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**FINAL PODCAST SCRIPT**

The American politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said ‘Everyone’s entitled to his own opinion but not to his own facts.’

It’s worth remembering those words today when voices we can trust seem to be in short supply. So let me recommend two people who might help. Both are Queen’s academics, both are regular media commentators, and both are contributing to public understanding at a time of enormous challenge.

Dr. Katy Hayward is a political sociologist. She’s also a leading authority on the subject of Brexit. Ever since the vote in 2016, she’s been guiding us through the twists and turns and possible outcomes. Not an easy task.

And now we’re in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. Dr. Lindsay Broadbent is a virologist at the Centre for Experimental Medicine. She’s been helping us come to terms with Covid and how to deal with it. Not only that, she’s also part of the Queen’s research team involved in the search for a cure.

The work of both these women provides a striking example of how this university has been contributing to society and advancing knowledge since its beginnings 175 years ago.

But it’s safe to say that when the Queen’s College Belfast was founded way back in 1845, issues like Brexit and Covid would not have been in the mind’s eye of even the most far-sighted of the first academics. Nor would the notion that such leadership would be provided by women. It was very definitely a man’s world in those days.

Times have changed. But they didn’t change quickly. Women weren’t allowed into Queen’s until 1882 when female Arts students were enrolled. That was 33 years after the college first opened its doors.

But fast forward to 1913 and we find an event that would go a long way towards making it a more welcoming place for women. That year two wealthy Belfast sisters, Eliza and Isabella Riddel, donated £25,000 – that’s almost £3m today – to establish a hall of residence for female students.

The Riddel sisters hadn’t been students themselves but they were totally committed to helping young women pursue a third level education. Riddel Hall on the Stranmillis Road was the result of their generosity. It’s no longer in residential use but it’s still part of the Queen’s campus as the home of the William J Clinton Leadership Institute.

And as another indication of how far we’ve come, we now have our first woman Chancellor, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

The story of the early days is one of women slowly beginning to make their mark. The first major appointment to an academic position was in 1916, during the First World War. Maude Violet Clarke was given the Chair of History, although only on a temporary basis. The first full-time female appointment wasn’t until 1931.

Maude had been encouraged to go for the job by her friend, the writer Helen Waddell, who would go on to become a literary celebrity and one of the best-known Queen’s graduates of the early 20th century.

In many ways, Maude Clarke and Helen Waddell were forerunners for many other outstanding women, both staff and students, who would follow.

There have been medical innovators – Professor Jean Orr, founder of the School of Nursing & Midwifery and Dame Ingrid Allen, the brilliant neuropathologist, both of whom died earlier this year. Professor Mollie McGeown, who dedicated her career to the lives of kidney patients and developed Belfast’s first dialysis unit. And more recently I think of people like Professor Usha Chakravarthy, leading a global fight against eye disease.

Our contribution to healing division in society, here and across the world, is recognised in the achievements of Professor Joanne Hughes, who holds the UNESCO Chair at the Centre for Shared Education. She was among those at St. James’s Palace last year when the university received the Queen’s Anniversary Prize for the Centre’s work.

There are politicians and public figures among our alumni – Bernadette McAlliskey, Arlene Foster, Naomi Long, Monica McWilliams and many more – even a President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, a Queen’s graduate and leading academic, who was also the university’s first female Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

In the Arts world, there’s Edna Longley - influential critic and educator and one of the key figures behind the creation of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry. Seamus Heaney has an unassailable position in the pantheon of the greats but I have no doubt that he wouldn’t want his shadow to obscure the fine work of other poets from Queen’s - women like Sinead Morrissey, Medbh McGuckian and Leontia Flynn.

You’ll find world-leading scientists among the staff, past and present – from Professor Ruth Lynden-Bell, contributing to a revolution in green chemistry, to Maire O’Neill, a world leader on cyber security and the youngest person, at the age of 32, to have been made a Professor of Engineering at Queen’s.

But both these women have also played important roles in advancing gender equality. And so we come to another anniversary.

In 1999, as a member of Senate at Queen’s, I was on the board which appointed Sir George Bain as Vice-Chancellor. I remember well our discussion that day about gender imbalance, an issue which George would make a priority from the moment he took up the post.

He brought a number of us together as a group to listen to the voices of the women of Queen’s – all of them – administrative and support staff as well as academics. I became the first Chair of that first Queen’s Women’s Forum, with Professor Margaret Mullett as its first Director, and academics like Ruth Lynden-Bell among the members. It was the year 2000 – 20 years ago this year.

That initiative opened a door that has never been closed since. First, we asked 600 women to give us their views on gender equality. They embraced the opportunity. Many of them began taking part in discussions in hallowed parts of the university that they’d never been in before.

The result of this process was the establishment of the Queen’s Gender Initiative which is alive and thriving today under the stewardship of its current Director, Professor Karen McCloskey.

There are many awards which attest to its success. Fifteen years ago, the Athena SWAN Charter was established to advance women’s careers in STEM subjects – that’s Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Queen’s became a founder member and is one of the very few universities to hold the prestigious Athena Silver Award as an institution, as well as winning 15 separate departmental awards.

And we’re having an international impact. Since 2009, there’s been an annual conference in partnership with the University of Massachusetts Lowell on the theme of Women and Leadership in a Changing World. One year it’s held in Belfast, the next in the US.

The success of the Gender Initiative is in large part down to the organisational skills of Professor Tom Millar who is a committed advocate of gender equality. But organising events isn’t easy. My dear friend Una Reid could have told you that. Una joined the staff of Queen’s 20 years ago and for much of that time organising events was her job. Graduation ceremonies were the highlight of every year and she organised hundreds of them time and transformed them into memorable, engaging occasions for everyone who took part.

Sadly, Una died in June this year but she was a wonderful role model for the women of Queen’s, a generous, talented, confident colleague and mentor, a link in the chain of female achievement that stretches back through the years.

We have also come a long way from the days when a young Queen Victoria was the only female portrait hanging in the Great Hall. Today the walls are adorned with the portraits of both men and women who’ve made a difference. But of all the paintings at Queen’s, my favourite is the huge dramatic triptych by the Newry-born artist Michelle Rogers, that was commissioned some years ago by the Gender Initiative. It’s called Out Of The Shadows and it hangs at the heart of the university, showing 25 women - staff, students and alumni - emerging confidently into the light.

Better than anything, it symbolises the journey we’ve all been on and I feel very honoured to have played my part along the way.

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