



**SDLP**

# **Martin Luther King Award**

**Mr John Hume MP, MEP**



**Atlanta, Georgia**

**January 18, 1999**

*Picture on front page:*  
Bishop Desmond Tutu, Corretta Scott-King,  
John Hume and Andrew Young

**Acceptance Speech by Mr John Hume MP, MEP  
Martin Luther King Award  
Atlanta, Georgia  
January 18, 1999**

I received this award with a profound sense of pride.

Pride because Martin Luther King has been a well-spring of inspiration personally throughout my life.

Pride because it is received on behalf of all the people of Ireland that have longed for peace through the dark decades of upheaval and violence.

Pride because this award is a symbol of the bonds between those who strive for peace and the inalienable dignity of the individual.

Martin Luther King is for me one of the giants of this country.

We have seen many revolutions in the modern age. We have gone from a horse-and- cart age to common-place trips to space, all in the span of a human life-time. This century has seen more than its share of war and bloodshed. Since 1900 vast numbers of people across the globe have lost their lives in the vortex of war. We have seen progress, but we have also seen oppressive ideologies advance and retreat, often leaving in their wake ruins of war and deprivation.

Somewhere along the line we needed to be reminded that the supreme value, above all the -isms- was the transcending spiritual worth of every human being.

Martin Luther King embodies for me the commitment to the ideals of a true humanism based on loving not just your neighbours, but your enemies.

When he spoke, he spoke with passion about the dreams of the individual for freedom, for peace, for prosperity and for justice. His words burned with the heat of indignation at the injustices suffered by his fellow African Americans in what for generations of white people had been the land of opportunity.

I have long admired and travelled in America. I have admired this great

country's welcome for the tired and huddled immigrants who came to it's shores, it's wealth of resources and human talents. America has been good to Ireland over the past generations. It has been a rock of support in the Northern Ireland peace process. I have wondered at America's economic might and the wealth of it's resources. It's democratic revolution has been an inspiration to the world and to all democrats fighting for what they believe in.

But who could not understand the anger of the black community at the closed doors of segregation and exclusion? Who could not stand with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Washington as he demanded that the promissory note of equality be honoured by the Government of the time?

He put a challenge to white America to fulfil it's promise to all it's citizens regardless of colour. He put down a challenge to black America to maintain it's righteous rage but express it only peacefully, not to satisfy, in his words, the thirst for freedom by "drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred".

We often Talk of slavery, discrimination, oppression, lynch law and marginalisation socially and economically. But who among us can really know the meaning, the actuality of the conditions they name. We can never truly know this from the outside. But we can appreciate the sense of injustice.

And we can begin to understand the human imperative for justice, for equality and for dignity. And through the force of Martin Luther King's words, we can feel our hearts quicken to the beat of his righteousness, of his moral outrage, of his desire for true peace.

Here was a man leading his people out of servitude to the land promised for all by the founding fathers of the United States. By moral force alone, he harnessed their energy, challenged those who sought to retard the delay of social and economic liberation for African Americans, and made the most powerful society in the world accept it's obligations.

Armed alone with words as the stones he would cast, he tackled the Goliath of racism and segregation and he triumphed.

When he spoke under then shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, he spoke not just for those who had gathered and not just for those whose cause he was a part of.

He spoke to everyone who would seek justice where there was injustice, who would seek equality where there was inequality, who would seek rights where there were none. He spoke with the power of the prophet who says there is a land we dream of and we will get there not through violence but with “soul force”, with moral force, spilling our sweat and not our blood.

The power of the idea that he embodied- that moral force alone can break the chains of oppression, of rancour, of division- was the driving force of the civil rights movement and has inspired countless peace makers across generations and in areas of conflict across the globe.

That was his dream.

This is his legacy.

That will be his greatest prize left to us and those who follow.

The bullet that killed Dr. Martin Luther King aimed not only to destroy the man but that idea. It was aimed at him but it was designed to hit all those who would choose the creative force of peace and non-violence.

But instead of killing moral force as weapon of change, it sanctified it through his sacrifice. Many peace-makers before and after him have paid the ultimate sacrifice. But as the Bible tells us, in the beginning was the Word, not the bullet. For words and ideals they embody can never be killed. In my work, I have been sustained by the words “we shall overcome”.

Fate decreed that I would not only be inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, but that I would find myself facing a challenge of civil rights in Northern Ireland that answered to his call to use moral force to make change.

Ireland does not for long remain immune from the great events that have shaped western democracies. We have a unique history but it is one informed and influenced by the flux of events beyond our shores.

The genesis of the conflict in Northern Ireland arose from power struggles and religious wars across Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Ireland as whole was convulsed by the thrill of the American and French revolutions.

We had an abortive uprising at the end of the 18th century inspired by

republican ideals which helped shape modern Irish nationalism. Because the wave of emigration that swept so many of our people toward American shores in the wake of the Great Famine, we feel a particular affinity with the United States.

We in Northern Ireland had not only reasons to hope, but a need to hope.

The forces of history can often deal peace-makers a bad hand. In Northern Ireland, deep grievances about our history, about discrimination, lack of civil rights, and about social and economic marginalisation had entrenched divisions among people and bred a legitimate anger that boiled beneath the surface in the early 1960s. In my own beloved city of Derry, democratic wishes were set aside ritually in favour of the vested interests of those running the state.

But the dream of equality, freedom and the dignity of the individual that Martin Luther King embodied helped shape the Northern Ireland civil rights movement that emerged during the closing years of the 1960's.

Inspired and guided by the moral philosophy of non-violence espoused by Martin Luther King, I felt it my duty to help shape and guide the growing movement for civil rights in Northern Ireland and later the SDLP, the party I helped found as a vehicle for non-violent constitutional nationalism.

We did not seek ideological confrontation.

We did not seek to inflict suffering. We believed, in the words of Martin Luther King, in the redemptive quality of unearned suffering.

We believed that we would accomplish more through suffering and enduring for our own beliefs.

We believed in inclusivity, not exclusivity.

We believed in peace, in the ability of human beings to find their common humanity.

We believed that true unity among all Irish people, Protestant and Catholic, nationalist and unionist, was a unity of the heart not merely of the soil.

Like Martin Luther King, we believed that no one was beyond redemption,

no one was beyond the pale of persuasion.

We shared his refusal to believe “that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of division and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood could never become a reality.”

And it is these beliefs that sustained us through decades of appalling violence and more recently through the ups and downs of the peace process in Northern Ireland.

That process has been a defined one for all involved- for Irish and British Government led by Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair, for unionists led by David Trimble, David Ervine and Gary McMichael, for nationalists and republicans led by Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Seamus Mallon and myself and for President Clinton’s critical support and assistance.

Let no one denigrate what has been achieved.

We have achieved much not because we challenged others but because we challenged ourselves.

Martin Luther King spoke along these lines when his thoughts turned to love and hate, to the need to love your enemy, to the essential need to recognise that there is good and bad in all of us, that we must recognise the bad in ourselves and good in those who hate us.

That the true test is loving your enemy, he said, is “when the opportunity presents itself when you can defeat your enemy, you must not do it.”

All of us involved in the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement believed intuitively that agreement would only come about through compromise rather than the pursuit of victory, that inflicting defeat on erstwhile enemies would ultimately only serve to frustrate agreement. In divided peoples, victories are not solutions.

As nationalists, we challenged ourselves to find a way of giving primacy to peace, of accepting unionism for what it legitimately is, of accepting what is here now and working with it resiling from our aspirations as nationalists.

Our fellow unionist citizens were challenged to believe that they could indeed have a working relationship with all shades of nationalism, that they

did not have to fear nationalist, that they did not have to surrender or compromise essential and defining aspirations to find a working accommodation.

We were all challenged to believe in the transcendent value of the human being and the quality of life of our citizens. We were challenged at least to accept those whom we considered to be our enemy.

We were all challenged to believe that peace and harmony could ring out from steeples and churches of Protestants and Catholics, unionists and nationalists.

The peace and harmony could ring out from Catholic Churches in the Bogside and West Belfast as well as from Protestant Chapels and Baptist halls in Ballymena and East Belfast.

And we have given real meaning to peace.

The guns of the main protagonists are silent.

The oppressive expectation -bred over decades- of another atrocity has begun to lift. No more need I turn on the news with the certain dread of another headline telling of lives and limbs lost.

People can see the land of peace and concord just ahead. In the Good Friday Agreement, we have agreed our political relationship in our land.

Not all the dangers have passed.

The brutal bombing of Omagh last August reminds us that the tree of peace needs constant nourishment and vigilance, that there are still those who would seek to trample it down.

There are those who may see the promised land of peace and yet fear to enter it. Their courage must be fortified. How we reconcile those who demand decommissioning of weapons as the price of entry with those who reject that demand as a legally unwarranted precondition remains the last and perhaps greatest hurdle.

But I believe, as I have always believed, that we will overcome. This is not a trite evasion but a profound belief that we have come too far now in this

- peace process to go backwards.

Like American society writ large, Martin Luther King believed in the inexorability of progress. He believed, as he said, in the audacious future of mankind. History tends to wind a bit more circuitously in Europe but we have seen immense progress. We have moved from a Europe devastated by world wars to a Europe that now together has launched a unified currency. The Euro currency transcends national boundaries and welds together the sovereign interests and destinies of former combatant nations.

In Ireland, we suffered centuries of war, conquest and exploitation. Yet today Britain is a close partner joined in neighbourly relations with Ireland and both Governments are committed jointly to the pursuit of peace and justice.

In Northern Ireland, we have suffered the agonies of division and violence for a quarter of a century. Yet we have forged peace and mutual accommodation on key issues of sovereignty, government and mutual rights.

There were those who held that the aspirations of nationalist and unionists were so fundamentally at conflict that no progress could be made.

There were those who believed that there must be victory or defeat for one side only.

They had their reasons and their logic. But they did not have the passion for peace, for progress, for humanity, that confounds the logic of division and conflict. Those of us who sought peace never wavered in our passion for it, no matter how apparently unanswerable was the logic of conflict and division.

The agreement that we have achieved lays the foundation of lasting peace and stability. Central to it is Dr. Martin Luther King's philosophy of respect for difference. All conflict is about difference whether it is race, religion, or nationality. Difference is an accident of birth. Difference is the essence of humanity.

The answer to difference is to respect it, not to fight about it and to create democratic institutions which respect it and the rights of all the people and to ensure that they work together in their common interest, spilling their

sweat and not their blood. By doing so they will erode the distrust and divisions of centuries and the new society will evolve based on agreement and respect for difference.

They say no man is a prophet in his own land. It may be that no man is a prophet in his own time. As we bring this century to a close, we can rightly look back and see those who through their virtues are the moral giants of our time.

I believe that Martin Luther King was a prophet for the next millennium. I believe his passion for peace will yet outlive man's weakness for war. I believe with him that what we achieve in the future will happen not through the weapons of war honed in this century but through the moral force and wisdom which he embodied.

I am proud too have been honoured along with David Trimble with the Nobel Peace Prize. When Martin Luther King, Accepted the prize in 1964, he wondered why a movement struggling for civil rights had been awarded it in his name.

His answer crystallised his philosophy and encapsulated his inspiration for me.

I quote:

“After contemplation, I conclude that this award which I receive on behalf of that movement is profound recognition that non-violence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time- the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resort to violence and oppression.”

That core belief has informed everything I have done in my life. Like him, I believe profoundly in the creative force of peace.

I believe, as he did, that humanity must and will transcend the false gods of oppressive ideologies. They must weigh as nothing in the face of our common humanity, our common entitlements to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is with a tremendous sense of honour that I accept this award.

I do so in the name of all the peace-makers who have helped nourish the peace process and given it deep roots in the minds and hearts of all.

I do so in the name of the plain people of Ireland, North and South, nationalist and unionist, who never wavered in their commitment to peace and reconciliation.

On their behalf and on my own, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. With this award, you have helped water and nourish and strengthen the tree of peace in Ireland.

And as we move towards the new century and the new millennium, let us remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. Let us celebrate him and his philosophy and most importantly let us act to implement his philosophy.

We live in a global world. Human rights are universal. Violators of human rights and denials of human dignity diminish us all. Injustice and oppression, wherever it occurs, whoever is responsible, diminishes us all.

His dream can become a reality. Let us make sure that it does.

We shall overcome.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John Hume". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

John Hume MP MEP