

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Mary Robinson, A Voice for Human Rights*, edited by Kevin Boyle (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006)**

The stage for this rather unique book is set by none less than UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, whose very first sentence of his Foreword sums up the qualities of the office and its former holder: “the job of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is not for the faint of heart”. And faint of heart Mary Robinson, the subject and, in many ways, also object of this collection of public interventions made during her five years in the ‘job’, certainly was not. Which is why the collection’s bland title comes as somewhat a surprise, not least as Kevin Boyle, its editor, has otherwise done a marvelous job in providing everything the reader might desire from this type of publication, be it the abundance of informative annotations, and introductory commentary, the comprehensive index and appendices, or simply the thematic organization which provides a fascinating and accessible overview of the multiple dimensions of UN human rights work. Only the title, *A Voice for Human Rights*, just does not quite do justice to the formidable story that emerges through the many places, people and occasions with which the book deals – with the ‘voice’ metaphor being so commonplace that the title finds itself in the company of such illustrious monographs as *The Voice of Knowledge: a practical guide to inner peace*, or *Songs of the Humpback Whale: a novel in five voices*.

Yet, commonplace is not what Mary Robinson and her term as High Commissioner can be said to have been, neither in terms of her personal endurance in the face of an abundance of challenges, nor in relation to the testing times which marked her term of office. This is why the *prima facie* outmoded format of a collection of public speeches works here to the benefit of the reader, as it permits the presentation of a vast range of topics with a clarity and simplicity that no deeper academic treatment could ever achieve. As a consequence, complex and controversial issues such as ‘mainstreaming’ or ‘human rights in development’ become concepts debatable far beyond the bounds of UN staff, NGO fora, or specialist academic circles. Indeed, *A Voice for Human Rights* is as much an eclectic, if still rather comprehensive human rights *lexicon*, as it is an account of Mary Robinson’s particular contribution “in her own words” (p. IX). That contribution is, as already mentioned, organized into five general thematic parts, which are, in turn, sub-divided into twenty chapters devoted to specific human rights topics. It ends, rather movingly, with Mary Robinson’s farewell speech to her

Geneva staff, and an Afterword by the successor of her successor,<sup>1</sup> Louise Arbour, another powerful woman at the helm of the UN human rights system.

*A Voice for Human Rights* aptly begins with Mary Robinson's overall vision for human rights, in a single chapter which consists largely of her widely-cited 1997 Romanes Lecture at Oxford University in which Robinson, only two months after resigning the Presidency of Ireland, gave her conceptual *entrée* as High Commissioner for Human Rights. In it she offers her reading of the historical trajectory of human rights from the Universal Declaration to the Vienna Conference and the creation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and sets out three important issues on her agenda, namely the further concretization of her office's mandate, the mainstreaming of human rights "into the broad range of the [UN's] activities",<sup>2</sup> and human rights in development. In other pronouncements collected in the 'Visions' chapter she adds to these the indivisibility of human rights as already articulated in the Universal Declaration, and the relationship of (human) responsibilities to human rights, a debate much *en vogue* at that point. What is remarkable about these early visions is their unorthodox and forward-looking character, for all of them transcend the ordinary human rights canon that is normally the (exclusive) focus of the major international human rights actors, whether governmental or non-governmental. What is more remarkable yet is that they came from the (then) international community's top human rights officer, who, as high-level political appointments go, one would not theretofore have expected to take any particularly transgressive position. It is, thus, ironically fitting when Robinson recites a characterization of herself by her Dutch hosts in her acceptance speech of the Erasmus Prize 1999 as "independent-minded and uncompromising, but not one of life's natural mediators" (p. 20).

The collection then moves on to the second part, dedicated to 'Fighting for Equality and Nondiscrimination' and which contains chapters or sections on combating racism, discrimination against women, religious discrimination, the disabled, refugees, migrants, victims of trafficking, and people living with HIV/AIDS. The first chapter goes right *in medias res* by dealing with what was, perhaps, the longest-lasting and most difficult experience in Robinson's five years in the Palais Wilson, namely the preparation, running and subsequent 'digestion' of the *2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance* in Durban, South Africa. Inheriting the commitment to the Conference from her predecessor, and appointed to be its Secretary-General by the General-Assembly, she ended up being implicated, by default, in its partly stormy proceedings, and its only partial success in establishing a common language on controversial issues such as slavery and the slave trade, colonialism, and the potential racial discrimination dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum. She did

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1. Her immediate successor was, of course, the Brazilian UN diplomat Sérgio Vieira de Melo, who tragically died in the rubble of the bombed UN Building in Baghdad while on special assignment as the Secretary-General's Special Representative in Iraq in August 2003.

2. Kofi Annan, *Renewing the United Nations: a Program for Reform, Report of the Secretary-General*, A/51/950, 14 July 1997, para. 201, action 15(b).

not escape the wave of criticism of the Conference, but, later, in her Report to the General Assembly's Third Committee, which is included in this collection as is her opening statement in Durban, she affirmed that "we [...] knew that [the difficulties were] precisely the reason why this Conference was so important, why we accepted the challenge to have it, and why we persisted in our efforts until we finally had agreement" (p.40). The other discrimination and exclusion issues addressed by Robinson again represent an engaging mixture of reinvigorating long-standing campaigns, and breaking new ground. Of the former, especially her efforts for women's rights are a continuation of her long-time activism since her days as a pro-contraception campaigner in the Irish Senate. Of the latter, her outspoken stance on inter-religious dialogue, and the rights of people with disabilities and people with HIV/AIDS takes up themes in need of a (and her) push. Only the absence of any specific treatment of sexual orientation is a strange omission, especially given the fact that, as with women's rights, Robinson has campaigned on this issue since her days as an Irish Senator.

The next (third) part is on the 'Dimensions of the Mandate of the High Commissioner', in which she addresses a diversity of issues dealt with in and by the High Commission and its various associate bodies. It is a heterogeneous assemblage of themes that she – and her ever-present editor- have put under this general heading, including human rights defenders, economic, social, and cultural rights, the right to development, children's rights, minorities and indigenous peoples, human rights after conflict, and business and human rights. Yet, all these themes share the common ground of again being innovations, inroads and advancements on top of the more established human rights canon. With regards to human rights defenders, the 1998 Declaration on Human Rights Defenders fell into the early period of her term, and, it would appear from her speeches, corresponds with a deeply-felt personal sympathy with this group of people, with whom she enjoyed close and constructive working relations throughout her mandate – a fact no doubt brought about by her own background as a life-long human rights campaigner. This proximity also made her an early and forceful spokesperson for their special protection when the then incipient 'war on terror' began threatening some human rights activities and activists. Similarly, Robinson has been an ardent defender of economic and social rights, and the related right to development and its interpretation in light of the so called 'rights-based approach to development', as well as of the social (rights) responsibility of businesses. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that, next to the Durban process, issues related to the bringing together of human rights and development have received Robinson's most sustained attention, especially if one includes among these efforts her front-line engagement in the mainstreaming exercise. Her basic premise seems to have been that the "gap between the language of recognition and the reality of respect of these rights" (p. 115) needs to be urgently bridged and she has concentrated a good part of her efforts to that end. The two landmark steps within this broad thematic field, the Global Compact and the Millennium Development Goals (both of 2000), were among the fruits co-seeded by her. Both on the themes of human rights education and children's' rights, Robinson did not shriek from taking on governments for either not realizing the immense benefits (of the former), or not having acted to put into practice their own earlier commitments (in case of

the latter). On indigenous peoples rights, she struggled for their recognition within the Durban process and kept on the pressure to fully recognize these arche-typical third-generation rights. Finally, on human rights after conflict, the collection shows how Robinson reaffirmed OHCHR's commitment to a significant field presence in peace operations as a second, non-development element of the mainstreaming effort.

The book then moves on to its fourth part, on 'Building Human Rights Protection' which brings together her reflections on the UN's human rights machinery and on their relationship with national human rights protection mechanisms. Although formally split into four distinct chapters, this part really corresponds to a general treatment of the nature and functioning of international and national human rights protection. Starting with Robinson's many reflections on her own office and its impossible mandate to "protect and promote all human rights for all",<sup>3</sup> she moves on, via her diverse comments on the existing treaty- and charter-based mechanisms, to statements concerning again the ever increasing field presence of the OHCHR in many countries and regions, as well as her office's role in the setting up of national human rights institutions under the Paris Principles.<sup>4</sup> A number of cross-cutting currents emerge from this vast array of issues, institutions, and operational theaters, notably her ever again articulated concern for the human rights and development nexus, frequently linked up with the OHCHR field presence in volatile regions and peace operations; and her special concern for children, whether in relation to poverty or to armed conflict. In addition, this part also contains her innumerable reactions to the grave human rights and humanitarian crises that coincided with her term, from events in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, to Chechnya, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, and the Middle East, to the September 11 attacks. While it is, in the end, difficult to connect all these issues with each other, or to see how the current UN machinery, for all the improvements implemented or at least brought under way during Robinson's term, could possibly address them all in a remotely adequate way, her apparent motto to be 'a voice for the voiceless' (p. 209) does provide a reassuring guiding thread.

Finally, the book's fifth and last part seeks to deal with what Robinson –and Boyle– see as the Continuing Challenges of international human rights. Its three chapters can be taken to stand for three formidable tests both of the international human rights movement, and of Robinson herself. The first chapter, 'Mainstreaming', as a crucial element of the larger project of UN reform, is a mighty internal task and has been her initial challenge as High Commissioner. 'Terrorism, Peace, and Human Security' is, in turn, perhaps, the principal and most serious threat to human rights in today's world, and it came to be her last great challenge as UN human rights chief. The third chapter, 'Ethical Globalization', is a challenge because it transcends both the ambit of human rights and the duration of her term of office, being, as it were, her principal

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3. Extract from OHCHR's Mission Statement, available at <<http://www.ohchr.org/english/about/mission.htm>>.

4. Formally known as the Principles relating to the Status and Functioning of National Institutions for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, A/RES/48/134, 20 December 1993.

post-OHCHR project as a now 'private citizen' (p. 354). As for Mainstreaming, it is, perhaps, one of the most frequently used, but still least understood concepts in UN circles, and Robinson's reflections on three 'mainstream' fields, notably development, peace operations, and environmental protection, sketch out in relatively clear terms what she understands the mainstreaming agenda to contain. It is, in the first place, a new perspective which sees "human rights as both a means and an end" (p. 301) whatever is being 'mainstreamed'. This, in turn, implies certain core features that are associated with rights-based approaches, such as accountability, empowerment, or transparency, as elaborated by Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen, and subsequently adopted for UNDP's *Human Development Index*. Her response to the terrorist conundrum, in turn, are again forward-looking. Condemning in the strongest terms the attacks of September 11, she nonetheless disagrees with Michael Ignatieff's pessimistic statement that "the question after September 11 is whether the era of human rights has come and gone".<sup>5</sup> Instead she immediately attempts to place terrorism into a larger human rights context, pointing to preventive strategies, the need for development in the geographical cradles of terrorism, and endorsing the conceptual attempt to wrest away security from the war-mongers by adding the prefix 'human' to it and making it a more comprehensive way of thematising human society. Indeed, it is 'human security' thus conceived that is to be gained on the battlefields of "deprivation and denial of rights" (p. 337). Lastly, she has made an Ethical Globalization project the main concern of her life after the High Commission. It again brings together some of the issues and positions that she addressed in her High Commission years, notably, development and business ethics, and introduces a new concern, the international trading system. All three chapters are joined up in her idea of 'ethical globalization' which, to her, is "our best hope for building bridges of respect and understanding between people of different cultures, traditions, and walks of life" (p. 349).

This concludes the substantive part of the book, and Kevin Boyle then gracefully drops the curtain with Mary Robinson's Farewell Speech to her Geneva staff, and Louise Arbour's short but succinct Afterword. In all it is a remarkable book, a panorama view of the world between 1997 and 2002, an inadvertent but very useful human rights encyclopedia, a piece of biography, and a grand plea for human rights. Hence, *A Voice for Human Rights* is, perhaps, after all, not such an unfitting title for this book. As its author and protagonist puts it in her Farewell Speech: "it is a time for those who believe in human rights to keep their nerve" (p. 351). She has certainly kept hers!

*Florian Hoffmann\**

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5. Michael Ignatieff, "Is the Human Rights Era Ending?", *The New York Times*, 5, February 2002.

\*Florian Hoffmann is the Executive Coordinator of the Center for Human Rights at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and Law Professor at this same University.