



## The quiet charisma of an institution builder: Robert Elgie at Dublin City University

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Robert Elgie spent the last eighteen years of his career as the Paddy Moriarty Professor of Government and International Studies at Dublin City University (DCU). He took that position in 2001 having previously worked in Loughborough, Limerick and Nottingham. When he came to DCU the School of Law and Government did not even exist. When he died in July 2019 he had left DCU an enduring legacy having built the School of Law and Government into one of the premier politics schools in Europe. By the time of his death DCU was routinely ranked in the top 200 politics schools in the world. Within the University it had a peerless reputation for its research endeavours but also for the quality, and indeed quantity, of its students.

Robert Elgie came to DCU in 2001 to work in a large teaching-oriented Business School which was subdivided into a number of organisational structures of which Law and Government was by far the smallest and least influential. The Paddy Moriarty Chair of Government and International Studies had been established by the University, in conjunction with a number of private donors, in the late 1990s, to honour the role of the late Paddy Moriarty, the former Chairman and Chief Executive of the Electricity Supply Board, one of Ireland's largest semi-state companies. Moriarty was a man who believed that government should be dynamic and make a difference. In essence these words sum up Robert Elgie's time at DCU.

When Robert Elgie was appointed to the Moriarty Chair at DCU he quickly realised the potential that was available in terms of staff and students. The Law and Government group had just six members of staff, three PhD students, and no undergraduate or postgraduate programmes of its own when it was established as a School in September 2002. Robert Elgie played the central role in the founding of the School. Law and Government was the first new school established by DCU since its foundation as an institute for higher education over two decades earlier in 1980. It was Robert who persuaded the then President of the University, Ferdinand Von Prondzynski, and its various stakeholders, that there was enormous potential in a School of Law and Government.

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This was not, however, a risk free adventure. DCU is located in the heart of a majorly disadvantaged part of the north side of Dublin city and was only granted university status by the Irish government in 1989. While those of us who worked there were very proud of its achievements we realized that on the international scene the University was a relatively small obscure place. Robert's vision to establish DCU as an international force in the study of Politics was in many ways extraordinary. In Dublin alone he knew that this new School, which he would have the privilege, but also the burden, of leading, would be competing with two large and prestigious universities, University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin who had major Politics departments and had been operating at a high level long before DCU existed. But Robert's ambitions went well beyond Dublin.

While Robert was very much an institutionalist scholar his lasting legacy at DCU will be one of institution builder. He led very much from the front. He persuaded the University authorities to fund a new school which would clearly be in deficit for a number of years on the promise that an influx of students would soon wind its way to the north side of Dublin, attracted by the degree programmes which he planned to offer and the staff he wanted to attract. In turn he thought that those staff would produce research which would bring an international reputation to DCU in the study of politics. And he was right.

Despite the daunting challenges of being a deficit school where money was tight, Robert succeeded in forging the School of Law and Government into a major internal force at DCU, and one which had significant respect on the international stage. When Robert died, the School had a lecturing staff of 35, and close to a thousand students on three distinct undergraduate degrees; an undergraduate joint honours degree, and five masters' degree programmes. It also had over 50 students on a PhD programme. Seven members of its staff, including Robert himself, had won the President's Research Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities and Social Sciences. It was DCU's top performing school in the QS rankings for five years in a row in between 2013 and 2018 and was the only School in the University to ever be ranked in the top 150 in those rankings.

While in his extensive and eloquent writings on political leadership Robert was sceptical about psychological and charismatic explanations for leadership there can be little doubt but that his own leadership style at DCU was driven by a quiet charisma. When he spoke people listened. He was never one to raise his voice but I often saw him hold university audiences spellbound with the evidence based rationality of his arguments. And on a one-to-one basis with students and colleagues alike his advice was beyond compare. After he died numerous students told me of the impact he had on their careers and indeed lives. And I know that he had that same impact on many of his colleagues, including me.

Robert brought an intellectual rigour to everything he did from persuading the University to the benefits of a new school to his teaching which was meticulous in its preparation and delivery. He particularly liked to teach first year students, rightly surmising that new students should have the most senior people in the School teaching them. As one of his former students said on hearing of his death: "I had Robert Elgie more than any other lecturer in DCU. No one shaped my time there quite like him. Without fanfare, airs and graces, or pretensions, he performed the most noble



service of all. A gentleman of remarkable intellect, lucidity and above all, untold decency.” Another simply said: “Robert was a brilliant and encouraging lecturer whose ability to make every class a positive and comforting experience made DCU a better place.” And indeed DCU is a better place for having Robert at its heart for close to two decades.

Robert Elgie constantly challenged himself and even reinvented himself as a scholar on numerous occasions as he mastered and contributed to a number of literatures, most notably French politics, political leadership, presidentialism and semi-presidentialism. He very much liked to think of the subject of politics in a scientific manner and as something that could be measured. In that context his view of the new School of Law and Government, which he was uniquely responsible for creating, was that it should be measured against the best. To do that it had to offer creative and cutting edge teaching programmes but it also had to be excellent and innovative in research outputs and methods. And while he was very much a political scientist he was exemplary in his encouragement of the law side of the School of Law and Government.

He led the creation of a new undergraduate degree in International Relations, and a BA in Economics, Politics, and Law, modelled on Oxford’s PPE degree in which he had taken a first in 1987. He quickly established and subsequently expanded the School’s suite of postgraduate programmes. But perhaps his greatest act of institutional building in the new School of Law and Government was in his mentorship of PhD students and colleagues. He instituted rigorous methodological training for research students and prepared them during their studies not simply for a thesis defence but for the ultra-competitive job market and for life itself. As Robert’s first PhD student at DCU, Shane Martin, now Anthony King Chair in Comparative Government at the University of Essex, remarked: “I would not be where I am today in my career without Robert’s patience, advice, counsel and support. Of that, I am certain.” Another former PhD student of Robert’s, David Doyle, now Professor of Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford noted: “Robert was a very important figure in my life. He was a supervisor, a mentor, a colleague—but he was also a dear friend. And he was also a role model—someone to aspire to, someone to emulate. His intellectual contribution was enormous—he was a true polymath. I teach his work all the time to undergraduate and postgraduate students and I always note with pride that this is my supervisor.”

As an academic mentor, Robert was peerless. He had a very decisive approach to academic appointments. He was attracted to candidates who had potential. His view was that the University should hire the best people. I sat on many interview boards with him as we strove to build up the School. He wanted people who were ambitious to publish interesting and innovative research in the best places but he also wanted them to be passionate about their teaching. He had no interest in candidates for whom teaching seemed an afterthought. He realized that if he was to build the School of Law and Government into a major research entity then he had to attract good quality undergraduate students to our doors in large numbers and to do that he needed people who were brilliant and enthusiastic teachers who would use their research to inform their teaching. And Robert Elgie hired brilliantly. He had an instinctive feel for who would be a good fit for our School. He also realized that



he would inevitably lose really good people to other institutions and he could live with that as long as they went to universities that he considered world class. Losing brilliant colleagues like David Doyle, Shane Martin, Francesco Cavatorta and others was painful, but to see the difference they had made at DCU, and that he was responsible for their development as scholars, was the reward.

In that context Robert was very proud of his people; staff and students alike. He took genuine pleasure in their achievements. As founding head of the School of Law and Government he viewed it as his job to mentor all his colleagues. He read himself into a variety of literatures so he could advise us on where we might publish and what was cutting edge in our fields. He advised on journals, publishing houses, grant applications, promotions, job opportunities, conference attendance and presentations, and internal university politics and bureaucracy. He was also fearless in his advocacy for the School internally and externally. He passionately argued for a meritocratic approach to university budgets particularly in research as he quickly established Law and Government as one of DCU's most productive and successful research entities. And he constantly strove to promote the School of Law and Government, and DCU, in his travels abroad. At DCU he was a source of constant sensible advice to those in leadership positions and his wise counsel was sought far and wide across the University.

Robert Elgie had a genius for honour, generosity, modesty, professionalism, conscientiousness, mentorship, and, perhaps above all, friendship. He was an intellectual powerhouse with a generosity of spirit that was boundless. He was a world class scholar who came to a relatively small university in a disadvantaged part of Dublin city and transformed its study of politics. He made DCU into a serious player by establishing a new school which quickly established itself on the international scene. It is a legacy to be proud of and one which those of us still working in the School of Law and Government carry as a badge of honour each and every day.

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