

My proud challenge

By MARY ROBINSON

President-elect of Ireland

THIS Christmas will be different for the Robinson family. Had anybody suggested to me during the festive season last year that I would be the elected choice of the People of Ireland for the highest office in the land, I would never have believed it.

I am particularly pleased that an election has been held and that so many people have exercised their right to vote. I feel that the office has been restored to the people of Ireland for the first time in 17 years.

It is a great honour to have been selected on a national basis for this office.

I said at the outset of this campaign that I felt I could make the office of Presidency mean something. I realised in saying this that I would first of all have to listen to what the people felt about the office and listen to suggestions as to how a President can help them.

ONE THING that became clear at an early stage was that people wanted the President to identify with them, not just with their problems, but in the sense of recognising their work and achievements in their own areas.

I realised that there are literally hundreds of organisations around the country doing excellent work with little or no official acknowledgment or awareness of them.

There are groups of people for example, involved in all sorts of community

development, working for the homeless, for travellers, adult education, environmental groups, in the art and cultural area generally. And many many others who are making an enormous contribution towards the welfare of our society.

They want to inform the President of their work, to be recognised and appreciated for it and for the President in some cases to act as a liaising person with groups doing the same type of work in other areas of the country.

I also got a clear message from people that they would love to see an active working President who would come out and meet the people and be among them rather than remaining somewhat aloof in the Park, so they can get an opportunity to speak directly with her, talk about their situations, the issues affecting their lives and for her to be a listening, compassionate and caring President.

THEY also do expect the President to speak out on their behalf and particularly on behalf of the vulnerable and the weak, the unemployed, the young, the elderly and forgotten minorities. However I am very clear that the policy decisions as to how issues can be dealt with are a function of the elected government of the day.

The last six months of travelling around the country have been a deeply enriching experience for both Nick and myself and I really look forward to returning as President to



'I will be taking an oath to not only "maintain the Constitution of Ireland and uphold its laws" but also "to dedicate my abilities to the service and welfare of the people of Ireland"... in the first article written by President-elect Mary Robinson she sets out why she looks forward to the challenge of the Presidency.

the areas and groups I met over the last few months.

Another thing that was brought home so forcibly to

me during that period was the extraordinary beauty of the country and the sense of urgency felt by people wish-

ing to protect and preserve our environment.

This has become a really important issue for many of us now. And I intend to be completely informed and aware of environmental issues and to play my part in the preservation of our precious environment. Again there are many environmental and conservation groups working in this area, often with few resources and not getting the recognition they deserve.

Another issue which was repeatedly raised with me right throughout the campaign was the extent of forced emigration, particularly along the west coast. This is a fundamental, social, economic and personal problem which touches the lives of almost every family in Ireland.

I FEEL that as President elected by the people, I can provide a direct link with young emigrants and their families, and I will value, enhance and support the work done by the many voluntary agencies providing services for our emigrants.

In this context I am particularly pleased with the messages of congratulations coming from abroad and I look forward to an annual meeting in Aras an Uachtaráin with representatives of support groups and agencies in contact with emigrants, and to being a tangible link with the Irish abroad and their country.

I also of course look forward to representing this country abroad whenever I am asked to do so, and to enhancing our reputation as

a country to be reckoned with — politically, industrially, intellectually.

I have also stated several times that as president I would like to use the resource of the office to extend the hand of friendship to everybody in Northern Ireland and to do my utmost in whatever way I can to enhance mutual understanding, appreciation of, and respect for all the traditions in this island of ours.

I am also very well aware of the importance of being the first woman president of Ireland and how excited many people are about this really momentous event.

I intend that my presidency will serve to encourage and inspire other women to become more active and involved with public life and I will do everything I can to support the efforts of women all over the country who are endeavouring to make this a society where the involvement at every level in public life will reflect the reality that we are 50 per cent of the population.

I fully appreciate that this aspiration is shared by many men as well. And I look forward to all of us moving together along the path to full equality.

FINALLY, on taking office, I will be taking an oath to not only "maintain the Constitution of Ireland and uphold its laws" but also "to dedicate my abilities to the service and welfare of the people of Ireland." This is precisely what I want to do. And I will be proud and happy to take the oath and I am determined to live up to the challenge implicit in it.