

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Address by Mary Robinson

on the occasion of her

Inauguration

as President of Ireland

3rd December. 1990.

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Citizens of Ireland, mná na hÉireann agus fir na hÉireann, you have chosen me to represent you and I am humbled by and grateful for your trust.

The Ireland I will be representing is a new Ireland, open, tolerant, inclusive. Many of you who voted for me did so without sharing all of my views. This, I believe, is a significant signal of change, a sign, however modest, that we have already passed the threshold to a new pluralist Ireland.

The recent revival of an old concept of the Fifth Province expresses this emerging Ireland of tolerance and empathy. The old Irish term for province is coicead, meaning a 'fifth'; and yet, as everyone knows, there are only four geographical provinces on this island. So where is the Fifth? The Fifth Province is not anywhere here or there, north or south, east or west. It is a place within each one of us - that place that is open to the other, that swinging door which allows us to venture out and others to venture in. Ancient legends divided Ireland into four quarters and a 'middle', although they differed about the location of this middle or fifth province. While Tara was the political centre of Ireland, tradition has it that this Fifth Province acted as a second centre, a necessary balance. If I am a symbol of anything I would like to be a symbol of this reconciling and healing Fifth Province.

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My primary role as President will be to represent this State. But the State is not the only model of community with which Irish people can and do identify. Beyond our State there is a vast community of Irish emigrants extending not only across our neighbouring island - which has provided a home away from home for several Irish generations - but also throughout the continents of North America, Australia and of course Europe itself. There are over 70 million people living on this globe who claim Irish descent. I will be proud to represent them. And I would like to see Áras an Uachtaráin serve - on something of an annual basis - as a place where our emigrant communities could send representatives for a get together of the extended Irish family abroad.

There is yet another level of community which I will represent. Not just the national, not just the global, but the local community. Within our State there are a growing number of local and regional communities determined to express their own creativity, identity, heritage and initiative in new and exciting ways. In my travels throughout Ireland I have found local community groups thriving on a new sense of self-confidence and self- empowerment. Whether it was groups concerned with adult education, employment initiative, women's support, local history and heritage, environmental concern

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or community culture, one of the most enriching discoveries was to witness the extent of this local empowerment at work.

As President I will seek to the best of my abilities to promote this growing sense of local participatory democracy, this energising movement of self development and self expression which is surfacing more and more at grassroots level. This is the face of modern Ireland.

Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuair mé taithneamh agus pléisiúr as an taisteal a rinne mé le míosa anuas ar fuaid na hÉireann. Is fíor álainn agus iontach an tír atá againn, agus is álainn an pobal iad muintir na hÉireann.

Fuair mé teachtaireacht ón bpobal seo agus mé ag dul timpeall: "Teastaíonn Uachtarán uainn gur féidir linn bheith bródúil aisti, ach, níos mó ná sin, gur féidir linn bheith bródúil lena chéile - toisc gur Éireannaigh sinn, agus go bhfuil traidisiúin agus cultúr álainn againn".

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Is cuid ́an tábhachtach don gcultúr sin an Ghaeilge - an teanga bheo - fé mar atá á labhairt sa Ghaeltacht agus ag daoine eile ar fuaid na hÉireann.

Tá aistear eile le déanamh anois agam - aistear cultúrtha, leis an saibhreas iontach atá sa teanga Ghaeilge a bhaint amach díom féin.

Tá súil agam go leanfaidh daoine eile mé atá ar mo nós fhéin - beagán as cleachtadh so Ghaeilge - agus go raghaimíd ar aghaidh le chéile le taithneamh agus pleisíur a fháil as ár dteanga álainn féin.

Translation

[I want to say how much I enjoyed travelling around Ireland over the last few months. Ours is a truly beautiful country and the Irish people are a wonderful race.

I got a message from the people that they wanted a President they could be proud of, but more than that, that we could take pride together - in our Irishness and our wonderful heritage and culture.

The Irish language is an important part of that culture, as spoken in the Gaeltacht areas and around the country. I am about to embark on another journey - a cultural voyage of discovery of the wealth and beauty of the Irish language. I hope others who, like myself, are somewhat out of practice, will join me on this journey, and that we will progress together to enjoy to the full our own beautiful language].

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The best way we can contribute to a new integrated Europe of the 1990s is by having a confident sense of our Irishness. Here again we must play to our strengths - take full advantage of our vibrant cultural resources in music, art, drama, literature and film; value the role of our educators; promote and preserve our unique environmental and geographical resources of relatively pollution-free lakes, rivers, landscapes and seas; encourage and publicly support local initiative projects in aquaculture, forestry, fishing, alternative energy and smallscale technology.

Looking outwards from Ireland, I would like on your behalf to contribute to the international protection and promotion of human rights. One of our greatest national resources has always been, and still is, our ability to serve as a moral and political conscience in world affairs. We have a long history of providing spiritual, cultural, and social assistance to other countries in need - most notably in Latin America, Africa and other Third World countries. And we can continue to promote these values by taking principled and independent stands on issues of international importance.

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I turn now to another place close to my heart, Northern Ireland. As the elected choice of the people of this part of our island I want to extend the hand of friendship and of love to both communities in the other part. And I want to do this with no strings attached, no hidden agenda. As the person chosen by you to symbolise this Republic and to project our self image to others, I will seek to encourage mutual understanding and tolerance between all the different communities sharing this island.

In seeking to do this I shall rely to a large extent on symbols. But symbols are what unite and divide people. Symbols give us our identity, our self image, our way of explaining ourselves to ourselves and to others. Symbols in turn determine the kinds of stories we tell; and the stories we tell determine the kind of history we make and remake. I want Áras an Uachtaráin to be a place where people can tell diverse stories - in the knowledge that there is someone there to listen.

I want this Presidency to promote the telling of stories - stories of celebration through the arts and stories of conscience and of social justice. As a woman, I want women who have felt themselves outside history to be written back

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As the elected President of this small democratic country I assume office at a vital moment in Europe's history. Ideological boundaries that have separated East from West are withering away at an astounding pace. Eastern countries are seeking to participate as full partners in a restructured and economically buoyant Europe. The stage is set for a new common European home based on respect for human rights, pluralism, tolerance and openness to new ideas. The European Convention on Human Rights - one of the main achievements of the Council of Europe - is asserting itself as the natural Constitution for the new Europe. These developments have created one of the major challenges for the 1990s.

If it is time, as Joyce's Stephen Dedalus remarked, that the Irish began to forge in the smithy of our souls 'the uncreated conscience of our race' - might we not also take on the still 'uncreated conscience' of the wider international community? Is it not time that the small started believing again that it is beautiful, that the periphery can rise up and speak out on equal terms with the centre, that the most outlying island community of the European Community really has something'strange and precious' to contribute to the sea-change presently sweeping through the entire continent of Europe? As a native of Ballina, one of the most western towns in the most western province of the most western nation in Europe, I want to say - 'the West's awake'.

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into history, in the words of Eavan Boland, "finding a voice where they found a vision".

May God direct me so that my Presidency is one of justice, peace and love. May I have the fortune to preside over an Ireland at a time of exciting transformation when we enter a new Europe where old wounds can be healed, a time when, in the words of Seamus Heaney "hope and history rhyme". May it be a presidency where I the President can sing to you, citizens of Ireland, the joyous refrain of the 14th Century Irish poet as recalled by W.B. Yeats:
"I am of Ireland. . . come dance with me in Ireland".

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

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