

Book Review

Title: A Voice for Human Rights: Mary Robinson
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A Voice for Human Rights is a collection of speeches by Mary Robinson, the second UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, delivered from 1997 to 2002. This work honors an outstanding woman, former head of state, global leader, lawyer and activist. It also addresses virtually every significant human rights issue at the turn of the 21st century. Robinson balanced service to 191 countries as a senior United Nations official and responsibility for a large bureaucracy with unwavering support for the principles of human rights. These speeches—from the first offering her ‘personal vision’ (pp 3-21) to her ‘farewell speech’ (pp 350-355)—reflect this careful navigation between international law and politics.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pays tribute to her in the foreword, describing hers as ‘a clear voice for human rights where a clear voice was needed’ (p vii). The afterword by current High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour acknowledges that ‘her sense of right and wrong never fell victim to political expediency’ (p 356). Kevin Boyle, the editor of the book and Robinson’s senior advisor for one year, highlights, in the introduction, how she built up the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), raised funds, and provided moral leadership (pp ix-xix).

The book succeeds in documenting the legacy of Robinson’s tenure as the most prominent world leader in human rights. Boyle has done an excellent job of grouping thematically texts that in fact cover overlapping themes due to the nature

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of public speeches drafted for specific circumstances. However, cataloguing speeches in neat categories is a daunting task. Boyle has arranged Robinson's speeches around four substantive areas: fighting for equality and non-discrimination, dimensions of the mandate of high commissioner, building human rights protection, and continuing challenges. An example of the difficulty is Chapter 16 ('Working with Countries and Regions'), where OHCHR field operations are discussed. It does not contain her speech on 'Strengthening Human Rights Field Operations' (pp 309-318), which appears in chapter 18 ('Mainstreaming Human Rights'). One could also quibble with his placing the institutionally oriented chapters on the High Commissioner in the UN system, UN human rights bodies, field operations, and national institutions (pp 209-296) in the part dealing with 'building of human rights protection,' rather than the one on 'dimensions of the mandate of High Commissioner.' These institutional issues are certainly relevant to building human rights protection but so are all the other chapters. Similarly, the chapters on various vulnerable groups are found under 'dimensions of the mandate of High Commissioner' rather than under human rights protection.

Another limitation inherent in this sort of publication is the style of public speaking, which does not lend itself to careful argumentation and elaboration of supporting evidence. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that these speeches provide considerable depth on the substantive issues they addressed. The part on 'Fighting for Equality and Nondiscrimination' covers racism (pp 25-46), women's rights (pp 47-66), religious discrimination and intolerance (pp 67-76) and other forms of discrimination, including the disabled, refugees, migrants, victims of trafficking and peoples living with HIV/AIDS (pp 77-100). The part entitled 'Dimensions of the Mandate of High Commissioner' contains chapters on human rights defenders; economic, social and cultural rights; the right to development; human rights education; children's rights; minorities and indigenous peoples; human rights after conflict; and business and human rights (pp 103-205). Additional substantive chapters on terrorism, peace and human security, and equitable globalization are found in the part on 'Continuing Challenges' (pp 319-349). The chapters on institutional issues—whether on mainstreaming human rights in the UN system or on the functioning of national and regional institutions—are particularly valuable coming as they do from the most authoritative human rights voice within the international bureaucracy.

The editor's introduction to each chapter and the notes (pp 363-396) provide valuable context, both with respect to the circumstances of each speech and to scholarly writing and official documents. Some minor mistakes have crept into the book, such as the reference to 'Jeremy Sachs' (p 140), when it obvious should be Jeffrey Sachs. Aside from such insignificant flaws, the book is beautifully edited and presented.

Two appendices supplement the book, one listing 30 major documents of importance to the topics covered. In this age of the Internet, Boyle was wise not to reproduce the texts, but he does provide the references, either to the UNTS, the OAS treaty series, ILM or General Assembly resolution number. The second

appendix is General Assembly Resolution 48/141 of 20 December 1993 creating the post of High Commissioner.

The index is indispensable for a collection of widely diverse reflections generated to meet the expectations of public speaking. The speeches are full of gems that might go unnoticed were it not for this 30-page index (pp 397-427). How else, for example, would the reader discover 12 observations on 'disability' interspersed throughout the book; or the score of issues under 'human rights, chief threats to' (pp 408-409) or the references to specific countries, individuals, documents or events?

Robinson's duties took her across the globe many times, including in the Asia Pacific region. She made several trips to China and concluded a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with China in November 2000 that aimed at 'improving the promotion and protection of human rights in China' (p 379). At a workshop on 'punishment of minor crimes' held in Beijing in February 2001 under the auspices of the MOU, she did not hesitate to express to her hosts that reeducation through labor and administrative detention were matters that needed attention in China (p 255) and her concern over 'the fact that there is no judicial review or a process to review evidence and to allow for the presentation of a defense; the vagueness of the offenses punishable by reeducation though [sic] labor; the severity of punishment, even in comparison with criminal punishment; and the fact that local governments incorporate reeducation through labor in local regulations.' (p 256) She also told the government authorities, at the opening of the Beijing workshop on human rights education in 2001 (pp 149-152), that she trusted their 'diligence and dedication' to incorporate human rights education fully into Chinese schools, reaffirming to the government the commitment of her office to support their efforts in this respect (p 152).

At the Tenth Workshop on Regional Cooperation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Asia Pacific Region, held in Beirut on March 2002 (pp 266-271), Robinson urged the participants to work towards a more permanent regional human rights institution (p 269). She also spoke to the human rights commission of Indonesia in November 2000, explaining how Indonesia can pursue its transition to democracy applying a human rights approach (p 182), stressing the importance of independent national human rights institutions to monitor compliance with international standards and the truth-and-reconciliation process (p 184). Two years later she addressed the opening of the national parliament of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, then the newest member of the international community, and expressed the hope that East Timor would 'show the world how best to lay the foundations for a vigorous culture of human rights built on a democratic society' (p 186). Tragically, recent events in have underscored the difficulty of that process in Timor Leste. At the University of Teheran Center for Human Rights Studies in February 2001 (pp 250-253), she again kept her nerve-to use Kofi Annan's expression from the foreword – and spoke in no uncertain terms about 'human rights violations here in Iran' (p 251), signaling out the Press Law, imprisonment of journalists, reprisals against student protesters, unfair trials

and wide use of the death penalty, while also welcoming some positive step the Iranian government had taken.

The topics of terrorism and equitable globalization in the final part ('Continuing Challenges') define in many ways the challenges Mary Robinson faced personally at the end of her UN mandate. Indeed, she took a principled position on the war on terrorism and paid a price for it. She characterized the attack on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, as a 'crime against humanity' (p 331), but she also denounced what she called a shadow that had been cast post September 11 by 'official reactions that at times have seemed to subordinate the principles of human rights to other more "robust" action in the war against terrorism' and specifically mentions suppression of privacy rights, fair trial, political participation, freedom of expression, and peaceful association. (p 333) Of course, she did not name names and but her statements did not go unnoticed in Washington. She had previously criticized some avoidable casualties of the United States action in Afghanistan and, along with her support for the International Criminal Court (pp 173, 327 and 352-353), her defense of Palestinian rights-and denunciation of anti-Semitism-at the Durban Conference (pp 25-46), her outspoken views on the war on terror seems to have been a contributing factor to her not being supported by the US for reappointment. She was only extended for one year and left the UN in September 2002. Upon leaving office she did not flinch but told the staff of the Office that 'in combating terrorism the full range of human rights must be observed,' adding 'It is a time for those who believe in human rights to keep their nerve' (p 351).

The two speeches on 'Ethical Globalization' (pp 338-349) were harbingers of her next incarnation as founding president of the Ethical Globalization Initiative, a name that is now officially preceded by 'Realizing Rights' (see <http://www.eginitiative.org/>). In this capacity since leaving office, she has indefatigably argued in the corridors of power and among civil society and the business community for more equitable trade relations, the involvement of business leaders in human rights, more effective responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa, more humane migration policies, the right to health and women's health.

A Voice for Human Rights is indispensable background for these new directions in her work. It is also a record of five years of principled thought and action that have had a lasting impact on the international human rights agenda.