

Discurso de bienvenida pronunciado por el profesor Francisco Orrego Vicuña en el acto de otorgamiento del grado de Doctor Honoris Causa a S.E. la Presidenta de la República de Irlanda, profesora Mary McAleese

Documentos Universidad de Chile, Santiago, 22 de Marzo de 2004

The University of Chile is privileged to have today the visit of Her Excellency the President of the Republic of Ireland, Professor Mary McAleese, with occasion of her State visit to Chile and the Award of a Doctoral Degree *Honoris Causa*. It is a particular honour to welcome President McAleese not only in her capacity of Head of State but also in that of Professor of Law, to whom the works of academic life are no stranger.

Allow me to state at the outset that this University does not award Honorary Degrees for ceremonial purposes, but only as the recognition of a distinguished academic and intellectual career resulting in a contribution of significance to the world of learning. The achievements of Her Excellency as a Professor of Law at Trinity College, Dublin, and as the Director of the Institute of Professional Legal Studies at the Queen's University of Belfast, together with the fact of having been the distinguished Pro Vice Chancellor of the latter university, are the background on which the University of Chile has based its decision to award this honorary degree.

A most successful participation of Her Excellency in a number of professional, business and social organizations has come to add to the recognition that this almost bicentennial university acknowledges on this occasion. The European and Irish bar associations, journalism and communications, welfare, Justice and Peace institutions and a number of other endeavours have also benefited from the dedication of Her Excellency along her career. The election of Her Excellency as the eighth President of the Republic of Ireland in 1997 would come as no surprise in the light of this history of achievements.

Born in the Ulster, Her Excellency is the first President of the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland. This in itself was a key factor pointing in the direction of what would become the essence of President McAleese's political leadership. The theme Her Excellency chose for her term in office is "Building Bridges", describing them as bridges that "demand patience, imagination and courage for Ireland's pace of change is now bewildering fast".

And Her Excellency has built bridges indeed. The concern of President McAleese for reconciliation in all corners of the Irish island, including Northern Ireland and the historical division between unionists and nationalists, has been a notorious feature of her office. In Her Excellency's inaugural speech, the cruelty and capriciousness of violent conflict were condemned without ambiguity, offering instead the prospect of working in partnership and approaching differences with joy and respect. Quoting a poem from John Hewitt, Her Excellency called for a country where "each may grasp his neighbour's hand as friend".

Other bridges have been importantly built in the area of economic development. The "Celtic Tiger", not unlike this Andean Jaguar that welcomes Her Excellency today, has achieved outstanding rates of economic growth, diversification of exports and industrialization of its economy, with particular success in the high technology industry. Ireland is today a landmark economy of the European Union.

The "Social Partnership" that government and business have arranged in Ireland is also an example of cooperation that has triggered continuing progress through social and labour development, tax incentives and facilitating the role of foreign investors in the Irish economy.

This economic success contrasts indeed with past periods of great suffering of the Irish people. And this is precisely why Her Excellency has prayed that “may we never become so cynical that we forget to be grateful”, a prayer of which we should also take due note in this country.

Suffering, however, has been rewarded by the joy of achieving what Her Excellency has called the “global Irish family”, to which, if you allow me a personal note, I am also proud to belong. Her Excellency has also built bridges to the Irish community across the world, most notably in the United States. A journalist referred to President McAleese’s visit there as having “made a big impact in Texas”, not a small achievement in itself.

And President McAleese has also built bridges to the world as a whole, as it is evidenced by this visit to Chile, a corner geographically far away but historically and contemporarily so close to the Republic of Ireland. The recent agreement of association between Chile and the European Union will bring this prospects still closer together.

The inaugural words of President McAleese foresaw that “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”. These wishes became true under President McAleese’s leadership. We are happy to join her in these wishes and to do so having barely survived the rivers of Irish whisky that flowed, also in Santiago, in celebration of Saint Patrick’s Day, the National Day of Ireland, just a few days ago.

The Honourable Rector will now bestow the symbols of our Doctoral recognition upon Her Excellency.