

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
PRESENTATION OF THE ULYSSES MEDAL

Tuesday, 3 December 2024 at 5.00pm

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
PROFESSOR CATHRYN COSTELLO, UCD Sutherland School of Law,
University College Dublin on 3 December 2024,
on the occasion of the presentation of a Ulysses Medal to SÍOFRA O’LEARY

President, Colleagues, Graduates, a Chairde

It is an immense honour to offer this citation for Judge Síofra O’Leary, a leading scholar, judge, and judicial statesperson; or as she describes herself:

‘an Irish woman who has devoted her professional career to European law and to Europe’

Studies AND Academic Life

Síofra O’Leary was born in Dublin, and completed her Bachelor of Civil Law here at University College Dublin in 1989.

From UCD, she went on to the European University Institute in Florence, where she wrote her PhD on *The Evolving Concept of Community Citizenship* (1993). She has continued in various academic roles throughout her career, writing a second book - *Employment Law at the European Court of Justice* (2002); teaching at the College of Europe in Bruges (2003-); and maintaining strong links with the UCD Sutherland School of Law.

Référendaire (Judicial Researcher) and Chef de Cabinet and Researcher at the Court of Justice of the European Union (1996-2015)

She undertook this academic work alongside her main professional role, working as a référendaire and chef de cabinet in the Court of Justice of the European Union in Luxembourg, the place she now calls home. She served in the chambers of Judges Federico Mancini, Fidelma Macken and Aindrias Ó Caoimh, working in French (the language of the Court), undertaking the meticulous doctrinal research and drafting ‘behind the bench’ that often goes unacknowledged in the public realm. At this juncture, let us acknowledge it – it is vital to the functioning of the court, ensuring the cogency and consistency of its work, sources of its legitimacy.

Judge (2015-2024)

Her next professional move brought her from behind the scenes in the EU court, to the bench of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Borne of the ashes of the Second World War, the world's first regional human rights court aims to secure the rule of law and democracy across the 46 Council of Europe states. Appointment to this judicial role is subject to rigorous open competition. She applied, secured one of Ireland's three nominations, and then was chosen by the Parliamentary Assembly. In April 2015, she replaced Ann Power as Ireland's judge at the European Court of Human Rights. (She would in turn be followed by the third woman, Úna Ní Raifeartaigh in 2024).

Her judicial career has been stellar – hers a strong voice for human rights. Her many noteworthy judgments include a stunning dissent in *Ireland v UK* (2018) on the meaning of 'torture', an exemplar of principle against what she termed 'judicial acrobacy' on the part of her judicial colleagues. More typically, she led the Court in progressive directions, notably in its ground-breaking climate justice ruling *Klimaseniorinnen*. 'Future generations' will 'bear an increasingly severe burden of the consequences of present failures and omissions to combat climate change.' she wrote in her leading judgment, which brought legal innovation on access to justice.

President of the Court – Judicial Diplomacy and Statesmanship (2022-2024)

Most recently, on 19 September 2022, she was elected by her judicial peers to serve as President of the Court, remarkably the first Irish person, and the **first woman** to hold that position.

The role of the President of the Court is onerous and public-facing. The President must be both a judicial diplomat engaging with states *and* an independent voice for human rights.

In this role, Judge O'Leary truly excelled. There is a resounding consensus amongst the human rights community on the commitment, gravitas, and strategic vision she displayed as President, befitting this challenging moment in European history.

Her presidential speeches and writings are wonderful resource – full of insight, a pan-European sensibility, and an urgent sense of the seriousness of the threats to human rights and democracy *across* Europe today.

Most tangibly, she played a pivotal role in protecting the Court at the Reykjavik summit in 2023, the outcome of which saw the Council of Europe's political leaders re-commit "to the Convention system as the cornerstone of the Council of Europe's protection of human rights".

Judge O'Leary receives this medal as she embarks on a new stage of her career.

We are delighted to honour you tonight Síofra with UCD's highest honour, the Ulysses Medal. We particularly welcome your family members to share in that delight - your husband Pepe, your children, Camilo and Dara (both UCD students), and your siblings.

Táim cinnte go mbeadh do thuismitheoirí Cathal agus Eithne, thar a bheith brodúil asat inniu - ní hamháin inniu ach bheadh siad bródúl as a bhfuil bainte amach agat id' ghairm eisceachtíúil.

UCD is very proud to honour you, one of our most distinguished alumni.

Pour sa contribution remarquable à la recherche juridique européenne, à la pratique judiciaire et à l'État de droit européen,

For her remarkable contribution to European legal scholarship, judicial practice and the European rule of law,

Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,

**Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina
habilem et idoneam esse quae recipiatur insigne ulixis; idque tibi fide
mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**