

Speech by John Hume MP MEP

Smile to the World

Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2002

Lord Mayor, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to be with you here this afternoon to join in the unveiling of the 'Smile to the World' banner.

I want to thank both Brian Cumiskey and Kevin Farrell for the invitation to address today's event. Moreover, I want to congratulate them for the imagination and innovation they have shown in dreaming up and delivering this unique project.

I am deeply impressed by the colour and the imagery in this wonderful banner. But even more, I am truly inspired by the message of hope it will send to all those people throughout Ireland, in the United States and beyond who will see it in the coming weeks and months.

In acknowledging this achievement today, I want to pay special tribute to the 130, 000 children from every part of Ireland who took part in this project. They have all made a very worthwhile contribution and they all deserve our gratitude and congratulations.

But congratulations are not enough. It is much more important that our children and young people are listened to. They have the right to expect that the ideals of hope, reconciliation and healing conveyed through

this banner be upheld, not just for themselves and their own generation but for all the world and all generations.

I believe we can see clearly expressed in this banner the hopes and aspirations that this new generation, the first of a new century, holds out for their communities, their country and for the wider world.

We can see as well that our children possess a deep understanding and appreciation of the values that many other people take for granted or fail to uphold at times. We can see clearly that our children favour the values of peace over war, friendship over hatred, respect for difference over intolerance.

It is the most appalling indictment of this society when young children are brought up to hate others simply because of their religion, skin colour, background - because they are different.

I have said consistently throughout my involvement in public life that difference is a natural and healthy component of any progressive society and that it should never be abused to instil fear or to inflict suffering.

It is utterly wrong and indefensible to teach our children that hatred towards another human being is acceptable. It is wrong to allow them to believe that sectarianism, racism, bigotry and intolerance are justifiable. It is wrong as well to accept that such sentiments are the inevitable consequences of modern society because they are not.

No child is born with hatred in its heart and as a society and as a country we owe it to all children to make sure they can grow up in an environment that encourages the values we see in full colour here today. We all have a role to play in achieving this objective. We must dedicate ourselves to encouraging our children to embrace the noble ideas of cherishing diversity, promoting genuine equality and developing mutual understanding.

We must not settle for what is, rather we must work to achieve what ought to be.

In this country we must not settle for an imperfect peace or for an acceptable level of violence. We must work instead to fulfil the promise of the Agreement and bring about an end to all violence and to the causes of all violence.

In the wider world we must work to bring to an end the appalling practise of using young children as soldiers in war, a fact that was chillingly illustrated in a recent report from Amnesty International. We must implement policies that will address the poverty in the third world in radical and imaginative ways. We must grow to understand that we in the developed world have a much greater role in addressing the inequalities in this world than we have previously acknowledged.

These children here today, along with children throughout this land, have high hopes. They deserve leadership from those of us in positions

of responsibility that can bring about a society where the fulfilment of their dreams can be limited only by the limitations of their own creativity and imagination.

In Ireland today, the first generation of a new century is growing up in an atmosphere of greater expectation than any generation before. In the North especially, hopes for a better future were renewed through the Good Friday Agreement. These hopes now need to be sustained and fulfilled by making the Agreement work for all the people.

The Agreement has provided us with a vehicle to ensure that we can all live in peace, partnership and prosperity. But we should not take the Agreement for granted. I believe the parties that represent all the people of Ireland must reaffirm our commitment to the Agreement, not threaten to walk away from it.

Thankfully, the children of today do not remember the worst of the troubles, although we need to recognise that for some the worst residues of violence are not memories but real experiences in their everyday lives. We must do more to help these children, their families and their communities, who are living in an atmosphere of constant fear and intimidation.

These communities are being held to ransom by a small minority whose negative agenda has been challenged by the positive working of the Agreement. It should make perfect sense, therefore, that we must all

keep challenging the wreckers by making sure the Agreement prevails and making it work for every section of the community. We must make it clear to all that the sectarianism and bigotry of a past generation cannot and must not be allowed to pollute the hopes of a new one.

Through the Agreement, we are working to transform our society, not just in the North but throughout the whole of the island. We have developed and are now working new partnerships that are creating new opportunities in which we can all share.

Opportunities for sustained economic growth that provides employment and prevents poverty for all people.

Opportunities to protect the fundamental human rights and uphold the different identities of all people.

Opportunities to develop new partnerships and understandings among all people in ways that will leave the tragedy of our past behind us.

At present, there are some who are predicting the demise of the Agreement and the collapse of the political process. To them I simply say this:

The Good Friday Agreement is the democratically expressed will of the people of this island. It is an historic compromise endorsed nationally and supported internationally that has set our country on the path to

unbreakable peace and unstoppable opportunity. It is a beacon of hope for other areas of conflict around the world.

All democrats and people who cherish peace and justice are duty bound to do all in our power to protect and fully implement the Agreement.

There are some others who are calling for the Agreement to be re-negotiated. To them I ask this:

With whom are you going to negotiate a new agreement? How are you going to deliver an agreement that can win the support of the entire community, unionist and nationalist alike, in the way that the Good Friday Agreement did? If you are so committed to a process of negotiation that can lead to an agreement, why did you walk away from the negotiating process that brought about the Good Friday Agreement in the first place?

It is time for those who talk about re-negotiating the Agreement to live in the real world with the rest of us and get on with the job that the overwhelming majority of the people want to see their political leaders do.

And there are still others who believe that violence can bring about the change they desire. Whether these people are loyalists or republicans, they should be in no doubt whatsoever that the overwhelming majority of the people of this island, North and South, have totally opposed

violence for more than thirty years and will continue to do so for the next thirty.

Those who supported and perpetrated violence over the past thirty years cannot now justify or glorify their actions. Equally, those who carry out acts of violence today – more than four years after the people solidly rejected violence in the referendum - can neither be permitted to justify their actions nor seek legitimacy by claiming to carry them out on behalf of their community.

If the history of the past three decades has taught us anything, it is that violence serves only to deepen divisions and perpetuate conflict. Its total brutality is matched only by its utter futility.

Political parties and paramilitary groupings whose shared objective is the destruction of the Agreement are trying to undermine the most basic principles of democracy and extinguish the most basic right of all people to live in peace and freedom.

But they will not succeed. The Agreement – and the will of the people of Ireland – is stronger than their will for destruction. The people of Northern Ireland have stepped out from underneath the dark shadow of the past thirty years. Ahead of us lies the daylight of new and better politics. The people's will to embrace that new politics is stronger too than the capacity for destruction of the wreckers. And I am certain that it

is strong enough as well to withstand the strains and stresses of political difficulty, come what may.

There are of course times when it would be easier for us all to allow ourselves to become dispirited and disillusioned, when it would be easier to just turn away from challenge and difficulty and choose instead to walk the path of comfort.

But on an occasion such as this we can really see in crystal clear focus what our responsibilities are, not just to ourselves and to each other, but to our children and future generations.

That is why I remain totally committed to the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement for all the people. It is our best hope for the present. It is your best hope for the future.

That is why I remain totally committed to achieving a new and better Ireland in which all people are guaranteed dignity and opportunity in an atmosphere of stability and peace.

That is why, I believe, we must all dedicate ourselves at the beginning of the twenty first century to the causes of lasting peace, an end to poverty and genuine equality for all the people of the world regardless of their colour, creed or continent.



These are my hopes today. I know they are the hopes of the children of this land. Let us deliver them for all children in all lands.