

Hubert Butler Lecture: Iar-Uachtarán Mary Robinson

“Where life is fully and consciously lived in our own neighbourhood.”
Meitheal, community and food sovereignty.

I have long admired Hubert Butler - his beautiful essays, his belief in the importance of local community, and his unwavering commitment to human dignity and human rights. More than ever, his ideas speak to the world we live in today and to the challenges we face. So I was delighted to be invited to deliver this lecture and to reflect on the theme of community, food sovereignty and meitheal.

My first memory of hearing that word ‘meitheal’ comes from my father, who was a medical doctor in County Mayo. It has been an especially good place to be from over the past few weeks! As a child, I used to love travelling with him on his house calls. Every journey came with a story - and usually a lesson.

I remember one day passing a field where neighbours were working together to bring in the harvest. My father said, “*Mary, do you know what that’s called? That’s meitheal.*”

He explained that, once they had finished in one field, they would move on to the next neighbour's, and the next, until everyone's harvest had been gathered. And if someone was ill or unable to work, the community would harvest that person's field too, whether they were there or not.

We know meitheal as an Irish tradition but the same ethos is found in cultures throughout the world. In Africa, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu taught me, it is expressed through the idea of Ubuntu: *"I am because we are"*. At COP30, last year, the Brazilian Presidency spoke of a global *Mutirão* – a call for people to come together in solidarity to confront the climate and nature crisis. During its current presidency of the European Union, the Irish government is using the old proverb, *'ní neart go cur le chéile'*, *'there is no strength without unity'*.

Running through each of these traditions is the understanding that we have obligations to one another - that mutual aid and cooperation are essential to human flourishing.

The international community gave expression to these same values by grounding them in human rights. I have recently been championing one of the most overlooked provisions of the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights: Article 29. Unlike most of the Declaration, it is concerned not with the rights of the individual, but with our responsibilities to the community.

The first part of Article 29 reads:

“Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.”

This is a profound idea. We often think of human rights as being about what society owes us. Article 29 reminds us that we also owe something to one another. And, in fulfilling those duties, we ourselves are enriched, because it is through our contribution to the community that we reach the full expression of our personality.

Perhaps this is why Hubert Butler looked back at his time in Vienna in the 1930s as one of the most fulfilling periods of his life. Working with the Quakers, he helped Jewish families escape Nazi persecution, while his wife Peggy received many of them in London and helped them to continue their journey safely. They were living the very principle embodied in Article 29: that we become more fully ourselves by fulfilling our duties to one another.

Our obligations to community are local, national and international. The title of this lecture is drawn from Hubert Butler's essay, *Beside the Nore*. The full quotation is:-

“Where life is fully and consciously lived in our own neighbourhood, we are cushioned a little from the impact of great far-off events which should be of only marginal concern to us.”

I do not believe that Hubert was arguing for indifference to the wider world. His own life simply doesn't support that reading.

This was, after all, a man who helped people flee Nazi persecution; who supported Hungarian refugees after the 1956 uprising; who travelled through the Deep South of the United States to witness the struggle for civil rights; who supported those fleeing Chile after Pinochet's coup; and who was prepared to sacrifice his own standing in Irish society by speaking uncomfortable truths about the mass persecution and murder of Orthodox Serbs in wartime Croatia.

My own reading of this essay is that Hubert was emphasising that our first responsibility is to ensure that life is fully and consciously lived in our own neighbourhood, because that is where our capacity to

understand the wider world is formed. He saw the local, national and international as interconnected. If each of us did more good in our own communities, the whole world would be better for it.

On this point of community, I am struck by how much Hubert's essays remind us of the importance of maintaining daily, face-to-face contact with our neighbours. This particularly resonates with me in an era when there is so much misinformation, polarisation and what is now being described as threats to our cognitive security.

Trust is one of the greatest strengths of a healthy community. It is also one of the foundations of truth.

Truth is fundamentally our relationship with each other.

Strong communities make us less vulnerable to misinformation because they give us people we know, people we trust and people who challenge us when we are wrong. At a time when social media and artificial intelligence can make it increasingly difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood, those trusted relationships are more important than ever.

We know that social media is tending to isolate people, particularly the young, from each other and to increase loneliness. A sense of owing duties to others needs to be deeply embedded in our educational system. We should encourage activities for and with others in our community as part of growing into adulthood, part of achieving the full expression of someone's personality.

There is also great wisdom in Hubert's observation that a life rooted in one's own community cushions us from the impact of great far-off events. He reminds us that strong communities provide resilience in an uncertain world.

And ours is certainly an uncertain world. We face a climate and nature crisis, a rapidly warming planet, growing geopolitical instability and conflict, and a worrying decline in international solidarity.

We have seen how disruption in one part of the world, such as the Strait of Hormuz, can have immediate consequences for energy markets, fertiliser supplies and, ultimately, food production. As climate change intensifies, we should expect shocks of this kind to become more frequent.

These risks have reinforced my belief that we have become too dependent on long and fragile supply chains. Global trade has brought enormous benefits but, in some respects, globalisation has gone too far. Too many countries have lost the capacity to feed themselves, leaving them vulnerable to shocks far beyond their borders.

Ireland is no exception. Last month, I attended a conference in Ballina, held in my name, on the theme *Food and Care: A Meitheal for Our Time*. We reflected on how, just twenty years ago, Ireland had 600 vegetable growers. Today, there are fewer than 70. We import approximately 83 per cent of the food we consume, including 70 per cent of our vegetables. We're not even self-sufficient in potatoes - we now import nearly four times as many potatoes as we export.

At the same time, we export ninety per cent of what we produce on our land. Of Ireland's one hundred and thirty-five thousand farmers, only about two hundred serve the domestic market. There is nothing wrong with exporting our beef and dairy products. But we also need greater balance. We should not be exporting so much of our produce while importing our dinner.

This is why I believe it is time for us to root ourselves once again in local community. We need much greater food sovereignty in every country. By food sovereignty, I mean ensuring that communities have the knowledge, skills and capacity to shape how food is grown, distributed and shared. It means more growers, shorter supply chains and easy access to locally produced food. Above all, it means placing communities at the centre of decisions about the food they eat and the land that sustains them.

This is about far more than local food production. It is about culture. It is about our connection to the land, to the soil, and to nature herself. Knowing where our food comes from, and taking responsibility for the land that sustains us, is as much a cultural imperative as it is a question of food sovereignty.

This is where the exciting opportunities lie. As I have travelled around Ireland in recent months, visiting livestock farmers, vegetable growers and food producers, and speaking at convenings across the country, I have sensed a growing appetite for food sovereignty, for stronger community bonds and for a closer connection to nature and to the source of our food. People recognise that we can build a food system that is more resilient, more balanced and more deeply connected to both nature and our communities. We have the

opportunity to create something special – something rooted in the enduring spirit of meitheal.

Fortunately, many people across Ireland are already putting these ideas into practice. I am a co-founder of Project Dandelion, a women-led campaign for climate justice – women-led but not women only! We work globally but are also focused on supporting food sovereignty here in Ireland. Our philosophy is one of radical connection, radical communication and radical collaboration. We are proud to work with many wonderful organisations, two of which I would like to highlight in particular this evening because of their focus on local community and food sovereignty: Talamh Beo and Community Gardens Ireland.

Talamh Beo champions agroecology - farming with nature to produce healthy food, support farmers and strengthen communities. It is an approach that reduces our reliance on synthetic fertilisers and agrochemicals, restores biodiversity and soil health, and creates a model of farming that benefits both people and nature.

Talamh Beo is a strong supporter of shorter supply chains. Every person should be able to access high-quality food, produced locally by farmers who are earning a decent living. For this to happen, we need

regular, thriving farmers markets. We have some, but need many more, including covered markets, given our Irish climate.

Notably, Talamh Beo is also part of a wider community, European Co-ordination Via Campesina, and will be organising an important conference in Maynooth University in November 2026 on ‘Farming For The Future’.

Hubert, who always described himself as a market gardener rather than a writer, was a great man for the local country market, where he sold the produce from his own garden. At Maiden Hall, his garden was filled with rows of fruit and vegetables. He kept beehives and took particular pride in the apple orchard he planted himself.

That sort of gardening resonates with me. When I was growing up, my grandfather and my father both had a passion for gardening. I have to admit that I never inherited their enthusiasm or skills for the vegetable garden – although I was always very happy to eat their produce. Sadly, this practice of growing food locally has steadily declined, and I believe we need to reclaim it.

Community Gardens Ireland is trying to address this. Their vision is for there to be growing spaces – allotments or community gardens -

in every village, town and city in Ireland and Northern Ireland. These gardens are incredibly important: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has found that allotments and community gardens not only bring food security benefits but also bring significant physical and mental health benefits. The collective act of food growing and sharing builds more resilient, thriving communities.

2026 marks 100 years since Ireland's first allotment law. Yet, over that century, the number of community gardens and allotments in Ireland has remained largely unchanged. We have just 2,500. By comparison, Denmark, with a similar population, has 40,000, while Scotland has 10,000.

This is not because people lack interest. There is significant demand from people who want to grow their own vegetables, and many places that provide allotments have lengthy waiting lists. Encouragingly, local authorities are increasingly recognising the importance of community gardens and allotments as part of their community and climate work. Here in Kilkenny, the County Council has made a clear commitment to supporting and expanding these spaces, and I hope many others will follow its example.

There are other organisations across the country doing work like An Talamh Beo and Community Gardens Ireland: Hinterland, GIY, Burrenbeo Trust, Foodcloud, Hometree, Bohemian FC Climate Cooperative and many others.

These organisations are locally focused but produce national and international benefits. This is hard, patient work, but I believe we are on the cusp of a better world, with clean energy, greater food resilience and more connected communities.

This should excite all of us because every one of us can play our part. Buy at your local farmers' market, support growers and farmers with your custom, especially those who are working in harmony with nature, get involved in your local community garden, and, above all, remember meitheal, Article 29 and the duties we owe to one another.

Hubert Butler was born with the twentieth century. In 1990, having just turned ninety, he and Peggy cast their votes in the Presidential Election. Two months later, he died.

After his death, a note was found among his papers beside the receipt for his postal vote. It simply read:

“P and I voted for Mary Robinson. She got in.”

I have never taken that as being about me. Rather, I like to think that it reflected Hubert’s quiet hope that the values he and Peggy had defended throughout their lives were finally finding their place in Irish public life. Many of those values have indeed flourished in the Ireland that has emerged over the past 36 years.

But I think there is an opportunity now to return to some of the other values that Hubert lived by, and which have much to teach us in the world we face today:

To renew the spirit of meitheal – our collective goodwill towards one another;

To strengthen our local communities and the responsibilities we owe to them; and

To embrace food sovereignty, so that we are better prepared to withstand the great far-off events that will inevitably shape the lives of future generations.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir