

INTERNATIONAL

Robinson's crusade: former president on 'climate justice' mission

Mary Robinson will return to Ireland this year but, instead of retiring, she will be taking up arms against climate change, she tells **John Gibbons**

MARY ROBINSON doesn't scare easily. In the course of more than four decades in public life, it's easy to forget that she has been pilloried at least as much as praised at home and abroad. The radical young lawyer and senator in the Ireland of the late 1960s could hardly have picked a more incendiary set of issues upon which to challenge the status quo than contraception, gay rights, women's rights and the status of children.

Decades later, as the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, her highlighting of atrocities and 'collective punishment' of Palestinian civilians in particular earned her the wrath of the Bush administration and the powerful US Jewish lobby. (One conservative publication suggested she be indicted for "war crimes".) Washington was reportedly apoplectic that this fiercely independent figure doggedly refused to come to heel.

Having spent the past 13 years in New York (where the UN has its headquarters), she will be moving home for good at the end of this year and, at the age of 66, will be entitled to her free bus pass. After a brilliant but bruising career spanning over 40 years as a human rights campaigner and advocate, crowned last year with the award of the Presidential Medal of Freedom – America's highest civilian honour – few would begrudge her putting her feet up at last and spending more time with her grandchildren.

But rather than fading gracefully into the twilight, Robinson is once again a woman on a mission. And her new challenge is to fight for what she terms "climate justice". To this end, she has



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recently established the eponymous Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice (MRFCCJ). She will head the organisation on a *pro bono* basis, working alongside her long-time adviser and friend Bride Rosney.

She has in a very real sense come full circle, as the fledgling foundation is based in an elegant if dusty Georgian building overlooking her old alma mater, Trinity College, Dublin. The MRFCCJ's ambitions, however, remain global. To this end a star-studded advisory council has been assembled that includes Richard Branson, Al Gore and former World Health Organisation chief Gro Harlem Brundtland.

This initiative stems from the realisation that hit Robinson some years ago: any hard-won gains for the world's poor are being wiped out by the growing impacts of climate change. Therefore, any human rights work that doesn't tackle the climate change dimension is guaranteed ultimately to fail.

However, the icons of climate change are polar bears and icebergs. Robinson feels this inures us from the reality that right now, millions of the world's poorest people are seeing their lives and liveli-

hoods threatened by dramatic changes in climate patterns. This manifests itself in much more severe droughts and flooding, and a general unpredictability that is causing havoc for farmers.

Climate justice argues that we in the industrialised world created this disaster and we have a moral, indeed a legal, responsibility to clean it up. This is not about charity. Rather, it is enlightened self-interest, for what goes around comes around.

By taking such a clear stance against the trillion-dollar fossil fuel lobby, Robinson can look forward to being excoriated and painted as a Luddite she-devil by the well-oiled climate change denialist PR machine. It will, in other words, be just like old times.

Just because you are not easily scared does not mean there's nothing to be afraid of. And Mary Robinson is, perhaps for the first time in her life, manifestly fearful. This fear comes from the gnawing sense that we are on the edge of an unspeakable catastrophe.

"I know it sounds unreal, and I think about it a lot," she said in an exclusive in-depth interview in Dublin. "Yes, we have had concerns in the past about the nuclear threat, and the potential for destroying parts of the world, but I don't think we've ever had this kind of situation."

Her rigorous legal training allows Robinson to keep her emotions firmly in check. This time, somehow, it's different. Discussing the spectre of a looming climate disaster causes her to put aside the jargon of the negotiating rooms and the formulaic language of international diplomacy. She lays it out plainly. Climate change is "the biggest human and human rights issue of the 21st century, because of its potential for conflict, its potential for devastation, in fact its potential for destroying our world as a whole". Robinson shakes her head as she recalls a comment by Tim Wirth, a former US senator and now president of the UN Foundation, that if planet earth files for bankruptcy, all the subsidiaries go under. "If we're not careful, planet earth will file for bankruptcy," she adds with a rueful laugh.

Almost as improbably as a 60-something Sylvester Stallone stepping back into the ring as Rocky Balboa, Robinson is coming out of retirement for one last fight, and this time, the odds have never looked more unpromising. When things are this desperate, despair is itself a luxury. But what really rankles with a woman who has spent her working life



battling injustice is the fact that climate change is, by almost any measure, the gravest yoke the rich have ever placed upon the shoulders of the poorest, most vulnerable yet least culpable people on the planet.

That burden is the hundreds of billions of tonnes of climate-altering carbon emissions the industrialised world has pumped into the atmosphere in a feverish scramble for growth and prosperity at all costs. There is a widespread belief that climate change is some new, controversial idea on which scientists are seriously divided. It is neither new nor in any real doubt among experts in the field.

In 1965, while Robinson was still an

undergraduate, President Lyndon Johnson told the US Congress: "This generation has altered the composition of the atmosphere on a global scale through... a steady increase in CO₂ from the burning of fossil fuels". That's how clear the science was almost half century ago. The scientific report on which Johnson's speech was based warned of dire consequences for the climate by the year 2000 unless this was addressed. The basic physics in these early projects has proven entirely accurate.

The conservative International Energy Agency translated this into real-world consequences in the decades ahead.



US president Barack Obama presenting the 2009 presidential medal of freedom to Mary Robinson last year

AP/PHOTO/
J SCOTT
APPLEWHITE

↳ We cannot allow Bono to give the impression that tax avoidance is acceptable, when it amounts to nothing less than anti-social behaviour

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A villager drives a bullock cart across a dried-up pond in Luliang, in southwest China's Yunnan province, which saw its worst drought in decades this year. Mary Robinson says climate change is threatening the lives of the world's poorest people; the former president pictured in New York last week; she has enlisted the support of Al Gore, left, and Richard Branson for her climate justice foundation

PHOTOS: AP, BLOOMBERG

"Without a change in policy, the world is on a path for a rise in global temperature of up to 6°C," was the agency's grim assessment – a view drawn from a range of high-level scientific assessments.

"I've seen the predictions and they are frightening, frightening," says Robinson.

She is also acutely aware of the role being played by the fossil fuel industry in funding 'denialist' think tanks to spread disinformation and confusion among the public and media about climate change. She recognises that this has spilled over from the US and into the public and media debate in Ireland. A favourite tactic of deniers is to high-

light 'uncertainty' in science and insinuate that we can therefore ignore consensus scientific warnings.

"Predictions are not 100% certain, because they never are, but I wouldn't get on an aeroplane if I thought it had an 80% chance of crashing," she says with an uneasy laugh. She is visibly angry at the people behind the current wave of denial of even the most basic science.

The lawyer in her favours deploying litigation against the major polluters and their PR skills.

"There is a reckless foreseeability about some of the damage. Somehow we have to get at those lobbies who are purely in it for profit and are trying to bend the science all the time," she says.

She adds on a lighter note that, as a retired lawyer, she would be happy to leave it to others to decide whether or not to take such actions. But as for the gravity of the threat: "I don't need any convincing; I'm just back from Addis Ababa and have seen at first hand the water stresses and other climate-related stresses they are having to cope with," Robinson says.

The era of carbon-based growth is now at an end, she points out, as "it's no longer sustainable since it's creating the greenhouse gas emissions that are warming our world and creating climate changes".

However, people in dire poverty have a human right to a better life, and she

feels it is our duty – our imperative – to equip them with low-carbon technologies to do this. Africa, she points out, receives huge amounts of sunshine but lacks the technology to harness this as solar energy. Instead, many African women are suffering lung disease by having to cook using filthy kerosene burners.

Efforts at reining in human impacts count for little when emissions reductions are overwhelmed by the sheer weight of human numbers. There are, she points out, over 200 million women worldwide who want access to contraception but haven't got it. The key, she stresses, is education and empowerment for girls and women, not coercion.

The freedoms she and others fought for and gained for Irish women remain elusive for countless others.

Ireland's many links with the developing world, and the famous generosity of the Irish people in privately donating, suggests strongly to Robinson that, despite our current economic travails, we are still capable of reaching out to others in altogether more perilous circumstances.

"Part of the problem with the climate issue is that it has been led by scientists, environmentalists and economists, but what we haven't understood is that people are suffering dramatically, in parts of the world that Irish people care a great deal about."