

EULOGY ON THE DEATH OF NIAMH BHREATHNACH

by her husband, **Tom Ferris**, on the occasion of
her funeral mass in Blackrock church on 10 February 2023.

*A Uachtaráin, fearaim fáilte romhat
Bishop Walsh, Monsignor O'Connor,
Fr O'Connor and Fr Conway,
thank you for today's celebration.*

*I welcome our family, our friends, the many colleagues from
across the political spectrum and those participating today online*

Niamh and I were married here in this very church¹ over 53 years ago. We had a great life together and were blessed with two treasured children, Cliodhna and Macdara, and two wonderful grandchildren Tom and Alice. Like all relationships there were ups and downs, but we recognised each other's strengths and weaknesses. For Niamh mainly strengths and our partnership endured and deepened over half a century.

If I said Niamh was child centred, it wouldn't surprise anyone. She was Minister for Education. But I am going back way beyond that. Niamh taught in Oliver Bond and cared mightily for the children there. That left a stamp on her for the rest of her life.

And she did more than that – she introduced *Early Start* and *Breaking the Cycle* when she was appointed as Minister. They may be forgotten, but what they subsequently morphed into is not forgotten. It is now the lynchpin of combatting educational disadvantage among children, the DEIS schools.

¹ St John the Baptist, Blackrock, Co Dublin

Niamh was a collegiate person, but didn't suffer fools gladly, be they high or low, or even occasionally myself in my foolish moments. She could have the difficult conversations.

She sensitised me to discrimination against women in a most practical and unforgettable way: "*Tom, how many women were at your meeting?*". It often turned out to be none, but that little test is one I carry with me right through to this day. And in no small way, thanks to her, the answers are improving all the time.

Another test she passed with flying colours was that she had respect for the civil servants who worked hard with her in the Department of Education. And in turn this contributed to her effectiveness in office. Not every Minister passes this test.

You sometimes hear tell that Niamh put the Irish educational system on a legislative basis. So, what, you might think? But this is against the background of the greater part of the Department of Education's activities being governed by civil service circulars from the very foundation of the State. Niamh believed that if you wanted to make it happen, you had to legislate for it.

I was always amused at Niamh's surprise when she discovered I did English in UCD, taught by the great Lorna Reynolds. Was it my ungrammatical speech? Was the language not flowery enough? Who knows? But I'm not going to shirk this challenge today. With apologies to William Shakespeare, who could not be expected to have kept up with the gender politics of our times, and to whom I have to give a 'wee' helping hand, I quote Sonnet 116 (introducing 'her' for 'him')

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although her height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within her bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with her brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no woman ever loved.*

It has been a great privilege to have loved and
been loved by this extraordinary woman.