of society, ethics, ecology and economy? The great intellectual challenges of our time depend for answers on how that fundamental question, and our universities, as I have emphasised many times, have a critical role to play in crafting and formulating its answer.

Already, the inadequacies of what is not only a dysfunctional – in terms of social cohesion – but also destructive model of connection has revealed methodological flaws and as a result produced some altered thinking on research and economic indicators. International institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, have now begun to question what were once sacrosanct policy positions, and the assumptions which underlay

them. Young scholars and a small number of policymakers are now beginning to recognise that the discipline of economics is not diminished by the encompassing of the concerns of sociology, of history, and of culture, but rather are made stronger.

Such a welcome critique could have been made stronger still by the application of philosophy to interrogate the foundational assumptions of a discipline that so often, in our own times, go unquestioned. Surely it is necessary to know, and to understand, the ontology and epistemology which underpin the economic models and methodologies which have been so influential over the past thirty years and which have determined the lives of so many. It simply does matter how we define the discipline of political economy. There is a difference between 'ekonemia' and a cabal for the advancement of mutual interests.

The role of our universities in enabling discourse on these inescapable challenges, which include questions of conflict and displacement, climate change, a loss of trust on the European Street and sustainability, and development and global poverty is a vital one. As seats of pluralist scholarship where it exists, or as advocates for it, you can only enrich any public debate or conversation at this time of great change and upheaval by your bringing of intellectual reflection, diversity of vision and inclusion to such conversations.

When I was inaugurated as President of Ireland, just over six years ago, we were a society that had been left just recently, if not for the first time, gravely wounded by the speculation, individualism and extreme form of neo-liberal economics on which the Celtic Tiger's theoretical and policy had been built. Put more plainly, the assumption of the inevitability of unilinear growth whose composition and consequences were not allowed for debate, I spoke, at that time, of the necessity to work together to create a very different set of values that would enable the building of a sustainable economy and an ethical and inclusive society; a society that would restore trust at home and inspire respect and co-operation across the world. I also said, in those early days of my Presidency, that mine would be a Presidency that would seek to develop an ethical discourse that would place human flourishing at the heart of public action.

In initiating that discourse, which would become known as The President's Ethics Initiative, I turned first to where I thought resources of an intellectual kind might lay, to our third level institutions to discuss and review the principles by which we might live and work ethically together as a society. I have, on several occasions, described the crisis of recent years as being an intellectual crisis as well as an economic crisis.

If we recognise that the challenges of our time are, inter alia, intellectual in nature, we are forced to consider what role our public intellectuals and our institutions of learning have in supporting the building of a republic of ideas. By inviting the various universities to play a leading role in the President's Initiative, my intention was to assist in that process.

There is an unavoidable intellectual dimension to the job of work that has to be done and that is why the university sector, with all its resources of mind and material at its disposal, was at the centre of this Initiative in its early stages.

Following that discussion, the debate broadened out to involve community and non-governmental organisations and then broadened out further to include many community discussions on how we could build, together, an ethical society. The late John Monaghan of the Vincent de Paul, for example, was an early contributor.

New themes emerged from those conversations and many obstacles were identified; for example, the necessity of restoring trust in public institutions, and the consequences of returning to what I have referred to as a de-peopled version of the economy as we move out of recession.

Fundamental to the many conversations that took place throughout the initiative was the importance of placing social values at the heart of our economic policies if we are to build an active citizenship based on participation, equality and respect for all. Looking back, I wonder if it would have been better to be more perceptibly polemical and to have spoken of how insatiable individualistic greed was driving our society. I was anxious however, to get beyond justifiable rage.

A significant and important aspect of that time too, and it had more than a linguistic significance, was that of the emergence of a new and dispassionate language where citizens had become 'customers', 'clients', 'service users', whose needs should be met as cost effectively as possible by a public service who no longer needed it was felt, to do any more than make their efficient delivery in a dispassionate way as one agent of a market dealt with another, who was a stranger. Any moral notion of an obligation, even a desire, to build the relationships of trust and co-operation which are essential to a democratic citizenry, seeped away.

In recent years this intensified with services, such as banks dispensing with any inherited legacy of contact with people which had brought them into existence in the first place.

It was a pseudo-discourse that highlighted one of the biggest conflicts facing our society today; that of individualism versus collectivism. Indeed, the individualist credo gained much traction in our society in recent years and many began to view themselves, and others, as autonomous individuals, consumers, connected by purely mercurial links, those of whom Zygmunt Bauman wrote of as having been "consumed in their consumption".

In that discourse too, housing became a commodity of the marketplace, a financial transaction for those who could afford it. The concept of a home became disconnected from the concept of a community and the need for shared spaces – the schools, parish centres, libraries, parks – where neighbours would gather and community spirit would be fostered were often absent from discourse and planning processes. An unstated rejection of the role of the State in universal provision prevailed, found a central place in nearly all forms of political expression. The discourse on the nature of the public world was not welcome and happiness would be defined as adequate levels of security and consumption in a market.

Workers became reduced to the status of units of labour; their need for dignity, security and personal development subjugated to the demands of employers, themselves fiercely competing for marginal advantage and, here in Ireland as across much of Europe, a 'precarariat' emerged as many workers found themselves trapped in chronic job insecurity, moving from temporary contract to temporary contract and often subjected to the indignity of 'zero hour' or 'if and when' agreements. The Irish Congress of Trade Union's report in December, again referred to by Michael Clifford in *The Examiner* this weekend, stated that nearly 160,000 people have significant variation in their hours of work.

An increasing disconnect between the tasks of expanding the economy and pursuing human well-being, as a shared public value, has led to the perception by some, that the greatest social good comes from enabling individuals to make personal decisions that are in their own best interest.

This represents a very specific context given to the concept of 'freedom'. That rhetoric of individualism has allowed many to explain social problems in terms of individual behaviour, absolving those who dominate our social structures and those responsible for running our institutions from blame and has allowed the formation of social policies that pursue, at most, a paternalistic route, and fail to tackle the root causes of issues such as poverty, homelessness, and addiction, preferring to impose solutions that deprive vulnerable citizens of autonomy and a voice.

Indeed, the dividing of society into 'those who are vulnerable' and 'those who are not vulnerable' is to ignore the reality that 'vulnerability' is something that is shared by all humans and is, indeed, central to our humanity. Viewing 'those who are vulnerable' as something 'other' and separate from ourselves risks the loss of that critical sense of shared humanity which lies at the root of truly just and equal societies.

It is a view that enables the reduction of citizens who find themselves in a vulnerable situation to be defined as human carriers of 'problems' that must be managed, or impersonal 'statistics' that must be improved, or as passive victims of their own bad decisions, whose primary need is paternalistic protection. That is a great denial of the dignity and autonomy that is the right of all humans, and which must be a fundamental feature of citizenship in any functioning democracy.

When we fail to recognise the essential humanity that lies at the heart of vulnerability, when we stigmatise, with loose or lazy language, those who live on the streets, suffer from addiction, or have come to foreign shores as refugees escaping war and persecution, it becomes very easy to exclude them, to regard them as being outside or even below the community of rights-holders in our society.

It becomes very easy to dehumanise them, often in the form of derogatory language, a denial of services, a lack of voice, and even, on occasion, victimisation. Rather than enabling those deprived persons, families and communities in vulnerable situations to reclaim their lost selves and become, once again, engaged citizens with a lifetime of possibility in front of them, we so

often neglect the necessary structural changes and impose solutions that do not answer the rights of such people and indeed violate their essential dignity as fellow human beings.

What happens in the depopulation of rural Ireland, which is proceeding at a galloping pace, or the continuing violence in our cities, including one capital city should concern us all. Those members of society whose consumption of what is the traded commodity that is at the root of killings and mutilation must be asked to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, which many of them ignore, not seeing the connection between their individual choices and social destruction.

This current moment in human history, here and around the world, invites us to reassess the relevance of moral sentiments such as care, trust and friendship, and to reassert the centrality of principles of mutuality, reciprocity, redistribution and cooperation to the flourishing of our social and economic life.

If we are to respond, we need a pluralist intellectual environment and an activism that is radical in its moral reach, informed as to diversity, research based in an engaged manner, and above all dialogical, and able to engage in a discourse in an open-ended way.

Is de barr sin a raibh mé chomh sásta an deis seo a fháil leis an cuairt seo a thabhairt ar Lárionad UCD d'Eitic sa Saol Poiblí a bhfuil sé mar aidhm shonraithe aige tacú leis an taighde atá ar siúl san Ollscoil faoi ghnéithe theoriciúil agus praiticiúil na hEitice, mar aon le bealaí cumarsáide dhébhealaigh a chruthú leis an pobal mór.

[That is why I am so glad to receive the opportunity to visit this new Centre for Ethics in Public Life whose stated aim is to both support the development of research within this University on theoretical and practical aspects of Ethics; and open up two-way lines of communication with the wider community on matters of ethical concern.]

Your intention, I know, is to become a hub for international philosophical research and a means by which that research can be incorporated into the ethical concerns of our wider society both here in Ireland and around the world.

I have no doubt that the intellectual work produced by this Centre will contribute in an important way to the seeking of sustainable and innovative solutions to the challenges we face as we strive to shape an ethical future.

Here in Ireland, and across the globe, we require such transformative thinking if our leaders and our institutions are to craft policies rooted in an ethical concern for the well-being, dignity and fundamental rights of the citizens whose needs should be placed at the very heart of those policies.

Is mian liom, mar sin, gach rath a ghuí oraibh don obair a bheidh ar bun agaibh sa todhcháí. Cinnte, tá áthas orm gur spreag mo leabhar "When Ideas Matter" bhur ábhar díospóireachta

inniu, 'sé sin "Making Ethical Ideas Matter". Tá súil agam go n-úsáidfear m'fhocail mar chuid den plé atá ar bonn againn, mar Éireannaigh agus mar shaoránaigh dhomhanda araon.

[I would like, therefore, to wish you every success in your future endeavours. Indeed, I am delighted and greatly gratified that the theme of today's discussions - 'Making Ethical Ideas Matter', - draws on the title of my own book 'When Ideas Matter', which I view as an invitation to take my words and use them as part of a shared debate by us all, as both Irish and global citizens.]

I thank you for responding so positively to that invitation.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.