

An Address

*given at the launch of the
Coventry Centre for the
Study of Forgiveness & Reconciliation,
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Mary Robinson

The President of Ireland



INTERNATIONAL MINDS FORUM



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Forgiveness & reconciliation

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I am deeply honoured to have been invited to inaugurate your Centre for the Study of Forgiveness and Reconciliation with this lecture, and to act as the Centre's Patron. Let me begin by welcoming the opportunity to bring to this Centre my sense of the spirit of reconciliation and the commitment to peace so deeply held throughout the island of Ireland by the overwhelming majority of men, women and children – and perhaps especially at this moment by young people. After all, for the young in Northern Ireland the cessation of violence provided the first experience of living in a peaceful if still troubled environment.

Three years ago, following the bomb in Warrington which killed two young boys – Tim Parry and Jonathan Ball – I was invited to attend the memorial service there. The invitation, signed by the leaders of the political groups on Warrington Council and the local rector, asked me to come and “represent the true spirit of Ireland”. This, at a time of such pain, was a generous act of reconciliation which I gladly accepted. Today, I wish I could find the words to convey to you how that true spirit of Ireland has deepened and matured into a profound harnessing of ordinary people engaged in the cause of peace. It does not minimise or underestimate the difficulties. It is reflected in the quite, dignified marches and vigils which have been taking place in cities and towns throughout the island of Ireland. People seek ways to signify that they have moved on in their perceptions and attitudes, in the links of friendship and understanding which have built up during the cessation of violence in Northern Ireland. On a recent visit there, just days after the Canary Wharf bombing, I was struck by the depth of determination of the people I met, insisting that peace must be maintained, and that differences, however intractable, must be resolved by discussions and negotiation. More than once I heard the words ‘never again’.

‘Never again. *Nie wieder.*’ ‘This eager city’ of Coventry, as Ulster poet John Hewitt called it in 1958, is an enduring reminder of that resonant call emanating from World War II. Not only enduring but vibrant, living. Living reminders are best, providing a chain of voices which

resound through the decades with the explosions of past suffering and the assurance of present hope. To visit this city is to encounter human destructiveness overcome but not ignored by human creativity. The bare ruined choirs destroyed by German bombing provide a mantle of protection and remembrance for that first work of reconciliation which is the new cathedral, built by German as well as English hands.

In a crisis one learns who one's friends are. After its crisis, Coventry had the generosity to reach out to enemies and make them friends, echoing Wilfrid Owen's 'Strange Meeting' in the underworld of World War I – "I am the enemy you killed, my friend". The energy of reconciliation is a people's energy. To convert enemy nation to friendly nation should be facilitated by political and religious leaders. To grow it must be rooted in the peoples coming together.

Just a year ago, at a commemorative event in Dresden, the Mayor of Coventry stated simply:

"Although it did not seem likely at the time, the devastation upon our two cities created, quite literally, a beacon of peace and of international tolerance. In a marvellous and almost miraculous way, the fires that burned so fiercely in Coventry and in Dresden have ignited a flame of hope in cities and among people all over the world".

Coventry has long been symbolic of the need and possibility of reconciliation. Today's ceremony marks another phase in its promotion of peace for people. Cathedrals and centres can be important symbols and tools of peacemaking but only people can finally make peace. Indeed only people need finally to be at peace, to be reconciled.

As it took people to destroy and people to re-create Coventry and its Cathedral, and as it is people the world over who must make peace and be reconciled, more attention should be paid to the potential of the people. The 'never again' mood of 1945 led to the founding of the United Nations whose charter begins "We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...".

'We the peoples' is a fine rhetorical phrase, but it was always intended to be more than that. Fifty years on, the rhetoric is still inclined to prevail over the practice. Perhaps people themselves even in the most developed of the democratic nations have not had the motivation, the opportunity or the means to enter more deeply into the peacemaking and reconciling process which is still so necessary within and between peoples. It is something of an historic irony that the oppressed peoples of Eastern and Central Europe could shed their oppression peacefully only for some of them to disintegrate violently in the era of democracy and freedom.

The great democratic ideal is rooted in the primacy of the people in their individual rights as human beings and in their collective right and capacity to choose their own government and decide their own destiny. Individual rights and governmental accountability may never be taken for granted. In our democracies, for all their deficiencies, there exist traditions, mechanisms and practices by which these basics may be monitored and protected. Western democracy has by no means reached its full potential in these matters, a point to which I shall return. What may be more urgent is an awakening of people everywhere to their responsibility to one another and to their common habitation, the planet Earth, so that 'we the peoples' may become true of cities like Coventry, of nations like our two and eventually of the international community.

It seems a fragile prospect when stretched around the globe. The imperative of human survival may demand no less. At the level of city and country it becomes a more manageable idea. Yet the achievement is very mixed. The story of this and other cities under wartime conditions reveals how vulnerable and yet resilient a people are. As neighbourhoods are destroyed, paradoxically neighbourliness becomes a practice. The common threat and the common needs intensify community. The communal wartime spirit of Britain and of other peoples under threat cannot be artificially re-created. But the reminder which this city, its cathedrals and this centre provide should stimulate in all of us a similar communal commitment, of people relating to people, of people caring for people.

And we have had a range of experiences and practices in the meantime which have developed people to people support. From justice and peace initiatives, from a variety of women's movements and from environmental groups, to take some obvious examples, we have learned about consciousness-raising, about networking and about the need for effective political lobbying. In the wider world non-governmental organisations have often shown themselves the conscience of the people and given the stimulus political leaders needed to adopt inclusive policies geared to the welfare of the weaker and the marginalised.

Turning now to relations between our two countries, Coventry has its own place in their entangled and ambiguous relationships. Marked for ever as the year World War II began, 1939 made its own sorry contribution to British-Irish relations with the bombing campaign in Britain in which Coventry suffered in February of that year. With its industry the city has attracted many Irish people down the years. Their faces and voices are recorded by another kind of Irish influence and emigrant, the Belfast poet John Hewitt referred to earlier. In time-honoured Irish fashion he came to England to get a suitable job and in his poem 'An Irishman

in Coventry' he pays a genuine tribute to the city which fed his Ulster identity and protected his poetic gift over twenty-five years.

*'A full year since, I took this eager city,
the tolerance that laced its blatant roar,
its famous steeples and its web of girders,
as image of the state hope argued for.'*

'The state hope argued for' is still to be achieved in Belfast as in many other places, but Coventry enabled John Hewitt and so many other Irish people 'in enclave of my nation' to retain their hope. He went on to make a very significant contribution to Irish literature in English, one of the continuing glories of our entanglement.

And in the teeming world of Irish theatre Coventry is the setting for one of the most savage comments on immigrant and family violence, in a tragedy of near classic proportions, entitled 'A Whistle in the Dark', by Tom Murphy. The idiom is Irish in Britain, in Coventry, but the scope is universal with discernible Greek classical connections, stark and unforgiving. And it is only in some later plays that Murphy offers more hopeful resolution.

For Coventry itself more hopeful and forgiving sounds with an Irish accent were heard through the Corrymeela connection, and the cultural life of the city is enriched by the large, vibrant Irish community. The ideals of this new centre are important to the emergence of an Irish community in Britain which cherishes its larger Irish identity while integrating in a reconciling and creative way into the wider and increasingly mixed community of Coventry and of Britain. I speak of a larger Irish identity because it is clear that among the diaspora there is a richness of identity which escapes the narrow confines of older definitions of Irishness.

Last year in an address to the Irish Parliament I reflected on the irony that the painful pattern of emigration over several hundred years has resulted in a deepening and enrichment of our modern sense of Irishness. Today Irishness as a concept is not simply territorial. Our relationship with the array of some 70 million people outside Ireland for whom the island is a place of origin instructs Irish society in the values of diversity, tolerance and fair-mindedness. On the island of Ireland itself this broader sense of Irishness can reach out to, and show itself capable of honouring and listening to, those in Northern Ireland whose sense of identity and cultural values may be more British than Irish. They, in turn, may be encouraged to accord a genuine and wholehearted equality of esteem to their neighbours who cherish their Irish identity, and long for the space to express it. Perhaps this Centre

could help by encouraging explorations of modern Irishness and modern Britishness, as well as what Seamus Heaney has called “two-mindedness”, in the context of Northern Ireland.

And there is another event which has shaped this broader sense of Irishness. We are also commemorating the 150th anniversary of the great potato famine, when between the years 1845 and 1850 over a million of the poorest Irish died and some two million emigrated. The process of commemoration involves retrieving the harrowing details of that famine. But the spirit is not one of reopening old wounds or renewing accusations. Rather, it is seeking through remembering past suffering to focus on addressing hunger and poverty in the modern world. And yet, there was warm appreciation of the eloquent statement last year by the Church of Ireland primate, Archbishop Eames, at an ecumenical service in the West of Ireland, when he regretted the practice of ‘souperism’ where it had occurred in certain parishes. Perhaps this Centre might participate by looking at ways in which there could be appropriate expressions of regret on both sides of the Irish Sea for what was done or left undone during that period of famine.

While I have concentrated on the role of peoples in the world of reconciliation and civilisation, and focused on the Irish dimension, I did indicate that peoples need adaptable structures to achieve their goals. Briefly this would involve a further development of our democratic processes to ensure the more effective inclusion of the people who may easily be overlooked and the fuller participation in policy and decision making immediately affecting them. This is a very large topic and needs far more analysis than there is time for here. I mention it in the hope that other people will follow up in thought and action, and in the belief that it is finally futile to discuss people power if it is not translated into effective structures. The translation will never be perfect. New challenges and problems will emerge. New informal movements of the people will always be needed. The adaptation of institutional structures under the inspiration and pressure of the people is an unending but exciting task.

This new Centre is a peoples’ centre which will attend first of all to Coventry’s needs. But in the Coventry tradition it is much more. In a topical and contemporary shorthand it might be described as inter-island and internet. The inter-island focus is demanded in face of the clear and present danger which faces these islands. The internet arises from the one-world consciousness in which British and Irish are already playing significant roles and may well be able to enhance each other’s internet roles by their inter-island co-operation. May Coventry and this Centre symbolise that inter-island and internet aspiration and achievement.



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