

Higgins says no widespread backing for ethical society

President notes role of 'individualism' and 'insatiable consumption' in economic crisis

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President Michael D Higgins has said that there is “no clear evidence” that there is a “major popular demand” for equality or that there is widespread support for an ethical society.

Nor is there evidence of a groundswell of support for a version of the State that might introduce equality, said Mr Higgins in an address at NUI Galway (NUIG) on Monday night.

Marking the 50th anniversary of NUIG’s social sciences research centre, Mr Higgins said that it had been “greatly inspiring to witness the real will that exists to envision a new version of citizenship, one that is fair and equitable and allows all its people to flourish”, he said.

“We cannot, however, assume that widespread support for an ethical society now exists, and that it is there for the calling upon into existence,” he said.

“There is no clear evidence that equality is a major popular demand, or that there is a groundswell of support for a version of the State that might introduce it,” he continued.

“Since the 1980s, the redistributive state has lost support as ever more ground was conceded to an extreme individualism grounded in a hegemonic version of the market without limit – even into areas of social vulnerability,” he said.

The failure of all of the people to “question . . . the concepts of individualism and insatiable consumption” had been “one of the contributing factors of our recent economic crisis”, Mr Higgins told his audience.

“The building of a Republic on true republican values such as equality was, for much of the modern period of our history, a task for the future, frequently to be dismissed as utopian,” he said.

‘Welcome signs’

Today, the challenge is to understand the connections between the State, society and economy, he added, saying that there were some “welcome signs of change”, such as the addition of politics and society to the Leaving Certificate syllabus next year.

Referring to the recent spate of terrorist attacks in Paris and elsewhere, Mr Higgins acknowledged the “understandable fear in many parts of the world in the face of terrorist attacks and deepening conflict”.

The President called for a “considered response”. It was of the “greatest importance”

that this focussed on “addressing the root causes of such conflicts, including those factors which lead young people to be made vulnerable to exploitation by extremist and criminal elements”.

The NUIG life course institute’s principles of “connecting discourses” were “of particular importance and relevance to the wider global challenges we all face at this time,” said Mr Higgins.

Earlier, Mr Higgins visited Scoil Bhríde primary school in Shantalla, and was also presented with an honorary award from Galway Unesco city of Film for his “outstanding contribution” to the west’s film and television industry during his term as Labour minister for arts.

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