

Speech by John Hume

The Patrick Mc Gill Summer School

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This is perhaps an appropriate moment to reflect and to take stock of our recent history in the last century and to try and identify the challenges of this century. Although it is essential that we put our tragic history behind us, it is important to see where we are coming from as we search for the paths to follow in the future. Although I am going to begin with a retrospective analysis my real objective is prospective – look at the problems we are going to face in future decades. Those who fail to understand the past are condemned to repeat it.

As we are now at the beginning of the new century and the new millennium the major challenge to us is to leave behind our past of quarrel and to build a new Ireland together, an Ireland that will fully respect the rights of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter and will channel our energy into working together. It is naturally hoped that particularly since we are living in a much smaller world today, because of the technological, telecommunication and transport revolution of the century we have just left, people across the world are closer together and therefore it is naturally hoped that war and conflict in the world will also be left behind.

In that regard the century that we have just left will go down as one of the worst in the history of the world. In the first half of the century there were two world wars involving the main countries of Europe and 35 million people lost their lives and in addition there was all the evils of imperialism.

When we look at conflict, no matter where it has been as I have repeatedly said, it has always been about the same thing, about difference, whether the difference was nationality, race or religion. The time has come to learn that humanity transcends difference, that the essence of humanity is difference. There are not two human beings who are the same, humanity is clearly richer for difference and the answer to difference is to respect it, not to fight about it. The time has come for our respect for our common humanity. That is a lesson that was powerfully learned in the second half of the century which we have just left and is reflected in the creation of European Union the greatest example in the history of the world of conflict resolution, which should therefore be studied in every area of conflict and its principles applied. As I have already said, all conflict is about difference and the answer to difference is to respect it. The principles at the heart of the European Union are the principles at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. I will return to that.

By 1970, it had become apparent that a new political party was necessary. With other like-minded people, I became a founder member of the SDLP. Although we had few illusions that we were taking on a difficult task. Our purpose was to try and get beyond the sterile conflict between nationalism and unionism within Northern Ireland. It was necessary to work towards reconciliation within Northern Ireland by focussing on the real economic and social issues that tend to bring people together rather than divide them. Economic development and jobs, housing, health and educational provision were issues that existing parties had little interest in. By working on such problems, we hoped to challenge the sectarian divisions in our society. At the same time, we believed that it was important to put Northern Ireland into a wider context, Anglo-Irish, European and international.

Anglo – Irish, so that the British and Irish governments confronted their responsibilities and worked together to bring about an accommodation within these islands. European – so that Ireland, including Northern Ireland, would be part of the emerging united Europe. International, so that we could draw on the support and influence of the Irish diaspora in North America and elsewhere. Above all, we wanted to build an Ireland without sectarian divisions, bring our society in the European mainstream

and create an economy capable of providing decent jobs and living conditions for all our people, irrespective of politics and religion.

The key concept in our thinking was the need for an agreed Ireland.

Essentially this meant (and means) finding a political agreement that would allow unionists and nationalists to find a way to share the island of Ireland ensuring that the political and cultural rights and aspirations of all are respected. Much to our frustration we had to wait until 1998 and the Good Friday Agreement to see the framework of an agreed Ireland put in place.

Historians will ultimately have to decide how successful we have been in achieving our aims. But I would like to point out a few factors that any objective analysis of our success or failure must take into account.

Through participation in the political system at all levels, we have put Northern Ireland on the political map. In Westminster, Strasbourg and Washington, we have been consistently constructive. We have put forward political ideas and innovation in Northern Ireland for three decades. We pioneered the concept of power – sharing in local government, something that all parties now find normal. We have gained political and material support of the EU and the US of bringing about an

end to the conflict. Our ideological influence on the substance of the Good Friday Agreement is self-evident.

In dealing with our problem in Northern Ireland throughout the past 30 years the SDLP has been the one party that has been totally consistent. The problem hasn't changed, didn't change and therefore our approach to resolving it did not change either. We argued that there were two mindsets and both had to change. The Unionist and Nationalist mindsets. The Unionists wished to protect their identity and their ethos and we had no quarrel with that, they not only had every right to protect their identity, it is absolutely essential to resolving our problem that their identity was fully protected and respected. It was their methods that we quarrelled with, holding all power in their own hands. The system in their Northern Ireland was to exclude anyone who was not a Unionist and this of course led to very widespread discrimination in jobs, housing and voting rights. Our challenge to Unionists was to recognise that because of their geography and their numbers the problem cannot be resolved without them therefore they should come to a table and reach an agreement that would fully respect their identity. They did.

The Nationalist mindset had to change as well. Our challenge to that mindset was that it was people that had rights not territory, that without

people any piece of earth is only a jungle. It was the people of Ireland that were divided, not the territory and therefore agreement was the only solution. The logic of the challenge in that mindset as well was that since it was the people of Ireland that were divided violence had not only no role to play in solving the problem it only deepened the divisions and made the problem worse. The line on the map is only a symptom of a much deeper border, the real border which is in the minds and hearts of people. That cannot be solved by either victory or violence, it requires agreement.

The changes that we argued for in both mindsets therefore work towards the same objective - agreement. In preparation for such agreement of course there had to be a clear definition of the problem that was to be resolved. Again the SDLP was consistent throughout the troubles. Therefore our analysis of the problem and our strategy for resolving it remained consistent.

The people of Ireland were divided we argued on three sets of relationships - relations with Northern Ireland, relations within Ireland and the relations between Britain and Ireland. The logic of that analysis therefore was that in any talks aimed at reaching agreement, those three sets of relationships should be the agenda and the talks should therefore

involve both governments as well as the Northern Ireland parties. It is now of course taken for granted that the two governments working together to solve the Northern Ireland problem and their close working together is very welcome but it took a considerable number of years to bring that about since for many years the British Governments refused to engage in dialogue about Northern Ireland with the Irish Government because of their argument that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom. In our approach to getting the two governments to work together our American contacts were very valuable. Indeed Senators Kennedy and Moynihan, Speaker Tip O'Neill and Governor Hugh Carey, known as the four horsemen, got President Jimmy Carter to make the first ever statement by an American President on Northern Ireland when he called on the two governments to work together on solving Northern Ireland if so they would get economic support from the United States. We in the SDLP were engaged on a campaign to get both governments working together.

Given that our analysis of the problem was the three sets of relationships, its was logical to pursue such a strategy and indeed we published a policy document in April 1981 which is very similar to the Anglo - Irish agreement of 1985 an agreement which in my opinion was the first major

step in what is now called the peace process and that first major step was underlined in article one of that agreement.

- (a) “The two governments affirm that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland;
- (b) Recognise that the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland is for no change in the status of Northern Ireland;
- (c) Declare that, if in the future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland, they will introduce and support in the respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish;”

It was very significant that the Irish government was accepting the principle of consent. When the SDLP was founded we made clear in our constitution that we would be seeking the unity of the people of Ireland but given that it was the people that were divided true unity could only come about by agreement and therefore required the consent of the Northern majority.

That is a principle that was very central to our consistent strategy and is now accepted by the whole of nationalist Ireland. That is a major

development that the anti agreement unionists don't seem to have noticed.

We in the SDLP also proposed that with any agreement reached, the last word would be with the people and not with the politicians and we proposed the joint referendum. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland have therefore given their consent to the Good Friday Agreement. The anti agreement Unionists should realise that if they were to succeed in overthrowing the Good Friday Agreement they are overthrowing the principle of consent which is the fundamental principle of Unionism.

What was however crucially important in the peace process was article 1c which the SDLP worked to achieve. In discussions with the Thatcher government we made the point that the consistent position of British Government had been that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the UK because a majority so wished. We asked them what would be the case if a majority of them wanted Irish unity. Would they agree to it? The reason that I put forward this proposal was that it was dealing with the traditional reason for violence given by the IRA, that the British were in Ireland defending their economic and strategic interests by force and therefore the Irish had the right to use force to put them out. Once article

It was published in the Anglo Irish Agreement that was the first step in what is now called the peace process.

In my statement welcoming the Anglo-Irish agreement I pointed out that the British government now had declared their neutrality on the future of Northern Ireland. That Irish Unity was therefore a matter for those who wanted it to persuade those who didn't and it would therefore remove the traditional IRA reasons for violence.

My statement on the neutrality and call for an end to violence led some time later to a request to meet with Sinn Fein and it led to the talks with Gerry Adams.

The traditional reason given by the IRA for the use of violence were that the British were in Ireland defending their own interests by force and they were preventing the Irish people from exercising the right to self determination. My response in talks was that while Irish people have the right to self-determination, they were divided on how that right should be exercised. If the Irish people are defined by all of the people who live on the Island, violence or physical force was not a solution, it would only deepen the division. Agreement was the necessary solution.

On the other reason, I argued that the British did not have any economic or strategic reason for being in Ireland. Basically as our dialogue took place I was asked to prove those points as it would lead to a cease fire. My response in agreement with Gerry Adams was to get a declaration from both governments making these points. Such a declaration would lead to an end to violence followed by all party talks with both governments whose objective would be to get an agreement that would have the allegiance of both sections of our community.

I kept both the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister privately informed of my talks with Gerry Adams and I worked for a considerable period of time to agree a proposed joint statement to be put to both governments and, of course, I worked in constant contact with the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, until we finally reached agreement on a proposed joint declaration and he fully briefed his successor Albert Reynolds on this detail and Albert Reynolds and John Major eventually made the Downing Street Declaration which led to an end to violence and to the talks process that led to the Good Friday Agreement.

I have already said that the European Union is the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution and that the principles of the European Union are at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. All conflict, as I have said is about difference whether it is nationality, race or

religion. The answer to difference therefore is to respect it, not fight about it. It is an accident of birth and should and never be the source of hatred or conflict. Respect for difference is therefore the first principle of European Union. It is also the first principle of the Good Friday Agreement because both identities are respected and there is no victory for either side. The second principle of European Union has institutions that respect difference - a council of ministers, a civil service commission drawn from all countries and a parliament drawn from all countries. That principle is also central to the Good Friday Agreement, an assembly and an executive both elected by proportional representation to ensure that all sections of our people are represented and councils of ministers for both Irish and British relationships. The third principle of European Union is that the representatives of the different countries work together on their common interests, largely economic. That is in effect what I have called the healing process because by working together they have left behind the distrusts and prejudices of the past and the new Europe has evolved and is still evolving and the French are still French and the Germans are still German. That third principle is also the third principle of our Good Friday Agreement and indeed in many ways it is most important one because of the healing process. As our public representatives work together in our common interests we will erode the distrust and the prejudices of the past and a new Ireland will evolve based on agreement

and respect for difference. That is the real solution. It won't happen in a day or a week, it won't happen by revolution, it will happen by evolution.

It is interesting that these are also principles which are central to the philosophy of Presbyterianism. When Wolfe Tone outlined the philosophy of true republicanism - unite Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter - it was logical that there is no way that they could be united by guns and bombs but only by the maintenance of equality and respect for difference. The true unity of people can only be based on agreement. That is the challenge that now faces us and as I have said before it is a philosophy that goes to the heart of Presbyterianism. As I said here in Glenties in 1987 "It is worth noting that the constitution of the United States had a substantial input in its drafting by Irish Presbyterians, people whose immediate past memory was that they had been driven from Ireland by religious intolerance. It is not surprising that the central principle of the constitution was the recognition that the essence of unity was the acceptance of diversity - e pluribus unum. That is the central principle which has given peace and stability to every democratic state in the world today although its acceptance in the US Constitution was heavily influenced by the experiences of the Irish Presbyterians. The tragedy is that it is a

principle, whatever about the rhetoric of the lip service, that has never really been put into practices in Ireland itself and certainly not by Irish Presbyterians. The challenge to all of us for the future is whether or not that principle is going to be both accepted and implemented.

Without it there will be no peace or stability and we will continue as we have done in the past - not to accept difference but to push it to the point of division with all its tragic consequences. That challenge faces us starkly on the streets of the North today for what is happening there is happening because of our failure and the failure of all of those involved to accommodate our differences.”

As we face the new century we meet the challenge to build the new Ireland together and it should be easier for us in today's smaller world because our experiences of that smaller world underlines to us that our difference are a lot less that they might be with other identities. Indeed if French and Germans, given their past, can work together in Europe with other peoples of Europe on their common interests can we not do likewise with one another on this island. As we do so the healing process will be taking place, the prejudice and distrust of the past will be eroded and the new Ireland will evolve based on agreement and respect for difference between Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, true republicanism - something we have never had in Ireland and of course the common

ground that we will work together will be our socio-economic development and as we succeed in that field give real hope to our young people. As we do so in today's smaller world as well we can become one of the most influential peoples in the smaller world. The reason for this is that in the past the people from this island, because of regular emigration, became one of the biggest wandering peoples in the world. There are over 70 million people in other countries of the world of Irish decent and in today's smaller world we should be able to harness that strength for the benefit of the island as a whole particularly in the economic sphere.

In our smaller world of our new century the harnessing of that strength could be of enormous benefit, but let it also be a century in which we harness the total strength of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter by leaving behind the out of date quarrels of our past and working together with total respect. Let us put into practice the Presbyterian philosophy that is written on American coins and on the grave of Abraham Lincoln – e pluribus unum - from many we are one, the essence of our unity is our respect for our diversity.

Obviously the principal purpose of the institutions of an agreed Ireland must address themselves to overcoming the causes and the consequences of the conflict. The economic and social disruption of the last thirty years must

be tackled. Economic and social reconstruction is the top priority. It is our common ground. While our economy has clearly advanced since 1994, we have not shared the experience of the Celtic Tiger. We still have unacceptable levels of unemployment and poverty. We do not have the industrial and commercial structure typical of a highly developed country. We are still heavily dependent on agriculture. We have a serious problem in terms of the educational and technical qualifications of a large part of the population. The problems of the victims of the Troubles are also a matter of concern. The Assembly and Executive have made a good start, but we need an intensive period, without political interruptions, of work by the institutions for the foreseeable future.

But we also have to recognise that the world has not stood still while the conflict continued in Northern Ireland. One of our ambitions in setting up the SDLP was to make ourselves part of the European mainstream, with equivalent economic and social conditions, But Europe and the rest of the world has moved on. When I was first elected to the European Parliament, the EU consisted of nine countries, nine markets, and nine sets of borders.

In the 15 member Europe of today, there is a single market and in most of Europe there are no controls on the frontiers between the member states. The European Institutions have a degree of power, responsibility and public recognition that would not have been imagined back then. And for all the difficulties and problems, Europe is the largest and most successful economic and political block in the world. Our combination of a dynamic market economy and the welfare state is one of the greatest achievements in the history of civilisation.

The most frustrating aspect of our politics has been the knowledge that we have been dealing with political issues that our European colleagues settled decades earlier. All the time that political leaders in Northern Ireland spent dealing with our conflict was time that our European counterparts were busy enhancing social and economic conditions in their countries, and adapting their countries to the massive economic and social changes of the last three decades. At last, I hope that our political leaders will be able to concentrate on the economic and social agenda. **For that agenda is massive.**

The technological transformations of recent decades have profound implications. They are creating a much more interdependent and smaller world. While the world has always been diverse, that fact is now much clearer to the ordinary citizen. Ireland, for example, which was an exporter of people for centuries is now an importer of people. That is welcome, as all dynamic societies attract people from outside, and should be regarded as a sign of success. That means that there will be new perspectives on society and new ways of doing things. Exclusivist cultures have always been condemned to decline. The fact that our island is attracting people is a sign that we have a future.

Technology also means that the levels of knowledge and skills required to participate in labour markets and indeed in citizenship are much higher than at any time in the past. Our new Ireland will have to ensure that our citizens are prepared for the demands a working lifetime will put upon them.

Above all, technology is the basis for globalisation. I do not believe that we can hold back the tide of globalisation. What we can do, is to ensure that this transformation takes place to the benefit of humanity rather than as a new form of imperialism or exploitation.

With our own experience and connections around the world, I would like to see our administrations North and South working together to ensure that free trade around the world becomes fair trade. As a relatively deprived region in Europe, we can only benefit from effective management of the forthcoming changes in the commercial structure of the world. Despite our domestic problems, it is in our own interests that the agreed Ireland is an outward-looking Ireland.

An agreed Ireland will also have to face the challenges posed by the enlargement and reform of the European Union. Membership of the EU has been highly positive for both parts of the island. The support shown by our EU colleagues has been extremely welcome and encouraging. But the EU is now going through its own major changes in which through the institutions of the Agreement both parts of our island can play an active role. For example, one of the most attractive features of the EU is the equality of status of the different member states. That is a critically important attribute that we must protect as the EU expands into Eastern and Central Europe and the Mediterranean. Democracy and diversity cannot be sacrificed to those who would undermine it on the pretext of rationalisation and efficiency. The EU is always going to be complicated as indeed are our institutions. But democracy is complicated.

I hope I have managed to convey to you something of the scope of the achievements that have been brought about over the last thirty years. But at the same time, it is essential to focus on the future and recognise that there is no room for complacency. The 21st century will hopefully be a much more peaceful one than the previous one. But it will also demand political commitment and imagination as we seek to guarantee our peaceful and prosperous new and agreed Ireland.