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And that bond has been made with your alma mater. Yours is a university of which you have every right to be very proud. Its academic reputation, based solidly on high and sustained academic standards is widely and deservedly recognised.

But it is not just its high academic standards which make your university stand out. It has never been or sought to be an ivory tower. It sees itself as not just being a part of its wider community but having the duty of leadership in that community. It fulfils that duty in multiple ways— through the quality of you, its graduates and the contribution you make at all levels; through the depth of its partnership with local industry, helping through collaboration in research and innovation, helping the economy to fight recession, and through its partnership to transform and invigorate ailing industries and, where there was despair to create a climate of hope and possibility.

It is something my own university, in our current climate of recession is trying to add is doing with some success. I can say with total sincerity that your university is a template for universities everywhere in demonstrating by deed and by aspiration that universities should and must have a key role in transforming and energising the wider society in which it operates and has its roots.

To me the third outstanding feature of your university is its commitment to the centrality of the student experience. That centrality is expressed in many ways on this campus but to me the most striking are the efforts, the successful efforts made to reduce the level of student drop-out. Student retention is a universal problem and there are many reasons why it

happens. It is easy for any university to pretend it does not exist and to concentrate its attention on the high achievers. This university does look after its high achievers as





centrality of politics in the life of any free society, because politics, good politics, honest politics, effective politics, is, along with the rule of law, at the heart of any free and democratic society. And without good politics we won't get good politics.

That is why I say to you who are graduating today, think hard about the concept of public service. The words of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy may now sound clichéd but they still resonate with great moral authority:

“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

That message inspired me. I believe it still has the capacity to inspire.

Idealism is nothing to be ashamed of. Idealism tinged with ambition is an important component of any free society. The great 18<sup>th</sup> century Irish philosopher Edmund Burke is often quoted, but his message is as relevant today as it was two hundred years ago:

“Allsaatou cc2um2dro notn

“All that is necessary for evil to prevail is that good men should do nothing....

Or we can go back to the words of the English metaphysical poet John Donne:

‘No man is an island entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main.....  
Any man’s death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind

In the two pieces I have quoted the first expresses the alienation of the individual from society, the unwillingness to be involved, while Donne’s piece powerfully communicates human interdependence.

For me, when I think of politics, and the why of politics I am drawn back to a man whose writings greatly influenced me. This is Tom Kettle, a poet, economist, philosopher, Member of Parliament, who died in 1916 almost one hundred years ago in the battle of the Somme, dying, he believed for the freedom of small nations.

When I had bad days in politics, and there were many, especially during the days of bombs and carnage in Northern Ireland, I always thought back to the words of Kettle, written in 1905. To me what he wrote was about the infinite possibilities of politics:

“Politics is not, as it seems in clouded moments, a mere gabble and squabble of selfish interests; it is the State in action. And the State is the name by which we call the great human conspiracy against hunger and cold, against loneliness and ignorance, the State is the foster mother of the Arts, of love and comradeship, of all that redeem from despair that strange adventure which we call human life”

You know, it is as true today as it was in 1905.

I am a realist. I know the conditions of modern life make it very easy not to be 'involved in mankind'. Life is busy, pressurised and challenging. The pace of technological change is both liberating and overwhelming. The modern workplace, as you may well already have discovered, is highly demanding, competitive and insecure. In these circumstances it is very easy for the individual to feel that he or she must concentrate on all his or her energies and talents on individual advancement, and have little space for politics or for public service.

But, if you feel the call of public life do not hesitate; it can be a noble call.

In conclusion, may I say a word about a subject very close to my heart.

For the past ten<sup>up</sup> years I have been <sup>of</sup> proud to lead the Irish Human Rights Commission and for five of those years the European Group of Nations >>BDC T\*C /P <1-2.3 pave 2(eD 4 >I k

But when we look back at the century just past we see great undreamed of advances in every area of life. But we also see in that past century, and even in recent times, barbarity and inhumanity greater in scale and intensity than ever happened before, or even in the Dark Ages. Hitler's Germany; Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia; Serbia, Croatia, Sierra Leone- these are only some of the places where literally millions have perished, and only rarely has anybody been held accountable. Countries to North Korea comes to mind – where the rule of law is no more than the will of the ruler.

Too often today the recognition, definition and enforcement of human rights is what stands between civilisation and barbarity.

There is nothing complicated or confusing about human rights. They are simply universally agreed basic standards which aim to ensure that every person is treated with dignity and respect and that both national and international law and practice reflect this.

eradication of poverty and discrimination, post-conflict rebuilding, sustainable development and multicultural understanding.

It is a huge challenge but it is one which no university can shirk.

So, in conclusion may I once again thank President Jacobs and the Board of Trustees for the great honour conferred on me today. It is a great and proud day for me, as I know it is for of you new graduates.

I intend to celebrate and enjoy it to the full.

I hope you do too.

Thank you.