Cherishing the Irish Diaspora; On a Matter of Public Importance: An Address to the Houses of the Oireachtas

(Irish Parliament and Senate)
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by President of Ireland Mary Robinson
Cherishing the Irish Diaspora; An Address.

Four years ago I promised to dedicate my abilities to the service and welfare of the people of Ireland. Even then I was acutely aware of how broad that term the people of Ireland is and how it resisted any fixed or narrow definition. One of my purposes here today is to suggest that, far from seeking to categorize or define it, we widen it still further to make it as broad and inclusive as possible.

At my inauguration I spoke of the seventy million people worldwide who can claim Irish descent. I also committed my Presidency to cherishing them--even though at the time I was thinking of doing so in a purely symbolic way. Nevertheless the simple emblem of a light in the window, for me, and I hope for them, signifies the inextinguishable nature of our love and remembrance on this island those who leave it behind.

But in intervening four years something has occurred in my life which I share with many deputies and senators here and with most Irish families. In that time I have put faces and names to many of those individuals.

In places as far apart as Calcutta and Toronto, on a number of visits to Britain and the United States, in cities in Tanzania and Hungary and Australia, I have met young people from throughout the island of Ireland who felt they had no choice but to emigrate. I have also met men and women who may never have seen this island but whose identity with it is part of their own self-definition. Last summer, in the city of Cracow, I was greeted in Irish by a Polish student, a member of the Polish-Irish Society. In Zimbabwe I learned that the Mashonaland Irish

association had recently celebrated its centenary. In each country visited I have met Irish communities, often in far-flung places, and listened to stories of men and women whose pride and affection for Ireland has neither deserted them nor deterred them from dedicating their loyalty and energies to other countries and cultures. None are a greater source of pride than the missionaries and aid workers who bring such dedication, humour and practical commonsense to often very demanding work. Through this office, I have been a witness to the stories these people and places have to tell.

The more I know of these stories the more it seems to me an added richness of our heritage that Irishness is not simply territorial. In fact Irishness as a concept seems to me at its strongest when it reaches out to everyone on this island and shows itself capable of honouring and listening to those whose sense of identity, and whose cultural values, may be more British than Irish. It can be strengthened again if we turn with open minds and hearts to the array of people outside Ireland for whom this island is a place of origin. After all, emigration is not just a chronicle of sorrow and regret. It is also a powerful story of contribution and adaptation. In fact, I have become more convinced each year that this great narrative of dispossession and belonging, which so often had its origins in sorrow and leave-taking, has become--with a certain amount of historic irony--one of the treasures of our society. If that is so then our relation with the diaspora beyond our shores is one which can instruct our society in the values of diversity, tolerance and fair-mindedness.

To speak of our society in these terms is itself a reference in shorthand to the vast distances we have travelled as a people. This island has been inhabited for more than five thousand years. It has been shaped by pre-Celtic wanderers, by Celts, Vikings, Normans,

Huguenots, Scottish and English settlers. Whatever the rights or wrongs of history, all those people marked this island: down to the small detail of the distinctive ship-building of the Vikings, the linen-making of the Huguenots, the words of Planter balladeers. How could we remove any one of these things from what we call our Irishness? Far from wanting to do so, we need to recover them so as to deepen our understanding.

Nobody knows this more than the local communities throughout the island of Ireland who are retrieving the history of their own areas. Through the rediscovery of that local history, young people are being drawn into their past in ways that help their future. These projects not only generate employment; they also regenerate our sense of who we were. I think of projects like the Ceide Fields in Mayo, where the intriguing agricultural structures of settlers from thousands of years ago are being explored through scholarship and field work. Or Castletown House in Kildare where the grace of our Anglo-Irish architectural heritage is being restored with scrupulous respect for detail. The important excavations at Navan Fort in Armagh are providing us with vital information about early settlers whose proved existence illuminates both legend and history. In Ballance House in Antrim the Ulster-New Zealand Society have restored the birthplace of John Ballance, who became Prime Minister of New Zealand and led that country to be the first in the world to give the vote to women.

Varied as these projects may seem to be, the reports they bring us are consistently challenging in that they may not suit any one version of ourselves. I for one welcome that challenge. Indeed, when we consider the Irish migrants of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries our preconceptions are challenged again. There is a growing literature which details the fortunes of the Irish in Europe and later in Canada, America, Australia, Argentina. These important

studies of migration have the power to surprise us. They also demand from us honesty and self-awareness in return. If we expect that the mirror held up to us by Irish communities abroad will show us a single familiar identity, or a pure strain of Irishness, we will be disappointed. We will overlook the fascinating diversity of culture and choice which looks back at us. Above all we will miss the chance to have that dialogue with our own diversity which this reflection offers us.

This year we begin to commemorate the Irish famine which started 150 years ago. All parts of this island--north and south, east and west--will see their losses noted and remembered, both locally and internationally. This year we will see those local and global connections made obvious in the most poignant ways. But they have always been there.

Last year, for example, I went to Grosse Ile, an island on the St. Lawrence river near Quebec city. I arrived in heavy rain and as I looked at the mounds which, together with white crosses, are all that mark the mass graves of the five thousand or more Irish people who died there, I was struck by the sheer power of commemoration. I was also aware that, even across time and distance, tragedy must be seen as human and not historic, and that to think of it in national terms alone can obscure that fact. And as I stood looking at Irish graves, I was also listening to the story of the French-Canadian families who braved fever and shared their food, who took the Irish into their homes and into their heritage.

(Indeed, the woman who told me that story had her own origins in the arrival at Grosse Ile. She spoke to me in her native French and, with considerable pride, in her inherited Irish. The more I have travelled the more I have seen that the Irish language since the famine has endured in the accents of New York and Toronto and Sydney, not to mention Camden Town. As such it

is an interesting record of survival and adaptation. But long before that, it had standing as a scholarly European language. The Irish language has the history of Europe off by heart. It contains a valuable record of European culture from before the Roman conquest there. It is not surprising therefore that is is studied today in universities from Glasgow to Moscow and from Seattle to Indiana. And why indeed should I have been surprised to have been welcomed in Cracow in Irish by a Polish student? I take pleasure and pride in hearing Irish spoken in other countries just as I am moved to hear the rhythms of our songs and our poetry finding a home in other tongues and other traditions. It proves to me what so many Irish abroad already know: that Ireland can be loved in any language.)

The weight of the past, the researches of our local interpreters and the start of the remembrance of the famine all, in my view, point us towards a single reality: that commemoration is a moral act, just as our relation in this country to those who have left it is a moral relationship. We have too much at stake in both not to be rigorous.

We cannot have it both ways. We cannot want a complex present and still yearn for a simple past. I was very aware of that when I visited the refugee camps in Somalia and more recently in Tanzania and Zaire. The thousands of men and women and children who came to those camps were, as the Irish of the 1840s were, defenceless in the face of catastrophe. Knowing our own history, I saw the tragedy of their hunger as a human disaster. We, of all people, know it is vital that it be carefully analysed so that their children and their children's children be spared that ordeal. We realize that while a great part of our concern for their situation, as Irish men and women who have a past which includes famine, must be at practical levels of help, another part of it must consist of a humanitarian perspective which springs

directly from our self-knowledge as a people. Famine is not only humanly destructive, it is culturally disfiguring. The Irish who died at Grosse Ile were men and women with plans and dreams of future achievements. It takes from their humanity and individuality to consider them merely as victims.

Therefore it seemed to me vital, even as I watched the current tragedy in Africa, that we should uphold the dignity of the men and women who suffer there by insisting there are no inevitable victims. It is important that in our own commemoration of famine, such reflections have a place. As Tom Murphy has eloquently said in an introduction to his play FAMINE: "a hungry and demoralised people becomes silent". We cannot undo the silence of our own past, but we can lend our voice to those who now suffer. To do so we must look at our history, in the light of this commemoration, with a clear insight which exchanges the view that we were inevitable victims in it, for an active involvement in the present application of its meaning. We can examine in detail humanitarian relief then and relate it to humanitarian relief now and assess the inadequacies of both. And this is not just a task for historians. I have met children in schools and men and women all over Ireland who make an effortless and sympathetic connection between our past suffering and the present tragedies of hunger in the world. One of the common bonds between us and our diaspora can be to share this imaginative way of re-interpreting the past. I am certain that they, too, will feel that the best possible commemoration of men and women who died in that famine, who were cast up on other shores because of it, is to take their dispossession into the present with us, to help others who now suffer in a similar way.

Therefore I welcome all initiatives being taken during this period of commemoration, many of which can be linked with those abroad, to contribute to the study and understanding of

economic vulnerability. I include in that all the illustrations of the past which help us understand the present. In the Famine Museum in Strokestown there is a vivid and careful retelling of what happened during the Famine. When we stand in front of those images I believe we have a responsibility to understand them in human terms now, not just in Irish terms then. They should inspire us to be a strong voice in the analysis of the cause and the cure of conditions that predispose to world hunger, whether that involves us in the current debate about access to adequate water supplies or the protection of economic migrants. We need to remember that our own diaspora was once vulnerable on both those counts. We should bear in mind that an analysis of sustainable development, had it existed in the past, might well have saved some of our people from the tragedy we are starting to commemorate.

I chose the title of this speech--cherishing the Irish diaspora--with care. Diaspora, in its meaning of dispersal or scattering, includes the many ways, not always chosen, that people have left this island. To cherish is to value and to nurture and support. If we are honest we will acknowledge that those who leave do not always feel cherished. As Eavan Boland reminds us in her poem "The Emigrant Irish":

"Like oil lamps we put them out the back, Of our houses, of our minds."

To cherish also means that we are ready to accept new dimensions of the diaspora. Many of us over the years--and I as President--have direct experience of the warmth and richness of the Irish-American contribution and tradition, and its context in the hospitality of that country. I am also aware of the creative energies of those born on this island who are now making their lives in the United States and in so many other countries. We need to accept that in their new perspectives may well be a critique of our old ones. But if cherishing the diaspora is to be more

than a sentimental regard for those who leave our shores, we should not only listen to their voice and their viewpoint. We have a responsibility to respond warmly to their expressed desire for appropriate fora for dialogue and interaction with us by examining in an open and generous way the possible linkages. We should accept that such a challenge is an education in diversity which can only benefit our society.

Indeed there are a variety of opportunities for co-operation on this island which will allow us new ways to cherish the diaspora. Many of those opportunities can be fruitfully explored by this Oireachtas [Irish Parliament]. Many will be taken further by local communities. Some are already in operation. Let me mention just one example here. One of the most understandable and poignant concerns of any diaspora is to break the silence: to find out the names and places of origin. If we are to cherish them, we have to assist in that utterly understandable human longing. The Irish Genealogical Project, which is supported by both governments, is transferring handwritten records from local registers of births, deaths and marriages, on to computer. It uses modern technology to allow men and women, whose origins are written down in records from Kerry to Antrim, to gain access to them. In the process it provides employment and training for young people in both technology and history. And the recent establishment of a council of genealogical organisations, again involving both parts of this island, shows the potential for voluntary co-operation.

I turn now to those records which are still only being written. No family on this island can be untouched by the fact that so many of our young people leave it. The reality is that we have lost, and continue every day to lose, their presence and their brightness. These young people leave Ireland to make new lives in demanding urban environments. As well as having to

search for jobs, they may well find themselves lonely, homesick, unable to speak the language of those around them; and, if things do not work out, unwilling to accept the loss of face of returning home. It hardly matters at that point whether they are graduate or unskilled. What matters is that they should have access to the support and advice they need. It seems to me therefore that one of the best ways to cherish the diaspora is to begin at home. We need to integrate into our educational and social and counselling services an array of skills of adaptation and a depth of support which will prepare them for this first gruelling challenge of adulthood.

The urgency of this preparation, and its outcome, allows me an opportunity to pay tribute to the voluntary agencies who respond with such practical compassion and imagination to the Irish recently arrived in other countries. I have welcomed many of their representatives to Arus an Uachtarain [Irish President's residence] and I have also seen their work in cities such as New York and Melbourne and Manchester, where their response on a day-to-day basis may be vital to someone who has newly arrived. It is hard to overestimate the difference which personal warmth and wise advice, as well as practical support, can make in these situations.

I pay a particular tribute to those agencies in Britain--both British and Irish--whose generous support and services, across a whole range of needs have been recognised by successive Irish governments through the Dion project. These services extend across employment, housing and welfare and make a practical link between Irish people and the future they are constructing in a new environment. Compassionate assistance is given, not simply to the young and newly arrived, but to the elderly, the sick including those isolated by HIV or AIDS, and those suffering hardship through alcohol or drug dependency or who are in prison. Although I think of myself as trying to keep up with this subject, I must say I was struck by the sheer scale

of the effort which has been detailed in recent reports published under the auspices of the Federation of Irish Societies. These show a level of concern and understanding which finds practical expression every day through these agencies and gives true depth to the meaning of the word cherish.

When I was student, away from home, and homesick for my family and my friends and my country, I walked out one evening and happened to go into a Boston newsagent's shop. There, just at the back of the news stand, almost to my disbelief, was *The Western People*. I will never forget the joy with which I bought it and took it back with me and found, of course, that the river Moy was still there and the Cathedral was still standing. I remember the hunger with which I read the news from home. I know that story has a thousand versions. But I also know it has a single meaning. Part of cherishing must be communication. The journey which an Irish newspaper once made to any point outside Ireland was circumscribed by the limits of human travel. In fact, it replicated the slow human journey through ports and on ships and airplanes. Now that journey can be transformed, through modern on- line communications, into one of almost instantaneous arrival.

We are at the centre of the adventure in human information and communication greater than any other since the invention of the printing press. We will see our lives changed by that. We still have time to influence the process and I am glad to see that we in Ireland are doing this. In some cases this may merely involve drawing attention to what already exists. The entire Radio 1 service of RTE is now transmitted live over most of Europe on the Astra satellite. In North America we have a presence through the Galaxy satellite. There are several internet providers in Ireland and bulletin boards with community databases throughout the island. The magic of

E-mail surmounts time and distance and cost. And the splendid and relatively recent technology of the World Wide Web means that local energies and powerful opportunities of access are being made available on the information highway.

The shadow of departure will never be lifted. The grief of seeing a child or other family member leave Ireland will always remain sharp and the absence will never be easy to bear. But we can make their lives easier if we use this new technology to bring the news from home. As a people, we are proud of our story-telling, our literature, our theatre, our ability to improvise with words. And there is a temptation to think that we put that at risk if we espouse these new forms of communication. In fact we can profoundly enrich the method of contact by the means of expression, and we can and should--as a people who have a painful historic experience of silence and absence--welcome and use the noise, the excitement, the speed of contact and the sheer exuberance of these new forms.

This is the second time I have addressed the two Houses of the Oireachtas as provided under the Constitution. I welcome the opportunity it has given me to highlight this important issue at a very relevant moment for us all. The men and women of our diaspora represent not simply a series of departures and losses. They remain, even while absent, a precious reflection of our own growth and change, a precious reminder of the many strands of identity which compose our story. They have come, either now or in the past, from Derry and Dublin and Cork and Belfast. They know the names of our townlands and villages. They remember our landscape or they have heard of it. They look to us anxiously to include them in our sense of ourselves and not to forget their contribution while we make our own. The debate about how best to engage their contribution with our own has many aspects and offers opportunities for new structures and

increased contact.

If I have been able to add something to this process of reflection and to encourage a more practical expression of the concerns we share about our sense of ourselves at home and abroad then I am grateful to have had your attention here today. Finally, I know this Oireachtas will agree with me that the truest way of cherishing our diaspora is to offer them, at all times, the reality of this island as a place of peace where the many diverse traditions in which so many of them have their origins, their memories, their hopes are bound together in tolerance and understanding.

Mary Robinson
President of Ireland

Note: Robinson was the first woman President to be elected in Ireland.

Born in 1944 in Ballina, County Mayo, Robinson's parents were physicians. She studied in Paris and at Trinity College in Dublin. She then lived for a time in Boston and graduated from Harvard Law School in 1968. After returning to Ireland, she became Ireland's youngest Senator at the age of 25. She was also the first Catholic Senator in the Irish Senate. During the next 20 years as senator and an activist lawyer, she focused on many civil rights and women's issues. Robinson continues to maintain her popularity since her election in 1990. She campaigned to be a president of "all people." In her inauguration speech, Robinson said she wants to redefine the symbol of being Irish. She wants to work to recognize the extended Irish family and be a working President.