

By Christopher Murphy

Speaking Out for the Voiceless

An Interview with Mary Robinson, former Irish president and United Nations high commissioner for human rights.

MARY ROBINSON SERVED AS PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND from 1990 to 1997, and as the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, from 1997 to 2002. Currently she serves as chair of an organization she founded called the Ethical Globalization Initiative (EGI), which seeks to incorporate human rights into the globalization process and support capacity building and good governance in developing countries.

Robinson was the first woman to hold the post of president of Ireland. Her career has included many honors and positions of significance in both Irish and international politics. She has spent the better part of her career fighting for the personal, political, and economic rights of those who have little or no ability to speak out for themselves. In addition to her political credentials, she has had a long and distinguished career in the law and academia.

Robinson first came to national attention in Ireland as one of Trinity College's three members of Seanad Éireann (the Irish Senate). From this body she pushed for a wide range of issues, including the right of women to sit on juries, the elimination of a requirement in Irish law that all women upon marriage resign from the civil service, and for the right to the legal availability of contraception.

Robinson is credited by many observers of Irish politics as having revitalized the presidency. Prior to her election in 1990, the office had been seen as somewhat hidebound, often held by politicians at the

end of their careers. But Robinson moved with vigor in the presidency and set it in a new direction. She placed special emphasis during her time in office on the needs of developing countries, linking the history of the Great Irish Famine* to modern nutrition, poverty, and policy issues around the world, thus creating a bridge of partnership between developed and developing countries.

Robinson was the first head of state to visit Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide and Somalia following the crisis there in 1992. She received the CARE Humanitarian Award in recognition of her efforts for Somalia.

By the midpoint in her presidency her popularity rating among the electorate in Ireland reached an unprecedented 93 percent. When she resigned from the office a few months ahead of schedule to take up the United Nations post she was the most widely recognized president in Irish history.

Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan hoped that she would bring a strong advocacy role to a position at the U.N. which had previously been primarily administrative. He was not disappointed. Robinson quickly set out to put the human rights agenda front and center on the world stage. She often met with international leaders, organized conferences and traveled extensively to press for a more unified approach to human rights that views

President Robinson will address the assembled international educators at a plenary session of the 2006 NAFSA Annual Conference in Montreal, on May 24. For more information on the 2006 conference, please visit www.nafsa.org/conference.

Mary Robinson, former Irish president and United Nations high commissioner for human rights, attends Korean Peace Festival in July 2005.



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economic, political, and education rights as part of one interrelated whole.

In 1998 she was named chancellor of the University of Dublin. Since 2004, she has been professor of practice in international affairs at Columbia University, where she teaches international human rights. Robinson also visits other colleges and universities where she lectures on her views of human rights.

Recently, *IE* interviewed President Robinson to explore her take on global workforce development, world citizenship, and migration among other issues.

IE: International educators understand the need to prepare their students for the increasingly globalized economy. But they also want to help students see the world as interdependent on many levels, not just in the economic realm. Can you tell us about the organization you now lead, the Ethical Globalization Initiative, and how its goals might relate to those of international education in this area?

ROBINSON: I think they do relate. In fact, I'm teaching a seminar this term at Columbia University on

human rights and globalization. In this course we look at the way in which a human rights approach can be relevant to those working on development issues and to the developing countries themselves. We discuss how it is possible to assure that the approach is inclusive. Development must tackle poverty from the point of view of a wider approach that talks about economic participation at all levels of society, as part of the basis of human rights rather than looking only at the needs of people who are poor and vulnerable, and marginalized in society. For example, we look at how adopting an approach that would focus on the right to health could make a difference on the ground.

What I've found is that for the graduate students that we're working with this approach helps them to see the link between basic human rights and national development. It connects well with the recent U.N. report of the Secretary General that says that you can have neither security nor development without human rights.

IE: You have spoken in the past on the vital link between education and citizenship. Could you tell us

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how you see these two as linked and what duties this linkage imposes on both students and educators?

ROBINSON: We need to be aware that in the twenty-first century we have to think quite deeply about educating for new layers of citizenship. And it's an open concept rather than a narrow one, so that young people can realize that they also have within themselves layers of identity and different kinds of loyalties, and that these can be very enriching, and mustn't include forms of intolerance or exclusion.

It's important to recognize that all of our societies are becoming more multicultural and that we have to think of the process of globalization as a process that is accelerating movement of people across borders. Globalization is a very broad subject, but one of the specific areas that we can look at is how migration itself is perceived today. That is one way of getting young people to adjust how they perceive the push and pull factors of populations.

Why do people leave their countries? In some instances it's because of bad governance, or because of violation of human rights, or it may be because of acute poverty and lack of hope of being able to look after your family.

And then, what are the approaches of the countries that people want to get to? This leads to examining the problems of closed borders in many richer nations which can lead to a lot of criminal activity, including the trafficking of people, the smuggling of desperate migrants who are trying to improve the situations for themselves and their families—by sending back remittances. I think helping young people to see these issues is a way of opening up their minds to some of the rather harsh realities in our world today.

And because these push and pull employment and economic factors are increasing in many parts of the world, we're not going to see a slow down in migration issues. Rather the opposite, because the demographic realities are that the huge increases in population are in some of the poorest countries, and the jobs and the need for sources of caring are in the countries that have aging and declining populations.

I think this is a way of addressing the issues of citizenship in a different context than in the rather fixed, more rooted migration of previous centuries. In those years if you migrated you might well spend the rest of your life in your new country because there were fewer opportunities to move. But now we have what we call circular migration. Migrants may well spend some years in a country and then want to go back either to their country of origin or even to a third country.

IE: Certainly your own country of Ireland has experienced a lot of that circular migration the last few years.

ROBINSON: Yes. I served on the Global Commission on International Migration which reported to Secretary General Kofi Annan last October. And we looked at the debates on brain drain—in particular the drain of doctors and nurses out of Africa where you have a high preva-

lence of disease. But we also talked about what we called brain circulation. This is where countries like Ireland, and India, and China notably are wooing back their own skilled young people and are even becoming attractive places for highly skilled graduates from other countries. And that leads to a further acceleration of economic development.

So we need to prepare our young people for a fast-changing world in which these economic issues raise a number of value issues which they need to be conscious of.

IE: As the chancellor of the University of Dublin and someone who has been on faculty at Trinity College and taught at other institutions of higher learning, how do you view international education's role in enhancing the lives of students and in preparing them for the future? (Here I'm referring both to the sending of students abroad to study and the welcoming of the students of other nations to your campus.)

ROBINSON: Well, certainly I think it's very enriching and beneficial to have individual students have the opportunity to do part of their study in different locations in different countries. I think really it's a great way of gaining further insights and different perspectives. And it's also good within a college to have challenges to certain cozy assumptions by interacting with people who have different backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences.

I certainly see, even in my capacity as chancellor, the greater diversity now at a lot of universities. I also see a better gender balance, in fact, a strikingly good gender balance at this stage, in most subjects at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. But now I also see the diversity in the different regions from which students are drawn. And I do feel that we have to foster a sense of being more outward looking and being more aware of the different cultures that are shaping our modern societies.

IE: You studied abroad both in France and the United States. Can you tell us a little about your personal experience of studying abroad and what insights that experience brought you?

ROBINSON: I think my two study abroad experiences had an enormous impact on me. The first was when I spent a year studying in Paris. That gave me a sense of language and culture. Being immersed in a different language was very enriching. There were a number of areas of benefit, whether it was in looking at the French civil law system, or the French approaches to the development of the cultural strengths of different regions in their country. It was all quite interesting. Their approach to seeing importance in regional cultural strengths was not paralleled in Ireland at the time. The idea in Ireland at that time was that the only place in the country where there was anything of interest culturally was Dublin.

The other regions of the country, in particular the rural areas,



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Soft power is important to the world right now. It is the moral voice, the legitimizing factor. Many countries have committed to respecting and enforcing human rights through international treaties that they participate in. So they're open to the effects of naming and shaming when they don't live up to those commitments.

felt really that they were not places that could be looked to for their cultural strengths. I remember talking about this quite a bit as a member of the Irish Senate in later life, the importance of regional strengths. And, of course, Ireland now is benefiting from regional centers, museums, and schools for writers from different parts of the country. It's no longer a highly centralized system.

And, certainly the year that I spent at the Harvard Law School was a particularly seminal time for me. The opportunity to see, on the ground, the questioning of the morality of the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement in the southern United States was very informative.

Also the basic issues regarding the methods of teaching the law itself were important—the Socratic methods and the more open dialogue between professors and their students. It was very heady material coming from a more structured lecture system. So I tried to bring this new experience into my own teaching in the law school at Trinity over a number of years.

And now in my role as chancellor, I'm active in looking at the role of the Irish universities in their relationships with African universities. I was just talking with a colleague about a visit to Uganda and looking at possible development of future links. Obviously there is an element of capacity building needed, but it's also an opportunity for learning in two directions and for us to benefit from African principles and senses of solidarity. I'm glad to see that Irish universities are beginning to connect with countries in Africa that historically have had a link with our nation over number of years.

IE: A number of governments are now taking measures to market their educational capacity to other countries and get international students to come to their schools. Has Ireland been doing anything of that nature?

ROBINSON: Our government has made some efforts in this area with the formation of Education Ireland in 1993.

And certainly there has been a very strong recognition in Ireland—as was reflected in the most recent Irish budget—of the need to strengthen Ireland's position as a knowledge economy and support the universities and indeed encourage them to be more prepared to collaborate together on areas of the third level, and in particular fourth level, graduate research.

And this, I think, is an acknowledgment of our position as a relatively small and very open economy and globalizing society. If Ireland is to retain its edge and continue to make the kind of progress that has been characteristic of the last several years, it must be based on increasing innovation and research and really building up a sense of the knowledge economy.

IE: In a speech at a meeting in Botswana in 2004 you noted that “a

‘fortress mentality’ has taken hold in many prosperous countries because of perceived economic, cultural and security threats...” What do you see as the root cause of this mentality in the richer nations and how do you think we can all work to overcome it?

ROBINSON: I think that we are faced with a paradox that the push and pull factors for people to move are stronger than they've ever been, and yet we're building up barriers and resistances that are driving a lot of this movement underground.

This combination is actually feeding criminal gangs who are involved in trafficking and smuggling. The trafficking obviously involves the worst violations, very often with children and women—exploiting them in a very cruel way for the sex trade or other modern forms of slavery. The smuggling is most likely to happen with those who are desperate to become economic migrants, and find that all legal methods are blocked. They feel they must obtain gang assistance and participate in this illicit trade if they are to get to where the jobs exist.

Human smuggling is an issue that really needs to be addressed by the leadership of the intellectual community—from educators, from universities—because migration is the human face of globalization.

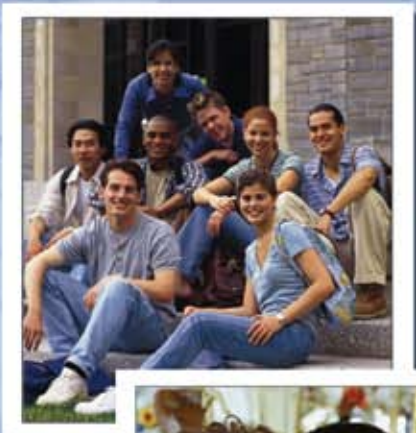
At the Global Commission on International Migration we drew up a set of strong principles of action because we believe that there's a need to inject values into this debate and to reassert that all migrants have human rights.

Even the language we use in these discussions matters a great deal. For example, I've noticed that here in New York where I'm based, television programs and radio shows, and other media make reference to 'illegal aliens.' That combination of words is very daunting and invokes thoughts of the 'other' as totally different. This only perpetuates fears.

We need to increase the number of people who understand that migration is actually good for the economies of the countries that the migrants go to. It has, for example, been a very important factor in the growth of Ireland at the moment. We're absorbing productive migrants who are adding to the wealth of the country. Of course, in Ireland as elsewhere there are some problems of racism and fears and resentment, but I think the overall assessment has been very positive.

IE: In the introduction to the recently published book *A Voice for Human Rights: Mary Robinson, Kofi Annan states that when he appointed you to be U.N. high commissioner for human rights he was placing you in an office whose “power is entirely of the ‘soft’ variety.” Having served in that post for five years, what is your view of the limits and strengths of soft power in a world with so many difficult conflicts in need of resolution?*

ROBINSON: I think that soft power is important to the world right now. It is the moral voice, the legitimizing factor. Many countries have committed to respecting and enforcing human rights through international treaties that they participate in. So they're



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open to the effects of naming and shaming when they don't live up to those commitments.

It is also vital to be very close to victims of violations to help them to tell their stories so that there will be accountability. I've learned that perhaps the most important tool in protecting human rights is to develop more ways of holding not just governments, but also international institutions, like the United Nations itself, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and increasingly the World Trade Organization, to account for the overall respect at the international level that human rights will be guaranteed.

And now because of our globalizing world and economy, corporations also can and should be held to greater responsibility. In my current work as the head of the Ethical Globalization Initiative, I'm still trying to employ that soft power, that moral voice, to encourage those governments and corporations to recognize that they have a responsibility and to say that the human rights agenda is a broad and balanced one, which includes not just political rights—fair trial, freedom from torture, stopping violence against women, etc.—but also rights to food, and safe water, and health, and education, which are so vital in developing countries.

IE: In a speech on promoting human rights education in December 2000, you stated that a mid-term report card on the International Decade for Human Rights Education should have read “considerable room for improvement.” Now that the decade has concluded (in 2004), what is your assessment of that effort?

ROBINSON: I think that the overall record was disappointing. There are still millions of people with no awareness that they have human rights. Many often have a very narrow perception of what that agenda of human rights is. In many countries whole sections of the population—because they're very poor, or because they're ethnic minorities, or because they're not literate—have no knowledge of their basic human rights.

But also in the richer countries, I think we still need to reinforce that this is a broad rounded agenda. My principal message is that the human rights agenda is also part of the solution to addressing the issues of the poverty in our world. We should take more seriously the core right to health, and to education, and to shelter, and to decent work as being part of the ways in which we should be trying to ensure a fairer, more values-led world.

I believe that if the rights-based approach is implemented, it will have tangible results on the poorest and most marginalized, that they will become

more central to the life of the developing nations. They will have a voice. And the population at large will know that it's not just a case of looking after the needs of the poor because we're compassionate, but rather because the poor have a right to a system that guarantees to them basic human and economic rights.

IE: You believe then that the marginalized people themselves must know that they have these rights and that will help to focus the governments, NGOs and even corporations on the importance of rights-based development?

ROBINSON: It has to be a kind of bottom-up development. That's why the decade dedicated to education on human rights still left a big gap that has to be filled. And I'm hoping that the Internet will help because there are some very good Web sites now, such as the Web site operated by a center in London called www.business-humanrights.org. These kinds of tools can help to hold corporations to some accountability and to give credit to corporations that are involved in demonstrating a commitment to best practices on human rights. And I'm hoping that increasingly small NGOs in developing countries will have access to further tools for their information to hold governments and corporations to accountability.

IE: That would be a more grassroots example of the soft power concept you spoke of earlier.

ROBINSON: Yes. Soft power is becoming more efficient all the time in holding those with power to accountability for how they exercise that power. **IE**

CHRISTOPHER MURPHY editor of *IE* and senior director, publications for NAFSA.



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