

**The Opening of Cloughjordan Community Amphitheatre
in Cloughjordan Ecovillage
by President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins**

Friday April 21st 2017

Transcript of Michael D Higgins Speech

[Transcribed by Eoin Campbell, Peadar Kirby and Deirdre O'Leary]

A Aire Corcoran-Kennedy is a dhaoine cóir. Ar an gcéad dul síos is iontach an rud é go bhfuil deis agam labhairt amach sa spás poiblí seo sa sean-stíl agus cuireann sé áthas speisialta orm fhéin. Is mór an deis é, ní amháin chun an spiorad iontach pobail na háite seo, an pobal atá lonnaithe anseo i gcroí-lár an sráidbhaile ionspiorádach seo a fheiceáil ach comh maith seans chun an amfaiotáir nua seo i gCloch Shiurdáin a oscailt go hoifigiúil.

May I say first of all, Minister and dear friends, what a great pleasure it is to have the benefit of giving an open air speech again. I gave many of them in different circumstances with different receptions over several decades. When I think back on it, it was a great time with very, very large crowds, not only in Ireland. But when I look out here and actually see all the generations represented, and particularly all the young people, and the fact that we are doing it in a setting that is out in the open air in an ecovillage - it would make anyone's heart lift. And also the children who are playing behind us - and I couldn't help noticing that there's a young fellow with red hair who is a very talented soccer player in the making, and we are a very low ebb in Galway United at the moment.

When I got the invitation to come here - and earlier I was in Birr planting trees... It's the eve of Earth Day, and it's the first anniversary of the Paris Agreement, and one of the things that strikes one, and particularly at my stage of life, is that very often you can look back at whole reams of words that really are quite distracting unless they are turned into reality. But here in this ecovillage so much is being turned into practical achievements, and in difficult circumstances.

Every now and again the thought occurs to me - whatever happened to the cooperative movement? I look back sometimes at the history of the cooperative movement in Ireland and I see when it was flourishing for a very great period of time. Reference was made to commemorations already. Somebody will have to face the reality of thinking what happened during our War of Independence, and what happened during our terrible civil war. One of the terrible things in the civil war was the burning of the house of Horace Plunkett. I often think of all the activities of people like that who were trying to encourage cooperation.

So here in the open air, where our voices can carry right up to the top, it is important for us to think again about what really can be achieved by doing what was started here eight years ago by those people who built the first houses within a certain set of values. Some of us have backgrounds after a certain kind of journey through academic life and the rest of it. There's nothing academic at all about this. Our lives are short. I refer to it in some of my speeches - we are, in the end, migrants in time, and what do we want to do with our lives? We have, in the course of getting to a point of freedom, had to reject not just imperialisms and restrictions, but all sorts of other blockages in our lives. And one of the great blockages we have at the present time is in relation to not being able to understand and take apart language that is being fired at us. I went to University at the age of 21. It was part of the way in which you wanted to escape from your circumstances - to get a kind of education. Then there was the glamour of giving lectures, and then there was a beautiful relationship with students.

But in trying how to live - at the present time, in my view, we have placed serious restrictions on our thinking. We have been stuck within a model of connection between nature (or ecology), ethics and economy that is not just restricting us but is in fact killing people all over the world. We might be on the verge yet again of another terrible, destructive set of war economies.

When you think of the alternative - out here, people in the open air, in the public space, listening to beautiful music and beautiful words and to poems, and people making music and children playing, and we living our lives and investing the time given to us, being able to take care of each other - that is what life is about. I have described it recently - instead of this notion that when I meet heads of state and others, you must tell them about all that Ireland has achieved or whatever, we must get to a point where we are able to exchange stories of each other's *vulnerabilities* and how we responded to them and how much we were able to take into ourselves.

I often think of the way that that works in amphitheatres. I remember visiting the amphitheatre in Epidaurus, in wonderful and much mutilated and much beaten Greece. One of the most terrible things about my time as President of Ireland was to hear people speaking dismissively of a great people who gave us some of the finest concepts by which we might live; saying things like 'we could be as bad as the Greeks'. I remember standing in Epidaurus and thinking about the origin of drama and theatre - how a man came home from the war and he stood on a stone and he stuck them to the ground as he was telling them about his experiences of war. And then that became the monologue, and then it went on through the chorus, and it gave us tragedy, and it gave us all the great things in literature. And Irish people did the same thing, many of them through hedge schools and in different circumstances. That is what in fact the best of Ireland is about.

Thomas MacDonagh - I'm so honoured to hear those members of his family speaking about it - understood that, that you must be able to have a kind of integrity of imagination such as will allow everything in, as the Irish poets did without censorship and without restriction, speaking of all the five senses and all of the passions of the heart and the capacities of the human body.

So the question then for the concept of people living together... Twenty years ago a group of people came together in the Central Hotel in Dublin, (itself a quite revolutionary context I must say, home to many dissident attempts), to share their dreams of what might be - a more ethical and sustainable life, lived in a community which isn't easy and can have difficulties, living under the gaze of the other. It is a powerful emancipating, ethical moment when you are able to live your life, taking the vulnerabilities of the other and knowing that yours are reciprocated, and to be able to live in the gaze of the other. It went beyond just simply doing things that are material. It is out of a shared value system and a connection not only with others, but also with the rhythm and the beauties of what surrounds you, that is, the space. The whole question then of what you might want to do, the ethical impulse, and of course what is shared in terms of practically existing in an economic sense.

It is very interesting to think about how people don't take words apart. It is said that it is all about individualism now. Individualism has to be understood as the loss of the personal, the loss of personal capacity because of the inability to live together. In the same way as the feminist movement over decades is not simply about what is directed against women but it is about what was lost in terms of human life by the fact that women weren't allowed to achieve and deliver their full potential. Everybody loses when you have these kinds of discriminations.

Equally, I think, when one comes out in the open air and hoping about the weather... you're also left with the importance of symmetries, of things that come together. When I was in my 30s going into the Senate for the first time, I remember giving a pretentious speech on the threat to the world's marvellous symmetry. But I still think it was right. We have so often, in the linear version of economic progress, described it as a struggle against nature. I used to often quote Francis Bacon who has all the prejudices in a single paragraph: 'I lead to you nature and her children in bondage for your use to gouge out her secrets'. And that, which stands there at the beginning of the colonising period, of all of the imperialisms, is a great disjuncture, an act of violence against what is natural.

So therefore the debate, which we may not be having but which you *must* have: What is natural in the human condition and its relationship with nature? Is it natural to be acquisitive, or is natural to share? Did somebody suggest, for example, that the human being is at her or his best when insatiability has been unleashed?... when you said nothing is enough, do you own the whole world yet? In County Clare they would say he wants to put his arms around the whole world. But when you make the transition from sufficiency, from giving yourself the time to listen to music, to hear children, to hear old people, to make

stories, to talk - when you give it all up to say 'I want more and more and more'... and then to have your conversations reduced to: 'Do you hear what so-and-so owns and he owns this as well?'... When they all own the world how much has been lost?

But these are basic issues! What is it that we want at the heart of value system? Is it to meet sufficiency not just for ourselves but for the whole world, and to do so in balance? Or is it to be regarding the celebrities as gods of our time - those who have insatiable and greedy instincts?

I think this disconnect is very, very important and it is wonderful that I am able now to speak as President of this lost symmetry and the price that we are paying for it. When we criticise the existing disconnect between ecology, economy and society, it isn't that we are saying we wish we had it all ourselves. No, it is just that it is so destructive - destructive of the person. It produces a lesser person, it produces a damaged community and it produces a damaged world. It stands as obstacles to forms of cooperation in practically every aspect of life. Therefore when people criticise extreme individualism, it's important to say we are not hurling insults at each other. We are claiming the right to take language and ask what it means. If the destruction of the personal is what we mean, let's call it that.

But then if we are to live ethically together... I remember going to Limerick University when Peadar was there, speaking to people who are interested in the concept of Utopia. Utopia is a damaged word. It simply meant a better place, a new place, a different place.

This a question I love to ask in the open air. How free are we now to actually think about a different form of economics or politics or society? How much more free are we than those that went before us? I think of Thomas MacDonagh as a teacher - and Thomas MacDonagh was somebody who had a version of a republic that was about freedom and that included commitment to language, and that made poems as well as teaching. When you think of his life - there are now many, many more... thousands... tens of thousands of people who would say, listening to what I have just been saying now, 'But sure that's what he has always said and anyway we couldn't possibly change'. These are people who have surrendered. They have surrendered to mediocrity and they have surrendered to failure. And I say to them, not in any reproach: 'You must not visit your despair on a new generation. You must allow people, young people, old people, middle-aged people, to have a different view and to be able to say 'We can remake the world! We can live together differently!'

This is what has happened here over the last eight years. Three houses, now 55 and more to come. Because people are saying, 'We are not just recalling Earth Day or Paris in 2015, we're actually putting it into practice'. Agus guím gach rath agus beannacht ar na daoine atá ag déanamh sin, atá ag cur gníomharthaí dearafacha in áit focail folmha. If we are to aspire to live ethically together, we do need these visions put into practice - ones that are democratic, enriching and respectful of our fragile planet - the mission not just of this village, because it doesn't stand alone but it has a wonderful relationship with its surrounding communities, which is important. Then too there is the mission of the Global Ecovillage Network, very simple: 'A world of empowered people and communities designing pathways to a sustainable future while building bridges of hope and international solidarity.' These are inspiring words translated into new ways of living here in Cloughjordan, seeking a holistic integrated value-led concept, as I have been describing it, about how we might live together and with joy! - not continually recoiling from one level of anxiety or another, but living with joy.

As you have heard Peadar describe it, yes it is possible - Is féidir é a dhéanamh! You can have a village like this, aspiring and delivering and being able to live a low-carbon lifestyle, and all the other sides of it. There is nothing odd about any of this because it's using science as it should be used - not science for war or science for ecological destruction or science delivered into technology for mindless consumption, but science used to live better in a symmetrical way with renewable energy heating, energy efficient homes, biodiversity, local produce, the freedom of children to play and encounter nature, green enterprise centre, solar and wood-powered community heating, acres devoted to allotments, farming, thousands of native trees. All of this is an agenda about life and hope on our planet, and the village stands as an impressive and encouraging testimony to gach rud is féidir a dhéanamh, all that can be achieved.

I think what is so important is that this has all been merged and bonded with the existing town. Rural Ireland is not only about which parts of an economy can be distributed through it. It is about families, businesses, it is about people baking bread, it is about people designing new things in science, making inventions, and doing so near that which they call a sense of place. That is important. So today is another important landmark out in the open, as part of the claiming back of the commons which is part of humanity - doing something in the open, the formal opening of the new amphitheatre in Cloughjordan.

I hope, as those artists who have come before me - and they were so wonderful – that people will often come here, like that person who came back from the war to Athens and spoke about all that he had seen and heard, and that people will talk about what they have learned, and what they have taken from people who taught them music, and all that they have imagined and they will offer it up the hill in the amphitheatre to anybody who wants to listen. And yes, yes that is what Thomas MacDonagh would have wanted! And that is what real republicanism is about. It is about the fullness of life. I think this original project - and I pay tribute to those who assisted in it coming into being - was originally conceived as a 1916 centenary project, inspired by the great native that is Thomas MacDonagh, and I think its construction is a work of vision, of reimagining, its design itself, its use - the repurposing of it, using local materials, as I have heard, local labour, people bringing it into existence for the day it was needed. All these cultural spaces are important.

We are not called onto this planet to use all of our efforts to fit into something that we are told we might never understand. There is nothing that cannot be understood, and one of the great challenges - and I will finish on this - what is needed now more than ever is this confidence and offering people hope and saying as often as we can, in as many places as we can, ‘there is no aspect of our modern world that should not be capable of being described and understood by every citizen’. It is in the same way, in fact, that literacy made possible democratic consultation. The new literacy will be about economics and fiscal matters, but it will be about principally the connection between forms of economy, forms of society and forms of living together. All of this is capable of being described, and that thinking must break out from the academy. It must subvert thinking that suggests there is only one way and that we all have to adjust ourselves to it. We are not called to do that.

So here in Cloughjordan as I formally open this amphitheatre I want say, may its example flow out, may people discover the courage and the joy of being able to live together and be able to do so.

(... the amplification system fails...)

The technology has punished me! [*laughing..*] There we are now. Now that's the good test of an amphitheatre. Is mian liom críochnú le focail buíochais dóibh siúd uilig a d'oibrigh comh cruá san chun an pobal inspioráideach saibhir daonlathach seo a thabhairt ar an saol agus ach go háirithe na daoine sin uilig a tháinig chun cabhair san oiread sin bealaigh chun an spás tábhachtach foghlamtha agus ealaíonta seo a thabhairt chun críche agus a cheiliúraimid anseo inniu. May I conclude by thanking all those who have worked so hard to create this inspiring, rich and democratic community and all those who have helped in so many ways to bring to fruition this important space of artistic learning and sharing that we celebrate here today and that will be celebrated by all those who share and come after in the vision of Thomas MacDonagh of Cloughjordan. Go raibh maith agaibh, thank you.

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