

**Democratising Knowledge -
The Role of Universities.**

Modified copy of a Speech made at the Launch of the

Community Knowledge Initiative-
In NUI Galway.

By

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Ireland has moved rapidly from the Parish Pump to the cold, clinical anonymity of the garage forecourt.

1. Introduction.

I am here at the launch of the Community Knowledge Initiative¹ at NUI Galway – like you – for two reasons. First, I am here because Ireland has changed almost beyond recognition in the short space of two or three decades and that change affects all of us. Most of this change had been for the better. If there has been a negative impact it has

¹ The CKI website at NUI Galway describes the CKI initiative in the following terms: "The National University of Ireland, Galway launched a major project in 2001, entitled the Community Knowledge Initiative, which set out to underpin and realise a civic mission as part of its core activities.

The Community Knowledge Initiative's (CKI) activities were viewed as *'integral to the University's strategic mission and involved a fundamental examination of the role of the University in the social fabric'* and were subsequently reflected as a core priority by NUI Galway's Academic and Strategic Plans 2003-2008.

The CKI aims to promote greater civic engagement through core academic activities, namely teaching, research and service at the levels of students, staff, courses, programmes and the institution as a whole. Up to 2005, the implementation phase, the CKI was supported by the CKI Policy and Executive Boards, which then amalgamated into one CKI Board. The project is guided by an International Advisory Group whose experience encompasses North America, Southern Africa, and Europe.

Within CKI there are four basic strands and the following represents the goals for each facet of the project. Through research, NUI Galway strives to become an internationally recognised centre for applied research on community regeneration, knowledge and interactions with learning institutions, while also promoting research into the areas of student volunteering and service learning. The goal of the CKI is to enable NUI Galway to become a role model in promoting the development of civic and leadership skills in students. To this end a student volunteering programme entitled ALIVE (A Learning Initiative and the Volunteering Experience), was established by the CKI to harness, acknowledge and support the contribution that NUI Galway students make by volunteering. Established in September 2003, over 700 students have been recognised to date for their volunteering commitment within a variety of pathways including community and non-governmental organisations, through participation within societies and clubs, and mentoring first year students through the Student Connect Programme to mention a few. The CKI also seeks to establish NUI Galway as a pioneering institution in the implementation of service learning programmes across all faculties. Service Learning seeks to reinvigorate the civic mission of higher education and instill in students a sense of social responsibility and civic awareness. It is a pedagogical tool that encourages students to learn and explore issues vital to society inside and outside the classroom. Students learn from engaging with communities by active participation. And To promote the growing and sharing of the University's knowledge resource for the betterment of academic staff, employees, students and the wider community". See: www.nuigalwaycki.ie/

been on the quality of our social or communal life. One could call this the ‘social deficit’ of recent economic change.

Secondly, and most importantly, I am here because of my strong belief that Universities have a valuable role to play in helping to ensure that this change remains positive. As an academic I am proud of this university’s announcement today that it stands ready to play its part in sustaining and regenerating community. It does so not because of a calculation of self-interest, still less because of image and profile. It does so because, in doing so, it fulfils the original mission of any university worthy of the title – namely to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to harness that knowledge in the name of humanity. I call this the ‘democratization of knowledge’.

The Community Knowledge Initiative has the potential to provide model of partnership between the University and the community - a model that will resonate far beyond the walls of this institution and indeed our shores. Through this Initiative we signal our willingness to find practical ways of placing our knowledge and social capital in the University at the disposal of our communities. To me this represents the University - both as an idea and as an institution - as its very best.

In the time available, permit me to say a few words on the nature of the ‘social deficit’ as I see it and to expand on the potential contribution of the university sector in general and the actual contribution of NUI Galway and indeed all Irish Universities in challenging this 'social deficit'.

2. The Impact of Economic Change on the Social Fabric

The economic change experienced by Ireland has been profound. The changes wrought by the Celtic Tiger over the past ten years have been particularly positive as well as profound. In truth, the seeds to these changes were sown at least 40 years ago by Ken Whitaker and Sean Lemass in the opening of the Irish economy to world markets. It is as if three hundred years of Western economic and social history had been telescoped into four short but highly tumultuous decades in Ireland – something that makes our

progress a matter of endless fascination to the newer Member States of the European Union and others.

Few, if any, lament the passing of a stagnant economic and social order. Economic stagnation ruined lives and rent families apart through emigration. The social impact was just as great. The resulting closure of social space and lack of social mobility bred countless valleys of 'squinting windows'. One might even conjecture that this closure of social space also impacted negatively on the quality of the democratic life of the nation. It could even be argued that to a certain extent - and especially in the 1960s and 1970s - the Courts made the most important strategic decisions and not the Oireachtas.

The regeneration of the economy has led to enormous change. But let us be clear on one thing. All change – no matter how positive – can dislocate people and communities. The 'costs' of change are not always evenly spread and some vulnerable communities can suffer more than others. At least people felt some 'belonging' to an entity higher than themselves in the 1950s. Now it seems our sense of belonging is much more instrumental - depending on the interests (golf) or comparative wealth ('purchasing' the community we inhabit by buying property in certain areas) that we happen to share with others.

Despite (or maybe because of) the positive economic changes brought about the past decades, many people sense the need to re-discover our social selves and the need to bring our collective existence back into alignment with the new economy. There is a growing sense that with our new-found economic opportunity comes the need for more, and not less, commitment to community. One can see this generally. But it is particularly evident in the rise of philanthropy in Ireland and the rise of the willingness of successful entrepreneurs to 'give back' to the culture whence they came.

In truth there is nothing exceptional about Ireland's recent economic success and indeed the social difficulties it gives rise to. Karl Polanyi's classic work *'The Great*

Transformation'² charts in great detail the social and other changes brought about by the introduction of market forces into England in the seventeenth century. He recounts the march of an idea and metaphor – 'the market' – and how it worked itself pure from generation to generation and from one economic sector to another. His analysis suggests three things that strike me as having particular resonance in Ireland today.

First, there seems to be is no outer limit to the market as an idea or as a mechanism. Everything is potentially commodifiable (including, infamously, human life itself in the form of slavery in times gone by). His analysis reveals the verity that society must be confident enough in its own values to impose limits to markets and not the other way around. Secondly, his analysis reveals that that market metaphor can also re-make society itself. That is, it is not just a mechanism for the allocation of goods and services through the laws of supply and demand. It also leads to a different worldview on society itself. If so, then the terms of co-existence (which are collective in society) can indeed be radically altered. The social world can be comprehensively re-made through the eyes (and self interests) of the unencumbered individual - that is, an individual who acknowledges no organic connectedness to others, much less any positive duties, to others. All social and economic arrangement can be made reducible to individual interest. Thirdly, his analysis reveals a different (market-based) way of valuing human relations. Put simply, all human interactions that cannot have a monetary value placed on them are simply not valued. The classic case in point is the 'work' done by mothers within the home. Hence the 'social capital' that itself makes capitalism possible is degraded.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with individualism as a philosophical concept. Yet, as the famous Canadian political philosopher, C.B McPhearson, once observed – the otherwise laudable ethic of individualism can all too easily degenerate into 'possessive individualism' in a market State.³ That is, the healthy regard that we naturally have for others in community becomes difficult to maintain if we no longer

² Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origin of our Times*, (1944).

³ CB MacPearson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: from Hobbes to Locke*, (1962).

acknowledge any meaningful attachment to others except through transaction-based relationships.

If we push this 'possessive individualism' to one extreme, as Margaret Thatcher arguably tried in the 1980s, then the social sphere may disappear altogether. We are left with 'Man and the State' and with a cold and inhospitable desert between the two⁴. And something else becomes degraded when economic power is allowed to suffocate social space. Civic virtue – considered to be the hallmark of democratic culture – also diminishes. Without steady and ongoing habits and patterns of social interaction our capacity to decide local issues democratically and without recourse to – say, the courts – erodes through time. That is to say, social erosion also undermines the habit of interaction which breeds respect for difference and tolerance - values that underpin the democratic order and sustain our capacity for self-governance.

I think the lessons from Polanyi are clear and very relevant for contemporary Ireland. First (and not necessarily foremost), society has to be defended because it is the precondition for a market economy in the first place. Social solidarity underpins efficient markets and does not undermine them. If this weren't so then one might expect Scandinavia to be backward economically. In this sense it might be said that society and 'social capital' is a 'productive factor' in an advanced market economy. Secondly, the social sphere is also worth defending and retrieving because it is pivotal to democratic culture. Maintaining healthy levels of social interaction goes to the capacity of communities to solve their own problems without outside intervention whether through the courts or otherwise. In this sense, one might call the social sphere a 'democratic factor'. Thirdly (and most importantly), society is also worth defending for its own sake. Society enables human interests such as health and well-being to be articulated which are not naturally or best advanced through market mechanisms. In any event, all economic forces ultimately revolve around human beings whose lives cannot simply be reduced to economic factors. In this sense it might be said that society and 'social capital' is a 'civilizing factor'. In sum, community, civil society and social interaction can be defended instrumentally as serving the ends of the economy and of

⁴ Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus the State: a Collection of Essays*, (1916).

democratic culture. But community can - and should - also be defended as an end in itself.

One caveat. If we agree that community is important, it has to be emphasized that the concept of community and the place of the individual within that community is, of course, deeply contested. No one wants to revert to a form of community life that suffocates the person. The notion of community at stake is one that preserves organic ties without intruding on the space of the person. It is a new sort of community – a new re-balancing in the quality of our collective lives. While many hesitate – and rightly – at the potentially stifling implications of community, few really doubt the need for better connectedness with community in contemporary Ireland. Thus, our traditional commitment to community which is one of our defining assets - an asset that allowed the dispossessed Irish in America in the 19th century to get head despite adversity- needs to be seen as a treasure worth preserving for future generations. While we live in market economies we are not necessarily fated to live in market societies.

3. The Role of the University in Retrieving Community

Universities might seem like strange places to look for tangible assistance in re-balancing Irish life and sustaining community. In assessing the potential contribution of the academy it pays to remind ourselves that Universities are (and are meant to be) highly peculiar environments. Universities are in fact pulled in two different directions. On the one hand, Universities stand apart from the world around them. Indeed, they are supposed to be apart from it! It is precisely this separateness that gives Universities authority, credibility and the capacity to engage in fresh and critical thinking – thinking that can often lead to solutions for pressing issues in the broader world. It is vitally important that this separateness should not be compromised nor seen to be compromised. That is why academic freedom is not academic – it is in fact vitally necessary to enable new ideas to emerge and to enjoy broad circulation. And it is through fresh thinking that new ways can be found to address old problems.

On the other hand, universities are naturally drawn to the world mainly because its knowledge comes from the world and it belongs to the world. Indeed knowledge is power - especially the power to change the world. To be more exact, knowledge provides the wherewithal to solve pressing problems and to move public policy forward. As knowledge holders in a wide variety of disciplines we, as academics, are naturally drawn to the world in different ways.

How can Universities make difference? Reverting to the language of the market for the moment it could be said that our primary 'product' is our students. They will hopefully capitalise positively on the skills and knowledge they acquire when here in their own lives. Knowledge gives them access to a relatively privileged life. But consider this. Our graduates are also privileged in another way. They bring their knowledge directly into contact with the world. They deal with 'what is' - and yet they have the vantage point to glimpse and articulate 'what ought to be'. They therefore have the means to effectuate change. Our core educational mission, to me, extends beyond the familiar market-based one of skilling-up people to lead rewarding and productive lives. It also extends to include equipping graduates with the skills needed to contribute positively to wider processes of change in society and in community.⁵

Student volunteering and service learning in real-time environments are not ends in themselves. They are means to higher ends. I suppose the first higher end is purely intellectual. It is one thing to study family law as a law student in the abstract - it is quite another to witness how family disputes are resolved in negotiations. It is one thing to learn about ergonomics as an engineering student. It is quite another to talk to someone with a lifting problem and design a kettle that allows them to make their own tea (and make a real difference in their lives). The point here is that students cannot really 'know' their subject unless they see it close up in environments that matter. So the first argument for volunteering and service learning is purely intellectual. That explains why there will be increasing emphasis in our Universities on the clinical dimension to the learning process across all Faculties.

⁵ Quinn G., *'The Future of University Legal Education in Ireland: Lawyers as Moral Agents of Change in our Republic'*, speech delivered in Trinity College, Dublin, 29 December 2006.

Yet the reasons for volunteering and service learning run much deeper. It is important that students acquire the reflex of 'giving back' to community. This is especially true - and life transforming - for students who (through no fault of their own) have led insulated lives and are not naturally inclined to see how the 'other' lives. By opening hearts and minds student volunteering and service learning helps to dispel prejudice which can coarsen public debate and so reduces the danger that such debates will needlessly polarise. There is another advantage which may take some time to manifest itself. Students have the capacity to become moral agents of change in our democratic life. They have the capacity to advocate for change - to enter public life and to craft rational arguments about why change is needed and how it can be accomplished. That is, the inculcation of the 'civic virtue' of public participation that is the glue that hold public life together can remain with students throughout their lives and motivate them to get involved in processes of change that assist people and their communities.

What of Universities themselves and the academics that compose them? It is true that we in the Universities sometimes suffer from the delusion that the world is perfectly rational and that the 'right' kind of knowledge will lead to the 'right' kind of change. Chaos more than rationality often seems to drive the process of change. Yet knowledge often makes the decisive difference in the process of change. As knowledge providers we plant seeds often without knowing how they will take root.

The above conclusion that our graduates participate in and often lead change and that the democratic value of knowledge is that it can fuel the process of change is fortified when one recalls that the university is not merely a 'market player' – it is also a community in its own right. And the 'academic community' has its own values. Perhaps the most important value at stake in today's proceedings has to do with the place of the university in the democratic life of the nation. Perhaps the chief *civic virtue* of the academic is to give back to the community the wherewithal to solve its own problems for itself. This is not something to be engaged in because academics have a superior vision of society. It is not something to be engaged in because of a patronising attitude toward community. It is something to be engaged in order to equip people to achieve their own vision of society and in a spirit of humility.

Many academics already do this. They advise a myriad of local groups and NGOs in areas such as community development, the environment, family dynamics, etc). They help these groups craft solutions to their own problems. They contribute important research to a wide variety of public bodies - bodies dedicated to identifying the public interest (e.g., in my own case the Law Reform Commission) and making relevant policy proposals to Government. Often this research is of direct relevance to the quality of life in our communities and locally. They join important research networks (e.g., funded by the European Commission) which leads to research that informs European law and policy that is also often of tangible benefit to the community.

And the flow is not all one way. Academics gain because the knowledge they already hold acquires new dimensions and is constantly refreshed once brought into meaningful contact with the world. Academics gain because of the personal satisfaction that they play their part in the democratic life of the community. Irish Universities already acknowledge and reward this in their promotions schemes. One could certainly argue that it should count for more when it comes to promotion and other supports.

Parenthetically, the advent of the information Society has enabled many academics to participate in virtual knowledge communities throughout the world. Again, the beauty of the Initiative is that it will give local communities from Barna to Ballina access to these wider virtual communities of knowledge.

4. The New Economy Initiative and the NUI Galway Commitment to Community.

If we live in market economies but do not aspire to live in market societies and if the retrieval of community is deemed important then how will the Initiative deliver on this University's commitments in this regard?

The emphasis on volunteering and experiential learning should prove valuable. Knowledge comes ultimately from the community. It is entirely fitting that 'learning by doing' should become as valorised as learning in the library in the University of the future. We should consciously see our students as agents of change and equip them to take some responsibility for the 'way things are' and to motivate them to participate in the public life of the nation to help makes things 'what they ought to be'.

This university has always had very strong research and other ties with the community. This Initiative marks yet another step in achieving one of the core missions of any university which involves harnessing knowledge for the benefit of humanity. In pioneering the democratization of knowledge we aim to play our part as a corporate citizen in the regeneration of community. We owe this to the community from which we spring. It may well be that we are also re-situating our University life within the democratic life of the nation. To me, this represents the University at its best.