

University of Limerick Oral History Project

Interview with Tom O'Donnell

11 December 2008.

I: Tom, thank you very much for talking to me. We are going to begin around the year 1955.

TOD: Yes, because prior to 1955, I had been in Dublin for eight years, where I held different teaching posts after graduating from UCD with a BA Degree. I have a very strong family background in politics and public life on both my parents sides of the family, so I think that from an early age my mind was focused on politics, and so in 1955 I got the idea that I would have to give it a go. I realised then if I had any chance of making a political career I would have to come back to Limerick where my uncle had been a T.D. earlier, so I packed up the teaching, took a job as a company representative covering Limerick and surrounding counties. I became very involved with Muintir na Tire and Macra na Ferme and of course in the Fine Gael organisation as well. I became particularly involved in Muintir na Tire and ended up as Editor of their monthly journal, *The Landmark*. I was attending meetings of branches of the different organizations of which I was involved throughout County Limerick. At this time the campaign for a University of Limerick was beginning to gather momentum and gradually a huge momentum developed. Resolutions of support were being passed by local authorities, voluntary organisations, chambers of commerce etc. I have been able to find some copies of the *Limerick Leader* which give an indication of how widespread and determined the campaign was.

A front page article in the Limerick Leader, dated Monday 25th January, 1960 is headed 'CASE FOR LIMERICK UNIVERSITY COLLEGE GETS FURTHER SUPPORT'. The article goes on then to state 'Resolutions passed this week calling for the establishment in Limerick of a Constituent College of a National University of Ireland brings the total received by the Limerick University Project Committee to over a 100'. The latest resolutions are from the following: Cappamore Co-Operative Agricultural Dairy Society, Croagh Parish Guild of Muintir na Tire, Fine Gael (Murroe Branch), North Tipperary County Executive NFA, Ballybrown Macra na Ferme, Feohanagh and

Castlemahon Guild Muintir na Tire, Tipperary Branch I.N.T.O, Limerick Men's Association in Dublin and Bruff Macra na Ferme. On Saturday 30 January, the *Limerick Leader* devoted a full editorial to support the University campaign. It also carried another front page headline, 'Bishop of Limerick Supports Claim For University College' over a report of an address by the then Bishop of Limerick Most Reverend Dr. Murphy to the annual dinner of the city branch of the INTO.'

I myself was using the opportunity of my attendance at meetings of the various organisations with which I was involved to promote the campaign. On 23rd January, 1960, the *Limerick Leader* published a full page report of research I had carried out within the context of my work with Muintir na Tire. This article aroused considerable interest among community organisations, local development associations etc., as it made the University campaign relevant to their objectives.

The records clearly show that the demand was for a constituent college of the National University of Ireland. I was very much in favour of this because I came from a family which, as well as being political, was very much education orientated. Five members of my family received university education. We all had to go to Dublin, at considerable expense to the family as we did not qualify for scholarships. Another dimension to my interest was that one of the prominent members of the University of Limerick Committee was Mrs. Margaret Lyddy, whose husband Frank was the Honorary National Secretary of Muintir na Tire and a close friend of mine, so I was very much tuned into the University campaign. I was totally convinced about it and an ardent supporter.

In 1961 I was elected to Dáil Eireann and of course every chance I got in the Dáil right through the sixties and early seventies I spoke about the campaign for a University of Limerick. I asked numerous questions and spoke in several debates. I should mention that there was one member of the University Committee, Paddy Mc Carthy who was from Cappamore and was a secondary teacher in Doon Christian Brothers School, in fact his father was principal of the national school in Cappamore, where I received my primary education. He was a great researcher and was continuously drafting parliamentary questions for me and for my colleagues from Limerick. There were several public meetings in Limerick and a major rally in Dublin, all of which I attended.

The campaign was for a constituent college of the National University of Ireland which would include Law and Medicine. We wanted a University the same as Galway, Cork and UCD. Now the government of the day had different ideas and they envisaged a new type of third level institution which would be technologically orientated. In 1972, the National Institute of Higher Education was established and a body called NCEA was established on an ad-hoc basis with a view to becoming the statutory degree awarding body for Limerick. You probably know all this. (Indeed it is in the public domain as well, isn't it?), so in 1972 the NIHE was opened and the intention was that the NCEA would confer the degrees.

There was a change of government in March, 1973 and I became a Minister in the Government; Minister for the Gaeltacht. There was a debate in the Dáil on the 6 December 1973 and this is what Dick Bourke, the Minister for Education said and I quote:

I'd like to say a few words about higher education following the decision of the government at the time to establish a third level educational institution in Limerick. The Higher Education Authority was asked to recommend how such an institution might be fitted into the existing or future provisions for higher education. The authority made certain recommendations and four years have passed since the Higher Education Authority reported on an institution to be established in Limerick and several events have occurred in the intervening period which have affected a situation which then prevailed in the Limerick region. In the first place, there has been established on the same campus a national College for Physical Education, which it is now planned to expand for the education of teachers for many other specialised subjects. Secondly, courses, leading to the Higher Diploma in Education now being provided in Mary Immaculate Training College from UCC, and thirdly, that the training course for primary teachers which is also provided in Mary Immaculate is to be extended from two to three years. These three developments have altered the whole landscape of higher education, not only in Limerick but in the country generally.

It was in this context that I made my recent statement and I want to make it clear that when I said I would envisage a University for Limerick I was not thinking about the immediate future, but about a development which might come about in the next decade or so, so meanwhile diplomas and degrees earned in the Limerick Institute of Higher Education will be awarded by the National Council for Education Awards.

That was the view at the end of 1973 of the Government of which I was a member. I was quite happy with the situation and I was particularly excited about the logic of what would evolve, we were going to have a University eventually and of course that what's happened. Dick Bourke was not too far out in his forecast. Limerick was declared a University in 1989, so he wasn't that very far out.

Not only was I happy with what the Minister said, but my constituents in Limerick and the people in Limerick were generally quite happy. There was at this time a growing public realisation which I shared, of the merits of the new type of third level college which was the NIHE. Unfortunately, during 1974, there was a complete change of Government policy in relation to Limerick. On 16 December 1974, Dick Bourke announced in a public statement that the National Institute for Higher Education in Limerick; 'shall be a recognised College of the National University of Ireland with the capacity to evolve into a constituent college of the N.U.I. or to become an autonomous degree awarding institution'.

UCC was asked to examine and determine whether or not the undergraduate courses at NIHE were of the standard required for the award of degrees by the National University of Ireland. The Government's decision and the Minister's suggestion that the degrees should be awarded by UCC was rejected by the Governing Body and students of the National Institute of Higher Education. Quite frankly, I was unhappy myself about the change as I had come to recognise the merit of the type of third level college we had in Limerick and the manner in which these courses were being developed to meet the educational needs of a rapidly expanding industry based regional development programme in the Mid-West Region spearheaded by Shannon Development Company founded by Dr. Brendan O'Regan.

I was also greatly impressed by Dr. Ed Walsh and by the calibre and enthusiasm of the members of the Governing Body and the staff of the Institute, and more significantly I was quite pleased with what Dick Bourke, who was my closest friend in the cabinet, said about the situation in Limerick when he made his speech in the Dáil in December 1973. I shared Dick Bourke's vision that NIHE, Thomond College and Mary Immaculate College would evolve eventually into an autonomous University of Limerick. Unfortunately, for Limerick and particularly for the students of NIHE, Government policy on third level education underwent major change as a result of an extensive review by a Cabinet Sub-Committee in 1974. It should be pointed out that the Government led by Liam Cosgrave from 1973 to 1977 had the highest number of high profile university academics of any Government in the history of the state, before or since. Garrett Fitzgerald, Conor Cruise O'Brien and Justin Keating were Ministers while John Kelly was Government Chief Whip with the right to attend cabinet meetings. Another very high profile academic, David Thornley was a Labour Party T.D. and a member of the European Parliament and naturally had an input into the formulation of Government education policy. The Government review which naturally was dominated by the academics in the Cabinet resulted in a complete change of policy in relation to NIHE Limerick. The Minister for Education Dick Bourke, on the 16 December 1974 announced that NIHE Limerick would be a recognised College of the National University of Ireland with the capacity to evolve into a constituent college of the NUI or to become an autonomous degree awarding institution.

Subsequently it was decided that the degrees in Limerick should be awarded by University College Cork. UCC then set-up a special committee to examine the Ministers proposal. On 16 February 1976, an article was published in the Irish Independent by Educational Correspondent, John Walshe, which reported in detail the outcome of the deliberations of the UCC Committee. It was published at the same time as a private members motion by John Wilson T.D., the then Fianna Fáil Spokesman on Education was being discussed in the Dail and John Walshe's article in the *Irish Independent* was quoted by Des O'Malley T.D. The reported comments by the UCC committee were highly critical of NIHE. They questioned very seriously the qualifications of the teaching staff as well as the contents and nature of the courses.

The UCC report came as a real bombshell causing consternation, worry and indeed anger among the Governing Body, staff and students of NIHE as well as the student's parents. We now had a situation in February 1976 where student's who were due to graduate in June 1976 did not know who would be conferring their degrees or indeed if they would obtain any qualifications at all. Now being the locally based Minister I was naturally in the firing line and the students and their parents were in contact with me. It was probably the most stressful, difficult and embarrassing time for me in my whole political career and I was personally very upset and angry about the whole thing. I contacted Dick Bourke and left him in no doubt about the reaction in Limerick and the deep concern which I shared about the graduation of the final year students. I suggested to him that the NCEA should be asked to confer the degrees just as the NCEA had done the previous year for the graduates of the National College of Physical Education in Limerick. Dick made it quite clear to me that there was no going back on the Government decision that Limerick should become a recognised college of the National University of Ireland. I then asked him to arrange a meeting for both of us with representatives of the NUI and UCC to see if we could find a solution to the problem which had arisen. Dick immediately agreed to this suggestion and a few days later we met representatives of the Senate of the NUI and the governing body of UCC. It proved to be a frustrating and unsatisfactory meeting. The NUI / UCC representatives were not prepared to budge an inch. The Government persisted in its decision to have NIHE, a recognised college of the NUI. The first class of NIHE students who should have graduated in 1976 had to undertake a further period of study under a restructured syllabus and eventually were conferred with their degrees in 1977 by the Chancellor of the NUI.

There was a change of Government in June 1977 and the new Government put the NCEA on a statutory basis in 1978 and it became the degree awarding authority for NIHE in 1979. During the General Election of 1977 the future of NIHE naturally became an issue in the campaign and I was getting a considerable amount of criticism of the Government at the door steps. I was saved by the fact that I had been for several years to the fore front of the campaign to secure a University for Limerick and, secondly, that I had done my best to try and resolve the degree awarding problem. The people acknowledged that I had done my best and they laid the blame on the academics in the Cabinet.

The outcome of the 1977 General Election was disastrous for the Government with three Cabinet Ministers, Pat Cooney, Justin Keating and Conor Cruise O'Brien all losing their seats and Jack Lynch being elected Taoiseach with a 20 seat majority.

While the General Election proved disastrous for the Government, I was comfortably elected. During the course of the campaign my canvassers and I were meeting with a considerable amount of criticism of the Government's handling of the N.I.H.E. issue but not of me personally.

I. They knew you as someone who had supported the committee and the University campaign from the very beginning.

TOD: Right back from 1955 onwards, very much so. I knew all the members of the University project committee, especially John Moloney, Paddy Mc Carthy, Sean Prendergast, Jim Lyons and of course my friend Mrs. Lyddy, to whom I have already referred. The people of Limerick appreciated the fact that I had been to the forefront of the campaign to secure a university for Limerick right from the beginning and that I had done everything possible to try and resolve the problem regarding the award of degrees.

I. At the time though when the decision was made to set-up NIHE it wasn't favourably received at all in Limerick. There was a lot of protest against it, wasn't there, when the Commission on Higher Education recommended a Technological College.

TOD: Yes, very much so. Speaking in a debate on the estimate for the Department of Education on Tuesday 6 February 1968, I dealt at length with the Limerick University question. In fact on the following day the Irish Times reported my speech under the heading 'Limerick College a mere Sop'. As reported in the *Irish Times*, I said that Limerick would not accept the proposed new college recommended by the Commission on Higher Education.

The views expressed by me in that debate in the Dáil reflected public opinion in Limerick. The primary objective of the University campaign was to secure a constituent college of the National University of Ireland. The people of Limerick did not want what they regarded as an inferior type Institution but a full blown University.

I: Were you aware of the Mulcahy Report the Steering Committee on Technological education which came out in 1965?.

TOD: I was yes, and that strongly recommended a Technological College as well. Yes, I was very much aware of the Mulcahy Report. I came to know Noel very well and hold him in the highest regard. In fact in 1975, when I established Bord na Gaeilge he was one of my nominees to the Board together with Dr. Ken Whittaker. Noel also worked closely with the late Donogh O'Malley. Donogh was a very close personal friend of mine even though we were on opposite sides politically. In addition to the Mulcahy Report there was of course the Lichfield Report and the report of the Commission on Higher Education and another report which was probably the most important report in the history of Irish Education was 'Investment in Education', which was published during Dr. Paddy Hillery's term as Minister for Education. Paddy who was also a very good friend of mine laid the foundations for the subsequent free post primary education policy launched by Donagh O'Malley. Unfortunately Paddy never got the credit which he deserved for his pioneering work. Going back to your question about the Mulcahy Report. That report and the Report of the Commission on Higher Education did not change the views of the people of Limerick who continued to demand a constituent college of the NUI. The Mulcahy Report did, however make a significant contribution to the national debate on the educational needs of a growing industrialised economy.

I: And if we just go further again to what you were explaining about the 1970s. Do you think in hindsight that those recommendations that were made by Dick Bourke, Minister for Education that they were not very well thought out?. You know that they met with so much resistance.

TOD: First of all, remember that Dick Bourke made two speeches. The first in December, 1973 where he said that degrees would be conferred by the National Council of Education Awards and that Limerick would eventually evolve into an autonomous University. He made another speech a year later in December, 1974, in the course of which he stated

‘The National Institute for Higher Education Limerick shall be a recognised College of the National University of Ireland with capacity to evolve into a Constituent College of the N.U.I. or to become an autonomous degree awarding Institute’.

As I have already pointed out the decision announced by Dick Bourke in 1974 led to an appalling situation in the academic year 1975 / 76 when the final year students didn't know in February of that year, following the adverse report from UCC, who was going to confer their degrees, or whether they would receive any degrees at all in June. The real insight into the whole debacle can be found in the official report of Dáil Eireann Volume 288, 17 February 1976 and in the *Irish Independent* article by John Walsh, Education Correspondent on the 16 February 1976. Regarding Dick Bourke, it must be remembered that he was endeavouring to implement a decision taken by the Government on the recommendations of the Cabinet sub-committee. It is easy to be wise afterwards and I am not going to exonerate myself or cast any aspersions on Dick Bourke who was my closest personal friend in the Cabinet, or indeed on any of my academic colleagues on the Cabinet Sub-Committee. All I will say is that, the situation should not have been allowed to drag along until reaching a crisis in February 1976. The views of UCC should have been ascertained much more quickly, but once they were known, the NCEA should have been asked to confer the degrees. This was my opinion at the time and I haven't changed my mind since.

I. Did the Students contact you?

TOD: The students came to me in March 1976 following the refusal of UCC to recognise the courses at NIHE as they and their parents were becoming very worried about the situation. I remember a delegation of final year students arrived to my office in Limerick very concerned and pleaded with me to do whatever I could as a member of the Government to resolve this situation. As a matter of interest one of the students is now a very distinguished academic, Dr. Bridget Laffan of UCD. As I have already explained I contacted Dick Bourke and he arranged for both of us to meet with representatives of the NUI the outcome of which was unsuccessful.

Going into the 1977 General Election, I was naturally apprehensive about how the NIHE issue would impact on my electoral prospects in my own constituency of Limerick East where NIHE was located. Fortunately however, any fears which I may have had proved to be unfounded and I was comfortably elected.

I continued to take a keen interest in NIHE both in Dáil Eireann and in the European Parliament and commended and supported its work at every opportunity.

I was elected to the European Parliament in the first Direct Elections in 1979 and again in 1984 and during those ten years I had a considerable amount of contact with NIHE. I sponsored visits by groups of students to the European Parliament and invited professors to address seminars which I organised throughout Munster. David Coombes, Joyce O'Connor, Geraldine Sheridan and Donal Dineen addressed seminars for me.

During my ten years as an MEP I was Spokesman on Regional Policy and Regional Planning for The European People's Party and referred on many occasions at committee meetings and at plenary sessions to the very fruitful interaction and co-operation that existed between Shannon Development Company and the NIHE and which was a major contributory factor in making the Mid-West a model of successful regional development

In 1989 I did not seek re-election to the European Parliament and retired from elected political office. Shortly after announcing my retirement I was contacted by Dr. Brendan O'Regan and invited to join the Board of the Irish Peace Institute which he had founded and which was based at the University of Limerick. The mission of the Institute is to promote programmes of education, research, and outreach in which people from North and South would participate. I was very pleased to accept Brendan's invitation and to join a Board which included a number of very distinguished people including two members whom I greatly admired, Dr. Brendan O'Regan, Founding Chairman of Shannon Development Company and Dr. Ed Walsh, Founding President of the University of Limerick. The Institute is a voluntary non-governmental organisation.

Shortly after my appointment to the Board of the Irish Peace Institute, Dr. O'Regan informed me that for family reasons he would be moving to Dublin from Killaloe and taking up residence in Malahide and therefore no longer would be able to give day to day

attention to the Irish Peace Institute. He asked me if I would take over as Executive Chairman but that he would continue as an ordinary board member and would continue to make the maximum input possible to the development of the Institute. I agreed to Brendan's request and for the next ten years I devoted an average of three days per week to the work of the Institute on a purely voluntary non-remunerated basis. I had an office in UL during all that time. I retired as Chairman in 1999 and was given the title of Honorary President in place of Brendan O'Regan who was accorded the title of Patron of the Irish Peace Institute. I am still on the Board and regularly attend meetings and other activities.

The Irish Peace Institute has made and continues to make a significant contribution to the promotion of mutual understanding and co-operation between the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One of the major initiatives undertaken by the Institute was to contribute to the establishment of a Chair of Peace Studies and a Peace Research Institute at U.L. The Institute also organises conferences, seminars and concerts with participants from North and South as well as North/South exchange visits involving schools, local communities and other organisations.

Another UL linked project with which I have been involved is the PAUL Partnership. P.A.U.L. is an acronym for Public Action on Unemployment Limited. In 1995 I accepted an invitation to be Chairman of the Board of the PAUL Partnership, the Limerick City Based Area Partnership and served in that capacity for ten years again on a purely voluntary basis. It was one of a number of such partnerships established by the Government in disadvantaged areas of the country having high rates of unemployment especially long term unemployment. The Partnership strategy was designed to encourage the maximum participation by local communities in these areas in the formulation and implementation of programmes beneficial to them.

Community development therefore became a key element in the work of the partnership and being well aware of the importance of leadership in the advancement of community development, I encouraged PAUL to enter discussions with UL with a view to providing a diploma course in Community Development. Mr. John O'Brien of UL and Anne Kavanagh CEO of PAUL played a key role in bringing the project to fruition.

This has proven very successful and upwards of a hundred people have successfully completed the course to-date and are playing a key role in providing local leadership in Limerick City and County. The provision of this course by UL was a source of special personal satisfaction to me as it related directly to the article I published in the *Limerick Leader* in January 1960. I retired from the PAUL Partnership in 2005 but I am still on the Board of the Peace Institute and a regular visitor to the Institutes offices at UL.

Another UL related project with which I was involved for a number of years as a board member is the Limerick Community Based Education Initiative (LCBEI). This is a very successful initiative involving St. Enda's Post Primary School and the University of Limerick which is directed by Dr. Pat O'Connor, Principal of St. Enda's. St. Enda's is located in a very disadvantaged area in Limerick City where traditionally a large number of pupils dropped out before or after Junior Certificate. LCBEI was established as a non-profit company limited by guarantee and its objective is to encourage and assist pupils to complete post primary and to go onto third level. This project has proven to be very successful. To-date 240 pupils completed a range of third level courses, including Diploma, Graduate and Post-Graduate Levels and recently 4 students have received PhD's.

That then is an outline of my involvement with UL from the university campaign of the 1950s and 1960s up to the present. Looking back over the past half a century I have no hesitation in saying that the establishment of Shannon Development Company under the dynamic leadership of Dr. Brendan O'Regan in 1959; the extension of its remit to Limerick, Clare and North Tipperary in 1968; the establishment of NIHE under the inspired leadership of its Founding President, Edward Walsh and its evolution to an autonomous university in 1989, and the co-operation and the interactions between the two were major contributory factors in the transformation of the Mid-West Region into a model of successful regional development.