

Mary Robinson and the Secularization of the Republic of Ireland in the 1990s

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Introduction:

The core identity of Ireland is deeply tied to the religious landscape of the island. Irish history is intertwined with the Catholic Church, which has been a powerful factor dominating not only religious and social life, but political identity as well. This structural control that had been maintained by the church changed significantly during the presidency of Mary Robinson (1990-1997). Mary Robinson, was born and raised in Ballina, western Ireland, a daughter of two doctors. As she recalls in her biography she had a privileged and comfortable upbringing. Robinson, attended Catholic school in her youth, and her aspirations when she was young were actually to become a nun before she spent some time in a French school, which exposed her to feminism and diversity, thus beginning her aspirations to become a lawyer and a voice for change. Robinson went on to garner a law degree from Trinity College in Dublin, King's Inn, and Harvard universities before becoming a senator for the University of Dublin in 1969 to 1898. Robinson's carrier thereafter led her to be a barrister and a campaigner before her time in office from 1990 to 1997. Robinson contributed to the realigning of political alliances, redistributing political power by enfranchising political sectors that had been previously marginalized by the government and the Church. Particularly, Robinson became an advocate of political representation of women and LGBT people. She proposed ideas that were radical given Irish political context, and her rise to power as the first female president deserves a historical analysis. The policies she advocated for greatly impacted Irish society, decriminalizing suicide and homosexuality, campaigning for better provisions on divorce, allowing women to have access and education on reproductive health, in addition to her efforts to remove the Church from state affairs.

This essay analyses Robinson's policies towards women and LGBT rights, contextualizing her political and activist connections with these social movements, and the reasons that explain her success in establishing policies that challenged Irish traditional politics and the powerful presence of the Catholic Church. I will argue that the changes Mary Robinson implemented throughout her career as well as the way in which she transformed the office of the president were fundamental to the removal of the church as a central power structure of Irish politics, rather secularizing the state of the republic to become more inclusive towards the previously disenfranchised populations of women and LGBT individuals

Robinson's status as the first female president in the history of modern Ireland alongside being such a mobilizing figure, motivating the highest voter turnout in women in Irish history, is the object of this study. Robinson's methods of garnering so much respect and popularity among the people of Ireland was due to the humanistic way she approached law, seeing it as a vehicle for social change¹. During her presidential campaign, she was a grassroots organizer and had a lengthy career as a barrister² who had worked with many people in Ireland who were marginalized. Her experiences with and talking to primarily women and the LGBT community allowed her to gather a sense of those who were in need, and where she had to focus her efforts. She was popular because of her empathetic nature and position, which is fundamental to understanding how she was able to make changes that seemed so radical to the conservatively run Irish Republic.

¹ Mary Robinson, *Everybody Matters: My Life Giving Voice*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 37.

² Michael Killian,, *Pioneering Spirit Irish President Mary Robinson Stretches to the Limits of Her Job*, (Chicago Tribune, 1993), 1.

Chapter One: Conditions before 1990

Throughout twentieth-century history, Eire and her people have proved to be resilient especially in regards to patriotism. The twentieth century is the perfect example of these two fundamentally Irish characteristics. The beginning of the century started with the Easter Rising event of 1916³ establishing the state of Ireland, followed by the secession from the United Kingdom in 1922.⁴ From here onward this was followed by the seemingly never ending strife between the Irish free state known as the republic and their northern neighbors in Ulster.

The struggles in the republic predominantly came from a very strict Catholic religious hegemony that was codified within the constitution. State and church issues were mutually imbricated, as seen in Eamon De Valera's⁵ 1927 Constitution which established the "special position of the Catholic Church" not only as the guide for personal morality, but legal morality as well.⁶ Such a religious view, catholic morality and catholic constitution, which was particularly conservative for women's role in society and politics, shaped gender relations and the expectations for women for much of the twentieth century. In this context, Robinson's victory as an advocate for removing the church's morality from politics in the late twentieth-century, defeating the power of the Catholic Church as well as Catholic morality, was astounding.

³ Easter Rising, also known as the Easter Rebellion, was an armed insurrection that took place in Ireland in 1916. The attack was launched by Irish republicans against the British armed forces that were occupying Ireland.

⁴ In 1922 Ireland officially succeeded from the United Kingdom creating the Irish free state. 26 of 32 Irish counties make up The Republic of Ireland, and 6 decided to remain under the control of the British Commonwealth making up what is known as Northern Ireland.

⁵ Eamon De Valera was head of government as well as head of state in Ireland immediately following the revolutionary period and wrote the Irish constitution of 1937.

⁶ Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 2000), 152.

The thirty years before her presidency and the events that took place within them only raise more questions about her sensational achievement of being the first female president of the republic. This includes the lasting changes she implemented thereafter causing another woman to take office post resignation. However, to understand how radical these changes were, we must go back further in the twentieth century to understand the development of Irish politics from being a sphere that directly excluded women, to being one that elected a woman to their highest ceremonial office.

The twentieth century in Ireland was a place of radical change, beginning with the creation of the Irish free state itself in 1922, and later on, in the 1960s when the fight for social reform began and continued until Robinson's presidency in the 1990s. As mentioned before, central to understanding modern Irish politics is the imbrication of the State and the Catholic Church, to the extent that as Bourke and Walsh argue, "The Catholic Church had become so strongly associated with Irish identity that it was impregnable."⁷ This relationship is what caused a majority of the erupting issues within Irish society. The harsh divisions between the Catholic Ireland of the republic and the Protestant Ireland of the North came to their head in the 30-year period that began in the 1970's known as The Troubles. The conflicts that took place during The Troubles period refer to the brutal collision of Catholic citizens of Northern Ireland being discriminated against by the Protestant majority. The religious division coupled with the tension preexistent from the revolutionary days only served to exacerbate the conflict and the increasing political violence, from 1972 to the mid ceasefire in the mid-1990s, which included. Journalist Mary Kenny, defined this period as "...a bitter chapter of shootings, bombings, maimings and

⁷ Richard Bourke and Maurice Walsh, *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland: Media and Culture in Ireland, 1960-2008*, (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2016), 266.

killings...”⁸ Kenny, a leader of the Irish Women’s Liberation movement describes how the events that took place during The Troubles contributed to the movements for the decentralization of the Catholic Church within Irish politics.

Though this period of political violence was predominantly occurring in Northern Ireland it nonetheless had a profound impact on their southern neighbors. The human toll between 1972-1973 was sixty dead, 399 injured in bombings, in addition to shootings, and subsequent acts of brutality that carried on throughout the 70s and 80s.⁹ Bearing witness to this heavily politically and religiously violence perpetrated by both the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British army; forced the Republic to look at itself as a theocratic state much more clearly.

The statement “home rule is Rome rule” became very popular, to point out the fact that should the Irish Government not make changes Ireland certainly had more troubles to come.¹⁰ The Troubles certainly brought this into public view for the republic, and the south became anxious to distance themselves from the sentiment that they were a catholic nation. “Reformers of all hues in the Republic of Ireland became anxious to purge the south of the charge of being a Catholic state for a Catholic people, just as the North had been destined as being a Protestant state for Protestant people.”¹¹ The movement for secularism in the republic began primarily because they themselves did not want to experience the same level of upheaval as their northern neighbors had. There was also the hope that this campaign towards secularism would aid in the effort of reunification, the results for this goal remain to be seen.

The idea that the republic had to become more secular was met with great discomfort by the highly conservative catholic population, the church being a fundamental part of both social

⁸ Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland...*, 267.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 273-274.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

and political life. The reforms that were intended to be enacted to distance politics from the Catholic Church would be an uphill battle. A battle that required having to acknowledge the effect of the religiously motivated legal structure, the analysis understands the role of Robinson and women and LGTB rights as part -a central part- of a broader process of separation between the church and the state.

The Irish state exercised control over women's bodies and rights, as stated in the constitution and catholic morality. "Divorce, previously available through an act of parliament, was banned in 1925; the 1927 Juries act made it difficult for women to sit on juries. The 1929 Censorship of Publications Bill prohibited the advertisement of contraceptives, while the 1935 Criminal Law Amendment act prohibited the sale of Contraceptives."¹² These were just the beginning of prohibitions made against women. These policies were implemented with the idea that women were to be home makers, that they played a biblical role, and that they were to have no complaints about their lack of agency within Irish society. The disadvantage of women was also palpable economically, women having and maintaining jobs as per the 1932 policy, which mandated that women who were teachers and civil servants were forced to retire when they were married.¹³ The efforts made to legislate women out of public life were extensive. The vision of rural Ireland as depicted by de Valera's 1943 St. Patrick's day speech described Ireland as: "a rural idyll populated by "Bright and cozy homesteads" and "comely maidens."¹⁴ Irish republicanism, therefore, reinforced patriarchal conservative gender roles, reinforcing notions of motherhood, nourishment, and caregiving within the domestic and private realm.

¹² Bourke and Luddy, *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland...*, 483.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 373.

The anger of Irish feminists radiated throughout the republic and came to its point of boiling over in the 1960's. Women simply did not want their roles to be delegated near exclusively to the maternal and domestic, and they were willing and ready to fight for these conditions to change. The fight for women's rights in Ireland was contentious and arduous. However, the conditions for women changed drastically during the 1970s due to the expansion of the education system as well as the presence of a looming economic downturn that forced women into the workplace.¹⁵ During this period, attitudes and expectations towards working women were forced to change out of necessity rather than out of true desire to change, however it remained a victory for the feminist movement, achieving the goal of women being recognized as workers. This in addition to the profound effect of a strong front for women's liberation that accumulated by 1973 resulted in feminism having a strong foothold in Irish politics, pushing for an agenda of social reform that would also shape Robinson politics.¹⁶

However, the policies regarding birth control and divorce were still major issues that were a constant uphill battle for Irish feminists in the last decades of the twentieth century. One of the most prominent feats of their political struggle towards the contraceptive bans in Ireland was "The Pill Train" of 1971. Organized by the Irish Women's Liberation Movement consisted of about twenty women who travelled to Belfast to purchase an obscene amount of contraceptives that were banned in the Republic and upon their return to Dublin dumped them at the feet of dismayed customs officials.¹⁷ This event was described as symbolic, "the entire incident was dubbed as "The Pill Train" although of course no pills were involved."¹⁸ Mary Kenny describes, going on to state, "But it was "The Pill Train" in popular mythology, because

¹⁵ Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 528.

¹⁶ Bourke and Kennedy, *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland...*, 375.

¹⁷ Bartlett, *Ireland...*, 508.

¹⁸ Kenny, *Goodbye to...*, 230.

the Pill, perhaps appropriately, came to symbolize both the sex revolution and the feminist revolution.”¹⁹

At the time Mary Robinson herself takes this event into account in her memoir that she herself knew many of the people on “The Pill Train”. Robinson stated that, “my approach was to identify the areas of the law that needed to be changed and then figure out how to go about changing them.”²⁰ Which she did, in this time of radical discrimination against women on account of both the church and contemporary Irish society she knew well of the roadblocks against women’s liberation in the conservatively run Republic. Robinson details in her memoir how it was impossible to narrow down the extent to which this sexism invaded legality, thus maintaining patriarchal, biblical standards for women.²¹ I expand upon the discussion of the feminist movement within chapter two of this paper going into more detail about the beginnings of the movement as well as Robinsons role within it, not only prior to her presidency but during it as a transparent feminist who was able to rise to power in a country where feminism had been written out of the narrative.

Women were not the only ones within Ireland who were legislated against per the Irish constitution. Homosexuality was illegal in Ireland up until 1993, the statues regarding being LGBT in Ireland were sufficed to say abysmal before that. “The laws were enforcing Catholic morality, mistakenly equating “sin” with “crime.” I exposed removing from the constitution the prohibition on divorce, lifting the ban on these of contraceptives, and decriminalizing homosexuality and suicide, on the biases that these were personal moral issues and should not be subject to the law of the state.”²² This statement made by Robinson in 1969 during a speech she

¹⁹ Ibid., 230.

²⁰ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 39.

²¹ Ibid., 39.

²² Ibid. 43.

made to the Trinity College of Law, would have been considered extremely radical. Considering the historical prejudice against homosexuality in Ireland founded primarily in religious doctrine as a “sin of sodom”²³, the idea that homosexuality was anything other than sin therefore making it evil and criminal was not something that could come to be accepted easily.

Prejudism and stereotyping hit the gay community particularly hard in the 1980s with the spread of the anxieties and fear around the AIDS epidemic, which the mainstream views considered it “a gay disease.”²⁴ The emerging epidemic was a disaster for Ireland during this period. Due to the turmoils of The Troubles, the feminist movement, and the sex and sexuality crisis as a result of conservative shame rooted in biblical teachings; the addition of the HIV/AIDS epidemic As what Oppenheimer describes, “a nettlesome problem in a culture which all forms of non-marital sex were regarded as heinous; access to birth control was restricted, politicized and contrary to catholic doctrine, and “homosexual acts” remained criminal offenses.”²⁵ This was a brewing storm for Ireland, bringing to light all of the things that the Catholic majority and conservatively run government didn’t want to discuss.

Though surprisingly, in the late 1980s the tides had turned on discussions about homosexuality. Due to the events of the reformers like Mary Robinson, there was a great shift in thinking within the Irish government and the Irish Catholic Church, one that somewhat embraced the reforms necessary to be made in the modern era. One such reformist figure was Father Ghallager, a reformist priest in the 1960s, who stated that, “many debates on homosexuality reveal prejudice, fear and unsupported statements rather than elements of reason and freedom which, theoretically, are the basis of ethical analysis... homosexuals should not be judged to be

²³ Kenny, *Goodbye ...*, 298.

²⁴ Gerald M. Oppenheimer, *The Catholic Church, AIDS and Sexuality in Ireland: Uncovering Part of The Story*, (Am J public health 108 no. 7, 2018), 850.

²⁵ *Ibid*,

immoral any more than a blind person if prenatally the visual tracts are not complete.”²⁶ This statement was groundbreaking for Christian Ireland. This radical shift in perspective was only further solidified by the statements made by Father Ghallager and other clergymen, taking accountability for the high rates of suicide and unhappiness within the LGBT community and proclaiming openly that these cases were a direct result of the alienation and ire of the Catholic Church.²⁷

The extent of this acceptance would contribute to the sexuality crisis, forcing people to question sex itself. As the Bible taught, the concept of sex was something exclusively tied to reproduction, and therefore was only acceptable within that context. However, with the reformist lens that “homosexual acts” were inherently non procreative yet equally as valid as procreative acts, forced the question, if non-procreative sex is valid, then why is birth control considered contraband? This question was one that would further the reformers cause to lift the prohibitions on contraceptives later during the Robinson administration in the 1990s.

The points that were raised by those who sought reform would radically change the political climate in Ireland. Yet the social justice and civil rights issues were not the only pressing matters that were occurring during the twenty years leading up to Robinson’s presidency, there was also the mass emigration of Irish young people as a result of the ongoing economic crisis. As Bartlett point’s out In his book, Ireland: a history “Years of profligate borrowing and spending in the 1970s along with another oil crisis, had produced an economy in the early 1980s in which unemployment was running at 17 per cent (over 200,000 people), interest rates were well into double figures, and the top rate of tax rose to 65 per cent of gross

²⁶ Kenny, *Goodbye...*, 298.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 298.

domestic product.”²⁸ The economic instability drove emigration to an ostensible height, by the end of the 1980s. Around 70,000 people per year were leaving the republic. The mass exodus was primarily composed of young people, most of which possessing higher education and their loss was felt significantly.²⁹

The conditions in the decades prior to Mary Robinson taking office in 1990, were suffused to say not prime for a liberal female candidate in the running. Yet simultaneously they were the exact right conditions for Robinson at the same time, Ireland needed a fundamental structural change to occur, with the economic downturn, the strong discontent of women and minorities, and general trend of reform that had been garnering popularity for decades, Robinson’s campaign seemed to blossom at the perfect time.

The success of her campaign was mostly due to the care she took to address all the issues that weighed heavily on the minds of the people. She spoke on her interest of removing the church from the law all the way back in 1969.³⁰ It was evident in her career before she took office, as a barrister and a senator, that she often represented cases that were deemed radical and brought by people who were underrepresented. In 1971 she proposed a senate bill that would amend the law prohibiting the sale and administration of contraceptives (this bill was vetoed in 1973).³¹ She also represented two clients who wanted to challenge the laws prohibiting women from sitting on juries and the law that prohibited mixed religious couples from adoption programs (she won both of these cases).³² She also represented Mrs. Johanna Airey in her landmark case in 1972, regarding her desire to separate from her husband when he would not

²⁸ Bartlett, *Ireland...*, 528.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 528.

³⁰ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 43-44.

³¹ *Ibid.* 67.

³² *Ibid.* 92.

cooperate. This case originally resulted in him being charged with domestic abuse however she was not granted the right to separate from him legally.³³ The case reached Mrs. Robinson in 1977, where she was able to successfully separate from her husband making her the first woman in Irish history to challenge the prohibition on divorce and win.³⁴ There was also the handwritten letter she received from her homosexual colleague detailing his experience of being a queer person in a very homophobic Ireland and her subsequently backing his case against the criminalization of homosexuality, which she recalls in her memoir was a significant event in her career.³⁵

These instances are exceptional markers of Robinsons unchanging character throughout her career, and the dedication to these stances allowed her to garner abundant support. Being an ally to her constituents and colleagues was not where her support ended, and she had shown demonstrable proof throughout her career that she was ready and willing to fight to make the necessary changes that would push Ireland into a brighter future. Throughout her campaign, Robinson organized primarily through grassroots traveling not only to the big-ticket cities, visited the rural agrarian counties throughout Ireland, and listened to the people therein to garner their support.³⁶ This was evident in the poll results from 1990. Robinson won the popular vote by a staggering margin, superseding the expected 12 percent of her base in Labour Party, as well as an unprecedented number of voters from both the workers party and the Green Party as well leaving her with a base around 20 percent.³⁷

³³ Ibid. 103.

³⁴ Ibid. 106.

³⁵ Ibid. 118

³⁶ Peadar Kirby, *Hello Mrs. Robinson; A New Turn for Ireland (President Mary Robinson)*, (Dublin: Commonweal Report, 1990), 742.

³⁷ Ibid. 742.

The position of president was prior to Mrs. Robinson, a purely ceremonial title, however she transformed the office, and took on the task of promoting many of the policies that would change the course of Irish history forever. The events that occurred before her time in office were no doubt circumstances that made a lot of Irish people desperate for a change and willing to elect a president who would do so. Therefore, through demonstrable proof of her dedication, and her willingness to listen to the communities she would serve, Mary Robinson would be elected, and deemed fit for the task as Ireland's First female president.

Chapter Two: Women in Ireland, and the feminist movement

Though Robinson's election would be a historic victory and her career as a lawyer, barrister, senator and eventually president, an incredible leap forward for Irish society. However, there was a long dynasty of Irish feminists who came before her to lay the groundwork.

Beginning in the revolutionary period in the early twentieth century, women played an essential role in the fight for Irish sovereignty. The presence of suffragettes and women's rights groups was strong in Ireland prior to the fight for independence. Revolution required unity across the board from all nationalists, including Irish feminists, which caused a dilemma, "should they support the government in the war effort and suspend their political activities, or should they refuse to give up on their demands and continue the campaign?"³⁸ Suffragettes had strong apprehension that if they temporarily halted their momentum to participate in the revolutionary efforts they would decentralize the movement and propel them backwards. Ultimately the popular nationalist moniker, "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity"³⁹

³⁸ Richard Bourke and Catriona Kennedy, *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland: Women and Gender in Modern Ireland*, (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2016), 480

³⁹ *Ibid.* 480

won over, and most Irish people, male and female, aligned behind the nationalist claim of an independent, republican Ireland. Thus, feminist of the first wave temporarily renounced to their fight for women's liberation temporarily.

After these first wave feminists played such a large role in achieving independence, Irish women expected to be treated with the respect that their actions in the struggles for national sovereignty should have garnered them. However, the catholic constitution codified in 1937 eroded the social liberties and legal rights of women in independent Ireland throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁰

The treatment of women in the incredibly conservative republic took on an incredibly misogynistic tone, particularly in the 1950s.⁴¹ Women's presence in the revolution was all but ignored in favor of the catholic standard for womanhood which did not look favorably upon a woman's strength outside of the private, domestic realm. Rather, the role of women was confined to fit the expectation of participation in "the cult of domesticity that privileged heterosexual marriage and motherhood and the Blessed Virgin Mary as a model for women and girls."⁴² This cult of domesticity presented a host of complications that were not considered within the Constitutionally Catholic government, such as: divorce, abuse, non-traditional families, and remarriage. The general consensus during the early to mid-twentieth century was that of "you made your bed, now lie in it."⁴³ This way of understanding marriage began early on in the twentieth century stayed in the popular consensus until the 1990s. The tide of Irish

⁴⁰ Bourke and Kennedy, *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland...*, 481.

⁴¹ Kenny, *Goodbye to...*, 35

⁴² Cara Delay, *Gender Sexuality and the devotional revolution*, (New Hibernia Review, 2020), 102.

⁴³ Anthony Bradley, Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, and Carol Coulter, *"Hello Divorce, Goodbye Daddy!" Women, Gender and the Divorce Debate* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 277.

feminism however, which argued against the prohibition on divorce, existed in a patriarchal societal structure.

The rise in women's rights mobilization began in the 1960s, "from the end of the 1950's, the old Ireland began to fade."⁴⁴ The second wave of feminism was brewing, with the "Pill train" in 1971 being the most significant example of women protesting for their right to birth control.⁴⁵ Irish feminists were rocking the boat, and letting their voices be heard. However, the failure of the 1986 divorce referendum was a catastrophic blow to the momentum of the movement.⁴⁶ The lack of success for initial referendum could be tied to the fact that the argument to remove the prohibition relied heavily on statistics of marital breakdown, rather than the strong association divorce had to the ongoing women's rights movement.⁴⁷ Irish society organized itself around patriarchal values and these values upheld were a key factor in the failure of the referendum. In 1969 there was a rise of anti-divorce lobbyists who fed off this undercurrent of sexism to substantiate their arguments as to why the prohibition should remain in the constitution. Lobbyists stated that "young working women were presumed to be sexually active, and, therefore, sexual predators of married men. This sometimes extended to young married working women, especially those with children. Not only were the latter neglecting their children, they were also rejecting the division of labor—and their consequent dependence— within the family, which, it was argued, lies at the core of social stability."⁴⁸ The act of confining women to the home and the domestic sphere were vital arguments as to why the prohibition on divorce should

⁴⁴ Ibid. 203.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 230.

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 113

⁴⁷ Bradley, Valiulis, and Coulter, *Hello Divorce, Goodbye daddy!...*, 279.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 286

remain in the constitution. The anti-divorce campaigns focused their efforts on these groups of vulnerable women, portraying them as seductresses or worse, rejectors of social normality.

Women's role in society was over policed, predetermined, and rigid, the role of wife, mother, and domestic caretaker, were already designated as the only acceptable model. This was a remnant of the 1950s culture as well as a byproduct of Catholic doctrine, in which shame was a vital teacher. Young Irish women for generations had grown up learning that they were the ones who must be without sin, as depicted in a particularly cutting sermon which read: "Where will you be, thoughtless girl, who thinks nothing but flirting, courting, and company keeping? You, who spend hours in sinful amusements; you, who thought before men appear to be a virgin, yet before God you are rotten with impurity? Where will your place be if you carry on this way?"⁴⁹ This sermon given to a church of women and young girls all the way back in the 1800s perfectly illustrates the long-standing patriarchal rhetoric that was weaponized against women. The divorce referendum's initial failure and the popularity of anti-divorce campaigns in the 1980s were so successful ultimately because of the shame that was projected onto women through these teachings. The power that the church had not only politically, but socially, permeated so deeply into the lives of women, and made the rise to power of Mary Robinson all the more astounding.

Robinson discusses the issues that she herself faced in her life as a woman pursuing a legal and political career. During her campaign in 1990, "a well known priest was heard to describe me as a "Marxist lesbian bitch".⁵⁰ Robinson details in her book how she faced scrutiny not only on the basis of her political ideology, which leaned towards the more radical spectrum, but because of her existence as a woman in a political sphere and ideological landscape that was not kind to women.

⁴⁹ Bradley, Valiulis, and Coulter, *Hello Divorce, Goodbye daddy!...*, 117,

⁵⁰ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 137

Mary Robinson herself, though an outspoken feminist and advocate was also acutely aware of her role within the Irish political spectrum. In the 1971 Pill Train protest, she did not participate and rather supported from the sidelines due to the fact that, “she was a lawyer, and planned to change things working through the law, rather than joining in with exhibitionist stunts.”⁵¹ Mary Kenny details the way Mary Robinson functioned within the feminist movement was by working within the system. This strategy was highly successful, considering that Robinson had the 1935 law against contraceptive devices voided in 1979 using the challenge that it was fundamentally unconstitutional.⁵² The critiques of Robinson did not come from the feminist movement but rather from her opposition. During her career as a barrister, she first proposed her bill to end the ban on contraceptives arguing that it was a matter of private morality in 1971. The bill was immediately vetoed, due to the pressure of the Catholic Church and majority, Robinson stated when pulled aside and chastised by the Leader of the Labour Party, “It alarmed me that a good and decent political leader would either not make the distinction or bow to such pressure.”⁵³ During Robinson’s career as a barrister, she developed an acute awareness that even within her own Labour Party there was a heightened fear of disrupting the “normality” of the catholic church’s power over Irish society. Though the body of Robinson’s work pertaining to arguing cases and proposing bills was primarily during her career as a barrister it is her time serving as president that the international world remembers her for.⁵⁴

In Ireland, the title of presidency is entirely a ceremonial role and does not hold the same weight as in other presidential regimes. An Irish president’s primary role is being a representative of the Irish State and the guardian of the constitution, with extremely limited

⁵¹ Kenny, *Goodbye to...*, 248

⁵² *Ibid.* 250.

⁵³ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 68.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 106-107.

powers as well as no absolute discretion. The president functions within a system of three parts of the Oireachtas (national parliament), which comprises the Dáil Éireann (the Assembly of Ireland or lower house) and Seanad Éireann (the Senate of Ireland or upper house). Ireland differentiates itself from most parliamentary republics because the president is not the chief executive. The president may give advice but offers relatively no executive function within the republic other than formally appointing the Taoiseach (prime minister) and accepting their resignations. However, the Taoiseach is appointed upon the nomination of the Dáil, and the president is mandated to appoint whosoever the Dáil designates without the right to decline. This made Mary Robinson's usage of her president title to advocate for this level of political change rather astounding, "I said I would like to make the presidency more relevant," Robinson stated in an interview in 1993.⁵⁵ It was clear that both as a woman and a politician, she had interest in transforming the office of the president to one of greater advocacy.

By using her office in such a way, she raised the issue of divorce to a global audience, gaining the attention of the New York Times, "In a rare exercise of power, President Mary Robinson has used her office in a way that could advance the cause of those who want to make divorce legal in the predominantly Roman Catholic land."⁵⁶ This use of the presidential office as a tool was seldom done. In her career as a senator for the Labour Party, Robinson was one of the few to campaign for the first vote on the removal of the divorce law and pushed the issue to vote the first time in 1986.⁵⁷ Robinson's advocacy on the divorce issue was a large contributor behind

⁵⁵ Killian, Michael, *Pioneering Spirit Irish President Mary Robinson Stretches to the Limits of Her Job*, (Chicago Tribune, 1993), 1.

⁵⁶ James F. Clarity, *Ireland's President Acts on The Divorce Issue*, (New York Times, 1993),1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.1

the initiative to drive Taoiseach Albert Reynolds to allow the country to vote again in 1994 to remove the prohibition on divorce.⁵⁸

Her election was contentious with criticism, although she won by a staggering majority, nearly everything that she did was faced with scrutiny. During her inaugural speech, when she addressed the large Irish diaspora, she was met with the statement, “typical of a woman, she’s elected by three and a half million and she immediately says she wants to represent seventy million.”⁵⁹ Later on, in her presidency when she met Pope John Paul II to advocate for her cause stating that “too many women sacrificed to maintain the facade of self-righteousness.”⁶⁰ This statement representing her position that the identity of Irish women should exist outside of the rigid Catholic doctrine, she illustrated this sentiment physically with her refusal to wear the penitents black dress and mantilla.⁶¹ This choice to illustrate herself as a president and representative rather than a penitent woman she was met with “looks of horror from Irish officials.”⁶² This decision garnered her both respect and controversy.

Her representation as a feminist was never in question, “she is a feminist in the best sense of the word, and for many years she was a lone voice in the legal profession championing the cause of women over access to contraception, rights for minorities, social provisions for single mothers and legal equity in marital status,” stated Mary Condren of the London Independent.⁶³

Feminism in Ireland stretched long before Mary Robinson, to the women who laid down their cause to fight for Irish sovereignty, to the women who suffered in unhappy marriages to the

⁵⁸Ibid. p. 1

⁵⁹ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 149.

⁶⁰ Mary Condren, *Ireland’s Message for the Pope; President Mary Robinson Visits the Vatican-Not an Easy Day for The Pontiff*, (The Independent, London 1997), 1

⁶¹ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 184

⁶² Ibid. 184

⁶³ Condren, *Ireland’s Message for the Pope...*, 1.

women who joined the “Pill Train” in a radical show of anger for the staunch refusal to allow them control of their bodies.⁶⁴ Robinson upheld their legacy in her career, making strides as a barrister to remove the prohibition on contraceptives as well as pushing the issue of divorce into public consciousness as president. Robinson forced the public to acknowledge the fact that though the integral role that Catholicism plays within Irish society, the churches role in a modern Ireland as the arbiter of morality was simply no longer viable.⁶⁵

Robinson recognized this, that the matter of catholic morality versus a greater societal need for change is what made her successful. In 1967, when she was elected as the auditor of the Trinity Law Society, she addressed what she identified as the core legal issues in Ireland stating, “I had identified the moral issues such as the constitutional prohibition on divorce, the ban on the use of contraceptives, the criminalization of homosexuality and suicide, and I wanted to make a case that these matters should not be criminalized by the state or reflect the morality of one dominant religion to the exclusion of others.”⁶⁶ Early in her career she had taken note of the fact that the role of the Catholic Church in the Irish government was one that was harmful and not sustainable to diversity that was growing within modern Ireland. Robinson made it clear in her 1997 visit to the pope where she declared that in relation to the misogyny in Ireland: if the Catholic Church was not part of the solution, than it was part of the problem.⁶⁷

The divisive stance that Robinson held was clear: if Ireland were to move forward, changes would need to be made in regards to the treatment of women and minorities, and the success of those changes was foundational to creating a lasting prosperity.

⁶⁴ Kenny, *Goodbye to...*, 178.

⁶⁵ Condren, *Ireland's Message for the Pope...*, 1.

⁶⁶ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 42.

⁶⁷ Condren, *Ireland's Message for the Pope...*, 2.

Chapter 3: Sex and Sexuality in Ireland

Another divisive stance that Robinson took in her political career would no doubt be her support of the LGBT community. Homosexuality was illegal in Ireland per the same constitution that banned divorce, the Catholic moral teachings provided a platform for religious homophobia, which had an incredibly detrimental effect on non-cishetero identifying people. Homosexuality is prohibited by the majority of mainstream catholic teachings; thus LGBT identities are treated as sinful.⁶⁸ Thus, treatment of LGBT peoples in Ireland which followed the catholic teaching combined with the way that biblical morality was the guiding hand behind social and political morality created an incredibly hostile environment for LGBT people in the Republic.

In the 1970s it was abundantly clear that the institutionalized homophobia that permeated the government and the media was strong, relying on Catholic moral teachings as the basis of exclusionary policies and attitudes.⁶⁹ The “Christian values” enshrined in the constitution played a large role in the experiences of the gay community in Ireland, limiting the visibility that would be necessary to accelerate the movement towards equality.

One of the core factors in understanding the longevity of homophobia in Ireland is the censorship of LGBT people and movements in both society and in mainstream public media sources. A result of this censorship was the denial of openly gay religious officials, as well as the strict isolation of LGBT people within the religious community of Ireland at large.⁷⁰ Isolation was a large detriment to the gay rights movement stemming from the theocratic control of the Catholic Church being such a strong cultural force. Sex was linked exclusively to sin, control,

⁶⁸ Finn Reagan and Geraldine Moane, *Religious Homophobia: The Experiences of a sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Ireland*, (Culture and Religion Journal, 2014), 299.

⁶⁹ Richard Dunphy, *Sexual Identities, National Identities: The politics of gay law reform in the Republic of Ireland* (Contemporary Politics Journal, 2008), 248.

⁷⁰ Reagan and Moane, *Religious Homophobia...*, 299.

and danger, and was understood as a powerful drive that could only be controlled through the church and was only acceptable through the consummation of marriage.⁷¹ Non-heteronormative concepts of sex were not factored into this equation, considered immoral, sinful, and therefore criminalized. These attitudes extended throughout most of the twentieth century, leading to the gay rights movement's lack of sociopolitical traction up until the late 1970's.

In the late 1970's there was a surge of awareness because of David Norris, lawyer and politician who came put publicly and advocated for gay rights on the basis that the issue of gay relationships was a matter of private morality, not a biblical evil that deserved to be criminalized. Thus, leading to the 1977 case championed against the Irish government, spearheaded by Mary Robinson. Robinson took on David Norris' case, which pertained to the 1861 Offences Against the Person act and the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, both laws relating to the illegality of homosexuality in the Republic of Ireland.⁷² Norris had written to Robinson prior in a personal letter which outlined his experiences as a gay man living in Ireland, as well as the prejudice that he had endured because of that facet of his identity. Norris was also a notorious figure in Irish LGBT history seeing that he publicly came out, founded, and presided over the Irish gay rights movement throughout the 1970s.⁷³ "I was shocked to discover that the very same laws under which he had suffered so many years before still applied in Ireland," Norris wrote in his letter referring to Oscar Wilde's strikingly similar experiences from over a century ago.

The letter gave Robinson a first-hand glimpse into the experiences of what it was to be a gay person in the political and cultural climate of Ireland. In the letter's detailing of Oscar Wilde's experience, it also conveyed to Robinson just how arduous and longstanding fight for

⁷¹ Ibid.301

⁷² Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 116

⁷³ Ibid.116

the gay rights in Ireland had been even a century prior. By this point had dedicated her career Robinson already had a reputation for fighting against the theocratic nature of the constitution and taking underdog cases that allowed for constitutional challenges to arise. Therefore by 1977 her career as a lawyer who embodied the ideals of personal morality over religious morality, the addition of this case to her roster was a groundbreaking addition in arguing for personal rights and morality in Ireland.

The outcome of Norris' appeal was infuriating, the court "upheld the constitutionality of the laws and dismissed the case."⁷⁴ Though the initial appeal was dismissed, Norris would go on to the European Council of Human Rights in 1988, where he would successfully argue that the Republic of Ireland's criminalization of homosexual acts between consenting adults was a breach of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which dictated the right to respect private and family lives.⁷⁵ However, there was an upside in the initial loss on the home front, through the expansive media coverage of the case a lot of publicity was directed to Norris' argument. Through revealing his personal struggles, and opening the issue to the public, Norris had started a thought-provoking national debate.

This debate forced the country at large to look at the pervasive history of homophobia and how it affects gay people in Ireland. The LGBT movement's struggle against religious homophobia was a symptom of a larger disease in terms of the Irish catholic fear of talking about sex, as stated in Finn Reagan and Geraldine Moane's article Religious Homophobia: The experiences of a sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Ireland, "There was a historical silence surrounding sexuality in Ireland. And sexuality was used as a

⁷⁴ Ibid. 116

⁷⁵ *Norris V. Ireland*, Case no. 6/1987/129/180

potent form of social control in the family, schools, and the public sphere.”⁷⁶ Sexuality itself is commonly equated with heterosexual intercourse purely tied to reproduction.⁷⁷ This tactic of sexuality being only acceptable to be discussed in terms of procreation linked it inextricably to the centrality of the conservative notion of family, understood as a core facet of Irish culture, strengthened by mass emigration and creating a sense of close-knit community. The notion of the “Irish family” being pervasive in Irish society also comes with the idea of the families “black sheep,” in this case being the rebellious social reformers of the gay rights movement. The “Irish Family” and the fear of being the “black sheep’s” of that family created a stifling and hostile environment to the notions of individuality and diversity in the family of Irish society.⁷⁸

In 1979, the outspoken Priest, Father Ghallager wrote about the Pastoral care of homosexuals in a newspaper called *The Furrow*, wherein he stated, “many debates on homosexuality reveal prejudice, fear and unsupported statements rather than the elements of reason and freedom, which are, theoretically, the basis of ethical analysis... Homosexuals should not be judged immoral and more than a blind person if prenatally the visual tracts are not complete.”⁷⁹ Ghallager argued that being gay was not an inherent sin. Creating the first instance of sexuality not being a “choice to sin” but rather a part of the human condition.⁸⁰ He argued that prejudicial treatment against homosexual individuals was morally wrong as it would be equally as morally wrong to fault a blind person for being blind. Father Ghallager also stated in his article that the unhappiness and and alienation of the gay community was a direct result of the

⁷⁶ Reagan and Moane, *Religious Homophobia...*, 301.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*301

⁷⁸ Richard Dunphy, *Sexual Identities, National Identities: The politics of Gay Law Reform in the Republic of Ireland (Contemporary Politics Journal, 2008)*, 251.

⁷⁹ Kenny, *Goodbye to...*, 297.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 298.

attitudes promoted by the church and thus Irish society at large⁸¹. Ghallager argued this point emphatically, that homosexuality was as equally valid as heterosexuality, and that the element of “transmission of life” in sexual congress needed to be removed from the dialogue entirely. “We must take cognizance of the changed emphasis on procreation in a theological understanding of sex. It can no longer be regarded as the single dominant norm by which all sexual behavior is judged. The reality of personal sexual encounters is too wide to be compromised into the motion of procreation.”⁸² Father Ghallager’s article was groundbreaking, finding that homosexuality is not unnatural in its origin, no more unnatural than sex itself as a concept, in addition to opening to the door of LGBT identity within theological discussions. Such discussions surrounding sexual identity within the confines of theology later inspired prominent theologian Joseph S. O’Leary in 1987 to comment, “all I can recommend is that we continue to practice uncensored dialogue and disinterested research, and refrain from too—confident promulgation of negative opinions of the kind which have had such damaging effects in the past and have so often subsequently proved to be incorrect.”⁸³ O’Leary’s term “uncensored dialogue” inspired the beginning of conversations regarding the role of homosexuality and the LGBT experience within the church. These “uncensored dialogues” in the theological sphere opened the door for later Irish gay activists to gain a foothold in the effort to decriminalize and destigmatize LGBT identities.

One of the most notorious organizations that arose in Ireland was an organization known as the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN), that was established in 1988.⁸⁴ GLEN was spearheaded by Kieran Rose, who helped propagate the idea that homophobia was a product of

⁸¹ Ibid.297.

⁸² Ibid. 299.

⁸³ Ibid.299.

⁸⁴ Dunphy, *Sexual Identities, National Identities...*, 248.

British colonialism rather than a product of a catholic constitution. Though this argument was objectively nothing more than an appeal to the nationalist sympathies held by most Irish people, it was a highly successful argument for gay liberation. The campaign stated that the values of tolerance and respect for diversity were inherent to Ireland, and portrayed homophobia as a residual effect of British Colonialism.⁸⁵ The success of this argument in terms of arguing for legal reform was bountiful. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) stated “the constitutional principles of equality, sexual privacy, intimate association of self-expression should be interpreted as to guarantee the equal rights of lesbians and gay men,” pertaining to the discrimination of LGBT individuals in the workplace.⁸⁶ Although GLEN achieved a high rate of legal success by appealing to the sensitivities of the larger scope of heteronormative Irish society, the concept that homophobia was a product of colonialism was demonstrably false.⁸⁷

The HIV/AIDS crisis was a looming issue internationally in the 1980s, having a catastrophic impact globally. The crisis had devastating and lasting effects on Irish LGBT community as well, “the minister for health scrupulously kept the charged issue of gay sexuality and the demands of gay activists at an untouchable distance while the parliament maintained a studied indifference.”⁸⁸ Sex and sexuality in Ireland were relatively new topics of conversation and were still treated with an air of untouchable shame. Therefore, when any sexualities were discussed let alone non-heteronormative identities there was deafening silence or belligerent fearmongering took place, so to say that though the theological discussions were open the overall topic of acceptance and inclusion were still off the table.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibid.252.

⁸⁶ Ibid 252.

⁸⁷ Ibid.260.

⁸⁸ Gerald M. Oppenheimer, *The Catholic Church, AIDS and Sexuality in Ireland: Uncovering Part of The Story*, (Am J public health 108 no. 7, 2018), 850.

⁸⁹ Ibid.851.

During the AIDS crisis there was a significant figure that disrupted this, Father Paul Lavelle⁹⁰. Lavelle was one of few who wanted to take the Catholic Church in Ireland in a progressive direction; he started a Task Force which would advocate for the distribution of condoms, as well as educate the public on HIV/AIDS. Lavelle was an open advocate for decriminalizing homosexuality and was outspoken in his beliefs that the church must change their position lest the crisis continue. However, Father Lavelle's Task force was disbanded in 1988 after he was stripped of his position when the Bishop vehemently disapproved of his advocacy⁹¹. The removal of the Task Force was a step backwards, and "the gay community was scapegoated and forced to develop independent supportive groups and safe-sex initiatives almost completely alone, fighting the fear and hostility these endangered."⁹² After the task force was removed, and the organization of GLEN saw its rise, there was still a lack of open dialogue within the larger scope of Irish Society. The issue of the lack of visibility for the LGBT community was a glaring problem, without attention and platform moving forward towards greater acceptance would pose a substantial problem.

However in 1992 President Mary Robinson invited 35 representatives of lesbian and gay groups to the Áras an Uachtaráin (Presidential official residence).⁹³ Robinson stated herself in her memoir that "a strong theme of my presidency was inclusivity, bringing outsiders into the conversation and involving people who had not previously had access to their president."⁹⁴ Removed were the barriers surrounding the Áras, giving activists a place to come and talk to a representative who would listen to them. This presidential decision transformed the role of an

⁹⁰ Ibid.851.

⁹¹ Ibid.851.

⁹² Ibid. 851.

⁹³ Valarie Bresnihan, *The Symbolic Power of Ireland's President Robinson*, (Dublin, 1999), 257.

⁹⁴ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 180.

Irish president into a community-oriented space in which all manner of Irish citizens felt that they had an ally in the political sphere.

By using her office in this way, in 1991 she opened the door for a question that would lead to the gay community as well as other marginalized groups to liberation, “even if actions are considered sinful, what demand that they be defined as criminal?”⁹⁵ Homosexuality was fully decriminalized in 1993, and there was a loosening of the rigid bonds between religion and sex in Ireland, thus allowing for a plurality of voices to emerge.⁹⁶

The church in Ireland played a detrimental role pertaining to the acceptance and visibility of the LGBT movement, however it also played a significant role in improving conditions incrementally. With figures such as, Father Ghallager, Father O’Leary, Father Lavelle and the initial efforts of the Bishops task force, there was an effort by some to attempt to unravel the deep shame tied to homosexuality. Though it must also be stated without figures such as David Norris and Kieran Rose, gay activists who took their issues to popular public consciousness, and the efforts of Mary Robinson as an allied figure able to provide platform to these initiatives, there would be little success. Robinson’s utilization of her platform in this instance was powerful and demonstrated her willingness to be an activist.

Sex and sexuality: contraception and abortion rights

Treating sex and sexuality as unapproachable topics had an incredibly harmful impact on Irish society, not only seen through the historical treatment of LGBT people but through the treatment of people seeking abortion in Ireland. Per teaching of the church abortion was considered to be a mortal sin through the concept of *Humanae Vitae*, a concept meaning “On

⁹⁵ Dunphy, *Sexual Identities, National Identities...*, 251.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

Human Life” propagated by Pope Paul VI in the 1960s dictating that the use of contraception and abortion was immoral.⁹⁷ The Pope detailed that contraceptives were immoral on the basis that they fell under the biblical jurisdiction of *coitus interruptus*, and inhibited the natural nature of sex and its divine purpose for procreation.

Humanae Vitae specifically reflects on the union and holiness of sex as a matrimonial act, “every act of marriage must in itself stay destined towards the chance of human procreation.”⁹⁸ *Humanae Vitae* had a major impact on Ireland, contraceptives had been outlawed per the 1935 constitution, but the Pope’s statement would go on to incentivize a new wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. This new wave of feminism was a subset of the larger feminist movement known as “The Pill Generation.”⁹⁹ Mary Kenny remembered “I became part of a group which founded a new feminist movement, calling itself the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement.”¹⁰⁰ This new feminist wave took global inspirations from Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eumuch*, Kaye Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Eva Figes’s *Patriarchial Attitudes*, as well as others.¹⁰¹ This approach by the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement brought in an international lens, largely motivated against the *Humanae Vitae* initiative.

Kenny was a part of the Pill Train Protest personally, she recalls this in her writing stating that “we young feminists took a train from Belfast, carrying contraband contraceptives, ready to declare the items on arrival at Connolly Station, it was a big media story.”¹⁰² The media attention to the pill train was pervasive and highlighted the outrage that many of the feminists of

⁹⁷ Kenny, *Goodbye to...*, 244.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 246-247.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 248.

the Pill Generation felt at the constricting forces of the arcane laws that oppressed them via both the Pope's outspoken anti-contraceptive statements, and the catholic constitution. Though the public at large recalled the event as a mortifying display, it did activate political change, "Mary Robinson, who was to go on to be Ireland's first woman president, was a month the feminists who had joined the Women's Liberation group, quietly approved of the train episode, yet prudently declined to come on the trip...Mrs. Robinson had the law against contraceptive decisis abrogated- having challenged it as fundamentally unconstitutional - in 1979."¹⁰³ The pill was not only a contraceptive item however, it played a role in the autonomy of women, who per catholic doctrine had their roles dictated to them: to be mothers, to be wives. Their inherent value was stripped from them, and their bodily autonomy about their choice regarding pregnancy and conceiving a child was out of their hands until 1979.¹⁰⁴

However, the words of bodily autonomy in regard to abortion would not be subject to discussion until the 1983 referendum. The amendment presiding over this was "The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn child, and with due regard to the equal right of life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, as far as is practicable, by its law to defend and vindicate that right."¹⁰⁵ The referendum resulted in the amendment being upheld.

Though the rate of infant and mother mortality was low thereafter the 1992 "X" case made international headlines. The X case being that of a fourteen year old girl who was a victim to sexual molestation and statutory rape by a friend of her father, and tested positive for pregnancy. Seeking a way to terminate the pregnancy she fled to London, and in doing so father was outraged and informed the authorities in Dublin. Authorities demanded that the girl be

¹⁰³ Ibid., 249.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 251.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 302.

brought back to Ireland, since the abortion was unconstitutional.¹⁰⁶ This case brought international attention to the abortion ban in Ireland and outraged audiences all over the world, the general consensus was that this ban and the Irish Governments action of bringing the girl back and forcing her to relent in her desire to terminate the pregnancy was ultimately a grotesque way to trap rape victims¹⁰⁷. Though there was international debate and outrage pertaining to this case, the results were lack-luster, the pro-life movement in Ireland proving to be a strong wave of lobbyists preventing any further action from being taken to protect people such as this fourteen-year-old victim of a devastating assault.

Although the tide of Catholic morality within the sphere of Irish politics was strong, by the time Robinson was elected to office their power was waning. In November 1994 there was a referendum on abortion information and the right that women ought to have to travel abroad to be able to terminate pregnancies.¹⁰⁸ The referendum was successful due to the fact that a larger European body of The Law Reform Commission, which was not privy to the influence of the church. Though there was a fear “by some Right-wing Catholic groups against ratification of the Maastricht Treaty — on the grounds that ‘Europe’ would seek to impose abortion and other alleged evils on the God-fearing Irish people.”¹⁰⁹ The fear would only serve to further alienate this sect of right-wing Catholics. Seeing as President Robinson herself stated that she had a reputation for humanitarianism and wanted to take a more global approach to politics rather than remaining isolated to the greater trend of European politics.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 302.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 304.

¹⁰⁸ Dunphy, *Sexual Identities, National Identities...*, 254.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 254.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, *Everybody Matters...*, 118.

Sex and sexuality, both homosexuality and heterosexuality were tied distinctly to a culture of shame and repression. With the actions of gay rights activists campaigning for the decriminalization of homosexuality, and the efforts of activists within the Women’s Liberation movement, the stigma around topics such as the validity of LGBT identities and the access to contraceptives became a very public conversation. As discussed in chapter 2, the political activism that had been taken prior to the 1970s and 1980s was substantial, however the activists that came later, paved the way for the legal changes that the people of Ireland needed to be able to move on into a more inclusive future.

Mary Robinson was not on the Pill Train, nor did she participate, as Kenny stated, in the shocking stunts that were performed to galvanize the republic, however her role as a lawyer, and as a president were incredibly important to the ultimate success of the gay rights and womens liberation movement. Robinson’s efforts in removing the church from politics during her career as a lawyer in addition to her using her platform during her presidency to boost visibility for these causes were foundational for the long-lasting changes that were made during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.

Conclusions

Robinson was elected for her seven year term as president in 1990, and although she could have ran for a second seven year term in office, in 1997 Robinson declined to run.¹¹¹ Robinson stated in her memoir that “If I were to run for a second term, I would very likely be re-elected, I could nominate myself—as provided for in the Irish Constitution—and would almost certainly

¹¹¹ Mary Robinson, *Everybody Matters: My Life Giving Voice*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 186.

run unopposed” however, “but I had doubts about whether I could do it for another seven years with the same 100 percent commitment.”¹¹² Robinson was aware of what her work had done for the people of Ireland, that she had transformed the office of the president into one that invited inclusivity, outspoken action, and had political influence despite the office’s status as a non-political entity. Robinson was also aware that her time in office was over, that she had achieved what she had set out to do, “the premise of my running for president back in 1990, and throughout my term, was of opening up the presidency, reshaping it into a dynamic office. If I had achieved something close to that, would my ongoing presence in the position not result in stagnation?”¹¹³ President Robinson was self-aware of the fact that she had accomplished her goals and done it in a way that would forever change the office of the president. As well as the fact that if she were to remain in office for another seven years, she questioned herself about whether she would be able to keep the same zeal? Or would her role become stagnant once again?

This perfectly illustrated her character, that rather than allow the office to stagnate she was willing to relinquish this power and move on to other avenues. Her decision to decline a re-election campaign came as a shock, after her announcement to the public in March the media attention was expansive “There was so much coverage—eulogizing— in the Irish media, print, radio, and television, emotional appeals from many quarters that I change my mind.”¹¹⁴ Robinson stated that all this attention and grief over her declination evoked a feeling of loneliness, and that she had somehow betrayed the people of Ireland. However, the attention soon turned to who would be replacing her in office, ultimately Mary McAleese was elected,

¹¹² Ibid., 185-186.

¹¹³ Ibid., 186.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 186.

another woman with a focus on social justice and inclusion and would carry the torch for change in the republic.¹¹⁵

Though Robinson's time as president came to a close her actions as a human rights activist were not finished. On December 12th after her final obligations as president were finished, Mary Robinson became the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹¹⁶ Robinson detailed that during her time as commissioner, "I made 115 trips to more than seventy countries during five years, almost always with the idea of helping to amplify the voices of victims, helping them to feel that somebody was listening."¹¹⁷ Her career was highly successful after she left the presidential office, and she continued to campaign for human rights causes through the end of the 1990s, and into the 2010s. Even today she remains a highly significant figure in most conversations regarding human rights activism.

Mary Robinson was a beloved figure in Irish history, she empowered women by being the first woman to become president of the Republic, spent her career prior to her term in the presidential office as a lawyer fighting for the removal of the prohibition on divorce, she advocated for the removal of the ban on contraceptives, fought for LGBT rights, and even after her presidency continued to be an advocate and activists for the ideals that she spent her entire career defending. "Robinson is a 1,000-1 outsider, made her dream come true by trudging around the country for six months with Howe campaign bus interminably blaring out the 1968 Simon and Garfunkle hit "Mrs. Robinson" Paul Majendie of the Los Angeles Times wrote in 1990. He finishes the article by quoting Robinson's colloquial statement about the on the nose nature of being elected on the first anniversary of the Berlin Wall's collapse, "Some kind of wall has come

¹¹⁵ Ibid.186.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.188.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.215.

down on the old politics in Ireland.”¹¹⁸ Robinson was correct in this statement, a wall did indeed come down, no longer were conversations regarding social justice swept under the rug in Ireland.

The church had lost its foothold in Irish politics, removing catholic morality from legislation was a groundbreaking success that would have lasting impacts on Irish society. As explored throughout chapters two and three, women and LGBT individuals were able to gain significant ground in the fight for equal rights through not only the activists within those communities, but through the aid of Ireland’s first female President, Mary Robinson.

¹¹⁸ Paul Mahendie, *Barriers Fall, Irish Elect Female President Politics: Mary Robinson, Internationally Respected Lawyer and Feminist, Prevails by taking on the old-style world of back-slapping and Patronage*, (Los Angeles Times, 1990), 2.

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