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## Robinson, 2009 Inamori Ethics Prize Speech: New Challenges to Human Rights in the Twenty-First Century

Mary Robinson

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Mary Robinson  
Recipient of the 2009 Inamori Ethics Prize

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Mary Therese Winifred Robinson was born on May 21, 1944 in Ballina, County Mayo, Ireland. She is the daughter of two Irish Catholic medical doctors. Robinson attended secondary school in Dublin, and then went on to study law at Trinity College in Dublin and Harvard Law School. In 1970, she married Nicholas Robinson and was temporarily disowned by her family for marrying a Protestant. Mary and Nicholas have three children together.

In 1969, Robinson was elected as an independent candidate of the Senate of Ireland (*Seanad Eireann*), where she served as a senator until 1989. She campaigned on a wide range of liberal issues, including the right of women to sit on juries, legalizing contraception, and fighting the requirement that all women must resign from civil service upon marriage. She also worked for many years on homosexual law reform, campaigning for the decriminalization of homosexuality in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Robinson served on multiple parliamentary committees between 1973 and 1989, including the Joint Committee on EC Secondary Legislation, where she served as chairman of its Social Affairs Sub-Committee, as well as chairman of its Legal Affairs Committee. She also served on the Joint Committee on Marital Breakdown and was a member of the Dublin City Council.

In 1990, Robinson was nominated as a candidate for the presidency by the Labor Party, with support from the Green Party. On December 3, 1990, Robinson was inaugurated as the seventh president of Ireland; she was the first female to hold this position. While president, she worked for peace and dramatically changed the face of Anglo-Irish relations. After serving for seven years, Robinson resigned her presidency in September 1997 for a new position at the UN, the High Commissioner for Human Rights. She served one full term and then extended her term an extra year following an appeal from Kofi Annan.

In 2002, Robinson founded an international non-profit organization, Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative ([www.realizingrights.org](http://www.realizingrights.org)). The mission of Realizing Rights is “to put human rights standards at the heart of global governance and policy-making and to ensure that the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable are addressed on the global stage.” The organization believes that the current critical global challenges are:

fostering equitable trade and decent work, realizing the right to health, shaping more humane migration policies, strengthening women leaders through intercultural forums, and encouraging corporate responsibility.

Because of Robinson's work in human rights she has received many honors, including Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award, the Sydney Peace Prize, the Otto Hahn Peace Medal in Gold, a John Jay Justice Award, and the very first "Outspoken" award from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Most recently, President Obama presented her with the United States' highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom.

On July 18, 2007, Nelson Mandela announced the formation of The Elders, a group of twelve world leaders that includes Robinson, Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan, and others. These individuals were brought together to contribute their wisdom, independent leadership, and integrity to tackle some of the world's greatest problems. The Elders travel to troubled regions and use their influence to marshal resources and give a voice to victims of intolerance, oppression, and abuse.

In 2009, Robinson was appointed the head of the International Commission of Jurists, an international human rights NGO. It is made up of sixty eminent jurists, including members of the senior judiciary in Australia, Canada, and South Africa. The commission aims to strengthen the role of lawyers and judges in protecting human rights and the rule of law. Robinson has always sought to use law as an instrument for social change, arguing landmark cases before the European Court of Human Rights, as well as in the Irish courts and the European Court in Luxembourg.

In February 2010, the Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice was created and Robinson joined the foundation full-time in January 2011. The main purpose of this organization is to address the link between human rights development and climate change. It also focuses on women's issues and female leadership, as the foundation recognizes the role that gender plays in human rights.

In 2011, the YWCA established the Mary Robinson Award for Young Women's Leadership in Human Rights. The recipients of the prize are young women activists who support and work towards women's leadership in the field of human rights, much like Robinson has done throughout her life.

Currently, Robinson serves as an honorary co-chair for the World Justice Project and on the Eminent Advisory Board of the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa. She is also an advisory council member of the

International Initiative on Maternal Mortality and Human Rights, a vocal supporter of The Big Read, and a founding member and chair of the Council of Women World Leaders. She has worked on issues of social justice and the environment as chair of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and is now chair of the GAVI Alliance Board (Global Alliance for Vaccinations and Immunizations). She chairs the Fund for Global Human Rights, is honorary president of Oxfam International, and is a patron of the International Community of Women Living with AIDS (ICW).

President Robinson embodies the ideal of global ethical leadership and is a tireless international champion of human rights. Michael Posner, executive director of the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights, said Robinson has navigated difficult and controversial issues, always emerging as a champion of those most vulnerable to abuse. She was recently described in the *International Journal of Humanities and Peace* as "one of the world's most eloquent and courageous defenders of human rights."

## New Challenges to Human Rights in the Twenty-First Century

Mary Robinson

Transcript of the 2009 Inamori Ethics Prize Speech

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It is a great honor to receive the 2009 Inamori Ethics Prize. I would like to thank everyone at the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence here at Case Western Reserve University for this tribute.

The Inamori Center's mission to foster the development of future leaders who will, in the words of Kazuo Inamori, "Serve humankind through ethical deeds rather than actions based on self-interest and selfish desires" is of great importance. Our world is in desperate need of ethical leaders—individuals willing to put the good of their communities, nations, and the world before personal gain—leaders willing to make courageous decisions to foster a more just, peaceful, and sustainable future for all.

Today I would like to reflect on "New Challenges to Human Rights in the 21st Century." My intention is to look ahead and offer some thoughts on a number of key global challenges—including poverty and climate change—that often aren't considered from a human rights perspective, yet which must be addressed with greater attention to questions of equity and justice.

But before looking ahead, allow me to begin by taking a few moments to look back. I think it is important to do so for two reasons. First, because it may be instructive to share with you some reflections on my own experiences in positions of leadership. Perhaps some of the challenges I faced and approaches I took can be of help, especially to students who are studying ethics and leadership. Second, because I'm aware that many of you will have followed some of the recent media coverage and discussions here within the Case Western Reserve community concerning the decision by President Obama to honor me last month with the Presidential Medal of Freedom Award and the controversy which followed.

So where to begin? For me, I find my strongest convictions always centered around a notion of fairness—of what's right. I often joke that maybe this was a result of being the only girl wedged between four brothers! In my early career, in the Ireland of the 1960s, I developed a strong view that

it was wrong that so many of our laws, based in significant part on Catholic teaching, intruded on the area of private morality. I believed that the modern Ireland should respect a person's own sense of morality on issues such as the use of contraceptives and sexual relations between consenting adults of the same sex. I felt our society was going against basic ideas of fairness and equal rights by prohibiting these activities through criminal laws.

I decided that combining a career in the law with one in elected public service was the best way to try and make a difference and address the issues I felt so deeply about. So I became a lawyer, taking cases before the Irish and European courts and was elected a senator in the Irish Parliament. I was fortunate to have been involved in cases that affected the reality of peoples' lives. I was privileged to be part of legal actions which led, for example, to the removal of discrimination against children born out of wedlock and the achievement of equal pay and opportunity for women in the workplace, among other cases.

When I speak with young Irish women and men today, I'm still surprised when I hear them say that it seems difficult to credit that in the lifetime of their parents some of our fellow citizens weren't guaranteed equal rights such as the benefit of the right to contraception or the right to civil legal aid. They are shocked to think that women were so recently barred from sitting on juries or were forced to resign their civil service jobs on marriage.

But the truth is, for me and the many others who were involved in fighting these injustices, our efforts and hard-fought legal victories were hugely controversial at the time. Our own reputations and personal and professional ethics were questioned. We were seen by some as the enemy. Of course, it is never much fun to be unpopular, but we never doubted that our cause was just and we never questioned the need to push ahead.

Years later, when I was elected by the people of Ireland to serve as President, I decided that leadership meant fostering a national conversation about a range of difficult issues, including the conflict in Northern Ireland, as well as Ireland's role in the wider world and on how we viewed those around us close to home. So I made it my business to travel to countries experiencing violent conflict and extreme poverty to raise awareness, to listen to those in need and to offer support. And I worked to open up dialogue and understanding with those who were most marginalized in Irish society.

Those experiences led me to the United Nations, where I served as High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002. In that role I traveled

around the world and witnessed the common yearnings of individuals and communities to have fundamental rights, to be free from fear and free from want, recognized. I hoped that by being close to the victims of rights violations and listening—very simply, listening, and showing an ability to take on board the extent of their suffering and the depths of their quiet courage—I could help make their voices heard.

The position of Human Rights High Commissioner has been called the “awkward voice” within the UN system. I took the job knowing that standing up and speaking out about government abuses wouldn’t make me popular. Choosing when to work behind the scenes to foster dialogue and accountability, and when to publicly highlight abuses, was a difficult calculation to make—and individuals who have come after me in the role have each sought to find that delicate balance.

As you may know, some of my actions as High Commissioner have been criticized recently in the context of the honor conferred by President Obama. Before addressing this, let me say first how humbling it was to receive this nation’s highest civilian honor. I first visited the United States as a law student in the late 1960s. That experience was one of the most formative of my life and through it I developed a great love for this country and what it stands for. It has been wonderful to be back again, living and working here over the past seven years and to discover America and its people all over again.

So you can imagine how painful it was for me when the President’s decision to award me the Medal of Freedom sparked protests, including among a number of US Jewish organizations. One of the main contentions was that I didn’t do enough during my time as High Commissioner to prevent or speak out against the deplorable anti-Semitism which surfaced in the lead up to and during the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism.

The conference took place the first week of September 2001, just days before the terrible terrorist attacks on the US on 9/11. The decision to hold this conference, the third UN global forum to address the subject of racism, was taken by the General Assembly in 1997. At its session in 1998, the UN Commission on Human Rights—an inter-governmental body which my office served—requested the UN Secretary General to designate the High Commissioner for Human Rights as secretary general of the World Conference.

It is important to distinguish the roles played by the various parties at a UN conference. The position I held was secretary general of the confer-

ence. It is common for this role to be assumed by a senior UN official who is mandated with responsibility for preparations and secretariat functions. This is entirely different from the role of Chair of the conference, which is always held by a high representative of the host country and who has overall responsibility for the conference agenda, negotiations, and outcomes. The decision to hold this conference in Durban, South Africa, was fitting given that country's legacy of racism and its inspiring example of reconciliation. The South African Foreign Minister served as the Conference Chair.

As secretary general of the conference, I had to oversee the organization of numerous preparatory events and the conference proper. But I also felt a responsibility to help make it a global gathering in which every country would consider its own challenges in combating discrimination of all kinds. To encourage positive thinking, in the months leading up to the conference I presented a Vision Statement of positive commitments, under the patronage of Nelson Mandela, which more than eighty Heads of State signed and which I hoped might contribute to the government negotiation process.

During the inter-governmental preparatory process, I stressed repeatedly that the conference would let down the victims of racism and discrimination if it was no more than a talking shop. I urged governments to make it an action-oriented meeting with specific follow-up and review provisions. I made clear that the conference could not be a forum where one part of the international community abused another. At all times I stressed that I regarded racism as a cancer wherever it appears and that no country can claim to be free of it.

But despite these calls, some participants, both inside and outside the conference, wanted to make the conflict in the Middle East, which at the time had entered a new phase of violence, the principal focus of Durban. Attempts were made by some governments to insert blatant anti-Semitic language into the document being developed through the inter-governmental process. This unacceptable language was in brackets, which means not agreed text, but nevertheless some countries insisted on retaining it in the draft all the way up to the conference itself.

Critics have contended that more should have been done to stop such actions by UN member states, and that I could have spoken out more forcefully against these offensive proposals and taken stronger positions in the weeks before the conference. I can only say that at the time I stressed that there could be no language which equated Zionism with racism. I condemned the horrible anti-Semitic language and actions which were in circulation during

the conference and refused to forward the final NGO document containing such offensive text to the conference.

I will leave it to historians to examine these events in more detail and to judge my actions. As in any difficult inter-governmental process, I'm sure there are things that could have been done differently that might have contributed to a better result. But what is crucial to understand is that despite the efforts of those who brought a message of hate to Durban, in the end they were defeated.

Frankly, I think the focus now should be on asking what all of us can do to combat rising anti-Semitism, as well as Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment which continue around the world. Instead of looking back, I believe all our energies should be aimed at supporting ongoing efforts to help Israelis and Palestinians resolve protracted conflict, occupation, violence, and terrorism, and find a way forward based on recognition of the equal rights and the right to self-determination of both peoples involved.

So let me conclude my reflections here by quickly setting out a few points which I think are important for you to understand in coming to your own conclusions. I do think it is important to correct distortions that have been reported in recent weeks around my role in the Durban conference and in the UN human rights system.

First, numerous commentaries and reports incorrectly state that the Durban conference produced a final result which affirmed that "Zionism = racism." As I've said, this is absolutely false. Though it is true that anti-Semitic and anti-Israel language was present in draft text during the conference, governments agreed to remove these references from the outcome document. The final Declaration and Program of Action from the conference makes specific calls and provides strategies for countering anti-Semitism, challenging rising xenophobia and protecting minorities, indigenous peoples, migrants, and other vulnerable groups.

Second, some of the most hurtful criticisms accuse me of being "anti-Israel" and a "Jew hater." Let me say again that I find the very concept of anti-Semitism repulsive. I have taken action against it all my life and will continue to do so. I have repeatedly called on governments everywhere to acknowledge that anti-Semitism is a virulent form of racism and that anti-Semitic acts need to be seen as violations of international human rights law. That record is available for anyone to see.

I visited Israel just a few weeks ago with the Elders, a group of international leaders brought together by Nelson Mandela, and we had constructive

dialogue with President Peres and a range of Israeli business, youth, and civil society leaders. Have I been critical of Israeli government policies? Yes. Does that make me anti-Israel or anti-Semitic? No.

Many human rights groups, including in Israel, have been and continue to be sharply critical of some of the Israeli government's practices based on the application of universally accepted international human rights norms. Just as I saw it as my responsibility as High Commissioner to stand up against the policies of China in Tibet, or Russia in Chechnya, or the United States in its responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which undermined international humanitarian and human rights law, I felt it was my job as High Commissioner to also challenge the government of Israel whenever its policies and security forces violated international human rights standards.

At the same time, I have repeatedly stressed that those who advocate for the rights of Palestinians have an obligation to ensure that their criticisms and related actions do not become broadside attacks against Jews and the legitimacy of Israel. It is at this point that they become racist. The conflict in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians—and by extension much of the Arab world—will become even harder to address if anger against Israeli policies continues to spill over into broader patterns of antagonism against Jews, and if the speech devolves into outright racism and calling into question Israel's right to exist.

Finally, I would like to clarify a point concerning the role of the High Commissioner and the UN human rights system in general. Any suggestion that votes concerning Israel in the then-UN Commission on Human Rights, an inter-governmental body, were in any way my doing show a lack of understanding of UN processes. Yet many continue to suggest wrongly that as High Commissioner I “supervised” or “led” the UN Commission on Human Rights or was responsible for its agenda and decision-making processes.

The Commission, which has been replaced by the UN Human Rights Council, consisted of state representatives. It was a political body with a very wide mandate. The Commission and Council are distinct from the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, which is part of the United Nations Secretariat, answering to the Secretary-General. The Office's role is to provide technical, substantive, and secretariat support to the inter-governmental body and is mandated to respond to requests made by member states. But it is governments which decide what actions should or shouldn't be taken.

I'm grateful for the opportunity today to try to shed some light on these issues. Honest differences are a natural and healthy part of public discourse. But as I said in a statement on receiving the Medal of Freedom, "We must ensure our sources are highly reliable and not be distracted by ill-informed comment. Contemporary savagery continues to thrive in our twenty-first century and will do so unless we all accept the challenge posed by President Obama and act as agents of change."

So let me now turn to just that point—some of the key human rights challenges which we all must face today. In thinking about the future, we must first acknowledge that sixty years on from the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, a declaration which proclaimed that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world," we still have much work to do to make rights a reality for all.

Today the dignity of people in countries around the world continues to be widely disregarded as a result of ineffective governance and corruption, poverty, oppression, and war. We see this in many guises—from the situations of millions of people lacking access to adequate food, basic health care, and opportunities for decent work, to the failure to protect civilians in danger during violent conflict, to the lack of effective action to confront human trafficking and the plight of migrants, to widespread discrimination against women and vulnerable groups. These and other affronts to dignity and rights shame us all.

Last December, to mark the Universal Declaration's sixtieth anniversary, I co-chaired an expert panel which was asked to develop proposals for an agenda for human rights for the next decade. The hope was to develop ideas which could be embraced by governments and other stakeholders as a common road map for action in the years ahead. Let me briefly outline three issues in particular from the panel's work to give you an idea of what we feel requires greater attention. These are:

1. The links between poverty and human rights and how more effective rights-based strategies can be implemented to combat poverty.
2. The efforts required to strengthen national human rights protection systems.
3. And last but certainly not least, the challenges of climate change and its impacts on human rights.

On the first issue—poverty—as our panel report notes ([www.UDHR60.ch](http://www.UDHR60.ch)), we are now well past the halfway mark on the UN Millennium Development Goals timetable, ending in 2015, to make significant progress on reducing poverty around the world. Poverty is an immensely complex phenomenon, rooted in discrimination, unequal access to assets, location, capacity, alienation from public institutions, and the legacies of history.

Though progress has been made by some countries, it is generally recognized that in some regions, and in many target areas, the world will fall short of its collective ambitions to reduce hunger, improve access to basic services like clean water, and increase the number of children in school by 2015. Reaching the MDG targets has become especially difficult with the global economic crisis added to the existing crises of food insecurity and climate change. The challenge is to understand where and why we are falling short and what can be done to close the gap between commitments made and results on the ground.

Our panel report stressed that at least part of the answer lies in strengthening the linkages between states' human rights commitments and their MDG pledges. We also feel there must be greater attention to expanding decent employment and livelihood opportunities around the world. This has been the missing link between growth and poverty reduction strategies over recent decades. We need policies that promote more jobs, and jobs that meet basic labor rights, but also expanded social protection systems that shield people, especially the poor, against economic shocks. Equally important, we need to shape more participatory economic governance through social dialogue between workers, employers, governments, and civil society more broadly. My colleagues and I at Realizing Rights—the organization I founded after completing my term as High Commissioner—have been working with a range of actors from government, business, trade unions, and civil society to advance these objectives.

This leads to the second issue I wish to highlight—how best to strengthen national human rights protection systems. As our panel points out in its report, though important work is being done to strengthen institutions of government in many countries, far too little emphasis has been placed on ensuring access to a well-functioning justice system. All should have access to justice, but just think of the level of violence against women—both sexual violence during conflicts and domestic violence—and the widespread impunity. Millions of women and girls have no remedy for pervasive violence and discrimination.

The vast sums that have been invested recently to combat inequities in global health, notably by private philanthropy and multi-stakeholder alliances of governments, private sector, and civil society actors, have had a demonstrable impact on the global vaccine market, on the incidence of tropical diseases, and on health services and immunization programs. Millions of people have benefited from these efforts. Our panel has called for the establishment of a new Global Fund for National Human Rights Protection Systems that would build on lessons learned from such initiatives and address the need for effective and accountable justice systems.

Finally, let me say a few words about the links between climate change and human rights. As you know, here in the US and around the world, there is increasing attention to climate change in the months leading up to the UN conference on climate change in Copenhagen this December, which will negotiate a successor agreement to the Kyoto protocol. The impacts of climate change are being felt today in countries around the world. In some places, environmental changes such as prolonged drought and rising sea levels are threatening entire communities and even nations. If we don't take meaningful and farsighted action now to address climate change, we are not only failing those who suffer today. We are also putting at risk the well-being of our planet and future generations.

Few dispute that climate warming is likely to undermine the realization of a broad range of internationally protected human rights: rights to health and even life; rights to food, water, shelter, and property; the rights of indigenous and traditional peoples; rights associated with livelihood and culture; with migration and resettlement; and with personal security in the event of conflict. Responsibility for human rights abuses linked to climate change often lies not with the government nearest to hand, but with diffuse actors, both public and private. This means recognizing shared responsibilities for human rights.

Many difficult issues must be faced to chart a more sustainable and equitable course and slow the current process of climate change to manageable levels. Government leaders will have to find ways to determine the appropriate distribution of responsibilities for climate change emissions. They will need to forge new agreements on the equitable use of the remaining carbon resources our planet can tolerate and ensure that adequate resources are available to support those forced to adapt to changes in the environment which threaten life and livelihoods.

A growing number of individuals and organizations are working together to make the case, in the months leading up to December's conference in

Copenhagen, that the time has come to think more deeply about our conceptions of obligation and responsibility—not just within nations but also beyond borders. The starting point is the notion of climate justice.

Climate justice means accepting the clear injustice of the fact that many decades of carbon emissions in richer parts of the world have led to global warming and caused severe climate impacts in the poorest countries. We must put into practice well-established principles, such as the requirement that polluters pay for the environmental damages they cause. Climate justice also means recognizing that although we all have responsibilities to act, because the world's richest economies have caused and continue to contribute most to the problem of climate change, they have a greater obligation to take action and to do so more quickly. That must include providing support to developing countries on a scale that not only ensures they avoid environmentally damaging economic development patterns but also enables them to meet their current and projected energy needs.

Government leaders have acknowledged their responsibility to work together towards social justice and protection of the environment. They have signed treaties and declarations in which they agree to cooperate to protect the climate system and to ensure respect for fundamental human rights. Now is the time to define more precisely what these international obligations entail, when they are triggered, and what factors condition our responses.

The challenges ahead are enormous. They require great political courage. But if we can summon the shared sense that we are truly all in this together, and give our leaders encouragement to take action, then the next decade for human rights might turn out to be much different than the last one. Let us work to fill in the gaps in accountability mechanisms to measure our progress. Let us learn to come together, across different cultures, sectors, and divisions in approach, to imagine—and work toward—a future where all human beings may, truly, live equally in dignity and rights.

Thank you again for this honor and for the invitation to be here today.