

## Our Rhyming President: Michael D. Higgins

Written by Desmond Devoy - Last Updated Thursday, 12 January 2012 07:00

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For a nation known for its disproportionate literary heft like Ireland, it is perhaps appropriate that poet Michael D. Higgins, 70, was elected as the Republic's ninth president on Thursday, Oct. 27.

While St. Thomas More is credited as being *A Man For All Seasons*, Michael D., as he is affectionately known, is also known for many things, not the least of which is for being a class act amongst the so-called "Magnificent Seven," the record number of presidential candidates in this year's race to replace the outgoing Mary McAleese.

Higgins is not only a former Galway West TD and cabinet minister, but a lecturer, peace campaigner and president of Galway United football club.

His speeches in the Dail - now available on YouTube - seem, in a good way, like a throw-back to something from Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, including a recent debate over cutting the minimum wage. In an era when saying one is a socialist is akin to political suicide, Higgins wore it proudly, in soundly criticizing a proposal that he saw as attacking the most desperately poor in Irish society.

When he speaks about poverty, he speaks from experience.

Born in Limerick on April 18, 1941, health and work problems forced him and his brother John to be sent to the farm of an unmarried aunt and uncle near Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare.

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Higgins later told the *Irish Independent* that he could only see his parents and two sisters during their monthly visits from Limerick.

"I experienced...the unfolding disintegration of family life due to the poverty and lack of work opportunities of my father over many years," he told the newspaper.

But Higgins' early days were not all a pale imitation of *Angela's Ashes*. Indeed, he took part in the average life of an Irish boy in the 1940s and 50s, attending nearby Ballycar National School, and later St. Flannan's College in Ennis, County Clare.

A fateful move, however, would make Munster's loss Connaught's gain, when the young Higgins moved to Galway to take up a job as a clerk with the ESB, the electricity company, in Newtownsmyth. He was granted a scholarship to University College Galway (UCG), and took to student life with gusto, becoming the auditor of the literary and debating society, and as president of the Student's Union from 1964 to 1965.

Higgins graduated with a degree in English, sociology and politics. He would later study at the University of Manchester and the University of Indiana. He was the first in his family to access higher education.

He returned to UCG as a junior lecturer, but the political bug was already worming its way into his mind, when he helped organize a strike of junior lecturers in the late 1960s, having broken with Fianna Fail, his original party of choice.

He stood as a Labour Party candidate in 1969, when the party ran under the banner "The 60s Will Be Socialist." Higgins was not successful in his attempt, nor during a subsequent run in 1973. However, the newly-elected Fine Gael Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave appointed Higgins to the Senate.

That very same year, Higgins married actress Sabina Coyne in Dublin. The couple has four

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children, the eldest, Alice Mary, twins Michael and John, and Daniel, the youngest. Sabina was a founding member of the Focus Theatre and the Stanislavsky Studio in Dublin.

Higgins finally made it in to the Dail Eireann in the June 1981 election, but his fortunes rose and fell during the tumultuous roller-coaster-ride that was Irish politics in the early 1980s. While he was re-elected as the TD for Galway West in the February 1982 general election, he lost his seat just nine months later in November of 1982. Higgins returned to the Dail in 1987, and represented the people of Galway West in every election thereafter until his retirement from party politics in 2011.

The gaps in his political duties were filled by lecturing in political science and sociology at the National University of Ireland's Galway campus, and in the United States at Southern Illinois University. His love of teaching was evident in that he travelled across the rural west of Ireland to provide accessible evening classes to interested citizens. Not surprisingly, he announced during his first month in office that he intended to hold a series of presidential seminars, with the first topic being on youth in Ireland.

While no spring chicken at 70-years-of-age, as his inaugural seminar topic demonstrates, youth issues are of importance to him. In fact, he was a regular columnist for *Hot Press* magazine - Ireland's version of *Rolling Stone* - from 1982 to 1992, during which time he sought to become "engaged (with) a young audience in the social issues of the day," according to Higgins' presidential biography on the Irish presidential web site.

Higgins was appointed as Ireland's first Minister for the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht in 1993, a position he held until 1997.

"(Higgins) is credited with reviving the Irish film industry and attracting many of Hollywood's biggest stars, including Marlon Brando, Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts to movies being made in Ireland," wrote Brian McDonald in the *Irish Independent* this past November.

During his time in the cabinets of Taoisigh Albert Reynolds and John Bruton, he also established national Gaelic-language broadcaster Telefis na Gaeilge, now TG4. Higgins also

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brought about the end of Section 31 of the *Broadcasting Act* which prevented Sinn Fein from the Republic's airwaves.

As though this were not busy enough of a schedule, matters of human rights, peace and democracy, were important to him. He took this message, and tried to bring these ideals, to places as far afield as Nicaragua, Chile, Cambodia, Iraq and Somalia. He also spoke out against the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

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In 1992, Higgins became the first recipient of the Sean MacBride Peace Prize from the International Peace Bureau in Helsinki, Finland, in recognition for his peace promotion work, speaking up for victims in General Augusto Pinochet's Chile and in Cambodia.

Higgins' love of poetry is well known, having produced four collections of his own verse:

- *The Betrayal*
- *The Season of Fire*
- *An Arid Season*
- *New and Selected Poems*

But he is not averse to prose either, having published two collections of essays, *Causes for Concern: Irish Politics, Culture and Society* and *Renewing the Republic*.

When he ran for president, his candidacy attracted a fair bit of support, not the least of which came from endorsements from some unlikely, but welcome, friends, including the Hollywood actor Martin Sheen, who called him a "dear friend," and the chart-topping Irish band The Saw Doctors, who even joined him on the campaign trail. The band had even once dedicated a song to him called "Michael D Rocking in the Dail Bar," according to *The Guardian* newspaper.

The race turned out to be a raucous one, with several candidates trading the top spot, while Higgins played the tortoise to the hares, the steady, grandfatherly-type to the hyper-active youngsters.

At one point in the race, Higgins, the former front-runner, was replaced as leader of the pack in the polls by businessman Sean Gallagher, best known as the star of the Irish version of reality TV show *Dragon's Den*.

Ironically for a TV star, one bad performance by Gallagher on the last TV debate before the election may have cost him the race, while Higgins' steady, statesmanlike demeanor may well have carried the day.

Gallagher had been the leading candidate heading in to the last weekend of the race according to several public opinion polls, leading Higgins by as much as 15 points. The *Sunday Independent* called the election Gallagher's to lose. But the *Prime Time* debate on RTE on the Monday night before the election virtually eliminated Gallagher's momentum, as he had difficulty answering questions about accepting money from a businessman for a Fianna Fail fundraiser.

According to *The Belfast Telegraph*, Sinn Fein candidate Martin McGuinness accused Gallagher, on air, of requesting and personally receiving a 5,000 euro cheque from a businessman who had been convicted of tax fraud and fuel smuggling. Gallagher denied any illegal shenanigans, but his handling of the controversy, and the image - which he did not deny - of ferrying cheques from shady businessmen to the now discredited Fianna Fail did not resonate well, and the damage had been done.

A Red C poll conducted on the day of the election for RTE showed a significant shift in support from Gallagher to Higgins after the debate, one of the largest last-minute shifts in Irish political history.

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As the votes rolled in after election day on Thursday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, the momentum was huge and unmistakable. Higgins won the first preference vote count in convincing fashion, far ahead of Gallagher, 39 to 25 per cent. McGuinness was in third place with 13 per cent, while Fine Gael's Gay Mitchel stood at 6.4 per cent. Independent Senator David Norris was not too far behind at 6.2 per cent. It was a race for the bottom for the race's two female candidates on the first count, with Rosemary Dana Scallon at 2.9 per cent, and Mary Davis at 2.7 per cent.

On the first preference count, Higgins won 33 out of 43 ridings. Gallagher won nine of the remaining ridings, while McGuinness won only Donegal North West. Higgins won on the fifth count.

Higgins was sworn in as Ireland's ninth president in a ceremony at Dublin Castle on Friday, November 11<sup>th</sup>. In his inaugural address, Higgins promised a "presidency of transformation." He stayed close to his Labour party roots, denouncing what he called the "egotism" of the Celtic Tiger years, one based purely on the accumulation of material wealth instead.

"That was our loss, the source in part of our present difficulties," Higgins said. "Now it is time to turn to an older wisdom." He also admitted that Irish society was "wounded" and that its people had "broken expectations," but added that, in spite of these set-backs, the Irish people were still "creative, resourceful, talented and warm."

Taoiseach Enda Kenny was in attendance at the ceremony and said that Higgins gave truth to an old Irish saying: "There is no nobility without virtue."

At one point in the campaign, and many times before, such as in 2004 when it was decided that Ireland would not go to the polls for a presidential election, Higgins may well have recalled the title of one of his poems, "When Will My Time Come?"

While Maya Angelou famously gave a reading of a poem she wrote for Bill Clinton's inauguration as president in 1993, and Robert Frost read aloud poetry for John F. Kennedy in 1961, last month, it was the poet who was getting sworn in, and many, like *The Irish Times'* Miriam Lord, pointed to lines from Higgins' poem "Memory," as a good jumping-off point for his presidency:

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"We make an affirmation/

The stuff of hope beckons.

Out of the darkness we step/

And blink into the new light."