



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 99th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Vol. 131

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, MAY 21, 1985

No. 67

Senate

JOHN HUME'S COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, yesterday in Boston, the University of Massachusetts awarded an honorary degree to one of the greatest statesmen and patriots in Ireland's long, distinguished, and often tragic history—the founder and current leader of the Social Democratic and Labor Party in Northern Ireland, John Hume.

In the 16 years since the current strife began in Northern Ireland, many of us in Congress have come to know John Hume, to admire the eloquence and insight of his leadership, and to respect his extraordinary commitment to nonviolence as the only acceptable path of change for the minority Catholic community in Northern Ireland.

In his commencement address at the University of Massachusetts, Mr. Hume reaffirmed his strong commitment to peace, and provided a thoughtful and moving analysis of the search for justice and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the inspiration he has drawn from the civil rights movement in the United States.

Mr. President, I commend the University of Massachusetts for honoring John Hume in this way, and for granting this well-deserved tribute to his leadership and his cause. I believe that his address will be of interest to all Americans who share his commitment to peace and a settlement of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and I ask unanimous consent that it may be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the address was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

ADDRESS BY JOHN HUME, COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS IN BOSTON, MAY 19, 1985

It is a great honour for me to be selected as the first non-American to give a commencement address at the University of Massachusetts, a University of ever growing stature and reputation in a state which is deservedly renowned throughout the world for its institutions of education. It is a particular pleasure to come from Ireland where I live to this city which has so many strong associations with Ireland, indeed which many would regard as Ireland's second capital and which I have certainly come to regard as my second home. It is furthermore a rare privilege for me to have this opportunity to address a group of young Americans, many of whom are—as I believe you are—from a minority tradition and to tell you something of the experience of my own minority and the problems it faces.

In Ireland, and more precisely in that part of Ireland which is under British sovereignty—Northern Ireland—I serve as an elected representative and the leader of a political party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party. But I speak first today as someone who was once a teacher and whose friends still accuse of being a teacher at heart. I am flattered by the accusation. For at their best, education and politics, have as their purpose the same high goal of excellence; the search for excellence in the individual provides in turn the basis for the broader quest for excellence in society as a whole. As the son of poor parents which I am, and coming from a minority as I do, I have learned to appreciate the great value of education—and above all higher education—not simply as the means to social progress which it has been for many but as a door to the liberation of the mind through which

minorities can redress their grievances and can enlarge the worth of the greater society to which they belong.

This Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been a gateway to the New World for generation after generation of immigrant. From the first sighting of the great Plymouth rock it has been at the centre of all the momentous events which shaped this republic. It has been a meeting point for many races who became in turn minorities within the United States—Irish, Italian, Black, Hispanic, Greek and Jew. Many arrived as refugees, others as slaves and bondsmen but all of whom have seen the opportunity in education to struggle from their desperate circumstances and build their future in this great society. It is no accident, that Massachusetts, which has so cherished education, which is so endowed in its centres of learning, should have made a contribution to the political and cultural life of the United States for above any State of comparable size or resources. Through the enlightenment of its schools and colleges, through the hard work and the imagination of its present minorities, this Commonwealth can continue to provide great leaders for the benefit of all Americans.

Your generation is now about to engage in the shaping of your society. It is your opportunity to build on the achievement of all who preceded you. It is also your responsibility never to forget from where you come and to remember those whom you have left behind and who have yet to commence on the road to progress. This is above all true for those of you who are from the minorities of this State and who have had to struggle harder than others to obtain the advantages of education who may indeed be the first from their family and from their street, as I was, to go to college. Your commitment in particular must not falter.

Within nations, minorities have a special role and indeed a special responsibility because they are frequently asked to carry the burden of the imperfections of the society as a whole. But because they have emerged through their own talent and know their own greatness and because they have experience of the intolerance and imperfections of others, they have the capacity and the moral authority, through constructive engagement, to change society and to move it ahead for the benefit of majority and minority alike.

"The hope of the world is still in dedicated minorities," wrote Martin Luther King. "The trailblazers in human academic, scientific and religious freedom have always been in the minority. . . . It will take a small com-

mitted minority to work unrelentingly to win the uncommitted majority. Such a group may well transform America's greatest dilemmas into our most glorious opportunity."

The words I quoted from Dr. Martin Luther King were spoken over twenty years ago when I was a high school teacher, living, as I still do, in a small depressed industrial city in the North of Ireland, part of a minority which know all the ravages of unemployment and all the grievance of the denial of basic civil rights. The dream which Dr. King proclaimed of a glorious opportunity for a new America, transformed by the moral energy of its minorities, was and for me and others of my generation in Northern Ireland the inspiration for our search for justice and equality within a transformed society. Your generation is about to build on the achievements of Dr. King and other great Americans like John F. Kennedy who preceded you and whose struggle and whose sacrifices have provided the basis for your opportunity. My generation in Northern Ireland has yet to find the basis for the advancement in peace and dignity of present generations and of generations yet to come.

I want to tell you now about the background to the problems of my society whose turmoil is so frequently and tragically a headline in the newspapers of your country. I do this not because the problems we face are immediately similar to yours. But I think you will find in its story that striving for dignity, that search for security, that drive for equality which is common to minorities everywhere. I hope by it you will also see that when those of any minority, in their impatience for change or in the passion of their rage, pursue the path of violence, they inflict a great injustice on their people and make more difficult the regeneration of society as a whole. Though an aggrieved minority knows full well the nature of its oppressor and its oppression, the pursuit of justice and equality demands the liberation of the oppressor no less than the victim.

The story of Northern Ireland is the story of a conflict—not I must explain a religious conflict, even though the two communities who live there draw much of their character and their coherence from their religious traditions. It is rather a conflict between the aspirations of ordinary men and women—600,000 Nationalists, 900,000 Unionists—who have been trapped by a tragic error of history which saw their hopes and fears as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable within an Irish state but which obliged them nonetheless to live and compete side by side in one

small corner of Ireland. These two communities in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist, both behave like threatened minorities and only by so regarding them and only by removing the fears which they both feel can a just and durable solution be found.

Northern Ireland was born out of the insecurity of the Protestant-Unionist minority in Ireland. Fearful of becoming a minority in the Irish State then emerging sixty years ago, distrustful of the intentions of their fellow Irishmen, zealous to protect the advantages they believed they had under British rule, the leadership of the Unionist community sought and achieved, through threat of force, the acquiescence of Britain in the creation of a new political territorial and artificial entity in Ireland wherein they hoped they could shape their own destiny as part of the United Kingdom. But the new self-governing political entity thereby established, called Northern Ireland, was neither secure nor homogeneous. Caught within its boundaries was a substantial Catholic and nationalist minority, which felt itself Irish, and which did not cease to be Irish simply because legislators elsewhere had drawn a line in a map and declared that henceforth they were British. Thus Northern Ireland, which was designed as part of a settlement to end the conflict between the British and the Irish interest in Ireland, served only to extend and aggravate this conflict by compressing the clash of majority and minority within an even more narrow and more rigid territorial, economic and social confine.

For over fifty years the Unionist majority sought to entrench their position through political gerrymander and discrimination. Though inexcusable, it was inevitable that they should have acted in this fashion—as other majorities have at times acted—since their inheritance was not a land of promise but a policy of insecurity. It was inevitable also that each attempt they made, at the expense of their neighbours, to strengthen their role and protect their privileges should have served only to disrupt the structures of society as a whole and to create new tensions and insecurities. This was the case also in the deep south of the United States not too many years ago where an insensitive and insecure white majority held sway. It was inevitable also that in Northern Ireland a new and highly educated generation should have emerged from the nationalist minority, as it also emerged from the black minority in the south, which would not accept intolerance and disadvantage and inequity as their legacy and the legacy of their children.

The American civil rights movement gave birth to ours. The songs of your movement were also ours. Your successes were for us a cause of hope. We also believed that we would overcome most importantly, the philosophy of non-violence which sustained your struggle was also part of ours. Our own history and our own circumstances gave a special power to the counsel of Rev. Martin Luther King that violence as a way of achieving justice is both impractical and immoral:

“It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leave everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.”

Can anyone looking at divided societies in the world today like Lebanon, Cyprus, and Ireland doubt the wisdom of these words of Martin Luther King?

The world responded with sympathy to our non-violent movement for civil rights as it did to yours. But whereas in the United States the structures of your democracy were resilient enough to encompass the challenge of civil rights, in the unstable political environment of Northern Ireland, our struggle was perceived as a threat to the very survival of the society itself and as such was resisted by the institutions of the State.

In the ensuing clash, the unionist majority, through the imposition of direct rule from London, lost their local parliament which they had come to regard as the symbol of their independence and as the guarantor of their heritage. Though many would still wish to regard Northern Ireland as their exclusive homeland, they lack the power and indeed the freedom to shape their destiny as they had once hoped. Though they dominate the security institutions of the State, they have not found security as a people.

In the ensuing clash, the philosophy of non-violence was rejected by a minority in my own community who followed the old law of an eye for an eye, who were inevitably brutalised by the process in which they engaged, who in their savage anger have come to reflect all of the hatred and sectarianism they had sought to overthrow and

who, in their pursuit of violence, demeaned the cause we hold dear and lost us many good allies. Sustained by their violence this group is beset by the illusion that they can, one day, impose their will on the island of Ireland as a whole.

In the ensuing clash, Britain once again became directly embroiled in Ireland and once again became a major participant in the conflict, destined to repeat time and again all the tragic errors of its past.

For my own community, the nationalist minority, Northern Ireland remains a society still dominated, in its institutions, its security system and its cultural assumptions, by an ethos which they see as hostile to their interests and aspirations so that many have now withdrawn for all practical purposes from any commitment to engagement within the society as it now stands.

I would quote Martin Luther King again:

"When an individual is no longer a true participant. When he no longer feels a sense of responsibility to his society, the content of democracy is emptied . . . when the social system does not build security but induces peril, inexorably the individual is impelled to pull away from a soulless society. This produces alienation—perhaps the most pervasive and insidious development in contemporary society."

Although a consequence of the injustice of others, alienation is a desperate and dangerous development within minorities because it weakens their coherence, erodes their faith in progress and gives terrorism the opportunity to take root.

When a society produces alienation in the individual, when it cannot provide for the equality and the differences of its citizens, "when the social system does not build security but induces peril," that society must be reshaped and transformed through new institutions which accommodate diversity and promote equality for minority and majority alike and thus provide the basis for reconciliation. Reconciliation can be the only solution in my country as integration has been the goal in yours. Reconciliation is the reversal of alienation. Like true integration, it does not entail the suppression of difference; it involves the legitimization of difference which is the essence of mutual respect. Yours is a nation, sustained by its pluralist institutions, which is not only learning to tolerate but which is coming to see the intrinsic worth of racial and cultural difference within society. You have realized that the essence of unity is the acceptance of diversity. We must strive yet to establish in Ireland and between Britain and Ireland the institutions which will allow all the tradi-

tions on our island to grow and flourish in full respect for the valid differences that exist and with full commitment to a new unity of purpose within which all in society can prosper.

The cause of minority rights and the achievement of civil rights gave to the United States a new sense of its own history and a new meaning to the concept of its nationhood. The history of America is now seen to be inseparable from the history of its minorities and the measure of the nation has become the opportunity and the prosperity it affords to its minorities. We must yet in Ireland find the true meaning of our own history and learn the full measure of our nationhood. Northern Ireland is a society overawed by its own polarisation, overpowered by constricting group loyalties and outdated views of State and nation and overwhelmed by the burden of its history and the narrow view of the history which prevails there. No society can afford to ignore its history or argue it away or wish it otherwise. If we do so we are doomed to repeat our failures. But we can not in any society, majority or minority alike, allow ourselves to be dominated by the bitterness of our past so that the past becomes the tyrant of the present. Nor can those in a divided society allow the blinding glare of their own narrow animosities to turn their eyes away from the search for progress. When society is paralysed by its successive failures, it must look beyond its own limiting obsessions and seek courage and example in the achievements of others.

Earlier this month, while attending the European Parliament in Strasbourg, I observed a range of events commemorating the defeat of Nazism—that most evil of all racist philosophies—and the ending of the second world war in Europe. Their purpose was to exorcise the bitter ghosts of history which lurk still in the dark reaches of the memory of those terrible times. Within Western Europe, former adversaries have left behind the narrow doctrines of sovereignty and statehood which brought them to war many times in the past and have constructed a community to entrench their reconciliation and to advance their cooperation. Ireland and Britain are both members of this European Community; both the minority and the majority in Northern Ireland benefit from involvement in this community. I do not think it is too much to ask, in the light of all of this, that Britain should set about its reconciliation with Ireland so that those two countries can both exorcise the ghosts of their past which still haunt the narrow streets of Northern Ireland.

In seeking to rebuild their future together, the Irish can also look to the experience and the history of this nation, a nation which has so many close ties to their own. Your greatest successes as Americans have been in accommodating the ethnic and cultural diversity of all who made America their home and in structuring around this a single nation dedicated to the progress of the individual. Your society may at times have faltered in meeting that challenge of accommodating diversity and of acknowledging difference. But you have also shown the capacity to rise to the challenge, to revitalize your democracy, to reconcile the discontented and to hold out the hope of partnership and participation for all who may still knock at the door.

The Irish experience, no less than the American, can admit of no rigid or exclusive doctrine of nationhood. Ireland throughout its long history, like your country over three hundred years, has accommodated many different cultures and peoples. Our history, however, unlike yours, has also been one of fragmentation and dispersal. We have been a nation of emigrants, emigrants from both the Protestant and the Catholic traditions, who made their home on many shores and in particular on the shores of America. More than in any other part of the world, here in the United States, where over forty million people look to Ireland, a land of five million, as the country of their heritage, the Irish can come to recognize that the nation is greater than the territory and that the doctrine of territory should not be nurtured to the neglect of the nurturing of the people. Those who would seek to base their future in Ireland on some narrow sectional interest and allegiance or on a purist and selective interpretation of race limit their potential as a people and do injustice to their own history and the history of the Irish diaspora. A people as varied in heritage as the Irish, as loyal to their traditions as the Irish, as widespread in their dispersal as the Irish, can draw courage from your history and from their part in that history in reaching for a new doctrine of nationhood around which they can construct a new society founded on reconciliation.

We all know from experience that we cannot overnight change the minds of men and women, or hope to better their circumstances, or end their fears or ease their anxieties or remove their prejudices with legislation alone. But we also know only when democratic institutions are shaped which are responsive to the needs of minorities, and only when intolerance is outlawed

and only when full opportunity is provided can the basis for healing in society begin. In this nation just over twenty years ago, John F. Kennedy had the wisdom and the courage to embrace the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King and to maintain the march of the nation by laying the basis for equality and justice. In the same spirit, I would call on the political leadership in Britain and in the Unionist Community to join with Irish nationalists in creating a framework for the reconciliation of the turbulent and polarized society of Northern Ireland so that the men and women who live there can look, not to the divisions of the past or to any limiting group allegiance, but to a new Ireland of the future which secures them in the protection of the law, gives them confidence in the recognition of their identity, assures them in the respect of their tradition and gives them equal access to all the benefits of partnership within a single community of interest.

The words of Martin Luther King are again relevant:

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals. Without persistent effort, time itself becomes an ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social destruction. This is a time for vigorous and positive action".

For your generation entering into the world, this is a time for vigorous and positive action. For all who seek peace and reconciliation in Ireland, we must ensure that now is the time for vigorous and positive action.