

Remarks by John Hume MP MEP

Manchester Irish Festival

Gala Opening

Manchester Town Hall, Saturday 8th March 2003

Lord Mayor, Councillors, Members of the Festival Committee, Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Co-chairs of the Festival for this invitation to officially open the 2003 Manchester Irish Festival and to address you all here this evening in this fine venue, Manchester Town Hall.

Manchester, of course, is a city that has very strong roots with Ireland and with Irish people. This city is synonymous with football and many Irish children have heard of Manchester long before they can locate it on a map. The culture of this city penetrates thousands of Irish homes a number of times a week as families sit down to follow the latest goings on in Coronation Street. Every year, hundreds of young Irish people cross the water to study in this city's fine institutions of learning and each day hundreds pass through Manchester Airport, often on their way to other parts of the world. In many ways, this city of Manchester is a link between the people of Ireland and Britain and between all of us and the rest of the world.

And in a special way, the Irish community here embodies that link. This festival is a celebration of that link and of the contribution that the Irish community has made to this city and to this country. I know that it has not always been easy to be Irish in Britain. Indeed, the events of the past 30 years have too often made it difficult to be identified as Irish in this land. Despite this, and despite all the difficulties and obstacles which have been faced, the Irish community in Manchester has maintained its identity, contributed to the community in so many different ways and looks forward to the future now with great confidence and hope.

This festival tells its own story, and that story is a microcosm of the success of those who have built it. Still only in its eighth year, this festival has now become the largest in the UK, attracting a complement of acts and artists the envy of many such events. Such is its standing now that last year it was the subject of a six-part series for Granada TV. A cursory glance at past visitors to stage and street for the festival shows a vibrant mix, a combination of the finest Irish traditions in song, dance, art and sport and the talents and confidence of our young people.

This year's festival boasts an impressive array of over 200 events, from big names to community events and children's workshops. I am only sorry that I can not be here with you to enjoy them all. While the higher profile events attract their own publicity, it is the participation of the community, and the festival's evident commitment to it, that shows the true worth of the festival.

Of course, it is appropriate that I am here to join with you in a celebration of our patron saint, St. Patrick - a man who was himself from this island. So many of the finest traditions of Ireland began with the arrival of St. Patrick and other missionaries. The church that they established led to a golden age of Irish civilisation, in literature, craft and learning. It is apt, then, that through communities such as this, Ireland gives something back to the island which gave us our patron saint.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Irish World Heritage Centre here in Manchester, so involved in the organisation of this festival, for the delivery of the Irish Diaspora Museum and grant every good wish for its future development. The Diaspora is a vital and vibrant part of the Irish nation, and such a magnificent facility will be of use and interest into the future not just to those in Manchester, but to Irish people and others from across the world who share an interest in that story. For the story of the Irish Diaspora is, in many ways, one without precedent in the history of the world. Never before has so small a country given so much to so much of the world. I know that you will build here a suitable testament to that tale. A place where the contribution Irish people will make around the world in the future will be celebrated and shared.

In some ways, the appreciation of the Diaspora that has grown so much in recent years has been made possible by the development of a new Ireland. An Ireland which is well on the way to peace. An Ireland which has put an end to emigration - where now our young people leave to learn and to gain experiences which they can

contribute to Ireland upon their future return. An Ireland which is mature, confident and outward-looking. As we look out, we see our Diaspora spread out across the world. A beacon of our heritage and of our values.

That confident, new Ireland is built upon dialogue and the principle of respect for diversity. As we gather here tonight, the world faces the distinct possibility of conflict. I would like to share one thought with you all at this time. We in Ireland have dealt with conflict through dialogue, through the deployment of philosophy in place of soldiers and bombs. It is through the sharing of the values of respect for diversity and co-operation that peace is achieved, not through the export of war. That is the lesson we have learned in Ireland and one that should be considered by others as the spectre of war looms.

The opportunity to spread the philosophy of peace is all the greater because we live in the greatest revolution in the history of the world, the information, telecommunications and transport revolution. This has made the world a much smaller place, where an Irish person in Manchester can leave their home here and return across the water in minutes. This presents us all with opportunities and with challenges. While many of us now have an opportunity to travel in a way unimaginable even a generation ago, we are all challenged. Challenged to spread the best values of the Irish as a people; a welcome for the stranger, compassion for the dispossessed and solidarity with the oppressed. Just this week, I took part in the Irish Music Awards in which Bono from U2 was presented with a 'Humanitarian Award' for his efforts to fight third world debt and to

highlight the scourge of HIV/AIDS. He is an example to our young people and to each of us, to fight injustice wherever we see it, be that in Manchester, Ireland, Africa or elsewhere. It is a challenge I believe our young people are up to.

It is important to share these values with people around the world. But it is also important to share with each other the best traits of our people; warmth of friendship, generosity of time and a love of craic. That is the essence of the bonds we share as a people, and I know they will be in evidence in the buildings and streets of Manchester over the next 10 days as friendships are renewed, experiences enjoyed and the pleasure of the festivities are shared. I am certain this festival will surpass even the high standards of past years.

Once again, I would like to thank you all for inviting me here. It has been an honour. Enjoy the festival!