

**Speech by Mr. John Hume, MP, MEP, on receiving the  
Mahatma Gandhi Peace Prize, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2002**

Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, distinguished guests,

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century India gave the world a Master fit to follow in the footsteps of so many Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Christian, and other saints. As well as being a seeker after Truth, Gandhi-ji was a political leader ranking with Ashok and Akbar.

My wife Pat and I are deeply aware of the honour done to us by the decision of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the other members of the selection committee for the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Prize. But today is not only a highlight in our lives. For all of us, today is an opportunity to ask a question. Will Gandhi's political ideas contribute to the future structure of our world?

Let me begin with my own country, Ireland.

In doing so, I feel history at my shoulder. One hundred years ago to this day, Gandhi-ji was staying in the home of Gopal Gokhale in Calcutta. Gokhale had visited Ireland a few years previously. With his friends he had arranged for a member of the Irish Party, Alfred Webb, to serve as President of the Tenth Indian National Congress. It is recorded by Webb that Gokhale's knowledge of Irish history was superior to that of many members of the Irish Party itself. So it is safe to assume that a century ago, as those two friends in Calcutta discussed the future of India, the word *swaraj* was mentioned, and with it, the name of Ireland.

In our small island, as in this great sub-continent, political change was an untidy business. In Ireland as in India, there were divisions that led to partition, and a continuing legacy of pain. The Northern Ireland in which I grew up was a divided society. No one from my background could be in any doubt about the characteristics of the problem. The question was what to do about it.

From the late 1960s on, some of us resolved to seek a fundamental change in our circumstances through peaceful, political means. That was and is the purpose of the political party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, that it was my privilege to lead until a few months ago. In the SDLP we recognise that in situations of conflict all of us carry a burden imposed on us by the past and must help one another cast off that burden. Our differences of religion and politics are accidental: none of us chose to be born. It is our goal to share the future with those who seem at first potential opponents. We reject the logic of the zero-sum game.

It follows therefore that the key to a successful society is to acknowledge and respect difference and to have institutions that enable us to work together. As I have said in more speeches than I can remember, let us not shed one another's blood but shed our sweat together. To arrive at stable and co-operative relationships within enduring institutions, it is not enough for Governments and parties to follow the currents of expediency, and respond to acts of violence that may have - as we see sometimes on our streets - an escapist or even addictive character. The Agreement that we have struggled to achieve has an organising principle, a principle ultimately subject to an objective test: that is, the principle of equality. For my party, equality in the sense of parity of esteem must be underpinned over time by material equality.

In the long run, however, it is not enough for us to respect differences and set up functioning institutions. We must aim higher, at a transformation of hearts and a healing process. In situations of conflict, some of the parties are first in denial - acting out a pretence, for example, that there is no injustice and that differences are a product of the false consciousness of others. The point of breakthrough is when we move from denial to the acceptance of compromise. But the rational acceptance of a need to compromise is a fragile and eventually fruitless state of mind. We must move on from acceptance to affirmation. To take our own case, within Northern Ireland, across the border in Ireland, among all the peoples of Ireland and Britain, we are learning to affirm a quality of earned friendship. It is something we can try to share with others going through a resolution of inherited historical pain.

One of the ways in which I came to my personal understanding of politics is through my love of France and French culture and my sense that France and Germany have overcome a terrible historical legacy through the shared institutions of the European Union. Europe was not always made up of nation states. Like this continent, it was at one time an area of shared culture in which political allegiances took multiple forms. As a member of the European Parliament I am a witness to the re-emergence of a Europe in which the territorially based nation State is no longer the sole unit of measurement and questions of sovereignty and territorial definition have been to a degree "relativised".

Let us put this in perspective for a moment. In the first half of the twentieth century, in two World Wars, 35 million people were killed. In the second half of the twentieth century, men and women of vision created the European Union, which apart from many other things is the world's most notable example of conflict resolution. Can anyone anywhere who is serious about the resolution of conflict ignore this example before their eyes?

Future historians will identify the European Union as part of the background to the Northern Ireland settlement - just as the Europe of geopolitical rivalry formed the background to some of our earlier tragedies. Future historians will see that the main features of the European Union and the main features of the Good Friday Agreement are parallel - respect for difference, common institutions, a healing process.

I am speaking in the presence of the Prime Minister of India so let me borrow from him a phrase. Both the European Union and the Good Friday Agreement have been conceived within the framework of humanity.

Europe was an important influence on me and my party. But before that, there was Gandhi-ji. When Gandhi died, I had just completed my eleven-plus examinations. I was old enough for India and Gandhi to form part of my mental furniture, long before I could imagine any other country beyond Ireland, Britain, and North America. As a young man in the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, I was a follower of Martin Luther King. Behind King, there again was Gandhi-ji.

For me and my colleagues, in the generation that bore the wounds of two great European wars, it was easy to hear Gandhi's words. As we defined our political strategy of non-violence, respect for difference, and working together in the common interest, we found ourselves giving expression to something resembling the Gandhian conception of *satyagraha*.

Above all my colleagues and I, working in a divided society, were opposed utterly to the use of violence. People not territory have rights. Difference is the essence of humanity. No two people are the same. Where differences have led to estrangement, the use of violence estranges us further, digs the ditch deeper. Gandhi-ji taught me - it has been etched in my mind at every turn of my political life - that the doctrine of an eye for an eye leaves us all blind.

In a famous speech in 1920 to the Friends of Freedom for India in New York, Eamon De Valera stated, "The great moral forces of the world are with India." By this De Valera meant that the day of empire was passing, and that independence for India, as for Ireland, should serve the wider purposes of humanity. Another President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, had a similar instinct when she recalled here in the Rashtrapati Bhavan in November that the World Conference Against Racism had been held in the very city in which Gandhi launched his non-violent movement against discrimination. "In a very real sense," Mary Robinson said, "I feel that the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi was with us, as the international community addressed for the first time the impact of slavery and colonialism on racism and intolerance right

through into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

I have no doubt that at the level of world politics, Gandhi has helped to shape our goals. But even more fundamentally he has helped us to understand the relationship between ends and means. Too often we are tempted to fall back on the utilitarian principle that the end justifies the means. Mahatma Gandhi turned this around. The ideas of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* suggest that it is the quality of the means - including our readiness to suffer for good ends but not to inflict suffering on others - that provide the justification of the ends. Gandhi's choice of means is natural in a world that is growing smaller. Gandhian methods are the counterpart to the purposes of the United Nations: peace and disarmament, human development, human rights, and the strengthening of international law.

In Northern Ireland and other situations of conflict we have seen how acts of violence within the confines of a community sow seeds of mistrust that can destabilise a society through time. That is to say, we have become more sensitive to the consequences of actions - to the subtle and unpredictable connections between human lives. I am tempted to compare this insight to some of our scientific discoveries. In medicine, for example, we are learning that malnutrition in the young over a couple of generations can lead to genetic defects, in the form of greater exposure in certain populations to the risk of disease.

This more sophisticated understanding of causation is relevant to the debate underway both in the European Union and in India on security policy. What do we mean when we talk about security or strategy? How much do we invest in the ability to project power and how much in education, development and dialogue?

We all know that the Mahatma wanted India to avoid simply copying a paradigm on offer from the existing world powers. I believe that Gandhi would have wanted us to measure with the greatest possible care the actual consequences of military action of any kind - not just the immediate deaths, unacceptable as these are, but the displacement of persons, the diversion of resources, the erosion of legal standards and psychological inhibitions, the loss of political opportunities, the “dragon's teeth” of hatred that may lead to future conflict. Gandhi did not apply in his own life the calculus of ends versus means. But to those who do, his advice would have been - at least as I see it - “Beware the short-term view, beware of overvaluing your ends and underestimating your costs.”

Gandhi was close to the poor. I recall his famous “*talisman*” and his statement that “*real swaraj* will come by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority

when it is abused". That is another contribution Gandhi-ji brings to our modern world of widening inequality. For him, our political strategies must address the plight of the less fortunate and the dispossessed not as a by-product of, or sub-text within, some overall formula for success but directly. I am struck by a metaphor employed by a modern Gandhian writer, Arundhati Roy. Roy identifies our tendency to give great weight to the concerns and sufferings of some groups while we fail even to see or measure the sufferings of others. An equation of this kind she eloquently describes as a kind of moral algebra.

In sum, I will answer my opening question in the words of Martin Luther King:

"Gandhi was inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony."

As an Irishman in India, I must acknowledge the presence among us today of one group in particular, namely the teachers working at a number of the schools in Delhi of Irish origin.

In Ireland, beside our peace process, we have also in the past decade seen a tremendous flourishing of the economy on both sides of the border. One consequence of this is our growing interaction with India in the sphere of IT. I am proud to say that the Hume family is part of this. One of our daughters is a lecturer in this field and has worked in Bangalore. A very important source of what we call the "Celtic Tiger" has been the dedicated work of teachers, often religious sisters and brothers, in every corner of Ireland. This feature of Irish life has appeared in India as well. One of the most moving of the many links between our island and India has been the stream of teachers who have crossed the oceans to India over two centuries, often leaving home forever, in the hope that they would help to make a better world. Most of the Irish teachers are gone but their institutions flourish. I am convinced that Gandhi-ji would salute all the teachers of India as the practitioners of a particular form of *satyagraha*.

I also want to recall here those who have been my colleagues in the peace process. One of the discoveries of my long political career is that in a peace process that works, the number of heroes extends itself again and again. A Prime Minister in Dublin or London, a President in Washington, the leaders of political parties - we are the most visible actors. But think too of the militant who sticks his neck out and argues for an end to killing, the policeman who risks his life in the course of duty, the journalist who struggles to be fair, a Minister of the calibre of Mo Mowlam, a

spouse like my Pat and all the other spouses - the list of those who have played their part is almost endless. So many have kept faith. So many have paid a price.

What I leave to last is the question that I, perhaps, am not the best person to answer: what does Gandhi mean for India today?

Let me offer two thoughts. First, as a visitor to India I am struck by the robustness of democracy, the freedom of the press and the quality of the writing, the coalition of cultures, the social programme represented by the Constitution, the rootedness of so many different traditions of faith, the activism of so many men and women on behalf of good causes. In all of this the legacy of the Mahatma seems to play its part.

Second, I believe that Gandhi, looking round him today, would see a number of areas in which he would want to see the spiritual depth in the peoples of this region harnessed as a transforming energy - and not least in the troubled relationship with Pakistan.

We have seen in this generation a transformation in relationships within our two islands of Ireland and Britain. Dialogue and partnership have replaced alienation. If there is anything we can share of value, we are more than ready to do so. What I am certain of is that change is possible. I will end on the words of my friend the poet Seamus Heaney:

"History says, don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme".

### Note

*swaraj*: self-rule  
*satyagraha*: action to affirm truth  
*ahimsa*: non-violence