

Human Rights
at the Heart of Peace

2002 City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture

Mary Robinson

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Introduction by Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees

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**Introduction by Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees,
Director of the Sydney Peace Foundation**

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Stuart Rees. I am the current Director of the Sydney Peace Foundation. First of all I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Eora people. Let me say something about the Sydney Peace Foundation, about why we are here tonight and why many of you have been here for the past five years. The Sydney Peace Foundation is an important coalition in this city of corporate, media, academic and community organizations, united to say that peace with justice is an incredibly important commodity in this country and globally. We are united to try and convey what we mean by that notion and how we can attain it. It is important that the Sydney Peace Foundation is an alliance that crosses occupational and discipline boundaries. At this point I want to acknowledge the Partners in Peace that have supported us for the past five years. They include the Conflict Resolution Network, Gilbert & Tobin Lawyers, Salomon Smith Barney, Rio Tinto and Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd. In the past ten days, we have also joined in partnership with the City of Sydney, so from tonight on, we have the imprimatur of this important international city. In fact, for the first time in this theatre, the Sydney Peace Prize Lecture will be known as the City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture.

Let me give you something of the flavour of what we mean by peace with justice by taking a couple of minutes to tell you who the previous winners of this prize were and what the titles of their lectures were. First of all, five years ago Mohamed Yunus, the visionary founder of the Grameen Bank for the Poor, spoke in this theatre about “Peace is Freedom from Poverty”. He was followed the next year by one of the giants of the twentieth century: Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. He came fresh from his chairing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa at a time when, as you may recall, we were trying to promote the cause of reconciliation with indigenous people here in Australia. Archbishop Tutu’s address was “Peace through Reconciliation”. The following year there came a poet and a painter who was therefore a reluctant politician, but a pretty good one. The current President of the newest country in the world, East Timor, Xanana Gusmão spoke in this theatre about the task of building peace as a challenge for East Timor. And then last year, at long last, the first Australian, whom we miss dearly in public life, the former Governor-General of Australia, Sir William Deane, received the prize. I am pleased to say he will be present when Mary Robinson

receives the Sydney Peace Prize at the ceremony tomorrow night. Sir William, if you remember, characterized his ten years of office with the preoccupation of listening to the voices of people who are usually not heard, in particular indigenous people of Australia. His address was about peace by making reconciliation with indigenous people a priority.

This past year, the jury did not have much difficulty at all in choosing the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the former President of Ireland and distinguished lawyer Mary Robinson, to be the 2002 Sydney Peace Prize winner. The deliberations of the jury had to do with Mary Robinson's courage and with the poetry of the way in which she conducted her office. That courage had to do with a certain fearlessness when as President of Ireland, she quickly welcomed Salman Rusdhi when he had a death sentence around his neck, while many other leaders around the world ran for cover. That courage was shown again when she was the first head of state to visit Rwanda after the massacre. And that courage has been apparent in her defence of the powerless throughout her ten years of office as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. I think in this country we welcome her for rapping Australian leaders over the knuckles to remind them that human rights are universal and indivisible. I particularly remember the stance Mrs. Robinson quickly took when she was at the Johannesburg Conference against racism immediately after the Tampa incident.

Now the poetry of her office reflected her Irishness and her quickness to be outspoken, but I also believe it had something to do with the foreboding of W.B. Yeats. In that poem *The Second Coming*, he predicted, 'the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world', followed by, as if foreshadowing Bali, 'the ceremony of innocence is drowned'. But it is not a foreboding of pessimism that has characterized Mary's stewardship, but rather optimism that she conveys. That is best captured in John Lennon's immortal song 'Imagine'. 'Imagine all the people, sharing all the world.' And then he almost foreshadowed the words that I put into Mary Robinson's mouth: 'You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I am not the only one. Perhaps one day you'll join us, and the world will be as one.' And that is my cue to invite Mary Robinson to give the 2002 City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture.

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I am deeply honoured to receive the 2002 Sydney Peace Prize. It is humbling to join the ranks of former recipients - Professor Muhammad Yunus, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Xanana Gusmao, and Sir William Deane – a group of truly inspirational people whose conviction of the necessity for both peace and human dignity propelled them to devote their lives to creating institutions — and in one case, even a new nation state — that instil these values in their communities.

In honouring me today, you honour all those who labour—often at great personal risk—so that others may enjoy peace, and with it, their human rights. I dedicate this prize to their name. The title I have chosen – human rights at the heart of peace – encapsulates my conviction that lasting peace cannot come to pass without addressing past rights abuses that have destroyed the fabric of society. Equally, durable peace and development cannot take root without ensuring that the structures and institutions needed to protect human rights are in place at every level of society.

When I had the privilege to come here on a state visit in 1992 there were already signs of political movement in Northern Ireland, but the peace process as we describe it had not begun. As it developed, what was particularly striking – and reflected in the Good Friday Agreement – was the emphasis on human rights. You will recall that apart from containing explicit language of human rights, the Agreement required the establishment of Human Rights Commissions in Belfast and Dublin, and envisaged their future co-operation. The peace process itself has gone through difficult phases, including at the current time, but I was interested to see when I visited Belfast last May, that human rights was still a core area of reconciliation and bridge building. I was invited to address a large audience, representing more than 80 organizations which spanned a wide cross-section of republicans, loyalists, trade unionists, church groups, women, activists on poverty issues, environment, child rights, refugees and asylum seekers. The common bond was their determination to campaign for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Human rights, clearly, is at the heart of the peace process there.

Over the past 10 years, both as President of Ireland and as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, I have visited some of the globe's most catastrophic conflict zones. I listened to civilian victims, government leaders and combatants alike in places like Rwanda, Chechnya, East Timor, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and most recently, Afghanistan. The common thread I found so often was that human rights abuses had precipitated the conflict. I have seen, for instance, how patterns of discrimination in a society drove wedges between communities. And all too often, corrupt and undemocratic governments that denied people basic rights precipitated rebellion and dissent.

In finding the way forward, we must first recognize how past human rights abuses come to bear on both the present and future. It is important to acknowledge the historical tension between peace and human rights advocates around this issue. Human rights activists have felt that peacemakers too often looked away from the occurrence of past abuses, and the need to seek justice for victims, in order to achieve an end to hostilities. Peace activists, for their part, have sometimes felt that a preoccupation with justice and with righting past wrongs could get in the way of eventual reconciliation within a given society.

Fortunately, these differences have begun to be bridged in recent years. There is now broad agreement that support must be given to processes through which different sectors of a community can come together to build and maintain justice, reconciliation and peace. Dealing with patterns of past human rights abuse and violations by means of a process of transitional justice - comprising both judicial and extra-judicial components - is a matter of both law and good sense. Allow me to offer some reflections on how the human rights community has developed such tools in order to help communities coming out of conflict.

Clearly, states are obligated by international law to prosecute perpetrators of international crimes such as genocide. A no less compelling reason is that the traumatic events of the past create heavy legacies for future generations, which, if not addressed, risk undermining efforts to establish sustainable human rights protection systems.

A failure to ensure accountability can leave the most culpable of perpetrators in positions of power and able to exert malign influence. More generally, the lack of justice and accountability perpetuates a climate of impunity, which undermines the rule of law as well as exacerbating a sense of injustice and discrimination within targeted communities.

Effective addressing of the past requires a wide-ranging process of truth telling whereby, with the creation of an objective record of events, the tendencies of societies towards myth making are confounded. Such truth telling, when associated with confessions of guilt, expressions of regret and acts of amendment can play an important role in defusing tendencies towards revenge as well as promoting some level of reconciliation.

Programs of transitional justice can serve another useful role for the sustainable protection of human rights by means of secondary impacts that they have in society. For instance, experience shows that to be effective, such programs should be associated with major public information campaigns, which will inevitably raise consciousness about human rights in general as well as about such particular issues as the justice system.

The implementation of these campaigns will also necessitate the mobilization and training of extensive civil society networks, thus supporting a potentially significant community of new human rights actors. Specific national sectors, such as the judicial system, can benefit in the long term through the enhanced skills level of their practitioners and such improved or additional resources as may be directed to them.

For all these reasons, I encouraged my former office, the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, to give priority to programmes of transitional justice in a number of countries: including East Timor, Sierra Leone, Peru and, now, hopefully, in Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands. The Office's work in this area, in close association with organizations such as the International Centre for Transitional Justice, was both challenging and satisfying.

On two occasions this summer I was able to witness that transitional justice programs already underway are having a discernible impact. The first was in Peru, where I attended a public hearing in Lima of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission during which three victims of terrible abuses told their stories. The accounts were so moving, and the incidents so recent, that at one point a cameraman beside me put down his camera and wept openly. The hearing was covered live on TV and was compulsive viewing for a population which found it hard to believe such brutal acts had been carried out in their name.

The second was in East Timor, where I participated in a community reconciliation ceremony organized by the Truth, Reception and Reconciliation Commission. It took place in a village, presided over by a women regional commissioner and some elders. Three perpetrators – young men from the village – confessed to their wrongs, including in one case burning houses of villagers; the victims told their stories and then forgave the three young men, and the ultimate verdict was that all three would be accepted back into the village with no further penalty. As I admired this healing process, I was conscious of a seething anger in the whole population of East Timor because of their frustration at the decisions of the *Ad Hoc* human rights court in Jakarta. They felt deprived of justice, and worried that the real perpetrators were going to get away with grave crimes against humanity.

Focusing on the victims and providing them with redress and reparations cannot bring back what can never be regained: family members, friends, a childhood, the sense of safety and home — but it can help assuage the loss and great pain that has been endured and begin the process of reconciliation.

So the case for addressing past abuses is a compelling one. But what about the future? How can peace-building and preventive efforts best ensure that the systems and institutions needed to ensure respect for human rights are developed and strengthened?

First, by seeing to it that human rights are part of peace agreements, as was the case with the Good Friday Agreement. I have often called on peace negotiators to include human rights specialists in the construction of peace agreements and in post conflict peace-building efforts. Some of the most important accords in recent years have had only limited involvement of human rights experts. Those who monitor the daily human rights situation on the ground have much to add to the conversation for peace and the strategies for reconstruction.

Second, the devastation of the moral and physical infrastructure of a community attempting to recover from conflict must be addressed. War sets back the work of development sometimes for decades. It is no accident, then, that so many states considered among the world's "least developed countries" are currently engaged in or have recently emerged from armed conflict. Starvation, displacement and disease are greatly amplified during these lost years. There can be no lasting development in a given society without respect for all human rights – economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights.

More and more, the international humanitarian and development communities have come to accept the need to adopt a holistic, rights-based approach. This is most obvious in the work of international NGOs, such as OXFAM, Save the Children and Medicines Sans Frontières, to name just a few. Some of the principal humanitarian donors have also come to accept and indeed to demand that their funds be spent in a right-based way. Most, though not all, of the UN humanitarian bodies have placed human rights at the heart of their humanitarian programming.

The delivery of humanitarian and development assistance is about ensuring respect for human rights. The starving have a right to food. The homeless have a right to shelter. The sick are entitled to medical care. It is to demean them to persist in seeing them as just passive and grateful recipients of our charity. And the greater the extent to which humanitarian actors absorb that the basis for their work is in the international human rights standards, the more targeted and profound will be their impact.

This century has to be the century when women make a difference. Let me pay a special tribute here to the role of women's groups – both international and local women's groups - in peace building. I saw this first hand when I visited Somalia and Rwanda as President of Ireland. But I have really been privileged to see how vital it is in the many situations of conflict and post-conflict I have witnessed as High Commissioner. It was not before time that the Security Council and the General Assembly afforded proper recognition to the leading role of women as actors for peace. I like the way Virginia Woolf described how women should act:

“We can best help you prevent war, not by repeating your words and repeating your methods, but by finding new words and creating new methods.”

Third, it is critical that states and the international community maintain sustained early warning systems, which pay proper attention to patterns of human rights violations. This is already happening to some extent in the United Nations – more is needed.

It is never enough just to be alert to violations of civil and political rights – to such practices as state-sponsored intimidation, torture or interference in the political system. It will often be the case that inequitable social policies have an equal or greater destabilizing impact. Just consider the situation in your neighbouring country, the Solomon Islands, where the recent conflict was precipitated by multiple causes, which were as much economic as they were political. The escalation to violence

could have been predicted, comprehensively understood and addressed. It was not. Early warning has to be sustained and fully integrated with systems capable of responding in good time. More could be done by the international community on this if more political will and resources could be marshalled.

This leads me to describe my current work, with a request to all of you for your ideas and engagement. The link between human rights, democracy and sustainable development is now widely recognized. Yet far too little of the intellectual and financial resources needed for human rights education, for effective administration of justice, rule of law and popular participation in local and national decision-making, has been made available to developing countries, particularly those coming out of conflict.

I will be focusing a significant portion of my post UN work on helping developing countries to strengthen their own national protection systems for human rights. The new project I have begun - the Ethical Globalisation Initiative – in cooperation with The Aspen Institute, The State of the World Forum and the Geneva-based International Council on Human Rights Policy, will focus this work initially in Africa. We hope that new and existing links between universities, research centres, NGOs and professional legal bodies in the North and other parts of the South with counterparts in individual African countries can be developed. In this way, increased resources could be marshalled for projects to support human rights capacity building in these countries.

What is clear to all of us involved is that we will need to engage a broad range of partners if we hope to make a difference. The Sydney Peace Foundation has recognized this in its partnership with business, media, public service groups and academic communities to further its goals. What is needed now more than ever are coalitions to uphold peace and human dignity – to create a more values-led, ethical globalisation.

In the end, the future of human rights and whether our world becomes a more brutal or a more peaceful place rests in our own hands. Yes, the challenges ahead are formidable. Yes, the familiar catalogue of problems and future obstacles remains to be faced. Yes, we have a long road to travel before human rights will be secured for all. But I am convinced that this is a time when civil society worldwide can make its voice heard as never before. If we can overcome doubts and fears, and build on shared values the new century can be one of human development and human security - a century of human rights at the heart of peace. Thank you.