

INTERVIEW IRISH POLITICAL LEADER

Ireland's 'Statesman of the Troubles'

*John Hume redefines Northern conflict and sets forth possible solutions***By T. Patrick Hill**

Special to The Christian Science Monitor

LONDON

JOHN HUME has an unshaken belief in the power of reasonableness.

To him, the resolution of conflict in Northern Ireland will come only by the acceptance of religious diversity — and trustful negotiations over how to “share the island.”

As a founder of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, Mr. Hume projects a distinct moral vision unusual in a country torn by sectarian prejudice. Yet his view is one that has earned him grudging recognition from unionists, who favor the continued constitutional link with Britain, as well as respect from nationalists, who want some form of Irish unity.

Hume recalls that the United States Constitution was fashioned in good measure by Irish Presbyterians. They had been driven out of Ireland by religious bigotry and did not want that to happen again. So they helped draft a Constitution, the essence of which is the acceptance of diversity. “And that’s my basic philosophy,” Hume insisted. “The essence of unity is the acceptance of diversity,” he said in a recent interview in London.

It is also the fundamental insight tragically missing in Northern Ireland, Hume believes, and one that cannot be given by outsiders, including the British. The Irish must learn it for themselves, he said.

The difference between Hume and other political leaders in the North is most evident in their definitions of the central problem. Ken Maginnis, a unionist member of Parliament, believes the overriding issue is violence, which needs to be addressed by military measures and selective internment. But Hume, appalled

as he is by the North’s incessant bloodshed, sees the violence as a symptom of a deeper friction.

“It’s a problem of a conflict of relationships which hasn’t been resolved,” he explained, referring to relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and relations between Britain and Ireland. “But the central relationship is between Protestants and the rest of Ireland, because that’s the one that has never been faced up to.”

Hume prefers to speak of his political roots as his personal roots. He was born in Derry in 1937. The oldest of seven children, he cannot forget that his father, a Catholic, was unemployed for 20 years and had to struggle even to provide a two-bedroom house. At that time, Derry was a gerrymandered town where, despite a Catholic majority, unionists (Protestants) controlled jobs and housing.

But by his own reckoning, Hume was fortunate. The year he turned 11 was the first year of a state-mandated IQ test. Any child that passed this examination was entitled to free education in preparation for university entrance. It was the break Hume needed to avoid repeating his father’s experience.

“I was able to pass that exam, and went on from there right through university,” he said. This led to his major role in shaping the history of modern Ireland as a member of the British Parliament at Westminster and the European Parliament in Strasbourg — and to becoming what Barry White, Hume’s biographer, calls a “statesman of the Troubles.”

After university, Hume returned to Derry in 1960. Conditions had not changed, but attitudes had. Self-help was the order of the day, and he accepted it eagerly. With four others and £5, Hume founded a credit union among the people of the Bogside, a Catholic ghetto. “And that wiped out the loan sharks.”

Today, the union has 12,000 members with £5 million (\$8.5 million) in assets. Hume also helped to establish a housing association to build homes for Catholics. But when local government denied permission, “We took to the streets in a civil rights movement.” From there, it was just a matter of time before he became deeply involved in politics.

Hume advocates talks between unionists and the Dublin government and has outlined for unionists a new and far-reaching proposal: “Go and sort yourselves out with Dublin to your own satisfaction,” he said, emphatically rejecting the inference that this would result in a Dublin takeover.

“Let the agenda be — this is very carefully phrased — how we share the island.” To succeed, Hume believes it is imperative that unionists, before they begin talks, get an agreement from

Dublin that any resolution has to be endorsed by majorities in both the north and south of Ireland.

“That gives absolute security to the unionist people that nobody is going to try and walk over them. But it also means that, for the first time ever, the people of Ireland as a whole will endorse how Ireland is shared and run. And that removes all justification of violence,” he said.

Hume’s willingness to include all citizens prompted him, despite considerable political risk, to hold controversial talks last year with the leadership of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the illegal Irish Republican Army (IRA). Hume hoped to persuade Sinn Fein to renounce violence and take up the peaceful search for a new Ireland by addressing them on three specific fronts.

The first is the price of violence. As of last November, 2,705 people had died in Northern Ireland since 1969. Of those, 62 percent were killed by the Provisional IRA and associated paramilitary groups. The IRA has killed more than twice as many Catholics — the very people they

claim to defend - as the British security forces have. "Some defenders!" Hume concluded.

The second front is the IRA policy of driving Britain from Northern Ireland. Is there any certainty that would result in a united, independent Ireland?

Hume is convinced that if the British leave before there is agreement between the two communities in the North, conditions not unlike those in Lebanon will occur and the gun will become the source of negotiation.

The third is the IRA's justification for the use of force. Its argument has been that the British are in the North defending their own interests by force. But Hume believes that the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement has signaled a significant shift in British policy.

"They have declared their neutrality," he argued, "on the central issue that divides the people of Northern Ireland - union or [Irish] unity." That means that it is a matter of one side - those who want it - persuading those who do not, that unity is in everyone's best interest. "You can't do that by force," Hume said.

The real challenge, he believes, is to break down barriers between Catholic and Protestant citizens, persuade unionists to join nationalists in building a new Ireland, and urge the British to adopt this as their policy.

But whether it is union or unity, only a new Ireland, Hume believes, will be able to meet the challenges of the Europe of 1992.

"The completion of the single market with freedom of movement for people, goods, and services, . . . will have a much greater impact on the daily lives of the people of this island, North and South, than any of the other matters that we spend most of our time discussing," he said.

In Northern Ireland, it is unusual for political leaders to look forward in this way. Hume's ability to do so has been widely recognized in Europe and the US. Small wonder that Kevin McNamara, shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, says that John Hume "stands head and shoulders above anyone else in Northern Ireland, and, I believe, in the island of Ireland."