

Mr Chancellor,

No family name is more illustrious in the history of these islands than that of O'Neill: the *Clann Uí Néill* of Gaelic history and legend. The ancient progenitor of the O'Neills was the renowned warrior *Niall Naoi Giallach*, or "Niall of the Nine Hostages". As his nickname suggests, Niall wasn't above a spot of kidnapping. Legend has it that one of his abductees was one Maewin Succat, a bewildered young Brit who would later be celebrated as Saint Patrick, the Apostle of the Gaels. Thus it was that Niall inadvertently launched the Celtic explosion of learning, which, following its expansion through the Western Isles and Northumbria, would go on to substantially illuminate the European Dark Ages.

Unlike Niall of the Nine Hostages, Baroness Onora O'Neill of Bengarve tends to take no prisoners – at least in print, and certainly when it comes to confronting many of the spurious orthodoxies that hinder rational discussion of major ethical issues faced by society today. Amongst the issues on which she has joined battle in recent years are the following:

- The perversion of educational priorities in our secondary schools which has arisen from the imposition of GCSE league tables, and from the untimely elimination of a modern language from the list of compulsory subjects.
- The paralysation of public services under the weight of record-keeping intended to improve 'accountability' and 'transparency'; as Baroness

O'Neill has pointed out, as the piles of unread documentation mount, the trust which citizens say they have in public bodies seems to be in steep decline.

- The often-heated debates over biomedical ethics; as anyone who had the opportunity to hear Baroness O'Neill's public lecture on 'Informed Consent' last night can attest, she has a knack for making rigorous analysis highly accessible to non-specialists. Few can match the flair with which she successfully marries lucidity to conciseness.

Despite the incisiveness of her critiques, Onora O'Neill remains a non-controversial character. She simply does not arouse the antipathy which many other opinion-formers evoke. Friends and adversaries alike acknowledge a quality of character which might be termed "a commanding quietness"; a genuine air of authority born of deep wisdom, and supported by wry wit and an impeccable sense of timing - knowing when to speak, and when to maintain silence.

Raised in the beautiful Braid Valley, in County Antrim, Onora was educated in London and Oxford. She travelled to the USA as a Fulbright Scholar, where she completed her doctorate at Harvard, under the supervision of John Rawls, the foremost Anglophone political philosopher of our times. After seven years teaching in New York, Onora returned to the UK, taking up a lectureship at the University of Essex. She was to spend fifteen busy years at Essex, during which time she established her enduring reputation as one of the greatest moral philosophers to emerge in this country in living memory. Along with several other women philosophers around the world, Professor O'Neill

was instrumental in reinterpreting the work of that great 18th Century philosopher Immanuel Kant in light of what is now known of human development. This work reasserted the centrality of reason and personal autonomy as key principles in the definition of ethical codes. The application of these principles is no soft option. As Kant himself put it:

“In law someone is guilty when they violate the rights of others;
in ethics they are guilty if they even think of doing so”.

The heights of integrity to which such a Kantian maxim calls us are extremely challenging. They cannot be attained without great determination and strength of character. Her friends say of Onora O’Neill that she does indeed live by her Kantian precepts; she has scaled these heights of integrity. But then she is O’Neill of *Bengarve* – the Gaelic *Beinn Garbh*, or ‘rough mountain’: *this* O’Neill, like so many of her forbears, is not intimidated by dizzying heights and rough going. Not that being a committed Kantian is all work and no play. Former students from Essex still recall with glee when their world-famous Professor attended a postgraduate party clad in a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan:

“Kantians do it from duty!”

1992 marked the beginning of another period of astonishing professional productivity, after Professor O’Neill became Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge. Besides maintaining her generous

dedication to her students and her prolific publication rate, Professor O'Neill redoubled her activities in public service. She has long been a Trustee of many charities, including the Nuffield Foundation, which she later went on to Chair. In her role as Chair of the Foundation's Council on Bioethics, and later of the Human Genetics Advisory Commission, Professor O'Neill was thrust into the media spotlight. In 1999, Professor O'Neill was appointed to the House of Lords, where she serves with great diligence as a cross-bencher. She is currently President of the British Academy, and was recently elected an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society. In 2002, Baroness O'Neill delivered the BBC's prestigious Reith Lectures: where many a lesser orator might have entitled them "Analysis of the effects of imposing on the public sector a culture of detailed performance metrics on the perceptions which citizens have of the probity of public bodies", Baroness O'Neill deployed her customary flair by entitling them simply "On Trust".

The North of England Stem Cell Institute is one of the UK's top three centres in that field, and the only one outside London which was visited by the House of Lords Select Committee on Stem Cells. This was the context in which many of this University's stem cell researchers came to meet Baroness O'Neill in person. All are agreed that her work has been key to the creation of an enabling environment for this promising area of research in this country, which has enabled the UK – and this University in particular – to develop and maintain globally-leading profiles in the field.

Immanuel Kant once wrote that “Science is organized knowledge [while] Wisdom is organized life”. Kant’s disciple, Baroness Onora O’Neill, has brought bountiful fruits of organized thought to many areas of public policy. For creating wisdom we can truly live by, I now ask you, Mr Chancellor, to bestow on Baroness Onora O’Neill, the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger