

Trinity Monday Discourse on

Noël Browne

By Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar T.D.,

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Introduction and Overview

Provost, Fellows and Scholars of Trinity College Dublin, ladies and gentlemen.

On Monday the 16th of May 1994, Trinity Monday, the seventy-eight-year-old Noël Browne was made an honorary Fellow of Trinity College Dublin. It was the greatest public honour of his long and often controversial career in public life, and it was one he treasured enormously. As Professor Tom O’Dowd of the School of Medicine recalled after his death, he sometimes even signed his letters ‘Noel Browne FTCD’.

In *The Irish Times*, the day after the announcement, there is a photograph of a jubilant Noel Browne hearing the news, and the happiness is unmistakable. He can also be seen in the traditional photograph of the new Scholars and Fellows, taking his place alongside the Provost, Dr. Thomas Mitchell, and new Fellows such as David Singleton and the late historian, Helga Robinson-Hammerstein.

Trinity meant a lot to Noel Browne, it educated and trained him to be a doctor, it was where he met his beloved wife, Phyllis, it was the constituency that elected him to the Seanad. It was the place that honoured him so publicly when he was otherwise forgotten and ignored. When

Trinity's autonomy and governance came under threat in the 1990s he rushed into print to condemn the proposed universities legislation.

In *The Irish Times* in 1996 he described Trinity as part of 'our internationally accepted precious heritage and a brilliant jewel in the crown of Irish enlightenment, culture and academic distinction'. Praising Trinity's 'centuries old and precious autonomy' his conclusion was to demand that 'Once again, Trinity must survive'.

After his death in 1997, Noel Browne's papers were gifted to Trinity by his widow, Phyllis, and they contain 37 boxes of manuscripts, with drafts of speeches and articles, as well as early versions of his memoir *Against the Tide*. Speaking in the Long Room at a public exhibition based around the papers in 1999, Phyllis Browne said that it was a miracle there was anything to donate, revealing that her husband 'was terribly untidy, never knew where anything was. I spent half my life looking for things for him' - she said

The collection also included letters from members of the public. One letter was from someone who believed he owed his life to the work Browne had done as Minister for Health and it gives a good insight into the incredible loyalty many felt towards him. The letter-writer revealed 'It often makes me angry what our countrymen did to you after all you did for the country'.

To best understand Noel Browne and the forces which drove him throughout his life you have to understand the tragic circumstances of his early life and the determination it gave him to

fight against prejudice, poverty and injustice. He spoke about this in 1994, when he unveiled a plaque in Hollymount in Co. Mayo, the village where his mother had been born.

In 1927 his mother, Mary Terese Browne, contracted TB, shortly after the death of her husband. Knowing that she was dying, she decided to travel to England because she was terrified of what would happen to her orphaned children if she stayed in Ireland. As Noel recounted, it would have meant ‘for myself’ the horror of Letterfrack’s notorious industrial school; for the girls, the great love-starved warehouses for unwanted children, the industrial schools’. Shortly after arriving in London, Noel’s mother died and, as they had no money, she was buried in a pauper’s grave, as he described it, ‘no grave, no headstone, no funeral – a non-person’. The family was shattered and scattered. A sister, Eileen, died alone in a hospital in Italy. His disabled brother Jody died in a workhouse. A sister, Una, went to America. Nuala O’Faolain was at the unveiling and wrote that ‘the story would move a stone’, and she wondered at the fact that Noel was able to tell it without weeping.

At the end of the event, Noel Browne concluded by saying ‘perhaps you may now better understand the life-long dedication of my wife Phyllis and myself to the cause of oppressed womanhood in the Irish Republic’. Afterwards people crowded around the street like after a funeral. One woman remarked that ‘every word out of that man’s mouth today was the truth. God love him, he’s not over it yet’.

It is an honour for me as a graduate of Trinity, and a former Minister for Health, to be invited by the Provost to speak about Dr. Noel Browne today and to deliver the final Trinity Monday Discourse of his provostship. I congratulate him on his term in office and also congratulate his successor, Professor Linda Doyle, and wish her the very best in the role. I am sorry that today's event is a different kind of one because of COVID-19, a fight to save lives that Dr. Browne would have understood only all too well.

Trinity has played a leading role in the fight against COVID-19, in the hospitals, GP clinics, and laboratories, and also on the airwaves explaining the science behind everything, and I want to thank your students and staff for all they have done over the past 14 months.

In 2015 when I spoke at Connolly Hospital in Blanchardstown as part of its 60th anniversary celebrations I paid tribute to Noel Browne's work as Minister and called him 'a true idealist'. Some people I think were surprised. Noel Browne was a member of five different political parties over the course of his career, but never Fine Gael, and we would certainly have differed strongly on some issues. However, I have always admired his idealism, his passion, and his determination to stand up for the causes and the people he believed in. Today is an opportunity to explore his remarkable contribution to Irish life in a respectful, but not uncritical way, and to assess his legacy.

This legacy includes his influence on other politicians. As Taoiseach, I enjoyed regular visits to Áras an Uachtaráin for Article 28 conversations with the President. In his study President Higgins has a portrait of Noel Browne as a young man, painted by Sean Keating, and he has called it his favourite possession. The young Michael D. saw the painting in Kenny's bookshop in Galway and had to buy it, and he paid for it in instalments, starting with his first

pay cheque. In it, Browne is wearing a bow tie and has gloves resting on his knees. Some people have interpreted this as Browne throwing down the gauntlet to the Catholic Church. President Higgins, however, sees the painting as more realistic. He knew Browne very well - Browne was his mentor as well as his friend - and he remembers that Browne 'drove a sports car' and that these were his driving gloves.

Early Life and Trinity Education

Born on the 20th of December 1915 in Waterford, Noel Browne was the fourth of eight children. His early years were spent in Derry where he contracted measles and became deaf in one ear, a disability he hid from all but his close friends and family. His excellent biographer, John Horgan, wonders whether this partially contributed to the belief that he was arrogant and aloof as sometimes he became withdrawn at meetings because he was not always able to hear everything that was being said.

The family next moved to Athlone where Noel's sister, Annie, contracted tuberculosis and died after only a few weeks. Noel described the tragedy movingly in his memoir, with the 'apple-sized head of the tormented infant, twisting and turning, uselessly fighting for life-supporting air that wouldn't come'. More tragedy was to come when both his parents became infected and became terminally ill.

Writing in *Against the Tide*, Browne believed that his father's 'hard-working conditions had led to the infection in the first place' and that he 'slowly destroyed himself working long and

late hours'. His father died in 1927 when Noel was 12 years old. Following this, the family moved to Hollymount in Co. Mayo. As Horgan recounts, tuberculosis had all the connotations of the plague, and the family was avoided for fear of contamination. It became an even more lonely and difficult childhood.

His mother's health worsening, the family moved to London, where she died and the family was scattered. Until the day he died Browne was motivated by a sense of injustice at what had befallen his family, and he suffered from a form of survivor's guilt, because he had lived, while those he loved had died. Even in later years he asked himself the 'nagging questions': 'Is your life stolen? How can you enjoy a life that isn't really yours?'

He disliked Christmas and didn't enjoy celebrating it with his family, preferring to go sailing on his own instead.

Now an orphan, Browne received a scholarship to attend a prestigious Jesuit-run public school, Beaumont, near Windsor. There he excelled academically and performed well at sports, and he took up rugby, cricket and boxing. Browne continued to box when he attended Trinity, but he gave it up suddenly after knocking out his opponent in one bout. Nevertheless, when he ran for the Dáil for the first time in 1948 his membership of the TCD Boxing Club was suggested by the editor of *The Irish Times* as a reason why the voters of Dublin South-East should elect him. At Beaumont a classmate remembers him as quiet and withdrawn, who could 'easily be aroused to fury by any misplaced humour concerning Ireland and the Irish'. There he befriended another young Irish student, Neville Chance, and this changed the course of his life.

Neville's father, Sir Arthur Chance, was impressed by Browne and decided to pay for his education, suggesting he attend Trinity College Dublin with the family's support. And so, in Michaelmas Term 1934 he entered the walls of this university to study Medicine.

According to many accounts, Noel worked hard and played hard during his time at Trinity. As John Horgan describes it, 'he lived life to the full, talking through the night, drinking in the back room of the Bailey or in Davy Byrne's, going to bed at six in the morning, and getting up in time to catch a train down the country to play a football match'. He was good looking, and he was invited to many parties, and he often brought along his own accordion which he played for guests. Religion sometimes prevented things going further.

Horgan notes that 'Noel once complained to a fellow student that on a journey home by car after a party, when he had been at close quarters with a girl in the back seat, his activities had been serially interrupted because she insisted on blessing herself whenever the car passed a church'.

Browne's great passion was social justice and this was also evident during his Trinity days. After one party at the Trinity Boat Club Browne went on for a meal with a fellow student at a local café. There he 'spoke passionately about the plight of the poor' and what needed to be done. Eventually they had to leave, because some of the other customers began to start making comments about 'Trinity students.'

In 1936 he met Phyllis Hogan at the Trinity Boat Club Dance, and it is said that their relationship began after running into each other near the Provost's House.

When Phyllis died in 2006 she was praised for the significant contribution she had made to Noel's career. It was also noted that 'Trinity College Dublin had a special place in her life' and that 'the honorary fellowship conferred on Noel in 1994 was a tribute they both treasured to the end of his life'. Phyllis did everything from typing his constituency correspondence, to on one occasion making a First Holy Communion dress for the child of an impoverished constituent.

In 1938 Phyllis was diagnosed with TB and had to be hospitalised. Noel wrote to her every day, until she recovered and was released. In 1939 he himself was diagnosed with the illness and was hospitalised in Dr. Steeven's Hospital and, as a result, he missed some of his examinations, but he was awarded enough credit to complete the year.

Browne qualified as a doctor in December 1940. His contemporaries considered him quiet and reserved and in the middle of his class academically. But one thing stood out, his lack of respect for anyone in authority. When he was an intern at Steeven's hospital he was once rebuked by Dr. Solomons, the famous gynaecologist, for wearing a dirty coat, and for looking 'worse than a painter'. Browne took one look at Solomons, still dressed in his hunting pink after a morning out with the Ward hunt, and responded, 'And you look like a broken-down jockey in that ridiculous gear'. The exchange became part of the Trinity folklore about Browne.

As his tuberculosis became worse, Browne had an extended period of hospitalisation in England, paid for by the Chance family. There he lost two stone in weight and had to have an operation on his right lung, but the operation was not a complete success, and contributed to his poor health.

Upon his release, he became a house physician at a sanatorium in Newcastle in Wicklow, before becoming assistant medical officer at Cheshire Joint Sanatorium. Determined to fight the spread of TB, and help those suffering from it, he began work on research which became the basis of the medical doctorate he was awarded

by Trinity in 1946, 'for original research into the blood sedimentation rate of tuberculosis sufferers.'

In January 1944 Noel married Phyllis in a church in Uxbridge near Harefield. It was a Catholic ceremony, even though Phyllis was Church of Ireland, and she refused to sign a pledge to bring up any children as Catholic. At the time she had been told by a friendly doctor that Noel had only six months to live. As it turned out they were happily married for over half a century and had two daughters. President Higgins has called the relationship between Phyllis and Noel Bowne one of the great partnerships of Irish politics, especially on the left.

He has said that from their 'earliest years together they embraced every progressive and egalitarian issue in Ireland and abroad, be it the establishment of rights at home in health, housing and education or participation in the opposition to apartheid in South Africa'. There was no money for a honeymoon. Deciding to move back to Ireland, Browne returned to a post at Newcastle Sanatorium.

Becoming Minister for Health

Browne took his first steps in national politics opposing the Public Health Bill in 1945. He also became friends with Oliver J. Flanagan, who was then an independent TD for Laois-Offaly, and who suffered with TB throughout 1947 and 1948. Browne visited him regularly at hospital and Horgan wonders what, apart from the question of TB, they might have had in common to talk about.

Thanks in part to his friendship with Noel Hartnett, another Trinity graduate, Browne joined the new radical political party, Clann na Poblachta, and was selected to run in Dublin South-East in the 1948 general election. The party ran two candidates in the three-seater, and Noel later believed he had been chosen as a 'sweeper' to help elect his running mate, Donal O'Donoghue. However, Browne's record fighting TB, which was a major plank in the Clann campaign, and his ability as a speaker impressed many voters and he received 4,917 first preferences and was elected on the fifth count, after John A. Costello for Fine Gael, and Sean MacEntee for Fianna Fáil.

As we know, after the election, sixteen years of Fianna Fáil government came to an end with the creation of the First Inter Party Government, with the National Executive of Clann na Poblachta agreeing by two votes to join the coalition.

The party was allocated two seats at Cabinet and MacBride surprised many by offering Browne the Department of Health, created the year before. And so, at the age of thirty-two Browne became the first TD since independence to be made a Minister on their first day in office. This was done, according to someone closely involved, 'in the teeth of fierce opposition from the older and more militantly Republican members of the party'. Browne became the youngest

minister in the Government, and it made the front-page of *The Irish Times* which celebrated his election as ‘a unique feature of Irish parliamentary history’.

The fact that Browne was the only Trinity graduate in the Cabinet was also a cause of some suspicion, and when he decided to turn a Church of Ireland training college in the Phoenix Park into a sanatorium, and relocate the college to the south side, he was accused of discriminating against Protestants.

There was tension from the beginning with James Deeny, the chief medical adviser, and the men had clashed publicly over TB policy before the election. When asked by T.F. O’Higgins and James Dillon whether he would have any difficulty working with Browne it is said that Deeny replied that he would work with Satan himself to end TB.

From the beginning Browne knew the importance of good communications. He established a publicity section to make newspaper advertisements, booklets, leaflets, films, exhibitions and radio talks, and for health films to be shown in schools, believing that it was money well spent and ‘that the nation will reap rich dividends in the way of healthier citizens’. The innovative publicity campaign to fight the spread of TB included a puppet film which dramatized the ways of avoiding infection, and a short film set in a shop to illustrate correct hygiene.

Browne’s voice was heard frequently on the radio, and he used the medium to encourage Irish nurses working in Britain to return home.

Browne was a young man in a hurry, believing that he could die at any time, and that he would 'only have one crack at it'. Told by doctors that he had only one or two years to live, he suffered a relapse from TB shortly after becoming a Minister. Phyllis remembered that at times in 1948 and 1949 he was having to run the Department from his bed at home, with officials bringing papers to him to sign.

In volume 4 of the *Cambridge History of Ireland*, the most recent major scholarship on this period, we see a notable tribute to Noel Browne. Brian Girvin suggests that 'the star of the new government was the politically untested Minister for Health Noël Browne.

With determination, skill and enthusiasm Browne pushed through an ambitious and comprehensive programme to eradicate TB which continued to be the major health threat to Irish families, especially those on lower incomes'. Browne appointed another Trinity medical graduate, Dorothy Stopford Price, the chair of a National Consultative Council on Tuberculosis and she used this position to advocate for a national vaccination scheme using BCG.

Looking back on this period, the credit for the successful campaign against TB can be shared between James Deeny, who had put much of the infrastructure in place for the anti-TB campaign, Dorothy Stopford Price, and Browne who implemented the strategy successfully. But above all to Selmon Waxman and Merck and Company which developed Streptomycin, the first antibiotic cure for TB in 1948 Browne's legend was fortunate in its timing!

Browne also embarked on a massive hospital building programme and again he benefitted from work that had been put in place before he took office, and the increased revenue from the Irish Sweepstakes. His energy and determination also played a vital part and he had a map of the country in his office with pins for everywhere a new hospital was being built. As part of his war against TB he established the national blood transfusion service in August 1948, something that has left a lasting legacy.

It was the Mother and Child Scheme that created the legend of Browne standing up on his own against the world, the fearless opponent of clerical power. The reality, as many historians have shown, was more complicated. The scheme to ‘provide a free medical service for women before, during and after childbirth, and for every child from birth up to the age of six’ predated the Inter Party Government, and it fell to Browne to try and implement it.

Unfortunately, his political inexperience undermined his efforts, and he fell victim to various vested interests, including the powerful Irish Medical Association, which viewed it as the socialisation of medicine and a threat to their income and position in society. The Catholic hierarchy was also deeply opposed, seeing the legislation as ‘anti-family’ and wrote to the Taoiseach, John A. Costello, who delayed passing the bishops’ memorandum on to Browne, a misjudgement and a mistake.

Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, in particular, viewed the proposal as an encroachment by the State into the life of the individual, and the first step to totalitarianism. Like the IMA, he also believed the scheme should be subjected to a means test.

Faced with the strength of this opposition, Browne's own leader, Sean McBride, refused to back him up.

The decision to leave Browne isolated caused a permanent breach between the men and was never forgiven. As the crisis came to a head in April 1951 McBride asked Browne for his resignation, and he was forced to tender it.

In his resignation speech Browne blamed his own government colleagues rather than the Catholic Church, saying that he accepted 'unequivocally and unreservedly the views of the hierarchy on the matter' but that he had not been 'able to accept the manner in which this matter has been dealt with by my former colleagues in the government'. Some of the blame for the debacle was Browne's and as Brian Girvin suggests, 'Browne acted ineptly at times in his dealings with the hierarchy, his colleagues and the IMA'.

Browne was a man of vision, drive and determination which carried him to many successes, in particular in the fight against TB.

There was another side to his character which lessened his chances of greater success. There was a tendency to stubbornness, he was not given to compromise, and he was the holder of personal grudges.

After his resignation Browne made the controversial decision to send his correspondence with Cabinet colleagues and members of the Catholic hierarchy to the newspapers for publication, something that was considered a breach of trust by his former colleagues. The Government

collapsed soon after and Browne stood as an Independent and was re-elected. After his attempts to form a new political party went nowhere he applied to join Fianna Fáil. This went against him in the 1954 general election where he was blamed for an unpopular budget and lost his seat.

Popular with the members for his fiery speeches, he was seen a disruptive by the party leadership and denied a place on the Fianna Fáil ticket in the 1957 general election prompting his immediate resignation. He stood once more as an Independent and was re-elected.

Later Political Career

A year later, Browne founded a new political party, the National Progressive Democrats, which had two TDs, and which became a thorn in the side of De Valera's government. The party made little impact nationally, but Browne has been praised for speaking out against corporal punishment in schools, the death penalty, and advocating for more to be done to help people with mental health difficulties. He was also a vocal speaker against apartheid and he called for 'a progressively expanding boycott on the importation of South African produce, as advocated by the ANC'.

Whenever South Africa came to Ireland to play rugby he took part in protests outside Lansdowne Road.

Throughout his political career, Browne was a regular speaker at the College Historical Society. As Minister for Health he spoke on 31 January 1951 opposing the motion 'That this House

deplores Party Politics'. He returned to chair a meeting of the Society on 11 March 1953 where he attacked the two-tier health system. He attended the inaugural meeting of Donnell Deeny, the nephew of James Deeny, where he criticised the Irish political leaders of the past, Cosgrave, De Valera, MacBride, Costello and Lemass for putting loyalty to the Catholic church ahead of the objective of achieving a united Ireland.

On another occasion he proposed the motion 'That this House would embrace a Gayer Culture', speaking alongside Dr. David Norris, then a lecturer in the English department.

Browne spoke powerfully about the destructive effects of homophobia and the many people who had been forced to leave Ireland or face blackmail or imprisonment.

Re-elected in the 1961 election, Browne decided on another change in political direction and joined the Labour Party in November 1963, but it didn't help him retain his seat in the general election two years later. In the 1969 general election he won back the seat and became a sharp opponent of the party returning to government as the junior partner in a coalition. This uncompromising position meant that he was deselected as a candidate in the 1973 general election after he refused to sign the party pledge supporting coalition.

Throughout this time Browne continued to work as a medical doctor and he returned to Trinity to study for the diploma in psychological medicine, which he was awarded in 1966.

Browne's work took him to Ballymun and he came to believe that many of the mental health problems he saw were the fault of social and economic factors. In 1970 he was appointed a

senior consultant psychiatrist by the Eastern Health Board, and returned to his old hospital at Newcastle, which had reopened as a psychiatric hospital. He retired as a psychiatrist in 1977.

Instead of running for the Dáil as an Independent in the 1973 general election, Browne decided to stand for the Seanad for the University of Dublin constituency. Browne found a home in the Seanad and he was free to speak on issues he felt strongly about, including contraception and divorce and he became the first member of the Oireachtas to advocate for therapeutic legal abortion. In so many ways Browne was ahead of his time, including when it came to the treatment of women and children.

Traditional views on illegitimacy were denounced as ‘dazzlingly inhumane, cruel and barbarous’, and Browne attacked the way both Church and State treated mothers who gave birth to children out of marriage, and the ‘cruel, repressive and totally unjust way’ the children were made to suffer. His criticism was far-reaching, blaming society and not just the State for not ‘exercising our own independent judgement to see that a child born out of wedlock is a precious and wonderful thing, a new human being’.

Still officially a member of the Labour Party, Browne was nominated to run for the party in Artane in the 1977 general election, before the National Executive rejected his nomination. Browne had fallen out with many of his former colleagues, and some of his language was considered far too harsh, for example, by comparing the Fine Gael-Labour coalition to Nazi Germany. Undaunted he ran as an Independent and was elected, receiving twice as many votes as his Labour rival.

Shortly after he was formally expelled from the Labour Party and he co-founded another new party, the Socialist Labour Party. Professor David Thornley, the distinguished Trinity academic, broadcaster and politician, joined the new party, purely because of Noel Browne. He said there was no one he respected more in politics, and if it was good enough for Browne, it was good enough for him. However even Thornley was sometimes confused by the conflicting positions his friend sometimes took, and once admitted that Noel 'has changed his mind so often that it baffles even me who has known him for twenty-five years'.

The new political party was not a success. Browne was the party's only TD but refused to be the leader of the party or even its parliamentary representative. Re-elected in the 1981 general election, he supported the Fine Gael/Labour coalition because of its stand against corporal punishment in schools.

Both Fine Gael and Labour attempted to persuade him to stand in the February 1982 general election, and I wonder how he would have fared if he had joined my party. Garret FitzGerald approached him to stand for Fine Gael partly in the hope that it would deprive Fianna Fáil of a seat. Browne said he would consider the request overnight, which he did before courteously rejecting it, and he decided against standing again and retired from active politics.

Living in a cottage in Connemara, Browne published his famous memoir, *Against the Tide*, in 1986 and it became a publishing sensation, capturing the public imagination with its revealing 'Cabinet Portraits' and unflinching language. However, as his great biographer John Horgan has recognised, there were many inaccuracies and omissions and Horgan has called it 'a better guide to feeling than to facts'.

In particular, his venomous description of the former Labour leader, William Norton, who was dead twenty years, offended many of his old colleagues and was seen as too harsh and unwarranted.

As the 1990 presidential election approached, some of Browne's supporters, including Michael D. Higgins, worked to secure him the nomination of the Labour Party run. Despite the backing of the Labour Women's National Council, he was overwhelmingly defeated by Mary Robinson in the vote of the parliamentary party and administrative council.

He never forgave her for it.

Browne criticised her frequently during her term in office, for example, dismissing her candle in the window of the Áras to remember the diaspora as 'fatuous'.

Towards the end of his life, he claimed he was happy he had not run for the 'impotent, titular post' and criticised Robinson for having 'squandered... her undoubted talents' on the role.

Conclusion

Browne died on 22 May 1997. The obituary in the *Economist* described him simply as 'the doctor who tried to cure Ireland' and it is a fitting epitaph. Throughout his career he was fearless in fighting for what he believed was right and he should rightly be considered one of Trinity's greatest graduates. The obituary writer in the *Economist* noted that Browne was

always praised for his fearlessness in the pursuit of his objectives and thought this was ‘an ingenious way of saying he was usually wrong, and obstinate with it’.

Browne was certainly not always right, and he could be harsh and unflinching, even to friends and those close to him, but he was someone who had a transformational effect on Irish politics and society and his contribution in so many areas was positive and profound.

To conclude, I want to take you back to Hollymount in Co. Mayo, and the plaque unveiled to honour Noel Browne’s mother. Browne wrote the text of the inscription and it contains his own summary of his career and how he wanted to be remembered. It reads:

‘Mary Terese Cooney, born 1885. Died tragically London 1927. Courageous mother of Dr. Noel Browne, Deputy and Minister for Health, 1948-1951. Resigned in defence of the Mother and Child Health Service, 1951. **Honorary Fellow, Trinity College Dublin, May 1994**’.

Thank you.