

**Conferring of Honorary Doctorate on H.E. Michael D. Higgins,  
President of Ireland by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens  
Citation by Professor Maria Sidiropoulou,  
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Your Excellency, the President of Ireland Dr. Michael D. Higgins

Your Excellency, the President of the Hellenic Republic Dr. Prokopios  
Pavlopoulos

Plato believed that the perfect republic, would come about either when philosophers become kings, or kings become philosophers. Borrowing from Percy Bysshe Shelley, who believed that ‘poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’, I propose instead that the ideal republic is more likely to be achieved when poets become presidents. Today we are delighted to honour the Poet-President of Ireland, Michael Daniel Higgins, with the highest honour of our university, the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. During his academic career President Higgins lectured on political philosophy; he may therefore be described as Philosopher-Poet-President!

Shelley contrasted analytic reason with the poetic faculty of imagination. Genius blossoms when reason and imagination together combine to enrich one another. Ireland and Greece have both exhibited such genius at various times throughout their history. Their languages are the oldest in Europe, each with an ancient oral tradition predating all others. The creative genius of each nation has thrived in a manner that makes them unique among countries of the West.

Today’s honoree is an outstanding example of a person who combines common sense and rationality with creative imagination. His practical life experience,

academic training as political scientist, dedication to humanitarian causes around the world, his promotion of the Arts in Ireland: all of these achievements explain his unparalleled popularity, and why in 2011 he was elected the 9th President of Ireland with the vote of over one million citizens, the largest ever recorded in Irish history. As President he continues to inspire the citizens of Ireland by the generous manner in which he supports and encourages initiatives by people from all walks of life and every background. His presidency is one of ideas and imagination, in which politics meets art.

Many similarities between Ireland and Greece have been recorded. We may refer to the parallel histories of the two countries: with ancient roots in a glorious past each has struggled to attain independence in modern times; recently both our countries have experienced the economic crisis, and a similar plight of emigration. Central to each of our peoples, however, is a pride in our past and the cherishing of such family values as honour and loyalty.

In this context of mutual affection and respect the Department of English Language and Literature of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens is pleased to honour the first citizen of Ireland, a man who ‘places ethics before competence’ a ‘radical egalitarian’, an academic and statesman, a poet and writer.

Michael D. Higgins was born in Limerick in 1941 and raised in County Clare, in the west of Ireland, where he attended Ballycare National School. He received his secondary education at St Flannan’s College, Ennis, after which he spent time as a factory worker and clerk before pursuing his studies at University College Galway, the University of Manchester and Indiana University.

I would like to thank Emeritus Professor Fran O'Rourke for insightful comments on this talk and for drawing my attention to the fact that at secondary school President Higgins excelled as a student of classical Greek. During his years as an academic political scientist he maintained his interest in classical authors, especially Plato and Aristotle. As President of Ireland he has been a strong advocate of Philosophy at secondary level, with an emphasis on the wisdom of the Greek masters.

President Higgins has been a strong advocate of democracy in education. As a lecturer in political science and sociology in the National University of Ireland, Galway, he promoted third level education beyond the confines of the university and travelled extensively across the West of Ireland to provide evening classes for interested groups.

Besides his academic activities Michael D. Higgins has been throughout his adult life committed to public service. Motivated by a concern for equality and justice he has served as a public representative at many levels, from city councillor and Mayor to 9 years in the Seanad and 25 in Dáil Éireann. He was Ireland's first Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht from 1993 to 1997, during which time he had direct responsibility for the promotion of the Irish language and for the economic and social development of Irish-speaking areas in the State. He was responsible for the establishment of an Irish-language television station, Teilifís na Gaeilge, now TG4. During his period as minister he emphasised the need for active cultural policy which would encourage critical thinking. He also repealed laws of political censorship in the Irish media.

President Higgins was Labour Party Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs in the Irish Parliament and a founder member of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs. He has been Honorary Adjunct Professor at the Irish Centre for Human Rights at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He was a regular columnist

for the popular 'Hot Press' magazine for a period of 10 years (1982—1992), during which he engaged young readers with social issues.

Michael D. Higgins has been concerned with emigrants who fled the economic crisis; he has exhibited keen solidarity with the Irish abroad and has been a regular visitor to Irish Centres in Britain. He has campaigned for human rights and for the promotion of peace and democracy in many parts of the world, from Nicaragua and Chile to Cambodia, Iraq and Somalia. In 1992, Michael D. Higgins was the first recipient of the Seán MacBride Peace Prize from the International Peace Bureau in Helsinki, in recognition of his work for justice across the globe. Every year the IPB awards a special prize to a person or organisation that has done outstanding work for peace, disarmament and/or human rights.

As already mentioned, Michael D. Higgins is a writer and poet who has contributed to a variety of publications on diverse aspects of Irish politics, sociology, history and culture. He has published three collections of essays: *Causes for Concern: Irish Politics, Culture and Society*, *Renewing the Republic* and *When Ideas Matter*. President Higgins has also published four collections of poetry: *The Betrayal*, *The Season of Fire*, *An Arid Season* and *New and Selected Poems*. Ten years ago the Greek-Irish Society was delighted to host a reading by Michael D. Higgins here in Athens while he attended the Symposium of European Cultural Capital Cities.

The Department of English Language and Literature has been inspired by the President's concern to protect Irish, a minority language, resisting the effects of globalization. In the same vein, we are very much concerned about raising awareness of the fact that Greek textual features are weakened in Greek translated texts as an effect of globalization. We have also been inspired by the President's interest in the politics of the media and the representation of identities in the public

space; this reflects his concern for 'identity and reputation', 'human rights' and 'public representation'. Our Department is eager to encourage the critical potential of our students as they engage with public discourse through their work as translators and citizens.

Similarly, the Department has been inspired by the President's concern for the Arts: Joyce, Wilde and Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, Yeats and others have been studied in the Department. In the context of the Irish struggle for national independence and mythological heritage, it has focused on Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and has taken critical approaches to the Irish theatre. It recently co-organized a poetry symposium entitled 'Inner and Outer Landscapes of Irish and Greek Poets'.

The School of Philosophy has been inspired by the President's concern for the emigrants. The School of Philosophy has recently taken significant action for improving the life of the current emigrant population in Greece.

The Department of English Language and Literature of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens is thus extremely delighted today to be conferring an Honorary Doctorate Degree on the President of Ireland, His Excellency, Dr. Michael Daniel Higgins.