

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**DR RUTH BARRINGTON** on 6 NOVEMBER 2025 in the Aviva Stadium, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **PATRICIA O'DONOVAN**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

It takes an act of imagination to place oneself back in the Ireland of 1975 when Patricia O'Donovan qualified as a barrister. Ireland had joined the European Economic Community and embraced free trade but society remained conservative, patriarchal and with high unemployment and emigration, was one of the poorest countries in Europe. Few married women were in paid employment and women in the public service had to resign on marriage. Women could be dismissed from their jobs on pregnancy and employment ads for 'young man wanted' were common. Maternity leave, career breaks, paternity and parental leave, a minimum wage, child care – all lay in the future. In the arena of industrial relations, there was open confrontation between trade unions and employers and strikes were endemic, aggravated by the recession of the mid-1970s.



All that was about to change. Patricia O'Donovan, who is being honoured today for her contribution to public life, was one of the people who, in the course of her career with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, helped to bring about the changes in employment law and practice and in industrial relations that laid the firm foundations for the economic prosperity and level of social development that we enjoy today. She then brought her expertise and experience to the International Labour Organisation, the UN body based in Geneva dedicated to promoting social justice and human and labour rights.

From where did this commitment to equality and the cause of labour spring? Patricia's early interest in advocacy, gathering the facts and

making a case, influenced her choice of a degree in law at UCC, followed by an LLB in International and European Law and qualification as a barrister at King's Inns in 1975. This was despite there being no history of law in her family. Her interest in the European Economic Community, which Ireland had recently joined, and European law encouraged her to spend a year as a stagiaire in Brussels in the Consumer Protection Directorate of the European Commission and in Strasbourg in the Council of Europe and the European Court of Justice. The Irish Trade Union movement, having opposed Irish entry into the EEC, quickly adjusted its position following the overwhelming vote in favour of membership. ICTU, which at the time represented over 60 per cent of the workforce, began to play an active role in the EEC through participation in the Economic and Social Committee and to appreciate the Community's commitment to dialogue between governments, employers and trade unions. As part of this process of adjustment to the new reality, ICTU appointed a European Officer and Patricia was appointed to this post in 1977.

In 1982, Patricia became ICTU's first Legislative and Equality Officer. In this role she pioneered a positive action programme that led to more women in leadership roles in trade unions. One of her responsibilities was to tour the country informing shop stewards about the EEC and the labour reforms being enacted or advocated at European level. The shop stewards were quick to appreciate the labour reforms which followed membership such as health and safety at work, equal pay and non-discrimination against female workers, maternity leave and protection of young workers. Patricia's role in ICTU complemented the influence of trade unionists such as Evelyn Owens and Mary Maher in promoting a more equal workplace for women.

The climate of industrial relations in Ireland began to improve in the 1980s. The Employer Labour Conference resolved tensions between unions and employers and the research conducted by the National Economic and Social Council on the economy and social issues, encouraged a consensus between trade union leaders and employers on the nature of Ireland's problems and how to resolve them. National Understandings on wages and conditions were agreed, leading in 1987 to the Programme for National Recovery in which the trade unions signed up for wage restraint and agreed to forgo industrial action in return for a commitment to tax reform and to building a fair and inclusive society.

In the same year, Patricia was appointed Assistant General Secretary of ICTU with responsibility for labour and employment legislation, equality

and disability policies, occupational health and safety and European and UN relations. In this position and from 1997, as Deputy General Secretary of ICTU, she played a leading role in negotiating successive social partnership agreements which delivered better pay and conditions for the employed and reduced unemployment, social inequality and exclusion. Patricia was the intellectual power house of the agreements in ICTU, coordinating multiple interests, resolving difficult issues and negotiating skilfully with employers and government. These national partnership agreements were credited with transforming Ireland into ‘the miracle economy’ of the 1990s and attracted much international attention. They helped ensure that the Irish tax and social welfare system is among the most progressive in the world. The focus on partnership stood in sharp contrast with the efforts of neo-liberal governments in the UK and the US to undermine the influence of trade unions.

In 1995, Patricia seized the opportunity of a career break to undertake a Masters in Labour Law at Harvard, University, followed by a short time working with the United Auto Workers Union in Detroit. It was an opportunity to understand US labour law and a context different to that of Europe.

Patricia played an important role in representing ICTU in Europe and internationally throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1996 she was the first Irish trade unionist to be elected to the board of the International Labour Organisation in Geneva, the oldest of the UN bodies, having been founded in 1919 and the only one that is representative of labour, employers and government. Ireland’s model of social partnership was much admired and studied in the ILO and when the ILO created a new position of Director of Social Dialogue in 2001, Patricia was offered the post. She welcomed the opportunity to promote social partnership among ILO member states, although the preconditions for such partnership – a trade union structure similar to ICTU, a representative employer organisation and a ministry of labour – were not that common outside Europe. Her challenge was to build the technical capacity of member states’ unions, employers and ministries to engage in social dialogue.

In 2004 she was promoted in ILO to the senior position of Executive Director responsible for the management and administration of the organisation. A key responsibility of the post was to promote the concept of value added to decision making by reorienting traditional IR relations away from conflict and towards consensus. In 2011, Patricia became the first, and only, woman to be appointed as Director of the International Training Centre of the ILO in Turin, a Centre with a staff of 160 and a

budget of €40m dedicated to improving relations between trade unionists, employers and government officials. During her tenure, she underscored the importance of inclusive practices and equitable gender representation, both within the Centre and across its programmes.

Patricia has contributed in many other ways to public life in Ireland. One seminal and challenging role was as a member of the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System, under the chairmanship of TK Whittaker. The members visited every prison in the country and listened to prisoners speak about prison conditions and their grievances. The members of the Committee were so shocked by the conditions in the Women's Prison in the basement of the St Patrick's Institution that they recommended its immediate closure. This was one of the first recommendations acted upon.

Patricia was also instrumental in persuading ICTU to take a stand on progressive social issues such as opposition to enshrining a ban on abortion in the Constitution, the introduction of divorce and the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Nor was she afraid to take risks for what she believed in. In 1987, in the year of the first Intifada, she and fellow trade unionists Kieran Mulvey and John Mitchell were invited by the Palestine Trade Union Federation to visit Gaza. On departing by the Karem Shalom crossing, they were arrested by the Israeli authorities and detained in Jerusalem. Their detention was raised in the Dáil and they were released after two days, with the Israeli authorities leaving them in no doubt that their presence in Gaza was not welcome.

In 1991, Patricia was appointed by President Mary Robinson to the re-invigorated Council of State. As a member of the Council, she brought a trade union and equality perspective to bear in advising on the draft legislation and on the President's address to both Houses of the Oireachtas.

On retirement from the ILO Training Centre in 2015, Patricia returned to Ireland. She completed a Masters in English Literature at UCC and was appointed as a public interest representative to the Press Council, later becoming Vice Chairman. The Press Council offers an opportunity to those who feel unfairly treated by the press to have their case heard, promptly and without charge. As a fellow public interest member of the Council, I saw at first hand and admired how Patricia brought her incisive intelligence, commitment to fairness, respect for process and strong powers of advocacy to each case before the Council.

In times to come, when historians ask how Ireland was transformed in the late 20th century into a prosperous, inclusive, diverse and more egalitarian European democracy, they will highlight the contribution of people such as Patricia O'Donovan who, through her work in ICTU and the ILO and her contribution to public life, helped change the country, and the world, for the better.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:**

**Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus  
quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur  
honoris causa ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam  
Civili quam Canonico; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo  
totique Academiae.**