

MAURICE MANNING D.Litt, MRIA



Maurice Manning is Chancellor of the National University of Ireland. He is currently Adjunct Professor of Politics and International Relations at University College Dublin. He has been Visiting Professor at the University of Paris and the University of West Florida and was a member of the Governing Authority of the European University Institute at Florence, Italy.

Dr Manning has been President of the Irish Human Rights Commission since 2002 and was Chair of the European Group of National Human Rights Institutions from 2006 – 2011. He has worked extensively with the United Nations and Council of Europe on human rights issues.

Dr Manning was a member of the Irish Parliament from 1981 to 2002. During that time he served as Minority Leader and later Majority Leader in the Irish Senate, was a member of the New Ireland Forum and a founding member of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.

Dr Manning has written several books on modern Irish politics including *The Blueshirts, Irish Political Parties*, *James Dillon – A Biography* and (joint editor) *The Houses of the Oireachtas – Parliament in Ireland*. He has also written a political thriller *Betrayal*.

He was recently appointed to chair the expert committee of historians to advise the Irish government and parliament on the commemoration of significant and sensitive centenary events.

Dr Manning is a member of Council of the Royal Irish Academy.

Dr Manning is keenly interested in sport and is particularly committed to the fortunes of Leinster Rugby.

He is married to Mary Hayes, a family lawyer and they have one son, Nicholas.

Dr. Maurice Manning
Commencement Address
The University of Toledo
May 5th 2012

President Jacobs, members of the University Board of Trustees, Provost Mc Millen,
graduates, ladies and gentlemen,

For many reasons today is a very special day for me. It is an enormous honour and one that I appreciate more than I can say that this great university has conferred on me a Doctorate in Humane Letters. I will cherish this moment. I am profoundly grateful.

I am privileged to be asked to make this commencement address and to say to you, the new graduates this, above all else, is your day. The degrees conferred on you today are a validation and celebration of your hard work, your organisation, your stamina over these past few years. It will give you the confidence to face into further studies if that is what you choose or to embark on your professional or business career with every hope of success.

And this of course is also a very special day for those who helped make today possible – your parents and families, your partners and friends who played their part in sustaining you through good times and difficult times and who today with good reason join in your celebrations. Today is also a day of friendship. During your time here you have bonded with classmates and with your academic tutors and, however seldom you meet in the future, a strong and lasting bond has been made.

And that bond has been made too with your alma mater. Yours is a university of which you have every right to be very proud. Its academic reputation, based solidly on high and sustained academic standards is widely and deservedly recognised.

But it is not just its high academic standards which make your university stand out. It has never been or sought to be an ivory tower. It sees itself as not just being a part of its wider community but having the duty of leadership in that community. It fulfils that duty in multiple ways – through the quality of you, its graduates and the contribution you make at all levels; through the depth of its partnership with local industry, helping through collaboration in research and innovation, helping the economy to fight recession, and through that partnership to transform and invigorate ailing industries and, where there was despair to create a climate of hope and possibility.

It is something my own university, in our current climate of recession is trying to do – and is doing with some success. I can say with total sincerity that your university is a template for universities everywhere in demonstrating by deed and by aspiration that universities should and must have a key role in transforming and energising the wider society in which it operates and has its roots.

To me the third outstanding feature of your university is its commitment to the centrality of the student experience. That centrality is expressed in many ways on this campus but to me the most striking are the efforts, the successful efforts made to reduce the level of student drop-out. Student retention is a universal problem and there are many reasons why it

happens. It is easy for any university to pretend it does not exist and to concentrate its attention on the high achievers. This university does look after its high achievers as evidenced in the quality of its academic results, but does not do so at the expense of those in difficulty. And that is the very test of any good university. Quite simply it is not about elites or exclusion. Put at its most basic every person counts. And how a university translates that into human reality is the real test.

And it is a test which this university passes with honours.

For me this occasion is, in however inadequate a way, an opportunity to draw attention to the strong links of friendship which bind our two countries. In my case it is more than friendship; it is also an expression of a profound sense of gratitude the Irish people feel towards this country. We have benefitted greatly from your friendship and your practical good will.

During our terrible, often tragic thirty years of troubles from the 1970s, on we had the support of every successive president and most especially President Clinton in seeking to find a resolution. We had the support of leading members of both Houses of Congress, most especially perhaps the late Senator Edward Kennedy whom I had the pleasure – and the privilege to meet on so many occasions – but help too at all levels of political life. And as peace was coming, dropping slowly, the whole process was jogged along by Senator George Mitchell. When peace came, the process was strengthened and sustained by practical and moral support from successive administrations – Clinton, Bush and Obama.

That peace is now solid; the process of reconciliation is becoming deep-rooted as is our relationship with Britain. Late last year I was privileged to be a guest in Dublin Castle when the Queen of England was the first British monarch to visit our country since Independence in 1922. Our nearest neighbour, yet it took ninety years for the first such visit. It was a wonderful moment when hope and history rhymed and clear evidence that the old scarring quarrel is well and truly over. And for that we owe you a great debt.

But the relationship between my country and yours is not all one way. At the last count 40 million American citizens claimed Irish ancestry. Indeed the most recent was President Obama who has documented family ties with the Irish midlands. But I can say with confidence and pride that the Irish have contributed hugely and in so many ways to the development of your country. I have already mentioned politics and could have mentioned some of the Irish signatories to your Declaration of Independence as also the late Presidents Kennedy and Regan, each of whom left an indelible mark on our national psyche. I could talk at length about the Irish contribution to arts and literature to business and education too but I don't think I have to labour the point. As countries we like, respect and appreciate each other.

And for me today this theme has a very personal note. My cousin Professor Maurice Manning is a distinguished member of this University's Medical School. He is Professor of Biochemistry and Cancer Biology and is an internationally renowned scholar. He is a graduate of National University of Ireland, Galway the most beautiful of Irish cities, the most westerly, in other words the one with nothing between it and this country but the wide Atlantic Ocean. It is a city that has always looked to this country in so many ways. That he should have made his career here without ever losing his Galway roots is entirely appropriate.

We in the National University of Ireland are proud of his achievements and his contributions to science. We know his presence here has enriched this university, but we know too that he has been greatly enriched by the opportunities and collegiality of the University of Toledo.

On an occasion such as this it is probably expected that I might reflect for a few moments on my own career.

Let me start with politics.

The profession of Politics is not particularly well thought of, and often with good reasons. Politicians can behave badly, can steal and cheat, may sometimes be strangers to truth, behave with mind-numbing hypocrisy and sometimes have a great capacity to make fools, utter fools, of themselves. Add to that the constant trivialisation of politics by the media, a media in my view increasingly negative, glorying in its capacity to dominate the agenda often in a truly manipulative and destructive way.

And yet that's far from being the full story. In my more than thirty years experience in politics, a majority of those I have met and worked with and against have been public spirited, committed to doing their best for their communities and their voters. Most have been ordinary, decent people who lived modestly and rarely died rich.

But not all were ordinary. Some were truly extraordinary in their ability to see the bigger picture, in their far-sightedness, their readiness to tell hard truths to people who did not want to know, their toughness in facing down sectional interests, but most of all their sense of personal integrity. Not too many maybe, but enough to sustain my faith and belief in the

centrality of politics in the life of any free society, because politics, good politics, honest politics, effective politics, is, along with the rule of law, at the heart of any free and democratic society. And without good politicians we won't get good politics.

That is why I say to you who are graduating today, think hard about the concept of public service. The words of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy may now sound clichéd but they still resonate with great moral authority:

“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

That message inspired me. I believe it still has the capacity to inspire.

Idealism is nothing to be ashamed of. Idealism tinged with ambition is an important component of any free society. The great 18th century Irish philosopher Edmund Burke is often quoted, but his message is as relevant today as it was two hundred years ago:

*“All that is necessary for evil to prevail is that good men should do nothing....
When bad men combine, the good must associate;
else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.”*

As human beings we have a choice.

We can be, in the words of Simon and Garfunkel

*I am a rock
I am an island
I've built walls
A fortress deep and mighty
That none may penetrate.
I am a rock
I am an island'*

Or we can go back to the words of the English metaphysical poet John Donne:

*'No man is an island entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main.....
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind*

In the two pieces I have quoted the first expresses the alienation of the individual from society, the unwillingness to be involved, while Donne's piece powerfully communicates human interdependence.

For me, when I think of politics, and the why of politics I am drawn back to a man whose writings greatly influenced me. This is Tom Kettle, a poet, economist, philosopher, Member of Parliament, who died in 1916 almost one hundred years ago in the battle of the Somme, dying, he believed for the freedom of small nations.

When I had bad days in politics, and there were many, especially during the days of bombs and carnage in Northern Ireland, I always thought back to the words of Kettle, written in 1905. To me what he wrote was about the infinite possibilities of politics:

"Politics is not, as it seems in clouded moments, a mere gabble and squabble of selfish interests; it is the State in action. And the State is the name by which we call the great human conspiracy against hunger and cold, against loneliness and ignorance, the State is the foster-mother of the Arts, of love and comradeship, of all that redeem from despair that strange adventure which we call human life"

You know, it is as true today as it was in 1905.

I am a realist. I know the conditions of modern life make it very easy not to be 'involved in mankind'. Life is busy, pressurised and challenging. The pace of technological change is both liberating and overwhelming. The modern workplace, as you may well already have discovered, is highly demanding, competitive and insecure. In these circumstances it is very easy for the individual to feel that he or she must concentrate on all his or her energies and talents on individual advancement, and have little space for politics or for public service.

But, if you feel the call of public life do not hesitate; it can be a noble call.

In conclusion, may I say a word about a subject very close to my heart.

For the past ten years I have been privileged to lead the Irish Human Rights Commission and for five of those years the European Group of National Human Rights Institutions. It has been a great experience but I know that when I mention 'human rights' people's eyes glaze over and frequently a sense of indifference or even hostility emerges. Advocates of human rights can be preachy and self-righteous, using language that is often remote and legalistic. Sometimes too we see stomach turning hypocrisy when at the UN and elsewhere, we see human rights invoked by oppressive and corrupt regimes, by politicians who murder their own people and plunder their country's assets. Such behaviour – and it is frequent – debases two of the most noble concepts in any language, 'human rights' and 'democracy', and rightly makes us wonder if words have any real meaning.

But when we look back at the century just past we see great undreamed of advances in every area of life. But we also see in that past century, and even in recent times, barbarity and inhumanity greater in scale and intensity than ever happened before, or even in the Dark Ages. Hitler's Germany; Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia; Serbia, Croatia, Sierra Leone – these are only some of the places where literally millions have perished, and only rarely has anybody been held accountable. Countries today – North Korea comes to mind – where the rule of law is no more than the will of the ruler.

Too often today the recognition, definition and enforcement of human rights is what stands between civilisation and barbarity.

There is nothing complicated or confusing about human rights. They are simply universally agreed basic standards which aim to ensure that every person is treated with dignity and respect and that both national and international law and practice reflect this.

In some ways it is as simple as that. Making it happen is one of the great challenges of our age.

And at the heart of this challenge the university has a crucial role. This point is well made in the UN World Programme on Human Rights Education:

Higher education institutions, through their core functions (research, teaching and service to the community), not only have the social responsibility to educate ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defence of human rights and the values of democracy, but also to generate global knowledge to meet current human rights challenges, such as

eradication of poverty and discrimination, post-conflict rebuilding, sustainable development and multicultural understanding.

It is a huge challenge but it is one which no university can shirk.

So, in conclusion may I once again thank President Jacobs and the Board of Trustees for the great honour conferred on me today. It is a great and proud day for me, as I know it is for all of you new graduates.

I intend to celebrate and enjoy it to the full.

I hope you do too.

Thank you.