



*Interview with Mrs. Mary Robinson,
President of the Republic of Ireland*

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Interview with Mrs. Mary Robinson, President of the
Republic of Ireland

Holger G. Ehling

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Ehling¹: President, the struggle for human rights issues and social reforms in Ireland has been a major part of your political work in the past. Being the representative head of state now, you have very limited powers in daily affairs. Every speech, every political move, in theory, has to be approved by the Prime Minister. But it seems that you do exercise quite some influence on daily politics. How do you do that, and what are the restrictions?

Mrs. Robinson: Being a constitutional lawyer, I am well aware of the constraints and of the potential of the office. I think that there are two different dimensions to it : one of them is the constitutional powers and duties — and two or three of these are quite significant. For example, I have the power to refer a bill passed by the Irish Parliament to the Irish Supreme Court if the bill may possibly be in conflict with the constitution, after consulting the Council of State, which is a formal body which advises the president. I have done this once, in relation to a fishery's bill, but I have not then referred the bill for consideration. Also, if the Taoiseach, if the Prime Minister, had lost the majority in Parliament, but somebody else might well be able to form a government, I have a potential discretion not to grant a dissolution of Parliament leading to a general election.

These are important powers but would obviously not be exercised very often. Then there are the normal ceremonial functions of appointing the members of the government on advice of the Taoiseach, appointing judges to the supreme and high courts and accepting the credentials of ambassadors and representing the State.

But it was the other role that interested me very much — particularly to be the elected choice of the people of Ireland, to be the person profiling in a personalized way the modern Ireland. I gave that a lot of thought, and I saw that it was possible to do this in quite a broad way, by being very clear what is excluded.

Ehling: What is excluded?

Mrs. Robinson: What is excluded is policy-making and the realm of politics, but that leaves quite a broad agenda, perhaps at two levels: one is above politics, to promote various values and concepts, like the hand of friendship to the two communities in Northern Ireland, the light in the window for the Irish emigrants and the extended Irish family all over the world. The other is below politics, to support community self-development, which I do a lot of.

Ehling: You have a reputation as an advocate of women's rights. What are you allowed to do to improve the situation of Irish women in everyday life, especially with respect to divorce and abortion?

Mrs. Robinson: These are questions in the policy area and indeed with constitutional implications, and as President, I would not speak on these issues. But when I was active as a lawyer and as a member of the Irish Senate, I did speak very clearly on these issues. My track record is very well known to the Irish people. However, through this office I have an

¹ This interview was held on May 1, 1992, in the President's official residence, the Áras an Uachtaráin, Dublin.

opportunity to be very supportive of the empowerment of women in Irish society. Women who might have felt excluded earlier from issues such as equality in the workplace — because they would not normally have jobs and workplaces that could be compared with men's, they may have part-time jobs in “women only”-situations — their empowerment comes in different ways. It comes through taking part in courses, developing a centre for women's issues, and it's very much grassroots, it's very much bottom up. Until very recently, although this was beginning to happen both in the city areas and in rural Ireland, it was just not noticed — it was so unimportant.

And I think as President, by putting high value on it, and by recognizing it, I have both encouraged it and given it a coherence and a sense of significance that wasn't there. That in fact reaches more women than when I was a lawyer and took cases to the courts in Ireland or in Luxemburg. Or when I was speaking in the Senate on the policy issues you've raised or introducing legislation, which I did in 1970 on the availability of contraceptives. I don't regret or feel inhibited — I know the constraints — but I have plenty of potential in other areas.

Ehling: From the outside, it seems as if the debate on these women's issues is mainly concentrated in the city areas?

Mrs. Robinson: No, I would not agree. They are certainly being debated throughout all of Ireland. What I find is very interesting and indicative of an opening up of Irish society is that the debate is a very open one. And the people have differences of views and they are prepared to differ. There is much more of a pluralist nature to the debate and a more open approach. But I won't comment further on any of the specific issues, because they're in the realm of policy.

Ehling: It has been said that your victory in the elections has been mainly due to the “city votes”...

Mrs. Robinson: No, there was a remarkable spread of votes. And this to me was fascinating — that in small villages and towns in the rural areas that I didn't have the opportunity to go to during the campaign, and where there wasn't a political machine that worked for me ... because we didn't have that machine — I got 35, 38 % first preference votes, which was almost as big as what we got in the major city areas that we had had to concentrate on. It would not be possible to say that it was a city vote or that it was a class vote. It was a very interesting wide spread of support. Because I come from Mayo, from rural Ireland — and the final, major launch of the presidential campaign was in the West of Ireland, in the town where I grew up — I have a very strong support in rural Ireland. It is very important to me that I would not be identified as a middle-class city person, that I have a very real and direct line of communication with those who are growing up in rural Ireland — and I appreciate their values.

Ehling: What about the influence of the Catholic church — isn't it much bigger in rural Ireland than in the cities?

Mrs. Robinson: It is difficult once again to be specific about that. The influence is obviously significant in a country where 95 per cent of the population are members of the Catholic church. What is very interesting is that there are now very significant debates and changes going on within the Catholic church in Ireland. So that when I go round to small communities and to those dealing with homelessness or various other issues on the margins of society, very

often there will be nuns in particular and also priests working with those communities, empowering them, being their greatest support, doing it in an open, empowering way — not talking down, but encouraging self-development. This is a relatively new development which I think is influenced by nuns and priests who have returned from working in developing countries. They have brought this sense of a different approach — to how they perceive the Church work and religion — into their work in Ireland, and there is a very close linkage.

Ehling: One of the major problems for Ireland has always been the exodus of young people. Many people with an education as good as yours have left and still are leaving Ireland. What made you stay in Ireland?

Mrs. Robinson: I think for one thing I was fortunate that I returned to Ireland from the Harvard Law School, having spent a year there, in 1968. In the early seventies, it was a time of economic growth and of social reform and it was an interesting time to work and to remain in Ireland. That coincided with Ireland's joining the European Community. And that continued until the start of the eighties. Now it is more difficult for Irish people with good qualifications to necessarily find jobs in Ireland. I think that most Irish people — and I would include myself — would have a strong preference to live and work in Ireland. We have a good educational system, and in a way we educate young people beyond our capacity to give them the jobs they qualify for. So it is sad that they do leave. But I notice more and more a cycle of returning: many Irish people return after they have spent a few years abroad and are married and have some children. They want to bring up their children in Ireland — because they value the environment.

Ehling: Young people in Ireland seem to be particularly disenchanting with the traditional Irish parties. You have been very critical of party politics yourself in the past. Would you see your election as a symbol for the rejection of party politics?

Mrs. Robinson: It certainly helped my candidature for the presidency that I stood as an independent — although I had been for a period a member of the Irish Labour Party. I think I did perhaps symbolize some of the aspirations of young people for a different kind of approach for representing what was happening in modern Ireland. In fact this has been reflected by an increasing critique of the Irish parties from within the parties, which is very healthy.

We have a politically very well-informed population, and we have a very sophisticated voting system. The level of interest in politics and awareness of not only Irish politics, but also British and European and American politics is very high in Ireland. Yes — young people are looking for more from the political system, they are critical of it, but they are critical in a way of being involved as opposed to opting out. They may be involved in environmental groups, they may be involved in particular social causes and I find that they are very engaged — it's a joy talking to them. Yes, some of them are very critical — and I welcome their constructive involvement.

Ehling: You have always expressed the hope of Ireland developing into a more pluralistic society with more space for individual and dissenting opinions and life-styles. You yourself have made the open society part of your everyday life — your husband is Protestant. How does this work out in a country as Catholic as this?

Mrs. Robinson: I think this has been quite helpful, having a close knowledge of the importance of respecting and valuing and creating space for the different religious traditions, not just Christian but for all the beliefs and aspirations on this island. And it is of course significant for reaching out to the two communities in Northern Ireland.

Ehling: Northern Ireland seems to be the eternal question in Irish politics. You said that changes should be made to Ireland's position, and you have visited Northern Ireland. What can such a gesture achieve — apart from it being symbolic?

Mrs. Robinson: Northern Ireland is very much a priority in my sense of the Presidency and my concern about the situation, but it's very clear to me that the office of President has no role in Anglo-Irish discussions or in the discussions of the political parties in Northern Ireland. I emphasized this myself in the presidential campaign. But I said I wanted to do something quite different, and modest, and important, because it hasn't been done, and that was to extend the hand of friendship with no strings attached.

I have good personal links with both communities, Protestant and Catholic — therefore I have personal credibility, which I use to make the office reach out to the people. And I emphasize that I am the elected choice of the people in this part of the country and that I extend the hand of friendship on their behalf. It has been very warmly responded to. Every week that I am in office, there has been at least one group from Northern Ireland that has come to visit me in the official residence.

Ehling: To meet different people from different levels of society within relatively short periods of time requires some flexibility. Is there any way to learn this kind of flexibility?

Mrs. Robinson: I find that my training as a lawyer is very helpful. When I address audiences on my visits around the country, I try not to use notes. I read the documentation and take a briefing. The memory is reasonably short-term, one forgets many details quickly, but it is a way of communicating. I find that this is important because it's valuing the particular occasion through knowing what to value.

Ehling: What does it feel like to be President?

Mrs. Robinson: It is a major adjustment to be the first citizen, to take priority over everyone else in the state. I had been a practicing barrister and I found that once I was President I took precedence over the Chief Justice, the members of the Supreme Court, the Taoiseach — and that took a considerable adjustment. Also, it's hard to be first on all occasions, formal or informal — you have to remind yourself that it's the office, and not the individual. I find that I have become very accustomed to it. I try to make people feel at ease when I visit parts of the country. The respect for the office must come from the moral authority of being relevant and interested and in touch and not from some symbolic fear.

Ehling: What is your vision of Ireland at the end of your term?

Mrs. Robinson: I would like to represent the Ireland that I see so much of, which is a modern State which draws on its past. Because we are now so used to the idea of participating in the European Community, and it was done by a referendum, which I think was very helpful. We are very much Irish within Europe. I would like to see a proud, peaceful Ireland within Europe, which brought to Europe more insights into our culture, into our resources —

archaeological, historical and cultural — and that contributed in a positive way to the intellectual and political development of Europe. And I see all the seeds of that here now. So I am reasonably hopeful that, if there can be a political framework that can be acceptable for the political parties, these things can develop within my term.