



UACHTARÁN NA hÉIREANN  
PRESIDENT OF IRELAND

**Statement by**  
**President Michael D Higgins**  
**Presentation of Hubert Butler Essay Prize**  
**Friday, 23 October, 2020**

I am delighted to congratulate all those who have submitted work for this year's Hubert Butler Essay Prize, taking the time to share with us their thoughts and insights on the relationship between communal solidarity and individual freedom. The themes and topics covered by the essays submitted are diverse and broad ranging, but all are rooted in an interrogation of the values by which we must live together if we are to create a truly ethical world.

Today, appeals to the common good have taken on a new urgency; a time when we are asked to exercise our responsibilities to the best of our capacity from an ethic of Good Citizenship. Responding to the coronavirus crisis provides an opportunity for the world to do things better in the future, to accept shared responsibility for matters such as global poverty and climate change, recover the sense of the collective that may have been numbed by a credo of individualism and uncritical, even insatiable, consumerism.

Hubert Butler after whom this prize is named was a man who marched, in the words of Roy Foster, with ‘history looking over his shoulder’, contesting, questioning and never afraid to transcend the self in his pursuit of human rights and a more tolerant Europe. His courageous foresight and refusal to become circumscribed by and limitations of self-interest enabled him to offer a greatly generous and humanistic vision towards the creation of a better world.

The American writer John Casey has written of how Hubert Butler, when writing about the Children of Drancey or the friends he made in Russia between the wars, refuses to ‘let them be reduced to statistical miniatures, or to let them be swept up into the blurred majesty of epic’. Indeed, Butler himself in the Children of Drancey talks poignantly of how, by reducing the children of the Holocaust to cold statistics rather than small people reading stories and playing with toys, we dehumanise them because:

“Their suffering is too great and protracted to be imagined, and the range of human sympathy is narrowly restricted”.

He is speaking, of course, about the intimacies of humanity and the great importance of scaling down the immense and the titanic to the shared vulnerability common to all humanity.

A deep awareness of that shared vulnerability is present in so many of the essays submitted, as they examine and discuss some of the drivers of a trend towards individual rather than collective welfare, and call in their different ways for the articulation of new models of co-existence. Our essayists have written on issues such as Brexit, identity politics, the Irish abroad, the refugee crisis, the need for solidarity and compassion in our societal and global relations and on so many other matters that underlie, propel or illustrate that greatest of conflicts facing our society today - that of individualism versus collectivism.

Hubert Butler realised that it is through the building of communities that are ethical in their structure and practice that we create the inclusive and ethical societies on which a truly equal and just world can be founded.

In his work he constantly alludes to that which fractures communities, which subjugates a sense of shared humanity in favour of strident forms of nationalism and populism. The most critical of these fissures is resentment of those perceived as 'other', a resentment which can so quickly lead to the viewing of one group of fellow citizens as being less than human, and to the loss of any sense of shared humanity which in turn enables a brutality and lack of mercy towards groups of fellow citizens.

We should never forget the price paid by Hubert Butler himself and his family in terms of ignorance, bigotry, sectarianism and boycotting. It was a terrible time in our relatively recent history. We must learn from it.

Our essayists too, in their writings, have made important connections between communities that are ethical in their structure and practice and the equal and just world to which we aspire.

Today we stand at a critical juncture in world history, a time for deepening and extending citizenship and rediscovering instincts of empathy and caring that may have been neglected in favour of extreme forms of individualism. Hubert Butler's daughter, Julia Crampton has expressed the hope that "Perhaps this year's essays will give us some ideas of what Hubert might have thought of the world today in all its extreme chaos."

I think she will be greatly pleased by the submissions, which are clearly written by citizens who are prepared to reflect on and explore the questions, the answers, the values and the actions necessary to lead us towards a common shared future built on the spirit of co-operation, of high ethical standards and integrity, the collective will, real participation and an exciting sense of what might be possible.

May I conclude by congratulating this year's winner Michael Amherst for his excellent and most interesting reflection on identity politics and how they should operate within the context of the common good. I wish him, and all our entrants every deserved success in the future.