

The Grattan Lecture: Trinity College, Dublin, 19th November 2019
'Speaking to the Hand: The Rhetoric of Division and the Threat to Democracy'

Mr Ambassador, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening.

It is wonderful to be back in the Irish embassy and to be here as part of such a large group of Trinity graduates. We are here to celebrate our connection to Trinity and to remember one of its famous graduates, Henry Grattan. Grattan like many other famous Trinity graduates: Jonathan Swift, Edmund Burke, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett sought to effect change through words and words are my theme this evening, especially words about politics and the relationship between Britain and Ireland.

Ireland has a long tradition of speaking truth to power. I'd like to tell you about one instance of this which links my present and former universities. By long standing tradition, Oxford Cambridge and Trinity, recognize each other's and only each other's degrees. In fact when I was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, I didn't need to receive a degree from Oxford, as I already had one from Trinity. (My Harvard degrees didn't count.) Oxford permitted women to matriculate 99 years ago in 1920. Trinity admitted women in 1904. So there was a three-year interval in which Trinity was able to graduate women, but had no women of its own to graduate. In that brief period, 720 women who had studied, and been examined for degrees in Oxford and Cambridge, travelled by steamboat to Dublin and were awarded degrees by Trinity. The enterprising Provost Traill used the fees he charged them to build Trinity Hall for female Trinity Students. (I lived there in my second year.) These women became known as the Steamboat Ladies. The fact that so many of them identified and utilized this loophole in such a brief period shows how important it was to them to get formal recognition of their accomplishments. Sometimes, it seems, Ireland can acknowledge realities to which England chooses to be blind.

I feel more Irish with every day that passes. It isn't because I miss the landscape, though I do. It isn't because I miss the people, though I do. It is because, in leaving Ireland physically – like so many emigrés before me – I have merely redoubled its presence in my mind.

I feel genuinely proud to be Irish, and never more so than at the present political moment.

One of the surprises and delights of my lifetime has been to see the transformation of the social, political and economic life of Ireland in the years since I left nearly 40 years ago to attend graduate school in the US. When I was growing up in Tramore, Ireland was a deeply conservative, homogeneous, fairly impoverished, society.

Now it is a prosperous, multicultural, progressive European society with one of the most globalized economies in the world.

It seems to me that – in some respects – Britain and the Irish Republic are changing places.

I used to think of myself as born in an island known for its 'Troubles', where two embittered political factions erected barricades, vilified each other in the Press, and called those who fraternised with the 'enemy', traitors.

Now I live in England, alas, I find myself once more on an island that is becoming famous for its troubles, where once again two warring factions are erecting barriers, vilifying each other in the Press, and labelling those who fraternise with the 'enemy', traitors. (Though not, I concede, by resorting to violence.)

The sides, of course, are 'Leave' and 'Remain'. And the ferocity of the Battle over Brexit, the intensity of the anger and hatred it has unleashed, show how any country (especially a country composed of more than one nation) can be rendered emotionally rabid, then politically paralysed, by the bite of a single question.

You will be pleased to know, however, I do not want to talk chiefly about the weary saga of Brexit this evening— though it is a subject on most of our minds, and all of our nerves.

Instead, I would like to talk about rhetoric itself, about the power of words to change the world for good. I'd like to talk about how we can preserve the virtues of rhetoric – its ability, in the words of Quintilian, to 'prove, to please, and to persuade' – in the face of current challenges to civility and public confidence in the political sphere.

One of the chief virtues of rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is that it can enable us to weigh the evidence and come to better understanding and judgement. It should be a vehicle enabling reasoned debate: so that we can evaluate what we think by examining the foundations of our thinking.

A second virtue is that it can raise our views from our own narrow perspective to a higher level. Cicero stresses the humanising qualities of eloquence, the sense in which – like Orpheus with his flute – the great orator tames the beast within the human breast.

A third quality of great rhetoric is that it draws us together, such that we feel our collective participation in history. Vitality, we read as individuals, but we hear as one.

At its best, rhetoric is an evocation of what we share. It can build community and common purpose. Indeed it can give a shape to our ideals that become – like America's Declaration of Independence or Abraham Lincoln's Inaugural

addresses— a touchstone for the endeavour to build ‘a more perfect union’, a commitment to forging ‘a peace among ourselves and with all nations’. Rhetoric, in its capacity to interrogate our assumptions, to unite us in sympathy with strangers, to inspire us to do better by one another, can be a deeply moral art.

Ireland has produced more than her fair share of great speakers, among them Henry Grattan himself, Edmund Burke, and Daniel O’Connell. Each of them is remembered today chiefly for speeches in which they took the part of the powerless against the powerful.

Burke spoke out against the East India Company and its immoral exploitation of Indians. He argued that corporate power should always be subject to democratic controls. As Yeats wrote ‘American colonies, Ireland, France and India/ Harried, and Burke’s great melody against it’.

Grattan insisted on the right of Ireland to self-government. O’Connell argued for the equality and democratic rights of Irish Catholics, but also of blacks, Jews, and the citizens of South America.

They were internationalists. They extrapolated the experience of Ireland under colonial rule. Their rhetoric was sometimes accusatory, sometimes limited by their experience and their assumptions, but it was not small-minded. It was big-hearted, looking consistently outward, with curiosity and a sense of responsibility to others that spanned the globe.

They were citizens of the world. And they knew well what citizenship meant. It is perhaps no accident that the phrase ‘Citizen of the World’ was popularised by an Irishman, Oliver Goldsmith, who satirised Western society by publishing imaginary letters by a Chinese philosopher in London. Among the behaviours that puzzled Goldsmith’s imaginary Chinaman was England’s habit of making treaties with France, and then breaking them, declaring war. The political cycle he identified, of warm diplomacy turning to hostile dispute, has been a feature of Britain’s relationship with Europe ever since.

I wanted to invoke these great figures from Ireland’s past today, in part because this lecture is named for Grattan but also because it seems to me that current political rhetoric in Britain is at such a low ebb, it risks running us aground. In September, Lord Stewart announced the creation of a new award for courtesy in Westminster, citing the fact that ‘everyone agrees that politics in the UK is facing a crisis of trust and a crisis of civility’. The Committee for Standards in Public Life reported that the extent of intimidation prevalent in UK politics poses ‘a threat to the very nature of representative democracy’. A 2018 poll showed that only 11% of British people trust politicians to tell the truth while in 2016 the Oxford English Dictionary declared ‘post-truth’ its word of the year, citing the fact that its use in

2016 had increased by 2000% in the context of the Brexit referendum and the US election.

I am not an advocate of false nostalgia: I recognise that the streets of politics have always been close to the gutter and to the gutter press. But the level of mud-slinging has worsened, and the scale expanded. It is not only the jibes that are often filthy; the well of verifiable information, and the channels that pipe it to voters, have been muddied. The *Washington Post's* fact-checkers list more than 13,000 occasions when President Trump made false or misleading claims during his first 1000 days in office.

How has this diminution in the rhetoric of public life happened?

One reason is that trust is hard won, mistrust is easily sold, and the Internet Age has made mistrust easier to promote. The truth is difficult to identify with confidence on Google. Indeed Wikipedia informs me that 'The Truth' may refer to any one of six films, thirteen musical albums, and is the self-elected title of a Christian rapper, a wrestler, a professional poker player, and a character in *Grand Theft Auto*. I cannot personally vouch for the authenticity of any of these iterations of The Truth. How, then, is the average voter to decide which party is offering the most reasonable policy platform and whether their claims are accurate?

Our daily reliance on screens to pursue our work and our social lives make us especially vulnerable to disinformation. In the wake of the Notre Dame fire in April last year, the Oxford Internet Institute unearthed a trail of propaganda promoting the false idea that the fire in the Gothic cathedral was started by Islamist terrorists, or that plans for reconstructing the Paris landmark would include a minaret.

The fake news spread as quickly and destructively as the original fire. There are numerous similar examples. The Notre Dame story, which was not immediately political, had been hacked for political purposes by Russian and other social media accounts with an islamophobic agenda. The Oxford Internet Institute has found over seventy instances in which so-called 'dark money' was used for political advertising online to try to swing the outcome of national elections.

It has become clear that this is a significant means by which Big Money and foreign money are influencing the democratic process.

A disturbing feature of political advertising on social media is that it so frequently makes use of data gathered to profile and micro-target individuals without their explicit consent to their data being used in this political manner. Users may find themselves bombarded with visual advertisements that bear an uncanny relationship to their lives, designed to fan their fears and goad their sense of

grievance. They do not know that they have been stalked by paid hunters of those most likely to respond to scare tactics.

Once, politicians had to speak in open fora, because they did not know with certainty where their potential voters lay. They were obliged to explain and to contest ideas in long-form debates, speeches on the hustings and searching media briefings. Recent research by the University of Southampton suggests that in 1945, almost 50% of the UK population had heard a politician deliver a full-length speech either live or on the radio. By 2005 almost nobody had heard a full-length speech. Where the post-war listener tended to ask whether a politician was 'good', the question in 2005 was more likely to be 'were they normal'.

One can laugh, or cry at this finding. But it is suggestive of the extent to which modern public experience of politics is highly visual, very brief, and – where it is verbal – usually limited to soundbites. Muddled thinking, manipulation of key facts, and suppression of inconvenient truths all become easier to hide where there is no regular, detailed scrutiny of political leaders' policies by the Opposition, by journalists, and by the general public.

In the Trump administration the daily press briefings now occur at about six month intervals while the President's preferred mode of communication is twitter.

In the UK too, where Prime Minister Thatcher and Neil Kinnock chaired daily press conferences and gave multiple lengthy interviews to experienced interlocutors, in the 2017 election Prime Minister May and Jeremy Corbyn limited their interviews to four minutes and one question respectively. During the Conservative leadership election Boris Johnson was seen only at hustings organized by his own party.

When politicians stage-manage their only appearances, and don't give the public time to deliberate their position in a neutral setting, to challenge them, to ask for evidence and supporting argument, we encourage simplistic thinking and a culture of assertion, brand-selling and name-calling, rather than one of reasoned debate.

We are all aware of the tendency of posts on social media platforms to 'go viral' and for those who seek attention to achieve it through generating the negative energy of anger and hostility. The lightning speed of reaction to Twitterstorms and other forms of cyber weather creates minute-by-minute turbulence in politics and rewards it. It does not reward the slower virtues of long-term thinking and collaborative working.

The experience is often particularly brutal for women, gays, and ethnic minorities. Female MPs and journalists routinely receive threats of rape and other forms of physical violence. Anonymity emboldens trolls, as does the rarity of significant

punishment for those who regularly overstep the bounds of decency that would be upheld by social norms in a real-life setting. Amnesty International, in a study of 2018, found that a woman is abused on Twitter every 30 seconds, leading to the suggestion that the platform be re-christened ‘Hit Her.’ Their study also found that black women were more likely to be abused. 74 MPs have said that they will not stand again in the 2019 General Election. The number and youth of the women among them is deeply concerning; most cite the daily stress of online abuse as a factor in their decision to leave frontline politics. As Mandu Reid of the Women’s Equality party has said: “Politics has become a hostile environment for women – in which we are harassed, demeaned, and threatened as a matter of course.” We will never know what potential future female leaders we lost, who won’t be captains on the bridge of politics because of the threatening trolls beneath it.

Another group that has found itself unexpectedly under attack in the overheated atmosphere of the new rhetorical jungle is experts: academics, researchers, judges. Michael Gove, (educated at my university, sorry) famously declared that ‘we have had enough of experts’. This casual dismissal of the fruits of dispassionate, dedicated, long-term study sends a dangerous signal. Trust gut feeling, not reasoned debate. The public is implicitly pitted against the Academy, as if the two were not united, with a mutual interest in discovering the truth. Once we begin to see intellectual analysis that produces verdicts we dislike as inimical to respecting the ‘will of the people’, we open the door to the kind of politicisation that led in 2016 to the closure of fifteen universities in Turkey and that has driven new laws limiting the independence of the judiciary in Hungary and Poland. I am disturbed by rhetoric that seeks to vilify expertise and brands criticism of political decisions by qualified experts as unwarranted interference. I am troubled by those who pit ‘the People versus Parliament’, as if democracy could ever be our enemy, rather than the complex expression of our collective choices.

This weekend I was in Vienna to mark the opening of the Vienna campus of the Central European University, a university driven out of Hungary, a member state of the EU, by an autocrat offended by the independent thinking it represented. Let’s hope the CEU does not prove to be a canary in the coal mine.

In the weary yet frenzied atmosphere of perpetual contest that this divisive rhetoric fosters – of adrenalin-fuelled anxiety and belligerence – like an election that never ends, there has been a hardening of opinion, such that supporters of one party are unprepared even to listen to alternative viewpoints or evidence. There is an emphasis on emotion and tribalism – on what you support – rather than why.

‘Speak to the hand’ in popular parlance means ‘say what you like; I am going to ignore you’. Speaking to the hand is what we do, in a sense, when we post insults to social media. We do not speak face to face. We communicate from behind screens and devices to other people’s screens and devices. Screens enable

concealment and manipulation but also indifference. The algorithms of social media, which give us more of what we have previously liked, act as filtering devices discouraging us from encountering points of view and types of information that challenge our preferred perceptions. They promulgate a Flat Earth politics, where it is difficult for anyone to see the other side.

Wherever we locate ourselves on the political map, this is a win for those whose interests are served by division, by fostering fear and anger and the kind of hostile or defensive, closed behaviour it inspires.

In recent years, we have heard less of the rhetoric of global citizenship. Internationalism has become a concept denigrated by many leading politicians intent on inculcating a much narrower sense of identity, bounded by new walls and reinforced by new borders. I worry that, thirty years after the Berlin Wall came down, with such outpouring of euphoria and hope as members of families trapped on the wrong side of history were reunited. That twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, establishing ‘interlocking and interdependent’ institutional arrangements designed to bring peace and stability to Northern Ireland. That now, speakers are determined to bring the barbed wire back into politics.

President Trump recently taunted the United Nations with an address positing its irrelevance. He claimed that ‘The future does not belong to the globalists. The future belongs to patriots’. This is, of course, a false dichotomy. Nothing prevents anyone from holding both a deep love of country and a commitment to international cooperation. But Trump went further to remark that ‘The true good of the nation can only be pursued... by citizens who are rooted in its history’, implying that recent immigrants were inherently unable to promote America’s best interests. This kind of inflammatory rhetoric deliberately pits a Mayflower generation against a Windrush generation. It alienates recent citizens by telling them that they remain aliens even in the country where they live and work, raise their children, and pay their taxes.

In 2016, Theresa May memorably told the Conservative Party conference: ‘If you believe you’re a citizen of the world you’re a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what the very word citizenship means’. As someone who was born, raised and educated in Ireland but has spent my professional career in the US, Scotland and England, I like to consider myself a citizen of the world. I see no conflict between patriotism and internationalism.

The turn inward is a fearful movement, a contraction. It suggests that our problems arrive with those from other places who desire to take those things that we hold dear. In truth, however, national problems, like family problems, are usually a product of our internal dynamics as much as external forces: how we

share or don't share our resources; who mistrusts whom; and how resilient we are when facing change.

Few places demonstrate the signal benefits of globalism better than Ireland. In the first decades of independence the Republic of Ireland did turn inward and the country suffered, both culturally and economically. It managed to stay connected to the rest of the world only through the mass migration of its population. It is worth reminding ourselves that the population of the Republic had declined to 2.8 million by the 1961 census. Today it is at 4.8 million. It was only after 1958 and the Whitaker Economic Development Plan, and most decidedly after 1973 and entry into the EEC, that Ireland fully engaged internationally. As a result, the Republic began to thrive, both socially and economically, and built up the resilience to withstand the difficulties of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the heady heights of the Celtic Tiger, as well as the lows of the financial crash. Ireland has prospered by rejecting the inward-looking policies of the past.

Trinity College's own projects demonstrate the essential value of cross-border collaboration in research and development. In March this year, it was announced that researchers from Trinity would participate in a 3 million euro project alongside researchers from universities in France, Italy, Finland and Estonia to develop 'chemical noses' to detect the environmental presence of pollutants including pesticides. Pollution knows no borders. Many of the agrochemicals and pharmaceutical drugs in common use can exist in more than one molecular form: detecting and removing them has become vital to protecting our shared environment. The European initiative of which Trinity College is part is a good example of how international cooperation clears the air for everyone.

Indeed the academic community is fundamentally international. Only by maintaining it can we solve the problems of the twenty-first century: the transnational challenge of climate change and sustainability; reform of global financial systems; accommodating the health and welfare needs of populations on the move for reasons of war, scarcity and extreme weather.

How, then, might we move forward from the zero sum game of increasing incivility, disinformation, and polarisation in political rhetoric, and challenge the wider narrative of withdrawal to which it is linked?

I believe we must preserve long-form debates and civil democratic fora that require politicians to present their ideas in a setting where the public can assess them in detail and to participate in genuine cross-party discussion. We must preserve detailed briefings, open to all members of the press and protect honest investigative journalists from political brickbats. We also need, in my view and in that of the Electoral Commission itself, to get better at detecting and preventing

foreign interference in national elections; at preventing spending on political advertising that breaches regulations, and to impose meaningful penalties on those who flout the law.

In improving Internet security, we should also address disinformation and make it easier for the public to find websites that have been fact-checked by independent sources. We need to re-establish trust in experts and in the kinds of detailed, objective analysis they provide. While preserving the all-important right to freedom of speech, we must also make social media a safer environment for women. Personally, I would remove the anonymity that social media platforms allow by requiring every post to be associated with an identified individual.

Finally, each of us can reaffirm our readiness to listen to, and work with, those whose views we do not share. We step away from tribalism with every difficult handshake we achieve.

This is certainly the lesson of Grattan's political life. He was one of the great orators of the age. He bitterly resisted the 1800 Act of Union, which dissolved what was known as "Grattan's Parliament." When he failed to prevent the Union he nevertheless took a seat in Westminster where he fought for Catholic Emancipation. In his last speech in the House of Commons in 1819 he said that his views on the Union were unchanged but that having taken place it was everyone's duty to make it work and his to make it as advantageous as possible for those he represented.

To bring things back to the present day and the dreaded B word: I must confess that I have been reminded in recent months of Grattan's approach, as the people of Northern Ireland, who voted 56/44 to remain in the EU, were represented in Westminster by one Independent and the leave-supporting DUP. The 7 votes of Sinn Fein were unused, even though exercising them to represent the expressed wish of the majority in Northern Ireland could have altered the result of 11 key Brexit votes, including two on remaining in the Customs Union, surely the best option from an Irish perspective. But Sinn Fein have chosen not to engage. It's not what Grattan would have done.

I have been heartened by the current situation in the Dáil where the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, leads a minority government and where the main opposition Fianna Fail and their leader Micheal Martin have recognised that the issue of Brexit is too important to the national interest to be used as a political football. If only Westminster would look to Leinster House, its denizens might learn how to behave.

Indeed Britain, as it stands, has much to learn from Ireland.

The recent referenda legalising gay marriage and abortion in Ireland have marked a turning-point in Irish history: a collective decision to embrace a new future. While the issues were contentious, the debates did not destroy the fabric of the national conversation. We have demonstrated that it is possible to remain civil even in disagreement over the most fundamental issues.

The transformations taking place in Ireland, in its economy and civil society, are a wonder that many British politicians have missed. As Daniel O’Connell wryly remarked about British attitudes in 1839, ‘The apathy that exists regarding Ireland is worse than the national antipathy they bear us.’ British indifference to Ireland has been, it seems to me, a more salient feature in the history of the relationship than any more perfidious agenda.

I became aware, as I was growing up, that when Britain remembered Ireland it was often with the sort of awkward fumbling that people experience who suddenly realise that they have left something behind, but can’t remember exactly what and where. It was usually more convenient for British politicians to forget the toxic situation that they helped create in separating Northern Ireland from the Republic. By ignoring the province, they tacitly authorised the dominant population to behave with impunity in ways that would have been completely unacceptable in another part of Britain. From the early 1920s to the late 1960s a powder keg of sectarian grievances was allowed to form that Britain only acknowledged when they exploded.

Belatedly and at considerable cost, Britain started to pay attention when violence erupted, but notwithstanding the occasional terrorist atrocity on the mainland, British political life continued, even though at the height of the Troubles there were 30,000 British troops on the streets in a part of the United Kingdom. Had those troops been based in Birmingham or Manchester, it would have been a very different story. Jonathan Freedland notes that as a young journalist he was told by a BBC editor that ‘the two most boring words in the English language are Northern Ireland’. Since the province was such a turn-off for the British media, it is unsurprising that many UK politicians and members of the public remained ignorant of both the historical context and the day-to-day reality of the Irish situation.

As we know, the Troubles eventually subsided and, thanks to the Good Friday Agreement, peace was restored to Northern Ireland, with the help of dedicated diplomacy and funding from the United States and the European Union. An international treaty was signed, the Irish republic voted to change the constitution and cede its constitutional claim to Northern Ireland in return for an open border, a cessation of violence and an acceptance of the principle of consent. British politicians promptly returned to their old ways and forgot about Northern Ireland, until Brexit.

The impact of Brexit on Ireland north or south barely got a mention during the Referendum campaign. After a speech in a London Club before the referendum when I tried to draw attention to the potential impact of Brexit on Ireland a member of the House of Lords said to me. “Of course all Ireland needs to do is rejoin us.” I smiled, thinking he was joking, until I realized, stunned, that he wasn’t. Didn’t he realize that the prospect of the Republic of Ireland reuniting itself with the UK was simply inconceivable?

Last January, the person I considered to be the most able and the most reasonable member of the May Cabinet pointed out to me, matter-of-factly in conversation, that Ireland’s big mistake was in not leaving Europe when the UK did as “our” bargaining position would be so much stronger with Brussels. He then casually pointed out that Ireland would have to leave the EU when the UK did anyway, or its economy would be ruined. Again, I was stunned.

It dawned on me that not only have many UK politicians not read the Good Friday agreement, they have not fully understood the weight of its obligations as an International Treaty. They have remained oblivious to the security risk of any border in a country where the legitimacy of the border is deeply contested. Irish concerns have been dismissed as a technicality and the real effects of any Brexit deal on Irish business have been waved away with irritation and bluster. There is a real risk of losing the precious fruit of a delicate, long-term, international peace process to the ill-considered shaking of a group who have little interest in the long-term health of the tree.

While insisting that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the Union, Irish interests have been treated with cavalier indifference. Meanwhile Northern Ireland continues to provide evidence on a daily basis that it is indeed a place apart. Where else in the United Kingdom could it happen, for example, that paramilitaries would intimidate opponents into not standing against a party leader in Westminster, to give him a clear run at re-election, and the fact meriting no more than a paragraph in the inside pages of a couple of newspapers?

However, I choose to be positive. Personally, I would like to see a different conclusion to the uncertainty of the last three years. Not an Ireland railroaded into economic chaos by Britain but a Britain put back on track toward economic sanity by Ireland.

Britain could choose to re-learn from Ireland the enormous benefits of internationalism. The GDP of the Republic of Ireland grew by 6.7% last year, making it for the 5th consecutive year the fastest-growing economy in the European Union. Britain could learn from the bi-partisanship in the Dáil in the years since the Referendum. It could learn from Ireland, too, about the necessity of

national reinvention, of embracing diversity and inward migration. The *Irish Times* runs a regular column, 'New to the Parish', where recent migrants tell their stories, impressions and experiences of becoming part of the Irish scene. Under its current ownership, is hard to imagine this kind of welcoming column in the London *Times*. Between 2010 and 2016, the *Daily Express* ran 179 headlines (including 'Migrants Rob Young Britons of Jobs') that presented immigrants in a negative light, while the *Daily Mail* published 122 headlines of this kind.

Ireland cannot wholly escape the effects of the power-struggles that have polarised and paralysed British politics in the last 3 years. But we can learn from them and reject the rhetoric of division. We can continue to embrace a rhetoric of inclusiveness. We can embrace a proud history of oratory and of eloquent appeal, effecting change by the power of words that are not shy of controversy, but respectful of truth and of civility. We can seek open means of persuasion, in public fora. We can choose to call out the bark of fear-mongering and the dog-whistle of sectarian hostility. After all, in Ireland, we know to our cost where that leads.

Men like Grattan, O'Connell and Burke were of their time. It's hard to know what they would make of Ireland today. But when I see countries the world over turning inward and Ireland resolutely turning outward I take enormous pride in the legacy of deliberative political discourse that they have left us.

Thank you.