

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

HONORARY CONFERRING

Bloomsday, 16 June 2014

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR BRYAN FANNING** on 16 June 2014, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa* on **Emily O'Reilly**

President, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

This award acknowledges her exceptional achievement as the Ombudsman and Information Commissioner from 2003 to 2013. During her tenure she came to be recognised as a strong supporter of human rights and of the importance of holding public bodies to account where issues have been raised regarding standards of services provided. She has championed the extension of Freedom of Information Agency to public bodies such as the Garda Síochána. Before 2012 her office had jurisdiction to investigate complaints in relation to the administrative actions of Government Departments, local authorities and the Health Service Executive. In 2012 legislation was passed that extended the remit of the Ombudsman to over 180 additional public bodies including all publically-funded universities.

She began her career as a journalist in the 1970s. Since then, she has held senior positions with *The Irish Press* and *The Sunday Tribune* as well as serving as a political columnist at *The Sunday Times* and as the Political Editor of *The Sunday Business Post*. She has also been the editor of *Magill* magazine. She is the author of three books. As a journalist she was respected for her acute, well-written political commentaries and but also for her capacity to convey issues of public concern in a forceful manner. Her reportage in 1984 on the death of Anne Lovett (a teenager who died in childbirth, alone) was an outstanding example of this ability to engage the readership both intellectually and emotionally in serious social issues. Such journalism challenged hypocrisies in Irish society but also, in keeping with her later role as Ombudsman, drew attention to how institutions failed the vulnerable.

'We have become', Emily O'Reilly wrote in a 2013 essay *Asylum Seekers in Our Republic: Why have we gone wrong?*, 'quite adept at apologising for the sins of earlier generations. We recognise that Ireland, from the 1920s to the 1970s, was a cold dark place for some minorities and the marginalised. We are only slowly beginning to face the possibility that we ourselves may not be much better than our predecessors. We have an image of ourselves as a modern, liberal democracy with a commitment to the rule of law and the protection of human rights. But there may be significant blind spots in our self-appraisal as a society'

She suggests that our treatment of asylum seekers is one such blind spot. Part of this blindness she argues is self-induced insofar as the states dealings with such persons, unlike much of its public services and unlike equivalent provision in most other countries did not come under the Ombudsman's remit. It is characteristic of what she brought to her role that when a complaint from an asylum seeker fell within the remit of her office - a case of a vulnerable child who fell between the cracks of our social welfare, social work, health systems and housing services - that she addressed the bigger picture of institutional barriers, legislative inadequacy, political intransigence and ethical failure.

As Ombudsman, she was forceful and explicit in calling government agencies to account. She stretched the boundaries of the Office and was successful in gaining government support for this. Her outstanding success in this role is reflected in her election in October 2013 by the EU Parliament to the post of European Ombudsman with responsibility for investigating complaints about maladministration in EU institutions, bodies, offices and agencies.

Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.