

## **Speech of Micheál Martin TD, Leader of Fianna Fáil**

### **Irish Universities Association ‘Future of Ireland’ Series “The role of Education & Research in the Knowledge Economy”**

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to contribute the opening address of what should be an important series. In order to have a healthy public debate about the future of our country we need our universities to play a central role in opening up issues which may be vital but rarely find a place in the daily news cycle. This is just such an issue.

In agreeing to speak this morning I am very conscious of the breadth of this topic and the difficulty in bringing all of its elements together in one framework. To be honest there is also the consideration that often the most effective way for an opposition leader to be invisible in the media is to deliver a substantive policy speech.

However I am very happy to accept this invitation because this is a very personal topic for me. It has been at the core of much of my work over the years both in opposition and in government. In different roles I have held responsibility for all of the main elements of education, research and innovation policy and today I am more convinced than ever that the development of our people through education and a diverse and expert knowledge base must be a real priority for public policy.

I believe that the agenda to step-change the role of knowledge in raising standards of living which was set in the late 1990s has achieved remarkable things. However it is long since passed the time when we should step back and consider whether policy has kept pace with the reality of today’s challenges. In fact we need to ask if the past success of research and innovation policy might be distracting us from major weaknesses which we need to urgently start addressing. Are we today so focused on a narrow range of policies that we are neglecting the core foundations?

As I've mentioned, this morning's topic is not a small one.

In truth it touches on six decades of Irish history and is central to most social, economic and environmental issues which confront us today. No understanding of the development and future of Ireland is possible without understanding the rising role of education, research and innovation. While Kildare Street rarely sees marches demanding more funding for research and no election has ever been decided by debates over policy on innovation, these are absolutely fundamental concerns.

As we all can see this is a critical moment in our modern history. National, regional and international changes are combining to create a set of challenges we have not confronted before.

We need to decide now if we are serious about Ireland being a leader or a follower in addressing these challenges.

A topic as broad as this cannot be fully addressed in the time we have available today, so what I would like to do is to explain why I believe that a growing knowledge base has been and will continue to be foundational for progress in our country. It is the single most important element in shaping our future and it deserves a much deeper engagement.

Developing from this I would like to make a number of more concrete points about where we need to go from here.

First we need to fully understand that we are into a new phase in both the challenges we face and the policies we should be pursuing – we need to create a new agenda.

Second, this agenda needs to be based on a series of core principles about how we should structure and operate support for the diverse infrastructure of education, research and innovation.

Third, we must tackle the innovation gap between large and smaller enterprises while also putting a new emphasis on policies with a long-term focus.

Finally, we must learn from rising divisions in other countries and warning signs here by avoiding the social divisions which knowledge economies often make worse. We need our policies to foster a strong society which values excellence without promoting exclusion.

This is a very appropriate moment to hold this event because last month marked exactly sixty years since the first decisive move was taken towards building an economy which had the skills and innovation of the Irish people at its core.

On June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1959 Seán Lemass was elected Taoiseach and appointed his first government. Lemass had by then been active in public affairs for over forty years and some were foolish enough to see him as part of an old order. But his election as Taoiseach actually began a period of progressive policy innovation which remains unmatched and inspirational to this day.

There were many pillars of the modernisation and radicalism on which his government built a renewed Ireland. Perhaps the most important were a commitment to overcoming historic divisions on this island, participation in the great project of building a shared Europe of peace and prosperity and the systematic development of all elements of the education system. If you look at the scale and quality of research and innovation in Ireland, the world-leading industries which are based here and the rising living standards which they have enabled, none of this could have been possible without the Lemass revolution.

And the importance which Lemass put on education was demonstrated on his very first day as Taoiseach when, in one of only two changes he made to the government he inherited, he appointed the dynamic Patrick Hillery as Minister for Education.

Because Hillary went on to successfully negotiate membership of the EEC, created the European Social Fund as a European Commissioner and served two terms as President his period as Minister for Education has largely been overlooked. This is a mistake because this was a time of rapid innovation grounded in his and Lemass' deep belief in the role of the individual in social and economic progress.

Hillery created new types of schools, began radical curriculum innovations, initiated the technological sector of higher education and funded the renewal and expansion of universities. He also commissioned the work which was later used to justify free secondary education – the single most progressive public policy initiative of that or any subsequent government.

The commitment of Lemass and Hillery to the role of knowledge in Ireland's future can be found in a remarkable speech which Hillery gave in the Dáil during his first year as a Minister.

He was introducing a supplementary estimate of ten pounds which was a technical measure to allow the state to begin supporting the development of what is today Ireland's largest university campus in Belfield. Rather than simply recount a list of platitudes and get the formalities over quickly Hillery chose instead to deliver a lengthy speech on the value of education, the need for reform in schools and the expansion of state support at all levels.

He also took head-on the belief that Ireland shouldn't invest in higher education because other areas needed money and so many graduates had emigrated.

Hillery looked at international developments and felt that universities were assuming a new place in economic and social developments "and have thereby attained an importance which has not been theirs since the Middle Ages." He argued that Ireland must avoid the trap of trying to limit numbers and narrowly match graduates to available technical posts.

Instead, he put it starkly; Ireland should invest in expanding and renewing higher education "if we believe that the country has a future".

The development of modern Ireland from being one of Europe's poorest states was founded on a faith that it was the skills and knowledge of the Irish people must first be developed. And this faith has been vindicated time and again.

In the subsequent decades we have seen regular step-changes in levels of educational attainment by the Irish population. Ireland has gone from having one of the lowest levels of educational attainment at secondary and higher education to one of the highest. At each point these advances have been the result of clear public policy initiatives and sustained support programmes.

There is often a lazy assumption that innovation is something which is found only in private enterprise but if you look at the development and impact of Irish educational institutions over the decades you find dramatic innovation. And central to this have been public policies which sought to enable rather than control institutions.

This is absolutely the case in terms of higher education and research, where the scale and pace of development has been dramatic. Ireland has gone from being not even a footnote to being amongst the world leaders in the quality and impact of research in many critical areas.

It is important for us all to remember the key principles which underpinned this success because there is a danger that this progress is being taken for granted, and a new potentially damaging policy of greater central control is underway.

When I became Minister for Education and Science in 1997 the first memo which I brought to cabinet concerned the issue of skills shortages. Many investment and development projects were threatened by a lack of suitable graduates from certificate up to PhD levels and there was a need to act with urgency.

What I was first presented with was a plan which was largely based on what you might call a central carve-up of money between institutions. Because of the urgency of the moment we decided to proceed with most projects but government agreed to my proposal to change a series of important points in the final package.

It was agreed that we had to move towards a new strategic approach to developing the system. We simply couldn't build an innovative economy on the basis of reactive policy which followed rather than led knowledge breakthroughs.

At that stage the Department's funding for research programmes was exactly zero. Other than what institutions could scrape out of the block grant or win from EU-led programmes, research support simply did not exist. So a small start was made by creating a fund of less than €10 million for a new research initiative.

As an aside and in a move that sets the current mess in relation to broadband in a stark contrast, we added to the package money which within a year and half meant that Ireland became the first country in the world to connect every school to the internet.

Later I returned to government with a more comprehensive proposal on research which involved a new scheme for building research infrastructure and began the creation of new funding bodies. In what I think was an important statement of the importance of diversity and the role of excellence in all areas, the first such body created was one for funding humanities and social science research – which is now part of the Irish Research Council.

Critical to the success of everything which followed was that we adopted the principle of completely breaking the link between lobbying and funding. In spite of the fact that major new funding was being provided, cabinet agreed that for all awards the key reviews and decisions should be international and that no minister or civil servant would have any role in deciding on allocations. We took best practice internationally and implemented it in full from the very start.

By every reasonable measure the decision to develop our universities and to invest in research has been a dramatic success for our country. The strongest part of our economy during the recent recession was the most knowledge and research intensive – and it directly underpinned large parts of the recovery.

So whatever way you look at the development of Ireland over the last six decades or in the last few years there is simply no question that investment in knowledge has been our greatest enabler. Without rising education levels and rising support for pushing the frontiers through research there is no modern Ireland.

However the surest way to undermine success is to take it for granted. Past performance is no guarantee of future returns and the evidence at the moment is that there is a dangerous drift in policy which will cause serious damage if not addressed immediately.

A profound funding crisis is threatening the quality and reach of undergraduate education. Central control of funding is increasing while the flexibility which is an absolute requirement for breakthroughs is steadily being eroded. There is no support in place for long-term capacity building. There has been a move away from understanding the importance of a broad research base which both emphasizes training and is flexible.

Our system of higher education and research is undeniably under real pressure and this is likely to get much, much worse in the next decade unless we start acting now.

Classes are getting larger, contact hours are falling and funding is increasingly being linked to small, competitive schemes rather than general strategic needs. In terms of advanced research, the focus is narrowing and the number of PhD graduates in critical fields has fallen substantially. In the middle of a strong recovery enabled by our knowledge base, real investment in that base has been at the bottom of the agenda.

On top of this in little more than ten years the numbers of students seeking admission to higher education will increase by over one quarter and there are no plans in place for funding or managing the required expansion.

If we as a country genuinely believe in the role of higher education and research in shaping our future then we have to start by accepting that we can't keep going on as we have been in the past few years. It's time for a renewed agenda which is honest in addressing failings and shows real urgency about the challenges.

There are four broad areas of action which I believe we must address if we are to protect and promote inclusive and world-class higher education and research.

The first point we must address is to understand that we have to move on to a new understanding and a new agenda for this area.

If we want to give our people the opportunity to access and benefit from high quality higher education and to contribute to research capable of shaping our future then more of the same simply won't do. A sector which today needs to fight for basic support needs to be valued and become a priority.

Through most of our history our biggest debates have been about the creation of institutions. In fact going back to the foundation of Trinity as a seminary for the spread of the Elizabethan Reformation up the recent creation of a new type of technological university, every one of the current institutions in our system of higher education has its origins in a public debate and state initiative. For much of the last fifty years there have been constant debates about the creation or status of institutions.

What has all too often been missing is a debate on how we support what happens within the institutions. The funding and quality of institutions has received only a fraction of the attention which debates about their creation have had – and this is not sustainable.

If we are serious about higher education and research then this has to change and we need to place this area much higher on the day-to-day agenda of both our politics and our public discourse.

There are many ways in which this can be done – and as I have said our modern history shows examples of real leadership in delivering sustained progress. One way forward may be to accept that the size and complexity of this field requires us to completely change how government handles it.

I believe the time has come to consider separating higher education from the Department of Education. Our first and second-level systems face rising demands to address vital issues such as diversity and inclusion. Areas like special needs education in mainstream settings barely existed twenty years ago and today involve tens of thousands of people. Similarly the demand to modernise curricula, provide

new places and tackle exclusion mean that there is packed education agenda before you can even consider higher education and research.

The creation of a separate Department of Higher Education and Research might be the only way to guarantee both a real priority for this area and to provide strategic leadership. Such a Department would have critical mass in terms of size and budget and would mean that for the first time we would have a senior political and administrative leadership whose sole responsibility would be to focus on higher education and the wider research and knowledge agenda.

I am conscious of the fact that recent examples show that simply changing Department configurations and titles does not by itself deliver anything. So in order to make sure that any changes are soundly based and quickly implementable I intend to move quickly forward in cooperation with my colleagues to consult on the practicalities of creating a new Department for this field.

If we want to create a new agenda which solves the current crisis and provides a stable strategic approach to the future, then we need to implement significant changes. These must be capable of setting out a credible financial path for the future and to move the agenda onto access and quality.

Which brings me to the next overall point I want to make – if we commit ourselves to a new agenda it has to be based on a clear set of core strategic principles to guide implementation? We must end the drift and ad-hoc approach of recent years and set out clearly what our standards and objectives are.

In terms of the core funding of higher education, the system needs clarity and certainty. We have to end the permanent insecurity about what each year will bring. How can institutions be expected to manage staff and implement long-term plans if they lack basic financial security? Funding needs to be based on a transparent approach to providing the resources necessary to deliver quality education.

Beyond funding, we have to be clear in affirming our commitment to high levels of participation and a diversity of provision. We reached close to the top of international

tables for higher education participation because we set ourselves this objective, provided the relevant places and build the relevant policies into our core assumptions. We also ensured that courses were available in a full range of areas and at levels appropriate to the needs of learners.

The demographic realities of the next two decades is that unless we plan for the necessary expansion it will either happen in a hap-hazard way or we may end up seeing falling participation rates.

Within our institutions we need a new emphasis on substantive academic collaborations both domestically and internationally. We have only begun to scratch the surface of the potential for collaborations and most are linked to once-off projects. If we want to unleash the talent we have in our institutions then we have to make them more open to systematic collaboration with the best in other institutions here and abroad. For example, shared employment contracts, joint curriculum development and joint permanent seminar series should be enabled as a core part of ongoing work.

Standards aren't measured within the walls of one institution, they can only be seen in a much wider context and this is something we need to be far more active on.

One area which all institutions have to become far more active in addressing is the urgent need to build the principle of sustainability into all courses. We appear to be behind many countries in ensuring that our graduates are trained to evaluate and act on the growing evidence of a sustainability crisis in environment, economic and social policies. We are often too static and are accustomed to seeing things in a linear way – where established patterns are assumed to continue. To be effective this cannot be a top-down initiative – it must be something where institutions, schools, departments and individuals take ownership of meeting the great modern challenge of sustainability.

In relation to the funding of advanced research we must renew our commitment to a diverse research base which has priority areas but which understands the centrality of small teams and individual researchers to a culture of opening up new frontiers. There

is no serious example in the world of a successful research system which is focused only on priority areas – there must always be a broader base both to build on and to create a culture of excellence and innovation. A balanced research system is like a pyramid. At its base is high quality undergraduate teaching and learning. Above this you find postgraduate teaching, junior team members and so on – with the funding of high profile major institutes appearing at the top.

What we have also done is to effectively end the strategic approach to developing research infrastructure independently from research project funding or the national industrial priorities approach. The research infrastructure which has delivered so well for Ireland was mostly put in place through the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions. An independent review carried out by the former Chairperson of the European Science Foundation said that the PRTL had created a virtuous circle in developing institutional priorities and creating the potential which was then realised through funding from agencies such as SFI, the HRB and Teagasc.

A new research infrastructure programme which is independent of agency programmes must be put in place if we are to have the level and quality of research which can keep Ireland at the cutting edge.

I am concerned that we appear to have, at least at political level, lost the understanding that this broader approach to research is at least as important as specific outputs from research awards such as patents. Equally we must reaffirm that we value the arts, humanities and social sciences as essential elements of a vibrant and successful system.

What I am absolutely opposed to, and what must stop immediately, is the current political attempt to bring ministers and government departments back into the decision making structures for research awards. Last year's National Development Plan is full of proposals such as the "Disruptive Technologies Programme" which allow ministers the final say and by-pass awards procedures which has so consistently worked in the past.

When challenged about this, ministers have started saying that they have no intention of influencing anything. This brings to mind what Brian Clough said about the offside rule – “if you’re not interfering with play what are you doing on the pitch?”

When we broke the link between contacts and funding twenty years ago we showed a commitment to excellence first. We gave a confidence to researchers that by focusing on the quality of their work alone they could win funding. There is no reason to reintroduce ministers into funding decisions and it must stop now before it goes too far.

We should undertake an independent international review of our current funding approaches. Let’s take an objective assessment of the balance which we are striking between different types of programme funding and the needs for new infrastructure. Let’s also see what changes we need to make sure that we do not repeat the situation where we risk losing world-leading researchers from our universities because their topic is not within a narrow-set of priorities.

It is striking that the only current living Irish citizen to hold a Nobel Prize in a science field, William Campbell, even today could not have received government funding for his breakthrough research if he had been based in an Irish university.

This is too important an area to be allowed drift.

In addition to accepting the need for a new agenda with clear core principles we also have to address the very real innovation gap in Ireland between small and larger enterprise – and to encourage a longer-term focus in innovation.

We have not yet managed to build a greater engagement with research amongst indigenous industry to match that which now defines much of our multi-national sector. This is a real concern.

As we look at dramatic threats such as Brexit the need for much higher levels of innovation in both products and markets is clear. The greatest damage of Brexit in economic terms will be to indigenous industries which operate in markets which are

highly reliant on price sensitive sectors of the British market. The most resilient sectors will be those which have invested in research and are highly distinct.

What we need in Ireland is something which supports indigenous industry in the same manner as the *mittelstand* sector in Germany. They are medium-sized businesses which invest heavily in product development and have stable long-term ownership. They have shown a remarkable resilience through recessions and they are an essential foundation on which much larger companies rely for a steady stream of innovation.

Central to this is an ongoing connection with higher education and research institutes. The companies are not large enough to have big research departments so they form close collaborations with public-sector bodies. This is very different from the campus incubator idea which is necessarily far more early-stage.

We have tried many approaches to this in the past but we haven't made a breakthrough. I think we need to consider again how we can open up our research infrastructure to more systematic engagement with smaller enterprises. This may well be an essential step before we can give people a realistic space within which to create and grow new enterprises and sectors.

A final area we need to address in looking at the role of higher education and research in shaping Ireland's future is the leading role we need this sector to play in tackling the sort of social division which is becoming too much a part of the modern world.

Specialist and advanced knowledge will remain the principal driver of growth in the economy of the future. However we must never forget the most fundamental point of all – that growth must serve the needs of society as a whole. It is not an end in itself.

In the ever growing body of writing concerning the rise of populism and division in the democratic world and emerging consensus is talking about how the rhetoric of elitism and meritocracy has become exclusionary. We honour success but we too often fail to build a narrative and place which includes all groups.

We need our academic community to play a leading role in helping to increase public understanding of complex issues – to help reinforce a shared public space which is the only way of working against division and extremism.

A very good example of this working well has been seen in the commemoration of the centenaries of the Irish revolution and the First World War. A wide generation of scholars, many of whom have benefitted from new research programmes, have taken a lead in opening up new areas of study and making them accessible to the wider public. We have had strong debates and there is no single national narrative being promoted, but we have been able to reflect deeply in our past, what it means for our future and those things which bind us in spite of historic divisions.

The inclusiveness and the remarkable modernity of these centenary commemorations has been wonderful to see and it just this type of public engagement by our academics which we need to encourage and see more of in the years ahead.

It is also essential that we understand that in funding higher education and advanced research we are using scarce public resources and putting them into fields which many people do not understand and where there can be headline-grabbing benefits for some. As such there is a risk that public support and legitimacy can be undermined.

The careful use of public resources, the avoidance of excess or waste and an acknowledgement of the support of the public need to be second nature in all of our institutions. Just because work is essential for the country does not mean that it does not have to be justified or that it comes without reasonable constraints.

As I have said, I believe a fair reading of modern Irish history is that education and the wider development of knowledge provided the spark and has sustained most of the growth and progress we have seen during more than half a century.

Through a series of important initiatives we have secured a radical and sustained improvement in the education and skills of our people – and this improvement has enabled everything else.

But we cannot assume that we will continue to progress if we just carry on as we have before.

If education teaches us anything it is surely the need to keep questioning ourselves and to look for ways to meet the new challenges which are always emerging.

The harsh reality is that our higher education and research system is at a moment of truth. Important measures are going in the wrong direction and there is an undeniable funding crisis which may cause real damage to participation and quality within the system.

In order to make sure Ireland has a future it can shape through being at the frontiers of knowledge we have to accept the need for a renewed agenda.

This agenda has to be based on clear principles including secure funding, non-political decisions, a balance between a broad research base and limited priority areas, a significant improvement in collaborations and building the issue of sustainability into the teaching and research agendas of all institutions. As part of this new agenda we must also consider a radical reorganisation of how we oversee the highest level of policy making for the sector.

Beyond this we have to act bridge a damaging innovation gap, which leaves much indigenous industry exposed to shocks such as Brexit and means we miss many opportunities for greater long-term stability. Higher education institutions have a leading role to play in this.

Finally we need our scholars to be out-front in helping Ireland to develop a dialogue which avoids division and ensure public legitimacy for the priority which higher education and research should receive.

Sixty years ago Patrick Hillery told the parliament of a much poorer country that if they believed Ireland had a future they had to begin an unprecedented programme of developing participation in higher education and the training of people who would open up new frontiers for Ireland.

This argument is as relevant today as it has ever been – and it's time for us to implement an agenda which once again puts its faith in the skills and innovation of the Irish people as the foundation for our future.

-ENDS-