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AN ROINN GNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA
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SPEECHES

INAUGURATION SPEECH BY PRESIDENT MARY McALEESE

NOVEMBER 11TH, 1997. DUBLIN CASTLE.

A uaisle,

Lá stairiúil é seo im'shaol féin, i saol mo mhuintire, agus i saol na tíre go léir.

Is pribhléid mhór í a bheith tofa mar Uachtarán na hÉireann, le bheith mar ghuth na hÉireann í gcéin is í gcóngair.

This is a historic day in my life, in the life of my family and in the life of the country. It is a wonderful privilege for me to be chosen as Uachtarán na hÉireann, to be a voice for Ireland at home and abroad.

I am honoured and humbled to be successor to seven exemplary Presidents. Their differing religious, political, geographical and social origins speak loudly of a Presidency which has always been wide open and all embracing. Among them were Presidents from Connaught, Leinster and Munster to say nothing of America and London. It is my special privilege and delight to be the first President from Ulster.

The span of almost sixty years since the first Presidential Inauguration has seen a nation transformed. This Ireland which stands so confidently on the brink of the 21st century and the third millennium is one our forbears dreamed of and yearned for; a prospering Ireland, accomplished, educated, dynamic, innovative, compassionate, proud of its people, its language, and of its vast heritage; an Ireland, at the heart of the European Union, respected by nations and cultures across the world.

The scale of what we have already accomplished in such a short time allows us to embrace the future with well-based confidence and hope.

It is the people of Ireland who, in a million big and small ways, in quiet acts of hard work, heroism and generosity have built up the fabric of home, community and country on which the remarkable success story of today's Ireland is built.

Over many generations there have been very special sources of inspiration who have nurtured our talent and instilled determination into this country. Many outstanding politicians, public servants, voluntary workers, clergy of all denominations and religious, teachers and particularly parents have through hard and difficult times worked and sacrificed so that our children could blossom to their fullest potential.

They are entitled to look with satisfaction at what they have achieved. May we never become so cynical that we forget to be grateful. I certainly owe them a deep personal debt and as President I hope to find many opportunities both to repay that debt and to assist in the great work of encouraging our children to believe in themselves and in their country.

Among those who are also owed an enormous debt of thanks are the countless emigrants whose letters home with dollars and pound notes, earned in grinding loneliness thousands of miles from home, bridged the gap between the Ireland they left and the Ireland which greets them today when they return as tourists or return to stay. They are a crucial part of our global Irish family. In every continent they have put their ingenuity and hard work at the service of new homelands. They have kept their love of Ireland, its traditions and its culture deep in their hearts so that wherever we travel in the world there is always a part of Ireland of which we can be proud and which in turn takes

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pride in us. I hope over the next seven years there will be many opportunities for me to celebrate with them.

At our core we are a sharing people. Selfishness has never been our creed. Commitment to the welfare of each other has fired generations of voluntary organisations and a network of everyday neighbourliness which weaves together the caring fabric of our country. It has sent our missionaries, development workers and peacekeepers to the aid of distressed peoples in other parts of the world. It has made us a country of refuge for the hurt and dispossessed of other troubled places. It is the fuel which drives us to tackle the many social problems we face, problems which cynicism and self doubt can never redress but painstaking commitment can. We know our duty is to spread the benefits of our prosperity to those whose lives are still mired in poverty, unemployment, worry and despair. There can be no rest until the harsh gap between the comfortable and the struggling has been bridged.

The late Cearbhall O Dalaigh, Ireland's fifth president and, dare I say it, one of three lawyers to grace the office, said at his inauguration in 1974

"Presidents, under the Irish Constitution don't have policies. But.... a President can have a theme."

The theme of my Presidency, the Eighth Presidency, is Building Bridges. These bridges require no engineering skills but they will demand patience, imagination and courage for Ireland's pace of change is now bewilderingly fast. We grow more complex by the day. Our dancers, singers, writers, poets, musicians, sportsmen and women, indeed our last President herself, are giants on the world stage. Our technologically skilled young people are in demand everywhere. There is an invigorating sense of purpose about us.

There are those who absorb the rush of newness with delight. There are those who are more cautious, even fearful. Such tensions are part of our creative genius, they form the energy which gives us our unique identity, our particularity.

I want to point the way to a reconciliation of these many tensions and to see Ireland grow ever more comfortable and at ease with the flowering diversity

that is now all around us. To quote a Belfast poet Louis MacNeice " a single purpose can be founded on a jumble of opposites."

Yet I know to speak of reconciliation is to raise a nervous query in the hearts of some North of the border, in the place of my birth. There is no more appropriate place to address that query than here in Dublin Castle, a place where the complex history of these two neighbouring and now very neighbourly islands has seen many chapters written. It is fortuitous too that the timing of today's Inauguration coincides with the commemoration of those who died so tragically and heroically in two world wars. I think of nationalist and unionist, who fought and died together in those wars, the differences which separated them at home, fading into insignificance as the bond of their common humanity forged friendships as intense as love can make them.

In Ireland, we know only too well the cruelty and capriciousness of violent conflict. Our own history has been hard on lives young and old. Too hard. Hard on those who died and those left behind with only shattered dreams and poignant memories. We hope and pray, indeed we insist, that we have seen the last of violence. We demand the right to solve our problems by dialogue and the noble pursuit of consensus. We hope to see that consensus pursued without the language of hatred and contempt and we wish all those engaged in that endeavour, well.

That it can be done – we know. We need look no further than our own European continent where once bitter enemies now work conscientiously with each other and for each other as friends and partners. The greatest salute to the memory of all our dead and the living whom they loved, would be the achievement of agreement and peace.

I think of the late Gordon Wilson who faced his unbearable sorrow ten years

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ago at the horror that was Enniskillen. His words of love and forgiveness shocked us as if we were hearing them for the very first time, as if they had not been uttered first two thousand years ago. His work, and the work of so many peacemakers who have risen above the awesome pain of loss to find a bridge to the other side, is work I want to help in every way I can. No side has a monopoly on pain. Each has suffered intensely.

I know the distrusts go deep and the challenge is awesome. Across this island, North, South, East and West, there are people of such greatness of heart that I know with their help it can be done. I invite them, to work in partnership with me to dedicate ourselves to the task of creating a wonderful millennium gift to the Child of Bethlehem whose 2000th birthday we will soon celebrate- the gift of an island where difference is celebrated with joyful curiosity and generous respect and where in the words of John Hewitt "each may grasp his neighbour's hand as friend." (1)

There will be those who are wary of such invitations, afraid that they are being invited to the edge of a precipice. To them I have dedicated a poem, written by the English poet, Christopher Logue, himself a veteran of the Second World War.

"Come to the edge.
We might fall.
Come to the edge.
It's too high!
Come to the edge
And they came,
and he pushed
and they flew."(2)

No one will be pushing, just gently inviting, but I hope that if ever and whenever you decide to walk over that edge, there will be no need to fly, you will find there a firm and steady bridge across which we will walk together both ways.

Ireland sits tantalisingly ready to embrace a golden age of affluence, self-assurance tolerance and peace. It will be my most profound privilege to be President of this beautiful, intriguing country.

May I ask those of faith, whatever that faith may be, to pray for me and for our country that we will use these seven years well, to create a future where in the words of William Butler Yeats.

"Everything we look upon is blest"

Déanaimis an todhchaí sin a chruthú le chéile.

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(1) (from A Little People, by John Hewitt in The Collected Poems of John Hewitt, ed. Frank Ormsby, pub. the Blackstaff Press 1992 p.539)

(2) (Come to the Edge by Christopher Logue in Selected Poems, pub. Faber and Faber p.64)

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