

# Celebrating 25th Anniversary of the Universities Act 1997

## *The Art of the Possible*

Niamh Bhreathnach

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Here on Bloomsday, I could ask what serendipity has brought me here to Maynooth to address your celebration of 25 years of the Universities Act 1997?

- Would it all have happened were it not for the need to fill the bishop's vacancy on the Cork
- University Board?
- Would it have happened if I wasn't newly appointed to a government committed to gender
- balanced appointments?
- or
- Would it have happened if Albert Reynolds hadn't been a one-page man?

But perhaps I am anticipating like Stephen Dedalus in giving this account of my Trojan journey that culminated with this, the Act that saw such welcome changes here in Maynooth University.

Welcomed today by a woman President, invited as a woman to make this address, and listened to by a roomful of women and men including men of the cloth from an independent Pontifical College. My wanderings, thoughts and activities may not have occurred on the 16th of June, but this story has all the elements of a Ulysses, rowdy suiters, those who sought a means of escape but by the intervention of the gods, I landed safely, concluding my journey probably like Molly saying the yes word at least 91 times.

Now 77-years-old, my memories of Maynooth will certainly differ from yours. It was a remote dark place, behind a high wall, subject to a Cardinal and a place where women were never seen. It was attached to the National University of Ireland and its Pontifical College ruled the rules. Early television pictures show bishops in long black dresses walking the quadrangle, funny hats with bobbins always covering their baldy heads. They walked in deep conversation, some rattling holy rosary beads, all wearing very polished shoes. Not a woman in sight. Questions like who washed their dishes, polished the floors, or washed their laundry were never asked. Although now I realise that there were plenty of women teaching me too in my young days, but they were all nuns and nuns didn't count as women. They were subject to the grand marshal of the Dublin diocese, Archbishop John McQuaid. Another man who lived behind high walls.

Moving on, let us get to the reason for today's celebration. In 1993 on a visit to Maynooth in my early days at the Department of Education, at an arranged informal lunch, the then Master, home on a brief visit from America asked me to tweak the University Act, so that the

Pontifical College could be ceded from the University. Only days in office, I had the wit to reply that tweaking was a no, no and that he should appreciate that any examination of the Act would need to examine the whole Act as it applied in current times, then of course the relationship of the Pontifical College to the NUI would be examined.

Still in the early months of office, I was asked by Cork University to agree the appointment of the Bishop of Cork to its Board, the vacancy to the Board seat earmarked for Bishops. No, no I replied. This Government was committed to gender balanced appointments and in this world all bishops were men. I think Albert Reynolds was amused at my earnestness but with Dick Spring, Mervyn Taylor and Michael D on side, I was driven to promise a review of the Universities Act and so opened a Pandora's box. Maybe it gave Albert a reason to smile again five years later, the University Legislation had now moved on and he had long lost the Taoiseach's office. I was fighting to retain my seat in a second government of Fine Gael, the Democratic Left and Labour, representing a Constituency where Trinity graduates were numerous and vocal.

Although not particularly high on my agenda, reforming the Universities Act had come sharply into focus because I was responsible for filling vacancies on University Boards. Promises to ensure equal access to all things educational determined that I address this issue while I battled to set up a Susie grant system, examine the fees issue we were the only EU country then charging fees, and updating the CAO system to address the access issue. No past pupil of mine from Oliver Bond flats had yet to walk down Dame Street and in through the gates of Trinity College. The investment in third level was skewed towards the wealthier sections of our society. But brains are not only the prerogative of the middle classes. How could those in disadvantage areas qualify to enjoy tax breaks for fees and afford grind schools for their children while paying their subsidized private second level school fees? Lots of pub owners' children featured in our third level stats. Their barmen's' rarely did. Was this fair? Were we tapping the full potential of our nation? Human capital can be measured, but measures to respond to the need to open up the system seemed difficult to realise.

Having been taught by the Dominican nuns at Sion Hill, I was very aware of Newman's vision for a university. Naively I believed that those at Third Level would be helping me lead the way and would be lobbying for change. It was only the Parents Associations and the Union of Students, speaking at the national debate on education at Dublin Castle who were exceptional in their understanding of what change would mean for them. The Education Convention was addressed by representatives from 29 interest groups. I was warned that promising change could be fraught with difficulties and insisting on changes to the University Act gave the senior players a platform to oppose, oppose and oppose.

I am so happy that it is this University that has chosen to celebrate the 25-year-old Act. Your former President, William Smyth will no doubt refer to its impact. In my time he was evident in his support for the changes proposed. DCU and UL were supportive too but not so the oldest University on the island through CHIU (Conference of Heads of Irish Universities) who led the opposition to all change while the other NUI colleges stood back and largely didn't participate in the front-line debate. The same people had greeted with horror the introduction of free fees a measure funded mainly by the abolition of the tax relief benefiting the higher taxpayer. So much more is needed but the gates have opened to pupils

of Deis (Delivering Equality in Schools) Schools including pupils from St Audeon's in Cook Street.

Since its enactment, Boards have become more reflective of society, women at least are being noticed if not always promoted and it is with pleasure that my visit today is at the invitation of your newly appointed President, President Leinonen.

It was your university that allowed the Department to appoint the late Professor John Coolahan (Former Head of Maynooth's Department of Education) as Secretary General to our Convention, to oversee the report that emerged with its proposals for change and participated in the backroom talks and manoeuvres that gave closure to the Convention Report and formed the basis of the subsequent White Paper. He was a powerhouse in the world of education, I was prepared to declare him a national treasure on the last public occasion we both met here.

How pleased I was too to find Sion Hill located its Froebel College – my Alma Mater - and secured its future here in Maynooth. Seamie O'Neill and I share a belief that Froebel is all things to child centered education and somewhere in his Department lies a signed copy of my White Paper "Charting our Education Future." It was remarked at the time of printing that it paid homage to Froebel philosophy and why not? In the Special Collections section of your library, Roisin Berry oversees my collection of Ministerial speeches and Press cuttings of the day which on examination can trace my five-year Odyssey at the helm of the Roinn Oideachais.

I wish you well in your celebrations. I urge you to embrace change. As elections are looming, now is the time to have your voices heard. What talent, what brains are in this room, any Party should certainly be prepared to hear your proposals just as I listened to the advice from your Master 25 years ago but do leave space for practical wisdom (my definition of philosophy) and remember that politics is best defined as the art of the possible.

Unlike Bloom, change does not come in a day, the journey can be long weary and trojan, but it can end safely home.