As part of the Carnegie Council Centennial Thought Leaders Forum, Carnegie Council's Devin Stewart spoke with Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland, and a former UN high commissioner for Human Rights. She is currently chancellor of the University of Dublin (Trinity College) and president of the Mary Robinson Foundation - Climate Justice.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you very much, Mrs. Robinson, for being here. It's a great honor to talk with you today.

When we start these interviews out, we basically take a look at how you look at the world today. When you look out at the world today, what do you see as unique, especially from a moral perspective?

MARY ROBINSON: What strikes me about the world today is that it's a world of 7 billion people who are more connected than ever before, and yet the divides are huge. We see growing inequality both within countries and between countries. I'm not sure that we can continue like this and be socially cohesive, because everywhere I go in the poorest parts of Africa or South Asia there are television aerials or smartphones on which they're looking at the other world. Even within countries, it doesn't bring about social peace.

I think that's one of the reasons why young people feel a lot of angst about the world—the Occupy movement, the Arab awakening—the sense that the world is too unfair still.

DEVIN STEWART: Would you say generally things are going in the right direction, or are you more pessimistic?

MARY ROBINSON: I am concerned, because my major focus of the moment is the fact that we need to stay within the planetary boundaries on climate change. We have been emitting too much carbon into the atmosphere, and we are in danger now of exceeding what will be a relatively safe world, staying below two degrees above pre-industrial standards. The World Bank recently told us what a four-degree world would be like in their report, Turn Down the Heat. I see the impacts already in poor developing countries, and I fear that there will be such problems about food security, water, migration of people, small islands going under, that this too may lead to more turmoil and conflict.

So even though I am by nature quite an optimistic person, I am deeply concerned that we are not taking our responsibility.

DEVIN STEWART: What would you say is the greatest ethical challenge facing the world? Is it one of the things you talked about, or is it something else?
MARY ROBINSON: For me the greatest human rights challenge, and therefore ethical challenge, is the injustice of the fact that weather shocks and severe climate change are affecting the poorest who are least responsible. So I talk a lot about climate justice.

But there is another kind of justice, and that is intergenerational justice. For the first time in human history, the activity of human beings is causing a danger to Earth itself and to the future of the human species and other species. I am aware from reading the science that we have a relatively short time in which to correct that by having low-carbon development. But we're not on track as we should be. That's a huge ethical issue, because it's also intergenerational.

DEVIN STEWART: Now, going back to looking at a more positive path forward, we are trying to look at shared values across societies and what we call a global ethic. Does a global ethic mean anything to you; and, if so, what is it?

MARY ROBINSON: I've been fascinated for a number of years about how we can develop and strengthen a global ethic.

I am particularly interested in the work of Hans Küng. I know him. We're friends. I've spoken in Tübingen. I really feel that with his work in drawing on the great religions of the world, we can also draw on the humanist tradition. [Editor's note: Check out Hans Küng's Thought Leaders interview.]

That's what the visionaries of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights did under the chairmanship of Eleanor Roosevelt. They looked to the great religions and the humanist tradition in 1948, and they gave us an extraordinary document, this Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The two articles, or part articles, that I think sum it all up are the first words of Article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." I often, when I'm talking to students, say, "And remember dignity comes before rights." Dignity is about that sense of self—spirituality, culture, that sense of identity; or that sense of having no identity because you are poor, you're invisible, you're sleeping in the street, people walk past you without even seeing you there. That's a undermining of human dignity.

The second article is Article 29: "Everyone has duties to the community, without which you don't reach the full expression of your personality." Again, I explain to students, isn't that very interesting, that you have duties to the community? You have to know about that, and you actually have to do something, or you, yourself, won't reach the full potential of your personality.

DEVIN STEWART: Taking those duties and looking at, for example, climate change—you said climate change is the thing that worries you the most—is there a recommendation that you'd like to talk about, a policy recommendation?

MARY ROBINSON: Climate change not only worries me, but it actually is something we can do something about.

First of all, as my friend Wangari Muta Maathai, who got the Nobel Prize for the work she was doing in planting trees and environmental issues in Africa and linking that with peace, said, "Everybody can do three things: reuse, reduce, recycle."

But we need more than that. We need to change the story of how we think about climate change, and it has to become a story about people, how it is affecting people. That is a very negative story at the moment. But it needn't be. We can actually do so much, especially for the 1.3 billion people out
of 7 billion in our world who have no electricity. We have gadgets now, we have lights that can be recharged by solar light. So it's possible.

Even more than that, we have 2.6 billion people out of our 7 billion who cook on open fires, who ingest fumes, and about 4 million die a year from that fume ingestion. Of course, they are mainly women cooking. We have clean cook stoves, we have biomass, we have ways of changing that.

That's all part of taking a responsibility. The biggest responsibility is for the countries that are using fossil fuel to shift more rapidly to clean technology, to share that clean technology with the emerging big economies that need to develop, and to have a low-carbon growth in all our cities and our rural areas. We can live a wonderful life on low-carbon technology.

DEVIN STEWART: As you know, we are turning 100 next year, 2014. We are taking this time to look back, but also to look to the future. What would you like to see happen in the next few decades?

MARY ROBINSON: I'm happy to take part in this centenary salute, if you like, to the Carnegie Council. I think it is important to try to look forward to the next 100 years.

Personally, when my first grandchild was born, it had a huge physical impact on me. I just had a different perspective. I now do think 80, maybe even 100, years hence, because that now is the horizon of my four grandchildren.

It worries me, because those four grandchildren will be in their forties in 2050. They will share the world with 9 billion others. It will be a world suffering terrible weather shocks—much, much worse than Sandy or drought in the Midwest or other shocks in the parts of the world, and it will come more frequently. I wonder what they will say about us if we don't act now.

So we need to act on many things. But many things we can act on, and if we don't it's not dramatically catastrophic. If we don't take the steps to stay below the two degree Celsius above pre-industrial warming and have more focus on adapting and becoming climate-resilient and having a low-carbon future, it will be catastrophic. That does worry me, and that is something that we should be paying attention to.

DEVIN STEWART: On a related note, how about moral leadership? What does this leadership mean to you?

MARY ROBINSON: I'm very interested in different forms of leadership. Political leadership, we don't have enough of it. Women's leadership—and I think we are seeing more women in positions of power and influence politically.

When I was elected as the first woman president in Ireland and the seventh president, I linked with women elected presidents and prime ministers and we formed the Council of Women World Leaders, which I chaired for a number of years. There are now more than 40 women who either currently are or have been president or prime minister of their country. And yet, I sense it's not making enough difference. We're not innovative enough. We're not actually trying to do it differently, in a more problem-solving, more consensus-building way.

One of the things we are doing in the climate area with my foundation, The Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, is we have developed a women’s leadership group on climate change, which commits to listening to women who are struggling at grassroots with trying to provide food and trying to cope with these weather shocks.
We had a great success at the climate conference in Doha, the 18th conference, where we got gender balance into the conference, so that on all the bodies now at the climate conference there will have to be gender balance, and delegations will have to strive for gender balance in going to the conference. Why is that important? Because when you undermine poverty, it has a huge differential impact on women and men. It's women who still have to provide the food, get the water, get the firewood, try to hold the family together. Therefore, we need more women at the table.

But the leadership that interests me most is moral leadership. As a non-executive president of Ireland, I had a feeling that that was moral leadership and needed to use symbols. Now, as a member of the Elders brought together by Nelson Mandela, that is the kind of leadership that we have to strive to show.

It's hard, because you have to be very true to core values and have an integrity and live the way you talk, if I could put it that way. None of us quite achieves that. But I've learned a lot from my fellow elders, from Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others.

DEVIN STEWART: Another part of Andrew Carnegie's legacy is promoting world peace. Do you think world peace is ever possible?

MARY ROBINSON: I believe it's extraordinarily important that we continue to strive for peace.

I see the importance of being able to stop gross violations of human rights and that there are a lot of failures, most notably at the moment the failure to address the terrible situation in Syria, because the political part of the United Nations, which actually is the Permanent Five governments, cannot agree. It's those governments that should be held to account, not the United Nations, in this instance. But it is tragic to see a government killing its people and driving them from their homes and destroying their cultural heritage, their habitat, and the kind of civil war and fighting, and indeed some nasty elements becoming part of that fighting in the country, just as it was terrible to have a genocidal killing in Rwanda, to have Kosovo happening. We're not good at stopping those gross violations.

But one of the things that I am interested in is the way in which women's groups now are insisting on having their voices heard—in Africa, for example—and getting countries to have plans of action to implement the Security Council Resolution 1325, which requires that women are involved in peacekeeping, peacemaking, peacebuilding. I do think that that will be a movement which will gain ground.

DEVIN STEWART: We like to end by talking about accountability. How do you see the average person getting involved with the issues that you talked about? You talked a little bit about that before. Who is accountable for the things you talked about today?

MARY ROBINSON: One of the things that I learned during my five years as UN high commissioner for human rights is that governments sign up to covenants and conventions in the area of human rights, but it's implementation that is the problem. The only way that we can get implementation is if people in that country, civil society, hold the government accountable, know about their commitments, and then challenge them, write about it. The media is important, taking cases in court is important, but also a wide movement of civil society.

A very good step in accountability was taken recently by the Human Rights Council in holding corporations responsible, by saying that "We now adopt the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights," which Professor John Ruggie had built up with his team and I have supported strongly in the past. Now corporations must respect all human rights so we can help civil society in
different countries to hold corporations to that standard and exercise a kind of authority of their brand. If a corporation is not respecting human rights, then its brand should be undermined, basically, and that will have a cost.

So there are different ways of holding to account. But without that we will not see implementation of the values, whether it’s in the area of human rights, environment, labor standards, wherever, that governments have subscribed to. They have to be held to account.

DEVIN STEWART: Reflecting back on your career, your diverse, incredible career, what is the idea or thing that you’d like to be known for?

MARY ROBINSON: What I reflected on in writing a recent memoir was that it was important to have the opportunity to develop the office of president of Ireland in a much more proactive way and show that that was fully compatible with the Irish Constitution. Since then, my successors have continued in that way. So I was able to strengthen the institution of president. That’s a sustainable objective, if you like.

Similarly, when I became high commissioner for human rights, the office was underfunded, young, and demoralized because of the huge mandate and few resources. Working with that team to build up those resources and to strengthen the office—and since then the office has gone forward in successive high commissioners and is playing a very key role within the United Nations.

And then, in reflecting on that, I conclude that what you do as an individual is actually not really your contribution as an individual. You work with so many people who support you. I think Archbishop Tutu puts it well: "You’re on the shoulders of so many that you work with. You may be the visible one, but so many people contribute to what you’re trying to achieve." I think that's a real sense that I have.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you so much, Mrs. Robinson. It’s an honor to speak with you.

Point B Podcast
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